

MULTI-DIMENSIONAL SOUNDSCAPE OF RADIO IN EGYPT

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Abstract

Egyptian radio broadcasting has always been strictly controlled by the government since the 1920s. Composed of two sections, this essay aims to explore the multi-dimensional radio soundscape in Egypt and how radio and loudspeakers have been used by the government to serve political goals in both religious and secular activities. The first section centres on Umm Kulthum and how she took advantage of the burgeoning radio to spread her fame and reach out to the mass audience in the Arab world. I also examine how the Egyptian government utilized radio to achieve its political goal of pan-Arabism. The second section discusses the usage of radio and loudspeakers for religious activities, including the Qur'anic recitation and the "call to prayer." I analyse how governmental control of radio technology affected daily religious events and people's social identities.

Keywords

Radio; Egypt; Umm Kulthum; Call to prayer; Radio soundscape

INTRODUCTION

As Rugh argues, "Radio and television in the Arab world have for the most part been monopolies under direct government supervision" (Rugh, 2004:181). Within the Arab world, Egypt has developed the most powerful and extensive radio system. This strictly controlled broadcasting system became a political tool to propagate official lines and mobilize the masses (Rugh, 2004). According to Castelo-Branco (1993), the history of Egyptian radio as a music media can be divided into four phases: amateur radio (1923–1934), the Egyptian State Radio Broadcast Station (1934–1947), the "radio era" under Egyptian administration (1947 – ca. 1975), and radio since the advent of sound cassettes (ca. 1975–present). Although Castelo-Branco's emphasis is on radio's use for music recordings and dissemination, this periodization can provide us with a large picture of radio's history in Egypt.

In the 1920s, a private firm started radio broadcasting in Egypt. The new media was mainly used for commercials and personal messages, and the monarchy had not paid much attention to radio for its political use (Rugh, 2004). Due to the inappropriate language, excessive advertising, and personal messages, the government decided to ban all privately owned radio stations and initiated the *Egyptian State Broadcast Station* in 1934 (Castelo-Branco, 1993). Because of the lack of expertise, the *Egyptian State Broadcast Station* contracted the Marconi company of the United Kingdom as its official agent, which should build and operate a non-commercial broadcast facility to be financed by the government. By December 1939, the number of radio sets was estimated at 86,477 (Boyd, 1977:4). Most of the radio sets were placed in public spaces, such as coffee houses and restaurants. After World War II, the Egyptian government decided to terminate the contract with Marconi in 1947 due to the conflict between the Egyptian and British governments, which marked the beginning of the 'radio era.' During the approximately thirty-year 'radio era,' radio became the most influential music media in Egypt. By 1949, the *Egyptian State Broadcast Station* was renamed Egyptian Radio, administered by the Ministry of National Guidance, which was responsible for the revolution's political ideology (Castelo-Branco, 1993). Moreover, during Nasser's time (1954–1970), the broadcasting

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media later became Nasser's official voice and the tool for him to promote his political ambitions (Boyd, 1977:6).

Schafer suggests that "[t]he soundscape is any acoustic field of study" (Schafer, 1994:7), which consists of all kinds of sounds heard by people. A music composition, a radio programme, or an acoustic environment could all be considered a soundscape. No matter what the sonic object is, the scholars of soundscape always ask similar questions: "what is the relationship between man and the sounds of his environment and what happens when those sounds change" (Schafer, 1994: 3). Back to the topic of Egyptian radio, under the strict control of mass media, how did it permeate people's radio and loudspeakers daily lives? What kind of soundscape did radio and loudspeakers create in Egypt? In what way did these two related mass media embody and strengthen state power? How did the government utilize radio to enact their state control? This paper investigates the multi-dimensional soundscape created by radio and loudspeakers in Egypt since the 1920s, the time when radio started.

I would like to focus on two aspects to explore how radio and loudspeakers have been used by the government as well as common people to serve for either political goals or religious and secular activities. The first case will centre on Umm Kulthum and how she took advantage of the burgeoning radio to spread her fame and reach out to the mass audience in the Arab world. I will also examine how the Egyptian government utilized radio to achieve its political goal of pan-Arabism. The second part will discuss the usage of radio and loudspeakers for religious activities, including the Qur'anic recitation and the "call to prayer." I will also analyse how it affected daily religious events and people's religious lives and identities.

