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Audience responses to Islamic TV: Between resistance and piety

Introduction

Most individuals of a Muslim cultural background today have probably experienced being confronted with questions of his or her beliefs, or how he or she perceives the role of Islam. For some, these may be more indirect questions embedded in global media discourses; the reality is, however, that for more than twenty years Islam as religion and being Muslim as a way of life have not primarily been solely private matter of belief. Instead, Islam and being Muslim have been globally contested, imagined and negotiated by both Muslims as well as non-Muslims. At the same time, this global struggle is paralleled in regional, national and local religious and political discussions over the role of Islam. The increasing number of Islamic television channels does not only participate in this ongoing struggle over how to interpret and understand Islam, but may also be seen as a consequence of the global and local attention placed on Islam. Regardless of whether Islamic channels are seen as voices of resistance, voices of piety, or both, they are – together with their audiences – contributing to and indeed shaping global and local discourses of Islam.

Over the past 25 years, the domination of national broadcasting outlets has been weakened due to commercialisation, internationalisation, and liberalization. The result has been a destabilization and decentralization of the institutional and technological arrangements of television (Ang 1996: 9). These changes have altered both the way scholars and the media industry approach audiences. A deeper awareness of audiences as being fragmented and often unpredictable has become the basis of strategies used in the media industry, as well as a point of departure for audience researchers (ibid.).

Despite increasing competition and fragmentation within the media, television has not lost its role as a key disseminator of knowledge. Much to the contrary, television and other media do offer a variety of authoritative forms. When it comes to Islamic TV in particular, religious knowledge has become fragmented and compartmentalised, and thus contested due to the many different programmes and different scholars who convey religious knowledge (Eickelman and Anderson 1999; Zubaida 2005). On the other hand, Islamic television also

offers audiences a space for (ostensibly) authoritative interpretations of religious knowledge and belief. Thus, the question is: what do audiences make of these many different programmes, scholars and interpretations? It is widely accepted that audiences actively participate in the interpretation of media messages and are not just passive subjects. This assumption, however, has limited what we know regarding audiences' use of television. For instance, what do audiences do with religious truths given in Islamic programming? And how do audiences ascribe authority to the different religious scholars?

In an attempt to answer these questions, I will present an analysis based on fieldwork conducted on Arabic-speaking audiences in Copenhagen, London and Cairo, which focused on their responses to religious programming. The aim is to shed light on the ways in which Arab audiences make use of Islamic programming in the construction, negotiation and rejection of religious identities and practices. In turn, this information will help us better understand the influence of Islamic programming on current conversations about Islam. By choosing audiences from widely different national and urban contexts, my research strongly acknowledges the reality of transnational media. Whereas many Islamic channels and scholars did emerge from national settings, they have in the meantime become transnational commodities, as will be demonstrated in the following analysis. On basis of a comparative approach to in-depth interviews with individual audience members, I discuss and critically reflect on how constructions of religious truth, knowledge and belief in Islamic programming are becoming more influential in audiences' own interpretations, uses and practices of watching Islamic TV. My analytical approach is inspired by media ethnography and an interest in how people relate to media in their everyday lives, along with how media provides symbolic resources for meaning making (Ang 1996; Croteau & Hoynes 1997; Gillespie 1995; Hoover 2006; Morley 1980).

The chapter is structured as follows: first, I will introduce the methodological and theoretical approaches that are central in my analytical argument. Second, I present the analytical findings focusing on the following three issues: how to characterise Islamic media, how to watch Islamic television, and how to make use of the discursive resources offered by Islamic television. In the end, I discuss the relevance of my findings and offer some concluding remarks.

Audiences, meaning making and everyday life

My analytical argument is based on data collected as part of a research project on 'Muslim and Arab audiences responses to new programming at Arab Television.'[1] The project was a qualitative study of how audiences relate to and make use of Islamic TV and how this relation becomes formative in the construction of identity. In this chapter, I draw on findings from fieldwork and interviews with audiences in Copenhagen, London and Cairo. The aim of the interviews was to gain qualitative insight into how interviewees produce meaning on basis of what they watch on TV. While several of Muslim television preachers and programmes may be thought of as either liberal or conservative, radical or moderate, *salafi* or Islamist, I wanted to better understand how 'ordinary' Muslims interpret and use what they see when watching such preachers and programmes. 'Ordinary,' however, is an imprecise and empty term. It is therefore not useful in identifying interviewees. Instead, I sought the 'widest possible differentiation' among my interviewees, drawing upon a wide spectrum of middleclass individuals who identified Arabic as their mother tongue. Additional inclusion criteria stipulated that interviewees saw themselves as belonging to an Arab and Islamic culture, identified themselves as belonging to the Muslim *Umma*[2], and desired to learn and practice Islam in the right way.

