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Good Tidings for Saudi Women? Techno-Orientalism, Gender, and Saudi Politics in Global Media Discourse

Joel W. Abdelmoez

Abstract

Gender equality in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia is still a contentious and hotly debated issue, both within the country and in global news media as well as social media. Not least has the government app “Absher” drawn attention and criticism, due to features that allow male guardians to track their female dependants, issue or withdraw travel permits, and file for divorce at the click of a button. This study aims to explore the campaigns and debates around the app, and how it has been represented in global media. Focusing mainly on social media campaigning by journalists, activists, as well as the Saudi government, I hope to shed light on the different sides of the debate, and what the representation of Saudi Vision 2030, the reforms and the app, particularly in European and American media discourse, tell us about popular imaginations of Islam, technology, and gender.

Keywords

Saudi Arabia; Absher; gender; Islam; orientalism; technology

Introduction

In January 2019, an 18-year-old Saudi girl, Rahaf Mohammed al-Qanun, fled from her family and barricaded herself in a hotel room in Thailand while appealing for asylum through Twitter. In April of the same year, two Saudi sisters, Wafa and Maha al-Subaie, used their father's phone to grant themselves travel permits, fled to Georgia and soon relocated to an unnamed third country. These stories, and many more, have been widely shared and reported on in English-language media, and attracted a lot of attention on social media. Interestingly, the increased media reports on Saudi women fleeing the country come after several reforms in the area of gender equality, such as women getting the right to vote, and to drive. Saudi Arabia has long been portrayed in media as the epitome of a patriarchal society, oppressive against women and gender minorities, yet when changes are happening, global media outlets often seem uncertain about how to deal with it.

Reports on gender reforms in Saudi Arabia have since 2019 often centred on the smartphone app *Absher*, which was developed by the Ministry of Interior and launched in 2015. This app can be used to renew personal documents, such as passports and driving licenses, but also to file for divorce and to grant and revoke travel permits. The app can also give notification to guardians when a female dependant is using their passport, which has led to it being referred to as a “woman-tracking app” (Leung 2019). However, some argue that this is a misrepresentation and that the app has in fact increased women's mobility by making it easier to obtain travel permits.¹ Previously, the male guardian would have to physically go to a government office, stand in line, and fill out forms in order to get a travel permit for their female dependant, whereas now they are able to do so just through their phone. The guardian system is still in place—although since the summer of 2019 the laws have been relaxed—whether or not one chooses to use the app.

¹ Interestingly, since the COVID-19 pandemic, the Saudi state has introduced a new app, *Tawakkalna*, developed by the Saudi Data and Artificial Intelligence Authority (SDAIA), which does track its users and is mandatory for all Saudi residents. This app has not received widespread attention in English-language media to the same extent as Absher.

This presents a row of issues to unpack. First and foremost, what the gendered implications of Absher actually are? Is there any truth in the argument of the Saudi government and some feminist activists, that the app increases women's mobility by making it easier to obtain travel permits, or is it in fact a "woman-tracking app" that maintains the controversial Saudi guardian system more than it helps Saudi women? Furthermore, what are the assumptions about women's rights in Saudi Arabia underlying this debate? More to the point, what does this debate reveal about how the intersection of religion, gender, and technology is treated in global media? Obviously, all these questions cannot be conclusively answered, but they provide an overview of the areas in which this article makes a contribution. I hope to shed light on the media debates surrounding recent developments relating to women's rights in Saudi Arabia, both within the kingdom and in transnational and international, English-language news media and social media, and explore in-depth the discourse, underlying assumptions, and implications of these debates. I do this by employing the mixed media studies method and digital ethnography, following and tracing the debates over time. As such, I aim to make an intervention in several disciplines and research fields, drawing from and engaging with media and communication studies, Middle Eastern studies, gender studies, science and technology studies (STS), as well as feminist technoscience.

Material and method

This article uses media material, both online news media and social media, as well as government statements and press releases. This includes both text-based media and visual media, for example, video clips, recorded statements, still images, and infographics. These have been identified through a close following of related hashtags, the pro-Absher campaign launched by Saudi authorities ("I support Absher"), and key Twitter users, including official Saudi government accounts and national, regional, and international media outlets. As such, the methodological approach taken is grounded in media studies, and mixes different analytical tools, mainly rhetorical criticism, semiotics,

and critical discourse analysis, in order to produce new knowledge about the way international media flows impact and are impacted by debates surrounding the representation of gender and technology in the Islamicate world, with particular emphasis in this study on Saudi Arabia. The tools and methods used have been chosen based on previous experience of how well they work with the material that is used in this study (cf. Abdelmoez 2018; 2017). The mixing of different methods and approaches is done both to better handle the different forms of media—for example, a semiotic approach may be better suited for the analysis of images, while rhetorical criticism works better with written or recorded statements—and to ensure well-roundedness and analytical accuracy. By combining and moving between these different methods, this study aims to show different potential explanations and interpretations of the same events and debates which in itself relates to the argument that the framing of events is tied up with ideology and power.

Rhetorical criticism

Apart from forming some of the theoretical positions for this study—such as the focus of the ideological–political purposes of the rhetor, that is, whether the Saudi government’s claimed concern for women’s rights can be considered genuine, and to what extent the intent matters—rhetorical criticism is, more importantly, a method. In this study, the method is drawn from the models of rhetorical analysis as delineated by Mral (2008), Foss (2004), and Pierce (2003), synthesized in order to form a methodology specifically suited for the material at hand, and best suited to answer the research questions. Foss (2004) distinguishes rhetorical criticism from classical rhetorical analysis in that it places systematic analysis as the act of criticism and understanding rhetorical processes as the purpose of that criticism. This research method is multi-layered and focuses on uncovering the purpose of the rhetoric, identifying the intended recipients, and exploring the context of the message. “Rhetoric” is understood broadly, enabling it to be applied beyond the scope of traditional rhetorical analysis, not only covering overtly political texts but also texts seemingly free from ideology, such

as social media posts, infographics, and press releases—of course, “seemingly” is a key word, as one could argue that no text is entirely free from ideology, especially from the perspective of rhetorical criticism.

Semiotics

Semiotic method can mean many things and could sometimes be considered a point of view more than a particular method (Gaines 2010). Therefore, in order to have a workable and applicable method for analysis, Chandler (2014) has developed a structured DIY that is used in this article. This involves an initial analysis of the surroundings, to identify the text (medium, genre, context, etc.) and one’s own purposes in analyzing this text (reflexivity), before looking at the signifiers and what they signify. This is then followed by questions such as “What reality claims are made by the text?” and “To whom might it appear realistic?” aimed at understanding the modality and constructions of reality. Next, Chandler (2014) recommends looking at the semiotic codes; the means by which a sign can be understood in a specific way, that is, the conventions of communication. This involves finding what codes are common and which are unique, an important aspect to distinguish the medium from other media. This part of the analysis also includes asking which codes are absent, since meaning is not only what is being expressed, but also what is not. As such, it is also important to look at other texts, or intertextuality, as well as the possible textual alternations. An important aspect in this regard is the paradigmatic analysis. “Paradigms” refer to the connotations that underlie the explicit content of texts (Chandler 2014). In other words, a paradigm is a set of signs that can be chosen, thus changing the meaning of the text. For example, different words can convey similar meaning, but which word is chosen in a certain context may alter how the message is perceived. Related is what in semiotic terms is called the syntagm, which is the structure of the texts, such as how signifiers relate to each other and form hierarchies of meanings. Similarly, intertextuality refers to the text’s relation to other texts. This is important since the texts do not

exist in a vacuum and do not only connect the writer with the reader, but also the text itself with other texts.

Critical discourse analysis (CDA)

Discourse can be defined in a number of different ways, but the perhaps most common definition comes from Foucault (1980), who views discourse as regulated institutions of knowledge. Foucault views language as formative—it forms and constitutes the way we think about things—which means that there is an aspect of power, as control can be affected through language, not least in the establishment of “knowledge.” Therefore, discourse is the institution through which such “knowledge” is established. Language usage constructs the reality that we are speaking of, and the way that we agree to speak of a certain thing—although not necessarily consciously—can be called “discourse.” Discourse contains everything that is said about a certain topic, and sets the limits of what *can* be said, although this changes over time. This is emphasized by Habermas, who defines discourse as sociopolitical validity claims, that is, statements and explanations that are considered *valid* in a certain context. What is considered valid, according to Habermas, are those statements which the audience can believe has good reason to be factual, even if they are not entirely convinced of it (cf. Habermas 1998).

Fairclough (1992) delineates a model of conducting discourse analysis which includes three levels: text, discursive practice, and social practice. The textual analysis means studying at the micro level, looking at the speech act itself, its structure, word choices, metaphors, et cetera. The social practice entails the context in which the text occurs, that is, the macro level, as well as the norms, ideals, and power structures the text relates to, and the way the text is positioned towards other texts and authors. While Fairclough argues that all levels need to be considered, he emphasizes the discursive level. This means studying the production, consumption, and distribution of the text, in order to uncover the processes and ideological forces that shape the text and the impact it

enacts on society. This often includes reception studies and ethnography, exploring audiences' consumption of texts through interviews and participant observations, but may also focus on the engagement of the text through other texts, what others are writing and sharing about the text in question, such as through social media posts (which is the main form of engagement explored in this study). More importantly, however, the analysis should try to uncover the factors that are influencing the production of the text, such as the political or ideological underpinnings, and the sociopolitical implications of the text; what effects are enacted or reproduced by the text, what are the ideologies that it engages with, challenges, or resists? These questions are what make the analysis "critical" and are also emphasized by Teun A. van Dijk who writes:

Critical discourse analysis (CDA) is a type of discourse analytical research that primarily studies the way social power abuse, dominance, and inequality are enacted, reproduced, and resisted by text and talk in the social and political context. With such dissident research, critical discourse analysts take explicit position, and thus want to understand, expose, and ultimately resist social inequality. (van Dijk 2001, 352)

Discourse analysis is often accused of being biased or politically motivated, which stems from the fact that discourse analysts emphasize their positionality and challenge the view of knowledge production as a neutral or objective practice. Knowledge is seen as situated, and thus deeply tied with social structures and power relations.

As previously mentioned, the method utilized in this study is inspired mainly by the three-levelled model of Fairclough (1992), but further inspiration is also taken from Fairclough and Wodak (1997), as well as van Dijk (2001), who focus on explaining discursive structures and its relation to social issues rather than describing them. As such, van Dijk argues that critical discourse analysts need to consider the patterns of access to public discourse; not just what is being said and whose voices are heard, but who is excluded from participation.

The Absher application

Absher, which means “good tidings,” is an application launched in 2015 by the Saudi Ministry of Interior, available through the Apple App Store and Google Play Store. As of March 2022, Absher has more than 23 million users, which is about 66 percent of the population. The main function of Absher is to make government services digitally accessible, making it possible to request and download government documents, renew personal documents such as passports and driver’s licenses, and apply for permits—such as the permit needed to perform Hajj. However, it was not until January 2019 that the app was given widespread attention outside of Saudi Arabia. The attention focused on certain features and services, mainly the possibility to add the names and passport numbers of dependants in order to grant and revoke travel permits, decide how many journeys they may take, and for how long they are allowed to travel. Another feature that has gained attention is the possibility to file for divorce, which will send a text message to the wife informing her of her new civil status (see Figure 1).



