



# CyberOrient

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# Online and Offline Continuities, Community and Agency on the Internet

Jon W. Anderson

## Abstract

*How the Internet spawns community and gets its features into offline life is a recurring problem met in searches for “impacts” of its successive iterations in the Middle East and arises particularly in assessing equivocal findings most recently about social media in the Arab Spring uprisings. But the problem is more methodological than ontological: it lies in viewing the Internet through a media lens on communication as message-passing and “influence” as the outcome to be identified. The Internet and its current embodiment for new users as social media have a richer – and, I argue, normal – sociology in a more extended habitus explored here through comparison of longer-term, intermediate-term, and immediate processes highlighted by recent research that give better pictures of the Internet as networking and as cultural performance, and of appropriate methodologies that will retrieve their features.*

## Keywords

*Internet studies, activism, blogs, public sphere, cyberactivism, social networks, Internet, social media, information and communication technology, communication studies, Arab Spring*

Continuities between online and offline life, social fields, and actions have been a persisting – and increasingly take on the character of a fundamental – problem for those studying and thinking about the social life of and on the Internet (Gruzd, Wellman and Takhteyev 2011; Katz et al 2001; Hampton and Wellman 2003; Matei and Ball-Rokeach 2001; Nie 2001; Best and Krueger 2006).<sup>1</sup> Thinking about their relations in the Middle East tends to follow a predictable curve, in which each new Internet technology from the World Wide Web and portals in the 1990s to social media in the last decade is first greeted as liberation technology, enabling alternatives, and empowering those who grasp them. Then, skepticism sets in as the new

online social formations are found to draw on old offline resources – not to be so revolutionary or liberating as initially hyped – or not to have quite the online resonances expected. As attention moves on to newer technologies, the cycle repeats, most recently on the roles of social media and their practitioners in popular uprisings from Iran, various “Twitter Revolutions,” and what some characterized as a “Facebook Revolution” in Egypt. Most of the more aggressive claims have been backed off as further inquiry has shown wider ranges of existing social resources, practices, and roles that online activists draw on and at least to some extent draw into their online constructions (Aday et al. 2012) or into a repertoire of communications reflecting a “media ecology” (Axford 2012, Kuebler 2011, Lim 2012). Taken together, the literature seems to affirm that online activism – and more generally online life – partly translates and partly replicates the offline. But the disconnect persists; so what accounts for it?

One might suggest persistent premature conceptualization, or it may be an artifact of method somewhat closer to the ground than revolutionary analysis. Analyses attributing positive structuration to the Internet treat it locally as an independent variable, having an “impact,” while those emphasizing its own social construction treat it distantly as a dependent variable, and in both cases ontology recapitulates methodology. More measured political science seems, after initial attributions of structuration to the Internet (e.g., Alterman 1998, Lynch 2007), to settle on more modest roles as “catalyst” of social and political change (Alterman 2011, Lynch 2011). Others in communications studies tend toward a larger, more positive role as “affordances” (Howard 2010), a concept originally adopted from human-machine interface studies by the network sociologist Barry Wellman (2002, Wellman and Hampton 2003) to capture how Internet use expands social networks on their margins. Focused perhaps by our up-close-and-personal default (aka, fieldwork), anthropologists have been more caught up in the ethnographic moment of getting the description right, or in the fervor of their interlocutors to get the interpretation right. I don’t claim this to be a particularly profound insight – some might dismiss it as mundane or as no insight at all – but I do think these are compelling rea-

sons to back off a bit and to seek a more comprehensive view of the subject and a more integrative perspective.

Common to these treatments is a strong outcomes orientation that obstructs conceptualization of behaviors, mechanisms, strategies composing a more comprehensive habitus in at least three ways. They are left theorizing about too little data, particularly about what came before the outcomes they seek to explain. Differing conceptions of what actors bring to situations and find in situations really point to different kinds of data about their relations to those situations that need to be united. Bourdieu's concept of practice (1977) as a larger body of data (than outcomes intellectualized by actors or by analysts) provides a useful starting point for bringing more information to bear and to resolve the indeterminacy that particularly bedevils thinking about the hard case of online-offline relations that is cyberactivism or the movements, links, connections – in Castells' (1996) terms, “flows” – between online activities and consciousness and those offline. Sassen's (2000) specification of such flows as “social thickening” (of the global in local sites) and “hollowing out” (of local institutions) opens that process, which can be a first step in thinking about the Internet in terms of online/offline practical continuities. Second, as activities the subject of online and offline continuities is really about computer-mediated communication (CMC), at least in the minimal sense of actual practice on the Internet. The question is how it figures, and for the most part the answer has been as communication: whether as tool or as medium, the Internet is framed above all as communication and fundamentally of information. This mostly seems self-evident. After all, is that not how we (anthropologists, other observers, practitioners) experience the Internet in the first instance and throughout? For whatever reason, this seems the settled, consensus view across the range of analyses of contemporary turmoil across the Middle East in which the Internet figures: the Internet, and its component technologies, whether one attributes agency to them or not, facilitates, catalyzes, affords, enhances agency through communication by providing information that adds to consciousness, on the one hand, and mobilization, on the other. I don't propose that this is wrong, but that we cannot tell when it is right because it is limited by a model,

methodology, and framing drawn from an altogether different format – or socio-technical formation – of communication than the Internet’s and particularly than “social media” on which so much attention currently focuses, and focuses away from their habitus. Framing in terms of communications and its outcomes, typically measured by some programmatic ideal, is at the expense of process and the practices that compose Internet activities.

My own approach to the Internet in the Middle East figures in this estimation. I have been interested in Internet implementation in the region and drawn to those who do it (Anderson 1995, 2000, 2003-04, 2007, 2011, Anderson and Hudson 2008), who largely though by no means exclusively have roots in computing far more than in media, as have social media cyberactivists as well (Valeriani 2011, Pollock 2011, Della Ratta and Valeriani 2012). So does the Internet: its roots are in computing, as are its key developments including the Web and its characteristic portals that conveyed the Internet to the public as a publishing medium down to – especially to – social media, or what is called Web 2.0 that are the Internet to the non-computing public. Its originating concept and implementing structure throughout has been the subordination of communication to computing which its engineers describe as removing “intelligence” from the system to its margins (see Abbate 1999). Its underlying structure and developer practice implements what computer scientists call “von Neumann architecture,” or “Turing machines,” which underlies all contemporary computing and distinguishes today’s computers from the calculation machines that preceded them. Its basic idea is that operations as well as data are each “machine-independent,” handled entirely in software, where results of operations on data feedback to modify further operations in the software, which is what makes it possible to model natural processes. The Internet’s engineers routinely think of it as software that makes it possible to use any medium of signals propagation to connect any programmable machine, and of its applications as modeling some higher-order process such as email or electronic bulletin boards and newsgroups that are progenitors of today’s social media. Social media model or, more specifically, incorporate models of and proceed by generating more models of social behavior, as its

current apodictic developers such as of Google and Facebook are keenly aware (Levy 2011, Lacy 2008, Kirkpatrick 2011, Mezrich 2009). Their programming models activities and practices that user-contributed and user-distributed content extends as models of worlds they are in, worlds they want and, somewhat more problematically, enact, which are not the same thing, except as modeling.<sup>2</sup>

This may seem a strong claim and even perverse in its subordination of communication to computing. Don't more people communicate than compute? And surely all those newbie users aren't computer scientists but otherwise ordinary people tweeting, blogging, facebooking. But understanding that activity as modeling actually frees communication from comparison to broadcasting and operationalized there as passing messages that change dispositions of recipients, which fails to register how what is called "user-contributed content," the *sina qua non* of social media, extends the programmers' modeling in a von Neumann sense – in this case of social processes. Artists understand this implicitly as in Clay Shirky's arguments for "how technology makes consumers into collaborators" (2011, also Shirky 2008). It is a commonplace in the web-designer realm that progressively more "user-friendly" software (i.e., that incorporates progressively more user behavior) collapses distinctions between consumers and producers that originate in studies of mass communication, particularly since producers do not need to own the infrastructure, and thanks to the intervening variable of software that also in political-economy terms is machine-independent.

More modestly, my claim would be that shifting emphasis from thinking about CMC primarily as communication to its basis in computing opens up analysis to reconciling the fundamental indeterminacy over the Internet as both causing and caused by social relations. It shifts the focus from outcomes, opens the field to additional data about its practices, and in the hard case of change, has the advantage of exposing the parts in motion. Here, I draw on two recent articles out of the plethora on cyber-dissent in the recent Middle East that usefully focus on the evolution of online-off-line relations from the fields of political science and communication that typically bracket this discussion: Courtney Radsch's "Core to commonplace:



the evolution of Egypt's blogosphere," which appeared in *Arab Media and Society* in 2008 following the April 6 movement, and Babak Rahimi's "Affinities of dissent: cyberspace, performative networks and the Iranian Green Movement," in *CyberOrient* (2011). These are not the latest or most comprehensive works on their subjects; but I am not concerned here with resolving those debates. Radsch brings forward data about networks and Rahimi about situated performance that trace evolving relations between online and offline activity that parallel in shorter terms and narrower spaces my own earlier account of Internet implementation in the Middle East (Anderson 2003–04) and update that to comparison with social media in ways that together may contribute to resolving the indeterminacy over online effects offline and vice versa, bring that discussion into better alignment with analyses developed elsewhere, and better contribute data from the Middle East to their refinement.<sup>3</sup>

My goal is not a new narrative of cyberactivism. Instead, I believe that "catalyst" and "affordances" are too weak and open-ended as conceptualizations of how Internet technologies figure in or contribute to offline environments and to changes in them. There is here more comprehensive task of conceptual resolution, or at least bringing separate conceptualizations into a common frame, which is the holistic goal of anthropology. It is primarily as an anthropologist that I approach this task and not as a political scientist interested in power or from a more humanist perspective on communication as meaning transfer. Although it is not my goal here, better outcome measures, I believe, will come from better understanding the processes that produce them.

### Activities and socio-technical formations of IT

Going back to the first generation of Internet implantations in the Arab Middle East in the 1990s before the Internet was widely available to general publics, *Fig. 1* aligns technologies, actors, activities and gross social formations linking them as stages in the Middle East's going online and compares them with the similar evolution in online Islam. The purpose was to identify and specify different kinds of "virtual communities" as reference groups and

their practices that linked online with offline activities, principally work – that is, focusing on occupations as key sites of connection and crossover.

Technology	Muslim (cultural) space	Mid East (political) space	Sociological Habitus
<p><i>1970s-1980s</i></p> <p>interactive computing</p> <p>WANs, MIS, 'minis'</p> <p>Listserv, newsgroups</p>	<p><i>Technological Adepts</i></p> <p><i>diaspora populations</i></p> <p><i>scientists and engineers</i></p> <p><i>put texts online</i></p>	<p><i>Technocrats</i></p> <p>administrative modernization</p> <p>in government and orgs</p>	<p><i>Creole Journeys</i></p> <p>internationalists</p> <p>public service</p> <p>modernization</p>
<p><i>Early to Mid-1990s</i></p> <p>personal computers give access</p> <p>World Wide Web for publication</p>	<p><i>Culture Managers</i></p> <p>official and oppositional 'content' providers</p> <p>restore context</p>	<p><i>Entrepreneurs</i></p> <p>IT niche businesses</p> <p>development = globalization of markets</p>	<p><i>Contending Elites</i></p> <p>information managers</p> <p>nationalists</p> <p>globalization</p>
<p><i>Late 1990s</i></p> <p>interactive Web</p> <p>global networking</p>	<p><i>Modulators</i></p> <p>add social and psychological contexts</p> <p>'new' ulema, modern professionals</p>	<p><i>Software Developers</i></p> <p>programmers and designers</p> <p>form internal/ regional diaspora</p>	<p><i>Postmodern Nomads</i></p> <p>'knowledge workers'</p> <p>transnational job circuits</p>

Fig. 1. Adapted from J. W. Anderson, "Vers un théorie techno-pratique d'Internet dans le monde arabe" (Maghreb-Machrek, Winter 2003-04). WAN = Wide Area Network, MIS = Management Information Systems, WWW = World Wide Web.

This chart is an attempt to line up developments in Muslim (cultural) space with a similar evolution in Arab (political) space, the characteristic technologies which those developments engaged, and the habitus they formed. Reading across lines up related developments; reading down, the progressions of those developments. So, for instance, the multi-user, interactive, networked computing of the 1970s and 1980s was embraced by technological adepts to bring Islam on-line and by technocrats to bring Arab governments on-line in a pattern that recalls what Benedict Anderson (1990) called “creole journeys.” Subsequently, with the World Wide Web came culture managers in the Islamic realm and entrepreneurs in the Middle Eastern around a habitus of elite contention, which modulated with the increasingly interactive Web into postmodern nomads moving around and between both spheres, passing skills and themselves between them in new patterns of mobilities of persons and skills. One of the things this chart shows is how, at any particular stage, Muslim and Middle Eastern tech actors were using, and contributing to uses of, the highest available Internet technology – whether the pre-Web Internet of the research world where it originated, the World Wide Web that took the Internet public, or the interactive Web later called Web 2.0 that spawned social media. It does not attempt to resolve priority of technology (on the left) or sociology (on the right) but to show gross features of their alignments in the evolution or development of Internet Islam (Anderson 2002) and in the Middle East’s coming online. The latter is based on a comparative study of Internet implementations in Jordan, Egypt, Syria and Saudi Arabia (Anderson and Hudson 2008).

Both progressions (in the cultural and the political spheres) began with technological adepts, who had gone or been sent overseas to study in the same high tech precincts where the Internet first spread beyond its original development (see, Abbate 2000). In the Islamic space, these were mostly students who, like their peers, brought avocational interests on-line, in their case Islam in the form of scanned texts of the Quran and Hadith collections as a kind of database they could search and discuss with co-religionists online along with issues of life in non-Muslim societies. Their counterparts in the political space were technocrats aiming to apply technologies of com-

putation-based, data-driven analysis to tasks of administrative modernization and, beyond that, informational freedom to their countries. Among the former are many now anonymous members of Muslim Student Associations, starting with chapters at the University of Southern California and MIT, which in the 1970s were academic homes of key Internet implementers. Among the technocrats was a similar cohort who received PhDs in computer science at the point it was becoming distinct from electrical engineering.<sup>4</sup> Dr. Marwan Muasher became famous as Jordan's Minister of Information for installing the Internet free of restrictions placed on media. Dr. Ahmed Nazif in Egypt went from a government think tank that introduced the Internet to become Egypt's first Minister of Communication and Information Technology with rollout of public Internet (and later Prime Minister), and Dr. Sami Khiyami in Syria taught a generation of engineers who founded the Syrian Computer Society to campaign for introducing the Internet there.

This phase was followed by the Internet's introduction into public use with the World Wide Web, which opened the Internet to less technically skilled cadres of culture managers. Activists and official spokespersons for Islam came online to provide "correct" interpretation of Islam in place of what they regarded as religious amateurism of tech adepts. New actors in the national spaces were for the most part IT entrepreneurs seeking business and often trained in it and in applications of computer science. Characteristic of culture managers were shifts from tech adepts' and technocrats' perspectives on IT as development tool to stronger views of IT as development sector – a shift in both cases to "local" content and modeling the Internet around it.

From these elite contentions of culture managers and the technologically adept emerged what were then called "knowledge workers," such as celebrated in the first Arab Human Development Report (2002). They range from engineers creating IT businesses focused on regional markets to seminary students at Qom who set about programming access to its libraries of religious texts (Amir-Ebrahimi 2008) to Web designers patronized, some-

times sponsored by, sometimes seeking out da'wa organizations, such as Islamonline.net, which featured Yusuf al-Qaradawi (Gräf and Skovgaard-Petersen 2009) and a coterie of “young Azhari” (Zeghal 1999) bringing Islam into contemporary vernaculars and concerns. Circulations between Egypt, the Levant, the Gulf, even to Southeast Asia traced an internal diaspora of post-modern nomads moving among high-tech firms, training programs, conferences, and projects that all took advantage of the proliferation of global networking in Muslim environments for programming the more interactive Web.

This comparison traces parallel developments that broadened the spheres and practices of both technological and cultural adepts by opening the strong tie networks of each through weak ties to the other. Sociologically, it is well established that information flows from strong tie nodes (such as friends and family or, in this case, educational cohorts) where everyone knows the same things through weak ties to friends of friends who know different things (Granovetter 1983). This is how the Internet neither merely reproduces existing networks nor creates wholly new ones but expands networks on their margins – i.e., as weak ties, which Wellman (2002) conceptualized as “affordances.” Designating action possibilities in the field of human-computer interaction,<sup>5</sup> affordances such as email or community websites that he studied may be thought of as stronger than catalysts because they don't unleash blocked actions but enable the specific ones of their means. In this sense, the Internet does not unleash somehow restrained democracy, protest, dissent, social movements; instead, it opens channels that convey the properties of those channels – in other words, “networking” – through their performance.

Internet networking and internet performances can extend this comparison of actor formations in two important ways by including Radsch's focus on networks and networking in the emergence of the Egyptian blogosphere about half a decade later and Rahimi's on Internet performances in Iran's “Twitter Revolution.” Twitter and blogs have much in common: they exist socially through and as networks of links and skilled performances. The

solitary tweeter or blogger is just that, solitary. Success in each is registered in the form of links on blogs and accumulating followings by subscribing to tweets in a game of building profiles and forming alliances through adept practice of the medium that connect to others in games of reputation management. Blogs are a more extended version of Twitter, which came later and was initially described as mini-blogging for its short (140 character) messages. Blogs become networked through links to others via blogrolls, which are a feature of all blogging software, and getting others to link to one's blog (known as exchanging links). The same sociology extends to Facebook: each identity is a node in a network (of "friends") and is performed through posts that build a more durable reputation, known as a "wall," than a record of Tweets, but more out of fragments (like Tweets) than blog entries. Together, these comprise what are vernacularly termed "social media," for the extensive interaction they provide, essentially to model self-fashioning.<sup>6</sup>

Radsch's formulation of networking in the Egyptian blogosphere can be aligned with these features. She depicts the emergence of the Egyptian blogosphere in three stages similar to mine:

1) Initially, a few dozen Egyptians discover and tinker with blogs as Internet access extends (and becomes nearly free) in Egypt and blogging software internationally after 2002. They form a loose body of technological adepts who experiment with the format by bringing their interests online in it. Beginning as self-expression, they "perform" for other bloggers, acquiring blogging skills, tips, and tricks from each other and by applying those to their own Egyptian and youth-culture content. In my terms, theirs are creole journeys, or projects in Radsch's more active representation of self-fashioning online. She labels this an experimentation phase that produced a "blogger elite" in Egypt, certainly blogging adepts who gained reputations for it.

2) Blogs gained exposure outside their own precincts and outside the Internet through roles taken up in offline movements, like Kefaya in 2004 or April 6 in 2008, and through attention of mainstream media and inter-

national human rights organizations. In the blogosphere, the former are more recognizable to the latter (as “people like us”), who created links to sample the Egyptian blogs, while bloggers seek links to institutions online in search of allies and audience (subscribers) on their margins. In these flows, “bloggers become activists and activists become bloggers,” and the blogosphere grows both in users and in content – particularly, in turns to activism from personal to political content as mobilization becomes part of the performance.<sup>7</sup>

3) Subsequently, Radsch depicts a phase of “diversification and fragmentation” as the Egyptian blogosphere, expanded to thousands and, with increasingly many politicized, began to resolve into “virtual enclaves... engaged primarily, though certainly not exclusively, with each other” around specific, limited interests that they cultivated – in other words, into self-referential strong nodes – some associated with parties or political factions and focusing on archiving and documenting uses of their technologies in the movements they joined.<sup>8</sup>

Radsch’s three phases in the emergence of the Egyptian blogosphere describe a progression of networking from strong-tie nodes that developed around the technology and its users in her first phase into something like open (weak-tie) constituencies in her second phase that fragment into multiple strong-tie nodes around documenting their particular participations in the expanded blogosphere. This self-referentiality is what Keltz (2008), in a study of programmers, characterized as “recursive” public spheres, self-consciously set apart as alternatives to other authorities by strong focus on their means of production (here in the form of archiving tech contributions) that is their habitus as a community. That is, an evolution from networks of strong ties of collaboration into the weaker ones of alliances that fragment into multiple projects of intense self-reference focused on its own habitus.

Adding Radsch’s three phases of blogger networking that grow online around local offline content to my initial model focused on actor types and activities that evolve through online interaction brings its sociology down to the social dynamics in networking practice (*Fig. 2*).