The aim of using the widest possible differentiation, as argued by Neergaard in her book on qualitative method, is first to gain access to 'the typical' by cutting across all differences. Second, it helps identify difference and nuances through comparison. Third, it provides access to 'the variations' within 'the typical' in order to get knowledge about the influence of a context (Neergaard 2007). Included within the group of interviewees were therefore both women and men, socially positioned between middle and lower middle classes who lived in urban areas. Furthermore, I roughly distinguished between two groups: one group was comprised of Muslims who actively attended a specific mosque or religious community; the other group included Muslims who were believers, but who mainly practised religion on a personal level. This distinction was difficult to maintain at different field sites, as it became apparent that attending a specific mosque meant something different in the United Kingdom than it did in Egypt. However, the reason for starting out with this distinction was to get a wide and differentiated spectrum of believers, and thus presumably also distinct ways of relating to Islamic TV. I did not establish specific criteria for how much Islamic TV the

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1   The project was financed by the Danish Council for Independent Research, Humanities.
2   Umma refers to the community (or nation) of Muslim believers.

interviewees watched. Instead, I wanted to explore how interviewees used Is-
lamic TV as an element of their general television consumption. Thus, I ended up
having interviewees who reported that they liked watching Islamic TV once in a
while, but would tune into programmes rather accidentally. On the other end of
the spectrum, some interviewees reported that they mainly watched Islamic TV,
but admitted that they sometimes watched other channels and programmes as
well. In 22 interviews conducted in Arabic in three different countries, I examine
the specificities in and similarities across each interviewee's narrative about their
television viewing habits.

The aim is not representativeness in sociological terms. Thus, I am not specifi-
cally looking for nationally or ethnically defined specificities. Given the number
of interviews conducted, I cannot definitively evaluate the influence of socio-
logical conditions. As such, in addition to anonymising participants by changing
their names, I have also left out the national or ethnic origin of interviewees. This
is done in part for anonymisation and in part to avoid speculation on the mean-
ing of differences without sufficient evidence. Instead, I examine diverse cultural
narratives that might come from different life circumstances and contexts. I am
interested in narratives of watching TV and how it becomes meaningful to an
individual audience member. With interviews lasting from two to eight hours in
length, the aim is to gain in-depth insight into the interviewees' interpretations
and negotiations of meaning and identity and how these could be related to their
specific life circumstances and context.

My approach to audience research is influenced by Ien Ang and her attempt to
bridge a sociological and semantic approach to audience studies (Ang 1996). By
doing so, Ang challenges the widespread understanding of audiences as driven
by choices as an insufficiently critical approach. Rather than looking for discrep-
ancies between the preferred reading of the media text and the audiences' decod-
ing of it, Ang suggests looking at the interaction between the particularities of
the text (e.g. fatwa programmes or *musalsal* [drama series] and specific viewers
(in sociological terms). The approach to finding the relationship between media
and audience becomes more dynamic by acknowledging that there are other fac-
tors outside the text that influence the way an audience makes sense of it (Ang
1996: 19). Furthermore, I want to evaluate television viewing as a certain kind of
practice that can be analytically addressed as well. Querying television-viewing
habits by asking questions about 'when' and 'where' allows us to place the mean-
ing of watching TV within the context of everyday life of the interviewee, thus
enabling us to emphasise the influence of factors outside the text.

    With a focus on watching Islamic programming, the construction of meaning and identity is not only influenced by programme content, but also by the global and local discourses on Islam, as presented above. Inspired by Stewart Hoover's work on religious identity formation through the use of TV (2006), I explore how individual audience members make use of what they watch in ongoing identity formation. As Hoover states, there is not necessarily a correlation between what people watch, what they believe in and how they identify (Hoover 2006). Islamic TV offers audiences a wide range of programmes and narratives within what they define as an Islamic framework. Channels like *Iqraa*, *al-Majd*, *al-Rahma*, *al-Nas*, and *al-Resaleh* are all owned by either Saudi or Egyptian businessmen.[3] They broadcast a mixture of fatwa, fiqh [Islamic jurisprudence] and lifestyle programmes. Most of them ascribe to a Salafi trend, which refers to the idea of going back to the early tradition of the Prophet Muhammad and his followers and to the authentic texts (the Koran and Hadith) as a basis for interpretation. As described in the introduction to this volume, the spectrum of Salafi is varied across different Islamic channels, but what they have in common is the goal of re-islamisation and the recurring use of references to religious texts and the Sunna (Galal 2012a). Thus, Salafi discourses are not easy avoidable when watching Islamic programming. The question is, then, how audiences relate to these Salafi narratives, along with how such narratives influence audiences' media use and formation of identity.

Contexts and their influence

The development of Salafi trends within current Islamisation is not only influential in the Middle East, but also among Muslims globally. However, adopting a Salafi discourse in Egypt, Denmark or in United Kingdom has different repercussions due to the varied religious and political contexts. Though the Salafi trend is neither popular among the majority of Muslims in Egypt, the consequences are different in Europe because the Salafi trend there is inscribed within a broader anti-Muslim discourse. Consequently, asking about religious television habits may invoke different associations among interviewees, depending on their context. This was often the case before even conducting the actual interview. When identifying interviewees and meeting with them for the first time in London and Copenhagen, I was often met with a certain amount of mistrust and scepticism. Although I had presented myself, the project and its aim before meeting with the interviewees, I was asked again rather suspiciously during the interviews for

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3   Read more about Islamic channels in chapter one of this volume.

whom I was conducting the project and for what purpose. I did not experience the same kind of mistrust in Cairo.

