Mass Culture and Modernism in Egypt began as my dissertation research. My plan was to write about concepts of the person in Egypt, and one of my sources was to be media, though I was not necessarily to be the primary focus of the research. At the outset, my plans were quite flexible. I was interested in the relation of local identity to practices associated with both foreign and ‘classical’ Islamic ideals.

My potential sources were eclectic. For example, I had hoped to incorporate a historical perspective through looking at late Ottoman-period Turkish-language manuscripts. In particular, I wanted to search out texts that made use of terms of appellation comparable to (or contrasting with) contemporary terms like din al-balad – literally ‘son of the country’, though the exact referent can change according to context, evoking various shades of locality in one situation, class distinctions in another, and national identity in still others. Sawsan el-Messihi, the anthropologist who originally analysed the term in the context of Egyptian identity, suggested that the term was not frozen, and had taken on a range of contemporary meanings in relatively recent historical memory. I had hoped to elaborate on these.

As often happens, once the research began, I changed my focus. Mediated culture is an inescapable part of contemporary Egypt, and yet writing on it was, and remains, astonishingly thin. The idea of trying to augment anthropological research through archival sources began to seem absurd in the face of the massive quantities of mediated material that were all around me. These materials were, of course, meaningful in various ways to my steadfast, expanding circle of informants and friends. But they were also characterized by historical depth, albeit not as great a depth as had once hoped to explore through archival documents. In the end, my ethnographic material ranged from 1930s popular magazines and cinema to contemporary newspapers. By default, the only modern medium that has really mattered in the study of Middle Eastern societies has been print. Not print as a medium of mass communication, but print simply as the vehicle for ideas that could be translated fairly easily from one medium to another. The metagenres of Egypt, which cheap and easily pirated cassette recordings of the 1980s, the rise of Adawiyya certainly is tied to the transnational processes that occupy the attention of American social scientists. It is a performative emblematic of the age of portable music – of a decentralized system of production in which cheap and easily pirated cassette recordings of the sorts of media I wrote about in the Middle East are now being produced by millions of people worldwide. It is a performative emblematic of the age of portable music – of a decentralized system of production in which cheap and easily pirated cassette recordings of the sorts of media I wrote about in the Middle East are now being produced by millions of people worldwide. It is a performative emblematic of the age of portable music – of a decentralized system of production in which cheap and easily pirated cassette recordings of the sorts of media I wrote about in the Middle East are now being produced by millions of people worldwide.