Social Type	Social Activity (Radsch)	Network Forms
Tech Adepts	Tinkering and experimenting with blogging	Strong-tie networks form around blogging practices and linking
Entrepreneurs and Elite Contention	Activists become bloggers, bloggers become activists	Explosion of weak-tie networks through external links
Postmodern Nomads	Looser constituencies resolve into enclaves of self-reference	Implosion on strong-tie nodes around their habitus

Fig. 2.

It might be objected that both cases can be described more simply as “domestication” of technology by the addition of cultural content, and that this would be in line with the general observation that the Internet doesn’t change much or so much as it catalyzes or affords shifts in existing balances. But this would overlook what is being added to produce such outcomes: identities, skills, practices, in this case of networking with and through technologies that specifically perform what is at stake in content that the technologies model.

Rahimi brings analysis a step closer to that performance in a similar trajectory in the Green Movement that contested the outcome of the 2009 presidential election in Iran. Focusing on a much shorter span – of weeks, by comparison to Radsch’s months, even years – he conceptualizes a trajectory of performances linking action, affect, and “social affinities” (i.e., identities) in net activism. In the run-up to the election, net activism began with “self-promoting platforms” similar to Radsch’s blogger elites’ bringing tech skills to margins of political activism overlapping with their practices. These activities, he implies, were mostly in the background – applied to campaign logistics and get-out-the-vote efforts – of the political-contestative performances of rallies, speeches, debates. Following the election and charges of fraud came a shift to “other-offensive performative actions” in dispersed



activism (demonstrations) of “ephemeral micro-publics.” Using SMS messaging, Twitter, and blogs to direct and communicate globally in real-time the social drama in the streets become part of the action and among the ways demonstrators interacted with authorities, which merge into a single game, or social field, bounded by high affect. This falling away of boundaries corresponds to what Radsch described in the Egyptian case as “bloggers become activists and activists become bloggers.” As authorities reasserted institutional control and restore separation of IT and political space, returning activists withdrew into “self-maintaining performative action” that, in Rahimi’s account, “largely revolves around memorial and mythical narratives for the maintenance of social affinities,” which would correspond to Radsch’s “virtual enclaves” documenting their own cyber-activities.

Three observations can be made about aligning network performance with network structures and structural transformations. First, the activities Rahimi describes as “self-promoting,” “other-offensive,” and “self-maintaining” unfold over a shorter term than Radsch’s (weeks versus months or years) or mine (years to decades), which highlights performance. Second, performance highlights the social drama in loosening structures and boundaries that include the structures and boundaries of online and offline activity – in their cases, both in the streets and reactions of authorities, in mine between professions. Third, when structure is restored, the actors’ activities include not just previous identities but also skills acquired and exercised reflexively in recording the contributions of those skills. What Radsch refers to as documenting and Rahimi calls memorializing are real discoveries about how online activities get into offline ones. The marginal differences in performance that he identifies track Radsch’s account that I recast as online and offline nodes momentarily merging in loose-tie networks, which Rahimi called “ephemeral semi-publics” characterizing the liminal field of demonstrations, from which emerge a new set of fragments. Temporal condensation also highlights an emotional loading implied in the crucible of elite contentions in each case but not retrieved in the rational-actor lens of resource-mobilization or the longer durée of creole journeys morphing into postmodern nomadism.

Additionally, the sort of inward-turning, self-referential memorials that Rahimi brings forward as performances and that Radsch's focus on networks brings forward as virtual enclaves should cause us to look again at other, similar documentation projects to assemble online records of online participation. A more recent example might be the Facebook page, "We are all Khalid Saeed," created to memorialize a young activist and Internet adept tortured to death by the Egyptian police and credited with being one of the sparks of the February 2011 demonstrations that led to the fall of the Mubarak regime. It is significant that the co-creator, Wael Ghonim, was identified with the contemporary heart of the Internet, as a Google executive, not only because it was in that context that reputation accrued to him most strongly, but for his subsequently forsaking return to Google in favor of applying ICT skills to documenting online participation in the demonstrations and deriving tools from them. In other words, applying the Google methodology, but in another content frame. Barsolou (2012) describes similar turns following the 2011 Tahrir Square demonstrations of bloggers and other techies to preserve, archive, and analyse "Arab Spring' tweets and web-based materials," ranging from a non-profit data-mining project, R-Shief (2013) to others recording particular political interests, such as the transnational Jadaliyya (2010), Egypt Remembers (see Good 2011), which began as a collaborative Google Doc and association with a Canadian website, and The Archival Platform (2007/) that describes itself as "a civil society initiative committed to deepening democracy through the use of memory and archives as dynamic public resources," on to individual and party efforts (listed in Barsalou 2012). ICT-adept participants not only learn on line but, in memorials/documentation of that, they proceed to model the process, not unlike pilgrims who return home with tales to tell, or the high-tech postmodern nomads emerging from their creole journeys.

The two cases, I am suggesting, have more in common than the play of the Internet in dissent, opposition, demonstrations and social movements. They open additional middle range conceptualization of relations of online and offline life and practice than the narrower ranges of political "impact" analysis of whatever time frame. Rahimi's adds an additional kind of data to the

model in *Fig. 2* that connect online and offline activities in actor formation, networking, and network forms and, in net performance, two important facts. First, collapse of boundaries between online and offline activities (the middle phases) is temporary; it doesn't last but is not reversed on exiting the field.

Actor Forms	Actor activity	Network Forms	Net Performance
Tech Adepts	Tinkering and experimenting with blogging	Strong-tie networks form around blogging practices	CMC form self-promoting networks
Entrepreneurs, contending elites	Activists become bloggers, bloggers become activists	Explosion of weak-tie networks	CMC become parts of high affect social drama
Postmodern Nomads	Looser constituencies resolve into self-referential enclaves	Implosion on strong-tie nodes around multiple cultural content	CMC reflexivity of participation

*Fig. 3.*

Second, the actors, networks, and performances emerge transformed by reflexive focus on their means: Radsch's bloggers on documenting the blog record, Rahimi's telling stories about the medium in the medium, and post-modern nomads on the mobilities of their CMC praxis.

Here, it is worth noting that the middle or intermediate phases of these sequences all involve contention, blurred boundaries, and heightened emotion associated with moments of liminality and the experience of communitas that Turner (1967) identified with social drama,<sup>9</sup> and which is more apparent in the shorter term but not absent in the medium or longer term. The initial phases are characterized by experimentation and rather tentative or low-commitment outreach, and the last phases by a combination of heightened self-reference focused on its means. Minimally, these features

organize a richer body of concepts, and middle range theories, for thinking about the Internet around sequences of fitting it with or inserting it into social life that suggest what to look for; but I have a bit more ambition for this demonstration.

### Toward more integral interpretation

As much as Radsch's focus on networking and Rahimi's on its performances extend accounts of the Egyptian and Iranian activists' use of the Internet, the role that Internet's socio-technical forms play in both analyses is fundamentally as communication, focusing on Internet actors as communicators. This may be termed the standard interpretation: Internet technologies and techniques – and ICTs generally – extend communication, increase access, and speed up flows of information and more of it. Underlying this framing is a concept of “more” (messages, senders, receivers, mobility, mixing) that registers as an overwhelming “hyper-reality” (e.g., Kraidy 2005). But as a resolution to the indeterminacy problem, this is inadequate: it substitutes abundance for sociology. It reproduces multiplicity and contradiction in the proliferation of voices, messages, and channels more than that captures what actors are doing – by Radsch's account networking or in Rahimi's performing. And it leaves the Internet as either a pass-through device or attributes problematic structuration to it as a multiplier or for “routing around” obstacles.

The minimum that the present exercise accomplishes is to identify different kinds of data, different middle-range phenomena, in the alignment of online and offline community that are otherwise collapsed in metaphors as “forces,” “adaptations,” or merely as combinations. They provide more specific sites for describing “flows” and “social thickening” between online and offline activities; and performance and networking are essential in moving analysis to practices that accomplish this. Taken together they are complementary, differentiated essentially by temporal frames: networking activities that are plainer in the intermediate term would be obscured in the longer term of structural transformations and invisible in the shorter term

of performances. Likewise, actor formation is harder to see in shorter terms, and fuller description of performances in longer ones would tend to resolve actions into broad types. Bringing these together helps to provide a thicker description and fuller conceptualization of how each joins online and offline activities and actors than communication as message-passing.

More ambitious than multiplying and differentiating types of data would be to go further and align them as different scales or temporalities of a uniform process in connecting online and offline activities into composite formations, activities, performances. Those are really only distinguished by temporal frames in which they unfold. In other words, I think what we see in separate longer, intermediate, and shorter terms as actor formation, networking, and performances are different expressions, in different temporalities, of a process by which unification of communities that form online, through CMC and typically around some feature or features of it, and communities offline occur. We know that communities online (and off, for that matter) come and go, lasting for longer or shorter terms, gain substance through interactions that are repeated and regularized, and gain identity through objectification of some of those experiences. We know this happens online, too, because online actors generate vocabulary to describe it – such as lurkers, newbies, adepts, masters of a technology as a platform of action. It is frequently the earlier stages that are elided in searches for impacts of online on offline activities. Accounts of political blogging, tweeting and uses of Facebook have been particularly prone to this selection bias by starting at the point that the activity becomes political.

Online habitus begins in more modest reference group behavior, which social media organize around being with and interacting with friends and fellow-travelers. Reference groups in this simple sense are first-stage phenomena of identifying with that activity which gain substance through what Lave and Wenger (1991) identified as communities of practice (as distinct from communities of identity). The concept identifies sites of informal peer-learning and mentoring as opposed to formal (classroom) teaching that characterize apprenticeships and sharing tips-and-tricks, or “situated learning.” A great

deal of learning to use the Internet, and particularly its various platforms, occurs this way – informally in communities of practice, whose members come and go, sharing individual expertise, passing from newbie to adept and some to masters, encountering or seeking out others with other expertise. Communities of practice take the form of weak-tie networks, whose strengths are those weak links to friends of friends (Granovetter 1983) who have information one needs that is not available in strong-tie nodes where everyone knows the same thing (so communication is largely through restricted codes, such as with “likes” on Facebook).

Communities of practice are distinguished from reference groups by interaction, though which they emerge, not so firm as the ideal-type community that confers identity on its members and bounds their action but firmer than the merely categorical reference group of ‘people like me.’ What Radsch termed “blogger elites” were such communities of practice, as were Rahimi’s “self-promoting” actors and those on what I referred to as “creole journeys,” each focused by and on the habitus of their expertise, acquiring it, and applying it. Della Ratta and Valeriani (2012) locate the cultural dimension of the Web objectively in such communities of practice “as a specific set of values, behaviors, skills and strategies that define... how linking, sharing and remixing have been among the core cultural practices.” When objectivated by their members, communities of practice take on the additional social reality that Kelty (2008) has called “recursive public spheres.” The concept, which would include Rahimi’s “self-maintaining performative actions” and Radsch’s “virtual enclaves,” refers to the intense focus on their own means of production as a community, which Kelty identified among Open-Source software developers and specifically as an alternative to other forms of authority, in their case for organizing software production. While Kelty is careful to restrict his reference to this population, he allows that the concept might be projected back onto the Internet, whose developers conceived of it as an alternative and of membership in their community as qualified by working on its technology. Likewise, it could be projected forward to conceptualize how communities of practice focus conscious of themselves through dedication to maintaining their practices of production as a community.

## Conclusions

Reference groups, communities of practice that emerge from them through interaction, and reflexive public spheres that emerge from self-conscious focus on their means of their production as a community, I suggest, differentiate the habitus of the successive stages in each of these temporal sequences (of actor formation, networking, situated performances) and unite them in a uniform process in which reference groups become communities of practice through sharing and learning through weak ties to each other, and communities of practice become reflexive public spheres by turning their attention back on practices that constitute them as a community. At the actor level, each of these successive stages activate modeling that moves from individual projection in reference groups to interactions forming communities of practice to reifications of those practices in reflexive public spheres. In their identifications of stages in implementations of ICT practices and how they connect to social affinities, Radsch and Brahimi point to practices that extend different information-handling capacities of participants – how bloggers become activists and activists become bloggers, in Radsch’s arresting characterization – and how those unfold as types of performances. In terms of networking and performances, they capture similar curves from incorporating offline into online habitus and then online into offline practice. From contemporary experimenters with social media back to tech adepts who decided to program access to Islamic texts and technocrats who embarked on modernizing administrative processes with WANs and MIS, up to Egyptians who extended their blogging from personal to political topics or the Iranians who used their mobile phones and the Web to spread the social drama of demonstrations against repression and remodel it as media event, the principal differences are their time scales that register as ever shortening cycles when viewed against each other.

At the other end, both Radsch and Rahimi find fragmentation and withdrawal into a sort of autopoiesis<sup>10</sup> that we can see in representations of the play of their modes of production in wider social fields as outcomes of an extended process linking peer-learning and mentoring, networks that form through those activities, performances that enact them, followed by

representations in the terms of their production. Collapsing these into communication tends to reduce to information-passing what more comprehensively resembles information-processing. By comparison to lax concepts of “hybridity” or “hyper-reality” for characterizing outcomes as mixes or additions, what we see is modeling that can be retrieved empirically as steps, identify where (on their margins) and how (through weak ties). An example could be the tech adepts, tracked into science and mathematics and away from systematic religious education, who applied principles and routines of their work to bring online what had long been stressed were the sources of Islam: the Qur’an, Hadith and interpretation. A word-searchable Quran or Hadith collection models those as databases that, like online forums created at the same time for discussing issues of living in non-Muslim societies, bypass the traditional guidance of an imam or shaykh. Searching texts also bypasses the deeply intertextual hermeneutic techniques of professional religious learning for another, which, as much as the technology, drew the attention of officialisers from traditional da’wa organizations to political movements to provide “correct” interpretations when the Internet entered a wider public and in the more accessible form of the World Wide Web. Then, Internet-adept ulema to various degrees re-program delivery of Islam to include religious advice (fatwa) both online and in databases that grow as queries are submitted and answered (Bunt 2003) and “grow” capacities of seekers to find matches themselves for their questions (Anderson 1999, Bunt 2009). At the same time, on-line ulema extend their model performance (Ask the Shaykh) to non-religious questions as a skill set that expands their own margins of connection with another population.

Radsch and Rahimi describe more compressed sequences that place actor formation in network practice and cultural performances of tech adepts taking up politics and activists taking up blogging, tweeting, and SMSing. Each describes sequences of alliance-seeking and coalition-building that extend weak-tie networks with CMC. That extension follows a general pattern of attaching new uses to applications that turn them into platforms for those activities that actors remaining in the field continue those activities by documenting/memorializing. These are significant discoveries, first for



identifying additional middle ground linking online and offline habitus, and second for disclosing actual linkages connecting them. Perhaps more significant for those disappointed by apparently equivocal “impacts” or outcomes are their identifications of the extensions of weak-ties (that pass information but not solidarity) and the documenting/memorializing of those with the means of their own production. The unifying process is not passing practices into a new field but modeling by which an application becomes a platform for developing others.

Shifting the denominator of CMC from communication to computing helps to accommodate features of the Internet as networking and as cultural performance. It also helps to unite longer-term actor-formation, intermediate-term networking, and immediate performance on the Internet around an understanding of it beyond information-passing. Modeling resolves indeterminacies between technological determination and social construction by focusing on how socialities are built into the Internet in communities of practice that feature peer-learning, mentoring, and other “informalities” that mark the margins of networking and cultural performances. The Internet embodies these processes throughout, and particularly in its incarnation as social media, as models of and models for social reality, in Geertz’s old terms. Facebook, obviously, but also blogging and tweeting enact models of social relations as cultural performances and extend them with user-contributed content. Viewing Internet activities as platforms for modeling social reality (and worldviews, such as Google’s or in Wikipedia) provides a more comprehensive frame for concepts that bring this modeling into focus as networking and cultural performances, for how information technologies support processes of learning, particularly peer learning and mentoring, and for how they actually proceed.

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## Notes

<sup>1</sup> This subject ranges from early anxieties over potentially isolating effects of computer use through a literature that is more relevant here on effects of Internet use on civic participation, which almost uniformly finds that, contrary to expected isolation from personal relations and/or replacement of them by “virtual” ones, online engagements correlate with high engagement in civic life or with dense personal networks. However, prospects-for-democratization arguments rarely take account of these findings but are instead normative interpretations of idealizations by Internet engineers of their collaborative model and understanding of Internet architecture (see Mueller 2002, 2010).

<sup>2</sup> The engineers’ concept starts with automating repetitive (“lower-level”) processes in order to free operators’ attention for “higher-level” functions, given visionary formulation by Vannevar Bush (1945) and passed into Internet design by one of its forefathers, J. C. R. Licklider (1960).

<sup>3</sup> For example, the International Journal of Communication founded by Manuel Castells dedicated a special section of its 2011 volume to “The Arab Spring & the Role of ICTs” by a mix of sociologists who study networked communications and regional specialists.

<sup>4</sup> Marwan Muasher’s PhD dissertation was on “Multistage Classification of Multi-spectral Earth Observational Data: The Design Approach” (Purdue 1981), Ahmed Nazif’s was “A Rule-Based Expert System for Image Segmentation” (McGill 1983), Sami Khiyami’s was “Conception et réalisation d’un minicalcateur hybride à base de microprocesseur” (Lyon 1979).

<sup>5</sup> To which the concept was introduced from industrial design by the cognitive psychologist, Donald A. Norman (1999).

<sup>6</sup> The term was applied to what used to be called “groupware” by marketers after the dot-com bust of 2000 turned developers from transaction software for e-commerce to social transactions, then exemplified in dating sites (see Boyd 2009, Boyd & Ellison 2007). Their precursors in the pre-Web 1970s were listservs and newsgroups, invented by computer science graduate students, for discussions of technical topics but quickly expanding to include avocational interests of operators and then to others with those interests. Contemporary social media exemplified by blogs, Face-



book, Twitter, peer-to-peer music-sharing sites like Napster, picture-sharing sites like Picassa, and video-sharing like YouTube and including “social forums” utilizing the portal model on the original World Wide Web emerged from a plethora that after the turn of the century included Friendster (for dating) and later LinkedIn (for professional networking).

<sup>7</sup> A NY Times story (Shapiro 2009) about the female co-founder of the April 6 Facebook page formed to support a workers’ strike recounts how she reached out to activists but was shouldered aside after declaring in public that she never would have done it had she anticipated being arrested. Actually, she was the partner with technical skills (trainer at a DVD company) who set up the page and was a Facebook adept: she had originally joined to keep up with her friends, fashion, music and discussions of the Quran on it.

<sup>8</sup> Barsalou (2012) describes the same turn after the 2011 demonstrations.

<sup>9</sup> In generalizing this concept from his studies of the liminal middle phase of rites of passage, Turner aimed to identify the experience of time-out-of-time in an undifferentiated if momentary eternal present, and experience of *communitas*, in longer form phenomena such as pilgrimage and social movements as likewise set apart from the boundaries and norms of everyday life.

<sup>10</sup> I adopt this term in preference to common extensions of engineers’ characterization of networks as “self-organizing” (because they use feedback rules to test results) from Maturana & Varela’s (1980) theoretical rooting of cognition in biology that describe as autopoietic systems – such as Radsch’s bloggers after the April 6 movement focusing their activism on creating a record of the output of those tools – capable of making real “the network of processes that produce them... as a concrete entity in [the] space in which they exist by specifying the topological domain of its realization of such as a network” (p. 78). In systems theory, this is treated as second-order feedback that in Internet engineering is called meta-data, and not to be confused with representations in other terms, i.e., outside the system producing it.

