The Mediatization of Jewish–Muslim Dialogue in Germany Amid COVID-19

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Abstract

In the wake of the coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) pandemic, religious organizations increasingly mediatized their activities. Studies examining this process mostly focused on communal offerings, while ignoring how rapid mediatization affected programs geared toward interfaith dialogue. This paper examines the effects and possibilities of this shift to virtual spaces by focusing on frameworks that promote Jewish–Muslim dialogue in Germany. It traces how Jews and Muslims intervene in popular discourse using social media platforms to self-define their respective religions and the relationship between them. In this process, those involved in creating virtual spaces focused on the intersectionality between gender biases and Christonormativity. This paper utilizes a broad methodological approach, including participant observation in dialogue events in virtual spaces, discursive analyses of videos and podcasts, and qualitative interviews with Jews and Muslims involved in the creation of virtual spaces. The first section discusses Jewish–Muslim encounters occurring in organized dialogue events on video communication platforms that are ephemeral in nature (no recordings). The subsequent sections analyze German-language formats that have a representative character and are streamed, recorded, and presented on social media platforms.

Introduction

Federal, state, and municipal policymakers promote direct engagement between different ethnic and religious groups, especially when their relationship is perceived as inimical, as an important means of dismantling stereotypes and fostering social

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cohesion. Interfaith frameworks also enable participation in the coordination of public policies on religious affairs. In light of the coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) outbreak in China in December 2019, which subsequently spread globally, including Europe in early 2020, social-distancing measures were imposed to curtail the spread of infection. Policymakers continued to meet religious representatives on video communication platforms to coordinate containment measures relevant to the upholding and administration of religious services. Considering the constitutionally guaranteed rights of religious practice, houses of prayer in Germany were among the last to close and the first to open during the lockdown phases and, in general, were treated more leniently in their rights to congregate compared with cultural institutions. Nevertheless, lockdowns and congregants' fear of contracting COVID-19 forced religious congregations to adopt digital formats for their activities to maintain communal life. Congregations had to redefine the meaning of communal space and solve ensuing theological implications while adapting religious services to the limitations and capabilities of video communication platforms. Communal dialogue initiatives as well as organizations and initiatives dedicated to interfaith encounters also followed the general trend of mediatization. Researchers reacted expeditiously and promptly published studies on the impact of COVID-19 and the ensuing mediatization of religious practices. However, the focus of their research was not Germany. Meanwhile, interfaith dialogue in other places has also received limited attention.

Literature and Methodology

Research has increasingly focused on the effects of government lockdowns and social-distancing measures on religious practices. Researchers observing this shift within Jewish communities in real time focused mainly on the effects of social distancing on the well-being of various demographic and socioeconomic groups within the Jewish community, as well as the influence of virtual spaces on Jewish communal frameworks. Studies have perceived loneliness as the main motivation for seeking virtual encounters, even though it was much less effective in alleviating loneliness compared with real physical encounters (Wright et al. 2021). During the pandemic, online communication was crucial for promoting the well-being of people and maintaining social networks. Furthermore, the broad and sudden implementation of new technology reshaped organized community work and the public sphere. Since much of the research was conducted in the early stages of the pandemic, the lasting demand for virtual spaces in the post-pandemic era, especially in communal work, remains an open question (Livne and Bejarano 2021).

The effects of isolation on mental health cannot be excluded from the physical and spiritual spheres of human life (del Castillo et al. 2020). Researchers focusing on transitions in Jewish communal life during the pandemic have also examined the adaptation of religious rituals and services to social-distancing measures and the personal dilemmas this entailed (Cooper 2021; Livne and Bejarano 2021), perceptions of antisemitism and xenophobia (Livne and Bejarano 2021), and the use of web broadcasts to create secular yet Jewish spaces providing "opportunities for

public expressions of togetherness and solidarity, extending one's immediate family to include the entirety of the Jewish people" (Yares and Avni 2021, 17). Interfaith activities, that is, organized meetings between people who consider themselves to be representatives of two or more religious groups on the basis of a programmatic approach assuming religious differences (Nagel 2019, 112; Tsuria 2020, 438), are also an important aspect of Jewish communal work. In the few studies on the transition of interfaith work into virtual spaces, researchers have acknowledged the importance of interfaith work, especially during the pandemic, but they seldom provided empirical research on it. Research referenced global initiatives of world religions such as a Day of Prayer for Humanity or a Multi-Religious Faith-in-Action COVID-19 Initiative calling attention to the impacts of this pandemic on youth (Corpuz 2021). The pandemic was a unique event that forced clergy and practitioners of all religions to react simultaneously. A comparative study showed commonalities and differences in the way faith communities in the UK adapted to the pandemic while emphasizing internal diversity within religious groups. There was some direct correspondence between religious leaders; however, the exchange was not formal but rather a result of long-lasting associations stemming from an established interfaith landscape (Taragin-Zeller and Kessler 2021). The study did not delve into the extent, focus, and effects of this interfaith exchange. Additionally, neither of the studies dealt with the mediatization of interfaith frameworks.

