Digitalizing Religious Preaching: YouTube as a place for traditional Islamic preaching Waz Mahfil

Author(s):

Abu Taib Ahmed
PhD Student, Journalism and Media Communication Department, Colorado State University
Email: abuahmed@colostate.edu

Abstract

Waz Mahfil, a gathering of Muslim devotees and common listeners for sermons on Islam, has long been one of the primary means of preaching Islam in Bangladesh. With the availability of the internet, the video-sharing website YouTube has emerged as a key platform for various Islamic groups to spread video-recorded Waz Mahfil in Bangladesh. The proliferation of the culture of traditional Islamic preaching on YouTube in Bengali has received a little attention although it has got a pervasive nature in digital space. Building on qualitative content analysis of YouTube space, the study has mapped out how Waz Mahfil transformed from physical space to digital space, enabling its protagonists to reach out to a larger and even inaccessible audience to spread their messages, going beyond the government regulations and geographical boundaries. Apart from reinforcing the Space and Place theory, this study contributes to the social science scholarship primarily in two ways. Firstly, the partial transformation of a traditional socio-religious practice from physical space to digital space clearly indicates the rise of "digitality" in society, particularly in a developing society like Bangladesh, and secondly, the phenomenon indicated that religious groups and/or communities are appropriating affordances of digital space to spread their religious message.

Keywords: *YouTube, space, place, digital space, digital place, religious preaching, Waz Mahfil, Bangladesh*

Introduction

Waz Mahfil has long been one of the primary means of preaching Islam in Bangladesh. *Waz* is originally an Arabic word meaning "giving advice" on what to do and what not to do about Islamic culture and practices, while the Arabic word *Mahfil* denotes assembly, gathering, meeting, or congregation. *Waz Mahfil* is usually held in tents erected in the open space, either in playgrounds or paddy fields after harvest in rural areas or at street corners and public grounds in cities, especially during winter. It usually begins in the evening and continues until midnight. Several speakers, who are usually called *Mufassir* (an Arabic term meaning somebody who can authoritatively interpret the Qur'an) or *Ulema* (Islamic scholars), speak one after the other. The chief speaker for the day speaks last. The speakers are seated, together with guests of honors from socio-political leadership, on a slightly elevated stage. The male congregation assembles on the ground in front of the stage, which is

covered with mats made out of bamboo, cotton, or rarely, straw. The female congregation is kept in different tents separated by a curtain from the male congregation. The size of the audience varies, depending on the popularity of the speakers, from several hundred to hundreds of thousands.

With the availability of the internet, the video-sharing website YouTube has emerged as a key platform for sharing video-recorded *Waz Mahfil* in Bangladesh. Millions of Bengali-speaking people from across the geographical boundary watch the video-recorded *Waz Mahfil* on YouTube. They also interact with them either by sharing the video-recorded *Waz Mahfil* or commenting on the video on social media. *Waz Mahfil* is still physically held in public places. Either the organizers or the various groups video-record them and upload them in their own YouTube channels. Centering around this practice, numerous YouTube channels have floated in the digital space. While digital communications, the social media, in particular, have taken the center stage of the people's everyday communications in Bangladesh like any other parts of the world, YouTube has emerged as a key platform for this socio-religious practice at a time when the practice of in-person *Waz Mahfil* is on the wane, thanks to multiple reasons including obstruction/non-cooperation from the government agencies ever since a secular government came to power a decade ago in Bangladesh in 2009 (Riaz, 2021; Riaz & Zaman, 2022; Stille, 2020).

Either the organizers of the *Waz Mahfil* or any other group in association with the organizer or the chief speaker of the *Waz Mahfil* video-record the lectures or preaching of the main speaker and publish it on YouTube immediately after the program. They upload old videos of *Waz Mahfil* too. Nowadays it's been the practice of those YouTube channel owners that they go for live stream on YouTube with old *Waz Mahfil* too. It seems that both organized Islamic groups and/or random people are doing this practice frequently, either for spreading Islamic teachings as part of their religious duties and/or for earning some pennies out of this practice. Even if the number of attendees of the *Waz Mahfil* nowadays is a maximum of several thousand as evidenced in the uploaded *Waz Mahfil* videos, the recorded preaching of the same *Waz Mahfil* are viewed by millions of people over some time. Engagement of thousands of viewers with their sharing, comments, and suggestions under the videos creates a sense of community in digital space, resonating with Benedict Anderson's (2006) imagined community.

The online media is penetrating and transforming new spaces in our society (Couldry & McCarthy, 2004). Scholars argue that digital affordances have changed today's notions of space and place (Baym, 2015). A space turns out to be a place when people attach a certain meaning to the space (Massey, 1994; Tuan, 1977). Digital spaces have emerged to be key sites for various socio-political activism (Linabary et al, 2020; and Smith, 2017). Scholars argue that YouTube affordances and

how they are used by its users have made it a public place (Dijck, 2013; Edgerly et al., 2009). This paper seeks to explore whether YouTube's digital *Space* has emerged as a *place* for the traditional culture of Islamic preaching *Waz Mahfil*.

This study explains how the digital space of YouTube has transformed into a place for *Waz Mahfil* for Bengali Muslims with various Islamic groups in Bangladesh using the place to serve their purposes (Riaz, 2021; Riaz & Zaman, 2022; Stille, 2020; T. Rahman, 2019) when secular Bangladesh Awami League (BAL)-led government takes measures to control physical *Waz Mahfil* through various means as *Waz Mahfil* are considered the "most convenient platform for the tirade against secularist" and aimed for "a society based Quran and Hadith" ("EC in a tight spot for 'misleading propaganda' on Waz-Mahfil," 2018; M. Rahman, 2019, p. 341; Uttom & Rozario, 2019). As Islam plays a key role in Bangladesh's politics and society (Raqib, 2020; Riaz, 2021; Riaz & Zaman, 2022; Stille, 2020; T. Rahman, 2019), it would be worthwhile to know how a huge number of people are exploiting digital space, YouTube in this case, as a place of their own or as a site of their community for their own purpose. It appears to be a significant phenomenon of social transformation in Bangladesh as far as the public space is concerned in the wake of a situation when dissent voices are silenced day by day ("ভিন্নমতের কারণে ১০ বছরে" [1525 killed, 781 disappeared in 10 yrs for dissenting voice], 2019) under an autocratic regime (Milam, 2019; Ruud & Hasan, 2022).

