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*Wi: Journal of Mobile Media* 2012 6:03

The online version of this article can be found at:

<https://doi.org/10.65968/TPQJ3300>

Riley, Krista Melanie. "Tweeting from Mecca: Mobile media, time, and sacred experiences". *Wi: Journal of Mobile Media*. 6.03 (2012). Web. <https://doi.org/10.65968/TPQJ3300>

# Tweeting from Mecca: Mobile media, time, and sacred experiences

Krista Melanie Riley

For hundreds of years, Muslims have travelled annually to Mecca for the Hajj pilgrimage. Although the specific rituals of the pilgrimage have remained the same over this time, the technologies involved in both the travel and the communication about the journey have transformed considerably. In November 2010, Toronto Star journalist Muhammad Lila went on Hajj with his Blackberry in tow, describing himself on Twitter as the “First-ever western [journalist] to live tweet the whole thing” (9:47am EST, October 21, 2010).<sup>1</sup> As both journalist and pilgrim, Lila participated in the religious rituals of Hajj, while blogging about the experience and frequently posting updates on his Twitter and Facebook pages.

Using Lila’s writings from this period as an example, this paper seeks to examine pilgrimage as a particular form of mobility, and to ask what this can bring to an analysis of mobile media. Among other things, I look at the ways that Lila’s writing allows him to report more or less instantaneously on many elements of the trip, to communicate with a wide range of followers around the world, and to use mobile technology in a setting and for a purpose that had not previously been done. Along with an analysis of Lila’s posts on Facebook, Twitter, and his blog, I also conducted an interview with Lila about his experience with mobile media in this context.

The focus of this analysis is on how we might understand mobile media as it moves into, and through, sacred spaces, in the context of the Muslim pilgrimage to Mecca. In this particular case, for example, Lila's updates allowed his audience not only to follow his physical journey to Mecca, but also to share in some of the spiritual reflections that were produced by this movement, as he tweeted about the things he saw and the other pilgrims he met. In this framework, I investigate the opportunities for shared religious experiences that arise through the presence and mobility of Lila's writing during the pilgrimage.

Additionally, I look for the limits of mobile media in this type of setting, asking what can be learned from such limits in the specific contexts of places and rituals of particular religious importance. What defines the contexts in which Lila's mobile phone is seen as intrusive or inappropriate (by him or by others)? What are the moments that Lila does not write about as they are happening, but rather waits until later? In other words, where is it that Lila's writing is less mobile, and less instantaneous, and what conclusions might we draw from this regarding the role of mobile media within spaces regarded as sacred? I argue that we should read these moments not as gaps in the information that we receive, but in themselves conveying something important about the spiritual experience of Hajj.

This paper begins by looking at some of the existing literature about space and time within Islam, in order to reflect on an important part of the religious context in which this analysis is located, and also discusses literature related to writing about Hajj and to

notions of pilgrimage as a particular form of mobility. Following this, I will proceed to talk about Lila's writing on this particular Hajj, and at what it is that his use of mobile media might be able to convey about his experience.

Fedwa El Guindi's (2008) anthropological work on the rhythm of Islam and of Muslim life provides a nice backdrop for some of the themes raised in this paper. El Guindi argues that "One cannot understand Muslim life without understanding, not Islam's structure, but Islam's rhythm – how Muslims weave in and out, from ordinary space and time to sacred space and time, throughout the day, every month, throughout the year" (p. 20). El Guindi uses as an example the five daily prayers within Islam to illustrate her claim; these prayers happen during five distinct periods within the day, and can be done nearly anywhere, either in mosques or rooms already designated for prayer, or simply by facing the direction of Mecca and undertaking the motions and supplications associated with each prayer. She describes the ways that, through this process, specific times of day become sacred, and that the person praying often transforms an ordinary space into a sacred space by, for example, putting down a prayer mat in what would normally be a workplace or ordinary public space, and designating it temporarily as a place of prayer (pp. 134-135). El Guindi writes that this interweaving of time and space happens in a way unique to Islam, and is a key component of understanding the religious lives and cultures of Muslims. Clinton Bennett (1994) similarly describes Islam as a system that "aims, in all spheres of life, to maintain a balance between [religious life and worldly life], to achieve such a degree of integration, or inter-relatedness between them, that any real distinction between the 'sacred' and the 'secular' becomes irrelevant" (p. 88). Bennett claims that any designation of certain places as sacred comes only out of a

human craving for symbolism and specificity, echoing El Guindi's claim that all space can potentially be considered sacred (pp. 88-89).

