Ehab Galal

# Where has the authority gone?
# New imperatives and audience research

> Shared, mediated experiences come to define the terms and outlines of social and political discourse. Through such trends, *culture* increasingly functions with a kind of autonomy that is in many ways unprecedented. At the same time, practices of religion are changing, with *individuals* assuming more responsibility for the direction of their own spiritual quests. Through their "seeking", the influence and legitimacy of formal religions of all kinds has increasingly come into question. The *power of legitimation* is more and more in the hands of the seeker as she looks to a wider and wider range of sources and contexts – beyond the traditional ones – for religious or spiritual insight. This has all served to center the media in these trends and in our understanding of them. (Hoover 2006: 2)

This quote from the introduction to Stewart Hoover's book *Religion in the Media Age* (2006) points to a number of aspects that characterises media's role in the individual believer's pursuit of religious meaning today. First, traditional and formal religious institutions are increasingly challenged by the media as an alternative place that can provide believers with resources for making meaning of faith. Second, it is up to the believer and media user more than ever to navigate and negotiate the many offers currently available. Third, accessible mediated symbolic resources are no longer restricted to one religious context or authority, but are embedded in not only different religions and different transnational, national and local contexts, but also in different media genres. All of these changes are important in understanding the relationship between audiences and mediated religion.

This volume explores part of this relationship by examining how Arab audiences respond to religion in Arab media. The focus is on mediated religion as it is *transnationally and globally* practiced and consumed by Arabic-speaking audiences. The chapters of this book explore how Arab Muslims and Christians in different contexts make use of religious, cultural, and political narratives offered by Arab media to construct ideas about believing and belonging within and across national borders. The volume presents six case studies examining audiences from various perspectives offered by scholars with different research interests and theoretical approaches to the Arab audiences. In terms of both theory and analysis, the approaches employed in these contributions are cross disciplinary and qualitative. In order to introduce the theoretical and analytical

approaches that frame these contributions, I discuss the role and position of religion in the media along with the dynamics of the media-audience relationship in this chapter.

## Mediated religion in Arab media

Religion has always an omnipresent topic in the media. However, the ways in which the media addresses religion differs widely across nations and across public and private media. In general, though, media researchers tend to agree that over the last twenty to thirty years, religion has become an increasingly popular subject (Clark 2007; Hoover 1997, 2006). Terms like re-sacralization or re-enchantment of public spheres have been suggested and refer to the current presence of religion in primarily western media as reflecting a *return* of religion into the public sphere. The use of the term 're-enchanting' of the public challenges Weber's idea of a disenchanted public as result of modernisation (Martín-Barbero 1997; Murdock 1997). The term re-sacralization likewise refers to the return of the sacred or holy to the public – contrary to modernisation's assignation of the sacred to traditional religious institutions and private spheres. The introduction of concepts such as re-sacralization or re-enchantment reflects an interest in the position of religion in public spheres and hence in the media.

One may, however, question the emphasis on the 'return'-perspective, claiming that religion has always been present in the media, but in different ways. It is precisely these 'different ways' that are the focus of my attention. Although analyses and discussions of re-sacralization or re-enchantment have mainly derived from the specific processes of secularism and post-secularism in western countries (cf. Clark 2002; Mitchell & Marriage 2003), in Arab countries similar – but different – changes have also been prevalent. Since the 1950s, a number of Arab states have restricted religious programming to Koran recitations and Friday prayers as a way of legitimising their own authoritarian power. By clearly demarcating the Koran recitations and Friday prayers from other media programmes and by observing prescribed ritual times, these broadcasts mirror traditional institutionalised religious practices. Thus, it was not the kind of dramatic shift in public religion that Hoover suggests in the quote given at the introduction of this chapter. Over time, however, religion has been succeeded in obtaining new spaces in Arab media due to a number of political, technological and social factors. Koran recitations and Friday prayers have been met with competition from a wide variety of different religious programming from religious teaching to reality shows. Some of these are broadcasted by 'ordinary' channels that embrace both religious and non-religious programming. Others are broadcasted by

the numerous religious channels that have been introduced since the late 1990s. It is also important to note that religious issues and language have also gained ground in non-religious programming. The factors behind this development are manifold. The islamisation of society and public institutions has frequently been cited to explain this trend. While this is surely an important factor, it cannot be separated from the general social development of better educated and more individualised audiences and the advent of and access to new technologies that free the individual from traditional dominant discourse communities (Eickelman and Anderson 1999). Furthermore, the gradually loss of state monopolies over television has resulted in increased liberalisation of Arab media. In addition the growing economic and cultural influence of Saudi Arabia and of Gulf State media tycoons has helped make them important players in the Arab media market (Sakr 2001).

In order to understand the position of religion in Arab media, I focus on three developments. First, I point to the influence of satellite TV on the emergence of new religious channels and programming. The audiences' relation to such channels and programmes are a point of reference in the first four chapters of this volume. As such, the following section provides important contextual background information. The second development of note is that religion has also gained new attention in more popular media genres such as drama series and cinema, a trend which is examined in the last two chapters. Finally, as a result of these two developments, the media has become a battlefield for political and religious positioning vis-à-vis different antagonists, which is a subject in all the chapters to varying degrees.

## Arab religious satellite media

An irrefutable aspect of the recent development of satellite media is the intensified transnational character of media production and media circulation; transnational refers here to extending or operating across national boundaries. Compared to previous national monopolies of radio and television production, almost all kinds of media are today influenced by transnationality, whether in terms of ownership, production, transmission, circulation, or as sources for local media. Arab media have also become transnational, not only in their reach but also in their ownership and language. According to the Arab League report from 2013, today there are more than 1,320 television satellite channels broadcasted by Arab satellites and among these, 168 are state owned and 1,152 are private. 16 television satellite channels are owned by non-Arab states broadcasting in Arabic (Itihad izaʿat al-Dewwal al-ʿArabiya 2013: 20–22). Arab channels transmit via

twelve satellites covering most of the planet (ibid.: 27). Among the Arab satellite channels, there are also about 135 Islamic channels including Sunni as well as Shia Islam (ibid.: 24). However, the majority of the Islamic channels are Sunni. There are also Christian channels offering full-time religious TV.

