Digital Islam:
Changing the Boundaries of Religious Knowledge?

The phenomenal popularization and transnational propagation of communications and information technologies (hereafter referred to as IT) in recent years has generated a wide range of important questions in the context of Islam's sociology of knowledge. How have these technologies transformed Muslim concepts of what Islam is and who possesses the authority to speak on its behalf? Moreover, how are they changing the ways in which Muslims imagine the boundaries of the *umma*?

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The book, pamphlet, and newsletter were taken up with urgency by Muslims in the nineteenth century in order to counter the threat posed to the Islamic world by European imperialism. The ᶜulama were initially at the forefront of this revolution, using a newly expanded and more widely distributed literature base to create a much broader constituency for their teachings. An inevitable side-effect of this phenomenon, however, was the demise of their stranglehold over the production and dissemination of religious knowledge. Muslims found it increasingly easy to bypass formally-trained religious scholars in the search for authentic Islam and for new ways of thinking about their religion. The texts were in principle now available to anyone who could read them; and to read is, of course, to interpret. These media opened up new spaces of religious contestation where traditional sources of authority could be challenged by the wider public. As literacy rates began to climb almost exponentially in the twentieth century, this effect was amplified even further. The move to print technology hence meant not only a new method for transmitting texts, but also a new idiom of selecting, writing and presenting works to cater to a new kind of reader.[1]

Contemporary Muslims have been speculating about the utility of electronic information technology in the organization of religious knowledge for some time now. Abdul Kadir Barkatulla, director of London's Islamic Computing Centre, explains that he first became attracted to computer-mediated data storage in his capacity as a scholar of *hadith*, a field which involves the archiving and retrieval of thousands upon thousands of textual references. The CD-ROM has provided an invaluable medium for his work. The entire Qur'an (including both text and recitation) along with several collections of *hadith*, *tafsir*, and *fiqh* can easily fit on a single disc. Barkatulla sees this development as having the greatest relevance for those Muslims who live in circumstances where access to religious scholars is limited, such as in the West. For him, such CD-ROM selections offer a useful alterna-

tive. 'IT doesn't change the individual's relationship with his religion', he says, 'but rather it provides knowledge supplements and clarifies the sources of information such that Muslims can verify the things they hear for themselves'. Barkatulla sees IT as a useful tool for systematizing religious knowledge, but – crucially – only for pre-existing juridical opinions. In his terms, IT is only for working with knowledge that has already been 'cooked', and not for generating new judgements. There are, however, those who disagree with him. Saᶜad al-Faqih, for example, leader of the London-based 'Movement for Islamic Reform in Arabia' and another keen advocate of information technology, believes that the average Muslim can now revolutionize Islam with just a basic understanding of Islamic methodology and a CD-ROM. In his view, the technology goes a long way to bridging the 'knowledge gap' between an ᶜalim and a lay Muslim by placing all of the relevant texts at the fingertips of the latter. 'I am not an ᶜalim', he says, 'but with these tools I can put together something very close to what they would produce when asked for a *fatwa*'.

That is certainly not to say, however, that the ᶜulama have been entirely marginalized. In fact, some religious scholars have become quite enthusiastic about computer technology themselves. 'Traditional centres of Islamic learning (such as al-Azhar in Cairo and Qom in Iran) did not respond to the opportunities offered by IT

for about ten years', Barkatulla observes, 'but now they are forced to'. He alludes to something like a 'race to digitize Islam' among leading centres of religious learning around the world. Because the modern religious universities have developed comprehensive information systems, the more conservative, traditional institutions are now forced to respond in kind in order to keep up with the times. At the Centre for Islamic Jurisprudence in Qom, Iran, several thousand texts, both Sunni and Shīᶜi, have been converted to electronic form. While Sunni institutions tend to ignore Shiᶜi texts, the Shiᶜa centres are digitizing large numbers of Sunni texts in order to produce databases which appeal to the Muslim mainstream, and hence capture a larger share of the market for digital Islam.

Neither has the rise of electronic 'print Islam' eradicated the saliency of the oral tradition. Electronic media are as adept with sound as they are with the written word. Certainly we have heard much about the role of audio cassettes in Iran's Islamic revolution, where recordings of Khomeini's sermons were smuggled over from his Neauphle-le-Chateau headquarters near Paris and, much to the Shah's dismay, widely distributed in Iran. The Friday sermon, or *khutba*, is today recorded at many mosques throughout the Muslim world and the distribution of these recordings along with addresses by prominent ideologues consciously emulating the rhetoric of influential modern Muslim thinkers such as

Sayyid Qutb, Ali Shariati, and Abu'l Ali Mawdudi, serves to politicize Islam before an audience of unprecedented proportions. Recordings of sermons by dissident Saudi ᶜulama, such as Safar al-Hawali and Salman al-ᶜAwda, also circulate widely both inside and outside the Kingdom, and this marks the first time that material openly critical of the Saudi regime has been heard by relatively large sections of that country's population. The website of a London-based Saudi opposition group has also made Salman al-ᶜAwda's sermons available over the Internet using the latest audio streaming technology.[2] 'Now that media technology is increasingly able to deal with other symbolic modes', notes the anthropologist Ulf Hannerz, 'we may wonder whether imagined communities are increasingly moving beyond words'.[3]