El Guindi's formulations are useful here for two reasons. First, the significance of time and space within Islamic practices and rituals that she describes is an important background for understanding the value of what may be communicated via mobile communication within that context. Taking Hajj as a moment where both space and time have major significance, it is obvious that those following Lila's tweets, as well as Lila himself, will be particularly aware of the time and rhythm of his movements, and will find meaning in them. Moreover, El Guindi's emphasis on the communal dimensions of the sacred within this experience of time and space underscores the value of some of the interactions that took place, and of mobile media in this case creating not just a one-way flow of information, but instead a means for communication to take place.

Secondly, El Guindi's description of Islamic rhythms in time and space as an "interweaving" of ordinary and sacred is relevant here for what it tells us about the fluidity of borders between the sacred and non-sacred, in a religious context where specific times and uses of space will construct a space as sacred. Bennett (1994) makes a similar observation, that "[use], or function, itself sanctifies" (p. 92). It is perhaps this relative flexibility within an Islamic worldview of exactly what defines a space as sacred or ordinary – often based on the actions performed within the space, and not on inherent qualities of the space itself – that allows for a consideration of the complex dimensions of sacred journeys like the pilgrimage, without having to close off the

possibilities for what any one space might be, or for what interactions might be appropriate within that space. We might also consider the virtual space of Lila's Twitter feed, Facebook page, and blog site as also potentially sacred spaces, depending on the discussions and interactions happening within them.

Bahiyyih Maroon's (2007) ethnographic work in Morocco also provides an important background for this analysis; her portrayal of the advertisement efforts of a mobile phone company in a public square on a Friday, the day of the most important congregational prayer in a Muslim week, is particularly pertinent. Maroon describes a promotional campaign attracting people to the company's booth in the busy square through, among other things, a draw to win a new car. The promotional events lasted all day, except for a period in the middle of the day, when they shut down during the prayer time. Maroon cautions against making the assumption that the timed shut-down demonstrates an incompatibility between Islam and this form of technology, or, in her words, that the advertisement and the prayer are "in a figurative face-off with one another." After all, it is because of Friday prayers that the company was present in the square that day, and although it shut down for the prayer time, this was done alongside an invitation to the crowd to return later. Given this, Maroon suggests that it is more productive to look at the ways in which religious practice and mobile communications make space for each other and interact with one another, in "the lived domain of social transitions in a modern Muslim public" (Maroon, 2007, p. 194). It is within a similar lived domain of transitions that the case study of this paper should be considered as well, looking at the negotiations and relationships between mobile media and religious

spaces and times, without assuming the two to be necessarily antagonistic (or, for that matter, to be necessarily always in harmony.)

In their introduction to an issue of the journal *Mobilities* dedicated to the theme of pilgrimage, Bajc, Coleman and Eade (2007) write about the need to “de-centre” the centre of the pilgrimage, and to move the focus of pilgrimage research away from the centre, or destination. They propose to examine not only movement toward or away from the centre, but also how the centre itself is constituted and may itself be moved or transformed (p. 322). In the context of Hajj, I would add to this observation that the movement of pilgrims within the centre is also of fundamental importance. As Michael Wolfe explains,

The pilgrimage is not just a matter of traveling to Mecca. Arrival is only a beginning. The Hajj itself is a protean event composed of many stages, each one marked by a collective rite. Changing its shape and purpose day by day, the ceremony does not take place so much as it unfolds, first in a city, then on a desert, becoming by turns a circle dance, a spiritual racecourse, a procession, a camping trip in the dunes, an athletic event, a trade fair, and a walking meditation. (Wolfe, 1997, p. xxv)

Described more concretely, the Hajj consists of a number of rituals; the origins of most of these rituals can be traced back to the time of Prophet Abraham, although they were formalised during the time of the Prophet Muhammad in the seventh century. These include: tawaf, or walking seven times around the Kaaba, which is the cubic structure that marks the direction of prayer; running back and forth between the hills of Safa and