This development reflects a shift from national monopolies of TV and radio that promoted secular nationalism in which the key role of religion was to support the cultural and moral order of the national imagined community (Abu-Lughod 2005; Rugh 2004). The growing liberalisation of Arab media – to the extent it exists – has supported the emergence of new private media and among these, satellite channels (Sakr 2001). Thus, in the 1990s, a number of Arab satellite channels were launched. Not only were satellite channels introduced by many Arab states, but private initiatives were also commenced – primarily by Saudi princes and businessmen with close connections to the Saudi regime. These included *MBC* (Middle East Broadcasting Center, 1991), *ART* (Arabic Radio and Television, 1993), *Orbit* (1994) and *Rotana* (1995). Since the 1990s new channels have mostly been launched under the umbrella of the large pan-Arab broadcasting groups previously mentioned, thus further consolidating their position. With the establishment of *al-Jazeera* in Qatar in 1996, the Arab media field became even more diverse due to the channel's critical news coverage, which has made it popular all over the world (Mellor et al. 2011). From the very beginning, one of *al-Jazeera's* most popular programmes was the religious programme *al-Sharia wa al-Hayat* [Sharia and the life] with the religious scholar Yusuf al-Qaradawi giving answers on basis of Islam to all kinds of questions from the audiences. Without doubt, the success of this programme has inspired others, and the fatwa programme did also get a central place in the Islamic channels that soon became part of the satellite development.

New channels that define themselves as Islamic offer what they themselves define in general terms as 'universal values' based on Islam (Galal 2012). These Islamic channels are characterised by being almost exclusively financed and produced by Arab businessmen, business consortia or financial companies. The first Islamic Arab satellite channel, *Iqraa* (Read)[1], was launched in 1998 by ART. The media group ART consists of several thematic channels, (with *Iqraa* as the only Islamic one) and is owned by Saudi businessman and multi-millionaire Saleh Kamel. Hence, most Islamic satellite channels do not stem from religious institutions or organisations, but from multiple business interests with a sharp eye for market

---

1    Iqraa is the imperative of the word 'to read' which was the first word revealed to the prophet Muhammad according to the Islamic tradition.

share, and thus for audience behaviour and interests. While Islamic satellite television appears to be considered a good business investment by many, most low-cost Islamic websites and pamphlet literature are published by religious institutions or associations. Additionally, most Arab-Christian satellite channels have been launched by churches or religious associations, not media corporations.

As a reaction to the events of September 11, the Islamic channel *al-Majd* was launched in 2003 and later expanded with a number of channels under the common name *al-Majd*. The owner is a Saudi investment company owned by Abd al-Rahman Ashmemri together with other partners. In 2006, *al-Resalah* [The message] was launched by Saudi prince al-Walid bin Talal, who is managing director of 'Kingdom Holding Company.' Another Saudi businessman, Osama Kadasa, was behind several channels (e.g. *Khalijia TV* and *al-Baraka*). In these cases, the owners are Saudi, but businessmen from other Arab countries have also founded Islamic satellite channels. *Al-ʿAfasi* was launched in 2005 by Kuwaiti businessman and religious scholar Mishari bin Rashed al-ʿAfasi. Likewise, *Tiba TV* was launched by a Kuwaiti investor in 2007. *Al-Najah* was started in 2006 by Jordanian businessman, Salah Salih al-Rashed. In Egypt *al-Nas* and *al-Rahma* are officially headed by Egyptian religious scholars promoting an Islamic way of life, but are funded by businessmen. For instance, *al-Nas* is funded by Saudi businessman Mansour bin Kidsa. Due to the more restrictive media laws in countries such as Kuwait and Saudi Arabia, some businessmen establish religious satellite channels with the Egyptian satellite provider *Nilesat*. The motive of obtaining higher revenue makes *Nilesat* agree to a more liberal channel policy and thus offers competition to other Arab satellite providers.

Most of the Islamic channels claim that they are apolitical in relation to internal political affairs (Galal 2011b). However, together with the Muslim Brotherhood channel, *Misr25,* al-Nas, al-Rahma and al-Hafez TV were closed down by the Egyptian military power after the removal of president Morsi on 3 July 2013. Their channelling of emotions and mobilization supporting the Muslim Brotherhood president Morsi and political Islam was obviously a thorn in the side of the military. While *al-Rahma* was only closed down for a short period, the Muslim Brotherhood tried to launch a new channel, *Ahrar25* [Liberators25], for a short time in Egypt. But this was not allowed, and now they broadcast *Rabʿa TV* and *Mekamillin TV* [We continue] from Turkey.[2]

---

2   Other channels established by brotherhood sympathisers through non-Arab satellites are al-Sharʿia [Legitimate], al-Sharq [The East], al-Midan [The square], and Misr al-An [Egypt now]. They can all be seen in the Middle East by satellite dish and internet.

Launching and shutting down channels not only reflects the continuous at-
tempts by Arab regimes to control media and audiences' access to media, but also
how different groups or individuals try to influence public debates of political
changes. Thus, *Misr25*, whose name refers to Egypt [Misr] and the date of the
Egyptian revolution (25 January 2011), was launched shortly after the Egyptian
Revolution of 2011. When compared with other Arab countries such as Iraq or
Tunisia, the situation is no better. In both countries, many television channels
were closed down by the state. In Iraq, ten television channels were shut down in
2013, followed by a few more in 2014. In Tunisia, the state closed down different
television and radio channels to a lesser degree since the Arab Spring of 2011.
Most recently in Tunisia, nine mosques, an Islamic radio and a television channel
were shut down in July 2014. According to the government, they were shut down
due to the killing of fourteen soldiers by some terrorists.