Research on the situation in Italy provided deeper insights into interfaith relationships, perhaps because some of the informants played crucial roles in interfaith organizations or because the Italian state framework was less harmonic. Religious leaders criticized the existence of a hierarchy of religions with Catholics at the top, followed by religious communities with an agreement with the Catholic state, and at the bottom, those who did not have such agreements. When lockdown restrictions were eased for religious communities, those without agreements were excluded. The blatancy of this hierarchy of religions was perceived as an impediment to interfaith dialogue. Nevertheless, interfaith dialogue exists in Italy and shifted to the virtual field during the pandemic. The focus was on community relief in the framework of national relief programs, as well as coalition building and public action. Other aspects of dialogue requiring physical exchanges and encounters were more difficult to transfer to the virtual field (Casavecchia et al. 2023, 7–10).

Building on this research, we provide a case study of Germany. However, this paper does not observe all interfaith initiatives, but specifically Jewish–Muslim ones.[1] Jews and Muslims have historically been significant in shaping European conceptions of alterity and a shared European identity (Renton and Gidley 2017). Narratives of the relationship between Jews and Muslims continue to play an important role in contemporary public discourse. "Media representations and policy debates perpetuate tropes of alterity which revolve in particular around questions of integration, migration, and national identity, often pitching 'new' and 'established'

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minorities against each other" (Gidley and Everett 2022, 1). Gidley and Everett demonstrated how these narratives oscillate between roseate historic conviviality and lachrymose interpretations. While the former emphasizes historic conviviality, the latter highlights Muslim antisemitism and Jewish Islamophobia, with the Israel–Palestine conflict looming in the background (Gidley and Everett 2022, 4–6).

Considering the importance of media representations of Jews and Muslims in European discourse, this paper examines the goals and effects of the mediatization of the Jewish–Muslim dialogue. In digital religion studies, "mediatization highlights how the Internet serves as a media institution informing popular conceptions of religion, thus shaping the religious discourse in the public sphere" (Campbell 2017, 21). This paper focuses on frameworks that promote bilateral Jewish–Muslim dialogue in virtual spaces, thus spotlighting attempts by Jews and Muslims to intervene in popular discourse by using internet platforms to self-define their respective religions as well as the relationship between them and to demonstrate the power of religion to promote tolerance and understanding in society. The videos and podcasts examined in this study disseminate knowledge about Judaism and Islam in the context of and in conversation with each other. The larger social implication of the mediatization of Jewish–Muslim encounters provides insights into Jewish–Muslim–Christian trialogue constructs in virtual spaces too. It is highly contested whether bilateral Jewish–Muslim relations, independent of the influence of Christian dominant culture, could even exist in Europe. Researchers have used the term "Christonormativity" to describe the invisibility and dominance of Christian privileges in Europe and the USA. Christonormativity describes how Christian traditions and perspectives set social norms while Othering non-Christian practices. This does not contradict the state's purported advocacy of religious tolerance and diversity. Since the term draws on concepts such as heteronormativity, color-blind racism, and post-feminism, it emphasizes its intersectional implications with other forms of oppression and marginalization (Ferber 2012; Langer 2018). The framing of encounters as Jewish–Muslim assumes that these highly diverse groups are monolithic Others locked in a conflict that could only be resolved through mediated dialogue (Egorova and Ahmed 2017).

This paper utilizes a broad methodological approach to examine the effects of the pandemic and mediatization on interfaith dialogue. The narrow focus on Jews and Muslims who identify religiously and are active in interfaith formats provided for a smaller informant base than the comparative studies referenced above, which relied solely on interviews. Therefore, this paper incorporates further material, such as participant observation in dialogue events in virtual spaces, discursive analyses of videos and podcasts, and public statements through qualitative interviews with Jews and Muslims involved in the creation of virtual spaces. The first section of this study discusses Jewish–Muslim encounters occurring in organized dialogue events on video communication platforms that are ephemeral in nature (no recordings). The subsequent sections analyze German-language formats that have a representative character and are streamed, recorded, and presented on platforms such as Facebook, YouTube, and Spotify, where they are accessible forever, at least theoretically. The research did not explore comments, hashtags, and talkbacks on social media platforms, because the database was relatively limited. The participant observation and

discourse analysis are complemented by semi-structured interviews with four Jews and two Muslims involved with interfaith dialogue in virtual spaces (details in the next section), as well as a Jewish woman involved with the production of YouTube dialogue videos. Information gathered through informal conversations with key figures involved in the video production was also used.

Interfaith Dialogue on Online Communication Platforms

The mediatization of religion did not start with the pandemic, but the pandemic forced a radical shift in mindset, allowing the digitalization of religious practices and spaces to become widespread. "The threat of the 'internet' … has been transformed into an opportunity, creating a robust sphere of new-media aimed at cultivating religious life and religious 'publics' online" (Taragin-Zeller and Kessler 2021, 2). Religious communities had to change the way they defined space and physical presence because certain practices necessitate joint physical presence. Certain elements of Jewish services, such as saying *Kaddish*, require a *Minyan*, a quorum of 10 Jews—traditionally men but of any gender in egalitarian communities. "From the perspective of Jewish law, the virtual quorum … entered relatively uncharted waters" (Cooper 2021, 48). Cooper explains that predominantly non-Orthodox rabbis have been discussing the impact of technology on conceptions of physical presence for over a century. The complete cessation of in-person gatherings and the requirement to congregate for recitals of the *Kaddish* at the time of mourning catapulted the debate from the theoretical sphere to the immediacy of real life, especially considering the pandemic's death toll. During the lockdown, congregations moved their religious services to video communication platforms and adapted them to the limitations of such platforms. "The public space during the pandemic … has remodelled itself on the space–time asynchrony of web platforms" (Casavecchia et al. 2023, 11). A technical example is the microphone override function of video communication platforms, which inhibits joint singing and praying over.