Theoretical Framework

Space and *place* are two important concepts in human geography, but the boundary of the two concepts are often misconstrued. *Space* is an abstract location or base or platform which doesn't have any certain meaning as far as human communications are concerned. The *place* is a certain point in *space* with which the humans maintain a particular meaningful purpose. The *place* is a social construction out of *space*. The relation between space and place can be likened to the relation between galaxies and stars where stars are "places" in the space of "galaxy". Philosopher Yi-Fu Tuan (1977), who searched for the meaning of place, space, and environment, has held such views of the concepts of space and place as he posits: "What begins as undifferentiated space becomes place as we get to know it better and endow it with value" (p. 6), which amply tells us that space is a social construction.

Although physical space hasn't disappeared, digital media like YouTube and Facebook has transformed our sense of space, thanks to the way it can be used them today. Given the features YouTube provides, it appears to be a forum for people to get connected and informed as well as share their contents, thoughts, and ideas. Scholars argue that YouTube features, which include uploading video content and

making comments on others' videos, appeals to "traditional notions of the public sphere" (Edgerly et al., 2009). They also observe that the site can sway the political process as well. Other scholars contend that YouTube's attributes of content creation and lack of monitoring have given it a democratic nature which helps foster "a self-regulating dynamic of social interaction on YouTube" (Susarla et al., 2012, p. 23). Antony et al. (2010) find YouTube's sociopolitical significance beyond its initial popularity as a video site to be rapidly growing.

Nancy Baym (2015) explores multiple ways of today's communication networks in the face of technological innovations and shows how that affects our social relationships. As for Baym (2015), the internet and digital media, the mobile phone, in particular, are changing the characteristics of today's "social relations and connections" (p. 165-166). Baym (2015) examines how technological inventions have changed the notion of space as well, at a time when people exchange messages "without being physically present." Arguing that face-to-face communication is "inherently limited" to those who are physically present in the certain space, Baym (2015) says digital communication is a "powerful subversion of the elitism of mass media", within which a single broadcaster or user could engage with millions of people even going beyond his/her regions (p. 111). Baym (2015) observes that digital media help us engage more people in the political process through its various means of engaging people. Van Dijck (2013) examines how YouTube has become normalized and engrained in everyday life with millions of people incorporating YouTube in their daily routines and argues that it affects sociality and re-shapes the cultural logic. Dijck (2013) points out that social networks like Facebook and YouTube have emerged as "public places" where people can communicate free of government and market control, giving them a sovereign nature (p. 14). She also argues that the use of YouTube by millions of people points to a "deeper cultural logic that affords media platforms the power to shape sociality and creativity" (p. 129).

Pointing out that the internet has emerged as a "virtual reincarnation of the public sphere", communications scholar Zizi Papacharissi (2008) observes that the features that YouTube provides and subsequently their use have made it a "commercially public space" (p. 23). Papacharissi (2010) also argues that social media platforms have introduced a space where boundaries between private and public spaces have become fuzzy. Johnson et al. (2011) posit that YouTube functions as a space for establishing and maintaining a social network alongside acting as a "channel for consuming video content" (p. 187). Burgess and Green (2018) show how "practices of cultural participation" (p. 36) are happening in YouTube and their connections to the place of media in everyday life making it a cultural public sphere. They argue that the way "others" or people from all walks of life or various groups use the platform, YouTube as if the space is specially designed for them, which

eventually creates a participatory culture contextualizing them with "politics of popular culture" (p. VIII). They point out that each of the YouTube users uses the media with their purposes and aims and thus collectively shapes YouTube as "a dynamic cultural system," making it "a site of participatory culture" (p. VII). They also argue that YouTube users actively participate in "shaping, contesting, and negotiating the emergent culture of YouTube's social network" (p. 63). Internet-based digital media like YouTube, Facebook, and Twitter have transformed our sense of space and our traditional sense of the public sphere. Drawing on the theory of *Space* that place is a social construction and on the above discussion, it can be argued that the digital space of YouTube can be transformed into a certain place by a group of people.

Figure 1

Conceptual framework
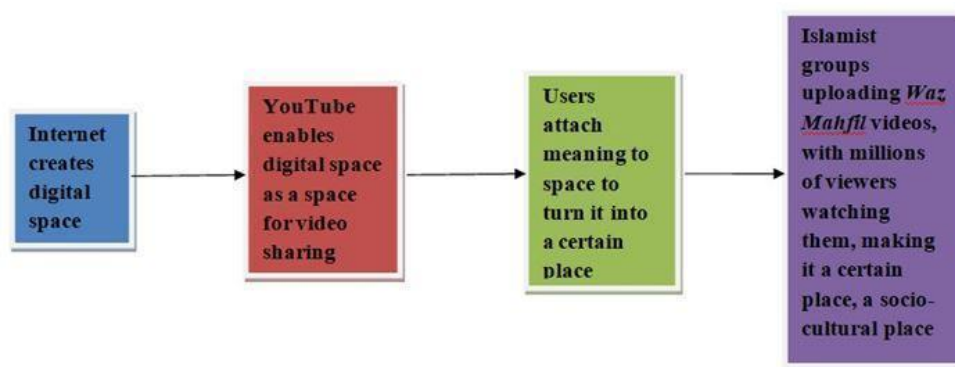
Note: The framework shows how YouTube with its affordances enables digital space a space for video sharing while Bengali Islamist groups attach certain meaning to it by uploading *Waz Mahfil* videos with millions of people engaging with the videos by viewing, commenting and sharing the videos.

