Get Yours Today! On the Production and Consumption of the Televised Fatwā

by

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Abstract

This thesis explores Yastaftūnak, a program aired on Al-Resalah, an Arabic-language Islamic satellite television channel, as a prime example of the fatwā show genre. Scrutinizing Yastaftūnak from different theoretical angles, I enquire into how such fatwā programs operate, why they are made and watched, and what repercussions their increasing popularity has for Muslim worlds. Considering the utilization of fatwās as a tool of societal discipline, I examine simultaneously how such discipline is embodied and performed. These subjects feed into larger arguments concerning the role of television programs in the commodification of fatwās and concurrent establishment of an “intimate public sphere.” Throughout this, I probe into the ways a seemingly uniquely Islamic knowledge produced in the form of an unending stream of fatwās is given the impression of being objective, and contest this view, teasing the social, political, and economic out of what is presented as solely legal or religious.
To my parents, for everything
Acknowledgements

This thesis begins and ends with my loving parents. Although not always fully grasping my fundamental need to pull apart the order of the world around me at its seams, they nonetheless have believed, unceasingly and wholeheartedly, in my capabilities to do whatever I set my mind to. Giving generously of their time, devotion, and hard work, they have granted me more than I could ever hope to recognize or repay. This work is as much for them as it is from them. I can only hope that it will offer a glimpse into the realms I at times stubbornly inhabit. I am excited also at the prospect of illustrating to my gifted brothers an entirely novel concept of engineering: social engineering. I hope that, through this demonstration, we are reminded that we all must live in the world we build; so build well.

I also express my utmost gratitude to my advisor, Professor Mohamad Tavakoli-Targhi, for his continuously energetic support for this project. His sharp insights have been invaluable, and the ideas emerging out of his vibrant classroom undoubtedly found their way into the following pages. Likewise, it cannot be overlooked that this thesis is a product of my time at the University of Toronto, and the various intellectual exchanges that transpired over the course of an edifying two years at the Department of Near and Middle Eastern Civilizations. I would like to especially thank Professors Amira Mittermaier and Todd Lawson for their always inspiring seminars, whose import carries far beyond the classroom. Much appreciation is due also to Professor Alejandro Paz, for his feedback on earlier portions of this work. Finally, the SSHRC graduate scholarship generously supported me during my second year, providing me the financial freedom to devote myself entirely to this academic endeavor, and for that I am grateful.
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## Table of Contents

Abstract  
Dedication  
Acknowledgments  
Table of Contents  
Introduction  
I. *Fatwās* Onscreen  
II. The Public, Intimate, and Everything in Between  
III. *Fatwā*/Show  
   A) Show (or, Mechanisms)  
   B) *Fatwā* (or, Ideology)  
   C) *Fatwā* Show (or, Putting *Fatwās* to Work)  
Conclusion  
Bibliography
Introduction

On any given weekday, between seven and eight PM, Mecca time, the camera pans to the show’s host as he welcomes viewers to another airing of Yastaftūnak. This program, whose title roughly translates as They Ask you for Legal Opinions, is a standard fatwā show broadcast on Al-Resalah, an Arabic-language Islamic satellite television channel. Every evening, the host introduces the guest scholar of the day, who then proceeds to speak for a few minutes on the episode’s theme before the calls of Muslims from around the world begin coming in. In succession, each caller will ask for fatwās (Islamic legal opinions) on every topic imaginable. These individuals will then hang up and, presumably, await a response.

This interaction between caller, scholar, and host appears to be straightforward enough. A seeker of religious knowledge asks a question, and a vetted possessor of such knowledge offers a legal response. This exchange, by virtue of the televisual medium through which it takes place, is made accessible to the rest of the world. The overall consequence, and stated objective, of answering the questions of these countless viewers is the cultivation of a more educated and faithful umma (Muslim nation), erudite in its religious duties and equipped with the know-how necessary to fulfilling them.

This rendition is one provided by a simple, cursory consideration of Yastaftūnak, or the many other fatwā shows like it. This thesis is not one such consideration, but, indeed, an attempt at the opposite. It takes its starting point in such basic interpretations of the workings of fatwā shows and interrogates them as a means to complicate our understanding of the various processes at play throughout. Taking Yastaftūnak as my object of study, I scrutinize it from different theoretical angles, inquiring into how such fatwā programs operate, why they are made
and watched, and what repercussions their increasing popularity has for the Muslim world. With these questions, I propose, we may begin to navigate the intricacies of fatwā seeking in the modern world.

Undertaking an extensive survey of Yastaftūnak’s episodes, I analyze not only the questions and answers broached, but the context in which this religious edification takes place. This thesis considers the utilization of fatwās as a tool of societal discipline, examining simultaneously how such discipline is embodied and performed. These subjects form a stepping stone towards larger arguments concerning the role of television programs in the commodification of fatwās and concurrent establishment of an “intimate public sphere.” It is the transformation of religious knowledge into a commodity, I contend, that enables the creation of a public sphere concerned almost exclusively with matters innocuous to the larger political landscape within which these shows operate. In the process, much as other forms of knowledge claims prove disputable, I probe into the ways a seemingly uniquely Islamic knowledge produced in the form of an unending stream of fatwās is given the impression of being objective, and contest this view, teasing the social, political, and economic out of what is presented as solely legal or religious.

This study is divided into three parts. As a literature review, Part I surveys the relevant scholarship on Islamic media, Arab television, and religious broadcasting in the Muslim world. Demonstrating the ways in which previous academic work contributes to our task at hand, I also highlight the avenues left unexplored by prior scholars, making the case for my own inquiry as an

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1 I borrow this term from Lauren Berlant, whose work I will consider in greater detail shortly. Lauren Berlant, *The Queen of America Goes to Washington City: Essays on Sex and Citizenship* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1997).
attempt to address them. Taking into account the dearth of research on televised fatwā programs in particular, despite their monumental role in the shaping of Islamic knowledge and society, I propose that an in-depth analysis of them is long overdue.² This section concludes by describing the socio-historical milieu of the particular show I examine, situating it within its local and broader transnational contexts.

Part II institutes a firm theoretical basis upon which my later analysis is constructed. I describe Jürgen Habermas’ theory of the public sphere, and explore various reworkings of it, focusing particularly on attempts to extend it to the analysis of Islamic environments.³ Here, I also detail Lauren Berlant’s notion of the “intimate public sphere,” bearing in mind the centrality of the human body to such a theorization. I then move to an examination of pertinent theory on discipline and performativity, locating in these themes critical conceptual devices for our appraisal of the fatwā show as a quintessential tool of modern power.

The third and final section bears the bulk of my critical analysis. Here, I break down the show into structural and thematic elements that I scrutinize in-depth. Surveying these programs, I think through the questions callers ask, and the answers scholars give, in a way that pushes me to reflect on the overall “fatwā institution” epitomized and empowered by these shows.⁴ Bringing the theory laid out in Part II with the ethnographic material gleaned from these shows, I offer tentative answers to questions about the commodification of religious knowledge and the

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² For an exploration of fatwās and their importance across the ages, see Muhammad Khalid Masud, Brinkley Morris Messick, and David Stephan Powers, eds., Islamic Legal Interpretation: Muftis and Their Fatwas (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1996).
state of one unique, but domineering, manifestation of the present-day Islamic public sphere.

Using example after example, I illuminate how a fatwā is so much more than just a fatwā, shedding light on the inextricable conditions from within knowledge is produced.5

I. Fatwās Onscreen

This thesis is indebted to numerous recent inquiries into media transformations within Arab and Islamic societies and their subsequent social, political, and economic implications.6 Beginning in the 1990s, in tandem with worldwide developments in media and communication technologies, many scholars predicted these changes would entail immense ramifications for the Arab and Muslim world. Typifying the scholarly output of this variety, Dale Eickelman and Jon Anderson’s edited volume, New Media in the Muslim World, proposed more than a decade ago that innovations in media forms would increase capacities for the construction of a productive “public sphere” in the Muslim world, and subsequently, engender a process of democratization throughout the region.7 In order to make this causal leap, Eickelman and Anderson contend that, as the public is allowed access to new media, “asymmetries between senders and receivers, and between producers and consumers, are reduced as more people participate in religious and civil discourse.”8 Such change is the result of the many obstacles of older media forms, such as the

5 I must emphasize here that my exploration of fatwā shows is just that—an exploration of fatwā shows. This thesis is not intended as an engagement with the particularities of “Islamic law,” but rather, it offers an investigation into the means by which such legal knowledge, as interpreted by a very specific group of individuals, is created and disseminated via television broadcasts.
6 In an attempt to delimit this study, I focus my own work primarily on Arabic-language fatwā shows, and hence refer overwhelmingly to the Arab and Islamic world, often interchangeably.
7 Dale Eickelman and Jon W. Anderson, New Media in the Muslim World: The Emerging Public Sphere (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2003).
hurdles of “official and unofficial censorship, available infrastructure, and gatekeepers who control access to newsprint, studios, and other required resources, including the training needed to use certain media,” being renegotiated and, it is claimed, overcome. In these ways, individuals utilizing alternative media avenues are purported to have effectively bypassed restrictions enforced by states in the attempt to limit the powers of a politically conscious and active public.9

Much scholarship has developed from (and in contradistinction to) Eickelman and Anderson’s proposal. Focus on the public sphere has remained a popular area of debate, albeit one not always perceived with the same optimism first expressed.10 Charles Hirschkind, for one, challenges what he perceives to be the dichotomy “scholars exploring the incorporation of mass media into religious practices” construct “between what are assumed to be two contradictory processes, the deliberative and the disciplinary.”11 Writing against the latter understanding that “media technologies... enable an extension of an authoritative religious discourse” in which “the resultant public is less a site of discussion than of subjection to authority, part of a project aimed at promoting and securing a uniform model of moral behavior,” Hirschkind also faults the theoretical counterpart of such thinking, which identifies only the deliberative.12 Such a polarization is indicative of “a tendency within liberal thought to view the individual as necessarily in conflict with the community and the forms of collective discipline that undergird

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12 Hirschkind, The Ethical Soundscape, 105.
it,” a characterization which Hirschkind contests. He points instead to the increasing prevalence of religious “counterpublics” in which “deliberation and discipline, or language and power, are regarded as thoroughly interdependent,” an abstract notion manifested through concrete acts of self-discipline and ethical speech.\(^{13}\) Hirschkind’s scholarship draws on that of Michael Warner, who highlights the fact that any and all deliberation inevitably takes place within the use of language, which is itself subject to the conditions of power.\(^{14}\) Following the work of Hirschkind and Warner, then, this study seeks not to join one side of the discipline versus deliberation debate, but rather, examine the ways in which the divide between its opposite ends are continuously being redefined.

One way to accomplish this is to follow the lead of recent scholarship on media, and television in particular. In her *Dramas of Nationhood*, Lila Abu-Lughod investigates the workings of Egyptian soap operas which, while topically tangent, stand as a useful point of comparison for our own study of television in the Arab world.\(^{15}\) Abu-Lughod analyzes television serials and conducts interviews with their female viewers in order to understand broader issues surrounding questions of belonging to Egyptian state and society. She works on the assertion that “Nation-states can be looked at both as cultural artifacts whose technologies of production and imagination can be analyzed and as modes of ordering everyday life that can be ethnographically investigated.” This recognizes in television “one of the richest and most intriguing technologies of nation building.”\(^{16}\) This is primarily a result of television’s dual role as educator and entertainer, be this “edutainment” manifested in the soap operas Abu-Lughod considers, or the

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\(^{13}\) Hirschkind, *The Ethical Soundscape*, 106.


fatwā shows we will shortly analyze. In addition to soap operas, Abu-Lughod also usefully surveys Egyptian talk shows in which people with complicated or uncommon personal problems voice their narratives before an audience.\textsuperscript{17} Though audience members are free to listen and, in some instances, comment on what they have heard, the show’s focus is undeniably the panel of experts which “[sits] there in judgment, to give advice and draw moral conclusions,” educating the show’s participants and its audience, in the studio and at home.\textsuperscript{18} Here, Abu-Lughod illustrates how, because such talk shows “[associate] moral judgments with educated and enlightened figures of authority, they establish dependence as the proper mode of relations between the disempowered and the state or the educated classes.”\textsuperscript{19} Similarly, the educational role of the talk show, and the inherent power of its starring expert, is of critical importance to an investigation of the fatwā show.

While Abu-Lughod offers an anthropological approach to the study of television, it must also be noted that the field of media studies boasts a wealth of literature on television broadcasting in the Arab and Muslim world. While older works tend to be focused almost exclusively on state television, since the proliferation of satellite television channels in the 1990s and the increasing ease of access to them, more and more research has explored the satellite realm.\textsuperscript{20} Marwan Kraidy, Naomi Sakr, and Muhammad Ayish are several noteworthy names in this regard, and their works provide a combination of quantitative and qualitative surveys of the

\textsuperscript{17} Abu-Lughod, \textit{Dramas of Nationhood}, 94-100.
\textsuperscript{18} Abu-Lughod, \textit{Dramas of Nationhood}, 95.
\textsuperscript{19} Abu-Lughod, \textit{Dramas of Nationhood}, 100.
\textsuperscript{20} This is not to say that contemporary works on national television do not exist; see, for instance, Tourya Guaaybess, ed., \textit{National Broadcasting and State Policy in Arab Countries} (New York, NY: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013).
current state of Arab television. In addition to their extensive descriptive accounts of the historical, political, and economic backgrounds of various Arab satellite television conglomerates, channels, and programs, these studies make larger claims pertaining to the role of television in invigorating what some would call the “globalization” of the Arab world, in addition to expounding upon television’s effects on the national politics of various Arab states. More recent works consider more specifically the critical influence of media in what has been termed the “Arab spring,” as is the case in a recent volume edited by Leila Hudson, Adel Iskandar, and Mimi Kirk.” At the same time, some studies have delimited their focus to a particular channel, as illustrated by the ubiquity of works devoted to analyzing the first free-to-air Arab news channel, Al-Jazeera.

Narrowing in on our object of research, we observe that Islam, as an assumed uniform unit of analysis, forms another prominent theme found throughout the study of Arab satellite television, finding a growing array of academic engagement with Islamic satellite television in particular. For instance, Khaled Hroub’s edited volume, Religious Broadcasting in the Middle

22 With more and more Arabic speakers, from all over the globe, tuning into an ever increasing array of satellite television channels, the Arab world is closer than ever before.
East, offers a useful overview of various popular Islamic television channels, in addition to a few Arab Christian ones useful for comparative purposes. While some of the other studies emphasize the transnational nature of Islamic television, much of them, particularly those based in the discipline of anthropology, may be categorized according to the field site in which the research is conducted. Gareth Barkin and Noorhaidi Hasan, for instance, write on Indonesian Islamic television, situating their discussions overwhelmingly in questions pertaining to the commercialization and commodification of Islam onscreen. The majority of work done on Arabic-language Islamic broadcasting, however, deals with Egypt, and is often centered on what has been dubbed the “Muslim televangelist.” Several articles—that of Yasmin Moll, to name one—embark from Brian Larkin’s rumination upon the figure of the Muslim evangelist, only to then apply this understanding to a study of Muslim televangelists in particular. Muslim televangelists prominent on the Egyptian scene, such as Amr Khaled and Moez Masoud, are scrutinized, illuminating everything from the storytelling features and visual culture of their shows, to their influence on Muslim youth worldwide. While important, the extensive scholarly...
attention to such individual figures and their specific contexts leaves much terrain of Islamic
satellite television unexamined.

Perhaps more useful to our purposes, in that respect, is the literature on the particular
ideologies underlying various forms of televangelism—that of Salafi or Wahhabi channels, to give
but one example. In an article on Islamic televangelists, Ibrahim Saleh suggests that, in their
usage of televisual media, proponents of Salafi and Wahhabi ideologies “have developed their
own hegemonic frameworks that have narrowed the range of what the right Islamic vision of the
world should be” by “turning mediation into opportunities for creating the ‘real Muslim’ self at
the expense of others (non-Muslims or even Muslims who do not conform to Salafism) through
the construction of binary oppositions, of sameness and difference.”

This mass mediation is a critical juncture “In the context of struggles over socio-political, economic, and political
hegemony” within the Muslim world, and, according to Saleh, Islamic televangelists exploit
broadcasting power to “[tame] the interpretation of Islam to offer what the producers want.”

These producers, “with clear Wahhabi and Salafi agendas and credentials,” use such television
programming to “inculcate mobilizing norms that have enabled the majority of illiterate, poor,
and discontented viewers to engage with mediated religious discourses as a form of worship”
necessary for the salvation of individual Muslims and the umma at large.

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31 Ibrahim Saleh, “Islamic Televangelism: The Salafi Window to Paradise,” in Global and Local Televangelism, eds.
32 Saleh, “Islamic Televangelism,” 70.
33 Saleh, “Islamic Televangelism,” 70.

http://tbsjournal.arabmediasociety.com/Archives/Fall04/wiseamrkhaled.html deal with Amr Khaled and Moez
Masoud specifically; Sharon Otterman, “Fatwas and Feminism: Women, Religious Authority, and Islamic TV,”
Transnational Broadcasting Studies Journal 16 (2006), available online:
http://tbsjournal.arabmediasociety.com/Otterman.html and Jessica Winegar, “Civilizing Muslim Youth: Egyptian
State Culture Programmes and Islamic Television Preachers,” Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute 20, no.3
programs may encourage identification with the larger public of the *umma*, they simultaneously reroute the energies of Muslim viewers towards more individualized, politically passive means of social participation.