*Iqraa*, *al-Resalah*, *al-Majd* group, *al-Nas* and *al-Rahma* have often been men-
tioned as the most popular among Islamic satellite channels (Galal 2012). In
this volume, the first four chapters also refer to audiences' use of Sunni religious
channels and programmes. The most popular – of those mentioned – can be
characterised as having Salafi aspirations dominated by a Gulf state and Saudi
conservative Salafi tradition. However, Salafi is a broad term denoting the idea
of going back to the early tradition of the Prophet Muhammad and his follow-
ers and to the Koran and Hadith[3] as a basis for interpretation. Thus, in reality
the Salafi trend may actually have many variations. What they have in common,
though, is what Oliver Roy has defined as a privatisation of religion through
economic liberalism that emphasises individual re-islamisation (Roy 2004: 53).
Like Hoover in the beginning of this chapter, Roy too argues that with islami-
sation, religiosity has become the responsibility of the individual, partly de-
pending on the premises of the religious market (ibid.). Seen in this perspective,
Islamic channels offer symbolic resources to the individual Muslim in order to
help him or her become a true believer instead of offering political solutions to
societal problems. The question is then: What kind of programmes and symbolic
resources do Islamic channels offer their audiences?

The programming on the most popular channels is characterised by a vari-
ety of different programmes that reflect how the Islamic perspective is trans-
lated into media practices. One group of programmes is based on traditional
religious practices that have been moved from an institutional platform into the

---

3    Hadith refers to the record of the traditions or sayings of the Prophet Muhammad
     (Encyclopaedia Britannica).

media. These kinds of programmes focus on interpretations and recitations of Islamic traditions (Koran, Hadith and Sunna[4]) and are thus a substitute for what could otherwise be found in a mosque or by approaching a Muslim scholar. On *al-Rahma* TV, a well-known programme is the *Usul al-Sunna* [Principles of al-Sunna] with Sheikh Muhammad Hassan, and another is *Usul al-Fiqh* [Principles of jurisprudence] with Muhammad abd al-Wahid. Most channels also broadcast so-called fatwa programmes. On Iqraa, one of these is *Fatawi Ramadan* with Abd Allah al-Muslih. The biggest difference of these programmes when compared to traditional religious institutions is that they provide access to many more different interpretations and interpreters. Another popular group of programmes includes talk shows, contests, health programmes and many others, which I characterise as lifestyle programmes because they address daily life and its challenges. One example from *al-Resalah* TV is *'Ish bibasata* [Live simple]. The programme focuses on young people and philosophical thinking. Through discussions of different topics related to younger generations, the programme tries to bridge the gap between the classical philosophical way of thinking and its complicated language with the modern mentality and the kind of language used by the younger generations. On *Iqraa*, the programme *'Ish illahza* [Live your minute] with *Mustafa Husny* focuses on how young people in particular should live happily by being close to God's call to human beings and understanding him. This group of programmes shares an emphasis on how to live a good and righteous life in accordance with Islam and how Islam helps the individual face life's obstacles. A third, minor group of programmes are those without a specifically Islamic frame of reference. Such programmes may include news, sports, documentaries or shows on social, economic or labour market issues. For instance, *al-Rahma* TV broadcasts educational programmes to secondary school students on subjects ranging from English and Arabic languages, physics and mathematics to geology. Iqraa broadcasts general interests shows such as *Matbakhik* [Your kitchen]. Although not explicitly Islamic, these programmes are carefully chosen to promote either ethical or traditional Arab values.

## Religion in Arab mainstream media

Despite the tendency to make specific religious channels or programmes, religion also appears to have become a greater part of a general entertainment and consumer culture. Not only does religious programming make use of popular

---

4    Sunna refers to the body of traditional social and legal custom and practice of the Islamic community (Encyclopaedia Britannica).

media genres such as lifestyle programmes, but also popular media genres in-
cluding movies, TV drama series, cartoons, reality TV, and television contests, all
of which increasingly include religious themes or figures (Clark 2007; Ginsberg,
Abu-Lughod & Larkin 2002a; Meyer & Moors 2006). In Arab cinema, religion
has always been present, but as argued by Abu-Lughod (2005) and Shafik (2007),
the place of religion has been to support the national secular imagination. With
processes of islamisation and new religious programming, religion has become
an increasingly more popular topic in mainstream media, resulting in a popular
culture that mixes religious symbols, rituals and semantics with media genres
developed outside religion. Thus, audiences are introduced to new platforms for
practicing religion by consuming programmes that are framed as popular media
genres (e.g. contests), but the content confirming participants' religious identity.
In the Islamic context, contests on Koran recitation or spiritual beauty of Mus-
lim women are examples of these genres (cf. Galal 2010). Religion thus becomes
a consumer good alongside other consumer goods that construct alternative
spaces to traditional religious institutions for religious practices. Many of these
programmes propagate a modern and individualised approach to being Muslim
as something one needs to 'achieve' through practice (Galal 2009).