Waz Mahfil in Bangladesh

Waz has a long history in Muslim culture. Prophet Muhammad used to do *Waz* before his *Sahabas* (apostles) and ever since it has been a culture in Muslim societies around the world to spread Islamic education (Ahmed, 1981; Hirschkind, 2006). *Waz Mahfil* became a "regular feature of Muslim social life" in the late nineteenth century in the Indian subcontinent, particularly in Bengali Muslim society (Ahmed, 1981, p. 104). Ahmed (1981) calls *Waz Mahfil* a peaceful religious assembly or meeting as opposed to the gathering or meeting called *bahas,* where a fierce debate is held between two or more groups on a contentious religious issue, in

the late nineteenth century (Ahmed, 1981). Ahmed (1981) also points out that *Waz Mahfil* was a "significant break with the tradition of *bahas*" (p. 101). The *Waz Mahfil* became popular in the late nineteenth century in the Bengal and played an "effective medium of communication with the masses in rural areas" (Ahmed, 1981, p. 102). Even the politicians joined the campaign to "use this unique medium of mass communication" (Ahmed, 1981, p. 102). *Waz Mahfil* was "not exclusively meant for the propagation of religious ideals", rather the medium used by the Islamic leaders, politicians, and social leaders to encourage "modern education" (Ahmed, 1981, p. 102). Max Stille (2020) calls *Waz Mahfil* a kind of "pedagogical theatre" where preachers teach the audience through scenes and gestures (p. 51). Stille (2020) likens Bangladesh's *Waz Mahfil* to the "sermons of US folk preachers" (p. 56). While *Waz Mahfil* is a dominant feature in the Bangladeshi preaching landscape, the social meaning of *Waz Mahfil* in Bangladesh has gone "far beyond the sermon" (Stille, 2020, p. 44) as it is "manipulated for outright political mobilization" (Stille, 2020, p. 29), with preachers seen seeking vote for particular parties and speaking against particular parties in *Waz Mahfil* in Bangladesh.

Figure 2

Screenshot from Sayeedi's YouTube Waz

Delwar Hossain Sayeedi (Allah Siristir Bishalota)

4,571,240 views • Jan 31, 2012   26K   4.5K   SHARE

Note: Screenshot of Sayeedi's YouTube *Waz Mahfil* showing a glimpse of the
audience from the 1990s.

Ali Riaz and Abu Naser (2011) argue that the traditional *Waz Mahfil* become instrumental for Islamic groups today in Bangladesh to spread ideology rather than theology. Since the early 1980s, *Waz Mahfil* has become a "forum of commentary on current affairs and thus more centered on ideology than on theology" (Riaz & Naser, 2011, p. 144). Initially, such congregations were usually organized by various mosques, madrasas (schools for Islamic education), and other religious institutions, like orphanages run by Islamic groups, ostensibly to raise funds for the particular institutions. But in the 1990s, various socio-Islamic organizations floated in the country organized such *Waz Mahfil* once a year, preferably during the winter. The attendees of a *Waz Mahfil* are "stimulated by the cultural construct of religion and these *Waz Mahfil* have emerged to be the "most authoritative sources of the interpretation of Islam and its relevance in daily lives", creating an enormous influence of the medium on Bangladeshi culture and society (Riaz & Naser, 2010, p. 144). Bangladesh's biggest Islam-based political party Bangladesh Jamaat-e-Islami's senior leader Delwar Hossain Sayeedi – a former parliamentarian who is now in jail – is the most well-known speaker of *Waz Mahfil* in Bangladesh. He single-handedly transformed the nature of *Waz Mahfil* and gave it a socio-political significance in the 1980s and 1990s and through this medium helped popularize "political Islam" in Bangladesh (Riaz & Naser, 2011, p. 144).

The way the sermons of Egyptian popular Islamic preacher late Shaykh Abd Al-Hamid Kishk were recorded and spread among the community in the 1970s and 1980s (Hirschkind, 2006), Sayeedi's *Waz* used to be recorded and video-recorded in the 1980s. Alongside his heroic calls to revive the true spirit of Islam by changing the lifestyle, Sayeedi, with his authoritative voice used to exhort the audience to work ardently for the welfare of the community. Listening to *Waz* recorded in cassettes became a culture in the 1980s in Bangladesh, like in Egypt, before CDs became pervasive in the late 1990s (Stille, 2015). Then came the practice of *Waz* being loaded on mobile data cards for a small charge (Stille, 2015). With the availability of the internet and YouTube, it has become a key distribution channel of *Waz* nowadays (Stille, 2015). Hirschkind (2012) found evidence of the popularity of the acoustically mediated Islamic culture and practices like preaching – *Waz* – and which becomes, as he says, evidenced in the visual medium, YouTube.

Since its inception in 2005, YouTube has witnessed explosive growth in its popularity around the world. Today it is indisputably the world's largest video sharing site with 2.5 billion users globally ("YouTube statistics 2022 [Users by country + demographics]," 2022). People spend a total of 1 billion hours every day to watch 5 billion videos in YouTube, the second most visited website after Google

("YouTube statistics 2022 [Users by country + demographics]," 2022). Videos on YouTube are watched from anywhere using our mobile phones. There is no limit to the number of YouTube videos that a user can create and download. It also has some community features, for instance: creating and following particular YouTube channels and commenting on videos posted by other users. As of 2022, YouTube has more than 51 million active channels and there are more than a hundred local versions of YouTube in over 80 languages ("YouTube statistics 2022 [Users by country + demographics]," 2022). More than 70% of YouTube watch time comes from mobile devices. Drawing on the above discussion, it can be assumed that the YouTube space is often made a place by attaching certain meaning to it by a certain group of people. This study seeks to examine the phenomenon of exploiting YouTube space by the Bengali religious groups for their purposes. The study would be guided by the following research questions:

RQ1: How does YouTube *Waz Mahfil* transform the digital space into a public place for the Bengali?

RQ2: How does YouTube *Waz Mahfil* create an imagined religious community in the digital space?

Methods

This paper seeks to explore whether YouTube's digital *Space* has emerged as a *Place* for the traditional culture of Islamic preaching *Waz Mahfil.* The study examined how the people, the Bengali community in this case of study, have attached meaning to YouTube's digital space surrounding *Waz Mahfil* to create the *Place*. To the end, in the first place, the paper has examined the ubiquity and pervasiveness of the *Waz Mahfil* in the YouTube space and then people's interaction with those videos, in a qualitative approach. Building on Suddaby & Greenwood's (2005) idea of the modified version of content analysis, this paper has employed qualitative content analysis including a combination of textual and audience analyses. The approach includes the examination of both the surface structure of the text *i.e.,* its manifested content (Berg, 2004), and the latent content which refers to a text's implicit meaning (Holsti, 1969). Qualitative content analysis which is often referred to as latent content analysis is an analytical means of decoding meaning from certain data by reducing them to make sense of them keeping contexts in mind (Julien, 2008). Textual analysis is applied to examine the "narrative structure, symbolic arrangements and ideological potential of media content" (Fursich, 2009, p.239), as text should be understood in its broader sense as any cultural practice or object. The qualitative analysis has been carried out in three stages in this paper. First of all, the study obtained data of how many *Waz Mahfil* videos were uploaded

in YouTube in a certain time. To obtain this data, the study used social media data providing website, *brand24.com*. The *Brand24.com* is a media-monitoring tool with powerful analytics through which the length and breadth of the internet can be monitored in search for the keywords (Gretzel, 2019). Second, a manual search was conducted to see the presence and trends of *Waz Mahfil* in YouTube and third, an audience analysis was conducted to see how people and how many people are interacting with those videos.