The method of using gatekeepers to identify interviewees in Egypt might be part of the explanation for what seemed to a greater sense of trust in the researcher. However, when analysing the content of the interviews, the attitudes displayed towards me also seem to be reflected in various ways interviewees' positioned the discussion of Islamic television. Because watching Islamic television is embedded in different socio-religious and political contexts, they appeared to take part in different dialogues on the role of Islam in society. Thus, as will be argued in the following section, interviewees in Egypt were preoccupied with local or regional disputes over Islam's role in society. Interviewees in United Kingdom and Denmark, on the other hand, inscribe their use and interpretation of Islamic TV within a global struggle over the securitisation[4] of Islam along with local and national discourses of Muslim minority group issues. Several studies conducted in Northern Europe show that Muslims, particularly Muslim youth, do find themselves in a position in which they are constantly confronted with their 'Muslimness' by members of the majority society group. As a result, they are compelled to reflect on and defend their Muslim identity (Jacobsen 2011; Khawaja 2010). In *Transnational Muslim Politics*, Peter Mandaville also observes that the Muslim minority in diaspora is becoming more aware of their religion. As he argues, 'travelling Islam becomes travel *within* Islam' (Mandaville 2001: 115). The encounter with the Danish researcher may be seen as part of this travelling, which potentially causes the interviewee to think of existing European discussions of integration and mistrust towards migrants' use of satellite television and religious programming.

The way in which interviewees positioned me strongly speaks to the influence of the context: as a researcher, I too am inscribed by the interviewee. Thus, the data produced in these interviews are not merely an account of facts, but rather of narratives produced and negotiated during interactions with the researcher (Järvinen 2005). The interviewees were not only responding to me and to my questions, but also to existent discourses associated with the interview topic. In terms of the discussion of Islam, this was very clear, but their awareness of ongoing discussions on the influence of television on viewer's beliefs also came out during the interviews. As Hoover argues, peoples' accounts of the media are

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4   With the term securitisation, I refer to policies that legitimise the use of extraordinary means in the name of security.

informative because they present images and ideas about how people understand themselves within social and cultural contexts (Hoover 2006: 88).

Several of the interviewees argued that they were able to critically engage with different kinds of programming and therefore allowed themselves to watch these. They asserted, though, that other people were not as educated and therefore not as able to distinguish between television with good or bad influence. Thus, in the interviewees' self-perception, they believed they themselves were able to objectively judge their beliefs and values and were not subject to the media's power. While this is very much in accordance with fieldwork conducted among Christian Americans in Hoover's study (2006: 260), my interviewees differ from Hoover's due to the fact that they did not trust the majority of others to be able to be critical towards what they watch. Due to this line of thought, they found the idea of censoring different kinds of broadcasting as reasonable.

In the following analysis, similar examples of the interviewees' active participation in existing discussions regarding the content and the viewing habits of Islamic TV will be further explored. As also argued by Ang, this kind of participation emphasises, that 'the relation between television and audiences is not just a matter of discrete 'negotiations' between texts and viewers' (Ang 1996: 51). The culture of modernity and the consumption of television have a much more profound influence in offering new possibilities for social relations, identities and desires (Ang 1996: 51). How do these new possibilities, then, manifest in audiences of Islamic TV?

Islamic TV: negotiations of definition

Islamic TV is a contested category by both researchers and media producers. The most popular Islamic channels have been *Iqraa*, *al-Nas*, *al-Rahma*, *al-Resalah*, and *al-Majd*.[5] They all define their purpose with very general statements about

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5   The extent of their popularity is difficult to determine, not least in relation to viewers'
     priorities among different types of channels. There are only a few audience studies
     dealing with religious channels. While one study by Amin suggests that al-Majd Koran TV is the most popular, al-Nas is the second and Iqraa the third most popular
     channel, al-Dagher identifies *Iqraa* as the first, *al-Resalah* as the second, and *al-Nas*
     as the third most frequently viewed Islamic channel. Shalabieh suggests that *Iqraa* is
     the most popular channel followed by *al-Majd*. The popularity of *Iqraa* may be related
     to its status as the first Islamic channel but also to the fact that the channel transmits
     through different satellites (Arabsat A5, Arabsat 4 Bader, Nilsat 101, Hotbird 8, Intesat
     19, Yahsat HD, Asiasat 5, CanalSat ESE 4 and Intelsat 21), thus reaching a potentially
     wider audience. Several Islamic channels have since been introduced and also been

Islam as a universal value that unites all Muslims and claim to facilitate knowledge about religious, cultural, social, educational, economic and political issues based on the Koran and the Prophet Muhammad's Sunna [traditions]. Furthermore, they want to strengthen Muslims' belonging to 'the Arab-Islamic nation and culture.' While interpretations vary between different programmes broadcast on the same channel, the channels generally stress a view that there exists 'an Islamic perspective on all aspects of life.' As Tash argues in an article about Islamic media, they are 'a comprehensive and total system' (Tash 2004: 3). At the same time, however, the concept of Islamic television is challenged by others, particular secularists, who claim that all television produced by and directed at Muslims could be considered Islamic, and therefore there is no need to establish specific Islamic channels.[6]

In this approach of exploring the relationship between the media and its audiences along with the factors influencing this relationship, the question becomes: how do audiences define and relate to Islamic TV as a specific genre? From the conversations with the interviewees, it became evident that they display a certain affinity towards particular elements of Islamic TV either in the form of a specific preacher, a particular channel or a specific kind of programme. On the other hand, when directly asked how to define Islamic TV, most definitions suggested were abstract and ideal – thus, not far from the channels' own definitions.