Marwa; moving to the Plains of Arafat for a day of prayers and repentance; and throwing stones at pillars that represent the devil (Wolfe, 1997, pp. xxii-xxiii). There are several layers of movement: most of the rituals themselves involve some form of displacement; pilgrims stay in different places for different parts of the pilgrimage; and many people often include a trip to the city of Medina as part of their travels. In other words, mobility is a key theme not only in the process of getting to and from Mecca, but also within most of the actions that happen in Mecca and surrounding areas, all at specific places and times. There is also a smaller pilgrimage, called umrah, that can be done at any time of year and includes only some of these rites, but the Hajj happens on specific dates within the Islamic calendar, which again emphasises strong connection to a shared sense of time. Since the Hajj happens over several days, it is not only the prescribed religious practices that take place during that time, but also more mundane activities like sleeping, eating, and calling home. Even within the revered city of Mecca, Muslims move fluidly through the interwoven spheres and times of the sacred and the ordinary.

It is hard to overstate the significance of this pilgrimage, which is one of Islam's five pillars, and is obligatory for every adult Muslim who has the financial and physical means to undertake it. Estimates were that the 2010 Hajj included over three million people (Lila, November 19, 2010), all in an area Lila describes as smaller than downtown Toronto (Lila, November 6, 2010). Predictably, the logistics of such a situation are rather intense, and have prompted some innovative uses of technology on the side of the Saudi authorities in charge of the Hajj. At that time of year, the Jeddah airport's dedicated Hajj wing can accommodate one plane landing every three minutes

(Lila, November 9, 2010). Buses in Mecca are now equipped with GPS systems, so that people running the buses can tell immediately when and where a bus has broken down, and dispatch a team to repair the bus and to provide fruit and drinks to the passengers on board (Lila, interview). Other current technological innovations related to Hajj include the development of 3D immersive digital environments as a way of simulating the Hajj and better preparing pilgrims (Schneider et al., 2011), and a digital “HajjLocator” system that uses mobile phones to track pilgrims who go missing (Mantoro, Jaafar, Aris, & Ayu, 2011). For those unable to make the journey in person, there even exists a “virtual Hajj” on Second Life (Hill-Smith, 2011).

Writing about Hajj has long occupied a prominent place within the literature of Muslim societies (see Wolfe, 1997, for a compilation of Hajj narratives spanning a number of countries of origin and over nine hundred years), and it is not surprising to see it now being increasingly visible within digital and online forms of media. In 2007, Guardian journalist Riazat Butt created an online interactive feature that included written blog entries, video diaries, and an interactive map illustrating her pilgrimage (Butt, 2007). Also that year, Toronto Star journalist Noor Javed (2007) published articles, online and in print, about her Hajj journey. In 2010, the same year that Lila went on Hajj, American Muslim scholar Amina Wadud published blog entries on the interfaith news website Religion Dispatches about her Hajj experiences. Wadud (2010a) is adamant in her writing that there is nothing inappropriate or un-Islamic about using blogs and other online media to talk about religious issues; she writes, “I believe in a living God, and since we do blog, we do have the internet, and we do Tweet, we need a sense of the divine presence in our current reality.” Interestingly, Wadud’s blog posts were written

during her trip, but unlike Lila's, were only posted online after her return (Wadud, 2010b). The extent to which Lila was able to both publish his blog posts throughout the trip and convey shorter (and faster) updates through Twitter highlight the uniqueness of his project, and of his use of media. Here, it is worth asking how a writing medium that is itself mobile, allowing the pilgrim to communicate while moving through these spaces, might allow for new ways of communicating the experience.