Figure 1: Screenshot of a now deleted tweet by the Saudi Ministry of Justice (@MojKsa_EN).

Many people, including Oregon senator Ron Wyden, called for Apple and Google to remove Absher from their app stores. In a letter addressed to Apple CEO Tim Cook and Google CEO Sundar Pichai, Wyden wrote:

It is hardly news that the Saudi monarchy seeks to restrict and repress Saudi women, but American companies should not enable or facilitate the Saudi government's patriarchy. By permitting the app in your respective stores, your companies are making it easier for Saudi men to control their family members from the convenience of their smartphones and restrict their movement. This flies in the face of the type of society you both claim to support and defend. (Wyden 2019)

Fourteen members of the United States Congress, all from the Democratic Party, also signed a letter with the same demand, and Republican senator of Florida, Marco Rubio, criticized Google for keeping the app in the store, calling it "grotesque" (Rubio 2019). International NGOs such as Amnesty and Human Rights Watch have also called on American companies to investigate the issue and potentially take down the app. Google pledged to look into it but later announced that they did not find the app to be in violation of their terms and conditions, and therefore would not remove it (Bostock 2019a).

After the backlash against Absher, Saudi Arabia launched a social media campaign to gather support for the app, which included taking down several of the tweets and infographics that had been criticized (such as the one about divorce notifications via text message), and starting a campaign under the hashtags "#i_support_ABSHER" and the Arabic equivalent. They also started posting new infographics, emphasizing the aspect that they wished Absher to be associated with, such as how it may help the elderly, disabled people, or those who otherwise have difficulty physically going to a government office (see Figure 2). Another image that became widely shared shows a large crowd waiting outside a government office, comparing the experience with using your phone for the same errands.



Figure 2: Infographic shared on the official Absher Twitter account (@Absher 2019).

Nonetheless, many people have continued to criticize the Saudi government and the application, as well as criticizing Apple and Google for keeping the app in their respective stores. One of the most ardent critics has been Bill Bostock, a news reporter for Business Insider, and he was also one of the first to break the story about Absher (Bostock 2019b). He has accused the supporters of faking positive reviews and stated that many of the Twitter accounts that shared the pro-Absher hashtag were in fact Twitter bots, that is, software programmed to perform tasks such as tweet and re-tweet supportive messages about Absher.

One tweet that went viral, from an account under the handle @farooi, was a linked YouTube video of a man defending Absher, pointing to the 160 different services it provides, and also accusing Senator Ron Wyden of being a man who hates Saudi Arabia.² This tweet and video were also quickly picked up by Bostock, who wrote a critical report about it in Business Insider, in which he criticizes the person in the video for not mentioning the features that are most controversial, mainly the ability to track and restrict dependants' travels (Bostock 2019c). In the article,

² See (including the video): @farooi, *Twitter* post, February 18, 2019, 1:57 p.m., <https://twitter.com/farooi/status/1097480161715458053>.

Bostock also brings up another viral video in support of Absher, showing a large crowd of Saudis rushing to a passport office (*jawazat*) as it opens, from before the launch of Absher.

Gender, discourse, and technology

Technofeminist scholars, such as Judy Wajcman, argue that the internet can function as a powerful tool for political mobilization and increased democratic participation for women, as well as an escape from the reduction and relegation of women to the corporeal and the private sphere. On this note, Wajcman (2004) writes:

This is highly subversive of the conventional definition of women as biologically determined and confined to the private sphere. The twin visions of bodily transcendence in cyberspace and easy engagement in the public realm of international politics are certainly seductive. (Wajcman 2004, 8)

However, an important aspect of Wajcman's analysis is that she refuses to treat technological advances as either utopic or dystopic, neither liberatory nor oppressive to women, but that it contains many possibilities, and it is the feminist politics in relation to the technologies that matter. This is what she calls *technofeminism*, which brings together the cyborg feminism of Haraway (1991) with a constructivist theory of technology, which "grounds it firmly in a thoroughgoing materialist approach to the social studies of technology" (Wajcman 2004, 74). This means paying attention to both the material and the social aspects of technology, as it is never purely one or the other. Technology and society are coproduced, and neither is ever a finished product but always changing and evolving. This also means that technology is situated historically and that it is shaped by social relations. With gender being such a pervasive aspect of social life, and with this perspective on techno-social development, Wajcman concludes that "technofeminism conceives of a mutually shaping relationship between gender and technology" (2004, 74). This is important to keep in mind when

considering the gendered impact of new technologies, such as the app Absher, particularly in relation to the perceived democratic impact of increased accessibility, government transparency, and the view that the internet is an egalitarian space.

Daubs (2017) argues that the internet is sometimes viewed as an egalitarian and equally available space, outside of the control of any particular group. If this was true, it would be a tool equally available for women to use for their political purposes and social needs. However, this view may be contested as the same power structures and hierarchies found in society at large are also designed into new information and communication technologies (ICTs). It is nevertheless true that technologies can be used in a multitude of ways; sometimes even ways that are antithetical to their purpose. While there may be aspects of a technology's design that inform how it is "meant" to be used—affordances in semiotic terms—there are few ways for a developer to entirely control the actual usage, particularly when it comes to ICTs and software, which are vulnerable to hacking. Shaw and Sender (2016) elaborate on this and offer a way for activists to turn technologies against themselves, by asking "how can hacking and resistance of heteronormative technologies offer alternative forms of engagement and experience?" (Shaw and Sender 2016, 2). When assessing the impact of Absher on gender politics and subjectivity, it is important to also consider the possibility of "subverting" the technology and using it against itself. Exploring the intersection of queer theory and technology is therefore useful in this regard.

Techno-Orientalism and Islam

European and American imaginations of Islam and the Middle East—particularly of the Arabian Peninsula and of the so-called *Wahhabi* form of Islam—are often marked by notions of social conservatism, tradition, and a general "backwardness." Such depictions, according to Said (1978), act to discursively construct "the Middle East," or "the Orient." In other words, they are not based on any material reality, but

are part of a political project to position the region in relation to Europe, or “the West.” In this dichotomized representation, Europe stands for knowledge, fine arts, technology, development, and the Middle East is its “Other.” It is depicted as a mysterious and exotic place, undeveloped, medieval, volatile, perhaps dangerous, and full of people who are not as progressed and enlightened as the Europeans. Perhaps most notable is the depiction of Middle Eastern life as deeply marked by Islam, and in turn, there is a connection made between religion and the perceived backwardness of society as a whole, that is, that Islam plays a key role in keeping the region from progressing.

The preconceived notion of religion being inherently incompatible with technological development and “modernness” is also noted by Lara Deeb in her ethnographic work on Shia Islam and modernity in Lebanon: “My guides always linked religion and modernization, almost as though responding to unstated accusations that the two were incompatible” (Deeb 2006, 170).

This popular imagination of Middle Eastern life creates an apparent paradox when combined with media reports of new and advanced technologies, particularly as used within a religious framework—such as the development of an app used for maintaining, aiding, and enforcing Islamic divorce laws (as applied in the Saudi context)—leading to what I call a “techno-Orientalist crisis” which highlights European and American anxieties over shifting cultural and economic powers. The term *Techno-Orientalism* was first defined by Morley and Robins (1995) but is perhaps mainly associated with the eponymously titled book by Roh, Niu, and Huang (2015), which begins by exploring the fictional character Dr. Fu Manchu, created by British author Sax Rohmer in the beginning of the 20th century:

A figure of unnatural, unknowable peril who must be kept from acquiring knowledge lest it be used against the Western subject, Dr. Fu Manchu is at once brilliant and technologically challenged. In one part of the serial, Dr. Fu Manchu plots to strengthen China

by kidnapping European engineers, suggesting the Orient's lack of technological prowess and desire for Western technology. Yet, in another, he is described as possessing "all the cruel cunning of the entire Eastern race, accumulated in one giant intellect, with all the resources of science, past and present." Both of the past and the future, his monstrous form captured Western ambivalences toward what it regarded as the mysterious power of the East, manifesting in strange contradictions. (Roh, Niu, and Huang 2015, 1)

In the above quote, the authors detail how the fictional character reveals the anxieties and fears that European powers at the time had about "the mysterious power of the East," which is strikingly similar to contemporary depictions of Saudi Arabia in English-language media. While Morley and Robins (1995), and Roh, Niu, and Huang (2015) focus mainly on East Asia, and define techno-Orientalism as the hypo- or hyper-technological depiction of Asia and Asians, there are similarities to be found in the depiction of West Asia and the Middle East, and the term is useful for the study at hand.

Of course, the popular depictions of Saudi Arabia differ in important ways from those of China, yet they still rely on similar Orientalist tropes of an illiberal, backwards state, which constitutes a threat to the Western world should they acquire technological advancements or cultural hegemony. News reports and opinion pieces about new technologies and implementations of new systems, such as China's "social credit system" (Dirnhuber 2019), or Saudi technologies used to regulate women's mobility (Bennet 2019), often portray them in an overtly Orwellian light; as belonging to a dystopic future, mixing technology with "outdated" social norms, much in similarity to the depiction of Dr. Fu Manchu. Techno-Orientalism, I would argue, is likely a driving force behind the way media reports and debates play out; it gives potency to anti-Muslim rhetoric by playing to commonly held beliefs about Islam's place in relation to technological development, and social and cultural values ascribed to Islam contra what is ascribed to Europe. In other words, reactions to Saudi reforms in English-language media may

be indicative of a view of Islam as essentially anti-technological.

On the intersection of Islam and cybertechnology, Varisco (2010, 100) notes that a “distinction can be made between ‘online religion’ which can radically alter traditional modes of being Muslim, and ‘religion online,’ which may be little more than archiving materials.” Here we may follow a similar line of argument as the technofeminists who write about the coproduction of technology and society, and see that Islam too is both shaped by, and itself shapes, technologies that Muslims use, not only for religious purposes but for all kinds of daily tasks. Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs) are used to share videos and recordings of popular preachers, disseminate fatwas, and religious decrees, but also to connect with a global community—virtual spaces are created for Ramadan meetups, and social networking sites specifically catering to Muslim users gain in popularity. Some scholars have argued that these trends require a rethinking of the concept of *ummah* (cf. Mandaville 2013; Varisco 2010; Anderson 2003). Absher may stand as a proof for this intersection and the socio-technological coproduction of religion, as it is a prime example of how technology is both developed to fit with religious doctrine while at the same time itself transforming how certain religious practices, such as *ṭalāq*, are practiced.