When asking Noura – a recently retired Egyptian lawyer living in Cairo – about her use of Islamic TV, she mentioned the name of *Azhari* TV and later *al-Rahma* TV, but immediately proceeded to mention a list of the names of scholars from Islamic programming she preferred. She liked Khaled al-Gindi, Mo'ez Mas'oud and Mustafa Husny. And among non-Egyptians, she liked 'Ai'd al-Qarni from Saudi Arabia and al-Habib al-Jifri from Yemen, while she disliked 'Atia Saqr and Mongi Farahat from al-Azhar in Egypt. Obviously, she was able to juggle a lot of names of specific scholars known from television without problem. From her way of addressing Islamic television, it appeared that she identified religious programming with religious scholars. In other words, Islamic TV for her was first and foremost characterised by the teachings of religious scholars. Indeed, Islamic channels do present a large number of religious scholars who either have their own programmes or are invited guests in their capacity as religious authorities

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forced to close. Thus the Muslim Brotherhood's channel *Misr25* as well as *al-Nas*, *al-Rahma* and *Hafez* channels have all been shut down by the Egyptian regime in the aftermath of the removal of president Mursi from office in July 2013.

6   Nabil Fayad argues for this secular position as a guest on *The Opposite Direction* (al-Jazeera, 27 February 2011).

on different kinds of shows (cf. Galal 2009). They offer religious-based guidance and answers to different kinds of questions on topics ranging from religious to personal issues. Rather than seeing their media presence as a result of the position they enjoy in the society as large, it is very often their presence on television that makes them recognized, which in turn strengthens their authority. In order to understand their influence, the audiences' and in this case Noura's recognition of their authority is therefore crucial.

To Ibrahim, religious authority is everything when it comes to choosing what to watch. Fifty-year-old Ibrahim, an Egyptian school teacher since 1997, watched Islamic television in order to learn about religion from an expert. His preferred one particular Salafi sheikh, Sheikh Muhammad Hassan. Since Sheikh Muhammad Hassan endorsed the teachings and religious scholars on the *al-Rahma* channel, Ibrahim chose to watch this channel. Thus, to Ibrahim, Islamic TV was Sheikh Muhammad Hassan and what he defined as *ansar al-Sunna* [followers of al-Sunna].

Another way of identifying Islamic TV is by referring to a specific way of dealing with a topic. Samir is an Egyptian judge in his mid-fifties posted together with his wife in Dubai. He explained that he preferred to see a programme that deals with a topic in depth, rather than the fatwa programmes with their all too often absurd questions and answers. Mohsen, a newly educated engineer of twenty two living in Cairo, had a similar approach. He asked for knowledge, and like Samir, he explained that he would prefer that religious programming were broadcasted on normal channels in between other programmes, instead of on specifically religious channels. They both thought that the so-called Islamic channels were influenced too heavily by self-appointed scholars from the Salafi tradition. Contrary to Noura and Ibrahim, both Samir and Mohsen questioned the religious authority of the television preachers.

Seen as symbolic resources offered by Islamic TV, Noura and Ibrahim cited names of scholars as powerful resources and models for them, whereas Samir and Mohsen identified substantiated arguments and in-depth discussion of specific topics as interesting and relevant to them. More variations of these two tendencies are present in my material, but what is important in this context is that these differences do not mean that the four of them do not agree at all. Surprisingly, they all said that Sheikh Muhammad Hassan was okay, although neither Samir nor Mohsen identified as Salafi. On the contrary, they made a point of distancing themselves from Salafi. But they liked Sheikh Muhammad Hassan, though they both claimed to prefer the late Egyptian sheikh al-Shaʿrawi, who

became famous for his TV lessons in the 1980s and 1990s long before Islamic channels were introduced.

When asked directly the question of what Islamic media is, the interviewees turned to identical kinds of explanations, despite their apparent differences in other respects. Ibrahim, the school teacher, answered:

> They are media that may save the poor ones [non-practicing Muslims]. And pray to God to meet them in heaven in one way or the other and get points for their good works.

In his answer, Ibrahim's description of Islamic media is abstract and is presented in the form of a religious phrase, rather than as an attempt to explain or define Islamic media. Another kind of general statement was given by Samir, the judge:

> They have to be guided by Islamic rules and education to be named Islamic media. The programming has to follow Islamic ethics, as for instance in dress.

He continued that Islamic TV does not lie or bring harm. Although this answer is more specific, it is also a very general statement that makes Islamic equivalent with ethical rules.

Karim is a young man in his twenties, who had been living in London for three years. He holds a Bachelor's degree but currently works in a supermarket in London at night. He is married to a British-born Muslim. He gave the following reason for watching Islamic TV:

> It is God's sharia that God has send to us to live it.