## Publics and counter publics

Not surprisingly, these mixtures of semantics and diversity in religious prac-
tices have led to an ever more vocal struggle over religious positions, places
and representations. In his study of cassette-recorded Islamic sermons, Charles
Hirschkind (2006) argues that they are used to create an Islamic counter public
that is ethical rather than political defined. The preachers assert that the West-
ern popular culture is contrary to Islamic values; their cassette sermons offer
another kind of public (Hirschkind 2006). Islamic channels also present them-
selves as offering an alternative to Western and secularised culture. Additionally,
they emphasise that the global, Western dominated picture of Islam is distorted
and they work to present a true picture of Islam (Galal 2012). With the excep-
tion of *Iqraa*, no other Islamic channel was launched before the terrorist attacks
of September 11, and the number of new channels grew significantly after the
Danish Muhammad cartoon crisis of 2006. Without being able to prove a direct
casual relation between these events and the increase in number of channels, it
appears clear that these channels see themselves as working to correct the dis-
torted picture of the prophet Muhammad and Islam. This positioning between
an Islamic and a Western-influenced culture is just one aspect of the field of
mediated Islam. Different self-appointed or institutionally associated religious

authorities also struggle over legitimacy and may question each other's authority in public. The media owner may have a position to defend, as may the regime who accepts the broadcast. The media owner might have considerations to make alongside his business interests, and as mentioned, the regime might close down channels for political reasons. Furthermore, most Arab regimes actively censor media products such as film and TV to a much greater degree than print media. When it comes to religious content, regimes censor programmes with the help of traditional religious institutions. Thus, the continuous struggle and fragmentation among traditional institutional authorities, characterises mediated religion in the Arab media. Audiences are invited to participate in the negotiations of true religion and what it means to be Muslim (or Christian) by choosing from among the many programmes, religious authorities and interpretations. This audience participation is the main focus of this volume. The guiding questions are as follows: Who are the Arab audiences? How do they navigate and make sense of the abundance of symbolic resources offered by the diverse range of competing programmes and genres?

## Watching religious channels and programmes: fragmented audiences

The development, history, circulation and content of religious channels and religious programming have been gradually gaining more research attention. However, very little has been published on Arab audiences and the relationship between mediated religion in Arab media and its viewers worldwide. In spite of the widely held acknowledgment that the effect of media has to be understood in the encounter between media discourse and audience responses (Hoover 2006; Morley 1980; Hall 1992), Arab television audiences frequently appear to be perceived as a passive, impressionable and homogenous mass. Since the majority of publications on Arab transnational media – particularly satellite television – focuses on programme content, the economic and political gains of television production, or the democratic potential of a civic Arab public, very little is known about the relationships among different channels, their programming, and their audiences. Rikke Haugbølle criticises these studies for having a media-centric focus (Haugbølle 2013). This is even truer for the religious programming, which has remained underexamined until now.

In general, existent knowledge about Arab audiences suffers from a lack of accurate audience measurement systems for TV and audited circulation (Project Team 2010: 21). Speaking of a typical or characteristic Arab audience is extremely difficult, given the fact that the Arab audiences are fragmented 'across a region

of approximately 7.5 million square kilometres, a population of over 250 million people and an extensive number of spoken dialects' (ibid.: 43), as well as major differences, when it comes to literacy, living conditions and generational divides. Market-based studies do, however, give us some general information. In the Arab world, television is still the most popular media outlet despite the global trend towards other platforms. This is supported by a study of audience habits in Egypt and Saudi Arabia, which shows that the average number of hours spent watching television did not change between 2009 and 2012 (Project Team 2012: 41). Furthermore, satellite is a much more popular television platform in these countries than in the international television market (ibid.: 43). As for viewership, the larger satellite channels like *Rotana*, *al-Jazeera* and *MBC* are the most popular across the region, with the exception of *MBC*, which is not particularly popular in Egypt (ibid.: 45). None of these are religious channels, and nor do these kinds of generalisations tell us much about the ways in which audiences navigate these programmes or derive meaning from them.

The concept of an audience is a very abstract and broad concept. As applied in this volume, it refers to 'both a product of social context (which leads to shared cultural interests, understanding, and information needs) and a response to a particular pattern of media provision' (McQuail 1997: 2). As for the audiences in the case studies presented, they are more specifically defined by – at least to some degree – being able to speak or understand Arabic and identifying with an Arab ethnic background. They are also defined by their exposure to Arab media, particularly to media with religious content or themes.

The analytical approach of the volume deploys what Stig Hjarvard has called a culturalist approach, considering 'media as religion,' rather than 'religion in media' (Hjarvard 2008a: 4). According to Hjarvard, the approach of 'media as religion' places focus on cultural meaning making in practice and 'a cultural studies approach to media and communication' (ibid.: 4). The effect of television is therefore to be understood as an encounter between media discourse and audience responses. In other words, the mediated messages do not have any influence without audiences' interpretation or decoding efforts. The culturalist approach is based on the understanding that audiences' responses necessarily include performing acts. Audiences are thus seen as agents. One kind of act performed by audiences is interpretive: audiences construct meanings of media messages. Since the act of interpretation is deeply socially embedded, a second kind of audience activity emphasises the audiences' engagement with media in social settings during their consumption, or by sharing interpretations and experiences with media as a continuation of actual use (Croteau & Hoynes 1997). By constructing meaning

and through socially embedded cultural and religious identifications, both kinds of activities can contribute to the audience's formation of identity. There is thus no automatic relationship between a programme being watched by an audience member and the member's identifications. Watching a religious programme, for instance, may result in fortifying an anti-religious attitude. Similarly, one audience may derive more religious meaning from mainstream television than from specific religious programming (Hoover 2006).

As an alternative to the culturalist approach, Hjarvard suggests the 'mediatization of religion' as a concept. This approach 'focuses on the ways that media and popular culture in general both transform existing religious phenomena and come to serve collective functions in society that hitherto have been performed by religious institutions' (Hjarvard 2008a: 4). By introducing the concept of the mediatization of religion (Hjarvard 2008a & b; Clark 2011), I want to emphasise the role of media in religion and religious practices. The mediatization perspective examines media as a new place for religion and as a force that increasingly replaces traditional religious institutions. Thus, not only overtly religious programmes construct media as a religious place, but also use media ritualistically as well as for commemoration and spirituality. I have previously argued that it is possible to see religious programming as 'a lived space' where it is the social practices around the programming and the ascription of meaning to these practices that makes the media a new place for religion – rather than the content per se (Galal 2011a).