The website -- *brand24.com* -- doesn't provide data of more than one month under the same keywords within six months. For this study, seven keywords were used. Before choosing these key search terms, a manual research was conducted on YouTube to see how many different ways the people have spelled this word *Waz* on YouTube and then seven key terms were selected. They are: "*Waz Mahfil*", "*Waj Mahfil*", "*Bangla Waz*", "*Bangla Waj*", "*Waz*", "*Waj*" and "*Oaj*" were used for the search. These seven key words include all of the terms found in the manual research. These seven different keywords and terms have helped maximize the representation of *Waz Mahfil* videos uploaded in the certain period that eventually help the study get a complete picture of the trend. The people who launched these sorts of YouTube channels use different spellings of *Waz* as most of them do not have a higher educational background and also there is a difference of opinion about the spelling of this Arabic word in English.

The biggest limitation of this study is, however, not having access to sufficient and accurate YouTube data, due to some inbuilt technical difficulties in obtaining them. It was not possible to determine exactly how many channels there are exclusively for *Waz Mahfil* and how many people are engaged with them, by listening to them and by commenting on those *Waz Mahfil*. Those data would give us a clear idea about the gravity of the use of YouTube space for the purpose. Any future study based on YouTube data for a longer period of time would give us a larger picture of the situation.

Data Analysis and Discussion

The *brand24.com* search result shows that a total of 466 videos were published from September 8, 2019, to October 8, 2019, by over three hundred YouTube channels. However, the content of some of the videos was not *Waz Mahfil* as such although those were uploaded under the same name. There was, however, no reason for selecting the abovementioned period. It is just because this study was conducted at that time. Following is a partial view of the data obtained from the *brand24.com* website.

Figure 3

Screenshot from brand24.com analytics
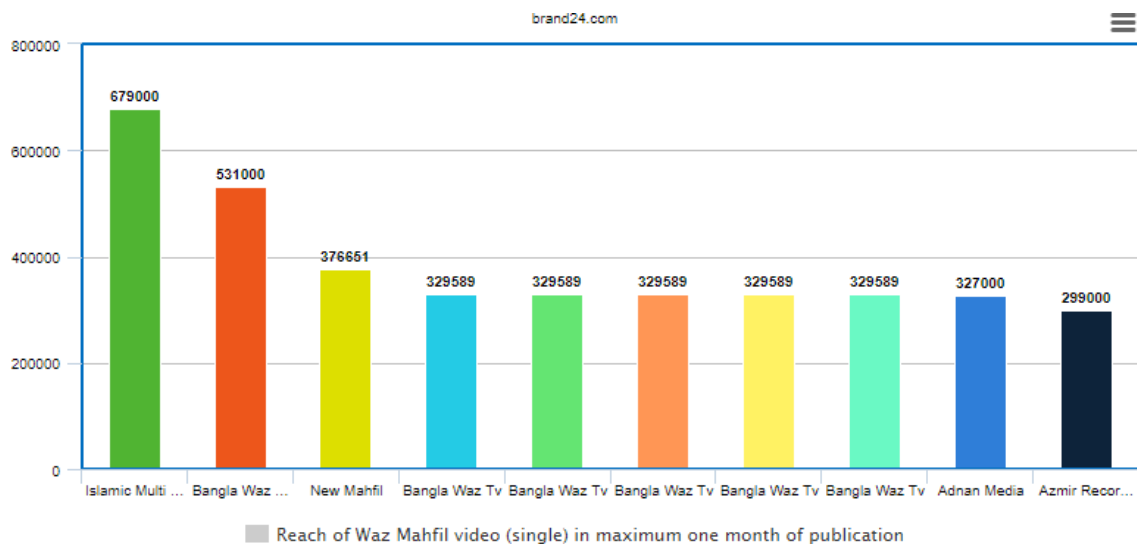
Note: The brand24.com analytics shows the reach of Waz Mahfil video (single) in maximum one month of publication.

This data gives us an ample idea about the number of YouTube channels that upload *Waz Mahfil.* It can be assumed that the number of YouTube channels dedicated to sharing *Waz Mahfil* will for sure be higher than 300 because many of the channels might not have uploaded any *Waz Mahfil* video during the study period. The most viewed video was published by a channel called *Islamic Multi Video* which has a total of 679,000 subscribers and the video has got 3,873 views in about a month. A YouTube channel called *Rose Tv24*, launched in 2017, has uploaded 882 videos, mostly *Waz*, and has got over 283 million views as of December 10, 2019. A manual research of YouTube *Waz* using YouTube's inbuilt features with the keywords was also conducted. YouTube's own features allow its users to see the most-viewed video under certain keywords. A manual search with keywords *Bangla Waz* and subsequently figuring out most-viewed *Bangla Waz* using YouTube's "view count" feature reveals that a total of 59 *Waz* videos have got one to 12 million views each as shown in figure 4.

Figure 4

Screenshot of a manual search in YouTube

Note: Outcome of a manual search in YouTube with keywords *Bangla Waz.*

Figure 5

Screenshot of a YouTube Waz video

Note: Screenshot of a YouTube *Waz Mahfil* content having over 12 million views and having over 3,100 comments on it.

The *Waz Mahfil* video having 12 million views has got over 3,100 comments as of December 10, 2019 as shown in figure 5. Another *Waz* with over 10 million views has got over 4,100 comments as shown in figure 6.

Figure 6

Screenshot of a YouTube Waz video

Note: Screenshot of a YouTube *Waz Mahfil* content having over 10 million views and having over 4,100 comments on it.