UMM KULTHUM AND HER STARDOM THROUGH RADIO

Umm Kulthum (1898–1975), dubbed as "the voice of Egypt," is perhaps the most well-known Egyptian singer. She is also considered as a national icon in Egypt and the "lady of Arabic song." She recorded more than 300 songs and released more than 120 cassettes. "Authentic" is the word that people have always associated with Umm Kulthum and her repertory. Her amazing voice, careful selection of poetry, mastery of "tarab," splendid diction of classical Arabic, and careful composition of music contributed to her success and significant place in Arab culture. Her fame spread to the whole Arab world and even areas beyond, including North Africa, Iraq, and the Arabian Peninsula (Marcus, 2007).

In c. 1904, Umm Kulthum was born in a village in the Nile Delta of northern Egypt. Because of her exceptional ability to sing, she started to perform with her family at a young age. In 1922, she moved to Cairo with her family and started her career as a professional singer. As many scholars suggest, the emerging media, including radio, recording, and film industries, played an essential role in disseminating her performances and spreading Umm Kulthum's fame (Danielson, 1997; Lohman, 2013; Marcus, 2007). Among various types of media, how did radio help build her popularity? Why did radio become a crucial way to spread her music? In what way did the government participate in her career on radio? What kind of socio-cultural impact was created by this soundscape created by Umm Kulthum through radio? This section is going to answer these questions.

Umm Kulthum's first Thursday radio concerts are an event that should not be ignored when we discuss how the media promoted her music. On 7 January 1937, Umm Kulthum started to give live concerts on radio at the Opera House, which continued throughout the rest of her life (Marcus 2007:118). Her long concerts were always held on the first Thursday of every month, from November or December to June. The Thursday-night concerts often lasted for five or six hours, from 9:30 p.m. until 2, 3, or even 4 a.m. in the morning. During the concert, she was able to make beautiful improvisations, extending a single song to last over an hour (Danielson, 1996). At that time on Thursday, the streets of Cairo and cities and towns throughout much of the Arab world were empty since people were gathering around radio sets to hear the music. Even people who were not fans of Umm Kulthum

might find themselves listening to her anyway because her voice was always on broadcast, and for people who were fascinated by her, the concerts were paramount.

The live radio broadcasting of Umm Kulthum's music promoted her place in Egyptian culture. The Thursday "Umm Kulthum night" became a regular and major event in Egyptian popular culture for people to gather around the nearest radio set, enjoy the evening music programme and socialize with friends and relatives. As Danielson argues, "Radio and television broadcasts, for example, are not merely to be absorbed, they are to be discussed" (Danielson 1996:5). Audiences not only often listened to her music but also frequently talked about her, which made her name repetitively circulate among people. As Castelo-Branco suggests, the majority of the radio stations featured music in nearly half of the programme, which increased Umm Kulthum's exposure a lot. The strictly state-controlled radio offered not many choices to audiences. Therefore, Umm Kulthum, who seemed anchored on the radio, came to have a seemingly ubiquitous presence on the radio and became a part of Egyptians' daily lives. Moreover, the radio concerts enabled more people to listen to her music without buying a ticket. Overall, due to the public setting and easier accessibility, radio helped this well-established artist reach out to a large number of audiences throughout the country and even the whole Arab world, regardless of gender, class, and religion.

Umm Kulthum's great success and stardom in the Arab world were also attributed to the support of President Gamal Abdel Nasser (Jamal Abd al-Nasir, 1918–1970). Nasser, one of the most charismatic Egyptian leaders, served as the second president of Egypt from 1954 until his death in 1970. In his book, *The Philosophy of the Revolution* (Nasser, 1955), he included an indication of radio broadcasting services in order to serve his political goals (Boyd, 1975). Nasser recognized radio's power of reaching and instructing the mass public and strengthened the broadcasting power of the Egyptian national radio so that he was able to disseminate his calls for national consciousness and Arab unity (Boyd, 1975; Marcus, 2007). Both he and Umm Kulthum came from the lower classes and caught the opportunity of moving upwards; Nasser was an admirer and personal acquaintance of Umm Kulthum. He recognized the potential of Umm Kulthum's voice and persona and established the Umm Kulthum radio station in the 1960s. This all-music station played a tape of a song from one of her concerts at the beginning and end of the broadcast every day. The voice of Umm Kulthum from this radio station formed part of social practice and helped to "characterize the location and the time of day" (Danielson 1997:9). Umm Kulthum herself also acknowledged the importance of radio in Egypt. She once said that,

"We are in the transistor age. Thus, broadcasting has become the weightiest of the arts. No one can stop it, no one can stand in its way. Everyone is able to listen to radio anywhere. Because of that I am a believer in the need for unlimited concern about broadcasting" (Danielson, 1997:183).