Findings

After the announcement of some of the new services from Absher, available from January 2019, social media users and international media outlets alike picked up the story and a campaign to get Apple and Google to pull the app from their respective stores quickly grew. This was then met by campaigns in support of the app, mainly under the hashtags “#i_support_ABSHER” and its Arabic equivalent. However, some of these services, such as the possibility to file for divorce had been announced in the newspaper Saudi Gazette several months before the backlash came, on July 23, 2018 (Saudi Gazette 2018). This raises the question of why reports and criticism were not widespread until early 2019; BBC and Al-Jazeera picked up the story on January 6, and CNN and The Guardian on

January 7, and there were no Tweets on the issue, other than the original announcement from the Saudi Gazette, prior to January, 2019. The Saudi Gazette wrote about the decision again on January 2 (Al-Shabrawi 2019) but still it took several days before international media picked up the story. A likely explanation is that the Ministry of Justice tweeted a since-deleted infographic image (see Figure 1), informing about the feature, on January 6, which is what triggered a widespread response via Twitter and brought attention to the issue for international media outlets. However, the response has also coincided with increased media attention on the issue of women attempting to flee Saudi Arabia, which shows that there may have been a rhetorical opening that international media outlets took advantage of—or in Vatz’s (1973) view, media outlets created a rhetorical situation by relating the story to an existing narrative. In other words, as there was already an established discourse on women demanding mobility freedom, media outlets knew that reports that conform to this narrative would be of interest to their audiences and would likely get widely shared. This explanation is further evidenced by the fact that some of the services that have also been a target of critique, such as the possibility to grant and revoke travel permits, have been available for several years, and, in fact, occur in older news stories and opinion articles as an example of how women’s rights are improving in Saudi Arabia. For example, Rym Ghazal wrote in 2016:

If a Saudi woman wants to travel, it is quite easily arranged via Absher, an e-service from the interior ministry listed under “travel permits for dependents”. A few of my Saudi relatives and friends said that their male guardians even gave them the login and password so they could set it up themselves. One permit can last for more than 10 years. (Ghazal 2016, n.p.)

Another report about this Absher service was published in Arab News in August 2016, again presented as an improvement for women (Arab News 2016). As we can see, although the feature that allows Absher users to issue and revoke travel permits has been around for a long time, it was not until early 2019 that it became a topic of debate in English-

language media, and has previously been used as an example within an antithetical narrative to the one that proliferated in 2019—that is these stories have previously been examples of the improvement of women’s rights rather than symptoms of a gender-oppressive system.

When CNN reported on the service allowing women to receive text message notifications about changes in their marital status, they did initially present it as a solution to the issue that women could otherwise be left without knowing that they had been divorced (Altaher and Clarke 2019). However, the presenter also followed up the same story by saying that Saudi women have historically “faced a number of social barriers” and goes on to list a few topics of gender inequality in the country, such as gender segregation in certain public spaces and the modesty laws (requiring women to wear abayas). As such, by relating this story to other women’s rights issues, they avoid framing the service as an improvement of women’s rights. The takeaway from the report is that there are still many issues that are faced by Saudi women. Similarly, Al-Jazeera also began their report by briefly mentioning the stated intention of improving women’s lives through the service of text message notifications, but then went on to detail the critique against the Saudi government and the country’s guardianship system:

Campaigners said the main sticking point remained Saudi Arabia’s guardianship policy, whereby women must have permission from a male relative to work, travel, marry, and even get some medical treatment. “The male guardianship system is a core issue and it must be dismantled. It controls women in each and every step of their lives. This system strangles Saudi women,” said Abu-Dayyeh. (Al-Jazeera 2019)

This could be compared to the original announcement of the feature, published in the Saudi Gazette, in which they quote the Minister of Justice, Waleed Al-Samaani:

“To protect the rights of women and to ensure that their divorce deeds reach them without delay, we have launched the SMS service that

will notify the women of their marital status the moment the divorce is approved.” (Saudi Gazette 2018)

They go on to quote outrage on Twitter as a reasoning behind introducing this service:

Many people took to Twitter to vent their anger over numerous cases where women had no idea that they were divorced, a matter which had immensely affected their lives. One of the accounts stated that a woman found out that she was divorced more than 15 years later after the death of her husband. She had been living with him as husband and wife when he died. It was only when she went to the court to claim her inheritance she found out that her husband had divorced her more than a decade ago and that she had no right to inherit him. (Saudi Gazette 2018)

When the Saudi Gazette later published an article about the new service, penned by Adnan Al-Shabrawi, they again presented it as an improvement of women’s lives and women’s legal rights, beginning with a lede stating: “Women lawyers welcome new legal system taking effect next week” (Al-Shabrawi 2019). The same article ends by stating:

Other lawyers said several reforms introduced by the Ministry of Justice lately contributed greatly to ensure justice to women and protect their rights. The ministry and the Supreme Judicial Council worked together to resolve many issues facing women and to protect their rights through the judicial system. (Al-Shabrawi 2019)

Just as with the digitalization of travel permits, we are presented here with a rhetorical problem, relating to whether these services can be seen as practical improvements for Saudi women or not. To the Saudi government and state-aligned media, the story fits well with the reform-narrative of Vision 2030. However, in international media, it is mainly represented as symptomatic of the Saudi guardian system. The question is which of these “solutions” to the rhetorical problem wins

legitimacy, and by what means? One way of winning legitimacy is simply by dominating the media channels and, by doing so, controlling the narrative. As previously mentioned, the Saudi government narrative seemed to be relatively unchallenged up until January 2019, which meant that there was no need for any massive media campaigns. However, when international media picked up on the story and it became widely circulated on Twitter after the release of an infographic from the ministry of justice, the Saudi government was quick to launch their support campaign.

Sharing their thoughts mainly in English, likely due to the attention in English-language media, many Saudi-based Twitter users—whether real or bots—defended the app, stating it is being misrepresented, that it makes Saudi women’s lives easier, and that it helps those who have physical impairments or otherwise have difficulties accessing government services. Many of the same statements and arguments are repeated, and the same videos and infographics are shared by many people. This includes images such as the ones previously presented, but also videos depicting a large crowd of people storming the passport office (*Jawazat*) as it is opening its gate. Another widely shared video is an explanation of the app and its features, in English with Arabic subtitles, and accompanying animation. In this video, the narrator directly addresses the critique relating to women’s rights.³

Just as with many of the written tweets, the fact that this video is narrated in English, with an American accent and what I would call an “infomercial tone of voice,” shows that the intended audience for the video is not mainly Saudis. One may question why the Saudi government would bother convincing non-citizens about the nature of an app that they would never use anyway, although there are a few possibilities. For one thing, they want to keep the app available to their citizens and residents, meaning they need the US-based companies Apple and Google

³ The video can be seen here: Brdese, Hani (@Brdese). 2019. *Twitter* post, February 19. 7:51 p.m. <https://twitter.com/Brdese/status/1097931817137651714>.

to keep the app in their stores. If pressured enough by politicians, activists, and customers, they might be inclined to remove it. Secondly, they want to retain an image of Mohammad bin Salman as a reformer, which is an image that has been seriously tarnished—not least since the murder of the journalist Jamal Khashoggi. This explanation falls in line with what Seib (2012) calls the “real-time diplomacy” of Twitter, that is, that the government has a direct channel to communicate with both politicians and ordinary citizens of other countries and engage in public diplomacy. Thirdly, and perhaps most importantly, is the country’s dependency on foreign investors to succeed in diversifying their economy and achieve the goal of decreasing dependency on oil. Important to note is that it is not necessary that the Saudi government succeeds in entirely dominating the media narrative—their “solution” to the rhetorical problem may be challenged and may not even be widely considered legitimate and true. All they need is for their narrative to be a possibility, to which the investors can point in case their business with the government is called into question. In other words, ambiguity and remaining in a state of liminality—always changing and reforming but never entirely reformed—may be beneficial to them.

It is important to consider the medium, in this case, a short informational video shared via Twitter. The video is likely produced, or at least commissioned, by the Saudi government, but it is not a statement or press release, which may tell us about the reach that they want. As they are aware that a lot of the backlash against Absher came from Twitter users, it is understandable that they would choose this platform for their response, and the video format likely reaches a different audience than those who would read press releases. Video is also a good medium because it is easy to fit in a lot of information in a short clip, while still retaining the interest of the “reader,” particularly when the video is accompanied by animations and animated infographics. It is also easily shared and attached to Tweets under the “I support Absher” hashtag.

Among the critics of the app is Executive Director of Human Rights Watch, Kenneth Roth, who has also called for Apple and Google to

pull the app from its stores. In a tweet from February 17, 2019, he described Absher as an app that allows men to control women. The tweet also includes a link to a longer article in Business Insider by Bill Bostock (2019d), which in turn is a response to a press release by the Saudi Press Agency (2019), stating that the “Ministry [of Interior] strongly condemns the systematic campaign aimed at questioning the purpose of (Abshar) services.” This press release was also shared by the Saudi Gazette, which further emphasized and endorsed the statement by adding that the “ministry reiterated its keenness to protect the interest of beneficiaries of its services from all the damage caused by such misinformation campaign” (Saudi Gazette 2019). Interesting in Roth’s critique of the app is that he says it “allows” men to control women, thereby placing impetus on the app itself rather than the guardianship laws. This logic follows the argument of Wajcman (2004) and others, that technology, society, and religious practice are coproduced, meaning that the app, rather than being just symptomatic of the guardianship system is actually part and parcel of its maintenance. One might argue that if the system remained as inefficient or impractical for Saudi citizens as many claims were the case before Absher, they would be more inclined to advocate for changing the system. By making it easier to obtain travel permits and conduct the government errands that are required by the guardianship laws, they are also making those laws more likely to remain in place. This means that the app and the system and regulations that it adheres to cannot be entirely separated, but must be understood as one and the same and that by supplying the app, Apple and Google are indeed complicit in maintaining the guardianship system. As such, opposing the app and advocating for it to be taken down could also be understood as opposing these laws, and it is possible that without the app the system would receive greater pushback.

While it is clear that the Saudi government has an interest in maintaining an image of Crown Prince Mohammad bin Salman as a reformer, it is also necessary to further consider the motivations, purpose, and ideological underpinnings of global media responses. If we take a rhetorical criticism approach, we ought to ask: what do international

media outlets try to convince their readers of? As previously mentioned, the reports surrounding Absher fit well with stories about women fleeing Saudi Arabia, and even when it is stated that services are meant to improve women's lives (such as in the reporting of CNN and Al-Jazeera on divorce notifications via text message) it is emphasized that Saudi Arabia is a heavily gender segregated and unequal country. This story can be pushed because the audience will be familiar with it and the media outlets know that it is likely to gain traction. However, ideologically and discursively there may be more to be found: through a Saidian, Orientalism-inspired analysis, this narrative of Saudi Arabia as the poster child of gender inequality is likely connected to a Euro-American project of constructing "the West." In this imagination, "the West" is seen as the pinnacle of liberty, liberalism, democracy, and so on, while Islam stands as its "other." Massad (2015) argues that far from being outside of the history of liberalism and European history, Islam is in fact "central to liberalism as ideology and as identity" (Massad 2015, 11), precisely by being placed as "other" against which it can be constituted. As Saudi Arabia is closely associated (connotatively) with Islam, these portrayals act to maintain an idea of Islam as something foreign and anti-Western; as contradictory to "Western" values, or as belonging outside of the sphere of Europe and America, which, paradoxically, makes it an important part of constituting it.