The chapters of the present volume are all informed to some extent by both a culturalist and mediatization approach. While several of the chapters take particular and situated human interactions and religious meaning-making that characterise the culturalist approach as a point of departure (ibid.: 5), some chapters also raise questions about the role of media as an instrument in practicing and articulating religious identity today in Arab countries or in Arab diasporas. Hence, the main objective of this book is to contribute new epistemic analyses of Arab audiences and to highlight the ways these groups make use of media in their construction, negotiation, and rejection of religious identities and practices. In the following section, I will draw attention to additional qualitative perspectives on how audiences make meaning of what they see by referring to audience studies in general and to the findings presented in this book in particular. One fundamental aspect of this approach is taking the heterogeneity and transnationality of the Arab Muslim audiences seriously. As such, case studies stemming from diverse national contexts are included: Algeria, Denmark, Egypt, Germany, Great Britain, Morocco, Tunisia and the United States.

## Audiences: why and how?

A general interest of this book is understanding why or why not Arab audiences watch religious channels and programmes. What do the audiences do with the religion that they watch, and how are various media used in various ways? Consequently, the question of 'why' is closely connected to general media use – the 'how' – and the meaning audiences ascribe to what they watch. By combining the why with the how, it is possible to explore the social aspects of media use as well as the influence of time and space on how audiences choose between different media outlets.

As presented in the prelude of this chapter, one of the general ideas that researchers in the field seem to agree about is that media offers an alternative space to traditional institutions, as well as alternative authority figures to the authorities of traditional institutions. In terms of Islamic programming, the question is to which degree the media substitutes or supplements the mosque, knowing that not only the mosque but also interpersonal communication have played a role in forming religious convictions and interpretations. Looking into the findings of Ehab Galal in his chapter on 'Audience responses to Islamic TV: Between resistance and piety', it appears that Islamic TV, at times, takes over the role of the traditional institution. TV becomes a place for religious learning and for meeting religious scholars whom individual believers can follow. It is also a place for contemplation. Furthermore, this alternative space is characterised by a transnational frame of reference. Although the relevance of the findings are disputed, audiences interviewed in national contexts as varied as Algeria, Egypt, Great Britain and Germany (to mention some of the contexts appearing in the contributions) seem to share a common language and at least a partial knowledge of the religious authorities and practices in Arab media.

Although the number of religious authorities has become manifold, authorities seem to play an immense role in the audiences' use of religious TV. Religious authorities are watched, listened to, challenged and rejected – and as such have not lost their meaning for believers. But authority has become multifarious. Placed within a field of competition in the open media, audiences challenge authorities, and authorities challenge each other. The right interpretation is no longer only guaranteed by institutional belonging, but also by belonging to a specific media or programme. Whereas institutions previously ensured or guaranteed the authority of a specific scholar, it now seems increasingly to be the channel or programme that takes on this role. In the chapter 'Religious media as a cultural discourse – The views of Arab Diaspora in London', Noha Mellor analyses identity negotiations among university students with an Arab-Muslim

background in London. She demonstrates how they renounce the religious television preachers supported by their parents. They reject the programmes as irrelevant because they find that they stem from a context other than the British. In addition, the religious authorities on such programmes generally lack knowledge about the university students' local context and way of life in London. This analysis shows how common references to religious authorities are shared across generations and countries, but the evaluation of these authorities is ultimately dependent on the individual.

In addition to serving as an alternative to traditional religious institutions, religious programming also appears to perform specific social functions related to the quest for religious insight. Particularly in diasporan communities, it appears that first generation immigrants try to make their families watch religious TV together in order to introduce the younger generations to their cultural and religious heritage. As noted by Khalil Rinnawi in his chapter titled 'Cyber religious-national community? The case of Arab community in Germany,' younger generations only reluctantly watch religious programmes together with their families during Ramadan or at the parents' request. Thus, watching Islamic programming is more about fulfilling familial obligations than about personal preferences or motivations. In both cases, some interviewees also point at the problems of understanding the advanced Arabic spoken on some of the programmes. Furthermore, the sharing of programmes within the family seems to create a joint feeling of cultural belonging rather than common belief. This is also the case in Ratiba Hadj-Moussa's contribution titled 'Maghrebi Audiences: Mapping the divide between Arab sentiment, Islamic belonging and political praxis.' She argues that when watching religious programming together, Maghrebi families adhere to shared cultural values and morals. She refers to normative issues regarding the body and sexuality that define what audiences watch when they are put together in the same room. She observes that when families watch TV together, they primarily tend to watch national or Arab TV that lives up to these shared norms. On the other hand, single men or young couples might have their own TV sets in their private rooms where they tend to watch western channels to a higher degree. Overall, the religious discussions that arise from watching religious programming appear primarily to occur between peers and colleagues of similar generational backgrounds. Several of the interviewees that appear in the contributions, especially the younger ones, claim that they often – after having watched a programme on their own – discuss specific issues among friends in order to reach their own opinion.