An early post from Lila's Hajj blog recounts a conversation he had with a Muslim woman who questioned him on why, when he spends his time writing anyway as part of his day job, he would want to be tweeting and blogging the whole time he was on a pilgrimage. Why not just try to enjoy the spiritual experience of being in Mecca? Lila had this to say about her comments:

She had a point, and it's something I grappled with for weeks before committing to this trip. I didn't want to be the guy (read: jackass) who was typing away on his blackberry smack dab in the middle of Islam's holiest of holies. That would be rude at best, and profane at worst. Besides, Mecca is primarily a place of worship. All that Web 2.0 and twitterati stuff can wait, right? (Lila, November 6, 2010)

Lila explains his ultimate decision to blog and tweet his experiences as part of his role there as a journalist, in Mecca not only for his own experience but also to find out and recount others' stories.<sup>2</sup> In my interview with him, he also explained a number of other factors that influenced this decision: one was that he had already performed the Hajj once, and thus that it was not as much of a religious obligation on him as it would be on someone going for the first time, and not as big a deal if something got missed. Another

factor that he mentioned was that he saw his writing as a way of being able to convey important stories about Hajj, and that in that sense, his writing itself could be considered an act of worship. He also described Twitter as a “perfect vehicle” for what he wanted to do, given the time-sensitive nature of Hajj, the movement involved, and the practicality of being able to bring his Blackberry with him and post updates when it was convenient for him.

Throughout the period of Lila’s pilgrimage, he posted short updates on Twitter, longer blog posts on the Toronto Star website (including some photos), and additional photos on his Facebook page. Over this time, as Lila noted in our interview, his Facebook fan page received 50,000 visits, and his blog was the most visited of any of the Toronto Star blogs, so he evidently had quite a number of followers. Lila’s sense of the makeup of the community following him was that most were Muslim, and he told me that many expressed a sense of gratitude for his writing, which allowed them to follow along on an important religious experience. Although there is much to be said about what Lila’s writing may have conveyed to non-Muslim followers, some of my reflection here will be more focused on his interactions with Muslims following him, given the shared context of a particular space and time that make his writings especially poignant. This could be seen, for example, in the shared observance of Eid al-Adha, a holiday observed by Muslims around the world. Lila re-tweeted one tweet from a follower, who wished him a happy Eid (“AsalamAlayKum & Eid Mubarak! Sitting in the Dawah Centre on Bloor & keeping your well-being in my duas as I open the Fast. :-)” [5:00pm EST, November 15, 2010]), and in Lila’s own tweet twelve hours later, “[wishing] everyone out there a happy + blessed Eid” (5:53am EST, November 16, 2010). Several commenters on his

blog conveyed a longing to be there with him, or a nostalgia for their own past pilgrimage experiences.

In what follows, I will focus mainly on Lila's tweets from his experience, rather than his blog or Facebook posts, in order to highlight his use of a medium that was especially mobile. His blog and Facebook posts will be used for reference in order to fill in the blanks of what else was happening while he was on his trip. An incident towards the end of Lila's trip particularly emphasizes the importance of Twitter as a mobile form of communication in this context. As Lila waited at the Jeddah airport to leave Saudi Arabia, he tweeted that given that he was on his way home, "it's safe to say #Hajj related tweets are coming to an end. Watch 4 a few final blog posts" (3:17am EST, November 20, 2010). In other words, his trip was ending, so his tweets about it would also stop, even if his other forms of writing about the trip continued. The point is obvious in many ways, but it is worth highlighting for what it shows about the role of Twitter on Lila's journey: useful for in-the-moment updates, but not for longer thoughts or for retrospective reflections. Not surprisingly, this element of Twitter is also reflected in the structure of the site itself, which is much more cumbersome to search through for past posts than blogs and even Facebook pages. While, for example, Lila's Hajj blog has archives that can be easily searched to find past posts, Twitter seems quite clearly built in a way that reflects the reality that people are not likely to want to search back through someone's tweets to find evidence of past experiences, and are much more likely to use the site for reading current and ongoing updates than for reflecting on earlier writings.<sup>3</sup> The important point here is to illustrate the use of Twitter as a specifically mobile and instantaneous form of media, which, as I will discuss below, has certain

implications for Lila's writing about Hajj. Tweets are, by nature, disjointed and often unrelated to each other, and Lila posted a few hundred while on the pilgrimage, making for an eclectic pool of comments from which to draw observations; what follows, therefore, may not be a comprehensive account of all of his writing, but nonetheless reflects some of the major themes that arose throughout this period, and the ways that mobile media conveyed Lila's messages.