We may also consider Abu-Lughod's (2013) critique of Western liberal feminism, and the attempts by European and American organizations at "saving" Muslim women, thereby universalizing the Euro-American ideal of what feminism and women's rights mean. As such, when the reports on Absher, its services and features, and reforms associated with Saudi Vision 2030, exclude the voices of Saudi Muslim women, they are also perpetuating an idea of these issues as being dictated by European and American values and ideals, which in turn reproduce these values precisely as "Western."

One aspect of the digitalization of government services that is rarely mentioned, either in news articles or in social media posts, is the

potential of alternative usage. Although the app has been designed for a certain kind of usage, and many of its services are meant for a certain kind of user, there is always the possibility of hacking the app or using it in ways that are antithetical to its purpose, and it is virtually impossible for the developers of the app to be in total control of the way it is used. In an article answering questions about Absher, Human Rights Watch writes:

Some Saudi women contend that *Absher* is preferable to the old card-based system, because women can more easily and surreptitiously change travel permissions and halt text message alerts on their male guardian's phone than forge travel permission cards under the old system. (Human Rights Watch 2019)

This is also the reason why Human Rights Watch is not advocating for the removal of the app by Apple and Google, and in the same article they write:

Women's rights activists told Human Rights Watch that Absher's removal would directly harm Saudi women who have benefitted from the relative ease with which they or sympathetic family members can surreptitiously change their travel permissions without their male guardian's knowledge. (Human Rights Watch 2019)

This is perhaps the clearest acknowledgement of how the app can be used in beneficial ways by Saudi women. An example of this is the highly publicized case usually just referred to as "the Saudi sisters," in which Wafa and Maha al-Subaie used their father's phone to grant themselves travel permits so that they could flee to Georgia and later relocate to a third country. Interestingly, the Saudi sisters themselves are vocal in calling for Apple and Google to take down the app (Harman and Patin 2019). At the same time, they have opted not to disclose how they managed to use the app for their own benefit, as it could lead to male guardians protecting themselves against this, and that they need to help other women. As such, even though they advocate for the removal of the

app, they too acknowledge it may be used in ways that are beneficial to women who want to flee the country.

Conclusion

In this article, I have traced several different arguments and perspectives relating to gender politics and women's rights in Saudi Arabia, with particular emphasis on debates surrounding the application Absher and its impact on women's lives in the kingdom. These arguments have been analysed in relation to theories on the intersection of gender, technology, and religion, as well as critical theories of representation and subjectification. One of the main fault-lines between the different sides of the Absher-debate appears to be whether blame should be placed entirely on the app, entirely on the guardianship system, or some combination of both. However, most commentators in English-language media go the path of placing blame on both, either by directly stating that removing the app without changing the guardianship system will only have a negative effect on Saudi women or by using the app as a stand-in for the system. Theoretical debates from critical science and technology studies and debates about religion and technology may back these positions, in that if we view technologies such as Absher as being produced concurrently with (and inseparable from) social values, systems, and relations of power, we must also consider those technologies as part in the construction and maintenance of the same values, systems, and power relations. As such, focusing our critique on Absher may still be an effective strategy in changing the system itself, although pragmatically, removing the app itself is likely to have a negative impact in the short-term. Beyond the fact that Absher may have improved women's mobility by making it easier for guardians to provide travel permits, it has also made it easier for Saudi women to subvert or circumvent the system, such as by hacking or otherwise gaining access to their guardian's phone and granting themselves travel permits. This may work as another form of critique, wherein the system is used against itself, thus making it work for the women who wish to flee the country, rather than against them.

Regardless of the attitude towards Absher or the mode of critique employed, it is also evident that a lot of the articles, posts, and comments about the application suffer from a techno-Orientalist bias, based on a view of modern technology as not only incompatible with Islam, but indeed a dangerous combination. These writers employ dystopic, Orwellian imagery, and emphasize surveillance, tracking, control, and regulation, as the main functions of the technology, while simultaneously connecting these functions to religious (Islamic) doctrine, the effect of which is (inadvertently or not) giving credence to ideas of Islam as belonging outside of the Euro-American sphere, and as antithetical to liberal values that are ascribed to Europe. Reports and posts about Absher are tied into wider questions of gender politics and women's rights in Islam, the effect of which is a narrative that gives potency to anti-Muslim rhetoric by playing to and reaffirming commonly held beliefs about Islam's place in relation to technological development. As such, it is important that while it is valid to criticize Absher, and other technologies that uphold the Saudi guardianship system, we must remain aware of the politics of representation—what assumptions are we building our critique on, what norms or tropes are we reproducing in our critique, and what is the impact of this critique on the larger scale?

I have argued in this article that the global media representation of Saudi gender politics, as well as social media debates around these issues, is embedded in commonly held beliefs about Islam as essentially anti-technology, as well as stereotypes and presumptions about the place of gender politics in Islamic societies. This further extends to how Islam is viewed in relation to “Western” society, which is often constructed as both the pinnacle of liberal social norms and values, particularly regarding women's rights, as well as the height of technological development, which means that (1) Islam is presented as incompatible with Euro-American values, and (2) technological development may be dangerous without these values, or in combination with other values.

I conclude that it is of utmost importance to keep in mind the underlying ideological structures we are treading on when either critiquing or

promoting technologies such as Absher, and to remain aware of the implications of our work and the kind of politics we are emboldening or undermining in doing so. What may at first seem like a tool of oppression may very well be used as a means of liberation, just as what may seem like a critique of a misogynist, patriarchal system may become a tool for another kind of politics. It is still entirely possible to oppose and challenge such systems, without playing to Orientalist fears, as long as we remain aware of the pragmatics and the realities of the political, journalistic, and academic work that is conducted.

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The Role of the Internet in the Formation of Muslim Subjectivity Among Polish Female Converts to Islam

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Abstract

In this article, we discuss the main arguments related to female Muslim converts' formation of a religious subjectivity in the context of studying Islam in online spaces. In distinguishing between Western and Eastern Europe, it is our purpose to highlight the significance of online sources for converts who inhabit geographic "peripheries" of Islam. After giving an overview of the literature that discusses Muslim subject formation among converts, we analyse 35 in-depth, qualitative interviews with Polish female converts to Islam in reference to a theoretical framework that integrates Belenky et al.'s model of epistemological categories of knowledge and the concept of Muslim subjectivity formation. We argue that for the Polish female converts we interviewed, the process of acquiring and revising their knowledge about Islam, through online engagement with individuals, groups, texts, and multimedia content, is vital for developing an ontologically secure Muslim subjectivity.

Keywords

Muslim subjectivity, conversion to Islam, Poland

Introduction

This article focuses on how female converts to Islam form their Muslim subjectivities through the study of Islam online: through accessing formalized knowledge (literature by scholars and established authorities), informal interpretations of Islam (for example, by reading blogs or watching YouTube videos), and communicating with other Muslims online. We approach the complex activity of studying Islam in its multiple modalities as a component of a broader process of Muslim subjectivation—that is, “becoming Muslim,” a process in which the symbolic act of embracing Islam—declaring the shahada—is a brief, if supremely important, moment¹.

Our understanding of subjectivation draws upon a Foucauldian concept of subjectivity. Foucault’s attention to power illuminates the power relations inherent in Muslim and non-Muslim discourses about Islam shape the converts’ new religious subjectivity. Illustrating the aim of his work, Foucault wrote, “I have tried to discover how the human subject entered ‘games of truth’ [...] like those that can be found in institutions or practices of control” (Lotringer 1996, 432). We aim, therefore, to critically examine the positioning of Polish converts and the dilemmas they experience as they negotiate what we characterise as the “game of truth” of becoming, or being, a “real Muslim” that pervades various religious and non-religious online spaces. This perception and orientation of converts to “idealized Muslim subjectivities” (Tourage 2012, 211) changes over time as the use of internet-based Islamic sources becomes more selective and sophisticated.

We find Hall’s (2004, 3–4) conceptual differentiation of subjectivity from identity useful insofar as it highlights the broader, more social and contextual character of subjectivity: “Subjectivity as a critical concept invites us to consider the question of how and from where identity arises,

¹ We discuss reasons for our respondents’ conversion and how it affected their relationships with significant others in our other work: Krotofil et al. (2021), Krotofil et al. (forthcoming), and Abdallah-Krzepkowska et al. (forthcoming).

to what extent it is understandable, and to what degree it is something over which we have any measure of influence or control.” The need to understand and actively shape one’s identity (according to Hall (2004, 3), “a set of traits, beliefs, and allegiances that [...] gives one a consistent personality and mode of social being”) in a dynamic context is embedded in the subjectivity that we focus on in this article.

Working from the premise that the Muslim subjectivity of female converts to Islam is inescapably entwined with the process of learning about Islam and interacting with other Muslims, we put these concepts in conversation with Belenky et al.’s (1986) categorization of “women’s ways of knowing” what is right or true, their reliance on expert advice or knowledge (or lack of thereof), and if experts disagree, how the women decide what is right. Based on their work, Belenky et al. (1986, 15) identified five coherent “epistemological perspectives from which women know and view the world.” These perspectives are the foundations for the developmental model of different epistemological categories of knowledge that are situated on a continuum. The categories reflect increasing confidence, critical thinking skills, problem-solving skills, mastery of the subject, and the need to contribute to knowledge among women.

1. Silence. Women at this stage described feeling “deaf and dumb,” disconnected, obedient toward authorities. They were comfortable with extreme sex-role stereotyping. They tended to describe themselves by the actions they performed, for example, “I am a person who likes to stay home” (1986, 31).
2. Received knowledge. Many women at this stage reported that childbirth was a major turning point in their lives. Words were central to the knowing process, as listening was the vehicle. Their moral judgments reflected those expected in their society. They looked to others for knowledge of self or for social or occupational roles. This often saw the need to live up to others’ views of them.

3. Subjective knowledge. At this stage, “walking away from the past” (1986, 76) was a common theme. Women reported that they had severed relationships, rejected obligations and moved out to live independently. Stubbornness was a common trait of most of these women; they often knew they would face loneliness and material and emotional difficulties but were steadfast in their ambitions. Importantly, they became more aware of their own internal resources for knowing and valuing.
4. Procedural knowledge. Most of the women in this category regularly practiced reasoned reflection. These women were aware that knowing requires careful observation and analysis. Women at this stage believed that everyone views the world through a different lens and construes the world differently.
5. Constructed knowledge. Belenky et al. described women at this stage as engaged in “weaving together the strands of rational and emotive thought” (1986, 134). Common to these women was a high tolerance for ambiguity or internal contradiction. They saw the knower as an intimate part of the known. In addition, they were able to see the contextual nature of knowledge and envisioned knowledge as a constructive process.

Our analysis of the data aims to increase the knowledge about the evolving Muslim subjectivity of the Polish converts by identifying Belenky et al.’s five stages connected to different epistemic categories of knowledge and their context—the internet. However, to understand this process, it is necessary to situate it in the existing literature on Muslim subjectivation and conversion.

