

Review: Islam Dot Com: Contemporary Islamic Discourses in Cyberspace

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Mohammed el-Nawawy and Sahar Khamis. Islam Dot Com: Contemporary Islamic Discourses in Cyberspace. Palgrave Macmillan, 2009. ISBN: 978-0-230-60035-5, ISBN10: 0-230-60035-2, 280 pages.

With growing Internet penetration rates and the proliferation of new media outlets in the Muslim world there is a simultaneously growing academic interest in possible social and political changes endorsed by these media. Whereas pioneering studies on the impact of the Internet in the Muslim world originated within the domain of Middle Eastern or Islamic studies, such as the work of Jon Anderson, Gary Bunt, or Daniel Martin Varisco, in recent years we have witnessed a growing interest in this field from scholars with backgrounds in communications studies. A recent contribution to this rapidly expanding body of research has been provided by Mohammed El-Nawawy from the School of Communication at Queens University in Charlotte and by Sahar Khamis from the Department of Communication at the University of Maryland. They have co-authored a book called *Islam Dot Com: Contemporary Islamic Discourses in Cyberspace*, which deals with the virtual Muslim public sphere and the contestation of and deliberation over religious authority and Muslim identity online.

The book analyzes the discourses and deliberations in the discussion forums of three of the most visited Islamic websites, namely IslamOnline.net, AmrKhaled.net, and IslamWay.com. In doing so, it explores the potential impact of the Islamic public sphere and the reconfiguration of the “virtual umma” (i.e. Islamic community) on the creation of multiple identities and resistances, which manifest themselves through various Islamic discourses

online. The book stems from extensive fieldwork and textual analysis of the deliberations taking place on the discussion boards of the above-mentioned websites. The fieldwork stretched over a period of six months, from February to July 2008, and therefore provides a solid empirical base for the subsequent analysis and argumentation. Overall, the whole book is characterized by unprecedented conceptual and empirical richness as well as by a unique combination of English and Arabic sources.

El-Nawawy and Khamis suggest that today many young Muslims live in societies that are going through transitional phases with an uncertain future. Therefore, many of them are trying to find refuge in their religion, and they are seeking religious figures that they can look up to as role models and sources of guidance that can help them make sense of their surroundings and reconstruct their identity. El-Nawawy and Khamis also believe that many traditional Islamic authorities have failed to understand the mentality of the young Muslims or to gain their trust and confidence. This, in turn, has caused many young Muslims to flock to the Internet, where many of them have found the coherence and ontological trust that they have been looking for on Islamic websites. This phenomenon is, according to El-Nawawy and Khamis, particularly relevant to immigrant or diasporic Muslim communities who rely on modern forms of communication to preserve their religious identities and where the vibrant discussions and interactions via the Internet can be viewed as a “virtual ritual” of “identity making.” As a result, the virtual umma is characterized by both feelings of uniformity, as well as diversity and plurality, among its members. The quality of the public sphere in which these deliberations and discussions take place lies at the heart of El-Nawawy and Khamis’ research.

Essentially, Islam Dot Com draws upon Habermas’ theory of the public sphere, which calls for a “rational-critical” communication, outside the institutional boundaries of the authority, as “the ideal standard of modernity.” In analyzing the content of the above-mentioned Islamic discussion forums, El-Nawawy and Khamis compared the discourses found therein with a set of requirements of the public sphere as developed by Jürgen Habermas and further refined by Lincoln Dahlberg. By doing so,

they aimed at investigating whether the public sphere of rational-critical discourse is extended through these Islamic websites and to examine the applicability of the Habermasian concepts to discourses in the discussion forums being studied (under review).

One of the most distinguishing features of the book is its deep theoretical insight and vast command of academic literature on the subject. Especially the two opening chapters, i.e. “The Public Sphere in an Islamic Context” and “Religion in the Virtual Public Sphere: The Case of Islam,” provide rich, state-of-the-discipline literary reviews, which alone will be valuable to scholars and researchers across the communications discipline and Middle Eastern or Islamic studies. The same academic rigor, coupled with a vast number of examples and case studies, is manifested throughout the whole book. Chapter 3, “Is the Umma a Public Sphere?”, provides an exhaustive overview of the historical context behind the development of the concept of the umma throughout different phases of Islamic history and examines the applicability of the public sphere criteria to it. Chapter 4, “The Virtual Umma: Collective Identities in Cyberspace,” explores how new media, especially the Internet, have reformulated and redefined the concept of the umma online. Special focus is given to the creation of what El-Nawawy and Khamis call “collective Muslim identities.” Therefore, the bulk of this chapter is devoted to a detailed textual analysis of postings on the discussion boards of the Islamic websites being studied, in an effort to examine how they reflect these collective Muslim identities online. Finally, Chapter 5, “Islamic Websites: Divergent Identities in Cyberspace,” analyzes how different, or even conflicting, identities emerged through the various discussion boards in the three analyzed websites.

Fundamentally, El-Nawawy and Khamis argue that most of the threads analyzed reflected a “non-deliberative” public sphere, where participants were keen on establishing and reinforcing their religious and ideological beliefs, but they were less apt to support civil discourse on topics that did not easily lend themselves to opinion change and consensus. El-Nawawy and Khamis suggest that the anonymity and easy accessibility that are made possible through these forums have contributed to creating a non-

deliberative environment, rather than improving the quality of a truly rational-critical Habermasian discourse.

Therefore, on a more general level, Islam Dot Com highlights the limitations of using the Internet to enhance civic participation and actual democratic practices. Given the conventional link between the Internet and democratization, which has until recently dominated literature on new media and societies in transition, El-Nawawy and Khamis' work provides us with a great and much needed contribution to the understanding of the religion-technology interactions in diverse Muslim contexts. Similarly, its grand scope and theoretical richness make it an indispensable source for any researcher dealing with the Internet, information and communication technology, and the contemporary Muslim world.