All in all, when asked directly about Islamic television, the audiences' answers were very close to how Islamic channels define themselves using Islamic termi-nology and referring to what the channel Iqraa has named 'an Islamic frame of reference'. They did not challenge the notion of an Islamic frame of reference despite their very different opinions about the consequences of the channels. Rather, an abstract and general definition made it possible for the audiences to make use of the same Islamic channels for different purposes, as will be exam-ined in the following section.

Between filling up time and filling in religion

Watching television in a western context has often been associated with the liv-ing room, as implied by the title of Ien Ang's book *Living room wars*. In Egypt, watching television has from the start also been a public activity – in a café or village, for example (Abu-Lughod 2005). Today, the places and hours for watch-ing television has increasingly become just as varied as the number of channels and devices used to access television. For both researchers and producers, the

possibility of choice has an unavoidable impact on analytical as well as commercial interests (as also pointed out by Ang 1996). However, choice does not equate to lack of structure, as the data from my fieldwork demonstrate. The choices made by my interviewees are deeply embedded in daily routines of work, religious duties, and leisure, on the one hand, but also in existing discourses. Thus, the structures of everyday life influence the manner in which Islamic TV is consumed; watching it becomes a matter of organising time and space.

Opportunity and intellectual relevance

When asking the interviewees about their television watching routines, it was not a surprise to find that watching Islamic television had very different functions in their daily lives.

For Mohsen, the young Egyptian engineer, the choice of watching Islamic programmes seemed to be one possibility among many different programmes he could choose to help pass time. He repeated that he normally watched the Islamic programmes in Super-Jet, referring to travelling by bus. Thus, he emphasised that it was a way of passing the time while travelling, which is often a frustrating and time-consuming experience in Egypt. While he mentioned the Super-Jet as a place for him to watch Islamic channels, he also explained that some other buses showed movies. As such, the choice of watching Islamic channels became a matter of accident rather than a deliberately planned activity or choice. However, his comment also reveals that Islamic channels are available in buses and must therefore be acceptable in public spheres. Time scheduling was another issue stressed by Mohsen, who explained that another way for him to watch Islamic channels is by finding them on YouTube or Facebook. His explanation revealed that he was motivated by discussions with friends and in public about specific preachers and programmes. He found and watched them on the Internet in order to form up his own opinion. Both opportunities to watch and social input were the striking features of Mohsen's use of Islamic television.

In London the young man, Karim who works in a supermarket, had similar concerns about finding time for watching Islamic television. Like Mohsen, the young Egyptian engineer in Cairo, Karim was a huge consumer of media – not only religious programming, but all kinds of shows including sitcoms, business and news:

> I watch my TV channels via YouTube. I watch them before noon. When I come home [from my night shift work], I go online and watch it. In 10 minutes I can get a quick overview about what happened the last 24 hours. Usually, I stay online until around 2pm.

> I talk to friends, watch the news, play games, see my relatives [who live abroad] during 4–5 hours; all of it through the Internet.

Though Karim was attracted by Salafi thinking, he was a very different media user from, for instance, the Egyptian school teacher Ibrahim. He consumed a lot of media from a wide range of programming, but mainly in small portions. As he said:

> … soon we don't need television, because you can find clips of the programme or the whole programme on YouTube, or even recorded lessons [religious] uploaded on You-Tube.

Easy access was an important factor in Karim's media use. When he explained that he preferred specialised programmes rather than a mixture of religious and non-religious programmes, he explained that it is not nice to have non-religious programming playing in which people are kissing, drinking alcohol, or making love, which is then interrupted with the call to prayer, after which the broadcast immediately comes back on. But his desire for specialised programmes may also be seen as a platform for easy access to the precise kind of programmes he would like to see at a particular moment. He can be categorised as an eclectic and consumerist media user.

Samir, the judge living in Dubai, is another example of a user who stressed that his watching of Islamic TV was relatively accidental, occasional and arbitrary. Very often, he came across religious shows by accident while channel surfing and tuned in if it seemed to be an interesting topic. As mentioned, he preferred programmes that examine a specific topic in depth. He did not have any specific religious programmes he watched regularly, and he preferred watching religious programmes on mainstream channels. As he said, he can easily enjoy a day without watching religious television, although he actually watches some religious programming every day. In his opinion, TV is not the best place to gain religious knowledge. Thus, for Samir, Islamic programming is a potential resource – so long as it is intellectual stimulating.

Purposeful teaching and contemplation

In contrast to Samir, the judge, the retired lawyer Noura watched Islamic television as a way to have a bit of religion on a day-to-day basis. She argued that it had become a necessary part of her life. Noura mostly watched TV after lunch (after 2pm) and in the evening. She explained that after lunch she would lie down on her bed and also in the evening after a long day to relax. Every day at 5pm, she would watch Moʻez Masʻoud, who is a young Egyptian educated from the

American University in Cairo, but has made a living out of his Western style of preaching. Watching TV and specific Islamic programmes had become an important element in structuring and providing meaning to Noura's daily life and routines after retirement.