It is perhaps on the Internet, however, that some of the most interesting things are happening. Can we meaningfully speak today about the emergence of new forms of Islamic virtual community? To begin with, we need to make sure that we have a more nuanced understanding of those Muslim identities which use the Internet. We cannot start talking about new forms of diasporic Muslim community simply because many users of the Internet happen to be Muslims. Noting that in many instances Muslim uses of the Internet seem to represent little more than the migration of existing messages and ideas into a new context, Jon Anderson rightfully warns that 'new talk has to be distinguished from new people talking about old topics in new settings'.[4] Yet we also have to acknowledge the possibility that the hybrid discursive spaces of the Muslim Internet can give rise, even inadvertently, to new formulations and critical perspectives on Islam and the status of religious knowledge. As regards notions of political community in Islam, there is also the Internet's impact on 'centre-periphery' relations in the Muslim world to be examined. A country such as Malaysia, usually considered to be on the margins of Islam both in terms of geography and religious influence, has invested heavily in information and networking technologies. As a result, when searching on the Internet for descriptions of programmes which offer formal religious training, one is far more likely to encounter the comprehensive course outlines provided by the International Islamic University of Malaysia than to stumble across the venerable institutions of Cairo, Medina, or Mashhad.

Detail from: 'Alim'
(ISL Software Corporation).
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It is usually amongst the diasporic Muslims of the Western world that we find the Internet being appropriated for political purposes. The American media has recently been full of scare-mongering about 'radical fundamentalists' who use the United States as a fundraising base for their overseas operations. Reports often cite the Internet as a primary tool for the dissemination of propaganda by Islamic militants. A more sober examination of the situation, however, reveals that very few of the Muslim groups who have a presence on the Internet are involved in this sort of activity. Moreover, there are also those who argue that the Internet has actually had a moderating effect on Islamist discourse. Saᶜad al-Faqih, for example, believes that Internet chat rooms and discussion forums devoted to the debate of Islam and politics serve to encourage greater tolerance. He believes that in these new arenas one sees a greater convergence in the centre of the Islamist political spectrum and a weakening of its extremes.

Thus, for the overwhelming majority of Muslims who seek Islam online, the Internet is a forum for the conduct of politics *within* their religion. In the absence of sanctioned information from recognized institutions, Muslims are increasingly taking religion into their own hands. Through various popular newsgroups and e-mail discussion lists, Muslims can solicit information about what 'Islam' says about any particular problem. Not only that, notes al-Faqih, 'but someone will be given information about what Islam says about such and such and then others will write in to correct or comment on this opinion/interpretation'. Instead of having to go down to the mosque in order to elicit the advice of the local *mullah*, Muslims can also now receive supposedly 'authoritative' religious pronouncements via the various e-mail *fatwa* services which have sprung up in recent months. The Sheikhs of al-Azhar are totally absent, but the enterprising young *mullah* who sets himself up with a colourful website in Alabama suddenly becomes a high-profile representative of Islam for a particular constituency.[5] Due to the largely anonymous nature of the Internet, one can also never be sure whether the 'authoritative' advice received via these services is coming from a classically-trained religious scholar or an electrical engineer moonlighting as an amateur ᶜ*alim*.

More than anything else, the Internet and other information technologies provide spaces where diasporic Muslims can go in order to find others 'like them'. It is in this sense that we can speak of the Internet as allowing Muslims to create a new form of imagined community, or a re-imagined *umma*. The Muslim spaces of the Internet hence offer a reassuring set of symbols and a terminology which attempt to reproduce and recontextualize familiar settings and terms of discourse in locations far remote from those in which they were originally embedded. As has become apparent, the encounter between Islam and the transnational technologies of communication is as multifaceted as the religion itself. The rise of IT has led to considerable intermingling and dialogue between disparate interpretations of what it means to be 'Islamic' and the politics of authenticity which inevitably ensue from this also serve to further fragment traditional sources of authority, such that the locus of 'real' Islam and the identity of those who are permitted to speak on its behalf become ambiguous. This, in many ways, is an Islam with a distinctly modern, or perhaps even *post*-modern ring to it. The vocabulary here is eclectic, combining soundbites of religious knowledge into novel fusions well suited to complex, transnational contexts. Most importantly, the changing connotations of authority and authenticity in digital Islam appear to be contributing to the critical re-imagination of the boundaries of Muslim politics. ◆

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Notes

1. Geoffrey Roper (1995), 'Faris al-Shidyaq and the Transition from Scribal to Print Culture in the Middle East', in: George N. Atiyeh (ed.), *The Book in the Islamic World: The Written Word and Communication in the Middle East*, Albany: SUNY Press, 1995, p. 210.
2. See http://www.miraserve.com/
3. Ulf Hannerz (1996), *Transnational Connections: Culture, People, Places*, London: Routledge, p. 21.
4. Jon Anderson (1996), 'Islam & the Globalization of Politics'. Paper presented to the Council on Foreign Relations Muslim Politics Study Group, New York City, June 25, 1996, p. 1.
5. Some of these sites are registering several thousand hits per day. Their users are often 'nomadic', spending several days or weeks in one discussion forum before moving on to populate another site.