Considering how communal life was affected by the shift into virtual spaces, the question arises as to how inter-communal and especially interfaith initiatives were affected by this shift. During my research, I conducted participant observations in two formats of Jewish–Muslim dialogue in virtual spaces. One of these formats started before the pandemic with in-person meetings, whereas the other started online. I continued participating once they transitioned or returned to in-person or hybrid meetings. Both formats were led by the same female Muslim communal leader. One was in conjunction with a female rabbi, and the other with a male rabbi. All three were interviewed. To broaden the sample, I included findings based on interviews with two Jewish and one Muslim woman involved in in-person and online interfaith initiatives that I did not attend. The findings in this section are based on six interviews and participant observations of eight online and in-person events.

My interlocutors belonged to two generations. Three women were in their early twenties: Zoe,[2] a Jewish woman in a rabbinical seminary; a Jewish woman working in Jewish education of young adults; and a Muslim woman theologian working for an interfaith dialogue institution. The other three conversation partners were in their fifties: Ella, a female liberal rabbi leading several congregations in Germany; a male rabbi of a Berlin-based community; and Saba, a Muslim woman heading a Muslim community whose main language is German.[3] It is important to note that all the interlocutors were born in Germany. The older generation held official positions in religious institutions, which tended to be a requirement for acquiring public funds, enabling them to establish Jewish–Muslim interfaith frameworks. The younger generation's involvement in in-person and online trialogue initiatives was sporadic and mostly within frameworks enabling interfaith encounters among European students.

Another characteristic of the older generation was that all three interlocutors converted to Judaism or Islam at a young age. The prominent role that ethnic German converts play in interfaith dialogue has already been noticed by researchers such as Esra Özyürek: "converts from Christianity are in a good position to lead a serious discussion because they are better informed about Christianity and atheism, and know what mainstream Germans find less or more appealing about the Islamic message" (Özyürek 2015, 41). However, my interlocutors, regardless of being converts, Jews, or Muslims by birth,[4] were generally disinterested in, and even repulsed by, playing to Christian appeals. Jewish interlocutors felt uncomfortable with Christians purposefully blurring differences between Judaism and Christianity—in the name of a "contrived siblinghood"—to "repatriate" Jews in Germany. Interfaith dialogue often focuses on the relationship between Christianity and other religions (Moyaert 2013, 202). Jewish and Muslim interlocutors were sensitive to the power dynamics, that is, Christian hegemony,[5] guiding trialogue interfaith meetings, which were mostly initiated by Christians, and took place in Christian spaces for a Christian audience with the topics determined by the Christian hosts. According to an interlocutor, Jews and Muslims are often invited as exotic birds. In these forums, my Jewish interlocutors often felt instrumentalized, and their Muslim counterparts attacked. The opportunity for dialogue is undermined by not providing space for Jewish and Muslim Others to reveal their genuine selves instead of enforcing Christian projections (Moyaert 2013, 208).

My female interlocutors added gender-related aspects to these power dynamics. They criticized male dominance in the realm of interfaith dialogue. As female clergy

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[2] The names of interlocutors have been changed to maintain anonymity. Not all interlocutors are refered to by name.

[3] Most mosques in Germany are organized in national associations with sermons and other communal activities being in the language of their countries of origin.

[4] The literature on conversion to Judaism and Islam in Germany is relatively limited. Barbara Steiner's publication on conversion to Judaism (Steiner 2015) is central to the research alongside Özyürek's work on conversion to Islam. While the paper does not focus on the role of converts in interfaith, the generational disparity in this regard is striking and worthy of further research.

[5] Langer distinguishes between Christian hegemony enforced by Christian institutions and a Christonormative environment shaping everyday life (Langer 2018, 185).

and lay leaders, they were often invited to discuss the role of women and the compatibility of feminism with the three monotheistic religions. "The church pretends that they abolished everything and are now free," asserts the young rabbinical student, Zoe. Deflecting to the oppression of women in Islam reinforces this illusion. The vast majority of Germans associate Islam with women's repression (Gamper 2011, 10). Trialogue panels on women's position serve as a stage to present the three religions on a scale of progression, with Christianity on the positive extreme, Islam on the negative extreme, and Judaism oscillating between the poles, thus representing the possibility of progression and integration. Jewish participants can choose to embrace commonalities with Muslims, such as gender-related religious practices— veiling, menstruation, and isolation during services—or instead emphasize differences pertaining to gender equality, such as increasing numbers of ordinations of women rabbis, thus leaning into a secular/Christian narrative of progress.

