

## **Impact of Emerging Digital Technology and Social Media on Muslim Communities**

The 47<sup>th</sup> Annual Conference of the North American Association of Islamic and Muslim Studies (NAAIMS), which focused on the **“Impact of Emerging Digital Technology and Social Media on Muslim Communities,”** was cosponsored by the Middle East and Middle Eastern American Center (MEMEAC) at The Graduate Center, City University of New York (CUNY), (September 14, 2018). The Conference Program Chair, Anna Ayşe Akasoy, professor of Islamic intellectual history at the Graduate Center of the City University of New York (CUNY) and Hunter College, welcomed the panelists and guests. She expressed CUNY’s excitement in hosting a conference that addressed an especially timely topic which “deals with significant transformations both of the Islamic world, and the ways in which this area is studied.”

Four panel sessions analyzed the impact of social media. The first panel session, **“Islam and the Digital Revolution,”** was moderated by the Panel Chair and Discussant, Saadia Toor (College of Staten Island, CUNY, NY).

The first presentation by Besheer Mohamed (Pew Research Center, Washington, DC) focused on “Youth Culture in the Digital Age: Findings from Pew’s 2017 Survey of U.S. Muslims.” According to the Pew survey, at least half of U.S. Muslim adults are millennials, born between 1980-2000. Mohamed’s presentation focused on “how the youth of American Muslims is related to their religiosity and religious authority, and political and social issues.” According to Mohamed, the survey indicated that while “younger Christians tend to be less religious than older Christians by a variety of measures, the same does not hold for Muslims. Younger Muslims and older Muslims are about equally likely to go to the mosque regularly, or to say religion is very important in their lives.” However, Mohamed added that “younger Muslims have different interpretations of religion and religious authority than do older Muslims [and that they] are more likely to see shared struggles with blacks and other minority groups and are more skeptical of the American assimilationist model that assumes that anyone can get ahead if they work hard.”

During the Q & A session, in response to a question pertaining to how search strategies like Google, or other digital devices influence today’s youth, Mohamed stated that online systems or search procedures are algorithms or instructions for “solving a problem, and/or informative guidelines for completing a task.” He noted that “although the Internet runs

on algorithms, and all online-searching is accomplished through them, sometimes the application of algorithms leads to undesirable consequences. A code, for example, written to make individualized information delivery more accurate (and more monetizable for the creators of the code), also limits what people see, read and understand about the world. It can create 'echo chambers' in which people see only what the algorithms determine they want to see. This can limit exposure to opposing views and random, useful information."

Judith Rahima Jensen, Klamath Falls, OR, (@Sister\_Sufi and [www.sistersufi.com](http://www.sistersufi.com)) followed with an inspiring talk on "Teaching Modern Islamic Sufism and Interreligious Understanding via Twitter and Blog." In her efforts to interact with today's fastest growing "spiritual but not religious public," Jensen launched the Sister Sufi project in August 2017 in hopes of "increasing interreligious understanding with an emphasis on core religious principles, and expanding the awareness of modern Sufism as a tolerant face of Islam." She said that she came to "respect the Twitter universe as the subconscious of our culture." Jensen found it possible to avoid harsh exchanges and slowly create a Twitter space to discuss ideas about modern spirituality. She noted that people seek interaction but "want a personality and a point of view, not facts, [since] facts are easy to find on the Internet."

During the Q & A session, she described Twitter as a digital channel that "enables the quick exchange of concise ideas (280 Characters) and offers many search strategies to find and interact with interested audiences." The challenge is to develop and express ideas attractive enough to stimulate engagement (i.e., "click bait"). Jensen added that it is vital to "avoid political discussions" to keep interactions positive. She has begun to target and engage a wide range and diverse group of people who are interested in spirituality, some of whom are religious, and many of whom are not. She added that at 3,600 followers, @Sister Sufi ranks in the 96th percentile for follower-numbers, and has a high rate of engagement.