A recurring theme throughout Lila's Hajj coverage is of the diversity of people he encounters and of the countries of origin that they represent. Among his observations on this topic:

In a GMC Yukon with three Turks, an Uzbeki, and a Saudi driver. The Turks are part of a TV crew, w/some very progressive ideas. (6:25pm EST, November 4, 2010)

Just hooked up with Bengali, Nigerian, and Yemeni journalists. Very interesting perspectives. They all had huge respect for @CBCNews. (3:00pm EST, November 6, 2010)

You know you're in Mecca when the Nigerians are lining up for Chinese food made by a Filipino. <http://twitpic.com/35tbyg> (4:59am EST, November 11, 2010)

Just had dinner with ppl from around the world, no idea what they were saying. But their smiles said enough. (3:31pm EST, November 14, 2010)

Most common languages: Arabic, English, Urdu. Then it's a toss up between Farsi, Turkish, and a handful of others. (3:37pm EST, November 14, 2010)

Up early. Will head with a Nigerian and the Turks to Mount Rahmah, shoot photos, then head back. (10:24pm EST, November 14, 2010)

Mina is bustling. Lots of flags from diff countries. (12:48am EST, November 16, 2010)

Is now in a room with mauritians, maldivians, cameroonians, and a south african. Great stories. (6:00am EST, November 16, 2010)

A Canadian, Mauritian, South African, and Maldivian are sitting in a room. A Sri Lankan enters. Hillarity ensues. #youhadtobethere (10:37am EST, November 17, 2010)

The repetition of this common theme fairly often throughout the days of the pilgrimage emphasises its importance for Lila as the observer and the nature of the Hajj as a gathering of people from literally all over the world. Of these, Lila paid particular attention to Canadian travelers:

Looks like two CDN caravans will be arriving here tomorrow (Monday). Both will make it to #Mecca just before the #Hajj begins. #justintime. (11:21pm EST, November 6, 2010)

Will be interviewing a CDN Qari (Quran reciter) over breakfast this morning, for his thoughts on whether #Mecca is changing for the better. (11:31pm EST, November 6, 2010)

Know any Canadians here for their honeymoon? Contact me. (4:17am EST, November 13, 2010)

Met complete stranger from CDA today. Said family watches @CBCNews, added “we’re very proud of you.” #warmfuzzy (12:13pm EST, November 13, 2010)

CDN caravans being housed in tented area with other N. Americans, S. Americans, Turks, and Europeans. Hoping to invu some tomorrow. (11:04am EST, November 14, 2010)

Many pilgrms already leaving #Mecca. One CDN caravan already gone. Will post a summary blog tonight. (8:05am EST, November 19, 2010)

Although far from home and constantly in motion, Lila rooted himself in his Canadian place of origin, and connected with Canadian followers, through his emphasis on travelers from his home country.

Of course, much of Lila's Twitter feed is devoted to chronicling the events of the Hajj itself, through tweets that mark the passage of time as the pilgrimage unfolds.

All roads now to lead to Mecca. All vehicles without valid Hajj permit are being turned away. (11:19am EST, November 11, 2010)

Definitely an electricity in the air now. One more night to go in #Mecca (Friday night) before pilgrims start moving to Mina. (6:06pm EST, November 11, 2010)

Less than 72 hours till Hajj officially begins. Gov't says all preparations are in place. (6:37am EST, November 12, 2010)

#Hajj timeline: Sunday night = pilgrims go to Mina. Monday = move to Arafat, then Muzdalifah in evening. Tues = in Mina, for Eid Adha. (6:45am EST, November 12, 2010)

Everywhere you go, pilgrims are wearing the "ihram" – two white pieces of loincloth. (8:26am EST, November 12, 2010)

All roads to Mecca now closed. Authorities turned away groups of ppl who didn't have proper paperwork. Everything being done by the book. (5:03pm EST, November 12, 2010)

Most pilgrims now in ihram. Thousands of buses slowly making their way to Mina, en route to plains of Arafat. (3:28am EST, November 14, 2010)

Definitely buzz in the air. Arafat is well planned. Wide roadways, water fountains, flush public toilets, even fake turf in some places! (11:05am EST, November 14, 2010)

Math lesson: Close to 3mil pilgrims, each will collect 49 pebbles for ritual in Mina.

