

The Proliferation of Non-Mainstream Islam on the Web: The Case of Turkish Preaching Videos on YouTube with Reference to the Videos of Ebu Hanzala

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Abstract

The Internet has transformed many areas of social life including religion. Especially, in the sense of fast access to information and global communication, it has been a new media through which to preach Islam and is considered a valuable source of Islamic knowledge by believers. It facilitated different channels to preach religion such as personal web sites, blogs, and personal pages on various social media platforms. Recently, thanks to faster internet facilities, video sharing sites have become popular and visual materials have become the prevalent method of preaching in the virtual space. The internet, due to its decentralised structure, is a fertile place for non-mainstream Islam. Although traditional media networks may have no place for preachers of non-mainstream Islam, the internet provides a seat for all kinds of *imam*. This article, in that context, will focus on videos of *Ebu Hanzala*, a famous young Islamic *imam* whose real name is Halis Bayancuk, on YouTube, the most prevalent video-sharing and hosting site. He is an Islamic preacher whose his videos have been watched approximately 7,000,000 times. In this article, I will argue the proliferation of the non-mainstream Islamic preaching on the internet through the videos of *Ebu Hanzala*. I will claim that internet preaching will challenge the power relations between mainstream and non-mainstream Islamic authorities. Analysis of this paper reveals how non-mainstream Islamic interpretations find a place and target audience on the internet, how they present themselves, how they preach Islam, and their future potential. In that sense, this article aims to widen debate of Islamic sects into a different area and draws attention to non-mainstream Islam grown on the internet.

Keywords: YouTube, non-mainstream Islam, Salafism, internet, Ebu Hanzala

Ana Akım Olmayan İslam'ın İnternette Yayılması: Ebu Hanzala'nın Videoları Özelinde YouTube'da Türkçe Tebliğ

Özet

İnternet din de dahil olmak üzere toplumsal hayatın birçok alanını dönüştürmektedir. Özellikle, bilgiye hızlı ulaşmaya ve küresel iletişime imkân sağladığından dolayı, İslam'ın

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tebliğ etmek ve öğrenmek isteyenler için de kıymetli bir medya olarak talep görmektedir. İnternette kişisel siteler, bloklar ve sosyal medya platformları gibi çeşitli kanallar bu amaçla kullanılmaktadır. Yakın zamanda internetin hızlanmasıyla beraber, video paylaşım siteleri ortaya çıkmıştır ve dini görüş ve yaklaşımlarını yaymak isteyenlerin popüler tercihlerinden birisi olduğunu görmekteyiz. İnternet merkezi olmayan yapısından dolayı, ana akım olmayan İslami yorumların özellikle tercih ettiği bir alandır. Her ne kadar geleneksel medya araçlarında bu tür İslam yorumları kendilerine alan bulamasa da internet bu açıdan her tür İslami yorumu yapmak ve yaymak için bir alan sağlamaktadır. Bu bağlamda, makalemde Ebu Hanzala lakabını kullanan genç imam Halis Bayancuk'un, YouTube adlı popüler video paylaşım sitesi üzerindeki videolarına odaklanılmaktadır. Ebu Hanzala, YouTube üzerindeki videoları toplamda 7.0000.000 civarında izlenmiş bir vaizdir. Bu makalede, ana akım olmayan İslam'ın, internet üzerinde tebliğinin nasıl yaygınlaştığı, Ebu Hanzala'nın videoları üzerinden tartışılmaktadır. Makalede internet vaizliğinin mevcut dini iktidar ilişkilerinin dönüşümüne yol açabileceği iddia edilmektedir. Bu makalenin analizi, ana akım olmayan İslam yorumlarının internette hedef kitesini nasıl belirlediği, kendilerini nasıl sunduklarını, İslam'ı nasıl tebliğ ettiklerini ve gelecek potansiyellerini ortaya çıkarmayı amaçlamaktadır. Bu anlamda, internetteki ana akım olmayan İslam yorumlarının yaygınlaşmasına dikkat çekerek, makale mezhep tartışmalarını zenginleştirmeyi amaçlamaktadır.