While a number of recent studies have been conducted on Islamic televangelists, to my knowledge, there has yet to be any extended inquiry into televised *fatwā* programs. Hroub provides the closest analysis of such shows, but even then, it forms only a side-discussion in his broader introduction. Hroub is in agreement with Saleh on the assertion that Islamic programming provides knowledge “in a patriarchal format based on religious argumentation legitimizing or delegitimizing social practices and behavior—the halal versus haram binary,” a situation which has progressed to such an extent that all “small or large issues now have to go through this ‘legitimization’ machinery” which the *fatwā* is foundational to. Indeed, Hroub maintains that “Issuing *fatwās* has become the backbone of (Islamic) religious broadcasting,” bequeathing Islamic scholars an ever-increasing power to command members of society in the ways they deem fit. He describes the resultant social structure as a “*fatwā* institution” which subjects its members to “public religious authority (physical and virtual) that invents and controls a process of legitimization of all aspects of life,” both private and public, preventing individuals

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36 Hroub, “Introduction”
from coming together in a public sphere outside the purview of such authorities.\textsuperscript{39} In Hroub’s suggestion that “religious broadcasting occupies territories in the spaces liberated from the control of the state and higher authorities” in an attempt to imbue them with its own ideology, however, the dichotomy he constructs between the “political (the state) and moral (religious/political institution)” betrays a specificity which does not hold in all Islamic contexts.\textsuperscript{40} In our case study, for instance, state and religious institutions are inseparably intertwined, a detail which holds immense implications for how fatwā shows should be approached. Drawing on Hroub’s observations, and his oversights, therefore, I attempt in this work to study fatwā shows while cognizant of the socio-political specificities from which these programs emerge.

One characteristic of the show I choose to study is that it airs on Al-Resalah, an Arabic-language Islamic channel based in Saudi Arabia and founded in 2006 by the Saudi Arabian Prince and multibillionaire Al-Waleed bin Talāl.\textsuperscript{41} Al-Resalah is a channel that Hroub himself recognizes as one which, though marketed as distinct from Saudi state-led broadcasting, “[functions] according to a ‘gentleman’s agreement’ by which [it avoids] any state-insensitive material,” and instead concentrates “on proselytising a strict interpretation of Islam stripped of any political dimension that could disturb the status quo.”\textsuperscript{42} Viewed in this light, the relationship between the state and religious scholars gains an even more critical significance. What is more, considering this show within its local context means recognizing its place within the Saudi state, and this

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{39} Hroub, “Introduction” 10.
\item \textsuperscript{40} Hroub, “Introduction” 10.
\item \textsuperscript{41} Sakr, \textit{Arab Television Today}, 9. To learn more about the history of Islamic satellite television, see Sakr, \textit{Arab Television Today}, 151-152.
\item \textsuperscript{42} Hroub, “Introduction,” 6.
\end{itemize}
necessitates appreciating the truly exceptional nature of the affiliation between Saudi state and religious authorities. ⁴³

Recall that, from its beginnings in 1932, “The invented ‘Saudi’ nation articulated an identity by claiming to apply the shari‘a (Islamic law) in all aspects of life and submitting to a universal Islamic ethos” drawn from the writings of an 18th century religious revivalist from Najd, Muhammad ibn Abd Al-Wahhab (1703—1792). ⁴⁴ Though Ibn Abd Al-Wahhab is often touted as the instigator of subsequent political developments, Madawi al-Rasheed takes great care to distinguish between “Wahhabiyya as an ahistorical coherent corpus of religious knowledge” ⁴⁵ and what transpired when this same “Wahhabiyya under state patronage was turned into a quasi-nationalist project” which drew “its legitimacy from divine sources rather than man-made modern constructions of national identity.” ⁴⁶ Central to this nationalist project was the transformation of:

personal piety into a public project, the objective of which was to create a moral community under the authority of a political centre. The personal and the public combined to foster the piety of the state. The state was able to manipulate public Islam, enforced by Wahhabi teachings and scholars, to create a legitimacy and a rationale for the foundation of a pious nation. ⁴⁷

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⁴³ For a detailed history of Saudi Arabia, see Madawi Al Rasheed, A History of Saudi Arabia (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002).
⁴⁴ Madawi Al-Rasheed, A Most Masculine State: Gender, Politics and Religion in Saudi Arabia (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 14. In reality, the shari‘a is very distinct from what has come to be termed, only in the last century or two, “Islamic law.” For an excellent analysis which distinguishes between these two terms, see Brinkley Messick, The Calligraphic State: Textual Domination and History in a Muslim Society (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993). For the purposes of this study, however, equivalence between these concepts will be assumed.
⁴⁵ Al-Rasheed, A Most Masculine State, 16.
⁴⁷ Al-Rasheed, A Most Masculine State, 43.
In exchange, vetted Wahhabi scholars were accorded the capacity to legislate and enforce these religious rulings, making the alliance between state and religious elites one of mutual benefit, not to mention necessity. In this manner, the proliferation of fatwās should not be viewed simply as a religious matter, but rather, a political one.

II. The Public, Intimate, and Everything in Between

Above we explored the various themes considered within recent research on media in the Arab and Muslim world. The thread that runs through most of this literature is the use of the Habermas’ conceptualization of the public sphere as an analytical lens. Informatively, questions of media in the Muslim world appear to have become inescapably entangled in questions of this narrow understanding of the public sphere. It would seem, then, that I face two options in my own examination of televised fatwā programs: in the first, I continue engagement with the public sphere in light of previous scholarship, and in the second, I challenge such a narrow reading, and instead work outside such a paradigm and the discursive boundaries that have been constructed around it. In the attempt to provide a fresh perspective on an increasingly examined subject, the latter option is at first tempting. However, further consideration leads one to the realization that, in actual fact, a calculated disregard for the public sphere is in itself a form of engagement with it. What is more, dispensing with the public sphere means also dispensing with much of the scholarship which, as described earlier, has developed around it. For these reasons, we find that the first option, an engagement with the public sphere, is necessary for my work, albeit only with qualification. Though acknowledging the fundamentals of public sphere theory and its subsequent varieties, I find revising it to suit the specificities of my own study essential. In
what follows, then, I elaborate on a multiplicity of helpful, relevant considerations of the public sphere, formulating in the process my own theoretical instruments employed throughout the rest of this study.

We thus begin with Habermas’ original theorization of the public sphere, to which much (if not all) later work on the public sphere traces its origins. Habermas is concerned with the ways in which the division between the public and the private in Western Europe has been reinterpreted and renegotiated over time. He notes how the collapse of feudal Europe starting in the 16th century coincided with developments in trade and capitalist financing and the expansion of a burgeoning state. Together, he proposes, these changes instigated new social forms and processes, among which was the growth of the bourgeois, a class of private individuals united by their shared literacy and possession of property. In their dual role as private individuals and public citizens who could read and discuss the contents of newly mass-produced newspapers, thus articulating political opinions on issues that mattered to them, while possessing leverage against higher political authorities in the form of their property holdings, these people constituted a public sphere. Habermas describes the public sphere as “a forum in which the private people, come together to form a public, readied themselves to compel public authority to legitimate itself before public opinion” which they accomplished by exercising their public critical reason.\(^{48}\) The public sphere thus constituted a space distinct from the state, yet thoroughly political and with an influence of its own.

Much has transpired since the rise of the bourgeois, however, and Habermas writes of it dejectedly. Processes of “neomercantilism” and “refeudalization” led to the “rise of a new

\(^{48}\) Habermas, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*, 25.
protectionism, an increase in functions of the state machinery,” and, ultimately, the state’s intrusion into the previously private areas of the market and personal lives of its citizens.\textsuperscript{49} With this, the boundary between the public and private disintegrated, dissolving with it the public sphere built upon their strict separation. These structural changes were manifested on a smaller scale; Habermas describes a shift from a public sphere of letters to one of leisure, which was enmeshed in the cycle of consumption and production and thus rendered apolitical. There was also a move from the production of opinion to the consumption of it, since people no longer participated in the political dialogue of the public sphere, nor owned the property necessary to negotiate with the powerful. The gravity of this situation was exacerbated by the development of new forms of mass media such as radio and television, which instilled even further in individuals the capacity to consume, not produce, all while subjecting them to newly developed advertising and public relations’ apparatuses. In this society, any discussion assumed “the form of a consumer item” and was “bound to certain prearranged rules of the game.”\textsuperscript{50} What remained was thus a pseudo-public sphere, still giving the sense of debate, but inherently powerless before the interests that control the space of engagement.

Central to Habermas’ conceptualization of the contemporary public sphere, therefore, is the role of mass media in shaping the public and private lives of its constituents. Francis Cody, in an extended literature review of “Publics and Politics,” emphasizes that “The political subject of publicity is deeply entangled in the very technological, linguistic, and conceptual means of its own self-production” to such an extent that “Publics might sometimes even appear as effects of

\textsuperscript{49} Habermas, \textit{The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere}, 143.

\textsuperscript{50} Habermas, \textit{The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere}, 164.
such media.”\textsuperscript{51} Since, as he proposes, “the very capacity of publics to know themselves and act in the world is premised... on recursive processes of mass mediation and self-abstraction,” understanding the inescapable presence of the media becomes essential to understanding the publics which inevitably operate within it.\textsuperscript{52} Larkin contends that the significance of media is even greater in discussions of religious movements, which not only “are constituted through communicative acts — practices of mediation whereby adherents bind themselves to one another and to a higher power,” but also established “through the circulation of discursive forms that address religious subjects, calling them into being, uniting them in common actions of reading, listening, seeing.”\textsuperscript{53} Religious movements then, like their national counterparts, are equally embedded in both the politics of publicity and the politics of the media, and must be studied as such.

Thus far, we have made a case for the significance of the public sphere to studies of the present-day media and addressed its relevance to the study of religion in particular. Armando Salvatore, who has written extensively on the public sphere, deals also with the particularities of its manifestations in the Muslim world.\textsuperscript{54} Embarking from the claim that “the idea of the public is culturally embedded,” Salvatore and Mark LeVine set out to discover what forms publics have

\textsuperscript{52} Cody, “Publics and Politics,” 47.
\textsuperscript{54} For some of Salvatore’s publications on the public sphere, on the Islamic world and elsewhere, see Armando Salvatore, \textit{The Public Sphere: Liberal Modernity, Catholicism, Islam} (New York, NY: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007); Armando Salvatore and Dale F. Eickelman, \textit{Public Islam and the Common Good} (Leiden: Brill, 2004); Armando Salvatore and Mark LeVine, eds. \textit{Religion, Social Practice, and Contested Hegemonies: Reconstructing the Public Sphere in Muslim Majority Societies} (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005); and Armando Salvatore, Oliver Schmidtke, and Hans-Jörg Trenz, eds., \textit{Rethinking the Public Sphere Through Transnationalizing Processes: Europe and Beyond} (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013).
assumed in diverse settings united by their shared Islamic heritage.\textsuperscript{55} To do so, they employ a modified definition of the public sphere, contending that “When not limited to modern secular settings, the public sphere can be understood as the site where contests take place over the definition of the obligations, rights, and especially notions of justice that members of society require for the common good to be realized.”\textsuperscript{56} In this reformulation, the emphasis is placed not on the distinction between the public and private deemed fundamental to “secular” states, but rather, to the activity that takes place within such a space. In this reconsideration of the public sphere, Salvatore and LeVine further point to another shortcoming of its earlier understandings: that such conceptualizations “are too rigidly premised on a notion of civil society of private citizens,” and as a result, “do not sufficiently consider the modalities through which modern states introduce disciplining and legitimizing projects into public sphere dynamics, and the tension between such activities and the public sphere’s specific role as a site for solidarities against the discursive powers of the state.”\textsuperscript{57} One presumes that, concerned primarily with European or North American contexts, such prior studies were confident enough in the “secular” separation between the public and private to safely discount any state influence on the public sphere. Foregoing any critique of this undeniably problematic assessment, we nonetheless find such approaches problematic in the case of states which are decidedly unsecular and identify as such—Saudi Arabia, our case study, providing a prime example. Defining the public sphere in

\textsuperscript{55} Armando Salvatore and Mark LeVine, “Introduction: Reconstructing the Public Sphere in Muslim Majority Societies,” in Religion, Social Practice, and Contested Hegemonies: Reconstructing the Public Sphere in Muslim Majority Societies, eds. Armando Salvatore and Mark LeVine (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005), 6-7.


\textsuperscript{57} Salvatore and LeVine, “Introduction,” 6-7.
terms of its content, therefore, is necessary to making it applicable to our purposes, which extend beyond the North-Western/Central European settings of Habermas’ writing.

Though not based in an Arab or Islamic context, another interpretation of the public sphere which is invaluable to our objectives is Lauren Berlant’s “intimate public sphere.” Unlike Salvatore and LeVine, Berlant maintains the value of the public/private split, but brings into it another critical element: the intimate. She differentiates between civic acts and intimate, or personal, acts, claiming that in the contemporary United States, it is the latter which saturate the public sphere by virtue of their being made into matters of public concern. Berlant thus “focuses on the ways conservative ideology has convinced a citizenry that the core context of politics should be the sphere of private life,” manifested in endless debates on otherwise intimate concerns revolving mainly around bodily and sexual practice. This public sphere formation is a result of “the privatization of U.S. citizenship” transpiring since the so-called Reagan Revolution (1980-), which transformed the nature of citizenship from the active participation in public, political debates on matters of general concern to the advocacy of and adhering to specific moral values and lifestyle norms. In this radically different configuration, in which the United States is demarcated “as a place where normal intimacy is considered the foundation of the citizen’s happiness, the [political/ideological] right has attempted to control the ways questions of economic survival are seen as matters of citizenship.” In this manner, questions of social injustice and economic inequality are, by definition and necessity, discounted in favor of

58 Berlant, *The Queen of America Goes to Washington City*.
59 Berlant, *The Queen of America Goes to Washington City*, 3.
60 Berlant, *The Queen of America Goes to Washington City*, 3.
questions of the intimate. Thus, the intimate public sphere is one in which public deliberation continues to take place, but not on the issues that should matter—at least according to Berlant.

One of the challenges of such a conceptualization, however, is that Berlant does not substantiate her own distinction between what constitutes the civic and what constitutes the intimate, and why one should be deemed more relevant to politics than others. Rather, she appears to assume that certain acts are inherently apolitical, while others are not, failing to recognize that in many environments, such as those outside a seemingly “secular” world, such dichotomies do not hold. Nonetheless, her recognition of the disproportionate prominence of the body and sexuality in defining citizenship, and the politicized ways such perceptions are manipulated, is helpful in examining fatwās which address all aspects of life: the public, private, and, exceedingly, the intimate, in ways very similar to those prevalent in the U.S.

It is of no small significance that the body is at the heart of Berlant’s public sphere, particularly considering the extent to which such a public sphere is a product of the state. Indeed, if one is to consider the work of Michel Foucault, manipulating the human body, often in subtle, innocuous ways, is one of the modern state’s primary concerns. According to him, while the body has always been susceptible to domination by external forces, it was in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries in Europe that there developed an art of the body which operated via fundamentally novel mechanisms. In these new methods employed by the nascent nation-state, the goal was not to manipulate the masses, but the individual body, “exercising upon it a subtle coercion... obtaining holds upon it at the level of the mechanism itself—

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movements, gestures, attitudes, rapidity; [cultivating] an infinitesimal power over the active body.” Moreover, such discipline was concerned not with “the signifying elements of the behavior or the language of the body, but the economy, the efficacy of movements, their internal organization.” The monitoring and discipline of these daily processes was not an occasional undertaking, but constituted an unending state of being, “an uninterrupted, constant coercion” centered on ensuring all acts were conducted “according to a codification that partitions as closely as possible time, space, movement.” The objective of this discipline was to “[increase] the forces of the body (in economic terms of utility) and [diminish] these same forces (in political terms of obedience),” thus allowing for the creation of docile bodies. The creation of compliant subjects in this way is thus one feature of “governmentality,” or, the “conduct of conduct” by which the modern state organizes its subjects. Foucault therefore demonstrates that “nothing is more material, physical, corporal than the exercise of power” in the modern world, and consequently, alerts us that any study of state power, such as our own, must inevitably account for the relationship of such power to the body.

Understanding the materiality of the body is no simple matter, however, and scholars such as Judith Butler have written at length in an attempt to apprehend the ways in which this materiality is constructed and negotiated. In her work, Butler explores how sex is “materialized” by the “regulatory norms” of the society in which one participates. Central to this process of

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63 Foucault, * Discipline and Punish*, 137.
64 Foucault, * Discipline and Punish*, 137.
65 Foucault, * Discipline and Punish*, 137.
materialization is the concept of performativity, which she describes “not as a singular or deliberate ‘act,’ but, rather, as the reiterative and citational practice by which discourse produces the effects that it names.”\textsuperscript{70} There are many layers to this statement; first is the extent to which performativity is based in language, so much so that not only “the schema of bodies” but their very matter must be understood to be “a historically contingent nexus of power/discourse.”\textsuperscript{71} Like in Foucault’s iteration of discipline, the subject according to Butler is shown to be “the effect of a dynamic of power, such that the matter of bodies [is] indissociable from the regulatory norms that govern their materialization and the signification of those material effects.”\textsuperscript{72} In both these conceptualizations, the subject is materialized—brought into material existence—through the mechanisms of power. We may also note how Butler designates this productive process of performativity as one of continuous (re)iteration and thus (re)creation, one undoubtedly acting, once again, in a manner very similar to that described by Foucault in the context of a state’s unceasing discipline of its subjects. Thus, Butler’s body “is a materiality that bears meaning, if nothing else, and the manner of this bearing is fundamentally dramatic... [dramatic meaning] only that the body is not merely matter but a continual and incessant materializing of possibilities.”\textsuperscript{73} As we will see, this perception of the body’s materiality as performative, and hence bound up in language that is itself caught up in webs of power, engenders noteworthy consequences in a discussion of an intimate public sphere based in dialogue.