Amira, a 35-year-old single mother of three who immigrated to London seven years earlier, also used Islamic TV as a way of structuring her day while making room for religion. She argued that Islamic TV is a positive force:

> We are very preoccupied with material life. Our soul does also need a little spirituality. We need words to help us getting closer to God. Life makes us too busy. We run, we are running all the time. Many people don't find time to read the Koran. These programmes make it easier for me. You feel your soul relaxing. And, you feel recuperated and ready to continue working.

By referring to the need for words, Amira very clearly saw Islamic programming as a resource for a specific spiritual language. But like Noura, she also liked to watch other kinds of programmes. Her situated use of Islamic TV as a symbolic resource among others was revealed when she said that if she had had a big argument with her ex-husband, she would only want to pray and listen to the Koran. Though, on another day she added that she would want to go out, listen to music, and would not do much else – except for observing the daily prayers, as she added.

Confirming truth and safeguarding piety

The schoolteacher Ibrahim represents yet another kind of audience. Like the retired lawyer Noura, an important element of his daily routine included religious activities both in the mosque and by watching television. Ibrahim was a keen follower of Sheikh Muhammad Hassan, and he watched his programme every Wednesday. He emphasised his exclusive media use. The scholars he watched had to have a Salafi approach before he trusted them. For that reason, he did not like to watch films, drama series or even talk shows that mix the genders, because this is *haram* [sinful]. However, he did watch news and programmes on non-Islamic TV channels in which political and social problems were discussed, for example 'Amr Adib's and Mona al-Shazli's programmes. Confronted with the issue of watching a woman, he defended himself by arguing that he was not watching her in order to flirt with her, and he usually was very conscience not to stare at her. In any case, the people who rejected watching her were a million times better than him, he added. It also happened that he would watch part of a film, if he came home and it was playing in the living room where his twelve year old daughter was watching it. He argued that he did not want to make things too complicated

for his daughter by denying her the option of watching content he himself would prefer not to watch. As a media user, Ibrahim was an ideological exclusivist and an authority-based viewer.
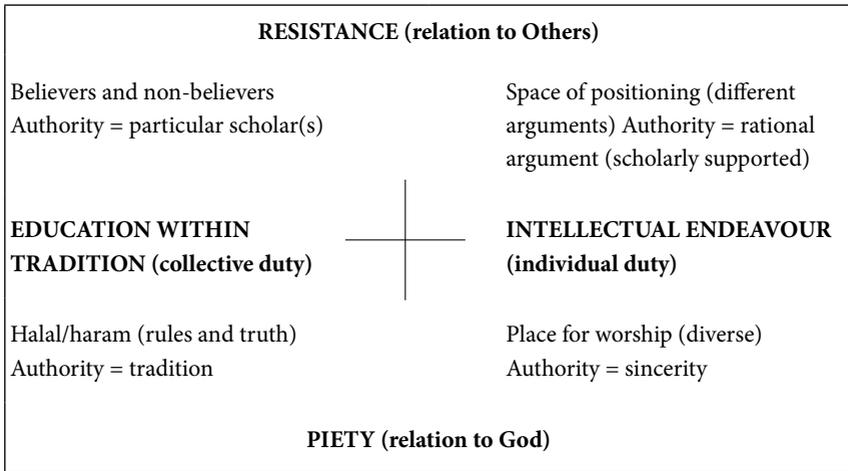
Another kind of exclusivist was Maher, who had been living in Denmark for about 20 years. He was in his late fifties and did unskilled work at his son's company. He volunteers for many hours a week doing administrative work at a mosque. He watched all kinds of programmes, also those he believed to have been built on 'lies,' such as secular Arab channels like the Saudi-owned *MBC* TV. Maher placed his viewing habits in two contexts. One context comprised his daily routines; he watched television in the morning and the evening. The other was the context of what was happening in the world. The interview with Maher took place in the autumn 2011 during which time the events following the January revolution in Egypt were still in the world news. He argued that he watched much more television than normal, particularly the news stories on the events in Egypt. As for Islamic channels, he watched them at home since they require concentration, as he argued. Regardless of the channels and programmes he watched, Islamic or not, he used them as proof of his worldview. Television corrupts and misleads most people, he argued, and while he had the capacity to distinguish between right and wrong television, he therefore could watch all kinds of programmes, but believes that most viewers do not have this capacity. While Maher was exclusivist in his judging of what constitutes good television, this was not motivated so much by a religious position as a political one, much in contrast to the schoolteacher Ibrahim. Thus, for Maher, watching Islamic TV was not motivated by a specific authority, although he praised *al-Rahma* and Sheikh Muhammad Hassan. It was a way of confirming his faith and his political position in the world.

As result of this section of the analysis, it has been possible to identify three different ways that people make use of the symbolic resources provided by Islamic programming: (1) Opportunity and intellectual relevance; (2) Purposeful teaching and contemplation; and (3) Confirming truth and safeguarding piety. In the following section, I will further examine how these strategies of television use are embedded in the different negotiations and contestations of the role of media and how the interviewees made meaning of what and how they watched Islamic TV. By looking more closely at their articulations, it becomes possible to further evaluate how their routines are related to the use of Islamic programming as symbolic resources.