Muslim subjectivation in literature

Becoming Muslim, as described by the growing body of literature on converts, involves complex transformations of beliefs, self, behaviours, attitudes, and social relationships (Moosavi 2012, van Nieuwkerk 2006,

Özyürek 2015, Rao 2015, Roald 2004, Zebiri 2008). Muslim subjectivation is experienced not just by converts, as Mahmood demonstrated in her landmark study of Egyptian Muslim women's mosque study groups (2005). Lifelong Muslims, just as converts, may experience challenges and doubts related to maintaining the Muslim subjectivity, especially of the "idealized," pious type (Jeldtoft 2011, Schielke 2009). The relationship between practice, belief, and identity, as Mahmood demonstrated, is multilayered and multidirectional. Acquiring Islamic knowledge, however, is of paramount importance to converts who cannot rely on heritage to be recognized as "authentic Muslims" in diverse Muslim settings. It is one of the strategies of coping with being "racialized out of Islam" by those who may not perceive them as authentic (Amer 2020, Galonnier 2015, Garner and Selod 2015, Moosavi 2012, Özyürek 2015) which is a function of being a convert and, in the Polish case, being a white convert. In performing Muslimness (Goffman 1963), the ability to support one's religious claims and decisions by referring to Islamic texts reflects the seriousness of religious commitment that also involves the (sometimes gradual) adoption of Islamic clothing or food practices described as "embodied practices." (Delaney 1991, Rao 2015, Winchester 2008).

Therefore, for converts, the study of Islam—in its scriptural and experiential forms—gains significance that transcends the idea of being more knowledgeable, and, therefore, pious. Using Goffman's symbolic interactionist terminology, it is central to identity management, the ability to perform Muslimness (a particular religious habitus, a symbolic set of affordances: knowledges, behaviours, languages, styles, and tastes) and, therefore, "pass" among lifelong Muslims as authentic and, therefore, acceptable (Moosavi 2012).

In this article, we address the process of acquiring Islamic knowledge as located at the intersection of bodily practice, belief, and identity in the process of "becoming Muslim."

Our point of departure is that converts' learning of Islam is socially situated in multiple contexts. The relevant contexts for studying Islam by Polish

converts include (1) Poland as a local setting shaping the process, defined by its historical, cultural, religious, and racial collective identities (Balogun 2020), and (2) online spaces, including social media, videoconferences, emails, and websites. The women we studied are located at the intersection of these contexts, each of them structured by dynamic relationships, affordances, and limitations. In the following section, we address each context and its particularities as related to the study of Islam on the internet.

Learning about Islam in Poland

Experiences of converts to Islam in Central and Eastern Europe were not addressed for a long time (Račius 2018). Several studies, almost all in English, emerged as an area of academic inquiry only in the last decade. Embracing Islam as an alternative basis for one's identity following the collapse of the geopolitical order and the overwhelmingly secular post-Soviet region is a common theme in the studies of conversion by Račius (2013) in Lithuania, Stoica (2011; 2013) in Romania, Pirický (2018) in the Czech Republic, and Shestopalets (2019; 2021) in Ukraine and Russia, respectively. However, Poland does not easily fit into this theme; it is a comparatively devout country (Topidi 2019), and Catholicism provides a meaningful social and religious context for Muslim conversion.

Muslims constitute less than 0.1 percent of the population of Poland (Pew Research Center 2017) although this number is growing. Along with immigration, conversion to Islam is one of the factors that account for this growth (Górska 2021). The indigenous Polish Muslims, the Tatars, are a small subgroup of Polish Muslims and their presence is concentrated in rural north-eastern Poland. Today, their number is estimated at approximately four thousand (Łyszczarz 2011). The first Tatar settlements in Poland can be dated back to the late 14th century. The type of Sunni Islam that they practise has been enriched by Turkic and pre-Islamic traditions. The Turkic elements are visible in the names of the prayers, while the pre-Islamic ones are mostly visible in magical and healing practices (Łyszczarz 2011). Tatars have also incorporated some Christian elements into their traditions, such as celebrating Christmas (as the birth of Prophet

Isa), or the All-Saints' Day (Kamocki 2000). There are two historic Polish Tatar mosques: in Kruszyniany and Bohoniki in the east of Poland. Today, many Tatars are organized in the Muslim Religious Union, the only Polish Muslim organization formally recognized by the Polish state. There are other ones, notably the Muslim League, whose members are mostly immigrant Muslims and converts. There are mosques in most large cities in Poland; in Warsaw, the two most prominent ones are the Muslim Cultural Centre and the Wiertnicza Street Mosque. There are also Muslim places of worship in Kraków, Katowice, Wrocław, Poznań, and a purpose-built mosque in Gdańsk.² Muslims organized through these institutions work to engage Polish citizens by organizing open days, conferences, and workshops about Islam. For Poles, especially the young people, these opportunities are the only ones, other than the internet, to learn about Islam, as there is no religious education (other than Roman Catholic instruction) available in Polish schools.

In elementary and secondary level education, as well as in the mainstream media, Islam is represented in mostly negative ways as a religion and civilization antithetical to Christianity and Europe (Górak-Sosnowska 2006, Piela 2020). Roman Catholic instruction is the norm in Polish schools, and while technically it is an elective, there is immense social pressure on families and children to attend, even if they are not religious (Balsamska et al. 2016). The ontological fusing of Polishness with Catholicism and whiteness, described by Balogun (2020) as “Polish-centrism,” the lack of education about religions other than Roman Catholicism combined with hostile political discourse about Muslims and refugees contribute to high levels of Islamophobia in Poland (Górak-Sosnowska 2016). The few print titles in Polish relevant to the study of Islam are criticized as too academic, although Polish translations of English texts about Islam are becoming more common, such as Karol Wilczyński's translation from English of Al-Faruqi's *Islam: Religion, Practice, Culture and World Order* ([2012] 2021). The most common Polish translation of the Qur'an by Józef Bielawski (and the only one that

² Most Polish women converts do not attend mosque regularly; some mentioned that mosque participation was not required of Muslim women. Many of our respondents do participate in Muslim women's meetups at mosques or cultural centres, but not necessarily in Friday prayers.

had been translated directly from Arabic) was often described as archaic and inaccessible by the women we interviewed.

Therefore, for converts, the internet is often the preferred medium that offers ease of access and a wealth of information about Islam. For many converts, it is the first source of information about Islam that reflects on it as a lived faith tradition. For those living in rural Poland, it is also the only opportunity to interact with other Muslims.

Learning about Islam on the internet

The internet has been at the centre of attention of researchers interested in converts' religious socialization for the last two decades (Račius 2013, Górak-Sosnowska 2015, van Nieuwkerk 2006, Piela 2015, 2021, Sakellariou 2015). The multiplicity of Muslim perspectives available online led many scholars to conclude that authority in Islam had become atomized or pluralized (Anderson 2003). Be that as it may, the very same multiplicity of interpretations and claims have created a situation where it is difficult to assess who speaks with authority for a new convert. Many converts, having few other reference frameworks, turned to Salafi teachings, the proponents of which perform Islamic authority very well (Pall and de Koning 2017). This is also a well-documented phenomenon in Eastern European and Balkan contexts (Clayer 2022, Norvilaitė and Račius 2014). Górak-Sosnowska (2015) noted that Polish Muslim online spaces were ideologically polarized between Salafi-oriented versus non-Salafi-oriented groups. Račius (2013) observed that the preoccupation with "halal" (permitted) and "haram" (forbidden) actions was the focal point of a prominent Lithuanian online forum for converts, illustrating the limited capacity of converts in earlier stages to accept the ambiguity of knowledge and truth. Abdallah-Krzepkowska (forthcoming), based on her ethnography of Polish online convert spaces, argues that for most converts, the "Salafi phase" is often superseded by a "mature Islam" phase that accommodates the complexities of Muslim life better.

All these considerations notwithstanding, for many Polish Muslims, including converts, internet forums and social media spaces provide a platform for cyber-community building (Górak-Sosnowska 2015) and a knowledge marketplace. Especially for those living in small towns and the countryside, the internet provides access to Islamic texts in Polish and English, scholars' interpretations and guidance, for example in the form of fatwas. Additionally, the network-building capacity enabled by the internet—interaction with other converts, as well as lifelong Muslims—in spaces oriented to Islam in general, and Polish Islam in particular, is invaluable.

Polish Islam-oriented online spaces have evolved technologically in parallel with online communication in general. In the 1990s, Poles' Islam-oriented internet use involved mIRC (a chatroom platform), ICQ (a one-to-one text communication platform), and email discussion groups. Especially mIRC enabled international text-based communication with people from all over the globe, and many first encounters with Muslims occurred there. Early, static websites provided access to Islamic content in English. In the 2000s, the first Polish Muslim blogs by women and for women emerged; for example, muzulmanki.blogspot.com (“muzulmanki” means “Muslim women” in Polish) or alejkumki.blogspot.com (alejkumki is a wordplay on the word *Allaikum*, in loose translation meaning “women who say Salaam Allaikum”). Both these blogs are now inactive, but still accessible; the latter one has resurfaced as a Facebook group. At first, Facebook's rise in Poland was slow, as in the 2000s, a Polish social networking platform Nasza Klasa (“Our Class”) that brought together people on the basis of their past elementary and secondary school assignments was the most popular. Some respondents mentioned that platform (now defunct) in interviews as a place where they found other Muslims and discussed Islam. Polish converts have always been enthusiastic about responding to threads on forums (Górak-Sosnowska 2015). Currently, Facebook is by far the most popular platform used by Polish converts to communicate via public or private groups (Homoncik 2018), but our respondents often mentioned YouTube. Instagram is popular mainly among Polish converts living outside of Poland.

Methodology

Polish converts to Islam are difficult to recruit for research participation. It is, therefore, difficult to gather reliable statistical data and ensure the representativeness of the research sample. A small group of converts serve as “Muslims on duty” in Poland; they frequently participate in research or give interviews (Rogowska 2017). Similarly, Harris and Hussein (2018, 1) commented on the existence of “everyday explainers” of Islam in Australia. However, in the case of Poland and other Eastern European countries, the reason behind the difficulties with recruitment is the very small size of the local Muslim community (with disproportionately intense interest in Islam and the resultant demand on Muslim research subjects). This kind of sampling bias might produce an illusion of group cohesion, a prevalence of a particular approach to Islam and uniformity of convert experiences. It should be, therefore, acknowledged that we might be unable to reach the less visible, “silent majority” of converts who locate their experiences in the private domain and do not want to participate in research (Amiraux 2006, 40). We made every effort to recruit women who represented diverse backgrounds (socioeconomic class, rural–urban location, Islamic affiliation) through personal networks, social media, public events, and snowballing. It is impossible to generalise from these findings to all Polish converts, however, we argue that they do provide a useful window into experiences of Muslim subjectivation. The main sources of our data are 35 qualitative interviews with Polish female converts conducted as a part of our research project between June 2018 and September 2019.