The radio audience expanded with the development of Egyptian Radio to reach across the Arab world. As Frishkopf states, a small number of state-owned radio channels dominated by Egypt dominated Pan-Arab music broadcasting during the Nasser era, which contributed to the unification of Arab listeners' media experience and taste (Frishkopf, 2010:13). The great pan-Arab media stars, as representations of Egyptian culture, became the point persons to set a primary affective basis for pan-Arabism. Umm Kulthum was the one who seized the opportunity offered by the burgeoning media and maintained her popularity in later years throughout the Arab world. It is no doubt that she was born with the great talent of singing, but it is also because of her fortuitous birth on the cusp of the media era that enabled her to inherit pre-mediated legitimacy while benefiting from the power of the media era (Ibid.). Without the assistance of the media, she might not achieve her magnificent career and pan-Arab celebrity status.

The power of Egyptian radio broadcasting and the promotion of President Nasser rendered Umm Kulthum her political influence and socio-cultural impacts around the Arab world. But at the same time, we should not ignore that Nasser benefited a lot through "binding" with Umm Kulthum and promoting her stardom. Unintentionally at first, Umm Kulthum was involved in the blueprint of Arab Cultural Unity through radio. She later used her music to support the policies of the revolutionary

government and emphasized the performances' demonstration of cultural unity. Her concerts not only presented a shared cultural product but also embodied shared feelings, values, and experiences (Lohman 2013:49). She said that, "These concerts in the Arab homeland—in its entirety—have the power to display the shared feelings that tie together the Arab people everywhere . . . and confirm that all across the Arab world" (Lohman, 2013:51). Broadcasting furthered her voice, as well as her emphasis on Arab cultural unity, in host countries and neighbouring ones.

The radio soundscape of Umm Kulthum not only told the story of a cultural icon's musical works and popularity but also presented the history of media technology, people's daily events in Egypt, power relations within the Arab world, and the state control of the government. Moreover, in Egypt, listening is participatory rather than fully passive; audiences are allowed to call out subtle compliments or loud encouragement to musicians (Danielson, 1997:9). It is the same when listening to concerts on the radio—people react to and evaluate the music among those listening together (Ibid.). People may call out the compliment or discuss with people nearby her virtuosity and beautiful improvisation. The discourse of Umm Kulthum made every concert unique in various ways for different people. With the audience's participation, the meaning of Umm Kulthum's work becomes more complex. It is a work produced together by performers and listeners. How about the radio soundscape of her music? Similarly, it is a production of Umm Kulthum, the audience, the radio, and the power relations among them.

RADIO SOUNDSCAPE OF ISLAM: QUR'AN RECITATION AND THE 'CALL TO PRAYER'

While the previous section focuses on Umm Kulthum and Egyptian popular music culture on radio, this section will investigate the radio broadcasting of religious activities of Muslims in Egypt, including Qur'an recitation and the "call to prayer," in order to learn about how radio has transmitted religious information and how media has changed the soundscape of essential religious events.

The public recitation of the Qur'an is an event that is commonly heard and seen in Egyptians' daily lives (Nelson 1985: xiv). As the central religious text of Islam in Arabic, the Qur'an is believed by Muslims to be the revelation from God. It represents the primary source of law, the highest authority for determining legality, and the referent of custom in Islamic society. Sound is at the centre of the transmission of the Qur'an – "the significance of the revelation is carried as much by the sound as by its semantic information" (Nelson, 1985: xiv). In other words, formally learning and transmitting the Qur'an is always oral. Only when people read aloud and hear the text does the Qur'an finally become the Qur'an. Actually, for the majority of Muslims, their only access to the Qur'an is the daily recitation (Nelson, 1985: xiv). Although the Qur'anic recitation incorporates elaborate melodic styles similar to other "religious" music forms, it still distinguishes itself from music. According to Muslims, the melodic recitation of the Qur'an is a unique sonic phenomenon. Moreover, Egypt holds a unique position in the history of Qur'anic recitation, and the Egyptian style is largely considered to be the model in the Islamic world.

One of the interlocutors of Mariam Shalaby said, "When I was little, all the shops on my street would play Qur'an on the radio. And I would hear it when I was going anywhere. I heard it on the TV, on the radio... and also in school during morning assembly" (2018:59), from which we can learn that radio broadcasting has become an essential and common way to present the recitation of the Qur'an. But how has the Qur'anic recitation been broadcasted on radio? What kind of institution is responsible for it? Who are the reciters? What is the difference between non-mediated Qur'anic recitation and the recitation on radio?