\textsuperscript{70} Butler, \textit{Bodies That Matter}, 2.
\textsuperscript{71} Butler, \textit{Bodies That Matter}, 8.
\textsuperscript{72} Butler, \textit{Bodies That Matter}, xii.
Crucially, participation in this performative process of bodily materialization is often unconscious on part of the subject, as Pierre Bourdieu describes.\textsuperscript{74} He observes that societies and their associated structures and institutions, in their attempt to produce compliant citizens, devote much attention to “the seemingly most insignificant details of \textit{dress, bearing}, physical and verbal \textit{manners}” for the fundamental reason “that, treating the body as a memory, they entrust to it in abbreviated and practical, i.e. mnemonic, form the fundamental principles of the arbitrary content of the culture.”\textsuperscript{75} According to Bourdieu:

The principles embodied in this way are placed beyond the grasp of consciousness, and hence cannot be touched by voluntary, deliberate transformation, cannot even be made explicit; nothing seems more ineffable, more incommunicable, more inimitable, and, therefore, more precious, than the values given body, \textit{made} body by the transubstantiation achieved by the hidden persuasion of an implicit pedagogy, capable of instilling a whole cosmology, an ethic, a metaphysic, a political philosophy, through injunctions as insignificant as “stand up straight” or “don’t hold your knife in your left hand.”\textsuperscript{76}

We note here the way in which discipline can be constant on part of the state or society; instead of being a state of perpetual observation, correction, and punishment, discipline is instituted by instilling in subjects a habitus which compels them to discipline themselves, and unconsciously at that. In this way, “Through the habitus, the structure which has produced it governs practice, not by the processes of a mechanical determinism, but through the mediation of the orientations and limits it assigns to the habitus's operations of invention.”\textsuperscript{77} The individual can only think, and thus act, in ways that have previously been decreed, and, importantly, previously embodied; “the habitus engenders all the thoughts, all the perceptions, and all the actions consistent with

\textsuperscript{74} For a detailed examination of Bourdieu in the context of performativity, see Judith Butler, \textit{Excitable Speech: A Politics of the Performatve} (New York: Routledge, 1997), 141-163.
\textsuperscript{76} Bourdieu, \textit{Outline of a Theory of Practice}, 94.
\textsuperscript{77} Bourdieu, \textit{Outline of a Theory of Practice}, 95.
those conditions, and no others.” Therefore, the performative constitution of the body not only is unconscious, but at the same time (and because it is so) prevents the realization of the existence of an “otherwise.”

Interestingly, much of Bourdieu’s theoretical work springs from fieldwork conducted in Algeria, and Lila Abu-Lughod considers his concepts of habitus and “hexis,” its bodily counterpart, as representing “one of the more promising theoretical insights to emerge from research in the region” of the Muslim world. This would, it may first appear, make Bourdieu’s theory automatically applicable to the Islamic contexts we seek to study. Gregory Starrett, however, while recognizing the utility of Bourdieu’s articulation of habitus and hexis, finds problematic in this comparative analysis these terms’ origin as an attempt “to illuminate the meaning of bodily disposition in social systems in which such explicit, formal interpretation is absent.” Not only does such a reading inaccurately presume that no such clear elaboration for practice exists in the Islamic world, but, perhaps more significantly, it allocates the anthropologist undue power in determining the “true” meaning of these acts.

Shifting the focus away from this “true” meaning, and the power inherent in ascribing it, Starrett offers an alternative understanding of hexis as “a set of processes through which

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79 Lila Abu-Lughod, “Zones of Theory in the Anthropology of the Arab World,” *Annual Review of Anthropology* 18 (1989): 296. Hexis is the term Bourdieu uses to describe bodily habitus specifically, for, as he writes, “Bodily hexis is political mythology realized, *em-bodied*, turned into a permanent disposition, a durable manner of standing, speaking, and thereby, of feeling and thinking.” Bourdieu, *Outline of a Theory of Practice*, 93-94. While habitus pertains to the limits of what one can think, hexis is concerned with the limits of what one can do (though, as he recognizes, thinking and doing are at the same time inseparable).
81 Starrett also describes how the reduction of Islam to orthopraxy by denying its possession of an explicit belief system is problematic because it “has been used in part by Western scholars to distance outer-directed Islam from inner-directed Christianity, the implication being again that ‘their’ ritual is empty while ‘ours’ has intellectual content.” Starrett, “The Hexis of Interpretation,” 964.
individuals and groups consciously ascribe meaning to—or learn to perceive meaning in—bodily disposition, and to establish, maintain, and contest publicly its political valence.”\(^8\) He thus emphasizes “the relationship between hexis and public discourse about hexis,” concerned not simply with what bodily acts are undertaken, but rather, how they are spoken about and understood.\(^8\) Such an outlook “[examines] the extent to which interpretations of hexis are changed, manipulated, and made explicitly into an object of contention is vital” to a study of Muslim worlds, in which “There have always been struggles, large and small, in the legitimation of the Islamic worldview—or, rather, of one Islamic worldview versus another.”\(^8\) To understand body hexis, therefore, we must understand these contests for authority, “[perceiving] in detail the ways in which the body is made symbolic, interpreted, and experienced as ideologically significant” by virtue of its being transformed into “an object of cultural and political contention.”\(^8\) In this manner, Starrett highlights the centrality of discourse to the shaping of the workings of the body and their expression.

This recognition of the importance of discourse brings us back full circle, for, if we recall, deliberation forms the cornerstone of the public sphere. We began this section with a consideration of Habermas’ theory of the public sphere, its relevance to the present day, and its pertinence to the contemporary Islamic world in particular. In each of these inquiries, the public sphere was based in discourse, and indeed, constituted by it. This was also the case in our analysis of the intimate public sphere, in which public discussion on intimate matters brought about a unique manifestation of the public sphere. Identifying the body as the focal point of this

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\(^8\) Starrett, “The Hexis of Interpretation,” 954.
\(^8\) Starrett, “The Hexis of Interpretation,” 954.
\(^8\) Starrett, “The Hexis of Interpretation,” 963.
\(^8\) Starrett, “The Hexis of Interpretation,” 965.
intimate public sphere, we then explored the ways in which the body exists in the modern world, examining it especially in light of discipline and the performativity with which such discipline is enacted, making it a process that is both unconscious and unceasing. It is in our attempt to understand the meaning implicit in these tacit, yet overt, bodily practices that we find ourselves again noting the significance of discourse. In our elaboration of these various perspectives relevant and helpful to an examination of our own fatwā show related questions, we have witnessed the theoretical entanglement of the public sphere, body, discipline, and discourse. Considering the fact that fatwā shows inexorably operate in a sphere impacted by all these matters and more, having elaborated on them, we are now ready to analyze our case study in light of the insights laid out above.

**III. Fatwā/Show**

One of the fundamental propositions of this thesis is that the fatwā show constitutes an inherently complex, multilayered object of study. With this in mind, in the attempt to more carefully examine the distinct processes at play in the airing of such a show, it is helpful to break up our analysis into segments. Pointing to both its origins and hybridity, the name itself—fatwā show—does the dividing for us. The fatwā show is, first and foremost, a television show. In this regard, it is characterized by features common to all television shows, and must thus be understood in the context of its broadcast via this particular medium.

The fatwā show is not simply any televised program, however, but one devoted exclusively to the production and dissemination of fatwās. How do these fatwās shape the show and its context generally? Exploring this question forms our second order of business. To
conclude, this two-fold inquiry which separates the fatwā from the show is reevaluated, demonstrating how, in practice, the fatwā and its show are necessarily intertwined. The fatwā show is noteworthy not because of the fatwā, nor because of the show, but because the act of bringing them together creates something as fundamentally new as it is substantial. Considering here questions pertaining to the relationship of knowledge and power, its dissemination as a commodity, and the ways such developments shape the public sphere, I thereby investigate what the fatwā show’s popularity means for the contemporary Islamic landscape at large.

A) Show (or, Mechanisms)

Before embarking upon an examination of the fatwā show as show, we must recognize that no such generic object exists. A profusion of Islamic television channels air an even more copious amount of fatwā shows, and in this study, I do not endeavor to speak for all of them. Making a case for depth over breadth, I focus solely on Yastaftūnak, a fatwā show broadcast on Al-Resalah. But why Al-Resalah, and why Yastaftūnak?

To begin with, considering the centrality of Islamic knowledge to this project, it is essential to examine a channel perceived as a legitimate authority in that field. One of the top Islamic satellite television channels in the Arab-speaking world (and beyond), Al-Resalah

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86 According to Hroub, in the Middle East, “The number of Islamic religious channels varies continuously as new ones keep emerging and others are short-lived. The number of channels that could be called religious (exclusively religion-focused in definition and material broadcast) easily exceed 120, but the most influential and established number around twenty, including Sunni and Shia.” Hroub, “Introduction,” 289 n.2. Fatwā shows are often a staple of any channel marketed as Islamic, with most channels broadcasting at least one, if not several, regular fatwā programs. This is not to mention fatwā shows that air on channels that are not chiefly Islamic, such as Al-Shari’a wa Al-Hayāt, starring Yusuf al Qaradawi, which was the very first fatwā show to air, broadcast on al Jazeera news channel. For more on this program, see Mohammad Ayish, “Religious Broadcasting on Mainstream Channels: Al Jazeera, MBC and Dubai,” in Religious Broadcasting in the Middle East, ed. Khaled Hroub (London: Hurst & Co., 2012); and Gräf and Skovgaard-Petersen, Global Mufti.
undoubtedly fulfills this criterion. Its mainstream popularity is another reason to consider *Al-Resalah*; the channel prides itself on offering a “moderate” and “modern” Islam. Rather than appealing to a specific variety of Islam, *Al-Resalah* provides a self-declared “middle path” to attract a wide range of audiences. Why not study *Iqra’*, however, which not only markets itself in the same populist fashion as *Al-Resalah*, but has done so for far longer, taking the title of the first Arabic-language Islamic satellite television channel to air? This has certainly been the path numerous scholars have taken, making *Iqra’* perhaps the most closely-examined channel of its kind in English-language academic scholarship. But such an abundance of research on *Iqra’* is in effect a convincing reason to take this project elsewhere, in search of uncharted territory. Having quickly risen to become *Iqra’*’s prime competitor, despite its significantly later start, *Al-Resalah* provides ample material fresh for study.

One final, decisive factor in the choice of *Al-Resalah* is the singularity of the *fatwā* programming it presents. Though many other channels, *Iqra’* among them, broadcast *fatwā* shows, the cast of most of these programs consists of a solitary, recurring scholar. What makes *Yastaftūnak* unique is that it hosts a rotating body of scholars who address viewers’ queries, with new faces making appearances as often as old favorites are invited back. Such an arrangement is

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87 For an evaluation of a number of Islamic satellite television channels and their respective popularity and influence, see Hroub, *Religious Broadcasting in the Middle East*; and Hroub, “Introduction.”
88 A more detailed self-representation can be found on *Al-Resalah*’s website: [http://www.alresalah.net/#/about.jsp](http://www.alresalah.net/#/about.jsp). Of course, in referring to Islam, *Al-Resalah* means a distinctly Sunni Islam. Following this, it must be acknowledged that this specific identity of *Al-Resalah* inevitably influences this project, which deals exclusively with Sunni manifestations of televised Islam. As the various contributors to Hroub, *Religious Broadcasting in the Middle East* illustrate, however, there exists an equally vocal medley of Shi’a satellite television channels, which operate in ways both similar to and distinct from their Sunni counterparts, offering multiple opportunities for future research.
89 *Iqra’*’s was established in 1998, while *Al-Resalah* only hit the scene in 2006. Sakr, *Arab Television Today*, 152.
appealing to not only audiences, who can direct questions to their scholar of choice, but also the researcher, who is given the opportunity to examine comparatively the divergences, or similarities, of the fatwās given. Evidently popular with viewers, the hour-long Yastaftūnak has aired live five days a week, uninterrupted since its launch on March 8th, 2009. For all these reasons, Al-Resalah’s Yastaftūnak represents an ideal case study of the broader fatwā show phenomenon, as long as it is kept in mind all the while that it is but one specific manifestation of larger processes at work.

With this, we can begin analyzing the fatwā show as show—or, more accurately, as television show. Bearing in mind Marshall McLuhan’s oft-quoted, yet ever relevant, statement, “The medium is the message,” we ask: what message does television deliver? This question enjoys no easy answer; from being “praised as a wondrous looking glass on the world, a valuable source of information, education, and entertainment,” to being decried as “valueless, vulgar, and vacuous,” responsible for all the ills of society, in reality, television is far beyond reduction to the uncomplicated dichotomy of good versus evil. A more critical perspective can address such oversimplification, illuminating the subtleties lost in black and white. Although this critical approach to television need not be critical in the negative sense, if we are to consider the writings of the theorists we have drawn upon thus far, assessments are unfavorable, to say the least. We recall that Habermas held mass media responsible for the transformation of a previously political, rational-critical public sphere into an arena of unquestioning leisure and consumption. Habermas’ antagonistic view, however, does not outdo that of his former

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92 Though the show began with only four episodes broadcast per week, its popularity led to the addition of a further day of airing.
mentors, Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno. Their scathing critique of the “culture industries,” their term for mass media, was an attempt “to call attention to the industrialization and commercialization of culture under capitalist relations of production.” Such a depiction stems from a fundamental recognition of how media works to serve the economically, and in turn politically, powerful. Culture industries target (as they simultaneously produce) an unthinking audience so accustomed to the relentless consumption of entertainment that “any logical connection presupposing mental capacity is scrupulously avoided” in all that is relayed. Importantly, this immersive experience is built upon “the necessity, inherent in the system, of never releasing its grip on the consumer, of not allowing for a moment him or her to suspect that resistance is possible,” a feature required for the cultivation of politically complacent populations. Such accounts, characteristic of the Frankfurt School with which Horkheimer, Adorno, and Habermas are associated, urge analyzing “television within the dominant system of cultural production and reception, situating the medium within its institutional and political framework,” rather than undertaking a mere exploration of the medium in and for itself. In the same manner that such a method merges “the study of text and audience with an ideology critique and a contextualizing analysis of how television texts and audiences are situated within specific social relations and institutions,” this thesis investigates both the mechanisms of

97 Horkheimer and Adorno, Dialectic of Enlightenment, 113.
98 Kellner, “Critical Perspectives on Television,” 32.
television and their relationship to the frameworks in which they operate. Hence, the televisual medium is not overlooked, but deemed central to the _fatwā_ show’s mode of operation.

As we have seen, one of the primary charges levied by Frankfurt School theorists is that, because television conventionally lacks a mode of response, the medium restricts viewers solely to the act of consumption. But gone are the days when television was restricted to television, and with it, gone are such limitations. _Yastaftūnak_, for one, can be viewed without a television altogether; its live broadcast is streamed on _Al-Resalah_'s website 24/7, accessible to anyone with an internet connection and digital device. Older episodes, in addition to their transcripts, are accessible on the channel’s website, while newer episodes are immediately uploaded to YouTube. With this increased online presence comes greater prospects of response, as comments can be added to posted videos, be they on YouTube or _Al-Resalah_'s website.

Besides, such recent, internet-related media transformations should not distract us from the fundamentally interactive nature of _Yastaftūnak_, for even when viewed on television, the _fatwā_ show is still primarily a talk show. People watching at home can not only call in with their questions and comments, but even tweet or email these queries to the show’s host, who reads them out in the event of a lull in phone-calls. If that were not enough, throughout the course of _Yastaftūnak_, a tickertape runs at the bottom of the screen, hosting the textual prayers and well-wishes viewers at home unceasingly dispatch. Without a doubt, then, media and technological developments such as these have allowed for more audience participation than ever before possible in the history of television. It is changes such as these that compelled scholars like

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100 These episodes can be found on official YouTube accounts associated with _Al-Resalah_, or unofficial ones belonging to its fans.
Eickelman and Anderson to counter the cynicism of the Frankfurt School and its likes, arguing for
the recognition of a revived public sphere not in spite, but, indeed, because of new media. But
have advances in these technological means of interaction profoundly altered the nature of
Television and the public sphere it generates?

Not significantly, I propose, for two primary reasons. Firstly, any unsupervised response,
such as that occurring online, remains invisible to the larger public, and thus, inconsequential.
Secondly, those responses which do make it to television, where they are visible to the masses,
are of necessity bound to the medium’s rules and regulations. These two scenarios can only be
fully comprehended when the link between the public sphere and visibility has been made clear.
Though not often considered in tandem, visibility is crucial to the public sphere to such an extent
that Ari Adut defines the public sphere as “a generic term denoting all virtual or real spaces, the
contents of which obtain general visibility or audibility.”

101 Space is here defined as “any container of signs that can be sensorily accessed with or without mediation,” be it through
communicative technologies or otherwise. This definition of the public sphere in terms of
sensory access, and thus visibility (or audibility, which Adut does not focus on but recognizes the
parallel yet simultaneously unique significance of), has many implications. By describing it as
“public only insofar as it contains signs that are generally accessible by spectators,” Adut
maintains the importance of an audience to the public sphere, recognizing that not all its
participants will or should be active in the same manner.

103 More importantly, in depicting the

103 Adut, “A Theory of the Public Sphere,” 243.
means to govern sensory access. Here, politics is not only the end result of the public sphere, as it is in most other formulations of Habermas’ theory, but rather a constraining factor, for “it is in part through political action that public spaces are regulated, and it is in part through politics that the visibility rules in society change.” Adut realizes how actors may obstruct access to the public sphere through various methods, pointing to the effects of this on the public overall.

Questions of sensory access to the public sphere are of even greater bearing when it comes to television, a medium built upon visibility and audibility. In an article entitled “Television,” Pierre Bourdieu quotes philosopher George Berkeley, who proposed that “to be is to be perceived.” Following Adut, this statement may be understood to be as true for individuals as it is for public spheres; unless a public is seen (and/or heard), it does not exist. Does television then provide people a chance to create and participate in a public sphere in which they may see and be seen, hear and be heard? Not according to Bourdieu. He highlights the many forms of censorship involved in airing television programs, from time constraints, to state regulations, to economic and marketing considerations, all of which limit the possibilities of the final televised product, and in some cases enable its instrumentalization for propaganda purposes. Combined, these factors determine what television will make visible and what it will not. Even more significantly, “television can hide by showing,” a feat which may be done “by showing something other than what would be shown if television did what it is supposed to do, provide information. Or by showing what has to be shown, but in such a way that it is not really shown, or is turned into something insignificant; or by constructing it in such a way that it takes

104 Adut, “A Theory of the Public Sphere,” 247.
on a meaning that has nothing at all to do with reality.” But what does “hiding by showing” look like onscreen? We may consider an extended example from Yastaftūnak to find out.

Let us begin before the beginning, before a single episode of Yastaftūnak is filmed, for more primary than the show is the channel on which it is aired. As mentioned earlier, Al-Resalah is funded by Saudi Arabian Prince and billionaire Al-Waleed bin Talāl, nephew of the current King Salman. As such, though Al-Resalah cannot be considered a “state” channel in the traditional sense, nor too can it be seen as removed from the political concerns of the Saudi state in which it is based. Certainly this “in-betweenness” provides its managers some leeway in airing content that is not tailored entirely towards Saudi state interests, but, realistically, the constraints on Al-Resalah’s programming far outweigh the freedoms. Because its owner is both a member of the Saudi royal family and key figure in its economy, Al-Resalah must ensure its subject matter complies not only with explicit state laws and regulations, but also those expressed more subtly. These implicit mores—“don’t bite the hand that feeds you”—indubitably impact the objects made visible on the show and the ways in which this is done. Such concerns come part and parcel with the economic considerations of running a television channel; it is of immense significance that no commercials air during Yastaftūnak’s fifty minute episode. From where, then, does the revenue from its broadcasting come? Needless to say, the currency utilized in its making may be just as much political as it is economic, both of which work separately and together to begin fashioning a theatrical stage upon which, during the show’s performance, certain things are made visible and others are not.