This was followed by a presentation on "Digital Islamic Studies: Pedagogical Perspectives from *The Maydan* Experience" by Ahmet Selim Tekelioglu and Paul F. Fischer (George Mason University, Fairfax, VA). The *Maydan* was launched in 2016 by George Mason University's (GMU) Ali Vural Ak Center for Global Islamic Studies as a "pedagogical resource to help the professional development of scholars and students in the field." According to Tekelioglu, the impetus behind its development was the "lack of an online publication that focused uniquely on Islamic studies" highlighting digital scholarship on Islam and socio-economic issues from the

Middle East to Africa, and from South and South East Asia to Europe and North America. This presentation analyzed how digital media has opened a channel through which scholars can review the implications that these new platforms have on the way Islam is taught online. It provided insight into how “digital humanities’ projects provide a new avenue for the dissemination of knowledge on Islam, produced by academics and experts in the field of Islamic studies.” For example, in addition to work that highlights studies on ongoing academic projects, the *Maydan* also posted reactions (minus the academic rigor) to such contemporary issues as the Travel Ban or the “Muslim Ban” and recent German and Turkish elections as a way to serve the web-audience.

He identified the challenges and opportunities experienced by scholars engaged with *The Maydan*, and web-based followers. For example, challenges facing scholars were focused on learning how to best “use online platforms for spreading their research; provide academic products easily accessible; and bridge the gap between the academy and the broader public.” Challenges facing “consumer” web-based audiences were identified as “finding materials they are interested in, on websites they believe to be credible, a challenge made greater by the vast sea of web-based production on Islam.” Tekelioglu noted that *The Maydan* experience was “instructive in identifying a number of challenges that intersect with disciplinary, political, and professional difficulties that face Islamic studies scholars and scholarship.”

He noted that the challenges experienced by *The Maydan* pointed to whether a digital platform for non-peer-reviewed articles is worthy of a scholar’s time, especially when monetary compensation was not provided; and whether a social media platform is only viewed as a blog due to non-academic rigor in its written submissions. He also spoke about how “building an audience and a following was more challenging” than GMU’s Ali Vural Ak Center for Global Islamic Studies had expected, and that the Center had hoped *The Maydan*’s online digital “platform would fill a gap and develop a solid and large following early-on.” He added that this endeavor was “a costly social media outreach” and that although *The Maydan*’s digital platform fell short of the Center’s expectations in developing a major following, it hopes to “develop a novel approach that can contribute to the study of Islam as a global religion in an academic culture that is more cut-throat, than collaborative, and often too patriarchal to allow for alternative voices and methods to flourish.”

The second panel session, “**Religious Authority and Social Media**” was moderated by the Panel Chair and Discussant, Emilio Spadola, (Tufts

University, Medford, MA). To examine the role and challenges faced by the religious authority during the digital age, the three panelists did not focus on new 21<sup>st</sup> century technologies, but rather, as noted by Spadola, they reviewed the new media “in a broader historical context by situating digital and social media within the longer historical period of *mass* communications, through technologies of mass reproducibility and large-scale circulation, from late nineteenth century print media, and steam and telegraph channels, to the twentieth century’s broadcast system of radio and television, and audio and video cassettes, onward to Internet and mobile digital platforms.”

The first presenter in this session, Taner Dogan (City, University of London, London, UK), provided an in-depth analysis of “Social Media as a Source of Self-Identity Formation” by examining how the “expansion of social media platforms influenced young people’s relationship with religion and faith” in Turkey. He credited the “neoliberal economic policies implemented by the Justice and Development Party (AKP) [for empowering] the modernization process” in transforming traditional societies “without any relation to religion or its institutions [which ultimately accelerated] the individualization process of the Islamic educated younger generation in Turkey.” His paper focused on “how Turkish President Erdoğan’s Islamist ideology and the socio-political process in Turkey created a diverse structure among the children of conservative families.” According to Dogan, his in-depth interviews conducted in June 2018 with Turkish students studying in Imam Hatip religious schools highlighted “how social media became the driving force in religious identity [which helped] form a new self-identity.” Although he added that these schools were meant to support Erdoğan’s attempts to cultivate a “pious generation,” but based on his interviews with students, these schools were not doing that. During the Q & A session, Spadola asked if these students “do not consider Erdoğan’s government oppressive or authoritarian, and do not oppose it at all, then in what sense are they not satisfying Erdoğan’s aims?”