Anahtar Kelimeler: YouTube, ana akım olmayan İslam, Selefilik, internet, Ebu Hanzala

Introduction

The internet is a relatively new phenomenon in our life; It has existed in our world for only 25 years. Its usage has dramatically increased in the world and Turkey over the last ten years. Statistically, almost four billion people use internet, almost three billion people are active social media users, and two and a half billion people use the internet through mobile devices today (Hootsuite, 2017). In Turkey, 66.8% of the population used the internet in 2017 (TUİK, 2017). Mobile devices in particular have dramatically increased in their total usage of the internet. Mobile internet's share of total web traffic is 61 % in Turkey and Turkey is placed 6th among other countries of the world for mobile internet usage (Hootsuite, 2017, p. 34). Mobile internet usage is important because it made it possible for the vast majority of people to be users of the internet. People of Turkey, on average, spend almost three hours per day using mobile internet (Hootsuite, 2017, p. 88). Turkey is among the top ten countries in the world in terms of time spent on social media (Hootsuite, 2017, p. 45). These statistics show that the internet has an important place today and its importance will increase in the world and Turkey in the future.

This study is about the relationship between the internet and religion. The purpose of this case study is to understand and describe the proliferation of non-mainstream¹ Islamic preaching on YouTube. It is important to note that "YouTube is not merely an archive of moving images",

¹ The case of this article can be named as Salafi or Wahhabi Islam. Instead of these terms, I preferred to use the concept of non-mainstream for two reasons. First, this article argues its case to understand the change of mainstream

It is much more than a fast-growing collection of millions of home-made videos. It is an intense emotional experience. YouTube is a social space. This virtual community reflects the cultural politics of the present times and thus is rife with both cooperation *and* conflict (Strangelove, 2010, p. 4).

The subject of my study is famous imam Halis Bayancuk, known as *Ebu Hanzala*. He is a young religious figure who mainly preaches to his followers via YouTube videos. Actually, he can be classified as an internet celebrity in his field with over 7,000,000 viewings on YouTube. At this stage in the research, I consider the internet as a break in “the methods of learning and of transmitting the Quran” (Robinson, 1993, p. 235). It brings incomparable speed in teaching Islam.

Take, for instance, the publication of a book in the early Islamic centuries. Its writing down like that of the Quran was merely an aid to oral publication. The author would dictate his first draft, either from memory or from his own writing; the copyist would then read it back to him. Publication would take place through the copyist reading the text to the author in public, usually in a mosque. During this process the author might make additions and emendations and several readings might be required before it was given his authorization. This was known as his *ijaza*, which means 'to make lawful'. Thus the author gave permission for the work 'to be transmitted from him'. Further copies had real authority only when they had been read back to the author and approved (Robinson, 1993, pp. 235–236).

My research question in this study is: How does Ebu Hanzala, the young non-mainstream Islamic *imam*, preach Islam on YouTube? Sub-questions of this research question are: How do non-mainstream Islamic interpretations find a place and target audience on the internet? How do they present themselves? How do they preach Islam? What is their future potential among the other Islamic authorities? In that sense, this article aims to widen the debate about Islamic sects into a different area and draw attention to non-mainstream Islam grown on the internet.

In this article, first the significance of the case will be debated and the methodology of the paper will be presented. Then the related literature will be

Islam, represented by the Directorate of Religious Affairs in Turkey. Secondly, I consider that conceptualization of Salafi or Wahhabi terms to be problematic. “The socio-cultural and the security-political” perspectives describe Salafi or Wahhabi terms differently (Sedgwick, 2010, p. 76). Besides that difference, there is a theological debate about the definition of that sect (Sedgwick, 2010, p. 77). Another recently published article can be suggested, “What Do We Mean by Salafi” by Frank Griffle.

reviewed in two successive headings. Lastly, three important themes on the videos of Ebu Hanzala will be analysed.

The Significance of The Case and The Arguments

Although there are several studies that focus on the relationship between religion and the internet in the context of non-mainstream Islam (Drevon, 2016; Iqbal, 2008; Just, 2015; Malik, 2017), there is not a study that specifically focuses on the Turkish case. In that sense, this study is important. Moreover, video preaching on YouTube is a new phenomenon which has not yet drawn much attention (Mosemghvdlshvili & Jansz, 2012; Strangelove, 2010; Warner, 2013).