Qur'anic recitation was first broadcasted in 1934, and the *mujawwad* style defined by this became dominant in radio programming (Nelson 1985:142). Later on, due to Egypt's well-developed communication industry, Egyptian reciters were broadcast all over the Middle East. As a religious radio

station, Idha‘at al-Qur’an al-Karim (The Holy Qur’an, n.d.), alongside two other stations, broadcasted the noon prayer from different mosques in Egypt every Friday ((Nelson, 1985: xxvi). The reciting of the Qur’an in *mujawwad* style was often heard at the beginning and closing programmes of daily broadcasts on Arabic-language radio stations and before and after the time of prayer. Some stations also featured daily recitation programmes, varying in length from five minutes (*murattal* style) to several hours (*mujawwad* style). Specially prepared programs of recitation were provided during Ramadan and other religious holidays. The time devoted to Qur’anic recitation may significantly increase during Ramadan (Faruqi, 1987). In the beginning, the reciters on radio were generally prominent figures, such as Shaykh Muhammad Rif‘at, who provided the model of the best recitation. His recitation can still be heard on Idha‘at al-Qur’an al-Karim and al-Sharq al-Awsat (Faruqi, 1987:142). Later, a committee called Lajnat al-Qurra’ (the Reciters’ Committee) was formed to screen, recruit, train, and evaluate less well-known reciters for broadcasting the Qur’anic recitation, which set the standard of the ideal recitation.

By 1964, a station mainly devoted to the recitation of the Qur’an was founded. The station’s programming featured either recordings or live broadcasts. While live broadcast is often associated with a specific occasion, such as Friday prayer, religious or governmental celebrations, commemorations, and inaugurations, acceptable recordings have become a major source of programming in daily life (Nelson, 1985). The station broadcasted the Friday prayer ritual and the preceding recitation in different mosques every week. The stations al-Barnamaj al-‘Amm and al-Sharq al-Awsat shared the responsibility of broadcasting Friday’s recitation. Depending on the technical feasibility of the broadcast, programme planners assigned the broadcasts to mosque personnel and reciters on a rotating basis.

Nelson claims that “One of the more significant aspects of the media, in terms of our discussion, is the role they play in imposing the standards of the ideal recitation” (Faruqi, 1987:144). Under the support and control of the government, all radio stations were subject to the same policy and standards. Therefore, only the personnel of the Idha‘at al-Qur’an al-Karim were in charge of all recitations broadcast on radio and television. It is common to observe that the radio personnel block out the audience’s excessive noise and calm down over-enthusiastic listeners in order to create an ideal context for the broadcast. The Reciter’s Committee, the institution that was and still is responsible for all recitations, was composed of religious scholars, administrators, and musicians. It served the goal of auditioning prospective reciters, critically evaluating the live recordings of radio reciters, training new reciters, ranking the radio reciters, and discussing general policy (Nelson, 1985). The criterion to evaluate a candidate’s recitation included three aspects (Nelson, 1985:72): *hifd* (memorization), *ada’* (execution of the rules of *tajwid*), and *sawt* (voice quality, general musicality, and melodic technique). Due to the Qur’an’s emphasis on voice, reciters’ auditions for radio were largely judged on the quality of their voice transmitted through a microphone and loudspeaker. From the above requirements, we can learn that the media, especially radio, contributed to the professional status of the reciters in Egypt’s unique tradition of Qur’anic recitation (Nelson, 1985.: xxii). Within the evaluating and ranking system, reciters were encouraged to promote their abilities and skills and therefore moved forward to a more professional and virtuoso stage.

Moreover, “the musical expectations of the listeners are further reinforced by the policies of the National Radio and Television Union” (Nelson, 1982:45). Because of the audience’s musical expectations, there is a trend among most professional radio reciters to master the essence of Arabic music, especially the principles of the *maqamat*². Among the eleven professional reciters that Nelson interviewed, only two did not mention their musical training. All of them acknowledged the melody’s importance of Qur’anic recitation. In addition, due to the requirement of a certain level of musical competence, the radio policy not only contributed to the professionalism of reciters but also functioned to shape the taste of the audience that was based on the admiration of musical skill (Nelson, 1982). But it is interesting that most reciters were able to intuitively produce a melodic recitation

² *Maqamat* is the plural form of *maqam*.

conforming to the principles of Arabic music. Although the reciters might not be able to recognize the particular maqam, they could reach the right pitch easily as if they internalized the pattern of the combination of recitation and melody.