# The Earth Is Your Mosque (and Everyone Else's Too): Online Muslim Environmentalism and Interfaith Collaboration in UK and Singapore

Lisa Siobhan Irving

## Abstract

*The environmentalist group Wisdom in Nature (WIN) and the online network Project ME: Muslims and the Environment have been chosen for analysis, from the UK and Singapore respectively, to illustrate examples of Muslim environmentalists who use the Internet, as a complement to community-based activism, to raise awareness of environmental concerns among both Muslims and non-Muslims. I will explore how WIN and Project ME seek to promote an interpretation of Islamic practice that is both environmentally responsible and open to close collaboration with non-Muslims as a consequence of being holistically protective of all in existence, both human and otherwise. In so doing, I hope to demonstrate how the Internet is used to facilitate the introduction of interested Muslims and non-Muslims into practical, off-line environmentalism, seen as an emotional community (Hetherington 1998), by minimizing the differences in culture, communication styles or religious belief that could otherwise pose difficulties.*

## Keywords

*Singapore, United Kingdom, cyberactivism, public sphere, activism, interfaith, environmentalism, Islam, social media*

In recent years, despite there being many Muslims who participate actively and contentedly in non-religious environmentalist groups and activities, there are a growing number who prefer to have a specifically Islamic platform from which to express their concerns about the environment. The rising popularity of groups such as IFEES (Islamic Foundation for Ecology and Environmental Sciences), which from humble beginnings in the 1980s has become an internationally recognized charity organization, together with the birth of several other self-defined Islamic environmentalist groups

worldwide, are evidence of a growing number of Muslims who consider environmental protection to be something worth expressing through a specifically Islamic framework.

In this article, I will briefly discuss some basic precepts of Islamic environmentalism and their implications for Muslim interfaith collaboration as well as the importance of drawing a distinction between Islamic environmentalism and Muslim environmentalism. I will then illustrate how the UK based *Wisdom in Nature* (hereafter abbreviated to *WIN*) and the Singaporean *Project ME: Muslims and the Environment* (hereafter simply *Project ME*) are examples of self-identified Muslim environmentalist groups who use the Internet to complement offline activism as well as raise awareness of environmental concerns. While a shared religious background makes Muslims the primary target audience of these groups' outreach efforts, non-Muslims are considered to be very important and, when engaged by either group, become equally part of the environmentalist community, seen in these examples as a community of emotions (Hetherington 1998). These two examples are not presented as being in any way representative of groups or other networks espousing Islamic environmentalism as a whole. Instead, *WIN* and *Project ME* were selected as informative online examples of an emerging Muslim discourse that is not limited to one particular country, region, community or other demographic, and also not limited to the Internet. At present, scholarship that specifically considers environmentalism as a part of online Islamic discourse is yet to be developed despite the ever increasing presence of "Islamic environmentalism"<sup>1</sup> on the Internet.

### Research methods

Methodologically this article has been based on both online and offline research. My research with *WIN* began in 2008, when the group was named *London Islamic Network for the Environment (LINE)*. As I never had the occasion to go to London and participate in the events and activities organized by *LINE*, despite being warmly invited to do so, my research was conducted, with the exclusion of several telephone interviews, as a

cyber-fieldwork (Hine 2000, Howard 2002, Puri 2007) through email, their Facebook page<sup>2</sup> as well as their website<sup>3</sup> and blog.<sup>4</sup> Although emails and chat logs do provide a convenient and accurate record of discussions with research respondents, the so called “digital divide” is important and does have an impact upon the research process, denying the researcher access to observing the interpersonal dynamics which are central to ethnography (Varisco 2010:174). I have taken this into account when preparing my analysis of all data resulting from my exchanges with respondents from this group, which took place over an extended period of time from April 2008 to the time of writing, September 2012. Considering the speed with which online content, such as websites and blogs, can be updated or vanish altogether, it is important to highlight that data is time-specific to the period in which it was collected, which in this case was from February to September 2012.

In contrast to my research with the members of WIN, my research with the members of Project ME was very much based on traditional ethnography and participant observation, yet with an analysis of web content and online activities remaining an important aspect. In 2009, my research on Muslim environmentalism in Singapore began with my participation in a public seminar, hosted by the Young Association of Muslim Professionals (YAMP) and organized in association with 350.org,<sup>5</sup> entitled “Going 350: Muslims and the Environment,” where Sofiah Jamil,<sup>6</sup> a YAMP board member, organizer of the event and thereafter a key informant in my research in Singapore had invited me to give a speech on the topic. Ms. Jamil founded Project ME wishing to foster interest in environmentalism among the local Muslim community. A research project carried out for the preparation of a book chapter on engaging local Muslim youth in environmentalism (Jamil 2009) together with the perceived success of the “Going 350” seminar inspired her in the endeavor. In Singapore, I conducted three semi-structured interviews with Ms. Jamil and five other participants (three female, two male) in the Project ME network. I also conducted participant-observation and unstructured interviews with members and supporters of other groups at various local environmentalism-themed events, all of which took place

between October 2009 and September 2011. I actively engaged with and collected data from the Green Bush blog and the Project ME Facebook community forum between February and September 2012.

### Approaching Islamic environmental discourse

Scholarly discussions of religion and environmentalism frequently make reference to Lynn White's "The Historical Roots of Our Ecological Crisis" (1967), which is essentially a critique of Western Christianity, seen as an anthropocentric religion and fundamental cause of the worldwide ecological crisis. Despite that White was a historian and not an expert in either environmental or religious studies (Harper 2008:6), his seminal 1967 essay has stimulated debate and shaped discussions of environment and religion since its publication (Proctor and Berry 2005:1571). Although White's criticisms are perhaps more widely known, his influential work was narrowly preceded by a series of lectures given by prominent Muslim philosopher Seyyed Hossein Nasr (Foltz 2003:252). In 1966, in the Rockefeller Lectures at the University of Chicago, Nasr linked environmental degradation to a spiritual crisis of modern humanity (Murad 2011:146).<sup>7</sup> More than half a century later, Muslim environmentalists contend that the very same spiritual crisis continues to burden the earth in increasingly harmful ways.<sup>8</sup>

As the basis of the problem is perceived to be fundamentally spiritual, so too is the solution (Özdemir 2008, Rahim 1991). Muslim environmentalists see environmental responsibility as being central to the Qur'anic concept of *khalāfa*, or stewardship (Foltz 2003:253), citing Qur'anic verses<sup>9</sup> which suggest that humankind has been placed on earth as a custodian. The role of humanity is often expressed in terms of a trusteeship, expressed by the Arabic word *amānāh*<sup>10</sup> in the Qur'anic verse 33:72, where all people – regardless of religion – are understood to have a moral responsibility for the care and proper maintenance of Creation (Khalid 2002:7). Stewardship of the earth, then, is understood by many Muslim environmentalists as a moral test for humankind, and not just for Muslims. For this reason the members of WIN and Project ME, and many others besides them,<sup>11</sup> emphasize the opportunity for interfaith engagement that environmental activism provides. Indeed,

involvement of Muslims in environmental interfaith activism is common, both as organizers and participants, and some consider it to be an excellent way to further the environmental cause (Abdul-Matin 2010:51–56).

So what exactly is Islamic environmentalism as an object of study? Just as ideals of piety can vary between individuals, so too can ideals of what “environmentalism” is and requires of a person when it is put into practice. Kay Milton, an anthropologist who has written extensively on environmentalism and conservation issues, has summarized the definition of environmentalism as being a quest for a viable future that is “pursued through the implementation of culturally defined responsibilities” (1993:2, emphasis added). This concise definition may appear useful in that it allows for varied expressions of environmentalism across different cultural contexts, whether religiously inspired or not. However, when scholars speak of culturally defined responsibilities, individual interpretations of what those responsibilities mean are often overlooked (Keane 2003).

Indeed, as Milton later clarifies, her summarized definition is not always the best description of environmentalism when it is to be objectified in social-scientific analysis (1993:8). It is incomplete as it is, and Milton elaborates on it by proposing that, for analytical purposes, environmentalism may be usefully seen as a trans-cultural discourse that can be described as a “field of communication through which environmental responsibilities (those which make up the environmentalist quest for a viable future) are constituted” (Milton 1993:9). Viewing environmentalism as a discourse emphasizes the role of communication and allows for the fact that a discourse changes, evolves, and is negotiated and renegotiated by individuals over time. If we follow Talal Asad in understanding Islam as a “tradition” that essentially consists of “discourses that seek to instruct practitioners regarding the correct form and purpose of a given practice [...]” (Asad 1986:14), Islamic environmentalism, then, can be seen as a discourse within the wider Islamic discursive tradition.

## “Islamic environmentalism” or “Muslim environmentalism”

Since the mid-1980s, there has been a steadily growing body of scholarly literature written about Islamic environmentalism by both Muslim and non-Muslim scholars. Titles often address topics such as animal rights in Islam (Foltz 2006, Masri 1986), linkages between traditional Islamic values and environmentalist ethics (Ammar 2001, Izzī Dien 2000, Manzoor 1984, Saniotis 2011), Islamic solutions to environmental degradation (Murad 2011, Özdemir 2003), and examples of Islamic environmentalism in practice (De Hanas 2010, Foltz 2005b, Rice 2006). Much of this work is rich in analyses of primary theological sources, such as the Qur’an and hadith material, as well as the commentary of various Muslim religious scholars on both. However, as has been noticed by Vasi (2010), although many possible theological roots of Islamic environmentalism have been much discussed among scholars, and even across disciplines, far less has been written about the environmental behavior of Muslims, which can sometimes even be at odds with mainstream theology (Foltz 2003).

In overcoming the gap that may exist between scripture and practice, some scholars have suggested that it is useful to restrict the use of the term “Islamic environmentalism” to that which may demonstrably be derived from the textual sources of Islam, rather than from the behavior and beliefs of Muslims (Foltz 2003:252, El Deen Hamed 1993:146). This restriction may pose a problem, however, as not all Muslims agree on what precisely the theological bases for environmentalism are, nor do they necessarily agree on what environmentalism or environmentalist behavior constitutes.

Indeed, identifying a distinction between “Muslim” and “Islamic” may be useful in some contexts, whether it be in scholarship concerning environmentalism or not. However, it is worth noting that creating such a distinction potentially opens an unanswerable question of who is qualified to give “correct” interpretations of scripture or religious traditions. Islamic environmentalism can sometimes appear to be a fairly unitary discourse, soundly based on the Qur’an and hadith, which enjoins environmental responsibility upon Muslims as being a religious obligation, but as any other discourse

among the various global Muslim communities, Islamic ecotheology is far from it (Ouis 2003:2, Foltz 2005a).

### Reaching out online: engaging humanity in environmentalism within and beyond Islam

Perhaps unsurprisingly, the Internet plays an important role in popularizing Islamic environmentalism by providing an easy means of networking and communication among people, both Muslim and non-Muslim, whom are interested in environmentalism from an Islamic perspective. Usage of the Internet among Muslims as a research, networking, interpretation and dialogue tool in religious matters have been much studied,<sup>12</sup> and some scholars, such as Gary Bunt, have written at length about how the Internet has, in his own words, “reshaped the boundaries of Muslim networks, created new dialogues, and presented new transaction routes within the Islamic knowledge economy” (Bunt 2009:276). No longer constrained by the circulation of print media, one might expect that these “new dialogues” would spread far and wide, opening up opportunities for Muslims of varying ideological and religious stances to come to a better understanding of one another. Although this does happen, and as we will see shortly, this expectation to reach people is the motivation behind many Islamic environmentalist endeavors online, the exchange of ideas over the Internet is sometimes limited as individuals are frequently drawn to online material that validates their own religious and ideological beliefs rather than challenges them (cf. El-Nawawy and Khamis 2009).

Unlike Project ME that, being founded as an “online network,” most actively operates through its Facebook page, WIN has always been first and foremost a community activism group whose main activities are by definition very much “offline.” In order to understand the nature and context of its Internet presence, then, it is important to mention its history and activities. This section will provide some brief background information before exploring the relationship between the Internet, interfaith engagement, environmentalism and Islam according to WIN and Project ME.



In an effort to raise environmental awareness among Muslim communities in the South East of England, Dr. Muzammal Hussain established the (now defunct) Ecobites environmental e-newsletter in 2002, and then later in 2004, the group then named London Islamic Network for the Environment (LINE), of which he remains the Chairperson. Although LINE began with just three members whom held their first meeting in Muzammal's parents' home in January 2004, with Muzammal's careful nurturing, together with the dedication of the growing group of members, LINE soon thrived despite a low level of activism experience among new members and the low priority that environmentalism was often given among British Muslims at that time (Hussein n.d.). The fledgling group established a regular forum, which was soon held on the premises of the Muslim World League in London, and later established their website in 2007 (Muzammal Hussain, email to author, September 10, 2012), allowing WIN to reach out further afield.

Topics covered in the forums, from their initiation in 2004 until today, are varied and cover issues such as Ramadan and consumerism, green economics, and climate change as well as environmental poetry, nuclear power, and biofuels.<sup>13</sup> Forums are, in a way, the main meeting-space of the group and discussions focus on shared values among the participants in order to foster a feeling of community among members and visitors. In addition to the forums, and in order to reach out beyond those who may already have an interest in environmentalism, WIN holds information and skills workshops<sup>14</sup> and frequently supports other groups in activism.<sup>15</sup> Unfortunately beyond the scope of this article, LINE's other activities are frequent and varied, including organized trips to organic farms, organic food-share picnics and events such as the 2005 "Snorkel Muslims" climate change awareness demonstration in Brick Lane (pictured below). This demonstration, held in a primarily Bangladeshi neighborhood, was intended to raise awareness of the impact of climate change in Bangladesh and was noticed by The Guardian newspaper (Vidal 2005).

LINE's philosophy was, and still is, very holistic in nature and is built upon four values of earth and community, deep democracy, whole economics and

climate justice – all of which are embraced through what WIN has termed “engaged surrender,” which the group defines as “a nonviolent, process-oriented activism, expressed through a contemplative dimension within the framework of Islam (Surrender to the Divine)” (Wisdom in Nature n.d.).



*Fig. 1. Courtesy of Wisdom In Nature, 2005. Used with permission.*

Although LINE initially set out to engage a primarily Muslim audience, as it was the Muslim community whom were perceived to be particularly disinterested (cf. Timberlake 1984), the intention to include non-Muslims together with a reflection upon the holistic nature of the aims brought members to consider changing the group’s name. As group founder Muzammal Hussain writes,

Whilst LINE was successful in its aims, we were aware that our emphasis on process, our holistic approach that was wider than the environment and included the social and spiritual, and our inclusion of those who were not Muslim meant that our name was not quite congruent with our focus and means even though these had not changed. We were also finding that in describing our work, we began

to use the term ‘ecological’ (which implies interconnectedness and gives value to relationship) more, and the term ‘environmental’ less. In November 2009, after discussions that included a consensus-decision-making process, we unanimously agreed on a change of name and became Wisdom In Nature. We continue as an Islamic group and hope that our new name captures more of the essence of our work (Hussein n.d.).

Although it has always been open to collaboration with non-Muslim individuals and groups, LINE’s change of name to Wisdom in Nature further facilitates that openness.

Despite being a group that is heavily involved community-based activism, WIN uses the Internet to reach out in five different ways: the group’s official website,<sup>16</sup> which hosts information about the group, including its aims, ethos and activities; the associated group blog,<sup>17</sup> which contains details about upcoming events and reflections by members; the relatively recent WIN Facebook page,<sup>18</sup> which has been active since January 2011 and shares relevant articles and web links; the WINnotices e-list, which details upcoming group events as well as those of a few select other groups and organisations; and finally, the WINnotices Yahoo Group,<sup>19</sup> which posts messages spread through the e-list. While there is an emphasis on promoting participation in offline activities (without necessarily being a “member”), the online presence of WIN is the first point of information for many people unfamiliar with the group, or Islamic environmentalism as a topic, and this is reflected in the group’s presentation on its website and social media. However, that said, it is unlikely that a person entirely unaware of Islamic environmentalism, or uninterested in environmental activism, would come to know of WIN’s online activities without being first introduced somehow. Indeed, upon examination of their Facebook page, many appear to have discovered WIN through searching for Islamic environmentalist groups out of a prior interest, participating in an event that featured WIN or hearing about it from others.

WIN's values, such as their four core values mentioned above together with their commitment to openness and dialogue, are very clearly presented on their website and social media. Together with a selection of self-published essays and pamphlets, WIN's website features a number of external resources that discuss Islamic environmentalism, such as reading lists, web links, articles and audiovisual material, all of which are labelled with a disclaimer in the heading of the page that states in clear terms that the material provided reflects the opinions and interpretations of the respective authors alone, and not necessarily those of the group. Despite possessing clear aims, values and objectives as a group, WIN makes no claims to possess an authoritative understanding on what "Islamic environmentalism" should mean, or look like in practice, and invites participation in dialogue and activities from people of all faiths and none (WIN 2010). As A.R., a 30-year-old, male Muslim of Pakistani heritage and long standing WIN member, once wrote to me, "all humanity was trusted [by God] with care of the earth, so we [Muslims] should remind all humanity of our responsibilities" (email to author, October 22, 2009). This sentiment parallels the welcome page on WIN's website which immediately asserts that the group "is open to people of all faiths and beliefs [...]," as well as the nationwide call for volunteers on their "Volunteer and Teamwork" page,<sup>20</sup> which reads,

Seeking Volunteers: Islamic Ecology: Become a 'Wisdom In Nature'

Community Activist!

Start date: Within three months of applying (with some flexibility).

Applications ongoing.

Want to be part of an action network based on Islamic principles?

Applications are welcome from people of all faiths and beliefs who have an interest in Islam, contemplative action and grassroots organising.

Clearly, it is not expected that non-Muslims remain passive observers within the group as they are actively encouraged to engage in community activism,

which in this case entails representing the WIN group in their respective local communities. Volunteering, as opposed to “membership” which is not defined, is a formal responsibility and the same page further instructs potential volunteers, “You will be working remotely (internet access is essential), and attending occasional meetings and events [...] where geographically practical.” Although WIN is based in London, the establishment of their webpage and social media presence has allowed for volunteers to offer their time and skills from all over the UK, provided that they undergo the interview and induction. WIN’s work, as a group, focuses on the community within which it operates and so this nationwide call for volunteers, made widely accessible through the Internet, extends the potential of the group to geographically reach out beyond London and the South East of England. In parallel, WIN’s inclusive ethos allows the group to extend beyond Muslim communities and reach people of all beliefs while maintaining its Islamic identity.

In Singapore, Project ME works in a very different way to WIN despite sharing many similar values and aims. Instead of being a community activism group, Project ME was intended to be, and primarily exists as, an online network where people share information and ideas, and where current opportunities for members to meet each other in person are limited to occasional informal gatherings or, more frequently, at the organized events of other local environmentalist groups, such as the popular Thursday night meetings of the Singaporean chapter of Green Drinks.<sup>21</sup> This has implications in terms of outreach capacity, and indeed, most of those whom I met associated with Project ME found out about the group through online searches for Islamic environment groups or through being introduced by friends with an interest in environmentalism.

Prior to founding Project ME in 2009, Sofiah Jamil, a committed environmentalist for many years, had maintained a blog titled “The Green Bush” (Jamil n.d.), where she shared her reflections on environmentalism and Islam together with articles and web links relevant to the topic. Since Project ME’s establishment, this blog has been partially dedicated to furthering

the aims of the new online network and advertising Project ME events as and when they occur.

Project ME is very loosely organized when compared to WIN: all decisions about the direction and aims of the group are taken by the founder and formal volunteering or organizational roles do not exist in the same way as they do for WIN. Despite that members can and do meet in Singapore, Project ME membership is essentially an online membership, consisting of following the Green Bush blog and/or the Project ME Facebook community page, where the boundaries between “membership” and “subscription” are blurry and ultimately open the group to full participation from anyone with an Internet connection. This fluid online membership is an advantage, however, as it encourages participation from people who may otherwise shy away from a more formal commitment (or from commitment with a Muslim group), which may be a turnoff for potentially interested non-Muslims. As Project ME aims to engage people and create a forum for discussion about “how individuals or communities can take action to protect the environment,”<sup>22</sup> formalized membership is neither necessary nor desirable.

Despite being a very recent endeavor, Project ME has attracted significant attention both locally and abroad. The network has become both well-known and well accepted within the local environmental activism community, and on June 28, 2012, the Singaporean Malay language television channel Suria ran a segment about environmentalism that featured Project ME on its news program, *Berita-on-Suria*.<sup>23</sup> Word of Project ME has also spread online (cf. Hafifah and Osman 2011; Muzlimbuzz 2011), with Sofiah Jamil’s efforts being acknowledged abroad by widely known and respected Muslim environmentalists, such as U.S. author Ibrahim Abdul-Matin, who mentioned Project ME as being an “excellent Facebook resource” on his blog, *Green Deen*, in August 2011 (Abdul-Matin 2011). Project ME has also been noticed by freelance journalist Arwa Aburawa, a UK based contributor to the green news website *Green Prophet*,<sup>24</sup> whom interviewed Sofiah about environmentalism and environmental threats in Southeast Asia in December, 2011 (Aburawa 2011). The Project ME Facebook com-

munity page is also well connected with other Muslim environmentalist groups with a Facebook presence, and has interacted online with WIN and IFEES<sup>25</sup> in the UK, DC Green Muslims<sup>26</sup> in the US, Groene Moslims<sup>27</sup> in the Netherlands, Pakistan Sustainability Network<sup>28</sup> in Pakistan among many others, giving Project ME visibility that extends far beyond Singapore and Southeast Asia.