Video preaching on the internet is significant to understanding current debates of Islamic sects because it has the facility to reach countless people who have no chance to be represented in the mainstream media. In that sense, this article analyses the YouTube channel which broadcasts non-mainstream Islamic preaching in Turkish within the context of the relationship between religion and the internet.

In this article, by focusing on the relationship between non-mainstream Islamic preaching and the internet through the videos of *Ebu Hanzala*, I argue that this new medium, the internet, will challenge the power relations between the mainstream and non-mainstream Islamic authorities.

Methodology

My conceptualization of video preaching on the internet is important for this article. "For the purposes of any ethnographic study, technology always becomes material culture"; in other words, "it has been about an integral aspect of people's daily lives: their relationship to their friends and family, part of their identity, their work and in this chapter their religion – not about a virtual world that stands against and defines or supersedes something else called the real" (Miller & Slater, 2000, p. 193).

Furthermore, in the case of the Internet we have encountered an extraordinarily dynamic form of material culture. Indeed, the speed of its emergence may leave us breathless; but by appreciating and rendering explicit the nuances of the social practices that account for its manifestation as material culture it may be possible for academics to remain in step. (Miller & Slater, 2000, p. 193)

In that sense, I consider videos on YouTube as part of material culture which corresponds with daily life rather than signifiers of a virtual life.

Determining the videos of Ebu Hanzala on YouTube was a challenging process while writing this article. Although “videos on YouTube seem to produce easy data”, they are in “constant flux” (Vis, Van Zoonen, & Mihelj, 2011, p. 114). Creators of the video content or YouTube have the authority to change the content of the site in real time. Moreover, YouTube administration has authority to change the content of the channel completely or partly when it desires. For these reasons, it is impossible to exactly determine the number of videos on a specific topic over a long period of time.

I selected Ebu Hanzala as the subject of this article because he is the most famous YouTube celebrity among other non-mainstream Islamic figures². I reached videos of Ebu Hanzala in two ways. Firstly, I considered videos on the YouTube channel called as “Ebu Hanzala Hoca”. Secondly, I searched “Ebu Hanzala” as a keyword on YouTube and considered videos which are not included in the aforementioned YouTube channel. I purposefully sampled these videos “to illustrate characteristics of particular subgroups” (Bricki & Green, 2007, p. 10), then categorised them and created themes according to their labels.

Non-mainstream Religion on the Web: A New and Contentious Area

In this part, I will review the literature on the relationship between the internet and religion. The internet is a new medium characterized often with fast access to information and global communication. In that sense, similar to other media, the emergence of the internet, first of all, created a debate on that area. Modern states in our age are considered “to control the broadcast and printed word to foster common, shared, and modern identities at least as much as to deny these means to potential opponents” (Eickelman & Anderson, 2003, p. 3). In that sense, they paid more and more attention to centralize the media and to surveil the information transmitted through it. However, the advancement of technology has made this control and surveillance mechanism ineffective, if not impossible, and has resulted in the fragmentation of the authority who had the power to control the media in a society. Controlling the advancements of technology is unsuccessful for modern states for several reasons. For that reason, even “some new media seen as innovative [even] in the 1980s are now almost taken for granted” (Eickelman & Anderson, 2003, p. 3). These new technologies, even though they created unrest, are unstoppable, for instance,

In countries such as Saudi Arabia, the same fax machines that disseminate rapid criticisms of the regime are also essential to the conduct of business. The state is powerless to limit their use without disrupting the

² There are Turkish Islamic preaching YouTube channels owned by religious figures who are also able to show up in the mainstream media. Most of them are more popular than Ebu Hanzala. In my article, I consider Ebu Hanzala as the most popular among other figures similar to him, who has no chance to appear in the mainstream media. Moreover, because he has no chance to be seen in other media, I consider that “being online in the name of Allah represents an obligation” for himself (Bunt, 2009, p. 11).

economy. Audiocassette tapes spread the sermons of Ayatollah Khomeini and others in the pre-revolutionary Iran of the 1970s, just as videotapes of anti-regime preachers and demonstrations today circulate in some countries of the Arabian peninsula (Eickelman & Anderson, 2003, p. 3).

