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Surfing the App Souq: Islamic Applications for Mobile Devices

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Abstract:

This article introduces issues associated with Islamic apps for mobile devices, and surveys some of the products that have emerged into the market. It considers the potential impact of mobile phone interfaces in relation to interpretations of Islam and the use of Islamic resources, given that mobile devices have widened potential audiences for online materials in various forms, especially in areas where other forms of digital access may be more problematic. The article also explores some of the religious and ethical concerns associated with mobile phone use.

Keywords:

Islam, information and communication technology, mobile phones, e-commerce

Introduction

Within the changing sphere of mobile computing and increased internet access, there is a sense that the dynamics of web interaction and use are also shifting (if not evolving). In particular, the substantial rise of mobile phone use within previously digitally marginalized contexts has also seen a parallel development in tools and applications for users. These can range from mobile phone micro payment systems through to locally oriented digital services: there can, of course, be a world of difference between the types of phones being used in different economic and social spheres. The ways in which they can be applied to access the internet has significance, in relation to this article, in terms of their impact on the consumption and development of cyber Islamic environments.

Islam and Mobile Phones

The increase in the mobile phone market, and developments in access, will mean over time that phone applications or apps will form a significant part of user interfaces into Islamic and Muslim related content. Of particular

interest is the emergence of a number of Islam related apps for mobile devices.[1] Mobile devices - including mobile phones, media players and personal digital assistants - have been significant in opening up access to the internet in a variety of Muslim contexts; for several years, Islam-oriented applications and programs have been devised for phones, and these have been enhanced with multimedia and Flash elements as technology has further developed.

Mobile phones have become one of the most significant interfaces for internet use, especially given their role as facilitating access for previously marginalised populations and individuals. Significantly, information and communication technology growth has been linked to mobile phone use in a number of contexts.[2] The growth in mobile phone use in previously marginalised markets, such as sub-Saharan Africa and South Asia, has opened up basic mobile phone access for many, including (for some) internet access. Many Muslim sectors have high mobile phone use and ownership (there is an implicit differential between the two), such as the United Arab Emirates, Saudi Arabia, Iran, Lebanon, Indonesia, Turkey and Malaysia.[3]

Whether all the key players within cyber Islamic environments are responding effectively to this change in medium is open to question. As with the early growth of Islamic websites, there is now a vying for influence to promote Islamic apps and other programs to the mobile computing and mobile phone markets, which may have the result of expanding influence on matters of religion.[4] Some Islam-oriented websites are already user-friendly for mobile phones. As with other areas of internet consumption, content developers have seen that the future for internet access is less restrained to the desktop, and with that in mind have focused on the development of mobile phone specific applications. Anyone who accesses web sites with a mobile phone will be aware that web design is critical, with many sites not always integrating content accessibility, bandwidth restraints, clarity and navigation for mobile phones within their design.

Added to the mobile phone market is the growth in other mobile computing devices. Most significantly, in January 2010, Steve Jobs launched Apple's iPad. The device is sized in-between a mobile phone and a laptop, and its unveiling ended months of feverish speculation as to its name, size and contents.[5] Several commentators noted that, with its emphasis on

e-books and movies, the touch-screen device was designed more for the passive consumer rather than the producer of content.[6] It will, no doubt, stimulate the development of a further generation of apps, based on the massive success of those designed for the iPhone, and also encourage competitors offering alternatives. The initial sales of the iPad were limited to the United States, with Apple claiming that 300,000 units were sold during the first week of its 3 April 2010 launch: international launches took place in the following months.[7] iPad internet access was initially restricted to wireless usage, with a 3G mobile-broadband enabled version rolled out later in 2010. The absence of Flash led to speculation on the types of media it would play, as well as sustained discussions in online forums as well as by commentators.[8] A number of iPad ‘killers’ are in various stages of planning, but of course over time there will be various iterations of the iPad.[9] Devices such as the iPad could further encourage such access, depending on cost and accessibility: iPhoneIslam noted that the first version of the iPad supported Arabic reading, but not writing via the keyboard.[10]