This was followed by a presentation on “Techno-religious Objects and Transformation of Conservatism in Turkey” by Husniye Esmâ Celebioglu (George Mason University, Fairfax, VA). According to Celebioglu, such “techno-religious devices as religious apps for smartphones (compasses showing *Qibla*, digital Qur’an, prayer time apps, etc.), talking prayer-rugs, Qur’an pen readers, digital prayer counters have accelerated the marketization of religion, and transformed the religious conservative culture in Turkey.” She based her conclusion on “site observations and interviews with individuals using these devices for religious purposes,” while acknowledging the positive transformation of Turkish conservative

religious culture due to the liberalization of Turkey's economic and political culture in the last decade.

Celebioglu's presentation outlined how digital devices provide avenues that reinforce the individualization of religious practices, and that "self-education and self-learning are enabled through online channels or digital materials." She explained how various digital reading-pens provide people a simpler way to learn how to read the Qur'an "without referring to a religious authority." For example, one can choose any of the listed scholars noted for their recitations of the Qur'an to hear specific chapters (*surahs*) or verses (*ayats*) line-by-line and listen to Qur'anic translations, etc. She also noted that beginners can acquire "reading-pen-sets that contain educational materials ... to help them learn Arabic letters and how to read the Qur'an with *tajweed*."

During the Q & A period, Spadola asked whether we could describe such consumers as "deferring not to the authority of *an individual*, but rather, to an *object* which acts as a substitute for an authority (the parents in this case) who, in the past, might have reminded young Muslims of the proper *adab* of prayer, eating, etc." The discussant questioned whether "authority" was even in question among these consumers. Celebioglu argued that portable digital devices have increased the privatization of religious practices, and that the use of social media platforms (i.e., Facebook, YouTube, etc.) by religious authorities increased its individualization because it "... can provide a more direct and interactive communication between followers and religious authorities."

The next panelist, Emad Hamdeh (Embry Riddle University, Daytona Beach, FL) spoke of the "Traditional *Ulamā'* and the Reservation of Self-Learning." His presentation focused primarily on "how the expansion of the pool of participants in religious discussions [through digital media] challenges traditional religious authority by allowing anyone with Internet access to speak for Islam." He explained that the maintenance of tradition is based on a "pedagogical process of 'handing down' knowledge from predecessors," and explained that his use of the term *Traditionalist* "referred to '*ulamā'* who serve as guardians, transmitters, and interpreters of Islamic knowledge, and that for the '*ulamā'*, "Islam can only be properly understood under the tutelage of a teacher, and not just through the Internet or books." He explained that the manner in which "religious knowledge and authority are transmitted in Traditionalist circles [is what] distinguishes Traditional '*ulamā'* from other autodidactic, reformist, or modernists' versions of Islam."

Hamdeh defined Traditionalism as a “current within Islam that adheres to what is considered authentically rooted in revelation that has crystallized under the banners of scholarly consensus (*ijmā'*), and has been passed on as Islamic knowledge (*'ilm naqlī*) in chains of scholarly authority (*isnād*). It is a current that is didactic and instructional, which stands in opposition to autodidactic ‘do it yourself’ Islam.” He examined why the process for attaining religious knowledge in Islamic history “was validated by a connection to past individuals and institutions such as an *isnād* back to the Prophet, an *ijāza* traced back to a teacher, or a disciple connecting himself back to a Sufi master.” He stated that traditionalists do not consider themselves to be a reform movement, but rather, learned individuals “connected to the Prophet through a scholarly chain of authorities, and that the teachers in this chain make up tradition.”