Making meaning from Islamic television: between resistance and piety

Watching TV in specific ways, as explored in the preceding section, cannot be isolated from the meaning that audiences make of what they watch. None of the audiences interviewed came up with one single interpretation of Islamic TV. Instead, they appeared to oscillate between Islamic TV as a protector and educator of tradition and as a basis for making up one's own mind about religious issues. Or, they went back and forth between perceiving Islamic channels as providing a foundation for differentiating right from wrong and as a place of worship. Despite the equivocations, it is possible to identify some dominant discourses that cut across the interviews. They are characterised by what I would call four ways of striving to be a Muslim, and therefore also four different variations of convergence between Islam and media in social practice. As I have argued elsewhere, one must do something to 'achieve becoming Muslim' (Galal 2012b). Thus, by watching Islamic programming, Muslims 'achieve becoming Muslim' by emphasizing different values, interpretations, and religious activities. It is important to note that these should not be taken for categories of Muslim audiences, since they oscillate between different interpretations. More precisely, the different 'activities' may be seen as clusters of symbolic resources that emerge from the encounter between Islamic TV and its audiences.

The four positions are: (1) Resistance against others' understanding of Islam; (2) Spiritually striving for piety; (3) Education and protection of tradition; and (4) Intellectually striving for new knowledge. In the model below, the four positions are also placed in relation to each other. I provide examples of the positions as exhibited by the interviewees and at the same time elaborate on the meanings of each of the four positions (Figure 1).

RESISTANCE (relation to Others)	
Believers and non-believers Authority = particular scholar(s)	Space of positioning (different arguments) Authority = rational argument (scholarly supported)
EDUCATION WITHIN TRADITION (collective duty)	**INTELLECTUAL ENDEAVOUR (individual duty)**
Halal/haram (rules and truth) Authority = tradition	Place for worship (diverse) Authority = sincerity
PIETY (relation to God)	

Above the horizontal line, the relationship to various Others is at stake. These may be infidels or secularists (on the left side), or they may be without rational argumentation (on the right side). Below the horizontal line, the relationship to God is what audiences find the resources which with to strengthen through Islamic TV, either in the form of tradition including rules (on the left side) or in the form of places for worship and remembrance (on the right side). Another analytical distinction of the model is between those who argue within an individual perspective (right side of the vertical line) and those who focus on Islam as a clearly defined tradition and thus collectively legitimated (left side of vertical line). Additionally, the different positions are reflected in different approaches to authority, as indicated in the model and elaborated in the following section.

An arena of cultural struggle and resistance (above the horizontal line)

Several of the interviewees read media texts within the context of current political struggles. By doing so, their evaluation of Islamic TV was inevitably and simultaneously a positioning of themselves within the socio-religious political field. This political field is not only characterised by contradictions and tensions when it comes to religious feelings and values, but is also embedded in on-going societal changes on both a global and local level. However, the interviewees did not subscribe to identical kinds of differentiation, as the following examples show.

Maher, from Denmark, was critical towards television in general from the beginning of the interview. According to him, all Arab channels were potentially an extension of the power of the United States. Thus, he differentiated between American-influenced, secular, and liberal channels such as *MBC* TV, and those he was able to trust, which included mainly the Egyptian Islamic *al-Rahma* TV. Thus, Saudi owned channels in general were not to be trusted, regardless if they were defined as Islamic or not. He explained that many Islamic channels were created to fulfil the interest of their owners and to spread what he denoted as 'Islam light' ('light' referring to diluted version). Maher's differentiation of right and wrong Islam is embedded within the global struggle between a western liberal discourse on secularism and a religious conservative discourse that in its Muslim version has been fed by anti-Muslim discourses that have swept western countries after the terrorist attacks of September 11 (Galal 2012a).

Among the Egyptian interviewees, the differences articulated were of a more internal, regional kind. The dominant divide was that between a pro-Salafi and anti-Salafi orientation. While Salafi seemed to be a reference point for both pros and cons, quite often the opposite of Salafi was denoted as wasatiya (meaning 'the middle way' and is referring to a moderate version of Islam). The retired lawyer Noura stated this preference very clearly when she explained how she preferred specific scholars because they represented a spiritual and moderate [wasatiya] approach to Islam, much in contrast to overly strict channels, like *al-Nas* (a Salafi TV channel), "which make people hate everything", as she said. Hence, viewers like the schoolteacher Ibrahim, the young engineer Mohsen, the judge Samir, and the retired lawyer Noura interpreted their preferences into a regional discourse on Salafi versus moderate Islam. They positioned themselves clearly as pro Salafi (Ibrahim), or against Salafi (Samir and Noura), or as someone who previously subscribed to Salafi (Mohsen).

The symbolic resources provided by Islamic TV offer viewers particular positions to adopt within the Islamic landscape and the means to respectively challenge them. However, Ibrahim, Samir and Mohsen, who were all preoccupied with positioning themselves, did not use the same strategy in order to reach a conclusion regarding the best or truest position. Here the understanding of authority played a role, which was again motivated by the interpretation of the resources offered by television. Ibrahim made it very clear that he only accepted knowledge about Islam communicated by self-declared Salafi scholars or by scholars recognized by Sheikh Muhammad Hassan, whom he followed. That was why he preferred *al-Rahma* TV, because Sheikh Muhammad Hassan guaranteed its quality. Thus, Sheikh Muhammad Hassan was his chosen authority

on Islamic matters. While Samir and Mohsen also occasionally watched Sheikh Muhammad Hassan, their argumentation for the right interpretation was quite different from Ibrahim's. Mohsen required clear references and arguments; Samir preferred well-argued and well-documented proof. They both also stressed that it was a question of making up one's own minds on the basis of reviewing and thinking about information presented. This was reflected in their media use, which was much more inclusive than Ibrahim's. For them, choosing trustworthy programming was their responsibility – not something to be left to one authority or scholar.