Apps for the iPad may be based on their iPhone siblings, although it is likely that a range of apps adapted from iPad Apps, or developed specifically for the iPad, will emerge. The increasingly crowded marketplace for apps contains a variety of distractions for use and download: “there’s an app for that” has been a marketing slogan and cliché. There is a growing sophistication in the nature of Islamic apps on offer, many focusing on ease of access, clarity and user-friendly features. As this market expands, new niche products will develop. Apps provide a specific widget interface on a mobile phone, enabling quick access and implementing the specific multimedia features of a mobile phone, in particular those with 3G. The early rush saw apps offering qibla direction, prayer times, Qur’an recitations and readings, hadith collections, and biographies of the Prophet Muhammad. Some of these were adaptations of content and tools that had been developed for other devices. The granulation of products will be shown in the emergence of apps focusing on specific Muslim branches and affiliations, as well as particular requirements of Islam.

The impact of generic apps, such as those developed by Google, Twitter, Foursquare and Gowalla, are also significant - especially when they are applied as part of cyber Islamic environments. Through their stimulation of discussion, mapping of mosques, and development of social networks, they

form part of an integrated interface between mobile phone and personal computer - allowing Islam to be “always on” for service users and consumers. Generic tools are an area for discussion elsewhere, as the focus of the present article is on Islam-specific products and apps.

The development of Islamic apps and phone products has a number of significant impacts: for phone manufacturers, seeking to promote their brand in a crowded market place, the integration of pre-installed Islamic apps offers a selling point that - if not unique - may be influential in a purchaser’s decision. There is competition, with major manufacturers such as LG and Nokia presenting a variety of models with pre-installed Islamic features. This is not a new innovation, given that Islam-oriented phones such as the Ilkone, developed in Lebanon, emerged in 2003. There has also been a long-standing market in Islamic phone tones, such as recordings of the adhan (call to prayer) and Qur’an recitations.

The phone market has moved substantially in the past decade, with improvements in memory, audio-visual quality, and 3G coverage. This has stimulated the development of multimedia applications, in particular for the iPhone, BlackBerry and Android phones, and for Pocket PCs. It has also generated a number of ethical and religious issues in association with mobile device use.

Islamic ethics and mobile phone use

Determining whether use of mobile devices for ‘Islamic’ purposes is appropriate has been a multifaceted subject of Muslim scholarly discussion. In Egypt, al-Azhar Sheikh Ali Gomaa presented a fatwa or religious opinion against the use of Qur’an-ic recitation recordings as ‘phone tones’, suggesting that they were disrespectful to the Divine Revelation.[11] This contextual opinion determines that ringtones are seen as a disruption, and their Divine Message may not be imparted or contemplated on in the format of a ringtone. Gomaa suggested that other Islam related tones could be used instead, such as praises or chants derived from the secondary source of the hadith (traditions associated with the Prophet Muhammad and his companions):

“The usage given in the present question gets the verses of the Qur’an out of that Shari’ah context into another one where they are used to

alarm when a call is received. Consequently, one's attention to contemplating the meanings of the Qur'anic verses will be interrupted in order to answer the calls. In addition, this surely will lead to the abrupt interruption of the verse and thus severance of the meaning - and even inversion of the meaning at times - upon stopping the recitation (ringtone) to answer the calls.

“The same applies to the Adhan; it is improper to make it a ringtone, as the Adhan is a notification for the start of Prayer time. Thus, using it as a ringtone brings about confusion and makes people mistakenly think that the time for Prayer is due. It also involves using the Adhan in something other than that for which it is prescribed.”[12]

Such issues associated with mobile devices have increasingly become an issue of concern and debate, within diverse Muslim sectors. In Saudi Arabia, Sheikh Abdul Aziz al-Sheikh had sought to ban camera-enabled phones on the grounds of their potential for immoral use.[13] In India, representatives of the Deoband Darul Uloom Darul Ifta noted the issue of the intrusion of phones into the mosque: “One can have worldly or religious talks only as much as necessary by mobile phone in a state of Etikaf (secluding oneself in mosque with the intention of worship).”[14] This opinion was also circulated to Deobandi institutions elsewhere. For several years, in a number of contexts, there has been consternation in mosques when mobile phones ring during prayer: “The one who forgets to turn off his mobile phone during the Friday khutbah [sermon] has to turn it off if it rings, even if the ringtone is permissible, because leaving it disturbs the khateeb [the person giving sermon] and other worshippers, and distracts them from the obligation of listening to the khateeb.”[15] In South Africa, Mufti Ebrahim Desai provided a detailed breakdown on whether it was permissible to continue prayer if a mobile phone went off due to an individual's forgetfulness: “In short, if ones phone starts to ring in salaah [prayer] and it causes distraction, he must switch off the phone or cancel the ringing with one hand and in a swift and appropriate manner as described above so that it does not appear to the onlooker that he is not in salaah.”[16]