The question of how to watch religious programming is no longer simply an issue of having a TV set. It is also a matter of having access to several media platforms. The concept of transmediality is useful here in understanding the complexity of media's function today. Elizabeth Evans defines transmediality as 'the increasingly popular industrial practice of using multiple media technologies to present information concerning a single fictional world through a range of textual forms' (Evans 2011: 1). Several media users – as portrayed in the present volume – are very aware of content 'made available simultaneously or near-simultaneously on multiple platforms' as phrased by Evans (2011: 2). When rejecting watching a particular programme with their parents, for example, a young person might claim that will later watch it on YouTube, as exemplified in Mellor's chapter. Or, as is the case in the chapter by E. Galal, they may selectively choose what they want to see using the Internet and YouTube as their main source, partially because they prefer to watch programmes outside of normally scheduled broadcasts use to of work or school. At the same time, this generation also appears to prefer having the option of being able to pick and choose what they like, when they like. The transmediality does make it possible to watch a programme at any time and at any place – whether in their private home, on a public bus (as is the case for one of the Egyptian interviewees in E. Galal's contribution), at work, or together with their family. These choices may create new rituals of media practices, in which watching religious programming is defined by the individual's rhythm of life.

Since the media text or content is not isolated from consumption practices (Ang 1996), the practices described in the case studies of this volume hint at changes in pursuing religious knowledge and insight due to mediatization. As for the relationship between media and religion, it becomes important to explore how media provides the Muslim believer with an alternative space for religious practices and a shared frame of religious references across countries and social divides, along with religious practices and convictions. Likewise, it appears that authority has become a contested category, and that transmediality and media convergence change the social practices of media use. This volume raises the question of how these changes influence religious identity formation.

## Identity formation and intersections

As argued by Steward Hoover (2006), religious media and programming may be used by audiences for diverse purposes. One purpose might be to negotiate and identify a personal position towards one's (or others') beliefs; another might be entertainment, and a third purpose could include finding ways to construct

meanings of identity and belonging. The culturalist approach emphasises how the individual actively uses media as an integrated part of his or her social and cultural life. Media participates in the structuring of social consciousness through style, genre, schedule, images and language. When people interact with media, they become involved in a process that simultaneously connects then with different cultures, with remembered and imagined pasts, and with sources of insight and meaning (Hoover 2006: 72). Thus, media offers different sources for audiences' identity formation processes. In this perspective, identity must be understood as changeable, situational and relational. It is the result of continuous and sometimes ambiguous processes of identification (Hall and du Guy 1996; Jenkins 2003). In religious studies, a similar understanding of identity refers to beliefs as achieved rather than ascribed. As argued by Hoover, it is no longer possible to define religion only based on its historical, structural or doctrinal characteristics. Instead, religion should be explored as something that is created on the basis of experiences, practices and the efforts of lived life (Hoover 2006: 39). This is not only a question of personal identity but also of belonging to a collective. As an unavoidable aspect of media's participation in the mediatization of religious identities, it does take part in collective processes of inclusion and exclusion. Media thus becomes a tool for performing religiously motivated cultural and social ways of life, which become symbolic of belonging to a religious group. The performative and participative become central in order to belong, as also argued by Eickelman and Anderson (1999: 2).

The simultaneity and intersection of identity formation processes, as analysed in the chapters of this volume, emphasise how religious identity in a global context intersects with ethnic and national belonging, and more importantly how these intersections are inscribed within negotiations of power relations. Although religious programming may help the believer to practice or learn about his or her religion, it may also help Arabic speaking audiences reject a marginalised, minoritised or colonised position vis-à-vis specific 'Others.'

Viewed from this perspective, audiences use media to negotiate religious, national, regional and many other forms of identity. The negotiations of subject positions are a general aspect of the contributions in the volume. In the chapter by E. Galal, belonging or not belonging to the Salafi tradition appears during several of the interviews. In the chapter by Hadj-Moussa, it is more a question of belonging to an Arab or a French cultural tradition. And in Mellor's contribution, it is a matter of belonging to either a Muslim or Arab tradition. These examples demonstrate the influence of context on how (the same) media are used in creating different strategies for identity formation.

Parallel to increasing access to Arab satellite TV in Maghreb, Hadj-Moussa argues that Maghrebi audiences have gradually come to identify more with a Muslim-Arab identity than a French one. According to Hadj-Moussa, Arab TV has helped Maghrebi audiences to 'recover a positive self-image' by offering a counter colonial power. She demonstrates how Arab coverage of the Gulf-war in 2003, particularly by *al-Jazeera*, has strengthened the emotional ties and degree of identification with Arabness and the Islamic world among Maghrebi audiences. She argues that political identifications intersect with more individual senses of belonging and points to Muslim TV preachers, such as the Egyptian Amr Khaled, as having had a profound influence, especially on younger Maghrebi audiences.

Like Hadj-Moussa analysis of Arab TV as a counter public in the Maghreb, Rinnawi suggests a similar perspective, though with generational differences. Rinnawi argues that Arab TV is a place for leaving the position of a marginalised minority in German society to become part of a transnational Arab-Muslim imagined community. Not only does Arab TV offer practical guidance on how to live as a righteous Muslim, but it also becomes the place where viewers can connect to their religious leaders and celebrate religious festivals. Thus, media offers a function similar to a mosque. For the younger generation, Arab media is more of a supplement to German TV. Arab TV serves as a space in which audiences can experience and construct an emotional and patriotic sense of belonging and solidarity with the religious and cultural heritage of their parents. For the younger generation, these feelings are closely connected to an experience of not feeling fully accepted in German society.

In Great Britain, Mellor shows how young Muslims struggle with the overly inclusive category of British Muslims. Young Arab students do not like to identify with this category because they do not feel an affinity towards Asian Muslims who constitute the majority of Muslims in Britain. They thus use Arab programming to help negotiate a specifically Arab Muslim identity as along with morality and values. However, interviewees reported finding most of the Islamic programming out of context or political biased – and therefore irrelevant to their purposes. In this case, the interplay between religious (Muslim), ethnic (Arab) and diasporan identity in Britain comprise young Arab students' negotiations and use of Arab media.