Let us take one example, taking place in an episode whose theme is “The Disturbance of the Arab Arena.” In it, the scholar Abd al-Aziz Fawzān al-Fawzān, introduced as a professor of comparative jurisprudence at the Imam bin Muhammad bin Saud University in Riyadh, Saudi Arabia, begins with an address that weighs the oppression of despotic regimes against the dangers of internal strife, and reminds those listening that no one is above God’s law. He closes by emphasizing that this rule also applies, provocatively, to those tyrants who fled once their cover was lifted, as had taken place with Tunisia’s Ben Ali only days prior to the broadcasting of this particular episode. Later in this show, one caller has not a question, but a comment. Live on air, Adil from Tunisia observes accusingly that while all countries refused to accept Ben Ali when he fled his nation, Saudi Arabia let him in. How do the show’s host, scholar, and producers work to mediate such a potentially explosive allegation, and what are the larger implications of such intercession for the public sphere?

Adil’s comment, aired live, voiced criticism of the policies and political leanings of the show, channel, and state at large, potentially sparking controversy. Though theoretically an avenue for opposition, however, such bold commentary is quickly mediated and neutralized as part of the show’s dialogue. Adil has barely finished his sentence accusing Saudi Arabia of harboring the ousted Tunisian president before the scholar swiftly commends Tunisians for not conceding to this course of events, and instead demanding Interpol detain Ben Ali and try him for his crimes. Here, Adil interrupts, exclaiming “Your door is open to anyone who comes!” The scholar replies declaring that “If we [Islamic scholars] were consulted we would not have

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All episodes of Yastaftūnak analyzed throughout were studied via the video recordings and transcripts provided on al-Resalah’s official website. As of May 19, 2015, this material can be found at http://www.alresalah.net/#/textsdetail.jsp?pid=157&sec_id=4147. In an attempt to make my source material more accessible, whenever referencing a particular episode, I include a footnote citing the date it was first aired. In this case, the episode aired January 29, 2011.
approved his arrival because he was an enemy to Islam, but we ask God to protect you, and I urge you to remember what I said at the beginning of the episode.” With the words “thank you brother Adil,” the host signals the end of the call, continuing to “remind all the brothers watching us that the Guardian of the Holy Mosques [the King of Saudi Arabia] has declared that if Ben Ali is here, it is not as a president but as a Tunisian citizen, and that as a result, such a ruler is not sheltered on our lands.” The scholar then adds that in fact Ben Ali’s being in Saudi Arabia is a kind of punishment for him, because “his heart constricts at the sound of the call to prayer, which he and his parliament attempted to ban throughout Tunisia.” He expresses amazement that Ben Ali was brought back to the lands where the light of Islam shines and the call to prayer is heard five times a day. The host concludes the discussion by praying for God to guide Ben Ali and return him to his senses, and thanking the efforts of those in Tunisia who continue to demand justice.

But how does this exchange transfigure an otherwise defiant critique of the system within which the show is based? Chiefly, it does so through a successful public relations move that transforms a potentially harmful turn of events into what is ultimately a beneficial one. To start with, Adil’s comment is particularly dangerous because it calls attention not only to Saudi Arabia’s possible evasion of international law, in its refusing to extradite Ben Ali, but also to its harboring of a head of state who is seen by many as insisting, throughout his reign of power, on a secular mode of governance antithetical to the allegedly “religious” rule of Saudi Arabia. To be seen as aiding such a ruler would thus injure Saudi Arabia’s political and religious credentials, on which Riyadh relies in its never-ending quest for legitimacy. Recognizing this, the scholar and host quickly rise to the occasion of offsetting any mounting doubts about the Saudi state’s
qualifications as a supporter of these “religiously-sanctioned” (and already promoted as populist) uprisings.

The scholar first tries to shift the topic to that of supporting Tunisians in their insistence on justice, at the same time referencing Interpol, making Ben Ali a subject not of Saudi or even Arab concern, but an international one. This set of rhetorical moves may thus be interpreted as an attempt to relocate responsibility for Ben Ali’s past actions and present whereabouts. In his second response to Adil, the scholar interestingly notes a schism in the religious and political governance of the Saudi state, only to rectify this slip with a reminder to heed his words spoken at the start of the episode, which provided the initial “Islamic” framing of the matter under discussion. After Adil’s call has been cut from the air, preventing him from responding further, the host relays the Saudi King’s official statement on the Ben Ali controversy, suggestively referring to the then King Abdullah not by name, but by his self-appointed title, “Custodian of the Holy Mosques,” thus reinforcing both his Islamic reputation and his capacity to make religiously justifiable political decisions. The final comments of the scholar reiterate these same religious credentials, but in the context of the Saudi state at large, portraying it as a nation devoted entirely to the safeguarding and endorsement of Islam. The scholar and host have thus both acted to ensure that this provocative issue, even when brought up unexpectedly by a caller, was made visible in a very particular way—one that ultimately cast not a negative light on the Saudi state, as may have first been expected, but a positive one.

Decisive in the ability to influence visibility is the differential power relationship that exists between the various participants involved in Yastaftūnak’s exchange. Though members of this televised public sphere may in fact be equal members of society in Habermas’ conventional
sense —property-owning, educated men— there nonetheless exists a hierarchy which renders Adil, and his comments and criticisms, of lesser significance than those of the scholar and host. This hierarchy is constructed in a number of ways. To begin with, the scholar and host are portrayed visually and aurally onscreen, giving them by default greater credibility than a relatively anonymous caller, represented only by a voice and first name ascribed to it. In contrast, the scholar is from the very beginning introduced as “the esteemed scholar, the doctor,” and associated with the state religious, educational, and judicial institute at which he teaches. Like the expert in Abu-Lughod’s Egyptian talk show, Yastaftūnak’s scholar educates Muslims on the correct modes of behavior and belief, and is given the final say in any back-and-forth discussion with callers.  

Indeed, the occasional contestation voiced by callers such as Adil is not damaging to the show or the scholar, but indeed vital for the enactment of his expertise. The relationship between “educated scholar” and “ignorant layperson” is not primordial, but rather, a product of such interactions, with expertise being “accomplished in socially and discursively mediated interactions rather than being an expression of already existing knowledge.” This process often “involves rendering invisible the ways in which knowledge is a socially mediated achievement,” while at the same time making expert knowledge visible in ways that make it “appear objective, universally relevant, generalizable, and inherent in the expert him- or herself.” Made perceptible through “linguistic and metalinguistic resources—such as jargons

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108 Viewers paying close attention may sometimes witness a struggle between scholar and host for the final say on a particular matter. In most instances, it is the host who trumps the scholar, another telling factor which indicates to which side the scales of power on Yastaftūnak tip.


and acronyms” and “gesture, uniforms, and other visual media,” in the case of *Yastaftūnak*, the expertise of both the scholar and his host is cultivated by the customary robes worn and the Quranic verses and ḥadīths (Prophetic narrations) referenced in response to caller’s queries.\(^\text{111}\) These conventions simultaneously build up and make visible the scholar and host’s expert qualifications, both of which may be called upon to defend a particular position, as took place in response to Adil’s on-air denunciation.

Crucially, this production of expertise is only possible with the acquiescence of both parties. In other words, it requires that the expert recognizes his or her proficiency in the matter at hand, and that the non-expert acknowledges his or her ineptitude similarly. *Yastaftūnak* provides no shortage of viewers willingly submitting to the scholar’s claims to wisdom and erudition while simultaneously embracing their own ignorance. Often, individuals commence their knowledge-seeking not by turning immediately to their question, but instead by lavishing upon the scholar praise and gratitude for his presence on the show, and praying for his well-being. In behaving thus, they openly concede to his superiority. Though the case of Adil initially appears to function differently, defying the system rather than celebrating it, in his televised exchange, he too reifies the scholar’s expertise—he is *interpellated* by it. Louis Althusser describes “interpellation,” the mechanism by which ideology constitutes its subjects, as a process which demands that an ideology not only dominate individuals, but that they recognize its hold over them.\(^\text{112}\) Such acknowledgement often takes place linguistically, for “it is by being interpellated within the terms of language that a certain social existence of the body first

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becomes possible.” In this manner, “to be addressed is not merely to be recognized for what one already is, but to have the very term conferred by which the recognition of existence becomes possible.” When Adil is addressed as misguided, he becomes so. To ask a question, listen to the response, or put into practice the scholar’s ruling thus not only interpellates callers (and indeed, viewers) as subjects of Yastaftūnak’s fatwā-issuing apparatus, but condemns them to an association with the unaware masses. This is the eventual position Adil occupies.

To be deemed uninformed by mere virtue of participating in such an exchange is a particularly striking consequence in those cases where callers demonstrate great familiarity with the subject matter considered. One such woman, Hind from Saudi Arabia, phones in to inquire: “What is the ruling on using Botox injections to tighten the forehead and neck’s sagginess? I know the general ruling which states that the use of Botox to repair deformities is permissible, and its use to beautify is not. But I would like to ask: is using Botox a means of changing God’s creation?” The scholar’s first reaction is a laugh, followed by the statement that “It appears she is already familiar with the fatwā on this matter.” He goes on to answer her question, providing further detail, but all in the context of the same ruling that Hind herself was aware of. The scholar concludes by deriding “naïve” people, and women in particular, who overlook their natural beauty in order to imitate “immoral actors, actresses and pop stars,” going to extents as dire as plastic surgery to attain their resemblance and the beauty that is thought to come with it. Here, therefore, the scholar offers not only a legal ruling, but also a harsh moral judgement, and as a result of her initial question, Hind unavoidably becomes subject to his expertise in both.

113 Butler, Excitable Speech, 5.
114 Butler, Excitable Speech, 5.
115 Episode aired January 1, 2015.
But who is the expert borne from these interactions, and what is the nature of his expertise? If one is to consider him (for Yastaftūnak’s expert is always a man) simply, he is an Islamic religious scholar with a host of credentials that, in the eyes of many, authorize him to deliver legal rulings and personal guidance to Muslims of all leanings and backgrounds, when called upon to do so. Allow us, however, to complicate such an appraisal. Who is this man before he makes it to the small screen, and is this background relevant to his fatwā-issuing powers? Undoubtedly, it is. It is no coincidence that scholars hosted on Yastaftūnak are not only of Saudi nationality and religious education, but are also affiliated with Saudi legal and religious institutions, and introduced as such at the start of each episode. To take but a small sample, we may return to Abd al-Aziz Fawzān al-Fawzān, a recurring guest to the show. Al-Fawzān is presented as professor of comparative jurisprudence at the Imam bin Muhammad bin Saud University in Riyadh, Saudi Arabia, board member of Saudi Arabia’s human rights commission, and general manager of the website islammessage.com. Devoted to training judges and conducting research on matters of Islamic doctrinal and judicial concern, his home department was established and headed in 1966 by the first Grand Mufti of Saudi Arabia, Muḥammad ibn Ibrāhīm Āl al-Sheikh. Many of Yastaftūnak’s guest scholars are affiliated with this department, in addition to boasting other credentials; for instance, Saʿad bin Turkī al-Khadhlan is also Vice President of the Saudi Jurisprudence Organization, and Saʿad bin Nāsir al-Shathrī is a member of

116 Writing of Saudi Arabia, Al-Rasheed notes how “Like the independent media, official television channels do not allow women to lead discussion in religious programmes such as the famous fatwā television series.” On Al-Resalah, women often appear onscreen, unlike other Islamic channels, where only men are shown. Yet, even on Al-Resalah, women are never accorded the position of muftī (religious scholar who provides fatwās), on this show or others, even though no Islamic text or ruling forbids it. Al-Rasheed, A Most Masculine State, 252.


118 For further information on the department, see: https://sij.imamu.edu.sa/profile/Pages/default.aspx
both Saudi Arabia’s Council of Senior Scholars, which provides religious advice to the King, and the Permanent Committee for Islamic Research and Fatwās, which undertakes the research necessary to generate such advice.

This overrepresentation of Saudi specialists is not new, but has characterized the fatwā scene since the state’s beginnings. Writing of the origins of this institutionalized clergy, and the beginning of its fatwā-issuing powers, Al-Rasheed details how:

A royal decree in 1971 established the Higher Council of Ulama as a permanent council, whose objective was to issue fatwās on matters of creed, worship, and transactions. This council became an embodiment of religious nationalism, serving as a guardian of the piety of the nation. Its membership reflected the monopoly of Najdī scholars over others. From its creation, seventy-three per cent of its members were drawn from the central region of Saudi Arabia. The fatwās needed majority approval from members of the council, which was headed by appointed grand muftīs... Their opinions were first published in both huge anthologies and small pamphlets, but now, in the age of the Internet after 2000, old fatwās are preserved on web pages.\(^{119}\)

Al-Rasheed’s final sentence is telling, for the significance of such local history can only be appreciated when it is realized that this same monopoly of Najdī scholars today populates the Islamic airwaves.\(^{120}\) The specificity of the Najdī expert’s Islamic knowledge, however, is kept meticulously out of sight, providing the sense that he is qualified to provide rulings which, based in an unchanging textual corpus, transcend limitations of time and space, thus possessing eternal relevance.\(^{121}\)

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\(^{120}\) Najd is a region of Saudi Arabia, of which Riyadh is the center. It is from Najd that both Ibn Abd al-Wahhāb and the Al Saud family originate.

\(^{121}\) Though these scholars’ political affiliations to such institutions are referenced, to further build up their prestige and credentials, it is never suggested that the Saudi origins of these institutions could influence the Islamic rulings ultimately produced.
A discursive tradition, however, Islam cannot be removed from its context and analyzed as such. Rather, any interpretation of Islam must be viewed as thoroughly bound to the political, historical, and economic conditions which made it possible; hence, it is not Islam in the singular, but rather Islams in the plural, which should be acknowledged. Though Yastaftūnak’s scholars speak from but one of many manifestations of Islam, in failing to emphasize their distinctiveness, they offer their narrative as Islam in the singular. In the end, however, it is the show’s producers, and their financiers, who determine which experts are invited to honor Yastaftūnak’s stage. Accordingly, the visibility of these scholars onscreen, and the absence of others, indicates not greater knowledge on part of the former, but, rather, their intimacy with those running the show, both literally and figuratively.

With this discussion, several questions arise. Firstly, what function is served by leaving the particularity of Yastaftūnak’s scholarly expertise understated? Secondly, are Muslim audiences around the world oblivious or indifferent to such partialities? And if not, why do they continue to call? In fact, these concerns are interwoven, and we must begin by recognizing that the failure to describe scholars as speaking for a particular interpretation of Islam, as opposed to Islam itself, is no simple oversight, but fundamental to the show’s structure. To admit Yastaftūnak’s scholars as experts solely in a Saudi-inspired Islam would render them irrelevant to audiences outside the kingdom’s borders. With Muslims calling in from Europe, North

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123 I use the term “Saudi-inspired” Islam rather than Wahhabi Islam, or Wahhabism, to draw attention to two facts; that firstly, though originating in and justified by the writings of Ibn Abd al-Wahhāb, in reality, present-day manifestations of Islam in Saudi Arabia are a uniquely contemporary creation. Secondly, and more importantly, I wish to highlight the locality of Saudi-inspired Islam, rather than its “sectarian” biases, which can only be understood in a framework where “orthodoxy” exists. Thus, for the remainder of this text, I refer to Wahhabism only when the term is used by other scholars, preferring to use Saudi-inspired Islam for my own purposes.
America, and Australia, in addition to those scattered across the Arab world, such a move would be economically unwise, to say the least. For this reason, among others that we will come to shortly, *Yastaftūnak*’s scholar speaks for Islam at large. But are audiences really as uncritical as Frankfurt School theorists would have us believe, taking these scholars’ *fatwās* at face value? If we are to be generous in our assessment, we must not attribute *Yastaftūnak*’s global popularity to the credulity of the Muslim nation, but explore the possibility of other, more pertinent factors at play. We must ask: what can *Yastaftūnak*’s scholars claim exclusively that endows them with legitimacy, authority, and significance to Muslims worldwide?

The answer is simple; *Yastaftūnak*’s scholars speak on the authority of the “land of Islam” in a way no individual uninvolved with Saudi Arabia can claim. The significance of Saudi Arabia to Islam writ large is found not in Riyadh, the state capital, but further west, in Mecca, the nation’s religious capital. “Nation” here takes on two connotations, both of which are central to our investigation. Mecca, and Medina, its sister city, are pivotal elements to the Saudi nation. Saudi’s incumbent King is formally dubbed the “Custodian of the Two Holy Mosques,” located in Mecca and Medina, and two gates in the *Ka’ba*’s holy precinct bear the names of past Saudi rulers, King Abdul-Aziz and King Fahd.¹²⁴ Having already considered the ways in which Saudi political power is hinged upon its affiliated religious authority, we see now that control over these sacred sites is vital to such a symbiotic relationship. But domination over Mecca and Medina entails Saudi Arabia relevance to not only Saudi citizens, but Muslims internationally, by whom these cities are revered. The Muslim nation turns towards the holy *Ka’ba* in Mecca five times a day in prayer.

¹²⁴ King Abdul-Aziz (1876-1953), also known as Ibn Saud, was the founder and first king of the contemporary Saudi state, ruling it from 1932 until his death in 1953. His son, King Fahd (1921-2005), ruled from 1982 until his death in 2005, and undertook extensive renovations to the sacred grounds in Mecca.
and millions make pilgrimage to it throughout the year, and during the Ḥaj season in particular. Many also take a side trip to the Prophet’s Mosque in Medina, the city which offered the Prophet Muhammad refuge when he escaped persecution in Mecca, and in which his body is buried. These two cities and their associated shrines are loaded with significance for a host of different parties, and the authority to articulate this meaning has constituted a site of continuous struggle.