There have been mixed responses to the use of Islamic content on mobile phones, with scholars debating their utility: IslamOnline's “Ask the Scholar”

The question can be contextual: for example, the text of the Qur'an, according to one scholar, cannot be viewed in the bathroom on a mobile phone (or any other device):

“In fact, it is not allowed for a person to put the words that stand for the testification [sic] of faith (*‘La ilaha illa Allah Muhammad Rasool Allah’*) on the mobile screen, as the mobile may be taken to the bathroom. Things that contain the name of Allah should be kept far from impure places like WC.”

“However, if the person is quite sure that the words of *tawheed* (There is no god but Allah, Muhammad is the Messenger of Allah) will be kept remote from impurities (for example, if the person leaves his mobile phone outside while entering the WC or switches it off before entering), then there is nothing wrong in having that words [sic] appear on his mobile.”[17]

The response can also be in relation to *how* the Qur'an is mediated via the phone. An audio-only recitation is seen as being appropriate within a bathroom:

“It is not *haram* (forbidden) to take these mobile phones into bathrooms because they do not come under the same rulings as the *Mushaf* (printed copy of the Qur'an). This is so, even after Qur'an has been recorded on them, because it is sound which is contained inside it, and not writing that is visible.”[18]

As with many other subjects, the discussions regarding appropriate use of mobile phones and other technology are nuanced. Dialogues on the application of mobile phones will be found in many other contexts, including the long-running topic on the legality (or not) of ‘SMS Divorce’, where intention of divorce is sent to a partner by text message.[19] There are also discussions on marriage by mobile phone, linked to wider concerns on internet marriage. There are a variety of Islamic opinions on many aspects of mobile phones, which have evolved over several years in response to technological developments. There are also concerns expressed in forums regarding the veracity of Islamic applications, especially those which do not fit within a user's worldview:

“I got so excited with mine, I downloaded so many apps! Then when I looked back and went through some of them such as the Islamic library one it was clearly Shia from the titles of the book so I thought a thread where we could post apps we have or have heard of and know are according to the Quran and sunnah and are reliable in terms of the accuracy when it comes to the Quran or Hadith apps would be useful.”[20]

However, mobile phones have become big business in many Muslim contexts, with the exponential growth in access coupled with reduced costs: the use of mobile phone content is an adjunct to other Islam-related material presented elsewhere on the internet. In terms of their being used for internet access, surfing for ‘Islamic’ content is only a small strand of much wider online habits, embracing Web 2.0 applications, social networking and multi-media. The model of an individual rooted on a desktop has mutated, as alternate interfaces enabling mobile internet communication have evolved in many forms. In contemporary contexts, all of these media forms can be said to be digital in many ways, and some would say there is no separation between the internet and other media. Rather, there is an integrated media, some of which is institutionalized, official and formal; some is within the private sector; some is unofficial and individual. There are points in-between, and connectivity between these spheres. At times, it becomes difficult or unnecessary to distinguish between the virtual and non-virtual, as the forms of Islamic expression blur together, and new ways of Islamic interaction develop.

Islamic apps

Observation of software and phone apps is critical if we are going to develop an understanding of internet usage and cyber Islamic environments in the next decade. This is linked with the phenomenal rise in mobile phone ownership and usage, which has gone some ways in some contexts to reduce the digital divide (subject to censorship and related considerations). I discussed in my book *Virtually Islamic*, published in 2000, how early adopters strategy of portals and Islamic internet service providers placed portals and organisations in significant positions of online authority and influence.[21] Now that pattern has the potential of being reproduced by those providing apps with Islamic content. While it may be an elite using iPhones and relat-

ed products at present, costs will go down and similar products will become available on other phones and interfaces.