Vivian Ibrahim also writes about the intersections of national and religious identity in her chapter titled 'Watching the history of the 'present': Religion and national identity in the Egyptian diaspora.' This chapter analyses diasporan responses to an Egyptian musalsalat [drama series] on the Muslim Brotherhood.

The diaspora groups interviewed by Ibrahim consist of Copts (Egyptian Christians) living in United States, along with both Copts and Muslims living in Great Britain. She particularly notices that the types of interpretations given on the religious and national identities represented in the series depend on the length of time the interviewee has lived outside of Egypt. Thus, while the U.S. group rejects the representation of a united and national brotherhood between Copts and Muslims in Egypt (as propagated by the series), British interviewees tended to support the show's narrative by contributing own experiences of brotherhood across religious divides.

## Resisting representation

As media can be used by its audiences to negotiate or resist unwanted subject positions by choosing particular programmes or channels, access to diverse media also activates a growing resistance to and critique of media representations. Resistance refers to the possible rejection, mediation, and negotiation of hegemonic discourses and power inequalities, which is to some degree a central part of current discourses on Islam. In other words, using media is not only a matter of audiences' personal or private meaning making; it has also become part of global as well as local struggles over representation. Thus, private meaning making converges with public meaning making. Often public meaning making is influenced by responses from political or faith communities contesting media's positioning of these groups. As argued by Lise Paulsen Galal in her chapter on 'Minority religion mediated: Contesting representation,' with a reference to Eugenia Siapera (2010), 'it is differentiations that make the struggle about representation a crucial aspect of globalization.'

When looking at representations of religious differences (across and within different religions), the increasing number of religious programmes and the inclusion of religion in popular culture media such as film and television dramas have contributed to an increased responsibility for the individual to make up his or her own mind about their religious identity. However, the diverse positioning of believers within religious programmes has also lead to increasing numbers of accusations of blasphemy or disrespect of religion. This trend compromises the ability of the individual to decide what is religiously legitimate. While the new diverse trend of religion as a topic and frame of reference in the private realm encourages individualised meaning making and negotiation, in the public space it appears to invite to struggle, rejection and contestation. The Danish Muhammad cartoon crisis has already been mentioned as an example that transformed a local Danish news story into a global struggle over representation. Mediatized religion

is not just approached as a cultural or religious message by audiences, but also at times as politically motivated (mis)representation. The interpretation(s) of a programme by audiences may be unforeseen or unintended by the programme's producers; as Ibrahim's analysis in this volume demonstrates, the context of migration may play a crucial role in determining an audience's interpretation. And given the global scope of most media today, contexts may be manifold compared to the past. In the chapter by E. Galal, one of the interviewees reports believing that the Islamic channels owned by Saudis are untrustworthy since they, according to him, have a political agenda influenced by the United States. Furthermore, what may by some be evaluated primarily for its entertaining quality (such as the drama series broadcasted during Ramadan, as described by Ibrahim), may be interpreted by others as a political discourse of national identity promoted by the Egyptian State and rejected for its silencing of inequality and discrimination.

The chapter by L.P. Galal focuses on public contestations of representation of religion that draw on global discourses of rights and equality. Perhaps not surprisingly, it is not only Muslims who challenge representations of their religion or religious authorities. The chapter analyses public – mainly Christian Coptic – responses to cinematic representations of Copts and Muslim-Coptic relations. L.P. Galal demonstrates how the responses are inscribed within different converging discursive orders. The argument is that public (audience) responses are never isolated from existing struggles over difference and sameness. Thus, it does not make sense to see the return of religion into the public sphere via the media as merely a decline of traditional religious institutions' power. Instead, it can be viewed as a new revival of religious practices through media. By changing or extending its platform by the help of the media, religion has also altered discursive orders due to new potential convergences with other discourses, such as religious freedom, human rights or national unity.

As previously mentioned, several Islamic satellite channels and programming have been launched in order to oppose existent representations of Islam in a global context. Looking across the different contributions to this volume, it is obvious, however, that the struggle springs from different contexts at different times and places. As for the Egyptian audiences interviewed by E. Galal, the key struggle has to do with what form of Islam is going to dominate the Egyptian public. Thus, when Muslim audiences watch religious TV, for example, it is not only in order to confirm their personal beliefs, but also to challenge on-going discursive imaginaries and to position themselves within a socio-religious context.

With its cross-disciplinary contributions, this volume offers an explorative and qualitative approach to the relationship between media, religion and audiences. The essays draw on analytical perspectives from media, religious, cultural, Middle Eastern, global and diasporan studies. Each case study contributes to knowledge of religious TV and religion in media, the understanding of audiences, identity formation and the influence of regional verses global contexts. The contributions demonstrate how media has taken over some of the functions of traditional religious institutions, but they also show that religious institutions are still influential – not only in the individual believer's life, but also in the struggle over the true religion. The role of religious authorities is a key aspect of this struggle. The essays point to a development that places more religious responsibility in the hands of the individual believer. However, they also show how identifying and evaluating different religious authorities appears to be important for audiences. The explosion in the number of religious programmes seems to help explain the sudden increase in the number of authorities. Thus, traditional structures of authority are to some degree reproduced, although the large number of available authorities is challenging for audiences to navigate and evaluate. Another finding of this volume that deserves more attention in future research is the influence of context on audience responses. Each case study is situated in a particular time and place. This specific context is potentially always in a state of flux, since audiences may identify simultaneously with different contexts. Sometimes the interpretations are located within a global context; others are figured within a local or regional context. As the context is interchangeable, the need for exploring the situated practices of media use becomes even more important.

## References

Abu-Lughod, Lila. 2005. *Dramas of Nationhood. The Politics of Television in Egypt*. Cairo: The American University in Cairo Press.

Ang, Ien. 1996. *Living Room Wars: Rethinking media audiences for a postmodern world*. London and New York: Routledge.