At play on this battlefield, on which Saudi Arabia holds strong advantage, are two levels of “religious nationalism,” local and transnational. Defining nationalism defined as a “state-centered form of collective subject formation, a form of state representation, one grounding the identity and legitimacy of the state in a national identity,” Roger Friedland suggests that religious nationalism emerges when a religion “offers an institutionally specific way to organize this modern form of collective representation, how a collectivity represents itself to itself, the symbols, signs, and practices through which it is and knows itself to be.” Al-Rasheed applies Friedland’s term to contemporary Saudi Arabia, arguing that, under state patronage, Wahhabism has been transformed from “an ahistorical coherent corpus of religious knowledge” to a project of religious nationalism, “embedded in institutions, the purpose of which is to create a godly community.” Critical to the cultivation of this religious nationalism is the Saudi state’s emphasis on “forbidding wrong as a mechanism of homogenizing religious practices and moral

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125 Ḥaj is the greater pilgrimage which each Muslim is obliged to perform at least once in his or her lifetime, circumstances permitting. Ḥaj and other pilgrimages to Mecca and Medina make Saudi Arabia the most important site for religious tourism in the Muslim world, and the economic returns of holding such a strategic position are monumental.
126 This term is employed by Roger Friedland; see Roger Friedland, “Religious Nationalism and the Problem of Collective Representation,” Annual Review of Sociology 27 (2001): 125-152.
128 Al-Rasheed, A Most Masculine State, 16.
codes... that ensured the emergence of a unified high culture based not on common history, language, or ethnicity but on common religious practice, rituals, and law."\textsuperscript{129} This resulted in the invention of what is, to a certain degree, a cohesive \textit{Saudi} nation.

While Al-Rasheed acknowledges here the role of Wahhabism in homogenizing the Saudi nation, she fails to fully explicate Saudi Arabia’s simultaneous attempt to extend this project of religious nationalism to incorporate the \textit{Muslim} nation worldwide. Indeed, framing its project in terms of “the example of the Prophet, who managed to unify tribes and regions under the banner of Islam to create a state,” the Saudi state’s transnational ambitions seek to unify the Muslim world at large.\textsuperscript{130} This attempt is rifled with problems, however, because:

Religious nationalism promoted a narrow definition of belonging to the pious community. Only those who adopted its jurisprudence, religious ritual practice, gender interpretations, and strict creed qualified to belong. This religious nationalism was based on a perpetual cosmic struggle between good and evil, which rejuvenated faith and ensured that practice conformed to the set principles of good religiosity. Above all, the struggle contributed to drawing strict boundaries between those who belonged to the pious nation and those who did not... The political leadership adopted the discourse of equality, universalism, and the strict definitions of boundaries that Wahhabiyya imposed in the public sphere. The Wahhabi religious scholars propagated the discourse of the equality of believers to mask serious inequalities, exclusion, and even discrimination. The universalism of their Islamic message concealed in its exclusive and narrow religious interpretations, which were presented as the only ones valid for the community. The universalism of Wahhabi religious nationalism was imposed as an act of faith and salvation. The movement claimed to represent Islam, but in reality it represented the narrow solidarity of one group of scholars drawn from southern \textit{Najd} and \textit{Qasim} who achieved a monopoly of the religious field.\textsuperscript{131}

\textsuperscript{129} Al-Rasheed, \textit{A Most Masculine State}, 58
\textsuperscript{130} Al-Rasheed, \textit{A Most Masculine State}, 67. While she recognizes that, in its beginnings, the Saudi state’s religious nationalism movement “needed to enlist famous Arab religious scholars to construct it as a pan-Islamic Salafi movement with an appeal beyond its narrow ethnic and regional origins,” she does not devote further analysis to explaining how the situation has developed into the present day. Al-Rasheed, \textit{A Most Masculine State}, 70.
\textsuperscript{131} Al-Rasheed, \textit{A Most Masculine State}, 71.
Though al-Rasheed describes the consequences of religious nationalism in Saudi Arabia, her illustration is easily extended to describe the state of the present-day Islamic world more broadly. But what justifies this causal leap from the local to the global? Such a move is best explained by the object that bridges them both: television.

We thus find ourselves once more examining the work of the televisual medium, and the work of fatwā shows more specifically. We have learned of the Saudi need for a rooted, local religious nationalism, upon which its legitimacy as a rightful sovereign depends. Increasingly, however, “globalization [has] threatened the religious nation and undermined its imagined tradition,” necessitating a call to action. In a world increasingly connected by all kinds of mass media, Saudi Arabia’s reputation at home has come to depend on its legitimacy abroad. The Saudi state no longer requires only the Muslim nation’s economic resources, in the form of revenue from religious tourism in Mecca and Medina, but also its ideological recognition. Yet, as was the case during the initial founding of its own local religious nationalism, in the attempt to expand its moral and political operations internationally, Saudi Arabia was faced with a jarring heterogeneity far outranking that present in the early twentieth century North-Eastern Arabian Peninsula. Considering that the institution of religious nationalism demanded that “The community [be] homogenized not only in its apparent religious praxis and compliance with religious law but also in the uniformity of its values, appearance, and lifestyle,,” innovative instruments of ensuring social conformity had to be developed. The fatwā show has emerged as one such instrument. In defining Islam in a way that makes programs like Yastaftūnak indispensable to leading a pious existence as a Muslim, Saudi Arabia compels all Muslims,

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132 Al-Rasheed, A Most Masculine State, 108.
133 Al-Rasheed, A Most Masculine State, 67.
irrespective of their location or personal background, to consult its exclusive religious authority. These Muslim seekers of knowledge are led to a carefully vetted group of Saudi (or Saudi-affiliated) scholars who are accorded a monopoly on this religious authority, to the exclusion of all those incapable of, or refusing to, identify with this state of affairs. In this way, then, the mechanisms of televised fatwā shows have permitted a closed group of scholars from the Arabian Peninsula to demarcate, via the airwaves, an Islam for the world.

**B) Fatwā (or, Ideology)**

But how are these processes expressed in *Yastaftūnak*’s day to day exchanges? What questions does the Muslim nation have? And what answers does it get? We turn now to the fatwā aspect of these shows to find out. Certainly, these inquiries are drastically shaped by the researcher’s subjective choices of investigation. Having illustrated above our methodological selections with regards to the channel and show studied, it now becomes essential to elucidate how we have approached the selection of fatwās specifically. *Yastaftūnak*’s callers request answers on almost every topic imaginable, and often times, those unimaginable as well. That everything is subject to question is in itself a consequential state of affairs which we will return to later. In the meantime, however, the wide breadth of topics raised on *Yastaftūnak* poses a dilemma for the scholar: how does one delimit what is, quite literally, an unending stream of questions?

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134 It must be stressed here that my use of the term “ideology” parallels that of Louis Althusser, who casts “ideology not as a matter of consciousness or subjective representations but rather of lived relations—” and thus focuses primarily on the power relations such ideology inevitably inhabits. For a broader look at various approaches to ideology, see Kathryn Ann Woolard, “Introduction: Language Ideology as a Field of Inquiry,” in *Language Ideologies: Practice and Theory*, ed. Bambi Schieffelin, Kathryn Woolard, and Paul V. Kroskrity (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998), 6.
The first decision I took was to take into account the show’s development across time, noting the transformations occurring from the show’s beginning until the present day.

Taking three episodes at a time, each batch spaced roughly two years apart, I analyzed shows aired in 2009, 2011, 2013, and 2015, for a total of twelve 50-minute episodes of *Yastaftūnak*. Even such a minute sampling provided me an archive so vast it necessitated further analytical choices on my part. Organizing into categories the questions asked, in addition to the introductory scholarly addresses given, I found that the global Muslim population is concerned with issues very similar to those explored in this project. From questions pertaining to the nature of knowledge itself, to appeals for personal counseling posed as questions, and inquiries on the most private, bodily habits, to concerns about the public, political environment, Muslims want to know it all. In the following, we will reflect on these diverse matters, while simultaneously tracking what topics become more popular, when, and why. While overall, the topics broached are distributed randomly, an overt politicization of the show becomes noticeable over time. Beginning thus with a discussion of concerns common to all episodes, I conclude with an exploration of the candid politics that found its way into *Yastaftūnak* later on, arguing that, in reality, it is a mere continuation of a task started with the first episode broadcast.

Like all fatwā shows, *Yastaftūnak* is grounded upon the fundamental Islamic injunction on seeking knowledge. In the very first episode aired, the host asks guest scholar Abdullah Yūsuf al-Abdullah al-Shbilī: “What is meant by ‘fiqh bil-deen’ (erudition in religion), and why is it so encouraged [in Islam]? Additionally, what is meant by the *ḥadīth* which states that ‘Whoever Allah wills well for, He makes him/her learned in religion’?”

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135 Episode aired March 8, 2009.
God to bless the show’s producers, the channel’s proprietors, and the viewers at home, the scholar begins his rumination on the act of seeking knowledge. Yastaftūnak, he asserts, responds to the demands of Muslims seeking the opportunity to inquire about concerns that arise in their daily life. Deeming fatwās “an essential pillar of Islam,” he indicates their importance by illustrating how God took it upon Himself to provide fatwās, quoting the Quranic verse which declares: “They request from you a [legal] ruling. Say, ‘Allah gives you a ruling concerning ‘al-kalala’.” He says that fatwās are of such prime importance that Muslims should actively seek the knowledge they impart in all areas of life, from family and money matters, to the minutiae of religious rituals and acts of worship.

Referencing the hadīth quoted by the host at the start of the episode, the scholar addresses viewers directly and identifies them with the people mentioned in this hadīth, implying that God selected them for the privilege of seeking religious knowledge and the rewards that accompany it. Quoting various hadīths which describe the remunerations God delivers to seekers of knowledge, he takes care to classify this knowledge as exclusively religious knowledge—“ilm sharī.” He concludes by deeming Yastaftūnak a “dhikr” circle, or blessed circle of religious remembrance, and describing how, although in the past one had to frequent the mosque to partake in such communities, the dhikr circle now conveniently makes its way right into a person’s home. With this, the scholar wraps up his introduction and, seemingly in response to it, the calls of those listening begin flooding in.

This relatively straightforward introduction offers ample prospects for engagement. Outlining Yastaftūnak’s own, explicitly stated reason for existence, it provide a useful comparison

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136 Quran 4:176. Translations of Quranic verses are drawn from the Sahih International translation provided at www.quran.com
to our earlier analysis of the implicit goals of such a show. Muslims are in need of religious
knowledge, the scholar proposes, and we are here to satisfy that need. The market undertones
of such a statement should not go unheeded, for the dynamics at play here are as primary as the
patterns of production and consumption examined at length by Karl Marx, albeit in different
contexts. Marx elaborates on how production and consumption form two sides of the same coin,
both equally critical for the maintenance of the other. He writes that:

Production... creates the consumer... Production not only supplies a material for
the need, but it also supplies a need for the material...The object of art- like every
other product- creates a public which is sensitive to art and enjoys beauty.
Production thus not only creates an object for the subject, but also a subject for
the object. Thus production produces consumption (1) by creating the material
for it; (2) by determining the manner of consumption; and (3) by creating the
products, initially posited by it as objects, in the form of a need felt by the
consumer. It thus produces the object of consumption, the manner of
consumption and the motive of consumption.137

Similarly, as demonstrated by this opening speech, fatwā shows create a need for the object
they produce: fatwās. By instilling in viewers the importance of seeking knowledge, Yastaftūnak
makes itself indispensable to the fulfillment of such a need. Yastaftūnak, in this case, creates a
public which is sensitive to the need for knowledge in every aspect of life, turning to the show in
each incident. Muslim viewers are interpellated as individuals in need of fatwās, and as a result,
they respond as such. The manner these fatwās are to be consumed is also (over)determined,
for this knowledge seeking is to be done at home, via the airwaves, by effortlessly dialing the
number provided onscreen. In this way, Yastaftūnak has successfully “[produced] the object of
consumption,” the fatwā, “the manner of consumption,” the show itself, “and the motive of
consumption,” the Islamic obligation to seek religious knowledge.

Not only does this portrayal of religious knowledge manufacture a demand for its own consumption, it also delineates the parameters by which the consumption of competitive products is made possible. To consider an illustrative example, we find in another episode an introductory talk which addresses the divergences in social ranking predetermined and willed by God.\textsuperscript{138} Sa’d bin Nāsir al-Shāthrī, the guest scholar of the day, describes how Muslims should come to terms with the existence of varying levels of humanity, both as perceived by people, and as recognized by God. Though he acknowledges that it is human nature to desire to climb the social ladder, in terms of social position and reputation, the scholar emphasizes that it is God’s \textit{sunna} (manner of doing) to divide people into degrees and categories, and that one should accept His will. A human’s value is ascribed in accordance with his or her usefulness to others, and consequently, one should confer importance only upon individuals worthy of it, al-Shāthrī says. Here, he quotes the Quranic verse which states that “Allah will raise those who have believed among you and those who were given knowledge, by degrees.”\textsuperscript{139} It is not the possession of wealth, he elucidates, which renders one esteemed, but knowledge. Why is this, he asks rhetorically. Al-Shāthrī reasons that, because scholars work to achieve the best interests of individuals and guide them to achieving higher rankings with God, and people more generally, these scholars are themselves blessed with a position higher than others, by virtue of their service to others. The best way to raise one’s status with God and humanity, therefore, is to gain religious knowledge and use it towards the good of society.

In its insistent emphasis on the value of knowledge, this address is reminiscent of the one analyzed above. It is significant in its own right, however, for as this oration implants a demand

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\textsuperscript{138} Episode aired January 19, 2013.  \\
\textsuperscript{139} Quran 58:11.  
\end{flushleft}
for seeking knowledge, it highlights that *not simply anyone* is qualified to deliver this prized good. Initially, the scholar’s concluding statement encouraging Muslims to amass knowledge and better society may be understood in populist terms. Yet, when considered further in its context, this declaration also undeniably constructs firm, exclusive boundaries for would-be knowledge seekers. What the scholar is effectively proclaiming, implicit in his illustration of a society based in inequality, is that distinctions in social power are premised on differences in amounts of knowledge possessed, and, indeed, in God’s support of these erudite individuals.\(^{140}\) It should not be lost on us that the speaker of these words is himself a self-proclaimed religious scholar, and recognized as such by the show’s host and its viewers. His pronouncement thus serves to bolster his own credentials as a possessor and righteous disseminator of religious knowledge, thereby bestowing upon himself a higher ranking with God and with people. The scholar’s degree is certainly higher than that of *Yastaftūnak*’s viewers and callers who, as we saw earlier, are, by design, interpellated as unknowledgeable. Though emboldening its audience, *Yastaftūnak* at the same time indirectly reminds them that they cannot claim as much wisdom as the scholar onscreen, thus ensuring their continued subjection to his terms.

*Yastaftūnak*’s viewers are urged to not merely attain religious knowledge, but to put such learning into practice. Nizār from Iraq may enlighten us with his question on whether the act of enjoining good and forbidding evil is *fard* (obligatory) or *sunna* (here defined specifically as a recommended following of the Prophet’s tradition).\(^{141}\) This practice has a long, often complicated history in the Islamic past and present, and is central to the practical application of

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\(^{140}\) Of course, such endorsement of social inequality— not only approved by God, but instituted by Him—also entails a number of political implications, which will be explored in the analysis to come.

\(^{141}\) Episode aired January 15, 2013.
knowledge.\textsuperscript{142} \textit{Al-amr bil-ma’rūf wal-nahī an al-munkar}—in its Arabic terminology—entails making not only oneself subject to the knowledge one has attained, but others as well. Upon learning of an Islamic obligation or prohibition, one is expected to act upon it, ensuring that this newly established belief becomes a conviction manifested in the body’s behavior or appearance. If a Muslim witnesses others contravening this religious dictum, she must advise them towards what, by virtue of the knowledge she has received, has been determined to be the correct Islamic conduct. What Nizār would like to know is whether such an implementation of knowledge upon others is compulsory, or simply preferred.

Responding to his query at length, the episode’s scholar, Abdul Rahmān bin Abdullah al-Sind, deems this practice “one of the most essential Islamic obligations,” in accordance with the Quranic verse which tells that “The believing men and believing women are allies of one another. They enjoin what is right and forbid what is wrong and establish prayer and give zakāh and obey Allah and His Messenger. Those - Allah will have mercy upon them. Indeed, Allah is Exalted in Might and Wise.”\textsuperscript{143} The ethical act of enjoining good and forbidding evil is so fundamental to being a believer, the scholar points out, that it is cited before other practices perceived central to Islam, such as performing prayers and distributing charity. But how exactly is this essential obligation to be put into practice? Al-Sind cites a \textit{ḥadīth} which declares that “Whosoever of you sees an evil, let him change it with his hand; and if he is not able to do so, then [let him change it] with his tongue; and if he is not able to do so, then with his heart — and that is the weakest of

\textsuperscript{142} For more on commanding the good and forbidding the evil, particularly its relation to the state, see Patricia Crone, \textit{God’s Rule: Government and Islam} (New York: Columbia University Press, 2004), 300-303. Consider also Hirschkind’s contemporary ethnographic illustration of this practice, which he terms \textit{da’wa}, in Hirschkind, \textit{The Ethical Soundscapes}, 108-113.

\textsuperscript{143} Quran 9:71.
A Muslim must actively right others’ wrongs, for doing so is foundational not only to Islam as a religion, but to the workings of society as a whole; abandoning this practice will lead to the downfall of a nation, as took place for previous peoples, al-Sind asserts. In this manner, the scholar affirms the importance of putting into practice, in one’s own life and that of others, religious knowledge gained, on Yastaftūnak or elsewhere.

In many instances, acquiring knowledge with the aim of advising others is one of the primary purposes Muslims call in to Yastaftūnak. A man inquiring on the religious restrictions on women’s attire, or a woman wondering whether trimming the beard is permissible, do not do so self-referentially. In both cases, the implication is that the answer provided by the scholar will be relayed to someone other than the caller his or herself, likely a friend or family member who requires guidance to the “correct path.” Yastaftūnak is in this way an implicit platform for commanding the right and forbidding the wrong. Still, in other cases, the show upholds this practice more explicitly. Aside from the fact that, with every fatwā, the scholar exemplifies this ethical act on-air, in some instances, the callers do so as well.