Advancements in technology, as exemplified in the quotation, may have an irresistible transformative effect in the culture of everyday life. Religion is no exception in being affected by it. For example, “the founding figures of Islamic reform in this century such as Muhammed Abduh (1849-1905) and Mowlana Mawdudi (1903- 1979) benefited wisely from their occupation as journalists to enable “the arrival of printing and of print news with new audiences for the written word” (Anderson, 2003, p. 47). In that sense, “they filled and expanded the space between previously restricted circulations of text and talk” (Anderson, 2003, p. 47).

The internet, similarly, came into our lives abruptly and transformed them. Castells (2005) considers the internet to be a tool that is not only shaped by its owners but also mainly by its users. The internet, as summarized by Castells (2005), has now opened very different spaces for people, and when we think about how it is invented, this last situation is really amazing. Now users have power. Now it is a medium that is mainly reproduced by its users. The internet, as a new medium, enabled “a new class of interpreters, who are facilitated by this medium to address and thereby to reframe Islam's authority and expression for those like themselves and others who come there” (Anderson, 2003, p. 45). Especially individuals or religious groups, who have various difficulties to express themselves publicly or “if their activities in public spaces and private locations are monitored in various ways”, consider the internet to be a functional way to preach (Bunt, 2009, p. 178), because restricting transmission of knowledge on the web is almost impossible. When a religious message comes online,

A single message in a chat room can multiply exponentially through e-mail contact, Web links, discussion in chat rooms, references in Net broadcasts, publication in magazines, and other media online and offline, as well as by word of mouth (Bunt, 2009, p. 182).

This style of transmission of knowledge and its spread among people is considered similar to a marketing strategy by Bunt (2009). He states:

This bears some resemblance to the paradigm of a viral marketing strategy, which can be defined as one that (1) gives away products or services; (2) provides for effortless transfer to others; (3) scales easily from small to very large; (4) exploits common motivations and behaviors; (5)

utilizes existing communication networks; and (6) takes advantage of others' resources. (Bunt, 2009, p. 182).

YouTube and Religion

In our age, seeing and learning visually is dominating our cultural world. Actually, in a broader perspective, "the modern world is very much a 'seen' phenomenon" (Jenks, 1995, p. 2). By the invention of optical technologies at the late 19th century, such as the microscope telescope and photography, the cultural world was transformed severely by the domination of sight. YouTube, first of all, as a video hosting site, can be considered from that perspective. It supplies countless visuals to its users.

"Since its establishment in early 2005, YouTube has become one of the fastest-growing websites, and ranks second in traffic among all the websites in the Internet by the survey of Alexa" (Cheng, Dale, & Liu, 2008, p. 229). Similarly, "The amount of content uploaded to YouTube in 60 days is equivalent to the content that would have been broadcasted for 60 years, without interruption, by NBC, CBS and ABC altogether" (Figueiredo, Benevenuto, & Almeida, 2011, p. 745). This statistic is clear evidence how YouTube is transforming human kind's visual memory. "Online videos existed long before YouTube entered the scene"; however:

Uploading, managing, sharing and watching videos were cumbersome due to the lack of an easy-to-use integrated platform. More importantly, the videos distributed by traditional media servers and peer-to-peer file downloads like Bit Torrent were standalone units of content. The video was not connected to other related videos, for example other episodes of a show that the user had just watched. Also, there was very little in the way of content reviews or ratings. The new generation of video sharing sites, YouTube and its competitors, have overcome these problems. These new generation sites are also known as user generated content (UGC) sites, in which the users are participatory and creative. The systems allow content suppliers to upload video effortlessly, and to tag uploaded videos with keywords. Users can easily share videos by mailing links to them, or embedding them in blogs. Users can also rate and comment on videos, bringing new social aspects to the viewing of videos. Consequently, popular videos can rise to the top in a very organic fashion. The social network existing in YouTube further enables communities and groups, as videos are no longer independent from each other, and neither are users. This has substantially contributed to the success of YouTube and similar sites. (Cheng et al., 2008, pp. 229–230)

YouTube requires no subscription to watch videos. Additionally, in order to publish a video on that site, a simple subscription and e-mail address are adequate. Today, accessing video capturing devices are rather easier than ten years ago. Even an ordinary mobile phone can capture high-quality videos and the user can upload it to YouTube with his or her mobile phone. YouTube draw attention to video producers on religion:

A considerable number of video bloggers on YouTube engage in debates over religion. Some of the larger areas of debate are focused on evolution, abortion, atheism, Scientology, Mormonism, Christianity, and Islam. The subject matter of these religious debates also appears to be significantly shaped by American cultural concerns (Strangelove, 2010, p. 148).