These analyses give us an idea about online viewers of YouTube *Waz Mahfil*, but we could not get a good idea about the number of attendees who were physically present in those recently-held *Waz Mahfil* as most of the videos did not show the audience nowadays. A very few YouTube *Waz Mahfil,* which were held recently, however, show the audience, particularly those with a good number of attendees like about several thousand as shown in figure 7.

Figure 7

Screenshot of a YouTube Waz video

দোয়া কবুলের গোপন রহস্য Bangla Waz by Mizanur Rahman Azhari ✅

10,705,538 views • Nov 9, 2017   👍 86K   👎 9.3K   ➦ SHARE   ⊞+ SAVE   •••

Note: Screenshot of YouTube *Waz* of one of the topmost popular Islamic preachers of

current time Mizanur Rahman Azhari which shows a glimpse of the audience.

Apart from current *Waz Mahfil,* a good number of video-recorded *Waz* of imprisoned Jamaat-e-Islami party leader Delwar Hossain Sayeedi, who can be credited with making *Waz Mahfil* a popular culture in Bangladesh, are also available on YouTube and being viewed by millions of people. One of his video-recorded *Waz* shows the audience (Delwar Hossain Sayeedi, 2012) and it can be assumed from the video that the number of the audience could be as much as several hundred thousand as shown in figure 3.

But an analysis of recent *Waz Mahfil* videos gives us an idea that the number of audiences, who were physically present in today's *Waz Mahfil* would not go beyond several thousand. It is very hard to say why the audience of the current *Waz Mahfil* has decreased in number compared to the past ones, particularly the ones of Sayeedi. There might be several reasons behind this. First of all, none of the current preachers, for sure, is of Sayeedi's stature (Still, 2020). Another reason is an antagonistic environment for the popular *waz* culture with a secular government (led by a self-proclaimed secular political party Bangladesh Awami League) in place. There are media reports of banning the preaching of some of the popular speakers of this time by the administration ("তারেক মনোয়ারসহ ৩ বক্তার ওয়াজ নিষিদ্ধ কুমিল্লায়", [Waz of 3 preachers, including Tariq Munawar, banned in Comilla], 2019). Mizanur Rahman Azhari, who rose to fame in a short period, stopped his *Waz Mahfil* in physical space and left Bangladesh, citing "unfavorable condition" in Bangladesh and currently living in Malaysia (Kallol, 2020). And the third reason might be the availability of such *Waz* online. People might have thought that they, particularly women in a

conservative culture, can listen to those preaching online, even without becoming physically present in *Waz Mahfil*. It would be worth mentioning that back in the 1980s, 1990s, and 2000s, people in their thousands from distant places used to take all the pains the of traveling a long way to arrive in the *Waz Mahfil* ground to listen to their favorite preachers, as if they were joining a religious festival. All three reasons might even work together to the end of reduction in the number of audience in the current *Waz Mahfil*.

However, thanks to the video-sharing space YouTube, this *Waz Mahfil* is being viewed online by millions of people from around the world with the internet removing the boundaries of geographic regions and cultures as the online *Waz* can be viewed from across the world given its nature of distribution. Either the organizers of the gathering or any other group having a YouTube channel in association with the organizer or the chief speaker of the *Waz Mahfil* video-record the lectures or preaching of the main speaker and publish it on YouTube immediately after the original *Waz Mahfil*. Even if the number of attendees of the *Waz Mahfil* is as few as several hundred, the recorded preaching of the same *Waz Mahfil* is viewed by thousands of people over some time as shown in the above screenshots of YouTube *Waz Mahfil*. The online reach of *Waz* has been so pervasive that the online *Waz Mahfil* culture now competes with Bangladesh's media outlets as far as the number of viewers is concerned. While the YouTube channel of Bangladesh's indisputably highest circulated daily *Prothom Alo* has got over 411 million views with its 8,415 videos, mostly news and entertainment items, as of December 10, 2019, the *Waz Mahfil*-based YouTube channel *Rose Tv24* has a got over 283 million views with only 882 videos as shown in the figure 8.
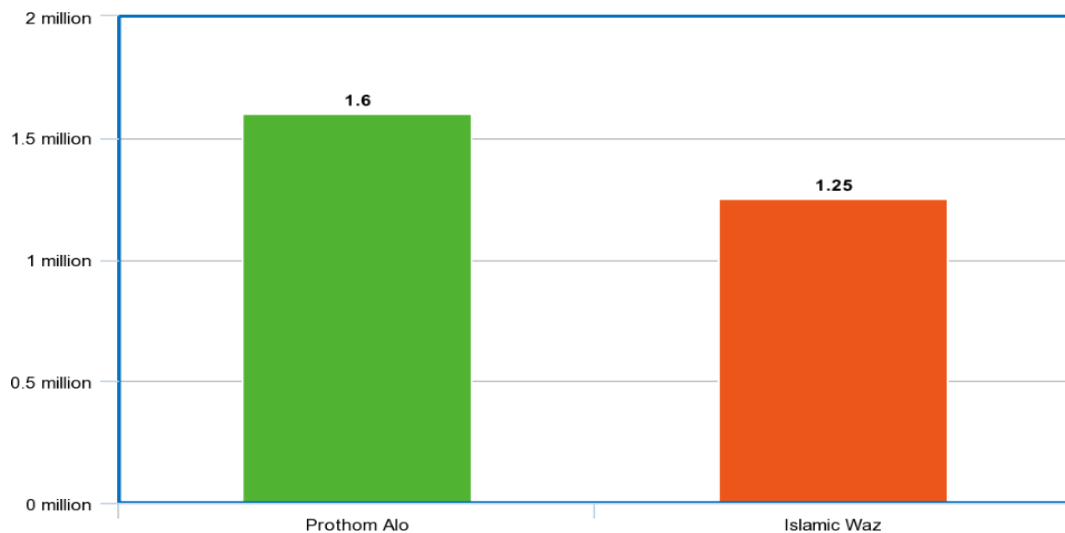
Figure 8

