Islam Takes a Hit

There are many ways for Americans to learn about Islam, especially with the volume of books that hit bookstores after the 9/11 tragedy. One increasingly-ly popular way is only a click away. It is estimated that for the two days following the hijacked airplane crashes into New York’s Twin Towers almost twelve million visitors accessed www.con.com, a sharp rise of 680 percent over previous usage. At least two-thirds of internet users searched the web for news about the bombing. Millions, literally millions, of web pages now have something to say about Islam. Whether people are looking for information or out to put a spin on what Islam really is, there is no question that Islam has reached, in the words of Gary Bunt, a Digital Age.

Through Google eyes

One unsophisticated, but no doubt, popular mode for surfing the web is simply typing in a word or two in a popular search engine. I can imagine that as you read this essay someone somewhere in cyberspace is looking at Islam through Google eyes. If you type “Islam” into Google, as I did in April 2004, you will find well over 8 million results. Most people find what they want, or at least what they get, on the first page of ten hits. Unlike some websites, such as about.com for example, the links are generated by a sophisticated computer program rather than an expert on the subject.

A critical look at the first ten sites generated by Google on April 11 through Google eyes shows the sampling problem with such a generic search. Eight of these are sites run by Islamic organizations, but there are also links to the official website of the Nation of Islam (www.noi.org) and to a Christian anti-Islamic site at www.answering-islam.org. The top ranked site (www.islamonline.net) founded by a Qatari consulting firm in 1999. In fifth place (www.islam-guide.com) is an electronic version, also available in PDF format, of A Brief Illustrated Guide To Understanding Islam, first published in Houston, Texas in 1996. This conversion guide may owe part of its popularity to its multilingual versions, available onsite in Chinese, French, German, Italian, Japanese and Spanish (with Arabic and Russian forthcoming). At number six is a site (www.Islam101.com), billed as educational, but actually a wide-ranging resource sponsored by a somewhat mysterious organization called the Sabri Foundation.

The third in the listing is a major Shia site (www.al-islam.org), although its Shia orientation becomes clear by looking at the content of the site rather than by specific admission in the FAQ section. One need not go far into the site to find its sympathies, since a menu item across the top heralds “Islam as Taught by the Ahlul Bay.” This is followed by another general mega site (www.islamonline.net) founded by a Qatari consulting firm in 1999. In fifth place (www.islam-world.net) provides a wide range of links to onsite and offsite pages. The third place (www.islam-guide.com) is an affordable illustrated resource sponsored by a somewhat mysterious organization called the Sabri Foundation.

The problem with webservation

The main problem with analyzing the use of cyberspace is that it is virtually impossible to know who is taking advantage of the several million page web pages which in some way mention Islam. As an anthropologist I am intrigued by the possibility of a new method of webservation, especially the interactive potential in participating through chat rooms and discussion forums. However, this presents a far different field than the villages in rural Yemen where I conducted ethnographic fieldwork in 1978-79. While I did not know everyone there on a first name basis, there was an opportunity in a small-scale social context to

http://www.islamworld.net, viewed 27 May 2004

Cyberspace gives access to an astounding amount of information on Islam. How do we find relevant data and possible answers to the questions one may have? Search engines are convenient tools but have not been designed by specialists in Islam. Many sites, including top ranking hits, fail to plainly indicate the objectives of the individuals or organizations that maintain them, while many others are ephemeral. As a result, researching digital Islam constitutes a major methodological challenge for social scientists.
observe behaviour and follow up with interviews and casual conversa-
tion. Traditional field sites are not likely to be replaced by surfable web
sites, but it does seem that the exotic others studied by anthropolo-
gists are increasingly to be encountered in html construct rather than
ethnographic context alone. This will require a rethinking of how virtu-
al reality is to be related to the more mundane reality of everyday be-
haviour.