Similarly to WIN, Project ME also welcomes non-Muslim members and both the Facebook community page and the Green Bush blog introduce Project ME by stating, “While the primary focus of this project is on Muslims in Singapore, it is open to all who are interested and not exclusively Muslims. The more the merrier!”<sup>29</sup> This inclusiveness is the result of founder Sofiah Jamil’s commitment to interfaith collaboration as a part of ecology. As she once explained to me, “Everyone has to do their bit [for the environment]. Project ME might be aimed more at Muslims, because there is a need to reach out there in particular, but anyone who wants to help, discuss, or participate in anything we do is not only welcome, but encouraged. It doesn’t matter who does what – we all need to act, and preferably together” (interview with author, Singapore, March 23, 2010).

The environmental activism scene in Singapore is fairly interconnected, with members of various groups and interested individuals often knowing each other and attending events together. Project ME is no exception to this and members will often meet each other at various environmental or ecology-themed events within the city state. Since its inception, Project ME has held only two organized gatherings of its own and interfaith engagement was a significant theme running through Project ME’s most recent get together, a vegetarian Ramadan dinner, or iftar, held on August 9, 2012. Despite the religious nature of hosting an iftar during the Muslim fasting month of Ramadan, invitations were sent out via social media to men and women of varying faiths who were known to the group (although only women attended). The decision for the meal to be vegetarian not only reflects the perceived environmental benefits of reducing meat consumption but also facilitates participation from those who may not feel comfortable

eating meat for ethical or religious reasons. Reflecting on this recent event, Sofiah writes,<sup>30</sup>

What I found to be the best aspect of the green iftar, was the ability to use an environmental initiative for the benefit of other social and cultural exchanges. While my initial thoughts of invitees were to be Muslims, I chose to extend the invitation to non-Muslims as well. No man is an island, and the environmental movement is clearly a reflection of that. In addition to non-Muslim guests gaining greater insight to Islam and the diversity amongst Muslims, the green chit-chat was certainly enhanced with a discussion on the cultural aspects and values associated with the environment based on our own ethnic backgrounds. Common threads such as food and water have played significant roles in bringing communities together as well as a means of understanding and appreciating how nature works.



*Fig. 2. Founder Sofiah Jamil (second from right) together with some participants at the August 2012 Project ME iftar dinner and discussion. Courtesy of Zafirah Mohamed, 2012. Used with permission.*

The event was a success and Sofia mentioned the possibility of holding a similar event in future, with Diwali or Navaratri<sup>31</sup> as possible Hindu festi-



vals to celebrate within multicultural Singapore (email to author, September 6, 2012), thus continuing Project ME's commitment to reaching out to people of other faiths while maintaining a Muslim identity.

### Cultivating common values to transcend difference online and offline

The holistic world view of my informants, which as we have seen embraced not only environmentalism but also interfaith collaboration as an integral part of their own faith, appeared not to be widely held among the communities they were trying to reach.<sup>32</sup> Working in the UK and Singapore, where Internet access is widespread, both WIN and Project ME believe that the Internet is a useful tool in attempting to bridge this gap not only with the primary target audience of local Muslim communities, but also with Muslims in other countries and with non-Muslims as well. The online presence of WIN and Project ME as well as other Islamic environmentalist groups provides an accessible public information resource that can be easily located and used by individuals or even disseminated within the community (and so also reaching those who may not use the Internet), such as through mosque sermons.<sup>33</sup> In this respect, there is no doubt that such websites provide a valuable resource.

Those who are interested by the message of either group can drop in and participate (online or offline) without necessarily identifying themselves as “part of the group” or making any other commitment. As N.A., an active Hindu supporter (but not self-defined “member”) of Project ME, told me during a discussion of Islamic environmental activism around the world, “As much as I support the message, I’d be embarrassed to act like they [IFEES and WIN] do in the UK: standing outside and holding signs with everyone looking at me. Maybe it’s a Singaporean thing, but I just don’t do protests” (N.A., female, 28 year-old Singaporean of Indian heritage, interview with author in Singapore, July 16, 2011). Another person present at the discussion, speaking about how other Muslim environmentalist groups present themselves, said, “Some appear very Sufi [in their approach to ecology],

almost New Age in fact. Although I don't have a problem with that, I know plenty who would find that a big turn off" (I.E., male, 24-year-old Singaporean Muslim of Indian heritage, interview with author in Singapore, July 16, 2011).

I was not able to obtain an accurate picture of the precise ethnic or religious composition of each group, although I did notice that both groups appeared attractive to men and women from tertiary-educated, professional backgrounds in particular. In Singapore, most Muslims affiliated with Project ME were of Malay heritage and this is most likely because an overwhelming majority of Muslims in Singapore are ethnically Malay. In the UK, Muslims affiliated with WIN came from more varied ethnic backgrounds, both British-born (including those of second generation origin as well as those whom had converted to Islam) and migrants, although many were of South Asian heritage. Those non-Muslims whom I came to know as associated with both groups, either as "members" or "supporters," were from numerous backgrounds that are yet more varied.

Members and supporters of both groups form a community despite coming from differing cultures, age groups, religious beliefs and world views. Indeed, this community is ever changing in composition, with people joining in and others drifting away, however those who remain actively involved are united by a common moral commitment to environmental awareness and responsibility. Being based on "affectual forms of sociation" (Hetherington 1998:52) and the expression of feelings and sentiments, Hetherington has followed Maffesoli in his description of "emotional communities" (1998:146) by arguing that new social movements are communities based on emotional processes rather than rational ones, particularly on empathy. According to Hetherington (1998:37), "Feeling and morality are not separate; caring for others, wanting to take responsibility for them is as much based on a sense of emotional solidarity as it is on abstract moral precepts." Project ME and WIN, then, may be described as emotional communities due to the moral and empathetic nature of the bond between members and supporters that ultimately transcends their differences. Being both "Islamic environmenta-

list” groups that readily include people whom may not even be religious (in any religion), a concern for the environment and humanity’s future is the only bond members and supporters share.

The existence of a sense of community, however, does not imply that disagreement and discord do not exist. Indeed, vegetarianism was often recognized as a potential point of tension among my Muslim environmentalist respondents. In many Muslim communities, vegetarianism can be viewed as an unusual or, at worst, an un-Islamic choice as a result of being considered tantamount to forbidding what is permissible in Islam (Foltz 2006, 2001). Of the Project ME members and supporters I came to know, I found that some believed that halal meat, which was authentically halal as far as animal welfare standards are concerned,<sup>34</sup> was impossible to obtain in Singapore and so local Muslims, as an act of piety, should become vegetarian. Others, however, perceived this as an unnecessarily rigid position given the importance of meat at Eid Al-Adha (the feast of the sacrifice), or as being a kind of extremism, citing the tone of the controversial website “Islamic Concern” as well as “Vegetarian Muslim”<sup>35</sup> as online examples of why Muslims should avoid advocating vegetarianism. Although vegetarianism can be a divisive issue, and perhaps even more so within the Muslim community, Sofiah Jamil has avoided creating a point of potential conflict within the Project ME network by emphasizing impartial mindfulness<sup>36</sup> over promotion or condemnation of any dietary choice. Perhaps the most effective prevention of conflict in general, however, is the fact that within a fluid community like Project ME, or even WIN, there is no need to define anything – neither the criteria of a good environmentalist nor the criteria of a “good” Muslim.

## Conclusion

This article aimed to explore two instances of self-identified Muslim environmentalist groups that use the Internet to raise awareness of environmental concerns from a Muslim perspective. The environmentalist group Wisdom in Nature and the online network Project ME: Muslims and the Environment were chosen for analysis as examples whose members interpret Islam

in such a way that environmental responsibility is perceived as an integral part of faith that is no more or less important than any other moral virtue. Embracing such environmental responsibility, in this case, involves interfaith collaboration as all peoples are believed to be responsible before God for the care of the Earth and all creatures within it. The Internet, then, is used by both WIN as well as Project ME to engage Muslims as well as non-Muslims, despite in both cases the former being the primary target audience in practice. The members and supporters of both groups, regardless of their differences, become part of an emotional community with one another in which the primary bond between people is based on a shared moral concern for the environment. The fact that neither group makes an attempt to define what constitutes either a “good” environmentalist or a “good” Muslim leaves room for empathy and shared values to flourish among people from varied backgrounds and beliefs.

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## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Islamic environmentalism and Islamic ecology are often used as interchangeable terms, although some groups, such as Wisdom in Nature, prefer the term Islamic ecology to describe their ethos and activities (Introductory Guiding Principles: Summer 2010). For the purposes of this article, the term Islamic environmentalism will be used unless otherwise specified.

<sup>2</sup> Wisdom in Nature's Facebook group page is available at <http://www.facebook.com/wisdominnature>, accessed September 28, 2012.

<sup>3</sup> Wisdom in Nature's homepage is available at <http://www.wisdominnature.org.uk/>, accessed September 30, 2012.

<sup>4</sup> Wisdom in Nature's blog is available at <http://wisdominnature.blogspot.com/>, accessed September 30, 2012.

<sup>5</sup> 350.org is a global climate change movement that was founded in 2008 by author Bill McKibben and has collaborated in environmentalist events occurring in 181 countries. <http://www.350.org/>, accessed September 21, 2012.

<sup>6</sup> With the exception of Ms. Jamil, a Singaporean Muslim of Malay heritage who founded the Project ME network and maintains the closely associated blog, The Green Bush, and Dr. Muzammal Hussain, a British Muslim of Pakistani origin, who founded Wisdom in Nature, all names of respondents referred to in this article have been anonymized.

<sup>7</sup> These lectures were later published as *The Encounter of Man and Nature: The Spiritual Crisis of Modern Man* (see Nasr 1968).

<sup>8</sup> For example, see Abdel Zaher et al. (2011), Deuraseh (2009:524–25), Denny (1998:11), and Foltz (2010).

<sup>9</sup> See for example, Quran 2:30 and 6:165.

<sup>10</sup> Despite overwhelmingly wide circulation of this verse in Islamic environmentalist literature, the interpretation above is not the only one (Adebayo 2009:182). Many take for granted that this verse refers to humanity's custodianship over the

earth, however, some Islamic scholars, such as Muhammad Asad, have claimed that the very same “Trust,” which many environmentalists understand to mean the earth, actually refers to humankind’s ability to exercise free will (Asad and Moustafa 2003:732 n.88).

<sup>11</sup> The Islamic Foundation for Ecology and Environmental Sciences (IFEES) is a notable example.

<sup>12</sup> For some relevant examples, please see Brower 2004, Bunt 2003, Eickelman and Anderson 2003, Lawrence 2001, Mandaville 2001, and Sands 2010.

<sup>13</sup> There is a detailed list of past forums available on the WIN website at [http://www.wisdominnature.org.uk/Action/open\\_forums.htm](http://www.wisdominnature.org.uk/Action/open_forums.htm), accessed August 20, 2012.

<sup>14</sup> There is a detailed list of topics covered here <http://wisdominnature.org.uk/Action/workshops.htm>, accessed August 20, 2012.

<sup>15</sup> A recent example of this is the Occupy Faith: Pilgrimage for Justice, which ran from 7-21st of June and consisted of a walk from London to Canterbury, culminating in a conference on economic, environmental and social justice. This event was widely publicized on the WIN blog, Facebook page and mailing list. Details of the event can be found on the Occupy Faith website at [http://occupyfaith.org.uk/?page\\_id=29](http://occupyfaith.org.uk/?page_id=29), accessed August 15, 2012.

<sup>16</sup> The WIN homepage is located at <http://www.wisdominnature.org.uk/>, accessed August 28, 2012.

<sup>17</sup> The WIN blog is located at <http://wisdominnature.blogspot.com>, accessed August 28, 2012.

<sup>18</sup> The WIN Facebook page is located at <http://www.facebook.com/wisdominnature>, accessed August 28, 2012.

<sup>19</sup> The WIN Notices Yahoo Group is located at <http://groups.yahoo.com/group/WINnotices/>, accessed August 28, 2012.

<sup>20</sup> This call for volunteers (emphasis in original) together with the details for participation can be found at <http://www.wisdominnature.org.uk/Action/volunteer.htm>, accessed August 29, 2012.

<sup>21</sup> Green Drinks is a self-organized global network of environmental enthusiasts that has a presence in over 800 cities worldwide. Information about Green Drinks Singapore can be found at <http://sggreendrinks.wordpress.com/about/>, accessed September 2, 2012.

<sup>22</sup> Quoted text taken from Project ME group description, which is available at <http://thegreenbush.wordpress.com/project-muslims-and-the-environment/>, accessed August 30, 2012.

<sup>23</sup> A clip of the program is publicly available on Berita-on-Suria's Facebook page, available (in Malay) at <http://www.facebook.com/photo.php?v=378238715564854>, accessed August 30, 2012.

<sup>24</sup> Green Prophet primarily provides green news from the Middle East region and is available at <http://www.greenprophet.com/>, accessed September 17, 2012.

<sup>25</sup> The IFEES Facebook page is available at <http://www.facebook.com/pages/IFEES/228051667256036>, accessed September 20, 2012.

<sup>26</sup> The Green Muslims Facebook page is available at <http://www.facebook.com/greenmuslims/>, accessed September 18, 2012.

<sup>27</sup> The Groene Moslims [Green Muslims] Facebook page is available at <http://www.facebook.com/groenemoslims>, accessed September 18, 2012.

<sup>28</sup> The Pakistan Sustainability Network Facebook page is available at <http://www.facebook.com/sustainablepak>, accessed September 18, 2012.

<sup>29</sup> The introductory message can be found at: About Project ME, Green Bush blog <http://thegreenbush.wordpress.com/project-muslims-and-the-environment/>, accessed September 20, 2012. About Project ME, Facebook community page <http://www.facebook.com/Muslims.and.Environment/info>, accessed September 20, 2012.

<sup>30</sup> A Girly Green Iftar, Green Bush blog available at <http://thegreenbush.wordpress.com/2012/08/10/a-girly-green-iftar/>, accessed September 2, 2012.

<sup>31</sup> For more information about these festivals, please see Sharma 2008.

<sup>32</sup> Unfortunately, a discussion of the reasons for this is beyond the scope of this article. However, interestingly, it has been noted that environmentalism is some-

times perceived among Muslim communities as an effort to address problems created by the West or as a “Western” pursuit in itself (Ammar 2001:206, Haq 2001, Kula 2001:6).

<sup>33</sup> Recent examples of mosque sermons on the topic of Islamic environmentalism include, among others, that of the East London Mosque, in the UK, which used purpose-designed sermon notes distributed by IFEEES to deliver sermons on the environment (EcoIslam 2006:8), the most recent of which occurred on March 16, 2012 and is available at <http://www.eastlondonmosque.org.uk/resources/sermons&pagnate=1&cipp=All>, accessed September 12, 2012; as well as Darul Makmur Mosque, in Singapore, which gave a sermon prepared by the Islamic religious council of Singapore (MUIS), on December 12, 2008 and is available at <http://www.muis.gov.sg/cms/uploadedFiles/MuisGovSG/Khutbah/E08Dec12.doc>, accessed September 12, 2012.

<sup>34</sup> Animal welfare is one of a number of factors that determine whether meat can be classified as “halal” or permitted for consumption among Muslims. For more information, please see Bonne and Verbeke 2008.

<sup>35</sup> Islamic Concern (<http://www.islamicconcern.com/>, accessed September 21, 2012) is sponsored by PETA and calls on Muslims to embrace vegetarianism and reject religious slaughter. Vegetarian Muslim is available at [www.vegetarianmuslim.org](http://www.vegetarianmuslim.org), accessed Sept 18, 2012.

<sup>36</sup> For example, please see “When was the last time you watched a Qurban taking place?”, Green Bush Blog, November 4, 2011, available at <http://thegreenbush.wordpress.com/2011/11/04/qurban/>, accessed September 18, 2012.

# Telling the Truth about Islam? Apostasy Narratives and Representations of Islam on WikiIslam.net

Daniel Enstedt and Göran Larsson

## Abstract

*This article analyses six apostasy narratives published on WikiIslam.net and examines how Islam is represented and understood in them. The narratives contain self-referential and autobiographical components, and the truth-claims made in them are often based on the narrator's own experiences as a former Muslim. From the six testimonies it is clear that Islam is presented in a negative and biased way, as summed up in the following three points: (1) Islam is an irrational, illogical way of thought; the beliefs that Islam holds to be true are false; (2) Islam is not about peace, high standards and God; Islam is an evil, self-centered and morally corrupt religion, and Muslims are hypocrites; (3) Islam is an oppressive, misogynist and violent religion, and is negative for its followers, especially women. These views on Islam, expressed in the apostasy narratives, articulate several themes found in islamophobic discourses and the so called New Atheist movement.*

## Keywords

*Islam, websites, Internet, Quran, study of religion, Internet studies*

Apostasy narratives play an important function in contemporary polemical attacks on Islam and Muslims. In the article six narratives from the WikiIslam portal are analyzed that can serve as illustrations of anti-Islamic polemics by means of 'personal' testimony.

## WikiIslam: a brief outline

WikiIslam was created to become the one-stop source of information critical of Islam and because it was impossible to publish what it represents as the truth about Islam on, for example, the Wikipedia online community-edited encyclopaedia. It is important to stress that "truth" is only associated with negative and critical stances against Muslims. Quotes are taken from Islamic sources and sayings from Muslim spokespersons and there-



fore presented as authentic, but selection and presentation of the material remains very one-dimensional, and alternative interpretations are seldom represented. For highlighting negative and biased perceptions about Islam and Muslims, the site is often perceived as being anti-Muslim, if not Islamophobic (Larsson 2007).

Besides providing critical information about Islam and Muslims, the aim of the site is also to build online [a] defensive position against Islam and Muslims as a global threat. Under the heading the Internet Toolbox for Islam-Critics, we read:

Islam is a global challenge. It should be met with a global response. The best instrument for doing this is the Internet, the most international medium of all. As many news outlets may still be reluctant to openly criticize Islam, the Internet opens the possibility of a freer discourse on such subjects than more traditional media do. The intention behind this Toolbox is to encourage more people to use the Internet as a way of getting critical discussion of Islamic issues out to the general public. Any person who wants to is very welcome to copy this list or any parts of it that they may find interesting to their own websites. The Toolbox is a work in progress, and everybody is encouraged to add more “tools” of their own. (Quotation taken from Larsson 2007:58).

WikiIslam provides Internet users with new ways of combating and criticising Islam and Muslims in both cyberspace and offline, by circulating critical information about Islam and Muslims. In order to get the message out to a larger audience, the information on WikiIslam must also be translated into as many languages as possible: today the site therefore offers translations into a large number of Western and non-Western languages. Those who support the aims of WikiIslam are therefore encouraged to send in new materials, thus contributing to the content of the portal and developing an online defensive position against Islam and Muslims. As we will see in the next section of our article, the narratives of ex-Muslims (here called apo-

stasy narratives) are of great importance for WikiIslam and its adherents. These stories are testimonies that illustrate, support and legitimize the critiques of Islam and Muslims posted on the portal.

Most of the apostasy narratives found on the WikiIslam portal are published elsewhere and are reproduced on WikiIslam with the permission of the original sites. For example, one of the most frequently quoted sites is [faithfreedom.org](http://faithfreedom.org) (see [Faithfreedom.org](http://Faithfreedom.org) 2001), where Ali Sina is one of the contributors, a topic that we will return to in the final analysis. It is clear that WikiIslam is attempting to show that Islam is wrong and nonsensical, and that Muslims should be taken seriously because they pose a dangerous threat to the open society. With these aspects in mind, the questions posed in this article are about the use of apostasy testimonies on WikiIslam. What is the role and function of the apostasy narratives posted on WikiIslam when it comes to the sites ambition to “tell the truth” about Islam? How are the “personal” experiences put to use when narrating about Islam and the process of leaving Islam?