An arena of piety (below the horizontal line)

Islamic television is not only used as a basis for differentiation. Just as much, it is perceived as a resource for coming closer to God. The need to be reminded of the message of Islam, as well as involve oneself in a religious space also seem to be important aspects. This mode of using Islamic programming is thus very similar to what Charles Hirschkind describes in his book on how cassette sermons are used to create Islamic counter publics (2009).

For the twenty-two year old university student Khatib, who is born in England, the Islamic programmes helped him to remember. As he phrased it:

> I think that the stories about the prophet and his followers or a programme on education within Islam may influence me. Although I may have heard about these things before, we human beings easily forget. Therefore, I find that these channels are fine, because they encourage us and remind us of the right things and about being decent.

Khatib was convinced that religious space should not be contaminated by secular topics; he thus preferred the separation between religious and non-religious channels. As with other interviewees, his interpretation was closely related to his use of Islamic programmes, which he only watched when he stayed with his parents, mostly during Ramadan. The Islamic channels offered him a specific religious space of worship that was private and safeguarded tradition in a moderate version.

As previously mentioned, Amira, the single mother from London, also found emotional and spiritual support through Islamic programming. Like Khatib she emphasised the importance of protecting and handing on Islamic traditions to the next generation. Noura's use of Islamic programming also reflected her need for specific spiritual spaces. But in contrast to Amira and Khatib, it was Noura's own space – one that was not shared with her family. At the same time she was a critical user who stressed that one should not believe everything:

> You have to listen to your heart and choose, what is the easiest to you, as the prophet Muhammad has prescribed", she argued.

Thus her spiritual needs were connected with the quest for sincerity and intellectual fulfilment.

Ibrahim and Maher also perceived the channels as a way to teach their children about Islam or the (Salafi) tradition. They tried to watch religious TV together with their children in order to influence them without pressure, as they said. Furthermore, Ibrahim gave the impression that he would like to watch even more, if possible. Islamic TV became like prayers and lessons in the mosque: something to continuously strive for, a place for living in accordance with Islam. The authority, though, is still tradition. Contrary to Ibrahim, Karim, the eclectic user, argued that he himself would decide what was useful. He did not want to become a parrot, just repeating what the scholar said. Instead, he sought to find out and experience himself what was right. In other words, he found answers through argumentation and what he considered authentic or sincere.

Conclusion

It is worth noting that several of the interviewees mentioned said that they watched the Salafi Sheikh Muhammad Hassan (Samir, Ibrahim and Karim). Considering the context in which they watched him and how they ascribed meaning to what they watched helps depict a much more complex picture of how audiences make use of the symbolic resources offered by programmes such as Sheikh Muhammad Hassan's. Though they reported watching the same sheikh, they differed in how much they liked him. For Samir, Sheikh Muhammad Hassan was just one television scholar he saw by chance and found okay. To Ibrahim, Sheikh Muhammad Hassan was his religious Master. Karim found him charismatic and strong in his way of speaking. Thus, Sheikh Muhammad Hassan influences audiences, but in very different ways. For an Arab user of Islamic television he appears to be difficult not to come across and have an opinion about between 2011 and 2014. Since my material is qualitative and I make no claim of representativeness, I do not argue that this most likely would be the case for all audiences. The point is that across different countries and across different beliefs, it is possible to identify shared frames of reference among Arabic-speaking audiences of Islamic TV.

Furthermore, audiences from different countries in general appear to use Islamic TV to differentiate and position themselves in terms of religion and identity. What differs is how these articulations of difference converge with other discourses. For the Danish interviewee, they are part of a global discourse on

Islam, while Egyptian interviewees, for the most part, took part in a national or regional discourse for and against Salafism. Again, it is interesting that possible clusters of positioning and identification made available with the help of the symbolic resources of Islamic TV. While to some degree a viewer's place of residence may influence his or her interpretation of Islamic television, it is just as relevant to consider the everyday circumstances that influence the use of Islamic TV. As judged by the interviewees, access and technology, combined with social practices of work, leisure time, family life etcetera are just as important.

It is also noteworthy that British and young Egyptian interviewees were more likely to use the Internet or YouTube to view Islamic programming, which may clearly be related to easy access or programmes on demand. The findings could indicate that the more an audience depends on the Internet and YouTube, the more likely the possibility is of eclectic and situational interpretations. As for symbolic resources on spirituality, the greatest differences seem to be between those who largely accept the symbolic inventory of well-defined rules, rituals and practices made available to them by Islamic programmes, and those who appreciate the inventory of symbolic resources, but ultimately insist on making them their own.

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