After asking an unrelated question, Yūsuf from Saudi Arabia bids the scholar to remind his Muslim brothers and sisters of the impermissibility of celebrating the Prophet Muhammad’s birthday. He declares that the tickertape running at the bottom of Yastaftūnak’s screen has become replete with scores of celebratory messages on the event of this contested occasion, and that this religious infraction must be addressed. The scholar, Abdullah Yūsuf al-Abdulla al-Shbailī, obliges, elaborating on the fact that, since neither the Prophet nor his companions celebrated this event, reveling in it today constitutes a bid’ā (an unorthodox innovation).

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144 This ḥadīth can be found in several collections, among them is the ubiquitous Sahih Muslim.
145 Episode aired March 8, 2009.
Accordingly, with this *fatwā*, and the question that brought it about, both scholar and caller have effectively put their religious knowledge into practical use.

What does the above theoretical and practical conceptualization of knowledge entail for the Muslim nation as a whole? At the heart of it, promoting this understanding of knowledge epitomizes the workings of hegemony, for, as Antonio Gramsci identifies, “Every relationship of ‘hegemony’ is necessarily an educational relationship.”146 To attain dominance, a state’s task is not to forcefully condemn its citizens to certain productive behaviors, but to instill in them the innate knowledge, and thus consent, necessary to impel them to act beneficially themselves. The task of this state which *educates consent* is “to raise the great mass of the population to a particular cultural and moral level, a level (or type) which corresponds to the needs of the productive forces for development, and hence to the interests of the ruling classes.”147 This is what unfolds onscreen in *Yastaftūnak*. Individuals call in to seek knowledge, and in so doing, publicize their compliance with the show’s norms and discourse—they declare their consent. The didactic exchange that ensues between scholar and caller not only imparts consent in this particular person, but broadcasts it to audiences globally, providing a public demonstration of this acquiescence. This consent is vital not only to the political elite invested in the maintenance of the status quo, but also to scholars themselves, who, as we have seen, underline repeatedly their indispensability to a system dependent on religious knowledge only fit to be administered by them. Ultimately, and most fundamentally, this religious knowledge is deemed of the essence to every Muslim’s day to day life, and in controlling the supply of this product, *Yastaftūnak* claims

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colossal power. As Foucault insightfully reminds us, “If... power is strong this is because, as we are beginning to realise, it produces effects at the level of desire—and also at the level of knowledge.”\textsuperscript{148} Doubly strong in our case, then, power produces a desire for knowledge.

Knowledge is not all that viewers desire from \textit{Yastāftūnak}; often, people call also to address their emotional needs. As inferred from their evidently distressed voices, though these individuals are ostensibly interested in receiving a response to their legal query, just as prominent is their search for liberation from personal distress. Emān from Saudi Arabia relates on-air the details of her brother’s death in a car accident at the age of 23.\textsuperscript{149} She grieves not only over his death, but perhaps more significantly, the fact that he did not pray regularly. With worry apparent in her voice, she says “I am afraid he is now being punished for his sins [of not praying], and I would like to know if there is anything I can do to allow his bad deeds to be erased. Does the [violent] method of his death mark him a martyr, and is he therefore absolved of his sins?” She repeats her question several times—was he a martyr?—throughout the call, which goes on for considerably longer than questions are generally accorded.

The host somberly offers his condolences, and then offers the floor to the scholar, Sa’d bin Nāsir al-Shāthrī. Al-Shāthrī speaks first about the fundamental importance of prayer, then going on to address Emān’s questions specifically. As humans, he states, we cannot determine whether an individual is destined for heaven or hell, regardless of their actions, because it is ultimately only by God’s will that anything is governed. All that can be done now is to pray for the deceased. Interjecting, the host addresses Emān, calling upon her to be patient and believe in the likelihood that God inspired her brother to, in his last breaths, repent from his misdoings.

\textsuperscript{148} Foucault, \textit{Power/Knowledge}, 59.
\textsuperscript{149} Episode aired March 9, 2009.
This is entirely possible, he continues, because Allah is *ghafoor raheem*—the most Forgiving and Merciful. The scholar concurs, and reminds the woman, and audience at home, of the value of patience, for, “Indeed, the patient will be given their reward without account.”

In this example, we witness an emotionally troubled woman sharing her suffering with *Yastaftūnak*’s cast and its audience. Though her questions touch upon legal matters, and may be considered an attempt to seek knowledge, it is not knowledge which directly impacts her own existence, but rather, that of a loved one. Consequently, Emān appears to be indirectly seeking not a legal remedy, but an emotional one; what she desires is the peace of mind which will assure her that her late brother is well. Though not providing her with such an assurance definitively, *Yastaftūnak*’s scholar and host nonetheless do their best to assuage her fears. Though admitting that neglecting prayers is a serious sin, they also recognize that such an act solely is not enough to determine her brother’s position with God. Though the scholar fails to ultimately provide a *fatwā* to the question she brought up—concerning the martyrdom of her brother—by leaving Emān with the hope that God is forgiving, their exchange ends with a degree of closure.

In still other cases, individuals calling are distraught over their own missteps. Ai’sha from Bahrain agitatedly tells her story: she called her husband’s mobile phone, and without his being aware of it, the call was answered and she could hear what was being said across the line. Later, realizing Ai’sha was privy to information he had not shared with her (that she had learned in the course of this phone call), her husband accused her of speaking in secret to his friend. He asked her to swear an oath that she had not communicated with the friend, and she obliged.

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150 Quran 39:10.
151 Episode aired January 4, 2015.
swearing this oath, had she acted sinfully, she asks. Throughout this narrative, Aī’sha was interrupted several times by the host and scholar, Abd al-Aziz Fawzān al-Fawzān, who implored her to calm down and speak slower so that they may understand her question amidst her flustered state. When she concludes, the scholar unambiguously assures her that if she did not lie under oath, she has committed no sin. Though she should not have been listening in on a conversation unbeknownst to others—a form of spying, which is reprehensible—overall, she was without blame. As he is then encouraging her to tell her husband the truth of the entire matter, she interjects to ask: “So I didn’t do anything wrong?” He once more reassures her that she did not—still, she asks a few more times, receiving the same answer each time, before she finally comes to believe it, with the change in conviction evident in her now more audibly exultant tone of voice.

In a number of ways, Aī’sha’s experience with Yastaftūnak’s scholar constitutes an act of confession comparable to its Christian equivalent. Yet there are significant differences on account of not only the context in which this confession takes place—television—but the purposes to which it is employed. It is helpful here to consider the above exchange in light of Talal Asad’s analysis of the appropriation of confession as an instrument of the modern state. Confession, he remarks, which began as a monastic tool for self-reflection and accountability, has in recent times been transformed into a state apparatus of truth-making. Truth (and, alongside it, power) is no longer established by physical force, but through “verbal discourse.”

Even in cases when a truth is already known, confession is necessary to publicize, and thus further substantiate, what before that moment is simply a claim. In this public performance,  

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152 Asad here refers to the truth of testimonies in court, but his insights can be expanded to speak to knowledge and truth-making practices more generally. Asad, *Genealogies of Religion*, 93.
“The final judgement [is] to be the authorization of a public knowledge.”\textsuperscript{153} Such a change “enhances the importance of the judge,” who alone is certified to deliver such a judgement.\textsuperscript{154} The move from ensuring discipline via physical torture to verbal statements is not accidental, but necessary to encompassing a growing populace and increasingly dispersed citizenry. Still, this is not to imply that verbal statements are free from torture, for “Mental pain (anguish) accompanying the inquiry is normally a sign that the penitent has admitted the whole truth about his sin and is properly contrite,” and thus is necessary to its fulfillment.\textsuperscript{155} Overall, the underlying purpose of such confession is the cultivation in individuals of “the will to obey what is seen as truth, and therefore the guardians of that truth.”\textsuperscript{156}

Returning now to the case of Ai’sha, we may reconsider the significance of her call. Undeniably, her religious inquiry took the form of a confession: she told in great detail what she conceived as her story of sin, and was noticeably distraught throughout. Though she sought legal advice from the scholar, even when she had successfully received it, she continued to inquire on the state of her wrongdoing, which needed to be addressed by more than a mere fatwā. Her repeated attempts to ask the same question may be viewed as stemming from her need to reaffirm—and indeed, republicize—the fact that she had acted correctly. Certainly, the scholar’s exchange with Ai’sha augmented his significance, not only to her, but to Yastaftūnak’s audience at large. We are reminded here that their conversation does not take place in the intimate confines of a one-on-one discussion, but across airwaves to which everyone can tune in. Their exchange is yet another display of Gramsci’s consent, but here it is submission not to the power

\textsuperscript{153} Asad, Genealogies of Religion, 94.  
\textsuperscript{154} Asad, Genealogies of Religion, 95.  
\textsuperscript{155} Asad, Genealogies of Religion, 118.  
\textsuperscript{156} Asad, Genealogies of Religion, 131.
which provides knowledge, but that which relieves suffering. By confessing, or witnessing the confessions of others, viewers are exposed to the production of truth and peace of mind exhibited on *Yastaftūnak*, and taught to submit to its keepers. In this manner, “an administrative and political space [is] articulated upon a therapeutic space,” effectively blurring the lines between all three.\(^{157}\)

Whether pursuing knowledge or self-help, *Yastaftūnak*’s viewers frequently arrive in the territories of the bodily and the personal. Often broached in relation to ritual, but sometimes referenced simply in the context of daily life, people ask questions that are unabashedly intimate. Muhammad from Saudi Arabia announces that, as a consequence of his kidney problems, he barely completes his *wuḍū’* (ritual ablution) before feeling urine involuntarily drip from his genitals; is his subsequent prayer still valid?\(^{158}\) An unnamed woman emails the host, who voices the inquiry for her, describing her doubts regarding her maintenance of *wuḍū’*.\(^{159}\) After she purifies herself, and begins to pray, she becomes incredibly anxious at the possibility that she may have inadvertently let off wind, thus invalidating her ablution, and with it, her prayer; what should she do? Yet a third person, Kabīr from Morocco, asks whether, after a woman performs *ghusl* (a ritual bath) to purify herself at the end of her menstrual cycle, she should also perform *wuḍū’* if she intends to pray afterward.\(^{160}\) When the scholar replies that merely *ghusl* will suffice, the host interrupts to add what he deems an important question—is one’s *wuḍū’* invalidated on the occasion that one’s private parts are touched while drying up

\(^{157}\) Foucault, *Discipline and Punish*, 144.
\(^{158}\) Episode aired March 9, 2009.
\(^{159}\) Episode aired March 9, 2009.
\(^{160}\) Episode aired January 19, 2013.
after said bath? The scholar replies in the affirmative, and the host adds again—does it make a
difference if this touch is accidental? It does not, the scholar retorts, for touching is touching.

Perhaps the most striking feature of these questions is their candor. This characteristic
can be productively analyzed with a consideration of the medium over which these frank
discussions take place. At first glance, bringing up such intimate matters in so public a context
may appear to be ill-advised. In the past, fatwā-seekers could rest assured of the privacy of their
exchange, often conducted in person, one-on-one, with the scholar they sought out. On
Yastaftūnak, however, the entire Muslim nation tuning in becomes aware of the nature of
Muhammad from Saudi Arabia’s kidney problems. Even so, Muhammad, like the rest of the
callers, is still afforded more privacy than ever before possible. The audience, supplied with only
a (potentially false) name and location, is likely incapable of pinpointing the precise identity of
the caller. The closest one comes to a unique, personal trace is in the voice. Even this potential
for detection can be evaded, however, by emailing one’s question, rather than phoning it in.

For the most part, then, Yastaftūnak provides an anonymous arena (at least to its
viewers) for individuals to publicize their most private, intimate concerns. This is a key mark of
the mediated fatwā, for Messick also identifies it in the case of “radio muftis” in Yemen. He
illustrates how “a number of discursive shifts... on the level of language, rhetorical style, and
address, are associated with the differences between the private type of fatwā, based on the
closed, muftī-mustaftī dyad, and the public type, which begins as a muftī-mustaftī dyad but ends
as an open, muftī-jumhūr (general public) relationship.” The intimate here no longer belongs to the individual, but the Muslim nation at large; “The personal matter has become public.”

Not all that is bodily is intimate, however; many of Yastaftūnak’s dialogues ensue over topics as seemingly mundane as attire. Clothing provides a noteworthy example to reflect upon because, unlike matters of intimacy, it is both public and private in equal measure. One recent episode of Yastaftūnak discusses the characteristics of what comprises acceptable attire in Islam. The host begins by describing an incident which occurred to him; while visiting the United States, and wearing the long white robe commonly donned by men in Saudi Arabia and other parts of the Arab world, he was mistaken for a Christian priest. Does wearing such “traditional” clothing outside its local contexts, he asks the scholar, imply pride in one’s religion, or is it simply deemed to be ostentatious behavior?

At first, the response the scholar Abd al-Aziz Fawzān al-Fawzān gives is simple: there is no such thing as “traditional” clothing. When the Prophet Muhammad lived in Mecca at the beginning of his call to Islam, he did not distinguish himself in clothing, but dressed to fit in with the community in which he resided. Similarly, the scholar reasons that one should don the attire of Americans when one is in the US, and Saudis when one is in Saudi Arabia. To act otherwise is to negatively call attention to oneself, an act which is forbidden. He then qualifies that, irrespective of location, one’s clothing should conform to Islamic injunctions on dress—one cannot wear attire adorned with images of living beings, or crosses, for example, and any kind of clothing should cover the awra (private parts). Here, he singles out women, who need to keep a

significantly greater amount of their body covered than men—all of it, implied by this scholar’s telling, except the eyes. With this introduction, al-Fawzān details the centrality of “correct” clothing to the life of a pious Muslim. *Yastaftūnak’s* viewers reiterate this emphasis with their numerous questions about what to wear. Overwhelmingly, the female body is at the helm—does my *abā’a* (external cloak) have to take a particular style, is *niqāb* (the face veil) obligatory, does wearing nail polish prevent my complete *wudū’*?—but on occasion, the male body is also scrutinized—does the length of my robe have to end above the ankle? Such inquiries, and the introductory speech that responds to (or, in fact, instigates them), point to a keen consciousness of embodiment, and the associated concerns that arise as a result.

Highlighting the Islamic aspects of embodiment is not unique to *Yastaftūnak*, but typical of any televised recognition of the body’s public status. To take one example, we may consider Moll’s description of the way popular Islamic television preacher, Amr Khaled, “introduces the idea of a ‘visual *da’wa*’ whereby a Muslim, through his very bodily and sartorial appearance, can come to call others to a more faithful adherence to faith, an inward disposition not accessible to external knowledge except through its visual embodiment.” One’s choice of clothing is here deemed a particularly accessible way of fulfilling the Islamic obligation to command good and forbid evil, described earlier. Muslim women, whose veil is the eternally referenced symbol of

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164 Episode aired March 8, 2009.
165 Episode aired January 3, 2015.
166 Episode aired March 9, 2009.
167 Episode aired March 8, 2009.
168 Such questions illustrate an interest in the ethical cultivation of the embodied self, a practice increasingly prevalent in other Muslim communities, such as those in contemporary Egypt, as studied by Charles Hirschkind and Saba Mahmood. See Hirschkind, *Ethical Soundscapes*; and Saba Mahmood, *Politics of Piety: The Islamic Revival and the Feminist Subject* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2012).
Islam, are thus especially equipped to carry out this duty, and Khaled describes veiled women on a beach performing visual da’wa to those women dressed differently.

Perhaps because of the public religiosity expressed by Muslim women who veil, in its varying forms, regardless of where one looks, there is disproportionate attention accorded to discussions of what Muslim women should look like.\footnote{Al-Rasheed notes how, in her studies of fatwās, she found that “Saudi ulama have produced more than 30,000 fatwās on women.” Al-Rasheed, A Most Masculine State, 112.} It is precisely because the woman’s body is perceived to be an object that is at once private, while also inevitably public, that it must be regulated accordingly.\footnote{The equation of women with the body is not unique to this case specifically, nor Islam generally, but is a feature present in other religious histories as well. Caroline Walker Bynum illustrates this before going on to examine how the association of women with the material empowered certain female Christian mystics to reclaim the body in novel ways. See Caroline Walker Bynum, Holy Feast and Holy Fast: The Religious Significance of Food to Medieval Women (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1987), 260-276.} Even disregarding the additional scrutiny the female body receives, however, on Yastaftūnak, bodies generally are treated as objects of publicity that thereby must be subject to regulation. As demonstrated by al-Fawzān’s opening address, Yastaftūnak’s producers are aware that “public spheres are not simply sites of disembodied debate but also arenas for the formation and enactment of embodied social identities.”\footnote{Annelies Moors, “Representing Family Law Debates in Palestine: Gender and the Politics of Presence,” in Religion, Media and the Public Sphere, ed. Birgit Meyer and Annelies Moors (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2006), 116.} In keeping with the show’s overall goal to influence the Muslim nation, molding bodies becomes one important avenue of doing so.

One way bodies—male and female—are shaped is by regulating the relationships between them. On Yastaftūnak, there is no shortage of questions revolving around not only the legal specificities of marriage and divorce, but also the nature of the interaction, verbal and
physical, between the male and female body.\textsuperscript{173} Such a pointed interest in these matters is not
to be unexpected, for it is a marker of most manifestations of religious nationalism, which “are
animated by a family drama; they all center their fierce energies on the family, its erotic
energies, its gendered order.”\textsuperscript{174} In the same way, Al-Rasheed describes how “Wahhabiyya
sought to restore the family, not the autonomous individual, as the elemental unit of which the
social is composed, hence its constant preoccupation with public modesty, purifying the public
sphere, and limiting the potential threat of mingling binary opposites, mainly men and
women.”\textsuperscript{175} This structuring of the public inevitably extended its activities into the most private
parts of life, and the subsequent blurring of the line between these domains was not
unintended. As Al-Rasheed writes:

> Religious education in schools and in media forums has ensured that even the
private lives of [men and] women—ritual performances, purity, and pollution—
attain conformity in the intimate confines of home and family. This surveillance of
the public and private spheres sent an important signal to the population, mainly
that there was no space that could not be penetrated by the state and its
religious vigilantes. All was under the gaze of the state and its priesthood. The
household itself was penetrated—first by preaching in the public sphere, for
example mosque and school, and later in the media with the television becoming
the main tool to influence the private family domain.\textsuperscript{176}

Al-Rasheed here calls attention to the role of mass media in penetrating what was once the
closed environment of the home. \textit{Yastaftūnak} is certainly a case in a point. In providing religious
rulings that regulate all aspects of not only public, but also personal, and, indeed, intimate, life,
\textit{fatwā} shows do away with any separation between the public and private. In this manner, one’s
private life becomes just as subject to state power and authority as is the public.