These discursive constraints of trialogue formats motivated the interlocutors to create bilateral dialogue spaces between Jews and Muslims. They perceive virtual spaces as an important tool to challenge both Christian and male dominance in interfaith dialogue and are optimistic that technology can assist in dismantling privilege that is reified in physical spaces. They reinforce Ferber's argument regarding the intersectional core of Christonormativity and the need to unravel the entangled multifold manifestations of discriminatory ideology (Ferber 2012, 74). Setting up meeting rooms on video communication platforms is relatively simple and inexpensive, allowing anyone to host them, either alone or conjointly. The virtual space is supposedly neutral and lacks religious symbols, although they may appear in the square tiles of individual participants as a chosen background design or in the physical surroundings of their private homes. Gender tended to be easier to identify in virtual spaces, especially when young people were involved because the preferred pronouns followed the names.

The role attire plays in in-person interfaith dialogue in comparison to meetings in virtual spaces was discussed in the interviews. Community representatives and clergy appear in their garb or wear other religious insignia. This serves to signal their validity as communal representatives (Moyaert 2013, 209). The limited camera frames in online communication platforms usually capture only the faces of speakers and participants. This and the fact that during the pandemic, lockdown participants joined from their private homes made religious attire superfluous and dialogue informal. The shift of religious life to the domestic sphere through mediatization, which also dissipated gender segregation during prayers, revealed existing gender inequalities and contributed to the critique of traditional gender roles distinguishing between the public and domestic spheres (Taragin-Zeller and Kessler 2021, 8; Casavecchia et al. 2023, 11). Rabbi Ella presented video communication platforms as a utopian meritocracy in which the divisive external identifying feature of participants was obscured, enabling content rather than identity to come to the foreground. However, the question remains in my case study: whether virtual spaces were indeed so revolutionary to gender relations, or whether their main function was strengthening existing solidarities between religious women, who suffer from isolation and double marginalization within their broader religious communities and feminist movements (Casavecchia et al. 2023, 3). The membership of the Muslim institution comprised

about 60% women, with the majority being born in Germany. Female rabbis also led the partnership of Jewish congregations. Even if female leadership is not directly involved in dialogue meetings, these communities have already challenged religious patriarchy. The hypothesis on the function of dialogue for women-led communities, both physical and virtual, is strengthened by the observation that, during extensive field research in Berlin that continued after the pandemic, we hardly found any communal (as opposed to meetings of community representatives) Jewish–Muslim dialogue formats involving male-led congregations.

Nevertheless, the virtual space created by Jewish and Muslim women was not completely free of negative sentiments about the role of women in Islam, as the following vignette demonstrates. For their dialogue formats, Rabbi Ella and Saba first chose the theme of the lunar year, which both Jews and Muslims follow, and then life cycles. There was a core of about 50 regular participants and 30 attendees at each dialogue meeting. According to Ella, approximately half of the participants were Jews from her transregional network and the different communities throughout Germany that she ministers to. Although there was no cooperation with or targeted promotion among Christian communities, Christians were the second-largest group of participants. The simultaneous mediatization of religious life created "an immediate religious free market for all" (Taragin-Zeller and Kessler 2021, 4). There were only a handful of Muslims from the Berlin-based community. According to Ella, Jews have more experience with dialogue formats because of their attempts at reconciliation from the majority society for Germany's genocidal past. The Shoa caused a pivotal change in the church's relationship with Judaism and its commitment to dialogue (Moyaert 2013, 197). Some Jews seem to have adopted this approach in their dialogue with Muslims. They perceive dialogue as a channel for signaling their wish for conviviality with Muslims and disassociation from their supposed entanglement in the Israeli–Palestinian conflict.

According to Ella, the general atmosphere at the meetings was one of astonishment about the commonalities between Jewish and Muslim religious practices. Participants were bonded by their reactions to overt Jewish and Muslim practices, such as surprise at the sudden appearance of non-Christian holidays. Ella felt that the online meetings provided Christian participants with an important learning experience of occupying a minority position. However, this experience did not prevent Christians from critical discursive interventions. For International Women's Day, Ella and Saba organized an online meeting dedicated to girls' education. Saba's Muslim community is deeply engaged in educational endeavors, and many female community members are active in the social sector. During her presentation, Saba coyly took an apologetic approach, mentioning that, in the past, families preferred giving birth to boys. She compared Koranic texts encouraging empathy among fathers to modern-day policies, such as paternity leave, aiming to induce attitudinal changes in the perception of fathers' roles from fathers as breadwinners to increased direct involvement in their children's upbringing.

In the question and answer portion, Ella talked about the transformation of gender roles within Jewish thought during the *Haskala* [Jewish Enlightenment]. A non-Jewish, non-Muslim functionary of the Green Party in Southwest Germany asked Saba whether there were comparable developments in the Muslim

community today. She intended to pursue this line of inquiry but was stopped by Ella on the pretext that others wanted to speak, too. However, Jewish participants joined the debate, some in defense and others in attack of Islam. An Israeli woman compared Islam's role in promoting science in the Middle Ages with that of the *Haskala*, while a woman from the former Soviet Union attempted to relativize Saba's claim of the recognition of many women scholars in Islamic tradition.

In conclusion, Ella and Saba believed that technology could provide a virtual space for dialogue that is free from patriarchy and Christonormativity. This space was an extension of the physical spaces they had previously created. Most of my interlocutors regarded the openness of virtual spaces for transregional and even international participation as their primary advantage. This was important because the double marginalization of religious women is possibly exacerbated when they live away from urban concentrations of Jews and Muslims. Jewish and Muslim panelists often travel from urban centers, especially Berlin, to participate in in-person trialogue events throughout the country. However, a comparison between the two online formats in this study suggests that Muslim–Jewish dialogue events were more likely to attract transregional participants when the organizers or presenters already had transregional networks in the first place. Those with transregional networks continued to hold communal events in virtual spaces—but not necessarily interfaith encounters—with the easing of COVID-19 regulations.