### Apostasy and Islam

The prohibition against apostasy, or abandoning one’s religion, is nothing new in Islam, and it is not only interpretations of Islam that expresses a negative stance on apostasy. However, it is Islam that is usually portrayed as the most extreme religion when it comes to defections. In Islam, apostasy (*irtidād*) has frequently been linked to other negatively charged terms, for example, unbelief (*kufr*), blasphemy (*sabb al-rasul*), heresy (*zandaqa*) and hypocrisy (*nifaq*). Abdullah Saeed and Hassan Saeed’s *Freedom of Religion, Apostasy and Islam* (2003) is one of few studies of apostasy and Islam. The authors examine the contradiction between freedom of religion and interpretations of Islam that imply that apostasy should be punished with death. They point out that this decree is contrary to other fundamental texts and beliefs in Islam and emphasize the often contradictory statements about apostasy that have been made throughout history. Saeed and Saeed mainly examine apostasy in Malaysia and the problems that have arisen there. Paul Marshall and Nina Shea’s *Silenced: How Apostasy and*

Blasphemy Codes are Choking Freedom Worldwide (2011) should also be mentioned in this context. Marshall and Shea survey how restrictions on apostasy and blasphemy are applied in Muslim-majority countries, as well as the contemporary debates on apostasy and blasphemy in non-Muslim-majority countries. Even if Marshall and Shea's main focus is on freedom of religion, international law and politics – not on apostasy – they, at least indirectly, demonstrate how the process of leaving Islam and legal responses to apostasy differs between Muslim-majority countries and non-Muslim-majority countries.

Most studies of apostasy have been conducted in a Christian context or in relation to new religious movements. We cannot mention all of these studies here, but will just point out two positions in previous research that are related to our analysis. In the anthology *The Politics of Religious Apostasy* (1998), edited by David G. Bromley, apostates are defined as religious people who leave their religious groups under the specific circumstances of conflict and instead become part of the resistance against the religion of the left. This definition separates apostates from other types of defectors from religion. It is also this type of apostate who gives voice to apostasy in Ibn Warraq's pamphlet *Leaving Islam: Apostates Speak Out* (2003). The autobiographical testimonies presented in Warraq's anthology articulate severe critique against Islam and the apostasy narratives on WikiIslam both replicate and refers to these testimonies, as the following analysis will show. Sociologist Phil Zuckerman's study of apostasy in *Faith no More* (2011) supports a somewhat wider definition of apostasy. Zuckerman examines the reasons why people abandon their religion through a series of interviews with actual apostates. Apostasy is, according to Zuckerman, often a lengthy, diverse and individual process, rather than the conflict-charged event that Bromley and Warraq assume it to be.

An even more nuanced and elaborated model of the apostasy process is found in Heinz Streib's (et al.) *Deconversion: Qualitative and Quantitative Results from Cross-Cultural Research in Germany and the United States of America* (2009). As the title illustrates, the authors prefer the term

deconversion instead of apostasy even if the latter is more frequent used in research. They single out five characteristics when defining deconversion: “(1) Loss of specific religious experiences; (2) intellectual doubt, denial or disagreement with specific beliefs; (3) moral criticism; (4) emotional suffering; (5) disaffiliation from the community.” (Streib et al. 2009:22). Besides these aspects they also lists a range of possible “deconversion avenues,” or possible outcome of the deconversion process, for example leaving religion, finding a new religion or leaving the religious group while keeping some aspects of the religious faith (Streib et al. 2009:26–8). “Deconversion,” Streib writes, “is biographical change” (2009:23). We can therefore talk about apostasy in terms of religious change, similar to Lewis Rambo’s description of the conversion process (Rambo 1993:1, 17). In their *Amazing Conversions*, Bob Altemeyer and Bruce Hunsberger describe de-conversion as a gradual religious change (Altemeyer and Hunsberger 1997:232). However, the apostasy stories analyzed below are mainly of the first kind, where a clear break occurs after a cataclysmic conflict.

## Current Worldview

### Testimonies from former Muslims

On the March 1, 2013 there were 303 apostasy testimonies on WikiIslam.net, 212 formulated by men and 91 by women. 248 apostates had been born into Islam, and 55 were converts. (See Table 1)

Current Worldview	Percentage
Christianity	12% (n=37)
Hinduism, Buddhism, Judaism	5% (n=8+6+1)
Theism, Deism, Pantheism, Spirituality	6% (n=19)
Atheism	28% (n=86)
Agnosticism	12% (n=37)

Humanism	9% (n=26)
Other-unknown	28% (n=84)

*Tab. 1. (Source: People Who Left Islam 2012)*

After reading all of these testimonial narratives, several themes and narrative figures seems to recur. We examine some of these narratives in detail here. As far as possible we have chosen narratives from different positions: male-female, born into Islam-converts, different current world views, and different country of origin and residence. The age variable was more difficult to calculate since most apostates were in their twenties or early thirties. Several studies suggest that apostasy more frequently occurs when people are in their late teens or early twenties. These findings do not depend on any specific religious tradition. Apart from these 303 testimonies, there were also a large number of “comments from former Muslims” linked from the web page, which, the web page makes clear, were “primarily taken from testimonies which were too short for their own page.” Of the total of 177 comments, 133 were formulated by men and 44 by women. Since these comments often only rearticulate what the apostasy narratives elaborate in greater detail, we will not deal with these comments further here.

After going through these narratives, we have chosen to analyze six testimonies that represent different positions and experiences. The chosen narratives will illustrate that apostates can give different reasons for leaving Islam and that they use different arguments when explaining their new position on Islam and Muslims. In analyzing these narratives, we use some of the methods provided by discourse analysis – “Islam” is, from such perspective, seen as an unstable and even “empty” concept interpellated or inscribed with meaning by the apostates – and rhetorical analysis, using the classical Aristotelian concepts logos, pathos, and ethos. We are here interested in both the position-specific narratives and experiences, and the group’s shared narrative, that is the group-specific narrative, these being the criteria for choosing the six different apostasy narratives. Our point is that

these narratives about being an ex-Muslim “gather people around them,” to quote sociologist Ken Plummer (1995:174). To be a member of the virtual apostasy community the apostates have to use the contemporary hegemonic narratives when expressing their experiences as former Muslims. Focus is therefore on how hegemonic narratives are at work in the formation of personal apostasy narratives and, at the same time, excludes non-hegemonic narratives. However, before scrutinizing these testimonies in detail, we will quote the so-called “Testimony Disclaimer” posted on WikiIslam:

Testimonies of leaving Islam are candid, honest submissions by former Muslims who have varying experiences and beliefs. After leaving Islam they may turn to agnosticism, atheism, Buddhism, Christianity, Hinduism, [theism] and so on.

[...]

Because these submissions are personal experiences and thoughts, they may not necessarily comply with our guidelines which apply to most of the other content on the site.

The validity and accuracy of the views contained have not been verified and do not have any connection with the rest of the content on the site. (WikiIslam: Testiomony Disclaimer 2013).

In the following analysis, it is important to stress that we are not trying to determine whether the testimonies are true or not. It is only the text and the internal textual rationale (i.e. the argumentation and rhetoric used and the examples employed to demonstrate the apostates’ case) that are of interest to us. The testimonies contain language that is very critical of Islam and Muslims, and it is obvious that many believing Muslims will have problems with how their religion is being presented. However, from an academic point of view the testimonies can be seen as vital parts in the ongoing struggle over how to define a specific religion, and they illustrate clearly the power struggle that is going on over how to define Islam and Muslims.

## Apostasy narratives

### Fool I Was

The alias Fool I Was is presented as a Swedish woman with a Christian background who converted to Islam. After being a Muslim for nine years, she left Islam for Christianity. Her interest in Islam was first raised when she met a man, an “Arab with hazel eyes and a big heart, or so I thought...” To gain his mother’s acceptance she started to study Islam, the Quran and hadiths. Love and marriage are not unusual reasons for converting to Islam in contemporary Sweden (Sultán Sjöqvist 2006; Roald 2004; Månsson 2002), even though the conversion process is usually seen as resulting from a crisis (See Rambo 1993:44–55). Her mother-in-law, who, according to the narrator, first saw her as “the ‘Swedish whore who took her little boy,’” changed her mind after she had converted to Islam. While her own family was upset by her conversation, her husband’s family was pleased. The conversion also satisfied her desire for a sense of belonging. “When you first fall in love with the religion, everything is wonderful.”

Besides her own reading of the Quran and the hadiths, she took lessons from a local imam. She became, as she puts it, “the perfect Muslim...” The “Arab Muslims” she met during her time as a Muslim she describes as basically ignorant about religion: “[m]any converts know much more about Islam than born Muslims.” During the years as a Muslim, she “helped many girls convert to Islam,” girls who were going to marry Muslim men. She summarizes her experience of women converts to Islam in a sentence: “Love is what gets women into to Islam; their brains are what get them out.”

It is important to note that this narrative is told from the apostate’s perspective. The narrating “I” is converting to Islam while marrying a Muslim man, and leaving Islam after divorcing the same man. Her love for the Muslim man and conversion to Islam coincide, as do the dissolutions of her marriage and of her Muslim faith. In a book that has now become a classic, *Becoming an ex* (1988), sociologist Helen Ebaugh points out the gradual shift between different positions, roles and identities as significant

for modern societies where changes of partners, work, sex, residence and religion are increasingly frequent. And it is from the position of the “ex,” in two ways, that the story is articulated.

The conversion part of the story of Fool I Was does not follow the usual pattern of conversion narratives. In *Reading Autobiography* (2010), Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson describe the conversion narrative as follows: “The typical pattern involves a fall into a troubled and sensorily confused ‘dark night of the soul,’ followed by a ‘call for help,’ a process of transformation, and a journey to a ‘new Jerusalem’ or place of membership in an enlightened community of like believers.” (Smith and Watson 2010:266). Interestingly, this “dark night of the soul,” a reference to the title of the poem written by the 16th century Spanish poet San Juan de la Cruz, occurs when Fool I Was converts to Islam, not before. In other words, the apostasy narrative follows a similar pattern but changes the place of religion that the narrator has left. But leaving religion does not necessarily mean losing religion. A change of religion can also imply yet another conversion; another religion is found and replaces the former one. This is also pointed out by Smith and Watson in referring to Malcolm X’s *Autobiography*: “Conversion may be neither definitive nor final, as suggested in Malcolm X’s chronicling of his multiple conversions.” (Smith and Watson 2010:266).

How, then, does the woman Fool I Was depict Islam in her apostasy narrative? Her first contact with Islam is described as a period of love and fascination for the religion’s clear answers to a variety of difficult issues in life. But already from the beginning there was also a sense of alienation, since the religion in general and the Quran in particular did not grab hold of her: “I got the Koran and read it. I had read about converts who got enlightened and started crying while reading it. I didn’t feel it; I was more confused.” The feeling of confusion grows even stronger over the years. On the one hand she is performing the role of a convert, even helping other women to convert, while on the other hand, behind the image of the “perfect Muslim” that she is performing, there were also feelings of unease, dissatisfaction and estrangement. The Quran, according to her understanding, “consisted



of rules of what to do and what not to do, different judgments for this and that. It's just a lot of hate and punishment." Still, she converted to Islam, or was "brainwashed," as she phrases it. By using the word "brainwashed," she is associating her conversion to Islam with the process in which people join so-called "cults."

The discourse about "cults" and their strategies of recruiting potential members is usually stereotypical and prejudicial and is frequently reproduced in popular media and media. In this discourse the "member" is described as a victim, kidnapped or in some way manipulated to join the group – terms like "mind control" and "brainwashed" are frequently used in this discourse – while the leader of the religious group is depicted as a pathological individual whose motifs are money, glory or sex (Wessinger 2000:6). Such ways of understanding sect or cult members as victims have met with massive criticism, not least from scientific perspectives (Richardson and Introvigne 2001:163). Even though there is no manipulating sect leader in her story, the narrator Fool I Was is using this theme in describing her time as a Muslim. Islam is therefore depicted using familiar stereotypes about "cults."

The time as a "perfect" Quran-studying Muslim was also a time of hypocrisy, double standards, and confusion. Islam is depicted as an oppressive, anti-intellectual and un-logical religion: "Islam is all about not using your own mind, thoughts or desires." Leaving Islam, conversely, is narrated as an act for freedom – "I'm free!" – and an awakening from "the dark night of the soul..." "I woke up," she writes, not when converting to Islam but when leaving it. This quote gives one example of how Fool I Was struggled with Islam during her time as a Muslim:

I tried to believe. I really did. I cried many times for not "getting it." I did not feel at one with Allah while praying. I was irritated when Ramadan came, rather than being happy. I hated the Hijab and the double standard in Islam. I also felt like an outsider. Mostly I feel sick for defending Islam. I was brainwashed and repeated phrases like: "The Hijab protects women." "Having many wives was not obli-

gatory; it was to help the widows in the time of the prophet.” “Islam is peace.” “When we fast we cleanse our bodies and minds.” I was confused. (Fool I Was [Former Muslim] 2013).

This way of describing Islam has been frequent in Western culture. Islam is described as a more or less fundamentalist religion, far from the peace-loving, democratic and multifaceted image of Muslim advocates such as Tariq Ramadan (2007) and John Esposito (2011). In studies about Islamophobia in the West, the shift from 19th century Islam as mystical, exotic and even erotic religion – in stark contrast to contemporary Christianity – to the post-revolutionary religion, with its connotations of military action, guerrilla wars and manhood, is a common theme (see Said 1981). This suggests that the rhetoric of the present-day apostasy narratives would be hard to find in, for example, 19th century Europe. It is clear that public speech about Islam and increased anti-Muslim – and Islamophobic – rhetoric in society has important implications for the debate about people who leave Islam. Fool I Was’ autobiographical narrative confirms these later, contemporary prejudices about Islam by referring to her own experiences as a Muslim, thus giving her image of Islam an air of authenticity.

### Tatsuhiro

In contrast to Fool I Was, Malayan Tatsuhiro was born into Islam, but left it for Buddhism. In contrast to predominantly Christian Sweden, the majority of Malaysia’s population practices Islam (61.3 percent), even though a significant minority are Buddhists (19.8 percent). But even though Tatsuhiro’s situation differs from that of Fool I Was in Sweden, there are some common figures of thought that seem to transcend the personal aspects as well as the culturally specific ones. These themes are connected to the way the two apostates understand and describe Islam. But let us first scrutinize Tatsuhiro’s narrative.

Tatsuhiro first discusses how Islam has come to influence Malaysian law in negative ways, especially at the present day. Islamic law limits freedom of religion, he writes, and he describes Islam as a foreign element in Malaysian

culture, since “pre-Islam ethnic Malays were adherents of Hindu or Buddhist faiths...” The Buddhist Tatsuhiro argues that, “to force an ex-Muslim [like himself] to keep his faith unto Islam and to discriminate [against] apostates is verily against humanity’s freedom of religion...” This discourse, in which Islam is an oppressive force in society, is due to the religion’s place in Malaysia, which differs from the Swedish discourse on Islam we have already dealt with. The obvious connection, however, is that in both cases Islam plays a negative role in society and in people’s lives. When we consider the motives for Tatsuhiro leaving Islam, we find that the Swedish and Malaysian discourses coincide here too:

I left Islam due to the fact that the Quran contradicts humanity and science itself, plus historical accounts of Islam conquests on other nations were horrible, and the historical accounts according to the Al-Hadith are terrifying towards women.

In this quote, Islam is once again given agency, as if the religion is monolithically acting on its own. The rationality argument is also mentioned when discussing the Quran, which is represented as irrational in relation to science, which here symbolizes rationality and “fact” in opposition to fiction and myths. But Islam is not just understood as an irrational delusion: its conquests are cited as an example of the religion’s brutal and inhuman history. That is fact, not fiction.

Although Tatsuhiro gives these reasons for leaving Islam, atheism does not seem to be an option for him. Instead, after considering Judaism, Christianity and Hinduism, he chooses to become a Buddhist. To Tatsuhiro Buddhism is a “‘free form’ religion” and “the most ‘neutral’ religion in terms of interfaith dialogues.” Hence, he compares and contrasts Islam and Buddhism with each other. While Islam is portrayed as irrational, oppressive and inhumane, Buddhism is simply seen as its opposite.

Tatsuhiro keeps his Buddhist meditations a secret from his father and other Malaysian Muslims. Living in Malaysia as a former Muslim and now as a Buddhist, he is surrounded with several problems that have to do with how

“the Malaysian government imposes Islamic Sharia law” on him. But even though he frames Islam in a basically negative light, Tatsuhiko points out that “Modern Islam has its good side,” using the analogy of how theories can be revised within science. A modern version of Islam can therefore be a positive expression of the religion. But it is clear, according to Tatsuhiko, that there is no such modern version of Islam in Malaysia.

Paz

The story of the American woman called Paz was first published at Apostatesofislam.com and, like most such stories, has been republished on WikiIslam. Paz was a convert to Islam, and her narrative starts with the conversion process and ends with the de-conversion or apostasy narrative. The narrative thus uses the well-established form and metaphor of Western literature, that of a journey (Bernhardsson 2010:33). In Paz’s case, the journey into Islam coincides with her marrying a Muslim man. But unlike the narrative of Fool I Was, Paz’s journey starts before meeting the man, a fascination that developed after encountering a woman who had converted to Islam: “I was captivated by Islam; it was so mysterious and new to me.” After reading about Islam on the Internet and studying the Quran at home, she came to the conclusion that Islam was the religion for her: “I wanted a change in my life and this was it.”

She met her future husband, Khalid, on a chat room on the Internet. After two months of correspondence they met at her home in New Mexico and got married in a local mosque. But things didn’t turn out as expected. Khalid “was revealing himself to be more and be stricter and stricter...” While she stayed at home all day, he controlled her from work and when at home questioned her about her activities, especially religious ones. She should, according to Khalid, live her life according to Sunnah, though the same rules did not seem to apply to him. Paz continues:

I was required to sit down and drink my glass of water in two or three gulps exactly, according to Sunnah. He was trying to make me become right-handed and stop using eating utensils also according

to Sunnah. [...]. He was on my back about my every move while he was clean-shaven, used mouthwash that contained alcohol (while at the same time insisting that I not use vanilla extract in any cooking because of the alcohol it contained), smoked, and did whatever he pleased. (Paz [Former Muslim] 2013).

The ideal image of the Muslim man she had married fell apart piece by piece up to the point when she could not take it anymore. She describes this period as “oppressive and suffocating” and as “the most exhausting, draining period” of her life. Thus far in Paz’s narrative, the representation of Islam has changed from being fascinating, mysterious and the ideal way of life to being more and more aligned with her husband’s views, which marginalized and oppressed Paz. Thus, Islam became at the same time more “masculine” in character, the “feminine” aspects being left aside (See, for example, Hoffmann 2012). The masculine image of Islam, in the narrative represented by Khalid, was also a religion full of hypocrisy, as the quote above makes clear. When Paz decides to leave Khalid, it is not only he she is leaving but also Islam. The image of Khalid and the image of Islam had become merged together for her. Paz also mentions a number of “key beliefs [...] that were contradictory to Islam,” among them equality between men and women, free agency, joy, love, compassion, fellowship and kindness, to mention but a few. These “traits [were] lacking in Islam,” and she could therefore no longer be a Muslim.

After escaping from Khalid during the daytime while he was working, she returned to her mother in New Mexico, to “sweet freedom and relief...” Though she did not de-convert immediately, she describes her new-found freedom as follows: “I could eat in a restaurant again! I could watch TV, go to the store, eat with a fork, I was free!” After Paz had left Khalid, she discovered she was pregnant and became afraid to tell him because she thought that he would take the baby and raise it according to Islam. Her apprehension was confirmed as Khalid, finding out she was pregnant, told her that he had “been advised by a cleric to take our child to Saudi Arabia, away from me...” But that never happened because Paz had a miscarriage.

Paz's narrative is presented chronologically; she is looking back at a period of her life, and it is from her present position that she is examining what happened. The last part of her story sums up her view of Islam. She seemed at first to be able to separate her marriage from Islam and considered Islam a "religion of peace..." She even describes herself as a "non-Muslim apologist for Islam:"

I blamed my failed marriage on my husband's abuse, not realizing that his abuse was acceptable in Islam. Though Islam was not true, I thought Muhammad might have been inspired with some truth to give to his followers. I even thought he might have been a prophet, but not the best or the last. I assumed the religion had been corrupted and changed to what it is now. I even knew about the horrors of the Taliban of Afghanistan, and thought they were severely misguided. (Paz [Former Muslim] 2013).