Itihad izaʿat al-Dewwal al-ʿArabiya. 2013. *Al- Bath al-Fada'iy al-ʿArabi: al-Taqrir al-Sanawi 2012–2013*. Tunis: Arab States Broadcasting Union.

Clark, Lynn Schofield. 2002. 'Overview: The "Protestantization" of Research into Media, Religion, and Culture' in Hoover, S. M. & Clark, L. S. (eds.): *Practicing Religion in the Age of the Media. Explorations in Media, Religion, and Culture.* New York: Columbia University Press.

—2007. *Religion, Media, and the Marketplace*. New Brunswick, New Jersey, and London: Rutgers University Press.

—2011. 'Considering religion and mediatisation through a case study of J+K's big day (The J K wedding entrance dance): A response to Stig Hjarvard.' *Culture and Religion: An Interdisciplinary Journal*, 12:2: (167–184).

Croteau, David and William Hoynes. 1997. *Media/Society: Industries, Images, and Audiences.* London: Pine Forge Press.

Eickelman, Dale F. and Jon B. Anderson. 1999. 'Redefining Muslim Publics' in Eickelman, Dale F. & Anderson, Jon B. (eds.): *New Media in the Muslim World. The Emerging Public Sphere.* Bloomington & Indianapolis: Indiana University Press.

Encyclopaedia Britannica. Available at: http://www.britannica.com/ (accessed 18 July 2014).

Evans, Elizabeth. 2011. '*Transmedia Television: Audiences, New Media, and Daily Life.*' London and New York: Routledge.

Galal, Ehab. 2010. 'The Muslim woman as a beauty queen,' *Journal of Arab & Muslim Media Research*, 3, 3: 159–175.

—2011a. 'Transnational Islamic TV: a space for religious and gendered living,' in Jakob Egholm Feldt and Kirstine Sinclair (eds.) *Lived Space, Reconsidering Transnationalism among Muslim Minorities*. Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang.

—2011b. 'Islamisk satellit-tv og staten,' *Babylon. Tidsskrift om Midtøsten og Nord-Afrika* 9, 1: 19–31.

—2012. 'Modern Salafi broadcasting: Iqra' Channel (Saudi Arabia).' In Khaled Hroub (ed.), *Religious Broadcasting in the Middle East*. London: C Hurst & Co Publishers Ltd.

Ginsberg, Faye D., Lila Abu-Lughod and Brian Larkin (eds.). 2002a. *Media Worlds. Anthropology on New Terrain.* Los Angeles and London: University of California Press.

Hall, Stuart. 1992 [1973]. 'Encoding/decoding,' in Stuart Hall et al. *Culture, Media, Language.* London & New York: Routledge.

—1996. *Questions of Cultural Identity.* London: Sage Publications.

Haugbølle, Rikke Hostrup. 2013. 'Rethinking the Role of the Media in the Tunisian Uprising,' in Nouri Gana (ed.) *The Tunisian Revolution: Contexts, Architects, Prospects.* Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press.

Hirschkind, Charles. 2006. *The Ethical Soundscape. Cassette Sermons and Islamic Counterpublics*. New York: Columbia University Press.

Hjarvard, Stig. 2008a. 'Introduction. The mediatization of religion: enchantment, media and popular culture.' *Northern Lights* 6: 3–8.

—2008b. 'The mediatization of religion. A theory of the media as agents of religious change.' *Northern Lights* 6: 9–26.

Hoover, Stewart. 1997. 'Media and the construction of the religious public sphere' in S. Hoover and K. Lundby (eds.) *Rethinking media, religion, and culture*. London: Sage.

—2006. *Religion in the Media Age*. London and New York: Routledge.

Jenkins, Richard. 2003 [1997]. *Rethinking Ethnicity. Arguments and Explorations*. London: Sage Publications.

Martín- Barbero, Jesús. 1997. 'Mass Media as Site of Resacralization of Contemporary Cultures' in Stewart M. Hoover and Knut Lundby (eds.) *Rethinking Media, Religion, and Culture*. London: Sage Publications.

McQuail, Denis. 1997. *Audience Analysis*. London: Sage Publications.

Mellor, Noha, Khalil Rinnawi, Nabil Dajani, and Muhammad Ayish. 2011. *Arab Media Globalization and Emerging Media Industries*. Cambridge: Polity Press.

Meyer, Birgit and Annelies Moors. 2006. 'Introduction' in Birgit Meyer and Annelies Moors (eds.) *Religion, Media, and the Public Sphere*. Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press.

Mitchell, Jolyon and Sophia Marriage (eds.). 2003. *Mediating Religion. Conversations in Media, Religion and Culture*. London and New York: T & T Clark.

Morley, David. 1980. *The 'Nationwide' Audience: Structure and Decoding*. London: British Film Institute.

Murdock, Graham. 1997. 'The Re-Enchantment of the World: Religion and the Transformations of Modernity' in Stewart M. Hoover and Knut Lundby (eds.) *Rethinking media, religion, and culture*. London: Sage Publications.

Project Team. 2010. *Arab Media outlook 2009–2013*. Dubai: Dubai Press Club.

—2012. (4th ed.) *Arab Media outlook 2011–2015*. Dubai: Dubai Press Cub.

Roy, O. 2004. *Globalised Islam. The search for a new Ummah*. London: C. Hurst.

Rugh, William. 2004. *Arab Mass Media: Newspapers, Radio, and Television in Arab Politics*. Westport: Praeger.

Sakr, Naomi. 2001. *Satellite Realms. Transnational Television, Globalization & the Middle East*. London: I.B. Tauris.

Shafik, Viola. 2007. *Popular Egyptian Cinema. Gender, Class and Nation*. Cairo: The American University in Cairo Press.