The following were among the questions raised during the Q & A session: What is the “*Ijaza* System?” and what educational tools are needed to acquire a proper understanding of the Qur’an?; Since “Sheikh Google” and the Internet are becoming the authority for today’s scholars, and given that there is no official clergy in Islam, who among the religious authority is authorized to dispute claims made against Islam?; How has Internet-Islam lowered the bar for the place of teachers?; and How has Internet-Islam changed education and authority?

For Hamdeh, *ijaza* (license to teach), elucidates the Traditionalists’ method of learning under the supervision of an acknowledged scholar of Islam. “The *ijāza* system was meant to supervise the student’s methodology and interpretation of scripture.” It is system of learning that consists of guidance and “a very careful grammatical analysis of why each word was selected and what it implies. The teacher would shed light on what kind of theological and legal messages the author is delivering in his choice of words.”

According to Hamdeh, “prior to the Internet, scholars were able to confine teaching activities to scholarly institutions [and that] the Internet changed this drastically [because] the *'ulamā'* who train in a highly didactic system are particularly challenged by it.” During the Q & A session, the panel discussant, Spadola, noted that since Hamdeh referenced the role of state institutions in education, we might consider how “this argument shifts if we go back to the old ‘new’ media of the twentieth century, when traditional *'ulamā'* were first encountering mass media and reforms that explicitly shifted authority not only from its exclusive sites of person-to-person transmission but to the state.” The discussant also commented on Hamdeh’s reference to *tarbiyya*, or self-formation and training and noted

that “in contemporary Sufi discourse at least, this is contrasted quite often to *ta’lim*, or merely intellectual ‘book learning,’ which, in the sense of a missing teacher/model/guide, is also ‘Internet-learning.’ How might the interest in person-to-person transmission prevalent among ‘traditional’ ‘*ulamā*’ not be a simple continuity, but rather, a revival or a return to a form of education that emphasizes etiquette, *adab*, ‘self-formation’ in general, at a moment when it seems most needed?”

In his response to how the Internet changed education and authority in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, Hamdeh stated that “although education is still ongoing in Muslim countries via the Internet, Facebook, YouTube, etc., online-learning lacks the personal human interaction of student-teacher etiquette, an important element in traditional learning.” He added that prior to the digital era, “it was the ‘*ulamā*’ who spoke for Islam, whereas the Internet allows everyone to share his/her views about Islam through videos, blogs, and social media outlets. Traditionalists are sometimes critical of learning from the Internet because it creates a space where the laity can study Islam without a teacher, and participate in teaching it, and ultimately reshape scholarly authority.” His main contention against cyberspace-instruction was that “this technological transformation creates competition over religious authority between ‘*ulamā*’, who are trained in Islamic sciences, and religious activists whose authority is based upon persuasion and the interpretation of texts they primarily access through print and the Internet.

The second panel session was followed by the Luncheon Keynote Address, given by Jon W. Anderson, Professor Emeritus of Anthropology, (The Catholic University of America, Washington, DC) on the “**Impact of Emerging Digital Technology and Social Media in the Middle East.**” He explained how the “treatment of Internet media in the Middle East and the Muslim world seem to be stalled around a restricted view of communication as *message-passing*, variable reception by individuals, and averaging them as ‘audience’ or, in political terms, as ‘public opinion’ that are producing inconclusive results.” He defined the concept of *structural transformations* of mass media, and examined how a reciprocal and “continuously interactive” networked communication system in the digital era can be analyzed. According to Anderson, instead of defining features of Internet interaction as “framings of *structural transformation* ... it is worth revisiting [the following] three *middle range* sociologies that capture the interaction of social actors with the Internet through the Internet: Communities of Practice, Strength of Weak Ties, and the Creation of Textual Authority.” This analysis brings features of digital interaction as social media “into better view than framings as *structural transformation*.”

The third panel session, “**Varieties of Religious Expression,**” was also moderated by the Panel Chair and Discussant, Emilio Spadola (Tufts University, Medford, MA). The discussant commented that although the three papers in this panel on calligraphic Islam; *ibtihalat* in the digital age; and Islamic eschatology and climate change addressed “disparate topics,” once he listened to the presentations he noted that “they cohered in a very powerful and meaningful way.”