Her position as an apologist eventually changed. When September 11 happened she questioned her previous understanding of Islam, after "reading more about the terrorists, the Taliban, and Islam, [...] starting to change my mind, starting to think Islam is evil..." Paz's narrative ends, not about her own experience or situation, but with a conclusion about Islam: "The truth was undeniable. Islam is not and never was a religion of peace." This is Paz's conclusion, one she draws from having been a Muslim for a long time. This way of integrating personal experience with opinions and harsh statements about Islam, as if Islam were an autonomous entity different from other religions that had several different interpretations and expressions, serves to make the narrative reliable and authentic. This way of using the "personal" when narrating about Islam the religion is rhetorically effective. These personal narratives all have significant elements of pathos that aim to affect the reader's emotions and create sympathy for the narrator. Once that has been achieved, the reader might also be convinced about the narrators' perspective on Islam. If the rhetoric succeeds, the reader gains the same insights about the true nature of Islam that the narrating "I" has acquired, namely

that “Islam is evil,” not a religion of peace. This way of criticizing Islam differs from other types of critique that predominantly use logos.

The self-referring and self-experienced narrative is similar to what John Beverley defines as *testimonio*:

A *testimonio* is a novel or a novella-length narrative, produced in the form of a printed text, told in the first person by a narrator, who is also the real protagonist or witness of the events she or he recounts (Beverley 2003:320).

Even though there may be some parallels between the life-story and the *testimonio*, the latter is distinguished by its aim of making a new audience aware of the situation he or she has experienced or is experiencing at the present moment. The position that the *testimonio* narrative expresses is intertwined with the narrator’s own identity, and the act of *testimonio* consists of oppression, suffering and marginalization “that is implicated in the act of narration itself” (Beverley 2003:320). Although the apostasy narratives testify to oppression, deprivation and marginalization, they usually have a triumphal character and have usually left the oppressive situation they are talking about. But, just like the *testimonio* narrative, the apostasy narratives give the reader access to a perspective and an experience that would not be available otherwise. And the narrative’s truth is deeply dependent on authenticity. Beverley again:

This presence of the voice, which the reader is meant to experience as the voice of a real rather than fictional person, is the mark of a desire not to be silenced or defeated, to impose oneself on an institution of power and privilege from the position of the excluded, the marginal, the subaltern (Beverley 2003:321).

Another mark that signifies a *testimonio* is the erasure of the author’s function and textual presence. The narrator has written down his or her narrative in the first person. It is the narrator’s own experience, thoughts and emotions that the reader can partake of. This is how the apostasy narratives become authentic, real and “true...”

## The Apostate

A very different story is formulated by the Apostate, a 24-years-old woman who was raised as a Muslim in Saudi Arabia, but is now living in America. Significantly, the Apostate's statement ends with the conclusion that she cannot believe in "a religion that is as nonsensical and ludicrous as Islam plainly is." While her narrative is given authority by her Muslim background, she uses logos arguments throughout. When she read a short book about the history of the world's religions, she "had an epiphany about Islam: it was crystal to me that it was just another man-made religion, destined to take its place with other religions that had come and gone, whose gods had been worshiped for centuries and then been abandoned into obscurity." Islam was no longer "God's truth" as she had been raised to believe.

The Apostate left Islam because of the religion's irrationality, history of violence and inequality, and she uses several arguments well-known from the New Atheist movement, in which Richard Dawkins is one of the most prominent figures. One example is when she is talking about the "modern Muslim" who is "reinterpreting scripture in the light of our modern values..." The question that arises is "why not just adopt the modern values and drop the unnecessary muddling factor of revelation?" What is notable is how she is rhetorically creating different positions. In contrast to other Muslims, the "modern Muslim" tries to reshape Islam into some relation with what she calls "our modern values." But in so doing the "modern Muslim" might just as well drop the religion altogether and hence become just "modern" (in her sense). The main reason is that "modern" and "Muslim" are incompatible and not able to combine. "Muslim" is per se anti-modern, and "modern" is anti-Muslim. This way of arguing about religion can also be found in Richard Dawkins' writings (Dawkins 2006:307-308). We give a few more examples of this way of arguing:

I see Islamic history as a sort of joy-ride of imperialism, oppression and a chronicle of misery with "Bad Idea" written all over it. But my main beef with Islam, the main reason I don't believe any divine



being revealed the Koran or appointed flawed Muhammad as the final prophet, is the utter ludicrousness of the idea of Revelation. [...]. The purpose of this whole revelation business was to provide mankind with guidance [...]. [w]e can't really take any of the "guidance" at face value because then we'd be slaying kafirs, taking slaves and oppressing women at every turn. [...]. The Koran and the Hadith are also very flawed as sources of law, or even as guidance, for the simplest human society, much less our complex modern societal structures. They fall apart with the least scrutiny – the edifice is built on ignorance, superstition, bad history and worse science. (The Apostate [Former Muslim] 2013).

The Apostate came to these conclusions by using her own mind, and states that she did not "set out to stop believing." Seeing Islam in this new light made it impossible for her to remain a Muslim. The Apostate's apostasy narrative is thus pursued through rational arguments, not emotions or relational aspects, as in some of the other narratives.

### Freethinker

Freethinker also had a Muslim upbringing, like the Apostate, and also criticizes Islam for being irrational. Freethinker mentions the new atheists Richard Dawkins and Sam Harris as influences, and for the most part his narrative is about "telling the truth" about Islam through Quranic exegesis. The starting point for this truth-seeking, however, as Freethinker himself puts it, was due to an embarrassment that occurred when as a Muslim he could not answer questions about Islam because he lacked a proper knowledge of it. Such lack of knowledge is common among Muslims, Freethinker points out, and he describes his own quest for truth in the following way:

Seeking the truth is not about consolation, comfort, confirmation of a prior conception. Truth means "facing and accepting" the reality, that can be harsh, cruel, bitter but the false notions are released. The best thing was that I was not afraid about unbiased inquiry following

factual information with awareness; I persuaded facts that led me to truth. (Freethinker [Former Muslim] 2013).

The remaining part of his story is dedicated to presenting “facts” about Islam that lead him to the “truth.” The facts usually consist of quotes from the Quran. Another important statement has to do with atheism in relation to religion: “you are born without beliefs. The mind of a child is hijacked by their guardians as it was not preinstalled with beliefs by any god.” While man is a born atheist, religion is imposed upon the child, who is indoctrinated. Another way of putting the logic of Freethinker is to say that atheism is natural and religion is its opposite, that is, not natural, or in a milder form; and, more in line with the Apostate above, religion is said to be cultural, man-made. This line of argument is well-known in atheist circles. At the same time, scholars argue that religion is “natural” (see, for instance, Boyer 2003, McCauley 2011 and Sloan Wilson 2002). Freethinker’s scrutiny of Islam leads him to the following concluding remarks:

Religion breeds group-ism, incites hatred, discriminates people and is an irrational fanaticism. Superstition is the seed of religious rituals. Traditional and cultural ideologies limit individual to pre-structured thoughts in every sphere. [...] Selective religious ideology may turn one into mother Teresa, but an absolutist (word by word) follower of religion is bound to sow seeds of hatred and discrimination. (Freethinker [Former Muslim] 2013).

This statement is about religion, not Islam, even though the rest of the text is about Islam. Freethinker also distinguishes between religion and spirituality, although only implicitly when discussing his admiration of the Buddha’s teaching, while rejecting Buddhism as a corrupted version and “contradictory to original teaching of Buddha...” This does not mean that Freethinker is a Buddhist. The distinction between the teaching of the Buddha and the religion of Buddhism relies on a common public understanding of religion as something aligned with institutions, power and men, while spirituality is religion’s opposite (Heelas and Woodhead 2005:12–32; Lynch

2012:4-5). This type of argument could be applied to Islam as well, but Freethinker prefers to discuss Islam as a prototypical religion, separate from spirituality.

## Naeema

Former Muslim Naeema is a 20-years-old woman who was born into Islam but has converted to Christianity. Her mother converted to Islam from Christianity when she married Naeema's father. Naeema describes her father as "extremely religious," even though he was an "open-minded man." Her upbringing was religious, and as a child she had a positive view of Islam. But as she got older Islam became a hindrance; she couldn't dress the way her friends did, and because she was afraid of Allah's punishment she did not develop her drawing skills. As she puts it, she "missed a lot of fun," but even worse she "feared the fire of hell" and did everything to please Muhammad and Allah. This period, when she was socially isolated, she describes as a period of phobic fear of Allah and Muhammad.

After studying Islamic views on women, she understood Islam as "every bit like apartheid in South Africa..." She mentions misogynic hadiths "about the household of Prophet Muhammad, about his wives, about his battle. Hadiths about rape and female war captives..." This version of Islam clearly differed from the Islam she grew up with. And her negative understanding of Islam only increased: "I looked at Islam's rule of polygamy for men, yet women are not given any alternative. I saw nothing but injustice." After reading the Quran and the hadiths, she dismisses Muhammad as a "man of 54 sleeping with a nine-year-old child" and as a "mentally and emotionally abusive husband..." And Islam is just as bad as Muhammad: "Islam turned women's bodies into sex factories for men..." And when she examined Islamic history, she "saw no love, no peace, no kindness, no humanity, but only a river of blood and anarchy flowing with the lives of so many innocent [The original is partly written with capital letters.]..." All these findings led Naeema to leave Islam: "I denounced the Islamic Prophet. He was a false prophet! [...] I'd rather spend eternity in hell with victims of war, than with warmongers and rapists in Allah's paradise."

But leaving Islam did not make her want to leave religion altogether: “I was longing, sorry thirsting for a God to praise...” And the interest in Jesus and Christianity arose together with this longing for God. She started to read the Bible and began comparing Jesus with Muhammad, the Christian God with Allah. Jesus

was way too pure and wise to be human. Especially in comparison to the Islamic Prophet’s 7 century, illogical and superstitious mentality. Jesus Christ was born 600 years before him, but seems to speak with eloquence, intelligence, authority and righteousness. [...] Why does he speak of a commandment of “Loving the Father with all your heart”? I never Loved Allah. I always feared him. He never gave me a chance to love him. By now I was in tears! All the frustration, the loss and the failures of all the years came gushing out. Suddenly the G-d of the Gospels and the G-d of the Quran split. One seemed like a G-d of Fire and War and the other a G-d of Love and Mercy. The one was promising hell fire, while the other was promising salvation. [...] I denounce Allah, Muhammad’s imaginary god. (Freethinker [Former Muslim] 2013).

Just as Freethinker contrasts Buddhism and Islam, Naeema makes a similar comparison between Christianity and Islam. In the quote it is clear that Islam is understood as a false and oppressive religion, its Prophet as superstitious and illogical. Allah is not God, but “only” Muhammad’s “imaginary God.” Islam, she writes, consists of “unjust, mentally exhausting, superstitious, oppressive, disruptive, intellectually stifling, hypocritical doctrine and chains.” It is Naeema’s background and experience as a Muslim that makes her anti-Muslim rhetoric seem reliable. She is a former insider who has turned outsider. Her story’s autobiographical character produces a “truth” about the “real” Islam. At the same time, her self-referring narrative is a story about stages of development in which Naeema’s life-crises make her change position on the question of Islam. And since Naeema left Islam, and even though she had a religious upbringing, she is what Bob Altemeyer and Bruce Hunsberger describe as an “amazing apostate” in their *Amazing Conversions* (1997).

## Conclusions

The apostasy narratives published on WikiIslam differ in context, contents and character, but follow similar patterns when it comes to genre, rhetoric and representing Islam.

### Genre

A central aspect of the apostasy narrative's type of text and its relation to truth-telling about Islam is the rhetoric aspects of genre or what genre does, rather than is. The apostasy narratives put several different genres to use, but we will limit our discussion to the genre of autobiography. As autobiography the apostasy narratives can be associated with non-fiction, documentaries and representations of the reflexiv truth of a person's life. The narrative contract between the narrator and the reader implies that the narrator represents the position he or she is talking from. There is a correspondence between the narrative's "I," its protagonist, and the narrative's author. If the reader did not believe in this connection, the narrative's authenticity, its truth claims, would fail. This self-referring text is aligned with the referentiality of literature as well as its realism.

The autobiographical pact, associated with French theorist Philippe Lejeune appears when the reader identifies the narrative's author with its protagonist. The autobiographical text supposes, Lejeune writes, "that there is identity of name between the author (such as he figures, by his name, on the cover), the narrator of the story, and the character who is being talked about." (Lejeune 1989:12, as quoted in Smith and Watson 2010:207). Through the autobiographical pact, fiction is suspended from the story, and the text is represented to be true. In this way, the autobiographical pact denotes a kind of truth claim – it is fact, not fiction. According to Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson, it is when the text's narrator and the protagonist coincide that the text's veracity becomes difficult to determine, since then it cannot be categorized as either fact or fiction (Smith and Watson 2010:15–16).

The key aspect of the autobiography's truth claims is that they are based on the narrator's own experience. In the above narratives, this type of self-

referring is most explicit in the testimonios of Fool I Was, Paz and Naeema, which claim to portray a specific, self-perceived experience. But this does not mean that the narrative is personal in the sense of being private; rather, it uses and reproduces a conventional narrative about what it means to leave Islam as a personal experience.

## Rhetoric

Looking at the *logos*, *pathos* and *ethos* arguments – well-known rhetorical ways of persuading the reader-listener – it is clear all three aspects are used at different lengths in the narratives, often with one aspect to the fore (See, for instance, Foss 2009:26–27). The typical *logos* argument states that Islam is an irrational, illogical way of thought: it is simply not reasonable to be a Muslim (for example, the narratives of Tatsuhiro, The Apostate and Free-thinker above). The *logos* argument points out details in the Quran and established Islamic beliefs, and comes to the conclusion that they are not God-given and true, but false, man-made and nonsensical. The narrator often comes to this “insight” after a period of serious study of Islam and Islamic thought, and at times the result of the generally isolated study was not planned from the outset. The “insight” therefore also surprises the narrators themselves. Aligned with this argument is also the view, expressed by the Apostate, that “religions comes and goes...” Emphasizing the temporality of a religion also relativizes it, representing “truth” in Islam as just one of many “truths” that will eventually disappear. The only truth that will survive is based on rational and logical arguments.

The *ethos* argument is about convincing the listener or reader that the narrative is reliable and true, which is generally achieved by gaining the audience’s trust. In the apostasy narrative, this is done by the self-referring narrator telling us about his or her own experience as a former Muslim. In the conversion narrative, there are several examples of how *ethos* is used. The motives for converting to Islam are “pure” and signify a high moral standard. This has to do with manners, restrictions on sexuality, alcohol and more. When the narrator, like Fool I Was or Paz, has been a Muslim for a

while, she or he sees the religion for what it really is: hypocrisy. And when Islam fails to live up to the high moral standards of the narrator, the latter has to leave it.

The pathos argument, finally, rests on the narrator's own experience of being a Muslim. By using biographical materials, the narrator is able to express and create feelings about the subject matter, Islam. If the reader is a Muslim, the pathos argument can also be about showing possibilities in the future. The "I" in the apostasy narrative can thus work as a textual node of identification.

### Islam representations

The apostasy narratives that contain self-referential and autobiographical components make the truth-claims based on the narrator's own experiences as a former Muslim. They make these in different ways that amount to different claims. Logos: (1) Islam is an irrational, illogical way of thought and the beliefs that Islam holds to be true are actually false. Ethos: (2) Islam is not about peace, high standards and God; Islam is an evil, self-centered and morally corrupt religion, and Muslims are hypocrites. Pathos: (3) Islam is an oppressive, misogynist and violent religion, and it is negative for its followers, especially women, even if they don't know it themselves. The descriptions of the effects of apostasy mirror [descriptively] the negative image of Islam. The recurring words characterizing apostasy are rationality, logic and truth; peaceful, happiness and permission; freedom, equality and autonomy. In the apostasy narratives and the narrators' testimonios, these adjectives are incapable of combining with the word "Islam."

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Both apologists and polemical writers who want to tell the truth about Islam and Muslims are using the Internet and other social media. How the truth is being construed is not just a matter of context and the aims of the writers but also technical and rhetorical aspects. As scholars of religion, it is our job to analyze how different opinions and voices are striving to gain the upper hand in creating simulacra of discussion, and from this point of view the opinions posted on the WikiIslam.net portal provide interesting empirical material. Several academic studies have demonstrated how the Internet has become the new platform for anti-Muslim opinions, racism and Islamophobia (See, for example, Larsson 2007). In this forum, we have analyzed how apostasy testimonies can be used as truth claims to demonstrate that Islam is a dangerous, irrational and anti-modern religion, but the narratives analyzed should not be seen as a sample to determine how Muslims discuss and argue the question of apostasy and we also need to know if apostasy testimonies (like the ones we have discussed in this article) are being read and whether they are having an impact on decisions to leave Islam or not. These apostasy testimonies can also be used by individuals who wish to question Islam and Muslims. From this point of view these stories can easily be turned into an important weapon in the hands of those who want to express anti-Muslim feelings and so constitute an important element in an Islamophobic world view that presents Islam and Muslims as diametrically opposite to all other world views.



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Comment:

## Digital Images and Visions of Jihad: Virtual Orientalism and the Distorted Lens of Technology

Raymond Pun

Abstract

*Since the aftermath of September 11, Western media have repeatedly lampooned and echoed the term “jihad” as a principle of the Islamic faith, arguing that this term inspires Muslims to wage wars against the west and modernity. The studies of jihad as a core belief of radical Islamic groups are numerous; the term is not a new phenomenon; it is mentioned in the Quran at least 164 times in various meanings and contexts. This piece analyzes how contemporary technology specifically search engines such as Google Images, pervades, distorts and reinvents Orientalist images of the term jihad from a western worldview. In these visual representations of jihad, we find abundant images of violence, mystery, terror, and even mockery and satire of Islam. The study focuses on the effects of these digital images to the consumers and how technology reinforces and reproduces “visual knowledge” in a transfixed level that neglects the multiple and ambiguous meanings of jihad in the Islamic context. This piece is not arguing for an authentic visual representation of the notion of jihad but is suggesting that the role of contemporary technology can be complicit in distorting and reconfiguring the meanings of sacred texts and ideas of Islam in the West.*

Keywords

*Islam, information and communication technology, Islam and civil society, Internet, Quran, photography, study of religion, authority, Internet studies, jihad*

### Introduction

If one performs a search in Google Images for the word jihad, a plethora of digital photos, images, works of art, and illustrations will appear in various disturbing depictions. These visuals range from photos of a bloody war with armed “Muslims” to satirical cartoons of a “jihadist” ready to detonate himself

for Islam. Since 9/11, there has been a massive wave of public speculations and political debates about the meaning of the controversial Islamic term jihad, and how this Islamic ideology motivates and encourages Islamic fundamentalists to challenge the West. Without really knowing what this sacred term actually means, the media portrays Islam as the “unknown-other” which is re-imagined as a great force of evil. With the creation and dissemination of digital technologies particularly image search retrievals, visual representations of jihad can be appalling; these collective images reflect traits of Orientalism. Because the term is ambiguously addressed in the Quran and other Islamic traditions, it is difficult to focus on an absolute meaning of the term without considering the various contexts used in these sources.

This piece examines the intersections of digital technology, representation and Islam; it is neither criticizing Google Images nor discouraging the use of this resource but is using Google Images as a case study to demonstrate this intersection in relations to “truth” and “power.” One of the main questions to ask is how this system of arbitrary images influences those who consume the images. What kind of effect or impact can these images have on the viewers, especially those who are not experts of the Islamic faith? Part of this piece explores exploring the origins and early notions of jihad, and focuses on theoretical frameworks of Edward Said’s critique of Orientalism. Another aspect of this piece focuses on the integration and intersections of “virtual studies” or Virtual Orientalism as proposed by Jane Iwamura and the accumulation of images through technology based on Martin Heidegger’s *The Question Concerning Technology*. By examining the integration of knowledge and power in the formation of colonial order of normalizing, marginalizing, and “enframing” Islam and its believers as the “other(s),” the piece brings into attention that these technologically-accumulated visual representations of Islam form and reveal harrowing structures of patriarchal, racial and religious hierarchies. The piece is ultimately concerned with the complicit role(s) of technology in perpetuating Islam in Orientalist stereotypes that underscore the dominant discourse of the “clash” in the digital era. The piece address how consumers will view these archived digital

images where some are “false” images stored in the memory bank of the cyber world.