Similar to Qur'anic recitation, the 'call to prayer,' a summons for participants of a particular religion to begin required worship, is a pivotal religious activity in Muslims' daily lives. Marcus suggests that "The call to prayer (azan in colloquial Egyptian Arabic; adhan in modern standard Arabic) is one of the most prominent and pervasive aspects of the Egyptian soundscape" (Marcus, 2007:2). The muezzin, the one who gives the azan, must be a male more than ten years old and be able to memorize the text of the call. But commonly, every Muslim can recite the call. The azan is presented by muezzin at five defined times a day: roughly an hour before sunrise, high noon, half sunset, at sunset, and roughly one hour after sunset (Marcus, 2007:6). Traditionally, the muezzin loudly recites azan from the minaret or the door of the mosque. In places where there are mosques every few blocks, people may hear several calls at the same time. But with the development of media technology, the azan is more commonly heard through loudspeakers or radios. How have loudspeakers and radio mediated the 'call to prayer' and changed its soundscape? What are the influences of the changing soundscape?

More and more mosques have been equipped with loudspeakers to amplify the azan's sound towards neighbouring communities. Big mosques commonly have many loudspeakers. For example, the central mosque in the city of Tanta has twenty-eight loudspeakers on the outer walls that enable the calls of the mosque to be audible throughout the entire city (Marcus, 2007:2). Some mosques' loudspeakers are hung on the outer walls of the building in the neighbouring street. Borrowing Schafer's idea of "acoustic community" (Schafer, 1994:214–217), the acoustic space that the call to prayer is able to cover defines the range of the community. As Lee suggests, "a [Muslim] community [can be] characterized by the acoustic space within which the call to prayer could be heard" (Lee, 1999:91). The use of loudspeakers has expanded the acoustic space of the azan as well as the size of the community. However, too many loudspeakers for the call to prayer might cause 'chaos' since the amplified sound from different mosques will probably mingle together. An article in the Cairo Journal of the *New York Times* on 12 October 2004, called 'God Has 4,000 Loudspeakers' described the cacophony caused by loudspeakers for azans: 'The call to prayer, the [Egyptian] minister declared, is out of control: too loud, too grating, utterly lacking in beauty or uniform timing, and hence in dire need of reform.'

Because of the chaos created by loudspeakers, radio has started to intervene in the process. The azans broadcasted on radio are mostly pre-recorded by famous Qur'anic reciters (Marcus, 2007:11). Shaykh Mohamed Gebril is one of the renowned reciters among them. For example, he was asked to give predawn azan for seven consecutive days in the nearby Egyptian province of Qalyubiyya, since the Cairo style of azan has become the norm in the Islamic world. The Egyptian government has even declared that it would connect all of the mosques in Cairo within a single sound system with only one muezzin broadcasting the azan throughout the city (Marcus, 2007). In 2010, the Egyptian government intended to unify the calls in the region of Cairo by transmitting them to prayers through radio frequencies to all of the capital's mosques. However, this plan was opposed by 730 muezzins in Cairo, who were afraid of losing their jobs and honourable social status (Shavit & Spengler, 2016:449). Some scholars opposed the idea of unifying the calls by stating that it may lead to a future monopolization of Friday sermons; others supported the government's plan, noting that the cacophony on the streets in Cairo caused by the calls from loudspeakers injured the original spirit and purpose of the azan (Shavit & Spengler, 2016).

FINAL THOUGHTS

As Lee contends, "broadcast over radio, the call to prayer has become decentralized; the mosque is no longer the exclusive source from which the call to prayer is recited" (Lee, 1999:94). The adoption of mass media by the azans has changed the way the mosques connect to the communities and the way communities identify their own groups.

The two sections above about radio's use in secular and religious activities have revealed two distinctive aspects of the radio soundscape. In Umm Kulthum's case, radio was an essential stepping stone for her to achieve unprecedented stardom in the Arab world. It also served as a useful tool for the Egyptian government, especially President Nasser, to achieve their blueprint of Arab cultural unity. In the case of Qur'anic recitation and the 'call to prayer' on radio, we have learned that the adoption of radio not only influenced the way that daily religious events are presented but also exerted impacts on people's daily activities. In summary, this paper investigates how Egyptian radio has permeated into people's daily lives and what kind of soundscape has been built by radio. Both sections have shown that radio, as a mass media, has not only changed the way that messages, information, or music has been conveyed but has also provided and built new standards, a new collective memory, new identities, and new ways for people to live their lives.

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