The fact that online dialogue events were designed as regularly occurring encounters between communities—as opposed to community representatives—shaped the demographics of the participants. Events were not broadly promoted on social media but rather within internal community communication channels. The events organized by the younger generation correspondingly attracted a younger crowd and helped reaffirm the organizers' belief that religion is not lost with the younger generation. Creating a unique space for women for prayer and conversation is also important for the younger generation.

A key aspect of direct Jewish–Muslim dialogue, as opposed to trialogue formats, is the desire for a direct conversation free from Christian hegemony, mediation, and Christonormativity. However, the vignette demonstrated that online spaces are also susceptible to Christian interference. The participants were not required to disclose their religion. The threshold for non-Jews and non-Muslims to attend is perhaps lower than that for in-person events, despite their designation as Jewish–Muslim dialogue events. Othering discourses on gender dominated the discussion and set an apologetic and defensive tone for the Muslim presenter, despite her authority as an organizer. Interventions by non-Jewish and non-Muslim participants disclosed attitudinal differences within the Jewish community vis-à-vis Muslims. However, these confrontations in the virtual space also spotlight the comfort of the participants in accommodating differences and even hostility. This is a major difference to the non-ephemeral dialogue frameworks on social media between representatives and functionaries, as discussed in the following sections. In a way, the surfacing of difference in virtual spaces through open, uncensored conversation can be regarded as a successful implementation of online communication platforms to create an atmosphere of ease and community, in which participants in lockdown literally "felt at home."

Actors, Goals, and Formats of the Mediatization of Jewish–Muslim Encounters

Despite social media's reputation for enabling grassroots discursive interventions through independent content creation, most of the content for the online dialogue formats under study was initiated and funded by established German institutions with funding by the federal government, that is, student scholarship funds,[6] the federal Jewish umbrella organization,[7] cultural institutions in several German cities,[8] and a Berlin-based interfaith organization.[9] Only two formats in this study were institutionally independent: the YouTube channel *Youde* and the podcast *MashAllah Masel Tov*. The former received funding for 20 episodes for depicting contemporary Jewish life in Germany,[10] while the latter was created without institutional funding.

Accordingly, the mediatization process under study does not seem to offer "a profound challenge to the control which religious institutions exercise over the communication of religious symbols in public discourse" (Lövheim 2012, 132). One of the possible reasons for the dominance of institutional players is that videos that stand out from the crowd require high-quality camera equipment and editing. Streaming panel discussions via video communication platforms was very common in the initial lockdown phases of the pandemic but decreased in popularity with the easing of regulations and people feeling "zoomed out." Podcasts served as an alternative to expensive video productions since they do not require the same level of equipment and editing. Therefore, podcasts enable greater participation, but independent productions are short-lived.

Jewish and interfaith institutions had several reasons to create digital dialogue formats. In general, the move into virtual spaces was a matter of survival when in-person gatherings were prohibited. Organizations' funding agreements required them to hold a certain number of public events. As the pandemic hit, the only possibility for them to fulfill their obligations was to adopt online formats. Some organizations have attempted to implement planned in-person programming par for par. Others saw virtual spaces as an opportunity to reach out to new audiences and revamp the public's perception of their organization. For example, one of the interfaith organizations whose public image centered on the collaboration of an older generation of

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[6] This study focused on Karov-Qareeb, a Jewish-Muslim think tank, and Dialogperspectives, both funded by the Federal Foreign Office.

[7] This study focused on the program Schalom Aleikum, run by the Central Council of Jews in Germany and funded by the Federal Government Commissioner for Migration, Refugees and Integration.

[8] This study focused on videos and live stream of the "Days of Jewish-Muslim Core Culture" associated with the Maxim Gorki Theater in Berlin. Events took place at cultural institutions in Berlin, Bremen, Cologne, Dortmund, Frankfurt, Hamburg, Heidelberg, Mittweide, Munich, Vienna, and Zurich.

[9] This study focused on the podcast *331—3 women, 3 religions, 1 theme*, run by the House of One and financed by the "Live Democracy!" program of the Federal Ministry for Family Affairs, Senior Citizens, Women and Youth.

[10] The funding came from a fund dedicated to commemorating 1700 years of Jewish Life in Germany, which was financed by the Federal Ministry of the Interior, Building and Community; The Commissioner of the Federal Government for Culture and Media; North Rhine-Westphalia State Government; and the city of Cologne.

male clergy used digital dialogue formats to feature collaboration between young, female representatives of the Abrahamic faiths.