This is very much the first generation of apps (certainly for 3G devices), so there are expectations in terms of potential improvements. What follows is a snapshot of popular Islamic apps, accessed on diverse mobile devices. It is recognised that there are specific issues of access and compatibility to address, and also that platforms and organisations which react to mobile interface development in a positive manner gain greater audiences.

A key entry point within Islamic apps would be in relation to the Qur'an. While memorization of the Qur'an is seen as a virtue, traditionally, the Qur'an can be accessed through listening to or delivering a (portion of) recitation and/or reading the text. Usability is a key element within the context of online access of the Qur'an, in a multitude of formats.[22] For the mobile phone, Guided Ways Technologies developed iQuran, a fully searchable text, with audio recitation. The Lite version is free to download, and contains a single translation of the Qur'an; the paid-for Pro version contains further English translations, and translations in several other languages; it also features a wider choice of six Qur'an *mutadjiwid* (reciters), compared with the Lite version's single reciter, the Egyptian Sheikh Mahmud Khalil al-Husari.[23] The free Lite version can be navigated in English and Arabic. In my use, the text in the Lite iQuran could not be turned into landscape mode (except for the opening surah) - unlike in Pro mode - which makes clarity problematic. Using the apps outside of 3G or wireless range means that some of their features are non-functional, for example the Qur'an recitation in Quran (unless it has previously been downloaded). The small text can be difficult to discern (especially on the bumpy bus ride I was on while testing the app!).

Guided Ways also produce Quran Reader Pro with translations in several languages, and different versions of the English translation, which works in Pocket PCs, BlackBerrys, Palms, and Java enabled phones. As well as being available via Guided Ways, iQuran is available through several other outlets, including through the App Store on iPhone. It can also be found on the iTunes Store: this broadens the potential market for a niche product, especially among those less inclined to go to a specific 'Islamic' online store. Feedback in the App Store has been positive from users, although some

complain about the cost, and others wanted an English audio translation alongside the Arabic recitation.[24]

Other Qur'an products are available: Egyptian company iPhoneIslam developed al-Mus'haf as a reproduction of the text of the Qur'an in Arabic. This can be magnified, and this certainly aided clarity for the small screen. The blog Arab Crunch noted: "Al-Mus'haf makes you feel like reading the Quran on a real physical Quran; it gives you a very realistic hands-on experience of flipping a paper-book by simply dragging the pages corner. It also has natural paper behavior and natural page reflection, shadows and realistic paper sound effects." [25] In as far as a digital copy can possess the 'feel' of the traditional printed or calligraphed Qur'an manuscript, there is a sense of familiarity of layout, typeface and ornamentation. A digital copy would, like other copies, be identical to a printed or written copy in terms of content and order. Al-Mus'haf can be difficult to navigate between surah sections, as there is no 'conventional' index. It is entirely in Arabic, with no commentary, requiring a level of familiarity and literacy from the reader.

Whether al-Mus'haf or iQuran would be seen as 'appropriate' or even necessary for use within a mosque setting is debatable. Some copies of the Qur'an come with exegesis (tafsir) as to the meaning of the text, and one would imagine that there is a demand for an app incorporating such commentaries and interpretations; the meaning of the Qur'an has also been translated into a number of languages, a number of which can be found online (and therefore available to mobile internet users). Versions could also be potentially developed with app interfaces.

A number of apps are available offering information on prayer, including qibla direction (prayer direction towards Mecca), prayer times and calls to prayer.[26] Face Makkah uses GPS (Ground Positioning Satellites) in order to provide a scientifically accurate qibla orientation.[27] 'Islamic' apps are not always necessary to do this. There are tools available mashing together Google maps and GPS, which enable a user to locate the mosque nearest to their location; this can also be determined through use of an internet browser on a mobile phone. GuidedWays' iPray provides automatic adhan alerts, and enables prayer timing to be calculated depending on city; this is reliant on proximity to a location within the database. Obtaining the precise time to pray is an important ritualistic element in Islam, and is based on scientific calculations; there are also a number of websites (also accessible

via mobile devices), which may provide more nuanced calculations based on more precise locations, given that there can be subtle differences even within a time-zone.[28]