In his concluding remarks, the discussant pointed to how the divine aspects of God’s *jadal* (might and majesty) and *jamal* (beauty) which were prevalent in these three presentations prompted him to recall “Kant’s theory of the sublime ... and wonder how the sublime accords with the Muslim experience of *khushu’* (awe, humble fear before God’s grandeur). [He also wondered about the ways in which the authors were] situating digital media in specific relation to Muslims’ *personal* and large-scale *communal* experiences of the sublime/*khushu’* in encountering God’s *jadal* or *jamal*, and how this coincided with the broad emphasis on ‘*da’wa*’ (the call to Islam) in modern Islamic reform movements.”

This session began with a presentation by Alan Godlas, (University of Georgia, Athens, GA), on “Social Media and Dissemination of Calligraphic Islam.” He focused on how digital technologies have allowed the masses to view the beauty and wisdom displayed in calligraphic art which was “largely witnessed only by an elite (who bought or commissioned the pieces), the principal exception being people who visited certain mosques (especially Ottoman) and Sufi centers where calligraphies were displayed.” Godlas explained how digital media helped him use calligraphic Islam as a medium to define the beauty of Islam. He argued that “just as Twitter is a medium that affects the messages it conveys, the calligraphic message of Islam has been influenced, throughout history and today, by the beautiful nature of the calligraphic medium ... showcasing certain Qur’anic verses, names of Allah, Hadith, supplications to saints, and Sufi poetry.” During the Q & A session, Spadola noted that Godlas “displayed Islamic traditions of beauty in order to induce a feeling for God’s beauty in viewers, and in so doing, to remind Muslims of *Islam’s* stunning beauty. But he does so not only for separate individuals, but to construct a community.”

The next speaker, Heba Arafa Abdelfattah (Georgia Institute of Technology, Atlanta, GA), gave a most fascinating account of “*Ibtihalat* in the Digital Age: Public and Private Domains.” She explained that social media platforms have “amplified one of the most popular cultural genres in Islam known as invocations (pl. *Ibtihalat*, sing. *Ibtihal*), Arabic short-poems performed with or without music by a sheikh known as the supplicator

(*mubtihil*). Although the *Ibtihalat* is a male-dominated genre and profession normally undertaken by an al-Azhar graduate who specializes in Qur'anic recitation, women like the renowned Egyptian diva, Umm Kulthum, also performed *Ibtihalat*." She noted that these short-poems are aired regularly on Arabic TV and radio stations that transmit the Qur'an and its interpretations. Broadcasting of *Ibtihalat* is an integral part of Islamic festivities during the two *Eids* (*Eid al-Adha* and *Eid al-Fitre*), and Ramadan.

She gave a riveting analysis of how "classic performance style of *Ibtihalat* is one of the reasons for the continued popularity and widespread viewership of this genre on social media [and that] the *Ibtihal* is often performed in a public gathering as a monologue addressing what Seyyed Hossein Nasr describes as 'the sacred silence.' [And by addressing silence] the *mubtihil* performs a personal spiritual journey that creates a private space for self-assessment in the public sphere."

During the Q & A session, Abdelfattah was asked what she thought of the contemporary pop religious-singing in Egypt, and if it was similar to *Ibtihalat*. She stated that her research is focused on "continuity of form and content and examines the reasons why a particular art-work continues to be celebrated so popularly." She noted that the popularity of art-work is "definitely an indication of authenticity, but more so an indication of the demand and the need for that particular artistic experience and the contexts of its production. It is not simply a matter of nostalgia, but rather, a question of how popular Islamic art has functioned in everyday life practices of Muslims, and how popular culture approach to Islamic studies continues to be marginalized and studied in fragmentation." Spadola then added that her presentation "evoked the powers of sound and voice in ways that evoke the effectiveness of the medium rather than its semantic content." He referenced how Hirschkind's work provided a model in examining how the "importance of these technologies rests perhaps less with the digital medium than with the efficacy of sound."