Literature dealing with Muslim converts and the internet often employs a form of a virtual ethnography, for example, van Nieuwkerk (2006) analysed 50 online conversion narratives to identify common scripts; Rhazzali (2015) analysed multiple websites that functioned like “conversion rooms,” assisting new Muslims-to-be throughout the conversion process;

² See (including the video): @farooi, *Twitter* post, February 18, 2019, 1:57 p.m., <https://twitter.com/farooi/status/1097480161715458053>.

Akou (2015) explored the role of online spaces devoted to Islamic fashion, such as online boutiques, review sites, YouTube channels, message boards. Piela (2015) analysed online Islamic forums populated by both lifelong Muslims and converts as sites of informal Islamic learning using the communities of practice framework. In contrast, this article uses narratives of internet use produced by the Polish female converts we interviewed, exploring the epistemological meaning-making frameworks that they deployed as religious internet users and subsequently reflected on in the interviews.

Participants were aged 24–60 (the mean age was 35) and included both recent converts as well as women who embraced Islam in the early 1990s. They lived in different regions of Poland (18 participants) and the UK³ (17 participants); two self-identified as Silesians (members of an ethnic minority in Poland) rather than Poles. Most women converted in Poland (23), while others converted in the UK (12). The UK-based Polish converts were first-generation migrants; they were permanently settled in the UK. Some participants were very active in Muslim organizations; others were active in informal convert groups. Although we attempted to achieve diversity in terms of education, class background, age, marital–parental status, and Islamic affiliation, we recognize that some groups, for example, rural women, are less represented in our sample.

The women we interviewed represented a broad range of Islamic affiliations. The majority did not identify with any school or branch of Islam, but some participants acknowledged that they gravitated towards a traditional, pietist interpretation of their faith framed by literalist readings of Qur’anic texts and the Sunnah (sometimes, but not always, describing themselves as Salafi). Others adopted a dynamic, context-based mode of engagement with the Islamic texts and traditions, commonly referred to as a progressive and–or liberal approach. Some of them explicitly self-identified as feminist, and–or leftist. Finally, a noticeable group embraced a form of Sufism, emphasizing the spiritual aspects of Islam.

³ The UK is home to the largest and best organised diaspora of Polish Muslims outside of Poland (estimates range from 2,000 to 4,000). For this reason, the UK, with a large population of lifelong Muslims and ethnic and cultural diversity provides a slightly different context for the Muslim subjectivation.

The interviews were carried out in locations chosen by our respondents—usually in their homes, or in public spaces, such as cafes, or parks. The interviews were semi-structured and followed a topic guide focused on participants' experiences of converting to Islam. We translated the interview transcripts into English. The participants signed an informed consent form, and they were assigned pseudonyms to protect their anonymity; the pseudonyms reflect the Polish or Arabic first names used by participants. We provide only sparse background information about participants with the quotations in order to preserve their anonymity within their small Muslim communities.

Findings

In the following section of the article, we use a framework for understanding the trajectory of individuals through different epistemological categories of knowledge developed by Belenky et al. (1986). Belenky and colleagues' reflection that epistemological assumptions of the women who participated in their research were intimately linked to their perceptions of themselves and their relationship to their world speaks to the narratives produced by the converts we interviewed.

From silence to received knowledge: Encountering Islam

Several respondents reminisced that they first encountered Islam in a variety of digital spaces. Angelika (UK) first heard about Islam from non-Muslim Poles:

I got interested in Islam in the 1990s. The internet was still a novelty in Poland, and I came across people who were discussing religions on a random online forum. I can't remember what it was called. That was my first encounter with Islam and Qur'an.

Czesława (UK) met a Muslim man on an online forum and in the course of the conversation, she slowly realized that her preconceptions about Islam

were largely inaccurate. Responding to the man's challenge to present him with three intellectual arguments against Islam, she immersed herself in online spaces where knowledge about Islam was accessible to beginners:

I was learning English and someone in a chat room directed me to Islam. They wanted to talk with me about religion, and I stated that religion was rubbish. I believe in God, not in religion, I didn't want to talk to them, and suddenly I heard "Islam." They asked what I believed in. And suddenly someone said: "It's a shame you don't want to listen about Islam, because you'd be a great Muslim." Me, a Muslim? I was offended, Muslims, Arabs, burkas, wars, terrorism, what's he on about? I didn't want to listen, but this man pestered me, sorry, he said he'd leave me alone if I could give him three solid arguments, why I thought Islam was evil. So, in order to find these arguments, I had to learn what Islam was. I started reading English-language websites and I realized, wow, that's what I believe in, that's what I've been looking for. And I pronounced my shahada three days later.

Amalia (UK), a religious studies graduate, was impressed by the trajectories of Polish Muslims she observed on an online forum before and after saying the shahada:

I joined an online group for Polish Muslims, and started exchanging thoughts with the women contributing there. That was five, six years ago, and that's how I began to get to know the sisters, I began to look at Islam in a way different to the schematic way they taught Islam at university, without those differences between different religions, definitions, schemas. I started learning about lived Islam, and that's how my friendship with Islam began [...] Even before I said the shahada I watched a lot of videos, I was inspired by [name of an activist]. She was so active in [online group for female Muslim converts]. She was my celebrity, my inspiration.

These three extracts stories illustrate individual embracement of the positions of received knower and subjective knower; they all identify

the period “before,” marked by a lack of awareness of Islam, one’s own prejudiced attitudes to Islam, or, notably, “schematic” academic knowledge of Islam. These could all be understood as a particular version of the silence position (Belenky et al. 1986) in the broadly understood religious and spiritual architecture of their lives. Czesława’s encounter with the man who challenged her on the online forum resulted not only in her identifying bodies of knowledge that allowed her to question her preconceptions about Islam; she immediately recognized that those beliefs were hers. In that sense, in the interview she constructed her identity as a Muslim even prior to saying the Shahada; the encounter merely enabled her to label her pre-existing beliefs.

Amalia’s story illustrates power struggles between what she saw as external knowledge about Islam and the lived truth of it (Danaher et al. 2000) which paved the path to her production of subjective knowledge about Islam, framed by her “friendship” with Islam itself and the emotional and intellectual impact of the activist from the local religious circles. As we see here, accessing different types of online religious content symbolically denotes transitions between different types of knower positions. For many, it is the saying of the shahada symbolically takes the individual out of the silence position into that of a received knower. For others, this is achieved through an encounter with one or more Muslims who can provide a connection between the doctrine and lived experiences of Islam. Many respondents were relying on “external authorities” to make sense of the origin and meaning of the new knowledge; at this stage, any ambiguity or internal conflict is intolerable as it is easier to accept absolute truths (Belenky et al. 1986).

The internet was mentioned as the main source of information on Islam at different stages of conversion, but particularly in the beginning. Daria (PL) said: “internet was my main source of information.” Websites such as the one mentioned below by Jadwiga (PL) are particularly useful at the received knower stage, as they provide simple, straightforward guidance for a convert. Other participants often echoed this biographical element.

Interviewer: At the time, in the beginning, when you were alone, where did you get the knowledge about everyday practices, what was the source?

Jadwiga (PL): Unfortunately, the internet. I found this website, www.newmuslims.com and it's not the worst website, everything is explained, the rules, and so on.

Interviewer: Where did you acquire deeper knowledge about Islam?

Bogumiła (UK): At the time, only off of the internet. Only the internet.

Interviewer: Was anything of help in acquiring knowledge and growing in the religion at that time or later?

Angelika (UK): Later, I found internet forums very helpful. All of the [Islam-oriented] internet. The internet helped a lot, and other Muslim women, of course.

At this point, most converts had a limited ability to recognize authoritative, reliable sources of knowledge. Marlena (PL) commented how very often new converts stumbled upon a particular mode of Islamic belief and practice, and accepted it wholesale, without an ability to recognize it as only one of many modes; she cited the sometimes-subtle differences between different schools of thought in Islam (*madhab*) as causing consternation for those unaware of interpretive and practical variations in Islam. Several women mentioned that the internet was a fount of information about Islam after their initial encounter which often happened by chance, during a stay abroad. Matylda (PL), a history of art student converted to Islam in Turkey, ten years prior to the interview, while visiting a friend who was in Istanbul on a student exchange. She reflected that online resources, mostly YouTube videos, helped her continue on her journey to Islam after her return to Poland, once the strong emotions triggered by saying the shahada subsided.

Matylda: I felt like I was the first Muslim woman in Poland. I had a sense of [...] illumination, but when I returned to Poland, I had to face the hard reality. I knew some stuff about Islam, but I couldn't pray. They showed me how to do it [in Turkey], but I had to learn from YouTube.

Embodied religious experiences are much harder to come by in absence of a Muslim community with its institutions and collective practices. Amalia said: "How did I learn to pray? The internet was my treasure trove. I was looking for videos, and I learnt to pray from YouTube." This quotation illustrates a dilemma encountered by Polish converts early on: some practices can only be properly learnt by doing (Speelman 2018), which makes the production of a religious subjectivity problematic in absence of a teacher or guide. YouTube was often mentioned by respondents as an entryway to comprehending and internalising the mechanics of the embodied prayer, salat, and eventually gaining mastery of it. The internet was often framed as a less desirable source of knowledge than personal interaction with an authoritative individual; however, limited access to Muslim communities left this as the only possible option, especially in the beginning of one's spiritual journey as a committed Muslim. Once more experienced, and with more connections to the community, the women became more selective about the answers to their questions, sometimes abandoning the internet as a knowledge source altogether, as the next sections show.

Developing subjective knowledge of Islam

However, becoming a Muslim encompasses more than adopting Islamic beliefs and practices. Redefining one's own identity, in a particular context where one is meshed into multiple social relationships, requires a great deal of work. The formation of a Muslim subjectivity means that they take on a more significant share of responsibility for their moral formation; in other words, they gradually begin to see themselves as an authority. For Stanisława (PL), Grono, a local social media network that is now defunct, inhabited some years ago by Polish converts provided a proof of sorts that "a Polish Muslim" was a feasible subject position:

When I was already quite into Islam, I felt the need to research how that could work in Poland. I wasn't even sure that it was possible to be a Pole and a Muslim. It was just so abstract. So I started looking [...] at the time there was a popular social network in Poland, Grono. There were groups there, Polish converts' groups, and that's where I read stuff. The first Muslim woman I met I originally came into contact with through Grono.

By reading people's online conversations, she was able to observe the lived reality of converts before accepting Islam herself. Even though she technically wasn't a Muslim yet, she was already carving out a path to a Polish Muslim selfhood. Once she was secure in the knowledge that it was a socially legitimate subject position, she was ready to embrace it. This quotation echoes Nai'ma Robert's autobiographical account (2005) of having to first overcome doubts about the compatibility of Islam with her Black identity; she only converted after discovering that Islam had a long and rich history in Africa, where her mother was from.

While websites offering Islamic content, such as www.newmuslims.com, were often mentioned as the beginning of the conversion journey, with time, the respondents usually managed to establish wider Muslim networks, which led to more targeted information exchanges. Some, like Matylda, mentioned meeting a more advanced "guide"—a peer convert who assisted them online throughout various challenges of conversion: "I knew her only virtually, I knew most people virtually. I really owe her this, she helped me find my way in Islam."

