Interface Dialogues: and the Online Fatwá

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Internet
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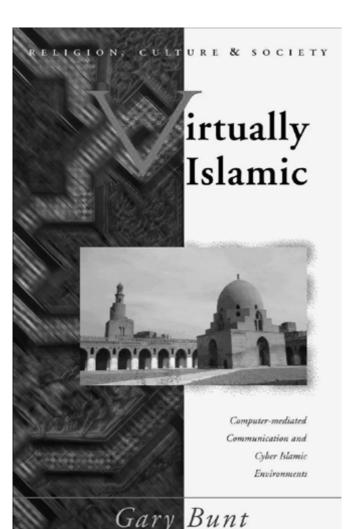
What makes a web site 'Islamic'? Significant issues emerge in answering this question and delineating Muslim cyberspace, associated with identity, language, patterns of behaviour, and the utilization of textual and ideological sources. In addition, the cyber Islamic environment may be shaped by the application of 'Islamic' symbols, images, sound files, and different conceptual approaches towards defining 'appropriate' Internet interfaces. These components illustrate diversity with respect to interpretative, cultural, political, and linguistic concepts associated with Muslim identities.

The extent to which the Internet has an impact on Islam in the modern world is difficult to quantify, given the different global levels of individual access and utilization, as use of the web continues to expand. There is currently an assertion for position in cyberspace both amongst parties seeking to establish themselves as key resources and Internet portals for Muslims. Research has sought to interpret these initial phases in the evolution and growth of Muslim cyberspace in order to anticipate possible future developments in the light of new technological interfaces becoming available.[1] These include the integration of 'new' technology – such as ADSL, WAP phones, and the MP3 sound format – in providing access to Islamic resources.[1]

Certain 'orthodox' proponents of Islam benefit from promoting their worldviews via the Internet, whilst others find that their influence is threatened. Increased Internet access undoubtedly presents challenges in the form of divergent concepts and interpretative approaches from outside of established cultural-religious frameworks. This is not a phenomenon exclusively associated with the Internet, but combines with access to other media (such as digital television) where forms of censorship and control can be circumvented. The Internet – via web pages, e-mail and chat rooms – is already providing a forum for discussion on significant issues of concern to contemporary Muslims, and a platform through which ideas can be expressed and propagated. Although the Internet has been dominated by the use of English-language materials (this article's focus),

other languages relating to Muslim interests are now present on the web. For example, in relation to Arabic speakers, HTML composition tools in Arabic have slowly improved.[3] In the Middle East, the use of personal computers has increased, and Internet Service Providers have opened up lucrative new Arabic-speaking markets – incorporating 'religious' web page content as part of their online services.

Groups that may be defined as being outside 'mainstream' orthodox Islam are also making use of the Internet, ranging from the 'homosexual Muslim' activists, 'Queer Jihad', to various political Muslim platforms and diverse popular religious expressions. Whether intended for a mass audience or a specific interest group, cyber Islamic environments are influenced by unique technical, aesthetic and content-related factors associated with Muslim identity. Some sites may be created as a resource for daily access to news and comment, and be associated with ideological political-religious platforms: for example, the Taliban in Afghanistan and Jamaat-i-Islami Pakistan provide regularly updated sites. Governments are utilizing the Internet in propagating their own approaches towards Islam for domestic and international audiences (including the governments of Iran, Pakistan, and Malaysia). Several web sites promote their interpretations of 'Islam' and their translation of the Qur'an as definitive, linked to specific searchable Qur'an resources that reinforce their specific worldviews. A variety of perspectives compete online to be the authoritative resource for 'Islam' as a whole, a phenomenon that links the Internet with other historical and contemporary trends relating to Islam within academic, political and/or religious discourse. These web sites may be presented as representative of 'Islam' as a whole, a phenomenon that links the Internet with other historical and contemporary trends relating to Islam within academic, political and/or religious discourse.

The online information marketplace

The substantial financial investment in the Internet by various Islamic organizations and platforms represents their attempts to secure online ideological advantages, and indicates a jostling for position in the information 'market place', although theoretically an individual's homepage on Islam can carry the same weight and interest to a 'neutral' surfer. This is particularly apparent when approaching issues relating to decision making and interpretation of Islam, and the 'qualifications' (if any, and if relevant) of those providing online advice to Muslims and others. It may be difficult to determine the credentials of an online Islamic 'authority', and this introduces a significant contemporary issue for Islam. Within a Sunni context, in particular, it can present concerns associated with the formulation of *fatāwā* (sing. *fatāwā*) or legal opinions produced by religious scholars and authorities. In various Shia contexts, authorities are strategically investing time and resources to present their own online conceptual approaches towards interpretation to a global audience.

The extent to which a Muslim surfer will apply or be directly influenced by the Islamic knowledge acquired in cyberspace is difficult to quantify. Advice on a key issue might be solicited on different sites: this may be

through searching database archives of *fatāwā* opinions, questions and answers – or by e-mailing a site with a question. One advantage for petitioners and the curious is that the Internet *can* be anonymous. Issues which could be considered dangerous or embarrassing within a domestic framework can be presented to an 'authority' – locally, globally, or indeed from a different cultural-religious outlook. However, local knowledge is also significant when decision-making processes are considered.