A comparison of video watching from two different outlets
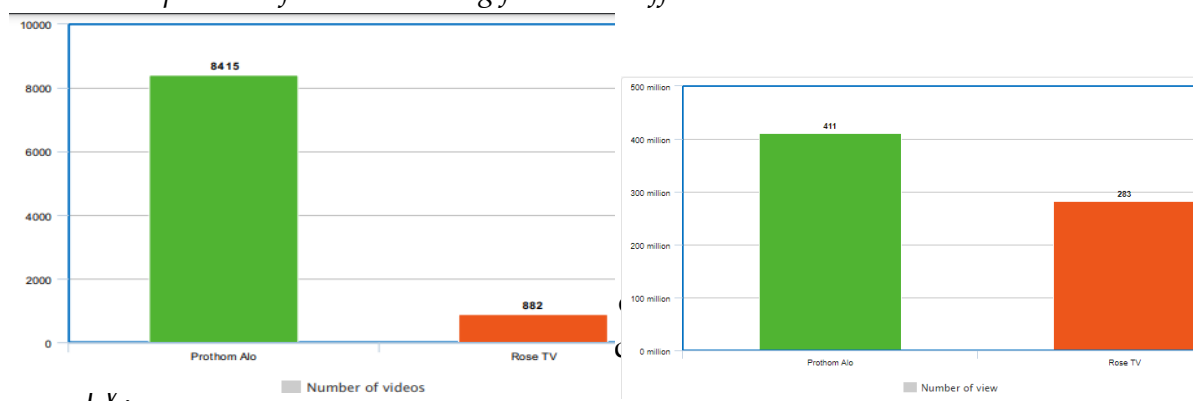
Figure 9

A comparison of subscribers between two different outlets

Note: A comparison of subscribers between Bangladesh's highest circulated vernacular daily *Prothom Alo* and a waz-based YouTube channel *Islamic Waz.*

While *Prothom Alo's* YouTube channel has a base of 1.6 million subscribers, a YouTube *Waz* channel called *Islamic Waz* has got a total of 1.25 million subscribers.

It was, however, not known for technical difficulties if there is any other *Waz* channel having more than this volume of viewers and views. *Waz Mahfil* on YouTube is also eating away at the adverts usually given to the mainstream media as a lion share of telecom ads is being invested in *Waz* content and media experts are voicing their concerns over this new trend in Bangladesh (Gayen, 2019). This phenomenon gives us an idea as to how far YouTube *Waz Mahfil* has been widespread in Bangladeshi society. While Sayeedi is languishing in jail and Azhari is in self-exile in Malaysia, millions of people are watching Sayeedi and Azhari's *Waz* on YouTube every day across both geographical and socio-political demographics. Sayeedi's recorded *Waz* continued to be played in "public spaces such as tea stalls, buses or hotels" (Stille, 2020, p. 20-21). Alongside, old *Waz Mahfil* of Sayeedi and Azhari are being uploaded anew and being telecast live every day on YouTube by a group of people for grabbing "views" of the videos of their YouTube channels. Several *Waz Mahfil* YouTube channels were found operating from outside Bangladesh with millions of Bengali-speaking people, both from inside and outside Bangladesh, engaging with those videos by viewing, commenting, and sharing those videos.

British social scientist and geographer Doreen Massey (1994) contends that place is a social construction based on particular relations. The place is constructed through a meaning-making process. In the era of "time-space compression", she argues, the notion of physical distance has become irrelevant. Now we can get a sense of place even going beyond the physicality of space. Space is something

abstract, without having any particular meaning. While place refers to how people are aware of or attracted to a certain piece of space. A place can be seen as a space that has meaning, significance. The place is a space with meaning. A general space, both physical space or cyberspace can emerge to be a place when a certain social meaning is attached to it. The process of uploading *Waz Mahfil* on YouTube space and subsequently engagement of millions of people with those *Waz Mahfil* videos -- either by viewing them or by making comments there or by sharing the *Waz Mahfil* videos represent a meaning-making process. It demonstrates that these people have found a meaning in it. In other words, the ubiquitous presence of *Waz Mahfil* in YouTube space has brought a certain meaning for Bengali Muslims, Bengalis and Bangladeshis as a whole. YouTube space has turned into a place of communication for Bengalis and Bangladeshis thanks to *Waz Mahfil* videos. Millions of people are making communication over *Waz Mahfil* videos in YouTube space. This communication over YouTube space has given a certain meaning to it, making a place – a place for *Waz Mahfil*.

The availability of *Waz Mahfil* on YouTube has also blurred physical boundaries, physical distances and sometimes blurred the timeliness as well. Andrea Baker (2008) argues that members of a certain online place visit the same type of cyberspace with similar interests and goals, creating a "sense of online community" (p. 168). Anderson (2006) viewed this imagined community as a community of a group of people who share some common values, practices and perceive themselves as part of the group. The online *Waz Mahfil* brought all Bengali people from around the world who love to listen to *Waz Mahfil* to a single community, removing the spatial and temporal distances and/or barriers, and even going beyond cultural stratification. Engagement of millions of viewers with their sharing, comments, and suggestions under the *Waz Mahfil* videos creates a sense of community in digital space. This digital community, which is performing a particular practice – religious socio-cultural practice, appears to emerge as an 'imagined Islamic community' in digital space, resonating with Benedict Anderson's (2006) imagined community. The study findings demonstrate that YouTube's digital space offers an effective framework and a space for Bengalis for a certain purpose. The creation of this new place in the digital space signals a strong socio-cultural and political importance in the Bengali society and culture.

Conclusion

The study findings demonstrate that YouTube's digital space has emerged as a significant socio-political site or place in Bangladeshi society. YouTube *Waz Mahfil* is a fascinating case for thinking about mediatized dissemination of religious preaching in Bangladesh. This study findings explain how the digital

space of YouTube has been transformed into a place for *Waz Mahfil* for Bengali-speaking people with Islamic groups in Bangladesh using the place to serve their purposes, particularly in a hostile atmosphere for such practice with a secular Bangladesh Awami League (BAL)-led government in place (Riaz & Zaman 2022; Riaz, 2021; Stille, 2020; and T. Rahman, 2019). Often connecting the *Waz Mahfil* preachers with Jamaat-e-Islami party, the secular BAL government tries to restrict or control *Waz Mahfil* through various means as *Waz Mahfil* are considered the "most convenient platform against secular politics in Bangladesh (M. Rahman, 2019; আজহারি মাজহারি জামায়াতের সৃষ্টি: ধর্ম প্রতিমন্ত্রী [Azhari Mazhari the creation of Jamaat: State Minister of Religious Affairs], (2020). YouTube *Waz Mahfil* has made the religious public reach far beyond the physical audience. YouTube *Waz Mahfil* is reaching out to even those women and men who either never physically visit *Waz Mahfil* ground for various socio-cultural factors or those women who are proscribed to attend such gatherings.