Prior to 9/11, Islam had been portrayed negatively by the American medias. The term jihad was not echoed as much across the media but the faith itself was portrayed as the enemy of secular liberal democracy.<sup>1</sup> According to Daya Kishan Thussu, “Media images of Muslims as fanatic aggressors pervade the non-Muslim World and especially in the West ... Ordinary Muslims have become targets of this demonization when in fact Muslims have been worst suffers in most recent aggressions [prior to 9/11].”<sup>2</sup> The media and academic presses such as Samuel P. Huntington’s *The Clash of Civilization* explore the relationship of the West and the Islam by framing the conflict as a dominant discourse of global politics.<sup>3</sup> As a result of this discourse, we find that Islam is portrayed, stereotyped, scrutinized and re-imagined as the “enemy” to the West. The public notion of Islam is not only misleading but also dangerous. To some scholars, this type of “cultural stereotyping by visual forms of media”<sup>4</sup> is known as “Virtual Orientalism.” According to Jane Naomira Iwamura, “Virtual Orientalism relies heavily on new seemingly uninterrupted flow of representations and their easy access make stereotypes of Asians and Asian religions all the more obdurate ... These [visual] forms train the consumer to prefer visual representations, and the visual nature of the image leads the representation as immediacy and ontological gravity that words cannot.”<sup>5</sup> Characterizing Islam as the “enemy” or the “other” distorts the perception of the principles and followers of the faith; reactions to the faith may be perceived negatively. Iwamura argues that Orientalist images in a virtual setting heavily rely on the viewer’s imagination of the “other.” These digital images that supposedly represent the word jihad are transforming the holiness of the term into a “sacred” code word used by “terrorists” who happen to appear as armed “Muslims” or “Middle Easterners,” and direct people to their 9/11 memories.<sup>6</sup> While this is not the case conceptually, associating this word with these disturbing images raises Edward Said’s Orientalism. To understand the meaning(s) of the word jihad, it is important to turn to the scholarly discussions and treatments of the word in the Islamic tradition.



## The Origins and Early Notions of Jihad

The revelation of the Quran to the Prophet Muhammad started approximately 610 A.D. Muslims believe that the Quran is the literal word of God revealed to the prophet in the Arabic language.<sup>7</sup> Based on the Quran, Islamic scholars and traditional sources, the term translates as “striving for” since the word jihad is the gerund form of the word jahada which means to “strive or to exert oneself.” From Islamic sources, there are three significations of jihad: an internal struggle to maintain faith, the struggle to improve the Muslim society or the struggle in a holy war. It is important to note that these three distinctive meanings have been mentioned in many Islamic traditions of narratives concerning the Prophet’s sayings (also known as hadith) and in the Quran but Muslims and non-Muslims can take and have taken the word literally and out of context. In one verse in a hadith, it remains unclear at how the term is used: “The Prophet said to the martyrs of Uhud: ‘are we not their brothers? We entered Islam as they entered Islam and we did jihad as they did jihad.’”<sup>8</sup> In the broadest sense, the term should be defined as a “struggle” since “there are many kinds of jihad and most have nothing to do with warfare. Jihad of the heart in Arabic is known as jihad al-qalb for example, denotes struggle against one’s own “sinful inclinations.”<sup>9</sup> Even throughout the Quran there are groups of verses where the Prophet called for a war against the enemy but the word jihad is not mentioned. Richard Bonney’s work, *Jihad: From Quran to bin Laden* synthesizes these scriptural verses in addressing the ambiguity of the term and finds that some describe a spiritual struggling or striving: “four verses which use derivations from jihad and are clearly ‘warlike’ in intention or which, given the context, are open principally to a ‘warlike’ interpretation.”<sup>10</sup> However, there are other instances in the Quran where the word is also used as an act of pacifism, but that meaning is often deemphasized.<sup>11</sup>

In Islam, there are three challenges involving the act of jihad: a visible enemy, the devil and aspects one of own-self.<sup>12</sup> According to early Islamic sources from the seventh century, it is evident that the Prophet Muhammad commanded “jihad of the sword,” the same religious concept that is often

echoed by fundamentalists today, urging Muslims to spread the new faith in the Arabian Peninsula, and to combat against the infidels of Islam. In this meaning, jihad is viewed in two categories: greater jihad and the lesser jihad.<sup>13</sup> The greater jihad signifies a struggle against one's temptation and sin while the lesser jihad focuses on waging a holy war against Allah's enemies. Today, the sacred meaning of the lesser jihad is not only constantly repeated and taken out of context by Islamic fundamentalists and the media but is also blasted as the only absolute meaning of the term that amplifies the theme of holy war or the discourse of the clash of civilizations between the West and Islam.<sup>14</sup> There are additional examples from secondary sources that address the historical development of the term in the field of Islamic studies but from Google Image Search, these visual representations of the lesser jihad on the web are apparent; thus Islam is portrayed as a volatile and monolithic faith based on dominant interpretations and perceptions by media, personal and political biases.<sup>15</sup>

## The Question Concerning Google Image Search

Created in 2001 by Google, Google Image Search, known as the most comprehensive on the web, allows users to perform a search for pictures embedded in web pages.<sup>16</sup> Similar to Yahoo Image Search and other image retrieval engines, Google focuses on popular images that draw on references from the inputted key word without filtering or censoring the type of images produced by the algorithm of the search. Based on computational semantics, Google Image Search heavily draws from news and media pages, personal websites, and blogs, etc. The key terms used in other sites provide a list to Google that is relevant to the search term. According to the Google Guide of Google Image Search, "Google makes a guess that the words are related to the image. Google technology isn't yet to the point where it can tell what's in an image by looking at it directly."<sup>17</sup> One of the main issues pertaining to these advance technologies is associating and referencing key words to images that may not be accurately depicted. This problem has already been noted in several studies of image retrieval systems; Google Image Search inputs metadata such as filenames and HTML texts to per-

form the search in web pages.<sup>18</sup> One interesting note is that if one searches for the word jihad in Arabic script, the image results are quite similar.<sup>19</sup> Referencing other Arabic websites, the jihad is portrayed again as a violent struggle. Google Image Search offers an option for users to conduct their searches using advanced or basic search; both provide same search results with the exception that advanced search option permits the usage of Boolean operators<sup>20</sup> and can also search for a specific content type image, size or format. If one searches for other polemic Arabic terms such as jahiliyya,<sup>21</sup> the search results are not as controversial as jihad. For this term, there are several visual references to Sayyid Qutb, an active member of the Muslim Brotherhood who protested against Nasser’s Egyptian government, and called for a “spiritual revolution” to challenge this jahiliyya.<sup>22</sup> In examining other image retrieval sites such as Yahoo to detect different representations, we find that they also generate similar content since they share the same algorithm in accumulating images from web pages.

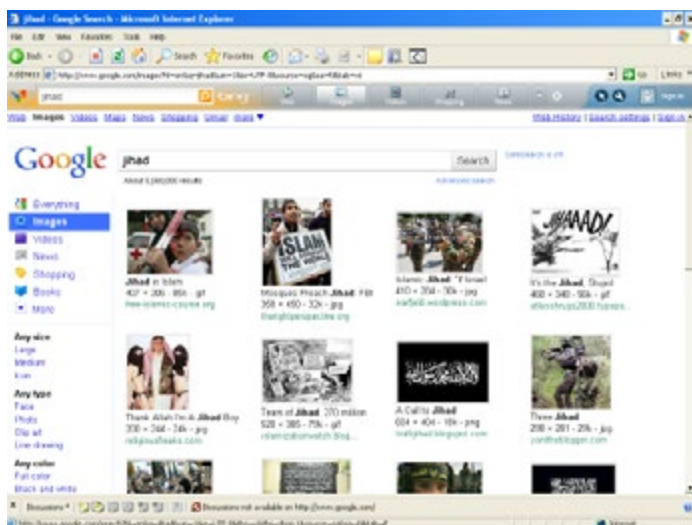


Fig. 1. Real-world use of content image retrieval using the term “Jihad.” We find real and photoshopped images of combat, protest, and satire regarding Islam. This search was conducted in 2011 (see Google Inc. 2011).

What do these images reveal about Islam and more importantly, as Barbie Zelizer, author of *About to Die*, asks, “What kind of information does one need to understand an image and how much information is necessary?”<sup>23</sup> In this critical work, Zelizer examines how (about-to-die) photographic depictions affect public discourse and tap into emotional senses of fear and anxiety. Zelizer writes: “Images offer implicative relays, suggestive slices of action that people need to complete by interpreting and imaging what unfolds beyond the camera’s frame.”<sup>24</sup> Returning to the concept of Virtual Orientalism, imagination can play a significant role in reframing and reinterpreting events.<sup>25</sup> These images taken out of context by Google offer a collective look of “angry” and “armed” Muslim and/or Middle Eastern men ready to commit a jihad against America.

Take for example the second image from above with a man holding a sign “Islam will dominate the world.” The image links to a blog post entitled, “10 percent of US Mosques Preach Jihad: FBI.” The article states that U.S. mosques are preaching some form of jihad or holy war based on this author’s interview. What is striking about this image is that it reinforces the illusion that the faith will dominate the world. The blog post does not offer any other substantial research support other than this image and a few claims by an author. One other interesting example is the first image on the top left with the child holding a bloody sword-like tool. The sword can also serve as a metaphor of “jihad like a sword” as described earlier. When you click on the image, it leads you to an article called “Jihad Kids – Islamic Seeds of Hate and Martyrdom” by the U.S. Veterans Dispatch. The article argues that there is a rise of Muslims and Islamic violence in the world and they have a secret agenda to take over the world. This image could be totally irrelevant and taken out of context; however, the image reinforces the notion that “Islam” is the enemy and needs to be repressed, thus echoing the hegemonic order. The other harrowing images also link to various conservative pages and amateur pages and blogs such as *History Of Jihad*, *Islamization Watch*, and *Citizen Warrior*.

Looking at these images can raise anxiety, fear and anger to the viewers who may not be familiar with the Islamic meaning of jihad but whose

memories are transfixed to the moments of 9/11: “In general, findings have demonstrated that media documentation of violence and brutality engenders feelings of fear even among individuals who have not been directly exposed to such violence and for whom it poses no immediate personal threat.”<sup>26</sup> Memory can be perceived as an agency of emotions that is entirely reliant on “patterned and identifiable forms.”<sup>27</sup> The type of memory produced by Google Search Engine, begs to question whether the historical events of September 11 can serve as what Roberta Pearson calls “commodified public memory, a subset of the hegemonic order.”<sup>28</sup> Pearson explains “the naturalized and widely accepted dominant representations temporarily halt history, establishing a set of unquestioned froze and abstracted ‘facts’ that play a crucial role in the construction of a dominant national identity.”<sup>29</sup> For this study, the discourse of commodified public memory plays an important role in addressing how internal images of Muslims as terrorists and architects of 9/11 are not only recalled, amplified and remembered as such but also illustrate how today’s Muslims as a collective group are being reassessed and identified as the combative foes. Once these images are on the web, they are digitally stored permanently: what are ramifications of having online images archived imperishably? What are the consequences of having collective “false” images stored in the memory bank of the cyber world? As false claims and ideas about Islam are being produced, reinvented and perceived as the “truth,” can digital technology play a significant role in hegemonizing, marginalizing and stereotyping “the other” just as well?<sup>30</sup> Who or why would anyone choose to upload these disturbing images to the cyber world? The answer is obvious: media bias and Islamophobia groups to construct and stabilize a hegemonic order. To those who view these arbitrary images, they may be fixed on these stereotypes. The consumers become part of the hegemonic order; their perceptions of Islam, Muslims and Middle Easterners will change and focus on their aggression. These representations reinforce the hegemonic structure but also the anger of the viewers who may have been affected by the aftermath of 9/11.

If one examines the collection carefully, one will notice that most images are taken out of context, and some are photoshopped: to illustrate the mystery

and mockery of Islam; however, violence is still present in some of these falsified images. If one ran searches of other terms such as “Islam” and the “Prophet Muhammad,” there are interesting results compared to jihad. For “Islam,” the images are less violent and contentious, at least not the first ones. The later images of Islam are questionable. These images come from media outlets and blogs such as Euronews, CNN, and Turkey Tribune. The purpose of this exercise is to show that there is a wide range of discrepancy in terms of visualizing Islam and Islamic terms. Consumers of these images who may not know anything about Islam may find it to be disturbing and enticing.

Regardless of their authenticity, all photos are subjected to manipulation: “Computer based digital imaging heightens the potential for deception in the print parathion process ... All photographers change reality somewhat by using different types of lenses or dodging and burning ... electronic manipulation is more insidious because it takes those tools and multiplies them by ten thousand.”<sup>31</sup> These images are still retrieved from popular web pages that are often viewed by many Internet users. These powerful images serve as a bridge in integrating “terrorism” and “Islam,” and channeling negative emotions in viewers who may then produce their own cultural stereotypes of Muslims, Middle Easterners or anyone who resembles those similar features of a 9/11 terrorist. With the support of digital technology in framing Muslims as violent groups bent on terrorizing America, this elevates the dominant discourse of the clash as the “truth” that ultimately distorts reality and makes the public merely a victim of Virtual Orientalism.

The revolutionary work that led to the notion of Jane Iwamura’s Virtual Orientalism is Edward Said’s Orientalism. According to Said, “Orientalism is a style of thought based upon an ontological and epistemological distinction made between the ‘Orient’ and the ‘Occident.’”<sup>32</sup> Orientalism draws a binary formation that defines ‘Eastern’ cultures as one archetype that differs from the West. Said analyzes a series of 19th century historical and literary works, and asserts that the “Orientalism is fundamentally a political doctrine willed over the Orient because the Orient was weaker

than the West, which elided the Orient's differences with its weaknesses ... As a cultural apparatus Orientalism is all aggression, activity, judgment, will-to-truth, and knowledge."<sup>33</sup> These images visually and mentally segregate myth from reality of Islam, and perpetuate the faith as a representation of "terrorism" based on the events of September 11.

To address the role of digital technology in perpetuating Orientalism, Heidegger's work: *The Question Concerning Technology* can be useful here. In this piece, Heidegger discusses the relationship between humans and technology, and finds that technology is a productive mechanism that can perform its duties but can also create new sets of problems for humans. Heidegger contends that "technology is therefore no mere means; technology is a way of revealing. If we give heed to this, then another whole realm for the essence of technology will open itself up to us. It is the realm of revealing, i.e. of truth."<sup>34</sup> The essence of technology is "enframing" which is the formation of revealing the "truth" that exists in reality before humans can actually perceive it.<sup>35</sup> According to Heidegger, the "enframing" aspect from technology can also be self-destructive. Heidegger addresses the dangers and ethics of technology and asks, "What is technology revealing about the world?"<sup>36</sup> By placing the term jihad in the context of Heidegger's enframing discourse, we must ask, "What is the Internet (or Google Image Search) revealing about jihad or Islam? Is the internet-jihad a visual and authentic form of the seventh century Arabian ideology being appropriated in the twenty first century and echoes and normalizes the dominant discourse of the 'West versus Islam?'" By focusing on Google Image Search, we find that digital technology can be complicit in configuring and positioning sacred terms of Islam into a contentious mode, and also reformatting the Muslim identity as the "other" in order to maintain a hegemonic order. The meaning of the term is constantly echoed inaccurately and vilified by media bias and fundamentalists. Thus, the term itself is channeling the same fear and anxiety that returns to the collective memories, experiences and shocks of 9/11. The Internet is portraying jihad as an Islamic accessory for "Muslim terrorists" to promote war but the Internet is also revealing that there is a mischaracterization of Islam; only viewers who know the truth (or

understand the faith) can distinguish the “real” Islam from the “media bias type-fundamentalist” Islam.

## Digitally Accumulated Images

With these multiple layers of digital images being exhibited in front of the screen, this interaction also raises the notion of accumulative orientalism mentioned by Said. But it has become more relevant today in ways perhaps was not imagined by Said. In *Orientalism*, Said examines a variety of literary and historical resources where he detects orientalism from famous writers, historians and travelers that romanticizes or imagines the Orient as the “other.” Said explains, “How modern Orientalism embodies a systematic discipline of accumulation [of human beings and territories]”<sup>37</sup> and addresses how these works collectively romanticize and re-imagine the East as the “other.” This notion of accumulative orientalism can be applied to this study that addresses how the perseverance of these images on the web replicate and harbor a form of identity and history of Islam through the word jihad alone.<sup>38</sup> The visuals are organized systematically according to (similar) key words, metadata and algorithms and produced a collective representation, which can be viewed as a “true” visual knowledge of Islam. As these “politically incorrect” images continue to surface, accumulate and saturate across the cyber world, we find that they are representing a new form of “truth” and adding a new course of “history” regarding Muslims.

The “truth” factor isolates and nationalizes one’s memory as a collective consciousness; these images may seem haphazardly arranged, but they are generating an absolute idea about Islam, and are striving to produce a new form “ideological-truth” that is visually presented, maintained and agreed and embraced by society via the Internet. According to Michel Foucault, “Each society has its regime of truth, its ‘general politics’ of truth: that is, the types of discourse which it accepts and makes function as true; the mechanisms and instances which enable one to distinguish true and false statements, the means by which each is sanctioned; the status of those who are charged with saying what counts as true”<sup>39</sup> Those who possess the “power”



or “knowledge” to produce these “true” claims about Islam as a “violent” religion can have enormous influence and success because they know that they hold the “truth.”<sup>40</sup> Since Google Image Search is revealing “Islam” negatively, this also reinforces the relationship between the Internet and power. The Internet can serve as a controlling vehicle – with these disturbing photos arranged systematically, people might perceive Islam as such; people’s perceptions of Islam are already compromised and have the capabilities extending their cultural stereotypes, biases or the Orientalist notion as the “truth” into a cyber-world. Foucault writes, “Truth is to be understood as a system of ordered procedures for the production, regulation, distribution, circulation and operation of statements.”<sup>41</sup> Those who wish to reinforce this false image of Islam are in fact extending the dominant discourse of the “clash of civilizations.” This is a type of control that marginalizes Islam and “normalizes” the identity of the faith and believers as a collective form of disorder or terror that needs to be “colonized” or “subdued.”<sup>42</sup> Islam is “put together as this re-presentation, and what is represented is not a real [faith] but a set of references, a congeries of characteristics ... or some bit of previous imagining or an amalgam of all these.”<sup>43</sup> This type of “normalization” of “Islam” can be traced to the nineteenth century thought of Orientalism in the configuration of colonial rule in the Middle East.<sup>44</sup> With these digital technologies and the continuation of the theme “war on terrorism” in the Middle East, a familiar form of colonial order is emerging where Muslims abroad and in the USA must be “controlled” and “ruled over” which also frames the dominant discourse of the clash as the “truth.”

Can other non-photographs also hold some “power” or “truth?” Since most of the depictions of jihad are based on wartime photos, there is also a small accumulation of photoshopped images, satirical cartoons, the Arabic calligraphy, and other representations to be seen as well. As these images are positioned with (real) photographs, we may assume that the image of Islam on the Internet can still be perceived as the “truth” if viewers have already developed a preconceived knowledge of Islam based on the events of 9/11 which can also be raised by looking at these photographs. Foucault contends “truth is linked to a circular relation with systems of power which

produces and sustains it and to effects of power which it induces and which extends it.”<sup>45</sup> Those who classify Muslims as terrorists may hold some form of power in influencing others to believe this hegemonic order. What needs to be discussed are ramifications of the re-imagination of Islam and its believers as the “other” or “enemy” of America in the digital world; how Virtual Orientalism reinforces the “truthfulness” of the hegemonic order of identities through the cyber world based on one key word: jihad.<sup>46</sup>

## Conclusion?

Initially this article began with an examination of visual representations of the sacred term jihad. We find that these depictions are far more disturbing than they appear to be. The imaginations behind these digital collages or exhibitions reveal a hidden Orientalist structure that underpins a hegemonic order of “enframing” Islam and Muslims as “the others,” terrorists and monsters. With the interventions of memory and imagination, 9/11, not as a historical event but as a political symbol serves as a reference point for perpetuating cultural stereotypes and ideas of Muslims as such in the West. With the creation, dissemination, and archival capabilities of digital technologies, any individual can reproduce or recreate new types of knowledge, power, history, memory, and “truths.”

In this study, the framework of Orientalism reveals the intersections and relationships of power and knowledge, truth and knowledge and power and truth. What has to be further explored is the psychological reasons behind individuals who desire to perpetuate these cultural stereotypes and standards; why do these individuals want to harm, subdue, marginalize or frame others as such? The strong desire for power, dominance and rule over the “others” are harrowing and obvious.