Internet was a great source for me. Later I met online a convert from France who was married to an Algerian. Thanks to her, I could understand Islam better. We had some differences, I'm more inclined toward Sufism, and she's more of a Salafi. (Danuta, UK)

While Matylda's and Danuta's statements indicate that they appreciated the virtual guidance of a fellow Muslim, they suggest that they eventually recognized the diversity of Islamic expressions and began to develop a more individualistic approach ("my way in Islam," "we had some differences").

Regular and comprehensive online interactions with other Muslims enable converts to position themselves in the broader Islamic milieu; as they encounter a robust variety of practices and interpretations, they are faced with making choices rooted in their own fledgling understandings, and, at least in part, personal preferences. These choices become sedimented into what Rogozen-Soltar (2020, 150) calls “religious feelings” that converts sense are correct *before* fully comprehending the logic of beliefs, practices, and injunctions. This observation dovetails with Belenky et al.’s (1986) characterization of the subjective stage of knowing as dependent on the development of an “inner voice” that allows women to make their own claims to truth and knowledge.

Procedural knowledge—critical approaches to the internet as a source of knowledge about Islam

With time, many converts who initially relied on the internet for Islamic education, gained enough knowledge and diverse perspectives to be able to recognize that not every website or scholar was suitable for them. In Belenky et al.’s model, the following extracts illustrate the procedural knowledge stage, whereby knowers acquire the mastery of procedures for evaluating the quality of knowledge. Methods and techniques for assessing the accuracy and authority are a central consideration. Maria talked about the differences between (presumably) Salafi-oriented content and content tailored to what she saw as European Islam. The ability to approach online religious content critically, rather than at face value, is an important step in the process of developing a contextualised, dynamic religious identity.

[...] yes, [I used] mostly the internet, and unfortunately, [I first came across] the very strict websites. Unfortunately, there are many websites that are directed at people who live in Arab countries, they do not take the European situation into account. These sites made me feel bad, because I read there that I shouldn’t do this or that, and that I was a bad Muslim. These days, I try to avoid it. (Maria)

Alicja (PL) explained about the procedures she employed to evaluate the accuracy of different sources, including checking the origins of claims and cross-checking between different sources:

I don't use the internet a lot because I don't believe in the internet a lot. There are a lot of distortions related to Islam online. I prefer to use reputable textual sources than read some strange online publications, from some unknown sources [...] [In the past] I was active on Islam-oriented forums, I asked questions and got answers. I met hundreds of people online, some of them I met in person. These connections are active to this day, they helped me understand things I couldn't figure out on my own. They helped me a lot, but I trusted only those I met face to face. I spoke to people on forums, but I took what they said with a pinch of salt, and I preferred to cross-check if different sources confirm their views. If they did, I knew it was true.

Each of these extracts represents a different variety of procedural knowledge, according to Belenky et al. (1986): Alicja's stance is characteristic of a connected procedural knower who emphasises the importance of context and personal experience in selecting and applying procedures. Procedural knowledge, although rarely leading to absolute truths, provides its bearers with intellectual tools that help them orient themselves to "objective truth." This, in turn, provides them with sufficient authority to communicate it to others, as it can be seen in the case of Barbara (UK):

Whenever I can, I try to share my knowledge, and sources that I know are good. That's possible mostly on internet forums, all I do is online, supporting and sharing resources with other Muslim women or potential Muslim women, who are interested in Islam.

Sharing resources with those interested in Islam constitutes *dawah*, or proselytization. The internet has long been a platform for Islamic *dawah*,

often utilised by Salafis (Olsson 2014) and minoritised groups such as queer or disabled Muslims (Piela and Krotofil 2021) who claim their belonging in the ummah and gain a voice in this way.

Negotiating global discourses: Moving between the margins and the centre

Digital spaces provide evidence that conceptual boundaries between “Polish” and “global” Islams are tenuous and porous. Participants create their individualized bricolages of knowledge based on the interrelated contexts which they inhabit. Allievi (1998, 220–221) calls this a “do-it-yourself-culture,” as the stage of conversion is followed by the phase of re-culturation, constituting a process of fusion occurring between various aspects of the local and the “Muslim” culture.

These days [in Poland] you can get halal products, order clothes online, meet people from the global ummah via social networks [...] it used to be harder, but now the world is our oyster. (Helena, PL)

Polish converts seek out fatwas published in English as the Polish fatwa bank is small, although it is useful as it situates rulings in the Polish context (Górak-Sosnowska 2015). English fluency is important, as English provides access to Anglophone Islamic discourse, and enables Polish converts to learn about Islam and communicate online with Muslims from other countries.

There used to be fewer Polish-language sources about Islam, and that motivated me to work on my English skills. I really improved, because I had a goal, I wanted to read specific stuff, rather than learn English for abstract reasons. And so I started using Anglophone internet sources. (Marlena)

Bogumiła felt that Polish-language online sources referencing Islam were more biased than Anglophone ones, which similarly motivated her to learn English:

I became interested in Islam and its tenets. And if you google “Polish Islam,” you’ll find only criticism and expletives. So, Alhamdulillah, I learnt English. When I started using English-language queries, I received entirely different results.

Marlena and Bogumiła recognized the limited usefulness of Polish-language online content about Islam, and remedied this problem by learning a new language, which, notably, was English, not Arabic (venerated in Islam as the original language of the Qur’an). Piela argues elsewhere (2012) that English is the online *lingua franca* for Muslims wishing to communicate beyond the boundaries of their linguistic communities. For Polish converts, English is still necessary to transcend both the constraints of Polish online content about Islam, as well as Polish Islam itself, which we described elsewhere as highly specific in terms of sociopolitical context and history (Krotofil et al. 2021, Krotofil et al. forthcoming).

Discussion and conclusions

This article contributes to the scholarly debates about the role of the internet in facilitating the creation and embracement of new religious subjectivities. It discusses this question in the contexts of relatively under-researched Polish and Eastern European Islam. In a sociopolitical sense, it complicates the stereotypical views of Poland as an exclusively Catholic country by addressing a small, yet growing population of Poles who abandon Catholicism in favour of another religion. We argue that, given the small size and dispersion of the Polish Muslim population, the internet plays a central role in the lives of converts to Islam.

The material presented in this article illustrates some key notions and logics that organize the Muslim subjectivation of Polish female converts to Islam. While their epistemic narratives are embedded in various networks of relationships with other Muslims and online Islamic content, individuality and autonomy are central in the process of becoming Muslim. The process of subjectivation is often mediated by the relationship to what our participants referred to as “Salafism,” “restrictive Islam,” or jokingly

borrowing from the Anglophone Muslim discourse, “haram police” (Karam 2019, 404). Abdallah-Krzepkowska (forthcoming) described new converts as “unconscious Salafis” who rely on literalist interpretations of Islam due to their need for clear instructions on how to be a Muslim and live a Muslim life. This is the stage of silence and received knowledge identified by Belenky et al. (1986); converts may experience a cognitive dissonance between Islamic prescriptions formulated in a rigid manner and their lived realities when, for example, there is no availability of *halal* meat in their area, or they experience harassment for wearing Muslim traditional clothing. Despite the central role the internet, and in particular, the Polish virtual *ummah*, plays in the life of the Muslim community, the internet is sometimes perceived as a hostile space rife with power play and judgment. Many participants described being shamed online by fellow converts for asking clarifying questions regarding Muslim bodily practices such as bodily hair management or the exact amount of coverage.

After the initial period, a small minority of converts evolve into “mature Salafis” (Abdallah-Krzepkowska, forthcoming) and move to a more welcoming environment, for example, a larger European or a Muslim-majority country. Most of those who remain in their local environment, develop a more localised Islamic perspective that relies on constant negotiations between flexible interpretations of Islam and their sociocultural location. In Belenky et al.’s model, this is the subjective model phase. A smaller subset of converts reaches the final phase: procedural knowledge. This involves a certain mastery of Islamic concepts and substantial experience of their lived applications. They often become educators (not necessarily formal): in face-to-face settings, they may lead study groups and give public talks about Islam; in online settings, they produce their own Islamic content in the form of blog posts, Instagram posts, and YouTube or TikTok videos. These converts are active producers of Islam-oriented online content in the Polish language, which reaches those who are not fluent in English or Arabic, thus democratising access to Islam in a context where having foreign language skills or the ability to read academic-level texts is a sign of class privilege.

Each of these stages of learning how to be Muslim corresponds to a different phase of forming a Muslim subjectivity that may be externalised through visible practices, but equally importantly, ultimately enables the convert to make confident decisions regarding how they interpret Islam in their everyday life. Subjective and procedural knowledges provide the ability to be selective in judging which interpretive approaches to Islam are most realistic to them as socially situated Muslims. In other words, with increased knowledge and experience such as narrated by the participants, comes the agency to form and articulate a Muslim subjectivity aligned with individual predispositions and structural affordances and limitations.

Converts engage with “different internal and external voices, giving prominence to some and silencing others” (Krotofil 2011, 166). This study suggests an important difference between the Polish and Western European converts. The former do not necessarily seek authenticity in order to align themselves with lifelong Muslims (Moosavi 2012); it appears that it was more important for our respondents to align with other, more experienced, Polish converts on issues of beliefs and their day-to-day application. Elsewhere (Piela and Krotofil forthcoming) we argue that this all-Polish clustering, which in some context could be described as self-segregation, is only partially explained by the small number of Muslims of minority (ethnic, immigrant, non-white) backgrounds in Poland or the preference of Polish converts to collectively create a “Polish Islam” (Krotofil et al., forthcoming). Exclusively Polish convert communities are likely to be white spaces in which “white culture of solidarity” (Bonilla-Silva (2010, 104) thrives. White culture of solidarity relies on drawing (often unspoken) boundaries between the white self and the racial Other. Thus, for example, Polish converts, especially those living in the UK and/or married to non-white Muslims often reject “culturally-tainted” Islam which they see as “too South Asian” or “North African,” creating a racial hierarchy within the *ummah* (Piela and Krotofil forthcoming).

The internet simultaneously reinforces mainstream regulatory Islamic discourses produced by scholars, thus strengthening their authority, and opens new discursive spaces within which Muslim women from varied

backgrounds study Islamic and discuss sources (Piela 2012). It is a space where knowledges can be absorbed, tested, reproduced, and questioned. This article, and its central argument that Muslim subjectivity is intimately related to these stages, complicates religious conversion debates that hinge on investigating reasons for conversion and, in the case of women, on patriarchal narratives suggesting that marriage is the main reason and interpretative frame for the experience of female conversion.

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Review:

Stein, Rebecca L. 2021. *Screen Shots: State Violence on Camera in Israel and Palestine*. Stanford University Press.

Omneya Ibrahim

Abstract

Screen Shots takes an ethnographic approach to explore the visual history of the Israeli military occupation of Palestinian territories and the different roles photography played within the decades-long conflict. Choosing to forgo the usual route of exploring the impact of photos on social activism, the author focused instead on how easily images can be utilized as tools of colonialism supporting the occupation; a unique viewpoint offering readers a more comprehensive understanding of the function of photography as a political placeholder in modern age. Although Screen Shots attempts to showcase a solid overview of the Palestinian-Israeli conflict through images for over more than two decades, it still comes short in terms of balance in revealing real-life experiences of snapping photos for political purposes from both sides.