Ironically, the very rationale that has concerned anthropologists to
collect information about traditional cultures before it is lost or ab-
sorbed in dominant cultures now faces those of us who treat the Inter-
net as a field of study. As Gary Bunt laments, there is no archive of old
Islamic web sites, some disappear and others are updated leaving no
trace of earlier stages. As a pertinent example, shortly after the 9/11
tragedy I accidentally stumbled upon a Yahoo web ring for “Jihad.” By
clicking up and down the ring I could access quite a few sites that
preached terrorism against specific non-Muslims or fellow Muslims.
One Kuwaiti site allowed me to download and watch videos of Bin
Laden or read his available works. By the end of 2001 this web ring had
been defused and the more militant sites were no longer online. Simi-
larly, long before the U.S. invasion of Afghanistan there was a tal-
iban.org web site, although that had disappeared well before the 9/11
attack. At the time it did not occur to me (nor did I have the digital stor-
age space) to archive such sites. Perhaps someone did, but retrieval for
study would no doubt be akin to looking for hand-written manuscripts
rather than consulting a library catalogue.

The ephemeral nature of web sites is compounded by the seeming
ease with which so many different kinds of sites can be found. If there
are indeed over 8 million web pages that mention Islam, it would the-
oretically take me over four and a half years of non-stop analysis, eight-
hours per day, if I only spent one minute on each webpage. Of course
not all the potential websites would be of value, but how could such a
massive sample be meaningfully analyzed by hand? Consider also that
Google does not access every webpage and many of the pages listed
no longer exist. The data set in itself is seductive, but how could it be
usefully related to the people putting up the sites and surfing through
the pages? A media revolution of enormous proportions is taking place
in cyberspace. With apologies to Marshall McLuhan, I am not sure that
the medium is the message for the Internet, but the medium is defi-
nitely a new kind of methodological challenge.

A final vista

My Google search in April 2004 can be compared with a similar effort
I made in October 2000 using an earlier search engine called AltaVista.
Three and a half years ago there were only about one and a quarter mil-
lion pages for “Islam.” The top ten at that point were decidedly more er-
getic. Oddly, the most rated site was Islam Tanzania (www.islamtz.org),
which was hardly a primary hit site even at that time. This web page still
exists, but was last updated in December, 2001. Second in the AltaVista
ranking was the Islam page (www.about.com), not a surprising top
choice then or now. In October 2000, however, the Nation of Islam web
site registered third, followed by Ismailiy City and Islam101. These three
sites, though not in this order, are still in Google’s April 2004 first page.

In sixth place was the main webpage of the Lahore Ahmadiyya Move-
ment (www.muslim.org/cont-islam.html), not to be confused with the
main Ahmadiyya Muslim Community website (www.alsalam.org). The
ninth and tenth slots were taken up by Answering Islam, once again giv-
ing space to Christian apologetic against Islam.

Whether entering cyberspace in October 2000 or April 2004, the ca-
sual browser would find a set of mixed messages. The Islamic mega
sites, which tend to duplicate much of the same information, would
yield ready access to the Quran, sayings of the Prophet Muhammad
and details on the major aspects of Islam as a religion. Today, more so
than before 9/11, major Islamic portals such as Ismailiy City attempt to
educate Americans about the peaceful nature of Islam. I am not certain
how the average American surfer would evaluate either an Ahmadiyya
site or the Nation of Islam. Neither site proclaims that a sizeable major-
ity of other Muslims considers what both stand for as against the main-
stream of both Sunni and Shi’a Islam. Christians might prefer the spin
of Answering Islam, especially given the apparent interest in dialogue
rather than blatant condemnation, which can readily be found else-
where. But Muslims would feel the need to log onto Ahmed Deedat’s
Combat Kit against Bible Thumpers (www.geocities.com/Athens/Del-
phi/7974/deedat/deedat.html) for relief.

Notes

1. Gary Bunt, Islam in the Digital Age: E-Jihad, Online Fatwas and Cyber Islamic

2. Daniel Martin Varisco, “Slamming Islam: Participant Webservation with a Web of
Meanings to Boot” (paper presented at AAA annual meeting, 2000) Working Papers
from the MES, http://www.aacenet.org/mes/feature1.htm

3. Bunt, Islam in the Digital Age, 17