Waz Mahfil is more of a political phenomenon than a religious phenomenon in Bangladesh as evidenced in the government measures. This transformation of *Waz Mahfil* from physical space to digital space has increased the audience of religious preaching, creating a widespread socio-political impact in Bangladeshi society. This paper has mapped out how the practice of *Waz Mahfil* transformed from physical space to digital space, enabling its protagonists—political Islamists in particular – to reach out to a larger and even inaccessible audience to spread their messages, going beyond the government regulations and geographical and cultural boundaries – which has been a big reason for worry for the secularists in Bangladesh. Communication scholar Macnamara (2010) argues that people communicate with real people on real issues in digital space as he holds: "there is nothing foreign, alienating, disconnected or virtual about Facebook" Macnamara, 2010, p. 109). Aligning with MacNamara's argument, this paper argues that with its ubiquity and pervasiveness, YouTube *Waz Mahfil* has emerged as the "real *Waz Mahfil*" among the Bengali community. Apart from reinforcing the *Space* and *Place* theory that people construct places out of space for their own conveniences, this study contributes to the social science scholarship primarily in two ways. Firstly, this transformation clearly indicated the rise of "digitality" in society, in a developing society like Bangladesh in particular, and secondly, the phenomenon indicated that the religious groups/communities appropriate affordances of digital space to spread their religious message. This study also helps us understand whether and/or how far digital technology is opening up an opportunity for "Islamism" in Bangladeshi society. The study also adds a significant contribution to the scholarship of knowledge about digital space's being a certain place through a meaning-making process. It helps us understand how the "practice of preaching" shifts from exclusively physical space to digital space in the era of the internet and

how religious groups undertake digital technology to serve their purpose. It shows us how the people exploit the digital space for their socio-religious and political activism avoiding various governmental censorship. Drawing on these findings of the study in light of theoretical understanding, it can be concluded that *Bengali Waz Mahfil* videos have constructed a globalized socio-cultural place in the digital space of YouTube.

Acknowledgment

References

Ahmed, R. (1996). *The Bengal Muslims, 1871-1906: A quest for identity*. Oxford University Press, USA.

Al Amin. (2012, February 1). *Delwar Hossain Sayeedi (Allah Siristir Bishalota)* [Video]. YouTube. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Ru3qZgzdwBE&t=765s

Anderson, B. (2006). *Imagined communities: Reflections on the origin and spread of nationalism* (2nd ed.). Verso.

Antony, M. G., & Thomas, R. J. (2010). 'This is citizen journalism at its finest': YouTube and the public sphere in the Oscar grant shooting incident. *New Media & Society*, *12*(8), 1280-1296. https://doi.org/10.1177/1461444810362492

Baker, A. J. (2008). Down the rabbit hole: The role of place in the initiation and development of online relationships. In Azy Barak (Ed.), *Psychological aspects of cyberspace: Theory, research, applications* (1st ed., pp. 163-184). Cambridge University Press.

Bangla Waz. (2013, May 13). *Allama Sayeedi Bangla Waz 1993 day 5 Full* [Video]. YouTube. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bTW505dzS9c&t=7869s

Bangladesh emerges as `autocracy': study. (2018, March 24). *New Age*. http://www.newagebd.net/article/37445/bangladesh-emerges-as-autocracy-study

Bangladesh not a democracy, a hybrid regime. (2017, January 26). *New Age*. https://en.prothomalo.com/bangladesh/Bangladesh-not-a-democracy-a-Hybrid-regime-EIU

Baym, N. K. (2015). *Personal connections in the digital age*. John Wiley & Sons.

Berg, B. (2004). *Qualitative research methods for the social sciences* (5th ed.). Toronto, ON: Allyn and Bacon

Burgess, J., & Green, J. (2018). *YouTube: Online video and participatory culture*. John Wiley & Sons.

Couldry, N., & McCarthy, A. (2004). Introduction: Orientations: mapping Media Space. In Nick Couldry & Anna McCarthy (Eds.), *Media Space: Place, Scale and Culture in a Media Age* (pp. 15-32). Routledge.

Dijck, J. V. (2013). *The culture of connectivity: A critical history of social media*. Oxford University Press.

Edgerly, S., Vraga, E., Fung, T., Moon, T. J., & Yoo, W. H. (2009). *YouTube as a public sphere: The proposition 8 debate* [Paper presentation]. Association of Internet Researchers Conference, 2009, Milwaukee, WI. https://www.researchgate.net/publication/265268922_YouTube_as_a_public_sphere_The_Proposition_8_debate

EC in a tight spot for 'misleading propaganda' on Waz-Mahfil. (2018, November 27). *Bdnews24.com.* https://bdnews24.com/bangladesh/2018/11/27/ec-in-trouble-for-misleading-propaganda-on-waz-mahfil

Ever wonder how YouTube works? (n.d.). YouTube. Retrieved September 5, 2021, from https://www.youtube.com/intl/en-GB/about/press/

Fair, C. C. (2019). Bangladesh in 2018: Careening toward One-Woman Rule. *Asian Survey*, *59*(1). https://online.ucpress.edu/as/article-abstract/59/1/124/25067/Bangladesh-in-2018Careening-toward-One-Woman-Rule?redirectedFrom=fulltext

Gayen, K. (2019, November 29). (Uncertain) Future of Journalism in Bangladesh. *The Daily Star*. https://www.thedailystar.net/star-weekend/news/uncertain-future- journalism-bangladesh-1833094

Gidley, R., & Turner, M. (2018). Judicializing history: Mass crimes trials and the historian as expert witness in West Germany, Cambodia, and Bangladesh. *Genocide Studies and Prevention*, *12*(3), 52-67. https://doi.org/10.5038/1911-9933.12.3.1566

Gretzel, U. (2019). The Role of Social Media in Creating and Addressing Overtourism. In Dodds, R. & Butler, R. (Eds.). *Overtourism: Issues, realities and solutions*, (pp. 62-75). Berlin: De Gruyter.