That's a lotta stones. (5:14pm EST, November 15, 2010)

First stoning ritual well underway. New jamaraat bridge is huge w/elevators, hospitals,etc [sic]. (3:12am EST, November 16, 2010)

Second day of stoning ritual today. (8:32pm EST, November 16, 2010)

Watching live feed of ppl circling ka'bah in #Mecca. Can be hypnotic. No more pilgrims in ihram anymore. Everyone in different colours. (10:44am EST, November 17, 2010)

Quite the scene in Mina. Huge throngs of pilgrims doing stoning ritual. Several thousand at a time, on each floor, non stops. Unique vibe. (4:48am EST, November 18, 2010)

Now that official #Hajj rituals are complete, all pilgrims back in #Mecca. Very crowded. 3mil+ ppl here. (3:22am EST, November 19, 2010)

Instead of only describing the timing of the Hajj rituals, these tweets illustrate it in a unique and compelling way, and their placement, interspersed with tweets about weather, logistics, technical difficulties, and links to articles of interest, reflects the variety and complexity of events that take place around all of these prescribed religious rites.

Although Lila's tweets often describe the rituals that the pilgrims (including, presumably, Lila himself) undertake, most of what Lila shared on his Twitter feed throughout this time was from the standpoint of an observer of religious rituals, or of a participant in more mundane activities like traveling and eating, rather than clearly

forming part of sacred practices or experiences themselves. In other words, within El Guindi's framework of interweaving, Lila's writing practice was most often linked to the ordinary, rather than the sacred. It was in response to a tragic event that one of the clearest expressions of a sacred practice through Twitter arose, when Lila tweeted, on November 15, "Our bus just hit a pilgrim. Its bad. Oh Allah" (12:00pm EST, November 15, 2010). Two minutes later, he followed this with "I saw the whole thing. My hands are shaking. Ya Allah. The sound was horrendous" (12:02pm EST, November 15, 2010).<sup>4</sup> The Arabic phrase "Ya Allah" translates to "Oh God," with clear connotations of supplication and calling on God (in other words, not simply an exclamation of surprise in the way that one might say "oh my God" in English). In contrast to many of Lila's other tweets that describe the religious rituals of Hajj in a general way, these two actively invoke God, using Twitter as part of a sacred conversation, and interweaving it, if briefly, out of the more mundane role that it has taken through most of the trip. Of course, as Lila mentioned in my interview with him, his entire process of writing about the Hajj could be considered a devotional act in itself, so this observation should not be taken to discount the presence of the sacred even in tweets about less obviously spiritually-infused events. Still, this event demonstrates an explicit engagement with the sacred that is less apparent in most of Lila's other tweets.

There were some light-hearted uses of Twitter as part of religious ritual as well. At the end of the Hajj, it is traditional for men to shave their entire heads; Lila was torn about whether to do this or to simply cut some of his hair. He put this to a vote on both Twitter and Facebook, which sparked some of the most active interactions that he had with followers, many of which he retweeted. It is perhaps unsurprising (and not unique to the

Hajj) that a question about head-shaving received a spirited response, but in this case, it still created another way for those following to be connected to Lila's experience.

Moreover, some of his Facebook followers brought up religious reasons for Lila to shave his head; comments on his Facebook status ("is taking a poll: Should I shave my head?" posted at 3:59pm EST on November 17, 2010) mentioned that he "must" do it if it's his first Hajj,<sup>5</sup> that it's "customary" to shave his head, and that the Qur'an favours shaving the entire head over cutting only a small amount of hair. In this discussion, followers were able to participate not only in the poll itself but in some of the religious negotiations that made up the decision.

In terms of temporality, Lila's tweets reflect the often-slow process of traveling to Mecca for the pilgrimage. His first blog post states that it "[doesn't] matter where you come from, why you're here, or which group you're with... your patience will be tested" (Lila, November 5, 2010). It is one thing for Lila to write about patience and how difficult it is to get into and around Saudi Arabia during Hajj season. It's quite another to be a follower of Lila's tweets and to see, for example, his speculation about when he might leave Medina, his comments about the bus driver's speed en route to Jeddah, and his hopes for when he might reach Mecca, all posted in real time, several hours apart, with twenty-one hours in between leaving Medina and reaching Mecca, and with some tweets appropriately bearing the hashtag #notinmyhands. The instantaneous and mobile nature of Lila's tweets means that his descriptions of the passing of time are illustrated and made concrete in ways that more conventional writing styles may not convey. Lila's reflections on the patience needed while traveling are made all the more relevant when those attempting to follow along are also having to wait for his next move, and cannot

simply skip ahead to the part of the story where he actually gets to Mecca and his adventure continues.