\textsuperscript{173} Questions are so numerous they are difficult to adequately list; virtually every episode hosts at least several
queries in some way touching upon questions of gender and gender relations.
\textsuperscript{174} Friedland, “Religious Nationalism,” 134.
\textsuperscript{175} Al-Rasheed, \textit{A Most Masculine State}, 73.
\textsuperscript{176} Al-Rasheed, \textit{A Most Masculine State}, 74.
In this constant back and forth between the public and the private, bodies are materialized and made subject to the norms (and power) of both.\footnote{The emphasis on the body is not to neglect the soul, for in fact, “the soul is taken as an instrument of power through which the body is cultivated and formed. In a sense, it acts as a power-laden schema that produces and actualizes the body itself.” Butler, \textit{Bodies that Matter}, 10. Similarly, in \textit{Yastaftūnak}, the importance of refining the body is often related to the ultimate goal of uplifting the soul. Consult the introductory address of episode aired March 9, 2009 for an example.} Necessary to this process is the continuous reaffirmation of truth, discussed previously, and the continuous materialization of bodies in light of this truth. Here we come to another feature which typifies \textit{Yastaftūnak}, and \textit{fatwā} shows on the whole: the repetitiveness of questions asked. While, to be sure, people often call seeking insight on their unique personal circumstances, in many cases, questions are as generic as they are straightforward. The same question is asked, again and again, and responded to, again and again. This process is not redundant, but necessary to the reassertion of power, “a sign that materialization is never quite complete, that bodies never quite comply with the norms by which their materialization is impelled.”\footnote{Butler, \textit{Bodies that Matter}, 2.} The mode of materialization is noteworthy because “the matter of bodies [is] indissociable from the regulatory norms that govern their materialization and the signification of those material effects.”\footnote{Butler, \textit{Bodies that Matter}, 2.}

In other words, bodies only come to be under conditions of power, and cannot be theorized as existing beyond or outside them. Because there are always competing forces compelling bodies to act otherwise, reiterations of truth—manifested in the asking and answering of the generic \textit{fatwā}—are essential to the establishing of authority. Ordinarily, however, such power-laden process are obscured to the extent that “material positivities appear \textit{outside} discourse and power, as its incontestable referents, its transcendental signifieds,” a move which “successfully buries and masks the genealogy of power relations by which it is
constituted.” Like this, we have being materialized on Yastaftūnak’s screen, ceaselessly, the body of the “good Muslim,” the building block of the larger Muslim nation.

With this, we bring to a close our survey of the ways in which Yastaftūnak’s fatwās have been implicitly put to work in the shaping of Muslim subjects. Though entangled with power in every instance, the questions and answers we have considered in this section have thus far failed to lay bare the political undertones of the show or channel on which it airs. This approach is in line with Al-Resalah’s self-styling as an “apolitical” platform, ostensibly achieved by its shows “deliberately [avoiding] tackling politics and [keeping] their distance from sensitive issues.”

As impartial as this may first appear, such a stance “is in fact actively political,” for this “declared neutrality acts squarely in favour of governments which have been more than happy with these channels and their pacifying effect on people,” who are effectively weaned off politics. Nevertheless, while the discourse of Islamic channels like Al-Resalah has commonly been described as “[focusing] on the salvation of the individual rather than social participation, and on religious appearance and duties such as wearing a beard, regular prayer and fasting,” as of late, such programs have taken a markedly different direction. To be sure, the indirect mechanisms of social discipline and instruction described above continue to operate, but in recent years, overt political campaigning has also risen to the forefront. With political transformations in the Middle East becoming too conspicuous to sweep under the rug of “neutrality,” politics has come to be a popular topic of choice on Yastaftūnak, among scholars and callers alike. We have already reflected extensively upon one politically motivated exchange

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180 Butler, Bodies that Matter, 35.
183 Saleh, “Islamic Televangelism,” 77.
on the show—that taking place in the context of Adil’s question on Ben Ali. Now, we turn to other instances in which the political is exhibited onscreen, and consider the implications such measures have for Yastaftūnak overall.

The first time Yastaftūnak’s official theme takes on a deliberately political outlook is in the episode aired on January 29, 2011, analyzed at length above. That day’s theme, “The Disturbance of the Arab Arena,” is deemed so critical that the scholar continues to address it the next day, on January 30, 2011. The tone of the latter episode is, however, much more cautious than that of the previous evening. Chastened by the only just averted debacle of the day before, the new scholar of the day, Abdullah bin Salmān al-Mnai‘ī, arrives with a palpably warier, less optimistic attitude towards the rapid diffusion of unrest throughout the Arab world.\footnote{Episode aired January 30, 2011.} The host commences by describing how, in its emergence 1400 years ago, Islam brought amn (peace and stability) to the Arabian Peninsula through its institution of the sharī‘a as a mode of governance. He then invites the scholar to elaborate on the value of this often overlooked blessing of social stability in light of current developments in the Arab world. Al-Mnai‘ī obliges, outlining how amn in all its forms—health, social, economic, legal— is crucial to the good of society, referencing several Quranic verses in support of his claim. At one point, he is interrupted by the broadcast of the call to maghrib (sunset) prayer, streamed live alongside footage from the holy Ka‘ba. When Yastaftūnak returns, the host reminds viewers that this call to prayer was broadcast from the sacred ground of Mecca, before allowing the scholar to continue. Al-Mnai‘ī then tackles a series of ideas in quick, but forceful, succession. Firstly, he describes how ensuring the security of society is an individual responsibility for which each Muslim is accountable. He then describes
oppression as the most significant cause of social instability, before going on to classify *shirk* (polytheism) as the greatest form of oppression. Comparable to these injustices is the act of disrupting a nation by rebelling against its leader. Citing several *ḥadīths* which warn against revolt, al-Mnai’ī instructs Muslims to instead address their civic complaints in a way that does not spread social strife. Finally, this discussion, which takes up more than a third of the entire episode, ends with a concluding prayer for the blessing that is security.

What is evident in this episode, aired in the initial moments of what would come to be termed the Arab uprisings, is a change in *Yastaftūnak*’s parameters of visibility, discussed at length above. Once invisible, the political is now made center stage in the most controlled of fashions. The discussion is so controlled, in fact, that it may be regarded an attempt to *depoliticize* the explicitly political. Surrounded by upheaval, Muslims are informed in this introductory address that what they need is not change, but stability—a continuation of the same. This attempt to “[shape] the attitudes and actions of citizens toward their larger society and their perspective of their role and obligations in achieving the ‘common good’,” here defined as stability, simultaneously instills in these individuals the belief that they are personally responsible for maintaining the peace.\(^{185}\) Rebellion, admonished by *Yastaftūnak*’s religious expert, supported by an abundancy Quranic verses and *ḥadīths*, is rendered impermissible, particularly when there exists no due cause—such as the prevalence of oppression, or *shirk*, as Al-Mnai’ī’s examples suggest. Considering that, by definition, the “land of Islam” is free from such injustice, the implication is that Saudi Arabia in particular is off-limits for any airing of discontent. If all that were not enough, as if by design, the soft, melodious call to prayer drives

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\(^{185}\) Salvatore and LeVine, “Introduction,” 2.
home the point that Saudi Arabia stands as the epitome of peace and stability, a result of its firm devotion to the precepts of Islam. In this manner, while slowly beginning to appear as part of Yastaftūnak’s repertoire, the political is depicted in a way that renders it effectively apolitical.

Even when callers deliberately steer the conversation towards manifest politics, they are inevitably cut short by the scholar and host, who quickly work to defuse the topic broached. In the case of Adil’s comment on Ben Ali, which we explored above, efforts were undertaken to reinterpret the facts of the matter in light of the official line provided. Other cases have been dealt with similarly. For instance, we begin by noting that, on January 11, 2013, the former King Abdullah of Saudi Arabia appointed women to the Consultative Council of Saudi Arabia, which serves as an advisory board to the King.\(^\text{186}\) This move, while fortifying the state’s “modernization” credentials, was also controversial, going against the long-defended position of keeping women out of politics, allegedly justified on religious grounds. Only a few days later, Abu Ahmad from Saudi Arabia voices a seemingly innocuous question: “What is the Islamic ruling on a woman’s participation in the Consultative Council?”\(^\text{187}\) The response Abu Ahmad receives is as immediate as it is sharp, and comes not from the scholar, but the host, who declares: “I apologize but we cannot answer your question, for it is somewhat political. This matter has already been discussed by the Custodian of the Two Holy Mosques, and a \textit{fatwā} and ruling for it has been assembled. Discussing it would take time away from our episode, and so I apologize to our scholar, who may respond to it at a later time.” With this swift retort, the host moves to the next caller’s question.

\(^{186}\) For further information on these political changes within Saudi Arabia, see “Saudi women take seats in Shura Council,” \textit{Al Jazeera}, February 19, 2013. \url{http://www.aljazeera.com/news/middleeast/2013/02/2013219201637132278.html}

The matter does not end here, however, for, as the episode is closing, the host returns to Abu Aḥmad’s question once more. He apologizes to him and any caller “who asks from this show what we do not have the ability to provide, both on account of the producers and the show’s purpose more generally, which is devoted solely to matters of jurisprudence.” According to the host, this jurisprudence “pertains to questions about acts of worship or matters of belief, and whatever is beyond that extends beyond our purview and cannot be covered here on this show, which is geared only towards concerns that are common and beneficial to the Muslim nation in its entirety.” Interpreted not as an indictment of the religious conduct of Saudi Arabia, as likely was the case, but an inquiry into the role of women in politics more generally, Abu Aḥmad’s question was determined to be outside the realm of the show’s expertise. Islamic jurisprudence on the whole is in this way defined as concerned strictly with matters of personal ritual and belief. By renegotiating the boundaries of what is and is not open to debate, politics is taken off the table altogether.

The tables are turned when shaping politics is what the Saudi state needs most. One recent episode analyzed was aired on the evening of a day in which three Saudi guards were killed on the border with Iraq.¹⁸⁸ The opening address is devoted entirely to reflecting upon the events of the morning, beginning as a solemn obituary and tribute to those “martyrs” who passed away. Very quickly, however, the speech of the guest scholar, Abd al-Aziz Fawzān al-Fawzān, transforms into a passionate frenzy against the traitors who committed this heinous act. Dā’ish, the group responsible, is referred only by the term “khawārij,” and described as the

According to the scholar, this group kills Muslims as it leaves non-Muslims untouched, all the while attributing its vicious acts to Islam. Al-Fawzān illustrates how the Prophet vilified the *khawārij*, commanding Muslims to kill them, and promising great rewards in return. What is deemed the group’s contemporary manifestation is especially dangerous, al-Fawzān warns, because it vows to liberate the Arabian Peninsula and holy land of Mecca—“liberate it from whom?!” he asks incredulously. In fact, he asserts that this group is entirely the doing of the enemies of Saudi Arabia and Muslims more generally, who financed and supported these modern day *khawārij* in an attempt to destabilize the region. These “*safaweeeen*,” as he calls them, are singled out as the most prominent of adversaries, and from their various locations in Iran, Iraq, and Yemen, are said to form the chief compatriots of the modern day *khawārij*.190

This heated monologue continues for twenty one minutes, almost half the length of the episode, before the phone lines are opened up to viewers. Considering al-Fawzān’s fervent speech, it is not surprising that, when he concludes, we witness an overrepresentation of distressed individuals from Iraq and Kurdistan phoning in. More often than not, they seek not legal advice, but political guidance: what do we do, they seem to collectively ask. Commanding them to stand strong and, if it is in their ability, fight the evil that confronts them on both fronts,

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189 Coined by Arabic and Iranian media vehemently opposed to the group, Dāʿish is an Arabic acronym for al- Dawla al-Islamiya al-Iraq al-Sham, or, ‘The Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant.’ The group is more commonly referred to in Western media as ISIS (The Islamic State of Iraq and Syria). The *khawārij* are a historical group of Muslims who rebelled in the years after the death of the Prophet Muhammad. For more, see Crone, *God’s Rule*, 54-64.

190 In the singular, “*Safawī*” is a derogatory term for Shi’a, and refers back to the Safavid dynasty which began ruling Iran in the 16th century.
the scholar in each case takes the opportunity to further elaborate on the dangers represented by the violent traitors to Islam.\textsuperscript{191}

This example not only provides an instance in which politics is at its most unapologetically overt, but can also shed one final note on the nature of \textit{fatwā} seeking. While providing many avenues for the exchange of information, \textit{Yastaftūnak}'s episodes may boast deeply affectual elements as well. As demonstrated by this episode, even in the realm of politics, perceived by many as the sphere of rational critical deliberation, emotions are key. This is the case because, as Hirchkind reminds us, “Political judgments are not the product of rational argumentation alone but also of the way we come to care deeply about certain issues, [and] feel passionately attached to certain positions.”\textsuperscript{192} Conscious of this, the \textit{fatwā} show’s patrons capitalize on it. Al-Fawzān’s pseudo-sermon can undoubtedly be viewed as one which is “\textit{mu’aththir},” a word which “embraces among its multiple meanings such ideas as effective, affecting, moving, emotional, impassionate, stirring, exciting, a kind of impact on the senses that—in accord with the noun form of ‘\textit{athara}’—leaves a track, trace, touch, taste, or imprint (specifically, on the heart or soul).”\textsuperscript{193} As represented by the popular, agitated response of viewers later in the show, the scholar’s speech was indeed effectual in the manner it was intended. In this way, then, we witness how \textit{Yastaftūnak}'s dialogues, even in the context of explicit politics, speak not only to the cerebral, but also find their way into the hearts of viewers worldwide.

To conclude this section, in light of what we have seen thus far, we note how, insofar as the \textit{fatwā} show “conjoins an ethical exercise with political debate and popular entertainment, it

\textsuperscript{191} In his reference to two warring fronts, al-Fawzān means the “\textit{khawārij}” and the “\textit{safaweeeen}”—or, \textit{Dā’ish} and Shi’a in Iraq, Iran, and elsewhere.

\textsuperscript{192} Hirchkind, \textit{The Ethical Soundscape}, 30.

\textsuperscript{193} Hirchkind, “Experiments in Devotion Online,” 6.
is an exemplary form of modern mass communication and social discipline.” Among their many functions, fatwā shows disseminate religious knowledge to Muslims worldwide, as they simultaneously provide examples of how such knowledge works, both in theory and in practice. Moreover, programs like Yastaftūnak provide Muslims the opportunity to seek emotional comfort, by offering a venue for confession and personal support. Fatwā shows additionally instruct the Muslim nation on the intricacies of going about one’s daily life, with a particular emphasis on the nature of embodiment, welcoming discussions that may otherwise be avoided as a result of their awkward nature. All these discussions, which provide the Muslim nation with a variety of benefits, come with a number of indiscernible social disciplinary strings attached. The ideology accompanying these dialogues, successfully kept out of view in the past, has become more perceptible in recent years, especially in matters of politics. Ultimately, apparent or not, these modes of social regulation are embedded into each fatwā sought and given, making the fatwā infinitely more than just a fatwā.

**C) Fatwā Show (or, Putting Fatwās to Work)**

In analyzing the show as distinct from the fatwā, we have constructed an artificial separation which illuminates certain processes as it obscures others. In order to make further structures and practices more visible, we must explore how the fatwā show functions by being a television show and a fatwā-producing machine combined. Above, we considered how questions of knowledge, power, and the influence of one upon the other shape both the specificities of the televisual medium and the fatwās sought and provided. The examples explored have pointed to

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194 Hirschkind, *The Ethical Soundscape*, 10. Though Hirschkind writes this in reference to cassette sermons, the comparison here is appropriate.
the number of ways in which knowledge, as manifested in *Yastaftūnak’s fatwās*, is determined by the conditions of power from which it emerges. We have also seen how such knowledge and power is subsequently exhibited through its material presence in the world. Acting as both the cause and effect of knowledge, therefore, power is equally *productive* and *material*. The indebtedness of knowledge and power to one another is recognized widely, for “there is no power relation without the correlative constitution of a field of knowledge, nor any knowledge that does not presuppose and constitute at the same time power relations.”¹⁹⁵ We have found *Yastaftūnak* to be no exception, supplying us with examples of the material and productive causes and effects of knowledge and power. The earlier case studies have illustrated how, “In becoming the target for new mechanisms of power, the body is offered up to new forms of knowledge,” and, accordingly, power, demonstrating how, together, they produce one of the most material of objects: the human body.¹⁹⁶ This materiality is key to the coproduction of “reality” and the “domains of objects and rituals of truth” characterizing power.¹⁹⁷ Not only does the *fatwā* show itemize the world beyond it into streamlined categories, but these classifications take the title of truth, with the entire performance standing in as a truth-making ritual. And yet because the act of “[producing] truthful discourses and [making] subjects respond to authority” is “the most direct, physical effect of power,” the resultant reality is anything but abstract.¹⁹⁸ Though *Yastaftūnak’s fatwās* cannot be physically enforced, in their production of truth, they nonetheless make individuals subservient to the show’s authority and ideology, manifested

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¹⁹⁵ Foucault, *Discipline and Punish*, 27.
¹⁹⁷ Foucault, *Discipline and Punish*, 194.
¹⁹⁸ Asad, *Genealogies of Religion*, 83.
materially in the lives and bodies of its viewers. In their creation of this concrete reality, then, 
*Yastaftūnak’s fatwās* are put to work.

Part and parcel of the capacity to create truths is the ability to determine orthodoxy, 
which “is not a mere body of opinion but a distinctive relationship of power.” Significantly, the 
issue here is not simply a question of whose version of orthodoxy holds the most sway, but an 
inquiry into how and why the mere *notion* of orthodoxy is itself left uncontested. Such an 
approach should not be considered foundational to Islam, but instead viewed as the 
consequence of a particular manifestation of it; Asad suggests “that the critical discourses of 
Saudi ‘ulama (like those of Muhammad ‘Abdul-Wahhāb before them) presuppose the concept of 
an orthodox Islam” in a manner not conventionally shared by other Muslims around the globe, 
or throughout history. In keeping with the significance accorded to “orthodoxy,” the 
knowledge produced on *Yastaftūnak* “seeks to construct a relation of discursive dominance” 
which not only instills in viewers the show’s orthodoxy of choice, but stresses the importance of 
the concept altogether. Regardless of what *fatwā* the scholar gives, by virtue of his provision 
of a single ruling— often by going “directly” back to the original texts, without even 
acknowledging the views of conflicting scholars—he reaffirms the idea that an orthodox Islam 
does, and should, exist.

