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New Media in the Muslim World: The Emerging Public Sphere

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Citation

Anderson, J. W. (2000). New Media in the Muslim World: The Emerging Public Sphere. *Isim Newsletter*, 5(1), 39-39. Retrieved from <https://hdl.handle.net/1887/17391>

Version: Not Applicable (or Unknown)
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Downloaded from: <https://hdl.handle.net/1887/17391>

Note: To cite this publication please use the final published version (if applicable).

Knowledge and Technology
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The Muslim world is experiencing a media explosion – from street-corner kiosks to satellite television and the Internet. Islamic messages and discussions of them are everywhere. They are proliferating, thanks to increasingly accessible, user-friendly technologies, from the already-familiar tapes and the lowly telephone to the hi-tech Internet, from pulp fiction to new law review journals, from popular culture magazines to multimedia Islamic educational material. Redrawing the dimensions of Islamic discourse, identity, and consciousness extends beyond audience fragmentation to an expanding public sphere of new genre and channels of expression for new voices and interpreters.

Observers and analysts of the Muslim world have become familiar with how cassette tapes and satellite television have changed the propagation of Islam. The face-to-face of sermons and fatwas are increasingly mediated, and Islamic discourse is increasingly embedded in the media tools of modern life. This integration process is as diverse as its channels, as messages migrate between media and the range of interpreters, if not of interpretation, expands accordingly. Expansion is not just of the field. Through the new media, increasing numbers of participants take part in a public sphere in which all have an authority to talk about Islam. In the process, ideas and understandings about Islamic thought and practice may be fragmented and recombined with ideas and experiences of contemporary, often immediate, contingencies of how to lead Muslim lives in increasingly global societies. The new media enabling these changes extend functionally and experientially beyond the already familiar tapes of preachers and their satellite outlets. They are vernacular and down-market, often overlooked in text-based scholarship focused on intellectuals and the more social and behavioral analyses applied to the masses. The new media range from pulp novels and popular culture magazines to new kinds of law reviews in which non-*‘ulama’* join the *‘ulama’* in thinking about the *shari‘a* and its contemporary applications. They also discuss how to be and become Muslim, and how to share Islam with others in non-Muslim countries and in the face of existing Islamic conventions. The

Cover of an ‘Islamic romance’ published in Bangladesh.



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same themes are taken up on Internet chat and World Wide Web sites. The channels of such discourse also include desktop publishing, faxes, the increasingly ubiquitous telephone, and the Internet. These genre and channels dramatically lower the barriers and risks of entry to the public sphere, and elude efforts to contain communication within acceptable – most narrowly within ritual – terms.

In this blurring of boundaries, a vast middle ground is opening between elite, super-literate, authoritative discourse and mass, non-literate, ‘folk’ Islam thanks to increasingly accessible technologies for mediated communication. The old communications ecology of the mass media, with their few senders and many receivers, is giving way to a new public space with nearly as many senders as receivers. Cast in the vernacular, they are rooted in the conditions of modern life – which they often address – are multi-channel, and tied to consumer-level technologies that are associated with and sometimes essential for contemporary professional and middle class life. Above all, they are participatory. Reception, and the sorts of informal deconstruction among intimates, is replaced by participation that displaces authority with engagement, broadening both the forms and content of engagement. Precedents range from the introduction of printing to desktop publishing, from leaflets to home-produced tapes of everything from sermons to folk music. The range of skills linking the singer and the studio, for instance, is increasingly available through user-friendly and distributed ‘intelligence’ built into consumer technology – and into consumers through two generations of spreading mass education.

The horizontal circulation of communication

The ground is shifting and enabling more than opportunities to answer back. While dissent initially attracts attention (of analysts, if not of authorities), the new media facilitate a much wider range as well as volume of views in entering the public sphere. These include alternative views, to be sure, but also mobilization that is horizontal and structured around shared interests and concerns in contrast to the top-down model in mass communications. The telephone becomes a tool for extending personal networks into community mobilization, and new law journals offer arenas for engaging a wider range of actors than traditional authorities in the *‘ijtihād* that actually links the *shari‘a* to contemporary life. Similarly, pulp romances with Islamic themes exemplify the increasing prominence of the vernacular in new media while the Internet, the medium *par excellence* of the ‘virtual community’, creates them on a global scale.