Norah Elmagraby's (Emory University, Atlanta, GA) talk on "Islamic Eschatology and Climate Change: A Study of the Virtual Discourse on Climate Change" examined if Islamic apocalyptic discourse affects public opinion on climate change in the Middle East. To provide a comprehensive picture of the online-discourse in Muslim-majority nations, she analyzed Muslim attitudes and comments made by laymen and Imams on YouTube by examining the "theological language, ideologies and reasoning" used in one-hundred Arabic-written public comments on scientific YouTube videos on climate change.

She began by referencing a 2017 article written in Arabic and English by the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) examining an updated timeline of the “Doomsday Clock.” This timepiece is “a symbolic clock that represents the likelihood of man-made global disasters, [which] has been maintained since 1947 by the Bulletin of Atomic Scientists (BPA), in order to increase public awareness of the dangers related to nuclear weapons, climate change and emerging technologies.” She noted that although the Arabic version of the BBC article contained numerous similarities to the BBC article in English, the “primary differences between the two articles, were the choice of words and translation associated with certain phrases. The translators of the Arabic article intentionally choose to translate the term “doomsday” as *Yawm al-Qiyamah*, which translates to the “Day of Judgment.” A more proper phrase associated with “doomsday” would have been *nihayat al-‘Aalam*, which translates to the “end of the world.”

She spoke about how the misuse of, and inaccurate translations of Islamic eschatological terms like the “Day of Judgement” or “end times” have generated misinformation about the causes behind climate change that have ultimately affected public opinion in the Middle East on this topic. Her presentation, which is based on ethnographic research, shows how incorrect translation of Arabic terms have necessitated further investigation and education about weather patterns and climate change. The main premise of her paper focused on the fact that “*misconceptions* of climate change and end-times eschatology have severe implications.” She analyzed how inaccurate use of Islamic eschatological terms by translators of Arabic are regularly misinterpreted from English terms when discussing and defining climate change. She stated that “the linguistic usage of the term ‘Day of Judgement’ when addressing the catastrophic predictions of climate change mark a prevalent ideology that links doctrinal beliefs regarding the end of the world, with climate-change-induced weather events. Instead of attributing extreme weather events to global warming, the translators attribute it to signs of end-times.”

The fourth panel session, “**Social and Political Mobilization**,” was moderated by Panel Chair and Discussant, Sylvia Chan-Malik (Rutgers University, New Brunswick, NJ).

According to Chan-Malik, the fact that the following “three disparate talks, very different in scope and subject matter presented by Alia Dawoud, Hasan Azad, and Zainab Alam, can be included in the same panel session, explains how digital media created different spaces for numerous roles, including different conceptions of political space. [She concluded that] taken together all three papers raised critical and urgent questions around

the ways in which social media and digital communication are producing new political, social, and cultural areas which must be taken into account in our approach in the study of Islam and Muslims.”

Alia Dawoud opened this session with a talk on “How Tunisia’s Decision to Equate Women with Men in Inheritance Ignited Fire and Fury on Social Media.” She examined how social media generated an intense debate among religious Muslim scholars and secularist intellectuals in Arab countries regarding the move by the Tunisian President, Beji Caid Essebsi, to “equate women with men in inheritance and allow Muslim women to marry non-Muslim men.” The fact that this call was condoned by the official Tunisian religious establishment, it could not be “ignored or dismissed neither in Tunisia, nor in the region as a whole.”

Dawoud used critical discourse analysis to examine comments made on social media “in response to an episode of an Egyptian talk-show which featured a heated debate between an Egyptian religious scholar and a secular Egyptian intellectual regarding the Tunisian decision. The video of the episode [available on YouTube], received a total of 1,167 comments from citizens from Arab countries, including Egypt, Tunisia, Algeria, Mauritania and Saudi Arabia.” She described the Egyptian reaction to the Tunisian decision as “fire and fury,” and noted that this debate encouraged heated discussions on Egyptian talk-shows that included “interviews with religious scholars, both male and female, who forcefully argued against these changes, on the grounds that they were a clear and unacceptable violation of Islamic principles.” According to the discussant, Chan-Malik, “YouTube comments clearly show that changes in inheritance law in Tunisia reveal a shifting public discourse around women’s rights, religion in the public sphere, and secularism and human rights.”

