

Review:

iMuslims: Rewiring the House of Islam. Islamic Civilization and Muslim Networks

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Keywords

Internet studies, blogs, public sphere, social networks, Internet, jihad, Islam, communication studies, websites

iMuslims: Rewiring the House of Islam. Islamic Civilization and Muslim Networks. Gary R. Bunt. Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2009. ISBN: 978-0807859667, 416 pages.

Gary Bunt, a senior lecturer in Islamic Studies at the University of Wales, has been among the very first researchers who started to systematically analyze the impact of the Internet and information and communication technology (ICT) on Islam and diverse Muslim communities. From publishing his pioneering work *Virtually Islamic* in 2000 he continuously assesses, examines and chronicles what he calls the cyber Islamic environments, that is the many and various manifestations of Islam in the digital age. *iMuslims: Rewiring the House of Islam* presents to readers the results of Bunt's latest research.

The book has an overwhelming scope, ranging from methodological and theoretical issues related to the research of Islam in cyberspace to detailed analysis of particular and diverse segments of the cyber Islamic environments such as the Islamic blogosphere or the use of the Internet by jihadi movements. Bunt clearly demonstrates his command of the subject by the vast number of examples, mainly websites, blogs and videos cited and analyzed in the course of his argumentation. The exhaustive list of primary

sources Bunt used for his research is unparalleled and itself could serve as an authoritative point of reference. The downside of this is that, especially in later chapters, the immense amount of examples could distract the reader and cause him or her to become lost in description.

The fundamental issue of *iMuslims* is the impact of the Internet on how Muslims perceive Islam and how Islamic societies and networks are evolving and shifting in the 21st century. Although the ways in which information technology is applied may seem new and innovative, argues Bunt, much of its content has a basis in classical Islamic concepts. Similarly, he demonstrates how the social networks enabled and enhanced by the Internet link into traditional Muslim networks with a resonance that can be traced back to the time of the prophet Muhammad. The subtitle of the book, *Rewiring the House of Islam*, emphasizes this concept. Bunt uses the term wiring as a metaphor for the creation of new collaborative horizontal knowledge economy reliant on peer to peer networking and innovative uses of hybridized media outlets. He argues that in some contexts the application of the Internet is having an overarching transformational effect on how Muslims practice Islam and how forms of Islam are represented to the wider world. Yet, Bunt acknowledges that many Muslims remain unaffected by the Internet, at least directly, but asserts that for others it has become a crucial adjunct to self-expression and religiosity. Furthermore, he traces these elements of Muslim societies which have been transformed through the newly enabled religion-technology interactions.

The first chapter *Locating Islam in Cyberspace* offers valuable methodological insights into the problematics of finding, accessing and interpreting cyber Islamic environments. As Bunt suggests, rather than a single ummah idealized as a classical Islamic concept, in fact there are numerous parallel ummah frameworks operating in cyberspace, reflecting diverse notions of the concepts of community and Muslim identity. The utilization of the Internet tends to reflect social, cultural and economic limitations. Bunt reaffirms Carl Ernst's (2005) observation that the effect of the spread of Internet technologies is likely to be the reinforcement of

the culturally dominant social networks, as well as the increase of their cosmopolitanism and globalization. At the same time, Bunt argues that a blurring of the lines of religious and secular spheres on the Internet enables individuals to establish reputations for themselves and their opinions in “alternative” spaces, representing a challenge to conventional political and religious authority frameworks. This paradoxical aspect of the Internet, which can simultaneously assert conformity and compliance with existing political order and traditional authorities while fueling resistance and public discontent, is subsequently negotiated through the whole book.

Probably the most salient chapters of the book are the ones dedicated to the Islamic blogosphere and digital jihad. Bunt has examined literally thousands of blogs coming from a wide variety of Muslim contexts, mainly from the Arabic and English blogging zones. His main findings suggest that within these zones there are many separate worlds and networks based on issues relating to cultural, political, and religious factors as much as on geographical location. This in fact corresponds with another recent analysis of the Arab blogosphere (Etlink et al. 2009), which similarly found a network of parallel, yet interconnected, public spheres organized primarily along the lines of nationality and citizenship. As Bunt argues, it is no longer possible to talk about a “blogosphere” in the singular; it may in fact be more appropriate to discuss a series of interconnected blogospheres, interlocked with wider cyber Islamic environments.

Finally, the chapter entitled *Militaristic Jihad in Cyberspace* deals with jihad-oriented groups and the ways they utilize the Internet to promote their specific understanding of Islam and to project affiliation, acquire funding, encourage recruitment, and develop affinities to like-minded networks. Beyond websites, Bunt analyzes video and audio files, such as radical Islamic hip hop, which are disseminated through torrents and peer-to-peer networks. On case studies of Iraq and Palestine Bunt demonstrates that the intensification of the applications of Internet-based technologies for promoting jihad is in line with parallel technological improvements, anonymity tools, cheaper hardware, and increases in technical literacy

among protagonists and their audiences. He also utilizes business models, such as the Long Tail or viral marketing, to increase our understanding of the recent jihadi activities in the virtual social networks.

As has been mentioned above, the book would certainly benefit from more theoretical and less descriptive approach. It offers an amazing amount of examples and case studies, but when it comes to drawing conclusions from the analyzed materials it somehow seems to run out of steam. By this token, Bunt argues that more empirical evidence has to be observed and recorded in order that a more complete impression of contemporary Muslim life can be constructed. This is undoubtedly true, yet I would welcome more profound summarization of the main trends and developments Bunt has observed during his extensive fieldwork. Some of these trends – such as the similarities between on-line and off-line networks; growing confluence between the production of Islamic knowledge and marketing strategies; and the continuing hybridizations of various media outlets – seem actually evident from the presented case studies and should deserve more theoretical exploration and overarching approach.

Nevertheless, iMuslims is a great and much needed contribution to our understanding of the religion–technology interactions in diverse Muslim contexts. Its grand scope and empirical richness make it an indispensable source for any researcher dealing with the Internet, information and communication technology, and contemporary Islam.

References

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