This article explores, analyzes and explains the ramifications of the intersection between digital technology and Islam. By positioning several fundamental social theories in this study, we find that technology can be complicit in framing and reinventing sacred texts that can ultimately

reshape the (authentic) representation(s) of the faith. However, technology alone cannot carry such a heavy burden; as cultural producers, people create and disseminate technologies, images, and imaginations; this also includes false and true claims that can influence politics and economics. Only by addressing, exploring, contesting, and understanding these social issues relating to technology, we can hope to deconstruct the existing hegemonic order that echoes the traits of Orientalism and Virtual Orientalism, and dismember the dominant discourse of the “clash” that seems to be in a perpetual state in the public mind. This study is still ongoing and the conclusion is not definitive since new theoretical questions continue to emerge in regards to the digital productions of Islam.

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## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Thussu 1997:266. In addition, “the media to act as ‘moral entrepreneurs,’ or agents of indignation, generating anxiety and concern and ‘amplifying’ threats [from Muslims] whether real or imagined” and focuses on “Muslims” as the uncontrollable fanatics challenging the West. Bakalian 2009:150.

<sup>2</sup> Bakalian 2009.

<sup>3</sup> Huntington's (1996:125) controversial political theory asserts that "great divisions among humankind and the dominating source of conflict will be cultural [in the post-Cold War world] and the fault lines between civilizations are becoming the central lines of conflict in global politics." In one section, Huntington frames the struggle for power and the clash between the civilizations of the "West" (Europe and America) and the Islamic World – this article will examine how digital technology can be complicit in promoting this dominant discourse through visual representations.

<sup>4</sup> Iwamura 2011:7.

<sup>5</sup> Iwamura 2011:7, 160. In this work, Iwamura argues, "Virtual Orientalism relies on repetitive [narratives] that masks the ideological interests and geopolitical concerns that invisibly drive its cultural imperialist enterprise. [Virtual Orientalism] relies heavily on new technologies and visual media that allow a constant stream of images" that perpetuates stereotypical ideas about the East (p.161).

<sup>6</sup> In addition, "Objects or images, such as man's bushy beard, a woman's hijab, the collapse of the Twin Towers, and the explosion of a double-decker bus have also come to symbolize Islamists. Consequently, Samuel Huntington's book *The Clash of Civilizations* and President Bush's reference to the Crusades have become crystallized as emotive." See Bakalian and Bozorgmehr 2009.

<sup>7</sup> Bonney 2004:21.

<sup>8</sup> Bonney 2004:34.

<sup>9</sup> Firestone 1999:17.

<sup>10</sup> Bonney2004:28. These surahs include: Q.9:82, Q.9:86, Q.9:88, and Q.5:36.

<sup>11</sup> See Bonney 2004:437. Key surahs to highlight the word as an act of pacifism include: Q.21:14–15, Q.25:53–54 and Q.12:77–78.

<sup>12</sup> Bonney 2004.

<sup>13</sup> Greater jihad in Arabic is translated as al-jihad al-akbar while lesser jihad is al-jihad al-asghar.

<sup>14</sup> Based on various scholarly interpretations of the term, Cook (2005:42) describes the term succinctly: "In all literature concerning jihad – whether militant or internal



jihad – the fundamental idea is to disconnect oneself from the world, to die to the world, whether bodily (as in battle) or spirituality (as in the internal jihad).”

<sup>15</sup> Devji’s *Landscapes of Jihad: Militancy, Morality, Modernity* (2005:87) describes how the meaning(s) of the term transformed into a unified cohesive system: “The jihad is defined not by its various local causes, nor even by the individual biographies of its fighters, but as a series of global effects that have assumed a universality of their own beyond such particularities. Indeed the dispersed and disparate acts of jihad provide proof enough of this, dispensing as they do with the traditional orders and genealogies of Islamic authority, as well as with an old-fashioned politics tied to states and citizenship. Perhaps the most important way to which the jihad assumes its universality, however, is through the mass media.”

<sup>16</sup> See Ziper 2001:G3.

<sup>17</sup> Blachman and Peek 2007:3.

<sup>18</sup> Datta.

<sup>19</sup> Jihad in Arabic is written as “جهاد”.

<sup>20</sup> Boolean Operators consist of “AND, OR, BUT.” Using these operators may help users retrieve better search results but for this study, it is not necessary to use them.

<sup>21</sup> Jahiliyya can be religiously defined as “ignorance of God’s guidance” or historically as “barbarism” referring to the primitive tribal systems in pre-Islamic Arabia. This Arabic term is illuminated in several works of Sayyid Qutb, an Islamist who visited America during the 1950s and was appalled at America’s “primitive” and questionable lifestyles. When he returned to Egypt, he called for a revolution to challenge, transform and “purify” Egypt into an Islamic state. Qutb describes “jahiliyya” as a type of spiritual ignorance that needs to be overthrown. “Qutb’s interpretation of jihad was that of a perpetual revolutionary struggle against the forces of unbelief, injustice and falsehood or in, short, jahiliyya.” See Bonney 2004:217.

<sup>22</sup> One interesting consideration is to view these images collectively as a “jahiliyya” in two perceptions: these images describe Islam as barbaric that needs be “controlled” but on the other hand, it is also exposing public ignorance of the faith – that this is not the “true” representation of Islam but an ideologically-transfixed and imposed

vision by those who would like to perpetuate the hegemonic order of colonizing Muslims politically and economically.

<sup>23</sup> Zelizer 2010:6.

<sup>24</sup> Zelizer 2010:6.

<sup>25</sup> Imagination is playing a role in reframing Orientalist stereotypes but these images and stereotypes become “embodied and hence objectified in mediate form. Although their recognition still depends on our imagination, they achieve an existence all their own (Iwamura 2011:8).”

<sup>26</sup> Slone 2000:508.

<sup>27</sup> See Zelizer 1999. In addition, the memory of the attack that is constantly echoed by the media, allows “the media to act as ‘moral entrepreneurs,’ or agents of indignation, generating anxiety and concern and “amplifying” threats [from Muslims] whether real or imagined (Bakalian 2009:150).”

<sup>28</sup> See Pearson 1999:181.

<sup>29</sup> Pearson 1999:181.

<sup>30</sup> Similar to the meaning of the lesser jihad as I have discussed, “Islam” as a whole is perceived and marginalized as a monolithic faith bent on countering un-Islamic values.

<sup>31</sup> Schwartz 1999:177.

<sup>32</sup> Said 1979:2.

<sup>33</sup> Said 1979:204.

<sup>34</sup> Heidegger 1977:12.

<sup>35</sup> Mitchell (1991:60) summarizes the concept of “enframing” as an order of appearance or hierarchy of truth, “The world is set up before an observing subject as though it were the picture of something. Its order occurs as the subject as the relationship between observer and picture, appearing and experienced in terms of the relationship between the picture and the plan or meaning it presents. It follows that the appearance of order is at the same time an order of appearance, a hierarchy. The world appears to the observer as a relationship between picture and reality, the one present but secondary, a mere representation, the other only represented, but

prior, more original more real. This order of appearance is what might be called the hierarchy of truth.”

<sup>36</sup> Mitchell 1991:27.

<sup>37</sup> Mitchell 1991:27.

<sup>38</sup> According to Said (1979:165): “[Accumulative] Orientalism organizes itself systematically as the acquisition of Oriental material and its regulated dissemination as a form of specialized knowledge.”

<sup>39</sup> Foucault 2000:42.

<sup>40</sup> According to Foucault (Clark 1997:24), “Power and knowledge directly imply one another ... there is no power relation without the correlative constitution of a field of knowledge, nor any knowledge that does not presuppose and constitute at the same time power relations.”

<sup>41</sup> Foucault 2000:43.

<sup>42</sup> These images collectively illuminate and foreshadow the underlying problem of America’s political treatment of Muslims. According to Foucault (2000:42), “there is a battle for ‘truth’ or at least around truth’ – it being understood once again that by truth I do not mean the ‘the ensemble of truths which are to be discovered and accepted’ by rather the ensemble of rules according to which the true and false are separated and specific effects of power attached to the true,’ it being understood also that it’s not a matter of a battle ‘on behalf’ of the truth but of a battle about the status of truth and the economic and political role it plays.”

<sup>43</sup> Mitchell 1991:31.

<sup>44</sup> “The purpose of constructing such an image and of articulating such a frame of discourse is to establish a ‘significant other’ by means of which to define Europe’s (or West’s) own self-identity, and to establish thereby Europe’s superiority and right to rule.” Clark 1997:24.

<sup>45</sup> See Foucault 2000:43.

<sup>46</sup> In addition to the Internet, media bias and anti-Islamic groups playing complicit roles in distorting the meaning of jihad and the image of Islam, there are also other cultural producers coming from books and television shows that have the authority to shape the public’s perceptions of the word and faith. See Bilici 2005:50–69.

Review:

## Arabités numériques. Le printemps du Web arabe

Luboš Kropáček

Keywords

*Internet studies, democracy, cyberactivism, activism, Internet security, Middle East, Internet, Arab Spring, media studies, social media*

*Arabités numériques. Le printemps du Web arabe. Yves Gonzalez-Quijano. Paris: Sindbad, 2012. ISBN 978-2-330-01317-2, 190 pages.*

To say that the Arab Spring 2011–2012 is closely associated with new electronical cultures seems to be a generally accepted truism. The book under review examines this phenomenon in much greater depth, which step by step takes into consideration all relevant political, social, cultural and technical aspects of the complex nature of the Arab e-revolutions. They were revolutions (the term is favoured by the Arabs) without leaders, their role being played by modern media. The ideas of anti-establishment protest were conceived and discussed mainly via Facebook, coordinated and translated into concise practical instructions via Twitter. The ensuing events were visualized via YouTube, which brought the news to the world.

An important part of Gonzalez-Quijano's both descriptive and analytical presentation is a historical account. A detailed survey points out that the Arab world of 2011 was not a digital desert. The young "Internet generation" (the shebab) and the "network readiness" have been quickly emerging and growing from one million Internet users in 2001 to maybe more than 100 million today. The well-arranged boxed table on pp. 68–70 shows the development of the Arab web before the events. The share of individual countries seems quite symptomatic: the first Arab country effectively connected by Internet was Tunisia (since 1987/91), followed by

Bahrain, Egypt, Morocco, Syria and others. In Egypt a special ministry for information technology was founded in 1999 and the Facebook came to use in September 2006. Furthermore, the historical account given in the book under review comprises analyses of the political issues appearing on the web as well as of clashes between the régimes and bloggers who dared criticize them. In this connection the reader can learn a number of names of icons and heroes of the political web as well as of victims and even martyrs of a repression. Some of the names are well known, such as that of Wael Ghonim, others – both men and women – are not. It is certainly a good thing to remember them and an index of persons attached to the book is a useful tool. A noted exception to the completeness of the historical overview of the web and uprisings in the Arab world: Libya.

Special chapters are devoted to phenomena of “cyberpessimism.” Under this heading a number of issues are discussed, among them E. Morozov’s *The Net Delusion: The Dark Side of Internet Freedom* (2011). No doubt, the Internet can weaken authoritarian régimes, but just as well it can strengthen them. In this connection Gonzalez-Quijano puts under scrutiny especially the government’s on-line media in Syria, which have been for years ready to face critical attacks of the opposition. Another dark side can be expected in the Arab world from the angle of radical Islamism, in an extreme formula of a “cyberjihad.” Our author records the rapid growth of the cyberspace in Saudi Arabia (including a wide spread consumption of YouTube) as well as increasing on-line activities of the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt, but does not dwell at length on these issues. In general, his approach to them is moderate and carefully based on available evidence.

In contrast, a great attention is paid to the transnational aspects of the information technology. The author puts to discussion the very term of the Arab Internet: where are its boundaries? Does it depend on who are producers, or consumers, or is it a matter of language? Some Arab bloggers do not hesitate to use English, some others use Arabizi that is romanized Arabic mixed with numerical symbols for phonemes that do not occur in the Latin/English script. On the whole, however, the Arabization – in a

wider sense than just linguistic – keeps going ahead. Google, for instance, started its Arabized version in 2008. But in spite of the remarkable Arab digital activism, the modern media still do not cease to be often regarded as means of promotion of foreign interests and, in particular, of the US domination.

The e-revolution in the Arab world, however, has without any doubt a wider meaning than just democratic political change with all problems arising as its aftermath. It has brought a new socio-economic boom, a progress of education and an overall liberalization, including the economic life and the emancipation of women. The interconnectedness within the Arab world, started in the past generation with all-Arab printed media and then with Al-Jazeera, has been greatly increased and pushed towards more active interaction in the spirit of the Web 2.0. Yves Gonzalez-Quijano concludes his multifaceted portrayal of the current social and cultural processes with a characterization of the present-day Arab “society in conversation” as a new way of “horizontal” self-identification of the Arab youth, distinct from the “vertical” political models of Arabism in the past. His book is a fascinating reading, probably the most comprehensive and topical grasp of the issue in French today and rich in reliable information and ideas that can offer inspiration just as well to the expert readership of the CyberOrient.

Review:

## Media, Power, and Politics in the Digital Age. The 2009 Presidential Election Uprising in Iran

Zuzana Krihova

Keywords

*democracy, politics, Iran, Internet studies, Television, censorship, Internet, communication studies, social media*

*Media, Power, and Politics in the Digital Age. The 2009 Presidential Election Uprising in Iran. Yahya R. Kamalipour (Ed.). Maryland: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2010. ISBN: 1442204157, 340 pages.*

In the light of the recent presidential elections in Iran, a collection of academic essays – Media, Power, and Politics in the Digital Age – edited by Professor Yahya Kamalipour provides us with a unique retrospection. It allows us to follow the dramatic and controversial 2009 elections in Iran, while exploring some more universal topics such as the interplay of media, power and politics, or the role and impact of modern communication technologies.

Unlike the recent post-election situation, Iran's June 2009 presidential elections sparked massive protests after the disputed victory of president candidate, Mahmoud Ahmadinejad. While the regime tried to spread false reports about the allegedly calm situation, barring foreign journalists from covering the demonstrations. Meanwhile cyberspace started to provide a range of diverse voices and first person accounts of what was actually happening in Iran. With the increase in crackdowns on protesters, news of the chaos was disseminated via social media networks such as Twitter, Facebook, MySpace, Wikipedia, YouTube, Flickr and other media services. The reports reached a global Internet audience and mobilized support.

Against this background, *Media, Power, and Politics in the Digital Age* focuses on several objectives, carefully selected by Professor Kamalipour in the introduction to the book. Thus we are offered a truly diverse number of perspectives to explore. The volume provides 24 essays by researchers, scholars and media professionals; each of them analysing a set of fixed topics from different angles. Although the central tenet of the volume is coverage of the Iranian elections by global media and online citizen journalists, the scope of the book is not limited only to the Iranian experience. Kamalipour emphasizes that the book was intended to provide “a multifaceted and balanced discussion of the role and impact of modern communication technologies” and this universal appeal was more or less observed by all contributors.

Quite predictably, it puts forth the question of whether the history of recent events in Iran tells us something remarkable about the impact of social media technologies, or – in the rather alarming allegation published in Li Xiguang and Wang Jing’s essay (citing Howard Rheingold), it raises the issue of whether human society really is “gradually changing its social structure and methods of exchanging information?” Throughout the book we can find this leitmotif of exploring the role of social media and questioning its impact on political mobilization.

Various authors remind us that a shift in the media system has been enabled by digital media. Social media are celebrated alongside mainstream media due to their ability to provide access to first-hand information sources and to facilitate the easy distribution of news by ordinary citizens. While acknowledging the capacity of social media to bring the voices of those affected by the uprisings to far wider audiences than ever before, the authors warn against the abuse or misuse of social media by pointing out its ability to spread false or exaggerated news as well. Despite these alerts, the writers repeatedly remind us that even CNN and Western mainstream media used social media to spruce up their reports on Iran and “that it was perhaps the first time a political issue of this magnitude had been dealt with by people after the spread and use of these networking tools,” as Mahboub Hashem and Abeer Najjar observe.



One should also note that the year of publication (2010) was just one year after the elections. Still, a critical distance was maintained and the essays seem to be well-balanced in their content. The book is divided into four parts: (1) Global Media Dimensions, (2) New Media and Social Networking Dimensions, (3) Ideological-Political Dimensions, and (4) Cultural and Communication Dimension. The editor warns us that in some cases the chapters overlap these general themes, but that doesn't matter significantly. What we find a bit more problematic is the structure of the book itself; serving one reader while restricting another. As the essays roughly match up within each part, segmented categorization helps the readers to focus on the selected dimensions, based on their choice. But when reading the book from its very beginning, the sequence of topics might discourage the reader to reach the book's high point, which is found in the second half of the book rather than the first.

The book starts with the essays describing the coverage of the elections by different international media and websites, for example CNN and Al-Jazeera, Canadian, Polish, Turkish or German media. It certainly provides us with very interesting reflections and comparisons: we can follow different views on the power of the news media, trace a debate about the CNN effect or the CNN effect as a myth, study an interpretation method for media-framing, compare the Velvet Revolution concept of the East European experience with the "it never happened" Iranian one, juxtapose the articles in the Iranian and Egyptian constitutions dealing with freedom of expression's double meanings, et cetera. It could be very worthwhile to examine these topics, but in the context of, not prior to, the following parts of the book: mainly the third and the fourth parts.

As the readers gradually uncover more and more interesting chapters, they may start to wonder whether certain parts of the previous essays wouldn't have simply been far more enlightening, had they been able to read later parts of the book in advance. For example, for a reader not aware of the cultural background of the Iranian television news network (called Press TV), which is mentioned in one of the initial chapters, it may be a bit

difficult to distinguish this official Iranian network (broadcast in English) from the other international or Iranian exile media. Nonetheless, it is only at the beginning of part four (dedicated to cultural dimensions) in chapter 19, written by renowned film and diaspora theoretician, Hamid Naficy, that we come across a profound explanation of this “combat” network, Press TV. The latter was launched by the Iranian regime with the single purpose of challenging the alleged cultural assault from the West.

Although the segmentation of essays according to different dimensions makes sense, it prevents the reader from comparing the various analyses of the same issues. This is because these subjects are dispersed throughout the book and not linked together in a more concise style (e.g. the tragic death of Neda Agha Soltani viewed from several different points, the examination of the so-called CNN effect, or various analyses of TV court trials in the aftermath of the elections). This divergence may seem to be more striking in the case of essays that contradict one another; such as in Parsi, Elliot and Disney dealing with Iran’s online opposition in chapter 15 and Li Xiguang and Wang Jing focusing on E-diplomacy at the end of part two (chapter 13). Both essays imply criticism of the American approach towards Iranian social media. Yet while one team accuses, albeit indirectly, America of being too active in promoting its E-diplomacy by means of social media (and serving mainly its own purposes), the other criticizes the US policy of limiting this flow of information to Iran due to IT sanctions: “In the battle over information in post-election Iran, American sanctions often posed an important barrier to Iranians looking to make their voices heard” (Parsi, Elliot and Disney in chapter 15). Were these two essays to appear in the book one right after the other, this contradiction might appear to be an intentional comparison, but since there is another chapter between these two, and both essays belong to different parts of the book, the inconsistency seems rather disruptive. And again, the theme of public diplomacy (both Iranian and American) is also examined by Hamid Naficy, but again no sooner than several chapters after the other two essays. Considering the book’s voluminous proportions (314 pages), its number of contributors (32 authors), and their variety of approaches, it’s fairly understandable that some

discrepancies occur. Professor Kamalipour should be nonetheless praised for his immense effort to bring these different voices together. The scope of the essays is enthralling and, despite its repetitive thematic nature, it offers a truly comprehensive approach.

To answer our question from the beginning of our review, whether we can trace some changes in social structure and in methods of exchanging information in human society, the readers are given a rather versatile range of viewpoints from which to choose. While most of the writers contribute, with more or less ambiguous stances, to the continuing debate about the relationship between traditional media and social media, the final chapter written by Michele Bach Malek provides a very explicit answer: "The primary controversy with this burgeoning media phenomenon is not with its subsistence, accessibility or prospects but with its disorganized, random and unverifiable nature. Social networking sites, as they exist today, will not and cannot replace or critically challenge the overall efficacy of professional traditional news media." This is good news for cybersceptics; yet it still also partly implies the role new media played in the Iranian presidential elections. That is, it acknowledges the interplay of media and politics, while admitting that the real impact of social media on Iran and the future of its society has yet to be fully determined.

Review:

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

**Vit Sisler**

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.

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