In the past, information deficits encouraged reliance on skilled interpreters to fill in the gaps and impose structure. Such structures of political, religious, intellectual authority are giving way to skills to compose and sift messages, to link and also to move messages between media, to translate and apply both messages and channels. Modernity poses such surpluses of representation in multiple, sometimes alternative lifestyles,

concepts, and ideas about how to live properly; modernity itself becomes a topic of representation and discussion in the popular press, where it is endlessly deconstructed, and also instructed. The slippage between subject and object can be seen in the blurred genres of Islamic novels that introduce themes of Islamic manuals written by *‘ulama’* into vernacular fiction and pop culture magazines, both significantly aimed at female audiences. Other messages also migrate from one medium to another, increasing the horizontal circulation of communication and shifting its registers toward a sense of participation quite beyond the experience of mere reception.

These are indicators of an emerging public sphere of mediated communication between elite and ‘folk’ representations, of intermediate forms between face-to-face interaction and mass media speaking to mass audiences, and of increasing participation through a continuum of forms, discourses, and channels. Its significance is that this range is both broader and more embedded than the limiting cases captured in the ‘civil society’ discussion focused on associations, citizenship, and civility or in characterizations of ‘activist,’ even ‘fundamentalist,’ Islam that increasingly appear overloaded as categories for analysis. Those limited cases are embedded in a wider range which is expanding and emerging along multiple other dimensions that come into view in the volume, *New Media in the Muslim World: The Emerging Public Sphere*.¹

Multiple dimensions of new media in the Muslim world

Continuities in Egyptian popular culture commentary, Walter Armbrust shows, form a tradition of reflection and self-reflection deconstructing alternative framings of modernity that belie easy interpretations of ‘hybridity.’ In a ground-breaking discussion of Islamic romance novels, Maimuma Huq re-sorts the contest of Islamists and secularists in Bangladesh. John Bowen focuses on contemporary proliferation of Islamic law reviews in Indonesia that engage a wide range of contributors, who in turn explore western social science as well as Islamic learning, to give a close account of contemporary consensus-building in one of the Muslim world’s larger publics. The multiple registers of connections with wider publics is the subject of Gregory Starratt’s account of the consumption and reuse of Islamic teaching materials in an American Black Muslim congregation. In it, issues of personal morality are tied to knowledge, including both technology and knowledge of the community of Islam. Hakan Yavuz provides an account of today’s media-saturated Turkey, where new media figure prominently in community-building that circumvents rather than merely challenges authority and previously fixed positions and interpretations. Eickelman describes the censors’ new dilemma with a world where messages easily migrate into alternative channels, alternative media, sometimes subtly borrowing their authority as well as their means. Jenny White tells a more grassroots story of how television in Turkey puts events before the public as they happen, and com-

pares that to how people use the telephone for mobilizing and combining personal networks for public action. On a more global level, the Internet has become a favoured tool of the dispersed and of emerging elites across the Muslim world, from ordinary Muslims with extraordinary command of the medium to vernacular preachers. They in turn lead the way for more orthodox institutions, including new, international Islamic universities, Muslim academies that arose in response to colonialism, and now the venerable Al-Azhar University and Sufi orders that were already transnational.

Commenting on this practical pluralism, Richard Norton describes responses of ‘the slowly receding state’. Behind the specific face of dissent, ‘the discourse that will give shape to change’, he argues, emerges from a broader society in which new media are moving to the centre.² Media have been a measure of modernization at least since Daniel Lerner’s *The Passing of Traditional Society*.³ Mass media were channels of nation-building states and stages for ritualized communication to mass citizens as witnesses. The new media, in their comparative diversity, flexibility, and lower barriers to entry, are channels for diverse, flexible, and more accessible participation than mere witness. This emerging public sphere is not only one of talking back to power, but also one of a wider range of actors who talk to each other, sometimes about power, and often about the power of the new media in their communication. What also emerges from *New Media in the Muslim World* are the multiple dimensions of their embeddedness.

We are widely recognized to be in a period of exploration, which moves into increasingly accessible media with more diverse players, means, and channels. Cassettes, pulp fiction, cheap magazines, but also law reviews and the Internet, are media of migrating messages and ‘blurred genres’, which confound authority, including that formerly reserved (sometimes self-reserved) for intellectuals. This is also a period of exposition, of messages moving into mediated communication from more restricted face-to-face realms. Here, a new communications ecology is emerging that expands the public sphere and participants in it. It is clear that we need to pay more attention to precisely where and how contemporary Islamic (and other) ferment is occurring, including the range of media between its anointed exemplars and supposed bases. ♦

Notes

1. Edited by Dale F. Eickelman and Jon W. Anderson (1999). Bloomington: Indiana University Press.
2. ‘New Media, Civic Pluralism, and the Slowly Receding State’. In *New Media in the Muslim World: The Emerging Public Sphere*, edited by Dale F. Eickelman and Jon W. Anderson, p. 27.
3. New York: The Free Press, 1958.

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