The professed purpose of most digital interfaith formats under study was political education and prevention. Jewish institutions perceived combating antisemitism, specifically among Muslims, as their primary objective. Cultural institutions and student organizations have advocated for the acceptance of social and cultural diversity, challenging integrative pressures into an ostensible majority culture. Interfaith organizations also promoted diversity while emphasizing the importance of religion for social cohesion within secular German society. Social media's main advantage over in-person events is its potential nationwide outreach, which bolsters the educational effect. Furthermore, Jews account for less than 0.2% (DellaPergola and Staetsky 2020, 31) and Muslims for approximately 6.5% (Pfündel et al. 2021) of the German population.[11] Both tend to concentrate in urban centers, making encounters outside these extremely rare, especially considering the minuscule share of Jews in the population. Social media could thus be immensely useful for bringing Jewish and Muslim voices and faces to the German countryside. Therefore, the intended audience of mediatized formats is, for the most part, not necessarily Jewish or Muslim but rather society at large.

Some of this interfaith media was used by other organizations to create educational material for schoolteachers, especially on religion. My interlocutors observed that teachers were the main group that approached them on social media. They shared their questions and experiences in the classroom teaching about Judaism and Islam and consulted with them directly on issues pertaining to their respective religions. One of my interlocutors compared her work in a program bringing Muslim theologians and rabbis together to schools (almost exclusively in Berlin) with her interfaith podcast. Both are meant to educate people about contemporary religious practices; however, when Jewish and Muslim clerics visit a classroom, it is very official. She is perceived as a representative of her religion, whereas in her podcast, she feels free to speak as an individual, without the burden of representation. She and her co-podcasters often reiterate in their podcasts that religions are not monolithic but rather internally diverse, meaning that they express their personal opinions and do not profess to speak for Islam, Judaism, or Christianity as a whole. The mediatization of dialogue allows for the "personalization of religion" and accentuation of personal experience (Lövheim 2012, 131). The podcast is important for her as an alternative to what she considers the mainstream media's Othering of Muslims and to social media content created by Islamic fundamentalist groups to recruit alienated youth.

Established organizations' preferred style for digital programming was to hold panel discussions. Therefore, they were not very different in format from in-person events. Often, they were in-person encounters between the panelists and the

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[11] The number of Jews and Muslims in Germany is debatable. Government censuses do not record religion. Muslims are estimated on the basis of migration from countries whose population is predominantly Muslim. While statistics on community membership serve as a basis for calculations of Jewish populations, the estimated numbers vary in accordance with different definitions of who is Jewish.

moderator, in which social distancing regulations were upheld, meaning that the panelists sat at a distance from each other without an audience. The panels included formats in which all panelists joined in online and hybrid formats, with some panelists joining conversations via video communication. While allowing for audience participation via questions to the panelists posed on the organizations' social media channels during streaming, the organizers did not attempt to recreate for the audience the networking aspect of interfaith encounters. This networking element is important for brainstorming and creating new formats. Furthermore, many interlocutors perceived direct encounters to be the most conducive to dismantling stereotypes.

The institutional backing of online formats and their long shelf life led to the careful screening of participants when institutional reputations were on the line. Conservative Jewish institutions venturing into Jewish–Muslim dialogue wanted fresh faces and a feeling of engaging "ordinary people" in dialogue instead of the usual communal representatives. However, they were fearful of what they perceived as skeletons in the closet of Muslim guests, such as support for the Boycott, Divestment, Sanctions (BDS) movement against Israel and ties to Islamic fundamentalist organizations. Potential participants' social media platforms were carefully screened. They were also wary that "ordinary people" have a higher likelihood of being loose cannons, saying something controversial during a live stream, than religious officials. The goal of their mediatized dialogue formats was the harmonic performance of Jewish–Muslim conviviality and not heated debates on conflicting issues. Furthermore, the shift toward recorded dialogue formats severely limited "ordinary people" from participating. Muslim participants, who had already agreed to the in-person dialogue, now voiced fears of repercussions for them in their immediate communities or for their families living under dictatorship in countries hostile to Israel. Terrorist attacks in Europe also caused potential Muslim participants to avoid the camera, e.g., after the beheading of teacher Samuel Paty in a Parisian suburb in 2020.

Cultural institutions also heavily used panel discussions, although they were often not as earnest and entailed pointedly political and social criticism. Occasionally, they created videos of poetic and aesthetic performances incorporating Jewish and Muslim protagonists. These videos ranged between scripted performances and spontaneous conversations between Jews and Muslims. Jewish–Muslim dialogue was represented as a bellicose coalition built on a shared criticism of integrational pressures in Germany, expressed in the concept of *Leitkultur*, that is, core culture, limiting the space for multidimensional identities. Religion, music, cuisine, and other cultural aspects were presented as extremely hybridized. Power asymmetries between Christian majority society and Jewish and Muslim minorities were playfully inverted. The representative coalition of Jews, Muslims, and possibly other minorities, and intersectional allies was intended to counter the divisive politics of the extreme right. The right-wing terrorist attacks in Halle (October 2019) and Hanau (February 2020) were fresh in their minds.

The shift to digital formats makes having open and sincere conversations between Jews and Muslims more difficult, especially when performative harmony is one of the goals. Considering the centrality of harmony in these mediatized interfaith

encounter events, they seem to lack the prerequisite conditions to be considered dialogue events: honesty, trust, and openness (Tsuria 2020, 441). They do not "entail the chance of being challenged and the risk of becoming changed" (Frederiks 2005, 8). The value of mediatized interfaith encounters for the organizations producing them does not seem to be the dialogue itself but its anticipated effect on the online audience. The harmonization of online interfaith encounters serves two further goals: popularization, that is, reaching new audiences, and politicization, that is, utilizing dialogue events for a political agenda (Nagel and Peretz 2022, 115–116).

