

Introduction

iMuslims and Cyber-Islamic Environments

The Internet has a profound contemporary impact on how Muslims perceive Islam and how Islamic societies and networks are evolving and shifting in the twenty-first century. While these electronic interfaces appear new and innovative in terms of how the media is applied, much of their content has a basis in classical Islamic concepts. These link into traditional Muslim networks with a historical resonance that can be traced back to the time of the Prophet Muhammad. *iMuslims* explores how these transformations and influences play out in diverse cyber-Islamic environments and how they are responding to shifts in technology and society.

My use of the umbrella term “cyber-Islamic environment” (CIE) acknowledges diversity among and within different zones in cyberspace that represent varied Muslim worldviews within the House of Islam, all of which present a reference point of identity with a conceptualization of Islam. The source encoding of such environments follows specific protocols of identity with particular Islamic reference points, including essential beliefs shared by the majority of Muslims. The encoding is refined and in some cases hacked to engineer manifestations of Muslim understandings that adapt to networks, contexts, histories, and contemporary issues. Islamic diversity encompasses many areas, ranging from elements in the headlines to those outside the realm of the media. Not all aspects of Islam are fully represented online, especially those from Muslim cultural-religious contexts with low levels of Internet connectivity, as well as traditionally quietist elements.

Specific forms of online or digital Islam, distinct from offline or analogue Islam, have developed. A place of religious instruction may only exist in a virtual context. A network or community may only gather online. Their name may not have a real-world equivalent. This is not just a phenomenon linked to so-called jihadi militaristic factions. It is one that is located in other areas of belief, such as elements of Shi’ism where, for

personal safety, followers must practice secrecy or dissimilitude—a circumstance that has a long-term historical resonance.

The utilization of the Internet, and in particular the World Wide Web, in the name of Islam has necessitated a reconsideration and reconfiguration of Muslim networks. While elements of historical networking patterns and concepts apply, there are also new issues to address. An innovative knowledge and proselytizing economy has emerged, causing a challenge to traditional “top-down” authority models. A collaborative, horizontal knowledge economy, reliant on peer-to-peer networking, has enveloped areas of Islamic cyberspace. Much of the content is also given away for free, and users are invited to make comments, amend information, and provide contributions in some areas. User input may come as a response to a question, a suggestion for a reference, or a commentary on a particular topic.

This might be described as “wiki-oriented” Islam in relation to the forms of interaction, knowledge sharing, and development that occur. Wikipedia describes the noun “wiki” as “a collaborative website which can be directly edited by anyone with access to it.”¹ This collaborative element can be extended into other areas. Don Tapscott and Anthony D. Williams describe such an approach in relation to economics as “wikinomics,” based in part on the precedents associated with the evolution of the Linux operating system. The deviser of Linux, Linus Torvalds, shared his version of the Unix operating system with other programmers in 1991 under a license that ensured that all changes would be made available to others for free.² The Linux product is now well established as an open-source alternative to Microsoft Windows and other computer operating systems and retains its roots as a collaborative product. The concept of peer-to-peer sharing (or “peering”), for which Linux is such a valuable model, offers a system that lends itself to many other areas of human life and interaction, including Muslim networks and societies.

While there is still a hierarchy in Islamic cyberspace, conventional models have in some cases been shaken to the core or forced to adapt to an open-source model of Islamic understanding and interpretation. Based on a core code of values associated with the Qur’an, new conceptual frameworks have emerged rapidly, accelerated by the collaborative processes of cyberspace. CIEs have always had a collaborative element, but this has been redefined through the application of social networking and other online innovations categorized as belonging to so-called Web 2.0.