Questions during the Q & A session focused on why it has been so difficult to update inheritance laws. Dawoud stated that it had nothing to do with religion, especially since inheritance laws are clearly stated in the Qur’an, and that it was all about patriarchy. She stated that it “is an argument that many secular Muslims make. They argue that the spirit of Islam is one of equality and that Islam gave women unprecedented rights when it first emerged, and the texts need to be revisited and reinterpreted.”

Dawoud concluded that since the inheritance issue is clearly addressed in the Qur’an, a sound argument, grounded in Islamic discourse is needed to support such a change. She added that when the Tunisian Mufti released his statement supporting the Tunisian President’s call for equal inheritance for women, it was neither credible nor convincing because the

Mufti “quoted a Qur’anic verse which addressed divorce, and not inheritance.”

The next presenter, Hasan Azad (Columbia University, NY), examined “Digital Muslims, Colonial (ized) Islam.” In his presentation, he spoke about how the enormous amount of digital data that is available to such companies as Facebook, Google, Amazon, etc., allows for “the manipulation of people.” His focus was on “how digitality is re-shaping what it means to be Muslim, and, thereby, how people *practice* and *think about* Islam.[He] examined the Facebook group *Decolonial Islamic Studies* which aims to create a ‘decolonial’ Islamic studies and Muslim identity in the West and the rest of the world.” He argued that “since digitality emerges from a Western, Eurocentric weltanschauung, it follows that the digital sphere tacitly rejects Islam and Muslims, where Islam and Muslims are the archetypal ‘Other’ of the West. Digitality is a continuation of Orientalism, or a Eurocentric power/knowledge project of (continued) global domination.”

Azad noted that since digitality is a mode of being and thinking that is already secular, Western, and modern, then the project “*Decolonial Islamic Studies* group, and similar endeavors, is from the outset fated to (re)create a secular, modern digital Islam and Muslim identity that, far from being decolonial, reinforces the logics of coloniality, albeit in a newly configured idiom.”

The third talk in this panel was on “Celebrity Politics in Pakistan: The Case of Qandeel Baloch,” presented by Zainab Alam (Rutgers University, New Brunswick, NJ). Qandeel Baloch, a social media star and activist from a poor family and an ethnic minority group was murdered in 2016 by her brother in what was purportedly an “honor killing.” Zainab Alam examined “Qandeel’s ‘do-it-yourself activism’ ... to gain recognition by the state, and expand the boundaries of national belonging in Pakistan to include culturally rebellious women of limited economic means. [She argued that] new social media, serves to open up new forms of political agency in Pakistan, particularly for those who, like Qandeel, were most marginalized.”

This presentation focused on how a “new form of activism arose in Pakistan, where there is increasingly limited space for dissent, and where mainstream media is strictly censored and notions of public femininity are heavily regulated by both social norms and the state.” By examining “Qandeel’s audacious claim of Pakistani nationality, her pledge of fealty to the recently launched political party Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (Pakistan Movement for Justice, PTI), and her use of photographs and videos to criticize a powerful Islamic cleric,” Alam demonstrated how political

engagement grounded in women's agency served as a powerful form of activism. She argued that "Qandeel's politicized celebrity-status was secured by her performance of three important acts of 'do-it-yourself activism,' namely her confirmation as a national *Pakistani* performer; her claim of political party affiliation as a form of active citizenship; and her role as a selfie-taking whistleblower which exposed the hypocrisy of a religious leader."

The discussant, Chan-Malik, noted that "Alam conceptualized the very notion of politics and political terrain through her astute analysis of slain Pakistani social-media star, Qandeel Baloch, whose case reveals the emergent [evolving, irrevocable] role of political mobilization and struggle in contemporary South Asia" in the digital age.

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