Interfaith Encounters versus Interfaith Dialogue in Virtual Space

Forced to rapidly mediatize, most of the dialogue organizations discussed above did not thoroughly consider the discursive practice of social media when adjusting their dialogue formats. They did not consider what was possible, religious/cultural norms, and the linguistic choices and strategies of these different mediums (Tsuria 2020, 449). This section focuses on formats that were designed for social media from the beginning and comprehensively considers the Jewish–Muslim relationships behind the scenes. While there were several podcasts in Germany on Jewish–Muslim themes, only two presented regular, direct interactions between Jews and Muslims. *MashAllah Masel Tov* was initiated by two students who met on campus. The participants of the *331: 3 women, 3 religions, and 1 theme* podcast were cast by the House of One staff and had no previous acquaintance. These podcasts could be perceived as a form of panel discussion, the difference being that the participants were the same in every episode. Owing to the regular nature of podcast recordings, intimate relationships were formed despite infrequent meetings in person. Whether scripted or not, the podcast conversation appeared relaxed and personal, reflecting the growing intimacy of podcasters owing to repeated encounters and shared projects.

YouTube was a platform widely used by all organizations in this study. However, most organizations merely uploaded panel discussions streaming over other social media platforms to their YouTube channels. Only the grassroots initiative *Youde* adopted styles common to the medium, instead of attempting to replicate in-person formats. Youde's funders were not involved in the production and were not even named in the credits of individual videos or YouTube channels. The initiative's original intention was to create videos disseminating knowledge about Judaism. While not completely abandoning this intention, organic decisions, such as collaborating with a film studio founded and owned by a migrant from Syria that was located in the vicinity of the producer's Jewish relatives, changed the plan. The production team grew out of the personal networks of the studio owner and the producer, thus consisting of Jewish and Muslim members who became "one family" in their words. Bridge-building between different minorities with an emphasis on Jews and Muslims became a shared goal for the interfaith team. As a result, the portrayal of Jewish life was embedded in a broader goal to present Germany's diversity.

The videos explored linguistic affinity between Hebrew and Arabic, as well as German and Yiddish, and linguistic differences were demonstrated through the complexity of translating idioms. YouTube-style challenges were aimed at playfully

creating empathy between Jews and Muslims. This included short "blind date" conversations behind a curtain between Jews and Muslims (and one Buddhist) revolving around personal questions; quiz competitions between Jews and Muslims revolving around the theme of diversity or the majority religion Christianity; and educational episodes dedicated primarily to Judaism but also one on Islam.

The process of creating social media content is also an important field of encounter, especially when a team of Jews and Muslims is involved in the creative process. Co-creating social media content for an extended period gives team members a common purpose. In their final video,[12] the Youde team talks about deepening their relationships through joint celebrations of personal events and shared accomplishments on the set. They learn to accept and respect each other's personal and communal quirks; for example, Jewish colleagues may not be available on *Shabbat* despite impending production deadlines. A Muslim production team member born in Syria but raised in Germany joked that, at one point, she also started to keep *Shabbat*. Muslim team members and video participants talked about how they had never met a Jew before participating in the project. One of the team members originally from Syria started the pitch to a potential Muslim employee with "we are working with this Jewish group at the moment." The joint project assisted in transcending initial reservations and challenging stereotypes.

The success of prolonged contact with the production team was tested during the Israel–Gaza War in May 2021. Team members raised concerns about what was happening in Israel and Palestine. A Jewish team member emphasized the different perceptions of war between those who had immigrated from Syria and those who had grown up in Germany. A Muslim team member was irritated by lump generalizations of Jews in her social environment: "well we are working with Jews and not everyone is as depicted." Muslim acquaintances and fans of the show approached them through private messages on social media, asking them to use their unique Jewish–Muslim voice to take a public position on the war. The team had already started discussing it beforehand but decided to adhere to their mission to focus on giving marginalized voices in Germany a stage on domestic issues. They did not want to give in to peer pressure to position themselves vis-à-vis the conflict, thus reinforcing the misconception that Jewish–Muslim is equated with Israeli–Palestinian. Before the war, they prepared humorous videos of the conflict between Israel and Palestine. However, they decided not to broadcast them, because they did not fit post-war sentiments.

Personal networks, or bubbles as they are often called by interlocutors, converge in this process, especially through broadening interfaith networks on social media. The social media consumption of those involved included podcasts, videos, Instagram, and Facebook posts. Some share and repost influencers and friends from other religious communities to educate their own communities about holidays and issues that are important to other minorities, thus avoiding the filter of mainstream media, which they perceive as exoticizing and Othering. The convergence of bubbles raises their level of awareness of living in a multicultural society and

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[12] https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LpStky4DBWQ&t=13s, last accessed 24 January 2024.

not a bipolar environment consisting of their own minority and a supposed majority society. Empathy with the experiences of other minorities in dealing with antisemitism, Islamophobia, and other forms of discrimination has become easier. This may lead to an altered perception of how migration has and is changing German society, imbuing the younger generation with a mission to play an active role in the process (Peretz 2023). However, the presence on social media is a double-edged sword for outspoken activists. The positive aspect is that social media resonates with messages and increases their outreach and availability. This helps them develop content in accordance with their audience's wishes. The downside is that social media makes them prone to verbal abuse, mostly in private messages and from members of their own broader community.