Lila's tweets about travel logistics also had some unexpected consequences for fellow Canadian pilgrims. Early in his trip, Lila posted a tweet about how he had just arrived in Mecca from Medina, and that the traffic getting into Mecca was very slow. Although that tweet was meant to be a simple update on where he was and what he was seeing, Lila later found out that a group of travelers who had also been planning on leaving Medina for Mecca that day had called home and had been told by their families in Canada not to go just yet, because Muhammad Lila had said there was a lot of traffic. They postponed their travel to Mecca, staying in Medina an extra day.

It was not only in the logistics of travel that gaps in Lila's trip were felt. As was mentioned earlier, one of the rites of Hajj consists of walking seven times around the Kaaba, the building that all Muslims face while praying; the sanctuary, something of an open-air mosque, in which the Kaaba is located is known in Arabic as the masjid al-haram. At 1:41pm Mecca time (6:41am EST) on November 10, Lila posted a tweet: "Made it to Mecca. Going straight to the Haram. No tweets for the next little while." His next tweet came nearly six hours later and said simply, "Now that was something" (4:23pm EST, November 10, 2010). The only elaboration he gives, in response to someone else's tweet asking him about it, is that he "Couldn't fit that into 160 characters" (4:27pm EST, November 10, 2010).

A reflection only on the words of Lila's tweet might designate this one as one of the least descriptive of his entire trip, particularly after several hours of silence during a time of day that was often the most active; I want to argue, however, that the silence carries within it something rather evocative, and that the six-hour space is not as silent as it may appear. Muslims following along would have been particularly attuned to the magnitude of what Lila was experiencing. Moreover, as those who had been there themselves would likely know from their experience, and as those familiar at all with other writing on Hajj may have already encountered, that moment is one that is especially difficult to describe.

A blog post that Lila published some hours after that period focused on the look on people's face when they first see the Kaaba, a building of immense importance in Muslim belief and practice. It describes the difficulty of putting that look into words, and of conveying it to a western audience that, Lila claims, has no comparable reference for understanding it (Lila, November 14, 2010). Lila also chose not to take photos while in the haram, partly out of deference to rules that forbid this (although it is not unusual for such rules to be ignored), but partly because of his own relationship with the space, which he described as the "holy of the holies," and an experience that could never be captured in a photograph. Although Lila described himself to me as a journalist who normally stops at nothing to get a good story, he decided at this moment that this would be where he would "draw the line."

I want to highlight two things about this moment: one is that this was a space in which Lila did not tweet or take photos, and the second is that, when he does try to describe

the moment, he has difficulty doing so. The latter element is something that's likely not uncommon in writing about the Hajj or other religious experiences, but the former deserves a bit more attention, considering that, even in a context where the technology existed to be posting instantaneous updates, this wasn't done, and a line was drawn. That act of drawing a line is meaningful in itself, and the six-hour silence that it created on Lila's Twitter feed became imbued with meaning. As was also reflected earlier in Lila's tweets about his travel process, his use of a medium like Twitter allowed for that time, and that silence, to be felt by his audience in ways that other forms of writing can't do as easily.

In terms of what is reflected by that silence – or, in other words, by the fact that Twitter was not used during those hours – there is a nice connection that we can draw back to El Guindi's work on the interweaving of sacred and ordinary space and time, which I mentioned earlier; as was previously discussed, she describes the way that in simply orienting oneself towards Mecca (and towards the Kaaba) and performing the ritual prayer, a Muslim could designate an ordinary space as sacred. It is fitting that once one is next to the Kaaba, the space will be experienced as one that could never be brought into the realm of the ordinary. It represents a limit not only to the place of mobile media, but to this interweaving process itself, as a place that will only ever be sacred, and where non-sacred activities (which extend far beyond that of tweeting) have no place; it is also a place of intimate personal experience that one might decide not to share because it is so private. As described above, although Lila's Blackberry followed him around most of Mecca, Lila's use of it as an explicit part of sacred practices was rare; it was most effective for capturing an outsider's observations, rather than for being