Broader than regulating orthodoxy is *Yastaftūnak’s* quest to govern knowledge about 
Islam on the whole. The demarcation of what beliefs and practices constitute Islam is essential to 
“[making] it useful as a political instrument,” a practice that, as established earlier, is a

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cornerstone of *fatwā* shows.²⁰² According to Starrett, two distinct processes contribute to this transformation: the “objectification” of Islam and its “functionalization.” The former entails encouraging a growing proportion of Muslims to identify Islam as “a coherent system of practices and beliefs, rather than merely an unexamined and unexaminable way of life.”²⁰³ It thus becomes possible to *know* Islam, because it is an *object* to be known, rather than a manner of being which is perpetually refashioned according to circumstance. *Fatwā* shows could not subsist if the objectification of Islam was not a practice prevalent among audiences; Muslims have come to deem it possible to objectively *know* Islam, with *Yastaftūnak* acting as their chief instrument of knowledge. This is not surprising, for, as Messick has shown in his study of Yemen, law has frequently been among the first aspects of Islam to be objectified, an act which “simplifies, systematizes, and packages” the infinitely more elaborate *shariʿa*.²⁰⁴ Undoubtedly, the *fatwā* show does all this and more.

The second undertaking essential to instrumentalizing Islam is its “functionalization,” which, as described by Starrett, “refers to processes of translation in which intellectual objects from one discourse come to serve the strategic or utilitarian ends of another discourse.”²⁰⁵ Giving one example of functionalization at work in the Egyptian context, Starrett describes how “independent local religious study circles are brought under the control of central or district government bureaucracies to act as tools of mass socialization,” turning them from avenues of dissent to ones of state dominance.²⁰⁶ We see this practice taking place repeatedly on

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Yastaftūnak, particularly in the political questions whose answers transform the original critique into a golden public relations opportunity.

Moreover, crucially, “functionalization, as a set of discursive and social practices that provides both for the interpretation and the application of these divine truths, constructs not so much a single reading of Islam, but a framework in which Islam is to be read.”²⁰⁷ Functionalization is thus essential to creating the conditions by which orthodoxy can come to be understood, as described earlier. But it also extends far beyond this, into delineating the very structure of Islam. For instance, on Yastaftūnak, when a man asks if shaving his beard is permissible, his question does “not merely construct specific content” regarding what a Muslim man’s beard should or should not look like, but it also “[constructs] Islam as a whole by defining its extension, by defining” the beard “as one of the things about which Islam has something to say.”²⁰⁸ Being behind the functionalization of Islam, therefore, accords one great power in selecting what Islam does or does not have a say on, in addition to determining what that say ultimately is. This functionalization is one of the central powers Yastaftūnak boasts.

Both the objectification of Yastaftūnak’s Islam and its functionalization are necessary for its success internationally, in a multiplicity of contexts emblematic of the Muslim world’s rich diversity. Taking into account “the specificity of politics and subjectivity in a present sense that is at once national and transnational,” I am interested in the ways a distinctly local Islam is translated to a global audience, and how these transnational subjects come to acknowledge such alien modes of practice and belief.²⁰⁹ Because “self-understanding is often produced through a

²⁰⁷ Starrett, Putting Islam to Work, 155.
²⁰⁸ Starrett, Putting Islam to Work, 156.
²⁰⁹ Berlant, The Queen of America Goes to Washington City, 14.
dialectic of exchange with texts circulating on a mass scale,” surveying the output of localized fatwā shows is one essential starting point to grasping the make-up of Muslim subjects universally. That these (audiovisual) texts may be transportable to, and, more importantly, consumable by, an infinite range of individuals requires that they be fundamentally transformed and rendered accessible to all. This process, I propose, takes place through the commodification of Islamic knowledge, in which the creation of the fatwā-cum-commodity is the ultimate consequence.

I draw here upon Marx’s classical discussion of commodity fetishism, in which he defines a commodity as “an external object, a thing which through its qualities satisfies human needs of whatever kind,” and, as a result of this utility, can be exchanged for other items. The commodity is at the same time a fetish, however, because the value that facilitates this exchange is not derived from the object’s actual use-value in and of itself, but rather its “social use-values,” determined by its place in the capitalist system, and measured in monetary terms. When this mere object is instilled with social use-value, and thus converted into a commodity, “it is changed into something transcendent,” endowed with a “mystical character” unrelated to its actual functional purposes. Marx traces the source of this mystical character back to the forgotten human labor that produced this commodity, for “in it the social character of men’s labour appears to them as an objective character stamped upon the product of that labour,” which is kept, in all cases, out of the consciousness of the consuming masses. It is thus only through this deliberate act of forgetting that “the products of labour become commodities,

211 Marx, Capital, 131.
212 Marx, Capital, 82.
213 Marx, Capital, 83.
social things whose qualities are at the same time perceptible and imperceptible by the senses,” and bound up in a larger system’s rules of exchange. Importantly, this mystification is bound to domination, for “the two aspects are intimately related, inasmuch as men are in no position to control, rather than submit to, social relations which they do not correctly understand.”

Not much effort is required to extend Marx’s description of the commodity to our own analysis of the televised fatwā. Indisputably, fatwās issued onscreen by a “recognized” authority possess an element of transcendence which originates from more than their basic use-value; at the same time, the particularity of this labor is overlooked. As noted above, fatwās, issued by a specific individual, are presented on Yastaftūnak as devoid of human agency, emerging instead solely from trusted religious texts. Though each scholar’s labor is incomparable and irreducible to that of another, be these others hosted on Yastaftūnak or not, the show works to depict a state in which all scholars are regarded to be exchangeable. The very fact that it is not a single scholar, but a rotating assortment of them, who dishes out the daily fatwā points to this semblance of the standardization and expendability of labor. We thus encounter not merely the fatwā, but the fatwā as fetish, valorized on the assumption that it exists outside the ordinary power structures of the mundane world.

When Muslims fixate on this fatwā fetish, on Yastaftūnak or elsewhere, the fatwā is perceived as an impersonal commodity, and hence, removed from the economic and political factors inherent in its production. In the long run, not only is human labor equalized, but also the commodity produced; though specific to the caller, the fatwā offered is often also generic.

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214 Marx, Capital, 83.
enough to demand application by viewers at home. It is this presumed (and, in fact, advertised) equivalence, between scholars and between fatwās, that allows Yastaftūnak’s fatwās to hold relevance for Muslims around the world. Only the fatwā as commodity, removed from its origin in human labor, can be dispatched globally. This generic, commodified fatwā that is the currency that links the members of the Muslim nation, regardless of where (or even when) they may exist. It is the proponents of this same fatwā who, crucially, keep Muslims unaware of its genealogy, so that its mystical nature may persist. In this manner, the fatwā has been effectively reified; viewed as a thing that has come to be, it subsists at the expense of our acknowledgment of the processes from which it was created.216

The commodification of religion has become so widespread that it has been recognized even by the very purveyors of its resultant commodities. We find one such instance of this in Messick’s account of media muftīs in Yemen, in which he writes:

Some years ago, al-Ghurbānī [a “radio” muftī] used a commercial metaphor to describe to me the nature of the sharī‘a and the role of the interpreting jurist. In their very general and summary qualities, he explained, legal principles are similar to wholesale commodities, while the opinions and rulings necessitated by practice are like retail goods. In making interpretive interventions, the jurist breaks down bulk principle to fit the detailed trade of everyday-life situations. Although this conception continued to inform his new interpretive work, al-Ghurbānī observed that preparing a fatwā to be heard on the radio broadcast was a different matter from writing one for an individual to read. Whereas a conventional muftī’s fatwā could be read and interpreted by the literate and knowledgeable, for themselves and for others, a fatwā heard over the radio must be immediately and generally clear.217

According to this scholar’s explanation, the fatwā takes a very different form in the age of mass media than it did previously. The broad principles of the sharī‘a must be itemized and rendered

into singular units which may efficiently be disseminated to a mass audience. No longer can the
detailed ruling and reasoning be provided, but instead, the fatwā must take on an easily
accessible format capable of being readily consumed. The fatwā has adopted, in the mufti’s own
words, the qualities of a commodity.

In this portrayal, we also become aware of the extent to which commodification is
enmeshed within the media forms that make it possible.218 Not only are media an essential tool
for the distribution of the commodified product—in our case, the televised fatwā—but they also
plays a fundamental role in its very creation. In the display of religion on television, radio, or the
internet, the various “technologies of mediation... transform conventional forms of religious
sociality, and...allow for new kinds of religious engagement and spiritual experience.”219

Encountering Yastaftūnak’s commodified fatwā is one such novel form of engagement;
that the fatwā show is broadcast on satellite television is not irrelevant to the institution of the
commodified fatwā, but is, in reality, a precondition to it. The transformative aspect of the
commodification of religion is key, founded upon the “ideologization of commodities and
comoditization of religion” that takes place onscreen.220 A commodified Islam is one that is
concerned with the ways in which religion “is packaged and offered to a broader audience and
how this has served to produce a framework for the moral order of society through the
objectification and systematization of Islamic values and practices as a normative model.”221

218 The connection between commodification and the media—visual media in particular—has been noted in a
number of contexts. For one admirable example, describing the commodification of Albanians occurring through an
affiliation between the “Western” press and academic scholarship, see Isa Blumi, “The Commodification of
Otherness and the Ethnic Unit of the Balkans: How to Think about Albanians,” East European Politics and Societies
12, no. 3 (1998): 527- 569.
Closely related, but not reducible, to the commodification of Islam is its commercialization. According to Gareth Barkin, the quest of commercial Islam’s champions (Yastaftūnak’s producers would invariably be among them) is “to render Islam not only compatible with neoliberal subjectivity, but to transform it into a discourse of materiality and consumption,” to such an extent that it “refers to the use of religious aesthetics and narratives in ways that cultivate Islam as (1) consumable in itself, but, importantly, (2) associated closely with consumption.”\(^222\) In all cases, then, the commodification and simultaneous commercialization of Islam is not simply about the propagation of an Islamic product to the Muslim nation, but rather, about tailoring this product (and, thinking back to Marx, its consumer) in such a way that it may be both desired and consumed. Hence, the nature of the televised fatwā, and that of the knowledge it bequeaths, is essentially transfigured by the medium through which it is transmitted.\(^223\)

The character of these commodities is reflected in the character of the public sphere which emerges around them. As we recall, according to Habermas, any public sphere is founded upon the act of consumption. From the earliest formations of the public sphere considered by Habermas, “news itself became a commodity,” and indeed, so did the very information such news transmitted.\(^224\) In more recent times, knowledge continues to assume “the form of a consumer item” in increasing degrees, so much so that any deliberation of this knowledge, “now


\(^{223}\) The prevalence of knowledge as commodity is not unique to the Islamic world, but consistent of “postmodern knowledge” more broadly. Jean-François Lyotard describes how “the relationship of the suppliers and users of knowledge to the knowledge they supply and use is now tending... to assume the form already taken by the relationship of commodity producers and consumers to the commodities they produce and consume that is, the form of value. Knowledge is and will be produced in order to be sold, it is and will be consumed in order to be valorized in a new production: in both cases, the goal is exchange. Knowledge ceases to be an end in itself, it loses its ‘use-value.’” Jean-François Lyotard, The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984), 4-5.

\(^{224}\) Habermas, The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere, 21.
a business, becomes formalized; the presentation of positions and counterpositions is bound to certain prearranged rules of the game; consensus about the subject matter is made largely superfluous by that concerning form.”

Form, the defining feature of all commodities, becomes the determining factor in how knowledge is perceived and engaged. However, this is not to contend that the content of this commodity loses all relevance, for it too plays a role in fashioning the public sphere. Though fatwās supplied on Yastaftūnak possess the archetypical traits of a commodity, they are also, in many cases, a distinct variety of this product: the intimate variety. As illustrated earlier, though encompassing every aspect of life, the topics discussed on Yastaftūnak point towards an almost fetishistic fascination with all the bodily, personal, and intimately ritual facets of being a Muslim. The pervasiveness of the intimate was carried through from the very first episode analyzed to the last; even while, in recent years, political questions were brought closer to the fore, this did not coincide with a parallel diminution in Yastaftūnak’s devotion to the personal. Accordingly, recognizing that Yastaftūnak comes to act as an arena premised on the consumption of fatwās in the form of intimate commodities is of utmost importance to understanding the public sphere it subsequently engenders.

The “intimate public sphere” depicted by Berlant is one established through the making public of the private, and the making private of the public. When a caller asks a question about her personal life, she makes the private public; when the scholar responds to her query, and she commits his answer to her personal habits and daily life, she has made the public private. There is another layer to this exchange, for this individual’s private life has also been broadcast to

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225 Habermas, The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere, 164.
millions of viewers across the world, be it through her legal question or request for personal advice. The intimacy of her own life, and indeed, own body, is no longer a matter of individual concern, but one which possesses significance for the Muslim nation in its entirety. At the same time, in its early stages, when politics could still deftly be avoided, Yastaftūnak insisted on defining the political as beyond the purview of the show—outside public concern, and inside the realm of the private. Having proven ineffective, this strategy was then replaced with others which act to more explicitly define the official public line of the good Muslim. Providing a platform where the public and private meet in a liminal zone in which each is renegotiated according to the leanings of those controlling the show, fatwā shows like Yastaftūnak thereby possess a significant say in determining the shape the resultant public sphere takes on.

**Conclusion**

Writing in the 1960s, Herbert Marcuse described the upsurge of the one-dimensional man, borne from the accumulated one-dimensional practices which transfigure his life. Such one-dimensional practices are those “that conform to pre-existing structures, norms, and behavior, in contrast to multidimensional discourse, which focuses on possibilities that transcend the established state of affairs.”\(^{226}\) When one’s practices are overwhelmingly one-dimensional, one “has lost, or is losing, individuality, freedom, and the ability to dissent and to control one’s own destiny.”\(^{227}\) This occurs because:

The private space, the dimension of negation and individuality, in which one may become and remain a self, is being whittled away by a society which shapes

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\(^{227}\) Douglas Kellner in Marcuse, *One-Dimensional Man*, xxvii.
aspirations, hopes, fears, and values, and even manipulates vital needs. In Marcuse’s view, the price that one-dimensional man pays for satisfaction is to surrender freedom and individuality. One-dimensional man does not know its true needs because its needs are not its own—they are administered, superimposed, and heteronomous; it is not able to resist domination, nor to act autonomously, for it identifies with public behavior and imitates and submits to the powers that be. Lacking the power of authentic self-activity, one-dimensional man submits to increasingly total domination.²²⁸

This bleak state of affairs is unattainable without the mass media that makes it possible. Marcuse maintains that “One-dimensional thought is systematically promoted by the makers of politics and their purveyors of mass information,” whose “universe of discourse is populated by self-validating hypotheses which, incessantly and monopolistically repeated, become hypnotic definitions or dictations.”²²⁹ In this one-dimensional state, “with the control of information, [and] with the absorption of individuals into mass communication, knowledge is administered and confined.”²³⁰ The varieties of knowledge are, in this undertaking, reduced “to their common denominator—the commodity form,” the only conceivable engagement with which is consumption.²³¹ It is thus in the consumption of knowledge as commodity that one-dimensional men and women perpetuate the dominance of the “apparatus producing the thought and behavior needed for the social and cultural reproduction of contemporary capitalist societies.”²³²

In its perpetual production, the one-dimensional reigns supreme.

The above has worked to suggest that the rise of fatwā shows like Yastaftūnak has increasingly transformed a formerly vibrant Muslim nation into an inert public of one-dimensional Muslims. When televised, the fatwā is fundamentally transmuted by the medium. It

²²⁸ Douglas Kellner in Marcuse, One-Dimensional Man, xxvii-xviii.
²²⁹ Marcuse, One-Dimensional Man, 16.
²³¹ Marcuse, One-Dimensional Man, 61.
enters into a playing field riddled with power disparities and political and economic interests, all of which play a determining role in its formation. The mechanisms of television, as demonstrated with a series of case studies, definitively shape the resultant knowledge conveyed in *Yastaftūnak’s fatwās*.

At the same time, the substance of these *fatwās* cannot be overlooked. From the way *Yastaftūnak’s* discussions define knowledge, to the way its viewers are urged to act upon it, religious questions and answers hold serious material implications for the publics they create. So too do the more affective elements of *Yastaftūnak’s* dialogues, exemplified in attempts at confession and pleas for emotional support, produce Muslim subjectivities dictated by the show’s mores. Such sensibilities continue being molded in terms of the intimate and the bodily, both of which the show addresses in infinite detail. Questions of politics, which, for many years, were left unasked and unanswered, now also join the ranks of those serving to explicate the sound practices and beliefs of the ideal Muslim. When explored, these mechanisms and official lines sketch a vivid outline of the intimate associations between power and knowledge. Knowledge here is, of necessity, commodified, and disseminated to a public which receives it as such. This consumptive, intimate public is so caught up in the private that it fails to find relevance in all that lays beyond it, to the benefit of those invested in maintaining the status quo of that external world.

We are faced with the preeminence of a one-dimensional Islam. When knowledge, so clear, simple, and specific, is delivered right into a Muslim’s living room, it is difficult to reject. It is impossible to think otherwise when no authoritative semblance of the otherwise is said to exist, onscreen or off. This Muslim does not watch *Yastaftūnak* alone, however; multitudes of
others across the world join him, every weekday between seven and eight PM, Mecca time. Together, they are edified, taught the correct ways to think, act, and live. Taught the same things in the same way, they become uniform, each seeking identical answers to his or her very different questions. These individuals are not forced, but willing, for they choose to tune into *Yastaftūnak*—but, ultimately, they do not. Repeated enough times, the command to seek knowledge becomes a part of their very being, the most fundamental and the most pronounced. With the demand for knowledge instilled, and the supply of *fatwās* ready at hand, the Muslim nation is left with a singular ability and obligation: consume... and behave!
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