Strangelove considers that YouTube provides a space for the people wrangling over "my God can beat up your God" (2010, p.148). On the other hand, visual and religion relationship is criticised that visual medium has a transformative effect on religion:

And today, television makes stars of conservative vernacular preachers. In their time, all new media have a certain "down-market" quality from high-textualist perspectives. They employ vernaculars and are often cheaply produced and ephemeral; but they expand the domain of Muslim discourse by engaging a wider public than previously had access to elite-controlled discourse and a more problematic public than other non-elite, "folk" forms reach. (Anderson, 2003, p. 47)

This criticism, similar to early "medium is the message" debate of media studies (McLuhan, 1964, p. 7), places emphasis on how visual preaching transforms religion into a lower quality discourse while expanding its territory.

Islamic Preaching on Turkish YouTube Channels

The number of Turkish broadcasting YouTube channels which focus on Islamic preaching are increasing recently³. Turkish non-mainstream Islamic preaching, parallel to the former situation, are increasing also. When the subject of this article, YouTube videos of Ebu Hanzala, are considered, it can be seen that this figure is the most viewed among other non-mainstream Islamic preachers.

³ See YouTube channels of *DiyaneTV*, *Sözler Köşkü*, *Hayalhanem* as examples.

Ebu Hanzala, according to a video of him published on YouTube (Ebu Hanzala, 2017c), was born in 1984 in Diyarbakır, Turkey. He is a graduate of Diyarbakır *İmam Hatip Lisesi* (Religious Vocational High School). While he was in high school, he also went to a classical madrasa in Diyarbakır. After graduation, he was accepted to Al-Azhar University in Egypt. However, he did not attend university, rather he followed informal religious education in Egypt for four years.

Videos of Ebu Hanzala are broadcasting to YouTube mainly by three channels. These are Ebu Hanzala Hoca, Tevhid Dersleri, and İslam'ı Anlamak. These channels started publishing videos in 2016, 2014 and 2013 respectively. There is no clear evidence that these channels are related; however, their videos are similar in their shooting technique. When the three channels are summed up, there are almost 3,000 videos, 60,000 subscribers. These videos have been viewed around 7,000,000 times and the daily view count is around 20,000 at the time of writing (Socialblade, 2017).

In the 'about' section of the YouTube channel, they describe themselves as follows:

We are preaching to our society, to those who do not know what they mean while repeating "la ilahe illallah", in the light of Quran and Sunnah. We invite people to rescue themselves from their slavery to other people, and to worship only *Allah*. If the creator is *Allah*, we believe in that, we invite people to give the all authority to him to regulate social life. If prayer is a religious practice, we believe in that, we invite people to pray only to *Allah* and to believe that the only authority to pray to is Allah. As mentioned in Surah Az-Zumer 36, "Is not Allah sufficient for his servant"? (Ebu Hanzala, 2017a)

In the recommended section of the YouTube channel, they suggest English, French, or Arabic channels which publish translated or subbed Ebu Hanzala videos. Compared to the Turkish content, other language contents are weak in number. Although YouTube does not provide any data on which country these videos are viewed in, it can be concluded, from the comments on videos, that basically they are viewed by Turkish speaking people.

There are two types of Ebu Hanzala videos: first, the long preaching videos, and second, short (less than twenty minutes) videos. The short videos are actually trimmed versions of the first long preaching videos. While the first type of videos contains many topics, the second type of videos have a single message. The first group of videos is similar to typical Islamic preaching videos. I consider the second type of videos to be a new version of preaching videos, created to be popular on YouTube. They are short, attractive visual objects, like the trending videos on YouTube.