itself a vehicle through which the sacred could be experienced. For instance, within the overwhelmingly sacred space of the haram (a word that can, in fact, translate as “sacred”), a device for capturing ordinary experiences simply had no role. In my interview with him, Lila described a similar decision to take time away from Twitter while at Arafat, a part of the pilgrimage focused on prayers, repentance, and reflection. Interestingly, this period of silence was also announced ahead of time, through a tweet reminding followers that Lila would “be offline today for a few hours in the afternoon” (10:04pm EST, November 14, 2010); later that day, Lila’s Twitter feed did indeed see a gap of eight hours. His act of announcing his offline periods functions to draw attention to these periods of silence and the meaning they contain, demonstrating that even in the areas where mobile communication does not take place, there is still much that can be communicated.

And yet, despite what mobile media can communicate in a situation like this, it would be simplistic to assume that Twitter, or other similar technology, should become the next medium of choice for covering the Hajj. This fact might go without saying, given the lack of substantial reflection permitted by Twitter’s character restriction, and thus the continued value of longer writings about the experience. Along with this limitation, Lila expressed a concern that widespread use of mobile media could detract from the spiritual value and experience of the Hajj, and that it could even eventually result in changes to some of the rituals involved. He was disturbed, moreover, that no one seemed bothered by his own frequent use of his Blackberry while he was there, and worried about a slippery slope, one for which he acknowledged his own possible responsibility in bringing about.

Even so, the journalist in him is proud of what he accomplished while on Hajj, continuing to defend the very specific circumstances in which he, who had been on Hajj once already and was now there as a journalist, decided to blog and tweet throughout the experience. When I asked him if he would do it again, Lila said that he would love to, and even had suggestions for how to increase the roles and effectiveness of his mobile communication.<sup>6</sup> Along with wanting to be more interactive through his tweets and possible live blogging, Lila raised the possibilities of livestreaming his footage, as well as using geomapping so that followers can see exactly where he is. In fact, in November 2011, the year after Lila's pilgrimage, YouTube broadcasted a live feed of Hajj footage for the first time ("Watch the Hajj," 2011). Creative possibilities exist alongside understandable risks; it seems clear, however, that mobile media has introduced new ways of conveying information about the Hajj, and that, for better or for worse, mobile media will continue to be used to reflect the time, space, and rhythm of the Hajj pilgrimage.

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1. All tweets cited are from Lila’s Twitter feed, <http://twitter.com/MuhammadLila>. ↵
  2. Amina Wadud (2010a) writes in a blog entry about receiving a very similar response to her plans to blog while on hajj. She is more blunt than Lila, and engages more directly in the theological questions at play: “I don’t think a Tweet about Allah will destroy divinity, integrity or love. It could, however, start a revolution in which we smash all false idols and reconnect with the God of the present—in radical ways — transforming those aspects of our religion which are

no longer tenable in the world which God has given us to live in: the world of now.” ↵

3. It is worth acknowledging here that I did, of course, do exactly that; although I did see some of Lila’s tweets while he was on hajj, the writing of this paper also required going back through the history of Lila’s tweets and copying several pages’ worth into a Word document. This also indicates something about the artificiality of my own project, imagining the experience of the time gaps between many of the tweets, instead of witnessing them as he wrote them. ↵
4. A blog post a few days after this incident revealed that the man who had been hit by the bus had later died (Lila, November 18, 2010). ↵
5. As mentioned earlier, Lila had, in fact, been on Hajj once previously. ↵
6. Lila himself did not go on Hajj during the subsequent year, but there were many others who did and who also used mobile media to narrate their experiences. Examples of Twitter feeds where updates and photos were posted include <https://twitter.com/#!/eurohajjmission> and <https://twitter.com/#!/RayanHajj2011>. The online companion to the British Museum’s Hajj exhibit ([http://www.britishmuseum.org/whats\\_on/past\\_exhibitions/2012/hajj.aspx](http://www.britishmuseum.org/whats_on/past_exhibitions/2012/hajj.aspx)) and the UK-based organisation Radical Middle Way (<http://hajj.radicalmiddleway.co.uk/>) both provided multimedia websites covering the 2011 Hajj, including regular blogging and posting of photos by those who were on Hajj. ↵