Hirschkind, C. (2006). *The ethical Soundscape: Cassette sermons and Islamic Counterpublics*. Columbia University Press.

Hirschkind, C. (2012). Experiments in devotion online: The YouTube KHUṬBA. *International Journal of Middle East Studies*, *44*(1), 5-21. https://doi.org/10.1017/s002074381100122x

Holsti, O. (1969). *Content analysis for the social sciences and humanities*. Reading, MA: Addision-Wesley.

Islamic preacher goes missing with three companions. (2021, March 17). *New Age*. https://www.newagebd.net/article/132977/islamic-preacher-goes-missing-with-three-companions

Jalil, M. A. (2010). War Crimes Trial in Bangladesh: A Real Political Vendetta. *Journal of Politics and Law*, *3*(2). https://www.ccsenet.org/journal/index.php/jpl/article/view/7193

Johnson, T. J., Zhang, W., Bichard, S. L., & Seltzer, S. T. (2011). United we stand? Online social network sites and civic engagement. In Zizi Papacharissi (Ed.), *A Networked Self: Identity, Community, and Culture on Social Network Sites* (pp. 185-207). Routledge.

Julien, H. (2008). Content Analysis. In Lisa M. Given (Ed.), *The SAGE encyclopedia of qualitative research methods* (pp. 120-121). SAGE Publications.

Kallol, Q. (2020, February 7). মিজানুর রহমান আজহারি কি সত্যি মালয়েশিয়া গেছেন? [Did Mizanur Rahman Azhari really go to Malaysia]. *BBC Bengali*. https://www.bbc.com/bengali/news-51413691

Macnamara, J. (2010). *The 21st century media (r)evolution: Emergent communication practices*. Peter Lang.

Massey, D. (2013). *Space, place and gender*. John Wiley & Sons.

Milam, W. B. (2019, April 20). Democracy to Autocracy: Bangladesh in Context. *South Asia Journal*. http://southasiajournal.net/democracy-to-autocracy-bangladesh-in-context/

Papacharissi, Z. (2008). The virtual sphere 2.0: The Internet, the public sphere, and beyond. In Andrew Chadwick & Philip N. Howard (Eds.), *Routledge handbook of internet politics* (pp. 230-245). Routledge.

Papacharissi, Z. (Ed.). (2010). *A networked self: Identity, community, and culture on social network sites*. Routledge.

Papacharissi, Z. A. (2013). *A private sphere: Democracy in a digital age*. John Wiley & Sons.

Raqib, M. A. (2020). 'Safeguarding Islam' in modern times: Politics, piety and Hefazat-e-Islami 'ulama in Bangladesh. Critical Research on Religion, 8(3), 235-256. https://doi.org/10.1177/2050303220952869

Riaz, A. E., & Zaman, F. (2022). Working Under the "Sword of Damocles": Experiences of Journalists in a Hybrid Regime. In Arild E. Ruud and Mubashar Hasan (eds.), *Masks of authoritarianism: Hegemony, power and public life in Bangladesh.* Springer Nature.

Riaz, A. (2021). Bangladesh: the return of religion to the political center stage. In *Ali Riaz (Ed.), Religion and politics in South Asia* (2nd ed.). Routledge.

Riaz, A., & Naser, M. A. (2011). Islamist politics and popular culture. In Ali Riaz & C. Christine Fair (Eds.), *Political Islam and governance in Bangladesh* (pp. 136-152). Routledge.

Rahman, T. (2019). Party system institutionalization and pernicious polarization in Bangladesh. *The ANNALS of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, *681*(1), 173-192. https://doi.org/10.1177/0002716218817280

Rahman, M. M. (2019). The making of an Islamist public sphere in Bangladesh. *Asian Journal of Comparative Politics*, 4(4), 330-351. https://doi.org/10.1177/2057891118811952

Ruud, A. E., & Hasan, M. (2022). *Masks of authoritarianism: Hegemony, power and public life in Bangladesh*. Palgrave Macmillan.

Sen, J. (2012). The trial of errors in Bangladesh : the international crimes (tribunals) act and the 1971 war crimes trial. *Harvard Asia Quarterly*, 33-43. http://ssrn.com/abstract=2159827

Stille, M. (2020). *Islamic sermons and public piety in Bangladesh: The poetics of popular preaching.* I.B. Tauris.

Stille, M. (2014). Islamic Non-Friday Sermons in Bangladesh. *South Asia Chronicle*, 4, 94-114. https://edoc.hu-berlin.de/handle/18452/9130

Suddaby, R., & Greenwood, R. (2005). Rhetorical strategies of legitimacy. *Administrative Science Quarterly, 50*(1), 35-67. https://doi.org/10.2189/asqu.2005.50.1.35

Susarla, A., Oh, J., & Tan, Y. (2012). Social networks and the diffusion of user-generated content: Evidence from YouTube. *Information Systems Research*, *23*(1), 23-41. https://doi.org/10.1287/isre.1100.0339

Tuan, Y. (1977). *Space and place: The perspective of experience.* University of Minnesota Press.

Uttom, S., & Rozario, R. R. (2019, April 2). Bangladesh to curb Islamic hate speech. *UCANEWS*. https://www.ucanews.com/news/bangladesh-to-curb-islamic-hate-speech/84876#

YouTube statistics 2022 [Users by country + demographics]. (2022, June 28). Official GMI Blog. Retrieved September 16, 2022, from https://www.globalmediainsight.com/blog/youtube-users-statistics/#second

আজহারি মাজহারি জামায়াতের সৃষ্টি: ধর্ম প্রতিমন্ত্রী [Azhari Mazhari the creation of Jamaat: Minister]. (2020, January 28). *Manab Zamin.* https://mzamin.com/article.php?mzamin=210456

তারেক মনোয়ারসহ ৩ বক্তার ওয়াজ নিষিদ্ধ কুমিল্লায় [Waz of 3 preachers, including Tariq Munawar, banned in Comilla]. (2019, November 12). *The Daily Jugantor.* https://www.jugantor.com/country-news/243168

ভিন্নমতের কারণে ১০ বছরে নিহত ১৫২৫, গুম ৭৮১ [1525 killed, 781 disappeared in 10 yrs for dissenting voice]. (2019, December 12). *The Daily Manab Zamin*. https://mzamin.com/article.php?mzamin=203484