The Ebu Hanzala videos seem to be produced by professional editors, camera operators and recording people. The videos do not contain any information about the production team. Although it is not common, some videos are translated or dubbed in German, French and Arabic. Additionally, recently the second type of short videos have started to be identified as clickbait. Clickbait is a new term which refers to “something (such as a headline) designed to make readers want to click on a hyperlink especially when the link leads to content of dubious value or interest” (“Clickbait,” 2017). Thus, clickbait videos can get more clicks. Examples of this type are the Ebu Hanzala videos (2017d, 2017e).

Furthermore, in the uploading process of videos they have a strategy to overcome possible problems. In a case where a YouTube channel or a video is reported by viewers, YouTube may close the channel or delete the reported video. In such a situation, the subscribers of the channel also are deleted. In order to overcome this possible problem, they have an alternative channel and they require their viewers to subscribe to both of their channels.

When the videos are analysed, it can be seen that there are three themes in Ebu Hanzal’s videos. These are: the rejection of parliamentary democracy, pointing at the social dimensions of life over various topics, and direct criticism of other people. In the following paragraphs, I will examine each of these themes.

One of the most distinctive themes of Ebu Hanzala videos is the rejection of modern parliamentary democracy. There are more than twenty videos on that topic. He criticizes democracy from several points. First of all, he considers parliamentary democracy to be a religion like Christianity, Judaism etc. He states:

Democracy is exact same as what Christianity or Judaism is for Islam. Democracy is a religion and its followers, similar to followers of religions other than Islam, are non-Muslims. No matter how ignorant, uneducated or indifferent they are about that topic, they are the non-Muslims as Christians in Europe (Ebu Hanzala, 2016a).

Besides that, he especially draws attention to voting (Ebu Hanzala, 2015). He considers Muslim people voting, although they want an Islamic regime. He opposes this behaviour and refuses to participate in any step in the democratic system. His attitude is more like an anarchic essence.

Another prevalent theme in the Ebu Hanzala videos is the topics that point to various dimensions of social life. These videos are different from videos that debate theological topics directly. In these videos, topics like the minimum wage, vaccination, compulsory military service, compulsory primary and secondary education are debated with a theological perspective. For instance:

Nowadays, the system that we live in provokes you for your need for a house and a wife. They seduce people with advertisements in movies on television. But this system does not give your needs. Furthermore, it does not give you a job. Let's say you got a job, if you do not have qualification, the system pays you the minimum wage. The system forces you to send your child to school. But you have to pay for it. You will pay for all your needs like natural gas, electricity, water, accommodation, food. How does a human get by with a minimum wage? (Ebu Hanzala, 2016b)

This quotation is an example of how Ebu Hanzala debates everyday social life events as a matter of Islam. In the following sentences of this quotation, he details how people will live in a prosperous life, if the Islamic state emerges. I consider that by using everyday social life events, he strengthens his speech. Another important point, in this quotation, is his case is on the calculation of the minimum wage. This indicates that the majority of his followers are minimum wage earners.

The third important point in the videos is their direct criticism of real people. In such videos, religious, public or political figures are directly criticised on certain topics by name. These videos are commonly being shot on the contemporary events in Turkey and the world. For instance, he criticises Cübbeli Ahmet and his followers, in a video entitled "Harsh Words to Cübbeli Ahmet and his followers":

This Jemaah is making their followers stupid. They despise and insult their followers. They are saying that we are dogs on the door of our sheikh. Why are you the dog at the door of your sheikh? ... This is not a behaviour compatible with Islam. This is against human dignity (Ebu Hanzala, 2017b).

There are more than twenty Ebu Hanzala videos that directly criticise people by name. This kind of video shows that Ebu Hanzala does not hesitate to conflict with other religious and political figures.

Conclusion

To conclude, in this article, I argued the relationship between the internet and religion in the context of the proliferation of non-mainstream Islam in Turkey. The subject of the article was videos of Ebu Hanzala on YouTube. I presented three distinctive themes in his Islamic preaching videos.

YouTube as a medium to preach Islam was at the focus of this article. It is important to see how YouTube provides a place for any kind of preaching at a very

low cost. For that reason, the number of non-mainstream preachers are increasing. Besides that, as in the case of Ebu Hanzala, the for these videos is also increasing. There are 7,000,000 viewers of Ebu Hanzala on YouTube today. While internet facilities are expanding globally, it is reasonable to expect that the number of non-mainstream Islamic preachers will increase.

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