The social media formats I examined often entail intersectional elements facilitating the dissolution of supposedly unbridgeable monolithic identities perceived by interlocutors as dialectically reinforced by dialogue frameworks in which participants are expected to play ascribed roles. Jewish and Muslim participants perceive Germany as being exceptionally unreceptive to the idea of complex multidimensional identities. Intersectionality, e.g having a common age and/or gender, facilitates identification in addition to the search for shared religious heritage and practice. Building shared experiences of discrimination to find common causes and building coalitions for solidaric action were also important themes. Possible common causes were religious freedom and the increasing visibility of religious and ethnic minorities in German society. These discussions were strongly influenced by right-wing, antisemitic, and racist attacks that have occurred throughout Germany in recent years.

While the search for commonalities and harmony characterized all institutionally backed formats, the independent podcast *MashAllah Masel Tov* presented political strife about current affairs between podcasters instead of their religious or ethnic identities. The differences between the co-podcasters were not necessarily an expression of their Jewish or Muslim identities but rather their diverging political worldviews. According to one of the podcasters, they chose this format to protest what they perceived as a prevalent tendency to fetishize Jewish–Muslim relations by incessantly trying to reconcile the two groups. In his opinion, the "normalization" of the relationship between Jews and Muslims should mean that they are able to withstand arguments and differences and develop empathetic listening capabilities. The capability to listen and learn from each other is at the core of interfaith dialogue. Tsuria's suggestion to perceive online interreligious interactions not as dialogue but rather "as part of a discourse, in which power, identity, and the negotiation of norms play a significant role" (Tsuria 2020, 450), strongly reverberates in the findings of this case study. Nevertheless, listening was also mentioned by other interlocutors as an important means of dealing with the cultural hegemony and Christonormativity shaping interfaith dialogue. Virtual spaces were perceived as potentially neutral and safer spaces in which co-creation at eye level was easier to establish, facilitating listening and learning from each other. For example, a Muslim interlocutor praised how, from Jewish participants, she had learned new methods for dealing with Christonormativity, such as gaining the courage to speak up in defiance, and, from Christian participants, how to listen to criticism and avoid reacting defensively. Jewish

voices occupy a unique position in post-Nazi Germany on issues of minority–majority relations and discrimination. Jewish and Muslim communities are aware of the different receptions of their criticism by the majority of society. Jews sometimes offer to lend their voices as advocates for other minorities who are not always keen on playing into this hierarchy. Jews are portrayed in some social media formats as shaped by centuries of migration and diaspora and as a model for successful resistance to integrational pressures (Nagel and Peretz 2022, 113).

These modes of operation, which are expressions of different hegemonic positions, often lead to tension during real-life dialogue events. A Jewish interlocutor observed these power dynamics at bilateral Jewish–Muslim gatherings hosted and funded by Jewish organizations. This experience sensitized her to the marginalization of other minorities by her own community. She perceived this as a reaffirmation of the importance of special conditions in shaping dialogue, and the value of co-created real-life and virtual spaces. Virtual spaces are not inherently identified with any community. Therefore, activists from different communities could shape them together with an awareness of society's hegemonic structures. These experimental spaces could change the mindset of those involved and reflect on the construction of frameworks of real-life encounters, at least by a younger digitally inclined generation. This study broadens Lövheim's portrayal of how mediatization increases the representation of religious diversity, and how blogs empower Muslim women by allowing them to speak from a position of authority (Lövheim 2012), to new media formats that gained popularity during COVID-19. Collaborative content creation of interfaith dialogue in podcasts, YouTube videos, and other mediums connect hitherto separated bubbles and allow the young creators to take a conscious heads-on approach in challenging discourses of Othering.

Conclusion

To conclude, this paper approaches Jewish–Muslim dialogue in virtual spaces as an expression of a common search for belonging as minorities in a religiously and culturally Christian Europe. It explores how different interfaith institutions and initiatives reacted to the challenges of rapid mediatization of their programs in response to COVID-19 lockdowns. Digital dialogue frameworks are not radically independent spaces, but are, for the most part, bound to the objectives of the institutions funding them. This was reflected in the measure of organizations' innovativeness in adapting their content to social media, as well as in the role of mediatization in tackling gender issues within religious communities. The interlocutors ascribed great potential to virtual spaces for creating freedom from gender-related pressures, and Christonormativity highlighted the intersectionality between them. The spaces here were also strongly connected to the "DNA" of the organizations running them and, in some instances, lowered the threshold for Christian participation in bilateral interfaith meetings spurring Christonormative gender biases toward Islam and Judaism. The mediatization of Jewish–Muslim dialogue can be divided into two categories: interfaith encounters and interfaith dialogue. The former tends to result in harmony and conviviality, whereas the latter facilitates co-creation by young members of

both minority groups that extends beyond the virtual sphere. They provide alternative sources for formal and informal education on Germany's social and religious diversity and enable nationwide outreach. The influencers active in creating new media formats become focal points for merging bubbles building virtual interfaith networks over social media outlets that enable interventions in internal communal as well as national discourses.

Declarations

Conflict of interest The author has not disclosed any competing interests.

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