Online *fatāwā*

Several Islamic web sites present a searchable listing of *fatāwā*, and a key word search should bring the surfer to the subject of interest within the site. The influence of Saudi Arabian scholars is evident on one of the most technically proficient Islamic 'advice sites': Fatwa-Online contained 479 *fatāwā* at the time of publication, with new content being added to the site on a regular basis. The site includes content obtained from at least eighteen scholarly sources, from Ibn Taymiyyah through to the *fatāwā* of Shaykh Ibn Baz and his former students – well connected to the Saudi Arabian Permanent Committee for Islamic Research and Fatawa. The site is searchable, with an easy-to-navigate interface containing ample user assistance. All the materials are in English, and there are no 'Islamic' images or Graphic Image Files (GIFs) on the site – conforming to some Muslim perspectives on 'images' as well as accelerating its download time. According to the site's counter, it had received over 30,000 hits from surfers between October 1999 and August 2000. Fatwa-Online's current emphasis is on translating scholarly opinion from Arabic resources.

This indicates an enthusiastic audience for online *fatāwā*, and that significant questions are not answered satisfactorily off-line. Amongst the guidance available is a prominent selection of materials for 'New Muslims', together with sections on women's issues, marriage and worship. Recent topics include: 'Does a new Muslim have to separate from his wife if she does not accept Islam?'; 'Is it permissible for a Muslim to visit his Christian neighbour when he falls ill?'; and 'Is it permissible for a Muslim to offer hospitality to non-Muslim companions by offering them alcoholic drinks which Islam has made unlawful for him?'. An e-mail list informs subscribers of new topics to be found on the site.

The production of *fatāwā* is not the preserve of Saudi scholars, however; although their influence is pervasive on other Sunni sites. Examples emerge from diverse global contexts relating to forms of decision making. Another *fatāwā* site prominent on search engine listings is the As-Sunna Foundation of America. This has a list of over twenty *fatāwā*, drawn from *Muslim Magazine*, on subjects ranging from fasting and mosque attendance to more controversial topics, including 'Revealing Intimate Marital Details', 'He smokes… is he right for me?' and 'My wife was molested'.[5] Some of the titles are linked to associated sites, such as the Kalimat site for Muslim women.[6] There are hyperlinks with over a hundred questions and answers, based directly on questions sent in by e-mail. These are useful indicators of contemporary concerns, and present an overview of traditional topics: 'The Veil in Islam', 'About Homosexuality', and 'Assisted Suicide' indicate the breadth of questions received and an-

swered by As-Sunna Foundation staff on their regularly updated site.[7]

Whilst many Islamic sites are produced in the United States, significant English-language resources are also produced in other Muslim minority contexts and provide other shades of opinion. *Fatāwā* in languages other than English and Arabic can easily be located on the Internet via search engines (in Farsi, Malay, Turkish, Urdu, and Thai languages). For example, within Iran, religious scholars such as Ayatollah Hossein Ali Montazeri are asserting their opinions online, despite efforts by the Islamic Republic's government to suppress 'dissident' views.[8] There are a number of sites containing *fatāwā* in Western European languages other than English – with original content, as well as translations.

New notions of community via Internet?

The extent to which a web site's author's location is actually relevant can be questioned, given the nature of globalization and common concerns of Muslims in diverse contexts. Specific Muslim interest groups and interpretative strands can dialogue and form new notions of community via the Internet. Traditional routes of authority can be transcended, whilst surfers are also exposed to forms of knowledge and Islamic understanding beyond conventional boundaries. Those living in environments hostile to their religious worldview may find comfort, advice and inspiration through the content of web pages. The influence of scholars, and others giving advice based on Islamic principles, can extend from their own (micro-)communities and be placed before a global audience. Analysis, observation and recording of developments such as the online *fatwā* in cyber Islamic environments represents a significant future research area in Islamic Studies.

Notes

1. Bunt, Gary R. (2000), *Virtually Islamic: Computer-mediated Communication and Cyber Islamic Environments*, Cardiff: University of Wales Press, http://www.virtuallyislamic.com. The writer acknowledges the editorial input of his wife, Yvonne Howard-Bunt, in the preparation of this article.
2. ADSL, or Asynchronous Digital Subscriber Line technology, rapidly accelerates web download times. A WAP phone can download Internet content. The MP3 format can download digital music with applications in other information retrieval contexts (such as digitized Qur'an recordings, or sermons).
3. HTML, HyperText Markup Language, forms the basis of web page construction. Arabic HTML is discussed on Arabic Gateway, 'Arabic on the Internet', http://www.al-bab.com/arab/comp2.htm.
4. Fatwa-Online, http://www.fatwa-online.com.
5. As-Sunna Foundation of America, http://www.sunnah.org/fatwa/. This site was prominent on the popular Google search engine's listing, http://www.google.com.
6. Kalimat, http://kalimat.org.
7. As-Sunna Foundation of America, MSA-EC Forum, http://www.sunnah.org/msaec/.
8. Abdo, Geneive, 'Cyberspace frees Iran's rebel cleric', *The Guardian*, 5 August 2000, http://www.guardianunlimited.co.uk/Archive/Article/0,4273,4047913,00.html.
   See also Ali Montazeri, http://www.montazeri.com.

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RELIGION, CULTURE & SOCIETY

Virtually Islamic

Computer-mediated Communication and Cyber Islamic Environments

Gary Bunt