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Islam Takes a Hit

DANIEL MARTIN VARISCO

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 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 cnn.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.¹

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

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.

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 Bayt." This is followed by another general mega 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 Sabr Foundation.

In seventh place is a site (63.175.194.25) dedicated to the work of Shaykh Muhammad Salih al-Munajjid, a Saudi religious authority who is imam of a mosque in al-Khobar. Shaykh Munajjid offers cyber fatwas to solicited questions in Arabic, English, French, Indonesian, Spanish, and Urdu. The next two web sites present a problem, since one is the official home of Louis Farrakhan's Nation of Islam and the other is a large Christian site dedicated to convincing Muslims of the error of their ways. The latter, *Answering Islam*, is subtitled a Christian-Muslim dialogue, although it is a very one-sided dialogue as one sorts through the apologetic information loaded onsite. This is prefigured in a neon-like flashing pair of verses from the Quran and the Bible. The Quranic selection (2:256) reads "Let there be no compulsion in religion; truth stands out clear from error." But this is rhetorically trumped by a verse from John 8:32: "And you shall know the truth; and the truth shall set you free." Scrolling down the "about us" section ultimately finds the intentions of the site creators. "This all said," they admit, "we are Evangelical Christians and agree without reservations with the statement of faith as given, for example, by the World Evangelical Alliance and the Lausanne Committee for World Evangelization." Both creeds emphasize that there is one "truth" and it is not to be found in the Quran.

If you knew nothing or next to nothing about Islam, several of the top ten sites would set you on the right path. The problem is that all of these first-page links are self-consciously subjective, several with a goal to convert the reader. Not until place number thirteen would you find an educational site attempting to treat Islam in an objective way. This is the excellent and updated scholarly compilation (www.arches.uga.edu/~godlas/) of Alan Godlas at the University of Georgia. Unfortunately, the ISIM site is not to be found even in the first hundred on the list (after which I gave up counting). In addition to the long, long list of web pages, Google provides a shorter set of commercially sponsored links. For my entry of "Islam" I could have taken this shortcut to "Meet Tens of Thousands of Muslim Singles for Love or Friendship" (www.MuslimFriendship.com) before I even began to surf. The lesson is that Google is both hit and miss (including a potential Mrs) for anyone looking for a balanced analysis of Islam.

The problem with webobservation

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 web pages which in some way mention Islam. As an anthropologist I am intrigued by the possibility of a new method of webobservation, especially the interactive potential in participating through chat rooms and discussion forums.² 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

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 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.islamworld.net) provides a wide range of links to onsite and offsite pages describing Islamic beliefs and rituals, but does not provide any information on who puts out the site. It is hard to imagine why this derivative site takes precedence over second-ranked [IslamiCity](http://IslamiCity.com), which has been operating since 1995 and announces that almost 280 million hits have been recorded since January 2001. The fact that [IslamiCity](http://IslamiCity.com) is linked by more than 13,500 websites around the world no doubt gives it such high visibility for the search engine. Neither of the first two sites advocates a distinct sectarian version of Islam. Indeed, a visitor to either site would think that one Islam fits all.

observe behaviour and follow up with interviews and casual conversation. Traditional field sites are not likely to be replaced by surfable web sites, but it does seem that the exotic others studied by anthropologists are increasingly to be encountered in html construct rather than ethnographic context alone. This will require a rethinking of how virtual reality is to be related to the more mundane reality of everyday behaviour.

Ironically, the very rationale that has concerned anthropologists to collect information about traditional cultures before it is lost or absorbed in dominant cultures now faces those of us who treat the Internet 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.³ 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. Similarly, long before the U.S. invasion of Afghanistan there was a taliban.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 storage 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 theoretically 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 definitely 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.⁴ Three and a half years ago there were only about one and a quarter million pages for "Islam." The top ten at that point were decidedly more erratic. Oddly, the most rated site was Islam Tanzania (www.islamtanz.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 IslamiCity 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 Movement (www.muslim.org/cont-islam.htm), not to be confused with the main Ahmadiyya Muslim Community website (www.alislam.org). The ninth and tenth slots were taken up by Answering Islam, once again giving space to Christian apologetic against Islam.

Whether entering cyberspace in October 2000 or April 2004, the casual 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 IslamiCity 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 majority of other Muslims considers what both stand for as against the mainstream 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 elsewhere. But Muslims would feel the need to log onto Ahmed Deedat's Combat Kit against Bible Thumpers (www.geocities.com/Athens/Delphi/7974/deedat/deedat.html) for relief.



<http://www.answering-islam.org.uk>, viewed 27 May 2004



<http://www.islamonline.net>, viewed 17 June 2004

Notes

1. Gary Bunt, *Islam in the Digital Age: E-Jihad, Online Fatwas and Cyber Islamic Environments* (London: Pluto Press, 2003).
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.aaanet.org/mes/lectvar1.htm>.
3. Bunt, *Islam in the Digital Age*, 17.
4. Daniel Martin Varisco, "September 11: Participant Webservation of the 'War on Terrorism,'" *American Anthropologist* 104, no.3 (2002): 934-38.

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