

Review:

Von Chatraum bis Cyberjihad: Muslimische Internetnutzung in lokaler und globaler Perspektive

Göran Larsson

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Egypt, Internet studies, Islam and civil society, Germany, Afghanistan, Morocco, Internet, fatwas, communication studies, blogs, dawah, social media

Von Chatraum bis Cyberjihad: Muslimische Internetnutzung in lokaler und globaler Perspektive, (eds.) Matthias Brückner and Johanna Pink. Ergon Verlag: Würzburg, 2009. ISBN 978-3-89913-632-6, 215 pages.

Von Chatraum bis Cyberjihad: Muslimische Internetnutzung in lokaler und globaler Perspektive, edited by Matthias Brückner and Johanna Pink, consists of a foreword and eight chapters that focus on different aspects of the Islamic and Muslim presence on the Internet. Contrary to most other volumes that could be counted as belonging to the genre of media and religion studies, this compilation has been produced by German-speaking scholars in Germany. From this perspective, it is a contribution that has the potential to supplement the overwhelming number of similar studies that have been produced in English.

The eight chapters in the volume are divided into three subsections. The first focuses on Internet use in the Islamic world, the second on trans-locality and the Internet, and the third on global Islam. Before I turn to the book's contents, it is important to pause and stress that the editors say very little about what they mean by the unclear concepts "the Islamic world" and "global Islam." Without discussing how the material in the book has been selected, the reader is mainly presented with separate case studies relating to Morocco, Afghanistan, Egypt, Germany - and more generally - North America and Europe. The chapters deal specifically with Internet use among

Moroccan youth, bloggers in Afghanistan and Egypt, the interpretation of Islam on the Internet, Shia groups in Germany, online fatwas that deal with political participation, a so-called jihadi online library and Internet-based missionary work by Muslims. However, like many edited volumes, this book suffers from a lack of clear focus. The contributors do not, for example, refer to a common question, theory or method.

For example, whilst Ines Braune's chapter on Internet use among Moroccan youth is based on fieldwork, interviews and participant observation, the great majority of texts in Brückner and Pink's volume are based on an analysis of materials (for example, texts, images, photos) posted on the Internet. Even though it is common to describe the content of web pages and blogs in earlier studies, most chapters in the volume do not pay attention to or raise media theory questions. Ultimately the outcome is descriptive and not analytical. For example, in the chapters by Jens Kutscher and Rüdiger Lohler, the reader is given an interesting and informed description of online fatwas and texts that deal with the concept of *jihad* in both historical and contemporary periods. However, it is not possible to say to what extent Muslims in Germany or in other places make use of these texts. And more importantly, what is the connection between new media and texts produced online? To put it differently, to what extent are the texts posted online dissimilar from the answers found in printed collections of fatwas or juridical and theological discussions about the concept of *jihad*? Even though some of these questions are partly addressed by Alev Inan (especially on p. 91) and Florian Harms, who deals with missionary work (*da'wa*) on the Internet and the rise of new interpreters of Islam, it is difficult to find texts dealing with how Muslims actually make use of the material published on the Internet. We are mainly presented with the material found online. However, this problem is not unique to Brückner and Pink's edited volume, as many studies of religion on the Internet also suffer from being descriptive rather than analytical. This is a reminder of the fact that we still lack methods and empirical studies aimed at finding out how new media are being used by, for example, Muslims and other believers. It is very difficult to study possible connections between online and offline activities. This lacuna is a serious

problem in the study of religion and media. I believe that more studies could benefit and gain inspiration from Ines Braune's attempt to talk to people about how they actually make use of new media.

Contrary to Brückner and Pink, who seem to argue for the necessity of developing an "islamwissenschaftlichen Internetforschung" (Internet research on Islamic studies), I believe that the study of how Muslims make use of and relate to new media should be situated in a much larger context. How "believers" or followers of a specific religious tradition make use of new media is not unique to Muslims. I believe it would be much more fruitful to make cross comparisons between followers of several religious and non-religious traditions. It is also necessary to raise historical questions and consider if, how and to what extent the Internet is revolutionizing the world and to what extent this revolution is different from, say, the print revolution or the development of written language. These questions are not the focus of Brückner and Pink's book. Therefore, it would be unfair to criticise the authors for not dealing with them. Yet, by addressing these and similar questions, it would have been much easier for the contributors to move away from mere descriptions and push toward a much deeper analysis.