Keywords

Photography, Digital Photography, Palestinian-Israeli Conflict, State Violence, Israeli Military Occupation, Middle East, Civilian Photography, Digital Activism, Social Media

Rebecca L. Stein's *Screen Shots* comes amidst a highly sensitive period of escalation in the Israeli–Palestinian conflict in 2021. Although the conflict itself has gone on for decades, 2021 marked various unprecedented large-scale incidents from protests and police riot control, rocket attacks on Israel by Hamas, and Israeli airstrikes targeting civilians in the Gaza Strip. These incidents started with uprising protests in East Jerusalem that quickly spread to all Palestinian territories and even triggered mass protests around the world. Soon after, it became a full-on war between Israel and Hamas, and after 11 days of continuous attacks that left more than two hundred people dead, both sides agreed to cease fire on May 21 while both claiming victory (Cai et al. 2021). Simultaneously, as *Screen Shots* went to press, the Black Lives Matter protests against police violence were reigniting the interest in the bystander camera as a tool of social change and putting an end to state violence. *Screen Shots* explores the role of civilian photography in politics, while chronicling the photographic timeline of Israeli state violence in the occupied Palestinian territories during the first two decades of the 21st century.

In an attempt to capture the gaze of both sides from Palestinian activists and human rights workers to Israeli soldiers and Jewish settlers, Stein manages to propose a comprehensive visual historical context of the Israeli military occupation; a context that goes back to the early years of consumer digital photography in the 2000s and extends to the current era of social media proliferation. Throughout the book chapters, one can clearly observe the comparison held between the role and impact of state violence images taken with rudimentary digital cameras by Israeli soldiers or Palestinian witnesses in the early 21st century, and newer ones currently taken in abundance by cellphones. Contrary to most current claims about digital activism and utilizing new technologies and social media for social change, and in an attempt to let go of the digital optimism or utopianism that was a product of the Arab revolts almost a decade ago, Stein shows the other side of the coin; focusing on the close relationship between colonialism and technology and investigating how the Israeli occupation sets to benefit from the current shifts in the

media ecosystem and use social media as a toolbox for supporting the occupation.

It is often thought that new technologies are almost organically suited for grassroots prodemocracy movements, however, *Screen Shots* takes a different stand and asks whether the current presence of cellphone cameras at the scenes of state violence and our anticipation of the visual evidence of such incidents are somehow normalizing these scenes as we are growing accustomed to the sights of killings. Stein investigates what she calls the “digital promise”; further elucidating that the promise of new photographic technologies offering clearer pictures with better details in real-time will somehow aid different parties in achieving their political dreams. The book follows how different actors including the Israeli military, Israeli soldiers, Jewish settlers, pro Zionists, Palestinian witnesses, and Israeli and Palestinian human rights workers, each on their own, manage these modern photographic technologies to realize this camera dream or digital promise.

From Israeli soldiers practicing on taking photos to perfect the military’s image, to human rights activists capturing soldiers killing civilians, to Zionist conspiracy theorists accusing Palestinians of playing dead in photos, *Screen Shots* delves deep into the visual history of all these players. In the author’s chronicles of the Israeli state violence photographs, Stein succeeds in vividly demonstrating the function of photography as a political placeholder during the past two decades. She focuses on image operations and visual practices concerning the same topic, but through different lenses of a broad range of actors and institutions. From her viewpoint, readers explore how different actors share the same dream of using photos and photographic technologies to lobby for their own political agenda.

The book’s first chapter “Sniper Portraits” comes through the lens of the Israeli soldiers whose jobs—set by the military—were clear: to take photos that combat the bad images of Israel playing on TV sets across the globe and strip the Palestinians from the visual field, replacing

them with the military's gaze instead. As Stein puts it: "in the hands of the Israeli sniper, even the simple Fujifilm camera was also a tool of occupation." She then moves to chronicling the experiences of Palestinian videographers and camera-activists working in the occupied West Bank as well as Israeli videographers working with the Israeli NGO "B'Tselem" (the Israeli Information Center for Human Rights in the Occupied Territories), and the continuous risks they had to endure to visually capture Israeli state violence.

Unpacking the perspective of Jewish settlers, she highlights the conspiracy theories utilized by these groups to counterattack state violence images and normalize such acts; from claims that killings did not happen because blood was not looking dark enough to allegations that funerals were not authentic. The continuous flood of allegations is now anticipated and expected whenever Israeli violence against Palestinians is captured on camera, to the point that bloggers argue that any new surfacing video, depicting wrongdoings by Israel, is presumed to be fake until proven otherwise beyond unreasonable doubt. All this contributed to images of dead or injured Palestinians being seen and treated as mere weapons in a war against Israel instead of being taken as evidence of awfully paramount human rights violations.

The book also explores the Israeli military's evolving media strategies to counterattack citizen photography uncovering Israeli wrongdoings in the Palestinian occupied territories and its end goal of monopolizing the visual coverage of occurring events. As Israeli officials witness with concern the proliferation of cameras and cellphones in the hands of Palestinians and human rights activists, particularly in the digital media era, they are constantly attempting to narrow the gap by acquiring new cameras and setting a surveillance infrastructure, so the world can get to only see their representations of occurring incidents, in lieu of these of Palestinian citizens or human rights workers and institutions.

Although Stein offers her readers a solid overview of state violence photos in the Israeli–Palestinian conflict, through different lenses, the

book still lacks balance in terms of showcasing real-life experiences from both sides. Only one chapter covers in detail the Palestinian visual experience in regards to shooting and distributing state violence images, with the rest of the book chapters solely following the Israeli experience, whether represented in Israeli soldiers, B'Tselem NGO and its activist workers, Jewish settlers, or the military. Dedicating more space to discussing the Palestinian viewpoint of how the occupied country's citizens are using photos to make their case would have granted readers further significant insights into the issue.

Additionally, even though the book focuses on the broken camera dream and chasing the digital promise of using photos and technologies to realize political agendas; a promise that—according to the author—often ends up in failure, it could have also touched upon incidents where the other opposing narrative of digital activism for social or political change proved successful. Nevertheless, *Screen Shots* offers readers an unorthodox outlook on the modern ideological battlefield; a battlefield where photography and images are employed as weapons that are as salient and potent as tanks and soldiers, or even more so.

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Review:

O'Neil, Cathy. 2016. *Weapons of Math Destruction: How Big Data Increases Inequality and Threatens Democracy*. Crown.

Michaela Slussareff

Abstract

The book Weapons of Math Destruction: How Big Data Increases Inequality and Threatens Democracy provides a very important point of view on the mathematical models and algorithms used for decision-making in our society. As the title suggests the author sees the possible dangerous influences of algorithms used for the specific groups in the society as huge and disastrous. The book describes the mechanism and functioning of mathematical models and algorithms in a comprehensible manner. It uses practical examples of various mechanisms commonly used in today's society. The main aim of the book is to break the myths about the mathematical models and their results, mainly the widespread beliefs about the algorithms as being fair, objective, and unbiased.

Keywords

mathematical models, algorithms, big data, social mechanisms, social divide

The book *Weapons of Math Destruction: How Big Data Increases Inequality and Threatens Democracy* outlines the main problems of the use and abuse of mathematical models and big data in our society. The title refers to the main thesis of the book, that mathematical models and algorithms used for the fundamental decision-making and management of institutions and societies, can be dangerous mainly for their opacity, scale, and possible damage caused by their wide use. The author presents this premise with very practical examples. After the short introduction to the math science of big data (Chapter 1, *Bomb parts: What is a model?*; Chapter 2, *Shell shocked: My journey of disillusionment*), the main chapters invite us to the world of schools and colleges (Chapter 3, *Arms race: Going to college*), courts (Chapter 5, *Civilian casualties: Justice in the age of big data*), workplaces (Chapter 6, *Ineligible to serve: Getting a job*; Chapter 7, *Sweating bullets: On the job*), banks (Chapter 8, *Collateral damage: Landing credit*; Chapter 9, *No safe zone: Getting insurance*) and civic life (Chapter 3, *Propaganda machine: Online advertising*; Chapter 10, *The targeted citizen: Civic life*).

Not only does the book use practical examples and deeply respects the popular science style, it is easily readable and understandable despite the difficulty of the mathematical concepts outlined. For instance, the mathematical models are metaphorically described based on the everyday experience of the author as she decides what to cook for dinner within her large family based on “data” presenting the preferences of each family member as well the data about current food, changing tastes, and special events. This example uncovers the main disadvantage of the book as well. It sometimes simplifies the issue of big data and algorithms exceedingly. For this reason, it should not be recommended to readers with a background in mathematics and/or big data science.

Indeed, the main aim of the book is to break the myths about mathematical models and their results. O’Neil attacks the widespread beliefs about the algorithms as being fair, objective, and unbiased. Throughout the book, she presents them as black boxes with poor proxies to abstract human behaviour. She highlights that “models are opinions expressed in mathematics” (or computer code), but we tend to forget this as any mathematical model

seems to be more objective than any human involved in the process of evaluating teacher qualities, capabilities to pay a loan, be a good employee, et cetera.

Throughout the book, we encounter many individual cases of people trapped in dangerous feedback loops as the evaluation systems of algorithms in various institutions actually make it harder for them to advance and improve their lives. It is a single mother of a cancer child failing repeatedly trying to find a flexible job, a young man with mild psychological problems unable to break the barricade of “well standardised” psychological tests preceding the job interviews, and many other people of various ethnicity, zip codes, and income level that discriminate them from quality work, study, and financial opportunities. The problem with actual systems using the mathematical models to serve an institution in the age of big data is that their feedback loops feed them back. If the bank model labels poor people with bad credit, it becomes more difficult for them to get a loan and they become even more unable to pay their instalments. Reinforced police patrols in the poor neighbourhoods arresting people for small crimes again and again confirm the assumption of the great functionality of the model. Nevertheless, some more serious crimes in unexpected contexts can be overseen as the model does not count on them. The same can be said within other examples, for-profit schools, banks, employers’ strategies. The author states that being poor in such a world becomes more dangerous and expensive. At the same time, from the perspective of the rich, the world is a safer and more comfortable place.

The author claims that “the mathematical models need to be a tool, not a master.” The mathematical models are described as opinions expressed in mathematics (or computer code). That is not necessarily a problem. The problem rises while we start to blindly use them for decision-making in crucial situations (and) in an uncontrollable manner. Unfortunately, the author does not offer a solution. The final chapter tries to bring up some thoughts for the future, but they are rather general than constructive. Basically, the author claims that we need better values in the algorithms. The created models should meet our ethical standards, putting fairness

ahead of the profit. The author proposes that the need for ethical design can be translated into a variant of the Hippocratic oath for the designers of such models and mechanisms. The second point of the author is that we need positive feedback loops (insights from “the other side,” such as in students’ evaluations of teachers or the 360 evaluating process) so the models can be improved to serve better to the society as whole.