In a related area, 'Fortification of the Muslim' is an app providing a searchable selection of supplications (du'a) or prayers, appropriate for specific occasions: This app is based on the Hisnul Muslim collection by Sheikh Sa'eed ibn Ali ibn Wahf al-Qahtani, which can also be found in other online formats.[29] iHadith, developed by TkXel, provided a complete database of collected hadith resources for the iPhone.[30] The same developers also created an app for participating in the minor pilgrimage (umrah), with a step-by-step guide to the pilgrimage stations, the du'a for umrah ritual, and an integrated Google map of Mecca.[31] The use of mobile devices in the precincts of Mecca is a controversial subject, and they have been generally proscribed, although this does not seem to stop pilgrims from their use.[32] TkXel have developed numerous other Islam related apps.[33]

Levels of religious obligation in relation to diet were also covered by GuidedWays' 'Halal Food Guide for Mobile Phones', which provides detailed information on food ingredients to determine whether they are Islamically permissible for consumption.[34] The Islamic apps market is spread around phone types and developers, with applications for other phone formats also widely available, for example the Android apps produced by Islamicapp.com.[35]

The significance of apps is difficult to measure at present, due to a lack of information about the number of international downloads (outside of the App Store) and the possibility of apps being illegally copied. It is feasible to consider that significant players within the Islamic information marketplace will be developing their own multi-platform apps to provide their own translations and perspectives. Those operating generic interfaces with built in browser compatibility for general mobile phone use can only benefit from promoting their worldview to an increasingly web-enabled audience.

Some services have already oriented towards the phone. Developments have come not just from the software industry, but from traditional centres of Islamic learning. Al-Azhar University in Cairo is a traditional centre of Sunni Islamic scholarship, with links to the Al-Azhar Mosque established in the

10th century. Al-Azhar developed El-Hatef El-Islami or the Islamic Hotline, which has been created with a mobile interface. Whilst not at the time of writing available as an app, El-Hatef enables users to phone, text or email the service (for a fee) and receive advice by return. Al-Azhar's Grand Imam Mohamed Sayed Tantawi officially endorsed the site.[36] Established in 2000, the service launched in the UK in 2009; the service is priced according to local market rates.[37] Related phone services include recordings of Qur'an interpretation, and a prayer service. No data was available as to how long an 'average' call would take. According to its publicity, the service had "the mission to become the global and primary source of information for Moderate Islamic Teachings in IT & Telephony medium, initially through the medium of Interactive Voice Response (IVR) systems, and subsequently, via Internet through unified messaging and e-debit cards.

"Islamic Hotline or El-Hatef El-Islami is a pay-per-call service which is online 24/7, ready to receive callers' queries at any time of day to give reliable answers by AL-AZHAR [their emphasis] Scholars, in Egypt after 24 hours, and outside after 48 hours. This easy to use service has begun in Arabic and has been translated to English, Urdu, Bengali, Indonesian, Malay and Senegalese (Wolof)."[38]

While not as extensive as the opinions and answers to questions available on databases such as Islam Online or Islam Q&A, there are listings of Frequently Asked Questions available onsite, indicating a range of questions and concerns: these were the same questions in Arabic and English. Family relations, sexual relationships and ritual dominated these listings, but this is no indication of the types of calls that are received on the Islamic Hotline, or the weight of traffic to the service. The key element within this present discussion is that this is a mobile phone enabled resource, established by a traditional centre of Islamic influence and scholarship. It sets a likely precedent for other related activities - which blur the distinction between religious authority, Islamic 'online' interfaces and the phone.

Conclusions

The impact of increased and varied phone applications in the name of Islam is transformative, in that it offers wider access to Islamic resources (amongst a competitive marketplace) and digital access continue to increase. As 3G

phone technology becomes more widely available, evolves (towards 4G) and is integrated into more phones, then the key providers of apps and other phone compatible services have the potential to be a significant channel of influence and authority. Islamic software products continue to develop at the cutting edge of technological innovation, so as new products for mobile phones enter the marketplace, one can expect developers and content providers to respond with Islamically 'appropriate' applications. The modes and communications dynamics of scholars, opinion providers and petitioners (or consumers) are shifting in response to technological developments, while perhaps maintaining the essence of long-held traditions of religious authority and interpretation. Following these trends will be a significant area for observers of Islam in the contemporary world.

Biographical note

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Endnotes

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