The notion of Islamic knowledge development through history also had an open-source element. The development of scholarship centered on the

collection of the sayings and traditions associated with the Prophet Muhammad, known as hadith, required scholars to network between centers of knowledge production in order to collect and transmit the versions of hadith that they acquired. This activity took place in the centuries following Muhammad's death in 632 C.E. and required extensive travel between Muslim communities in different parts of the nascent Islamic world.³ These were subject to critical evaluation, sifting, and enhancement by bodies of scholars across the networks of place and time in order that definitive collections of hadith could be compiled. In many ways, this represents one form of open-source Islamic scholarship and collaboration, although it could be argued that the openness was subject to limitations and restrictions over time.

Another precedent would be the refinement over time of Islamic legal knowledge, necessitating a similar process of networking and connectivity. Without contemporary communications media, these processes took centuries. Now, information can be circulated and worked on in a rapid manner by iMuslims. Some of this process reinforces previous forms of knowledge exchange in Islamic contexts, but there are also elements that necessitate what can be described as a "rewiring" of the House of Islam. "Wiring" is something of a metaphor. It has metaphysical and technical connotations. In a literal sense, the individual interface does not have to be hardwired into a network, given the options of wireless networks and Internet-enabled cell phones. Wiring is also suggested in the sense of a connection, both of the individual and the computer, into Islam. Speaking from personal experience, anyone who has been through a rewiring process in their home or workplace will know that it can be a disruptive, chaotic, and at times dangerous process.

In some contexts, the application of the Internet is having an overarching transformational effect on how Muslims practice Islam, how forms of Islam are represented to the wider world, and how Muslim societies perceive themselves and their peers. On one level, this may be in terms of practical performance of Islamic duties and rituals, or on the interpretation and understanding of the Qur'an. On another level, CIES have exposed Muslims to radical and new influences outside of traditional spheres of knowledge and authority, causing paradigmatic shifts at a grassroots level within societies.

These points will be emphasized in every chapter of this book, with specific examples drawn from diverse contexts. The elements relating to this transformational process are drawn together in the conclusion, which

will point a way forward for how Islam and Muslims will continue to apply the Internet as a means of understanding, interpreting, and transmitting forms of religious knowledge to a variety of audiences. The book takes account of how these processes are not static but evolving and how their utilization has become a natural adjunct to traditional forms of Islamic discourse.

iMuslims shows that computer-mediated communication can have a transformative impact on Islam and Muslims in a number of Islamic contexts, while recognizing that there are distinct variables and that some contexts are manifestly unaffected by information technology. What impact there is may be scientifically measurable, while our proximity in terms of time means that it may not be possible to determine other patterns until a greater time has elapsed between the period of observation and the writing of any analysis. Impact may be subtle rather than overt, and it may combine with numerous other factors.

This book emerges from a religious studies context, in which charting specific phenomena and mapping the field are the primary elements. This provides indicators of particular trends and changes associated with the rewiring of Islam, based on sustained monitoring of a range of online materials. Despite its disciplinary origins, it is hoped that *iMuslims* will be relevant to those in other academic areas who may approach this subject area with different foci.

I am aware, through discussing and presenting this research in a variety of academic settings in the United Kingdom and elsewhere, that there are different expectations and approaches to Islam, Muslims, and the Internet. At this stage, it is not my intention to provide a quantifiable, scientific calibration of the transformative capacity or impact of computer-mediated communication on Islam, Muslims, or cyber-Islamic environments. Determining the measures would necessitate extensive, international surveys and resources.

Any study of user communities would require a multivolume international study in order to examine the relationship between online output and offline behaviour within diverse Islamic contexts. Such a study would require several years of sustained effort from teams of academics across numerous disciplines. As with any fieldwork, it would require a great deal of personal access to individuals—in a subject area where respondents and participants would not necessarily be willing to reveal, or feel comfortable offering, sensitive personal information on Web-surfing habits and Islamic lifestyle choices. There may be discrepancies between “expected answers”

and data presented. It is hoped that *iMuslims* will help steer future research in this area and act as a reflective guide within the processes associated with formulating methodologies and multidisciplinary approaches in the field.

iMuslims shows how the digitization and “wiring” of the House of Islam takes on many thematic and methodological approaches. This process represents one of the most significant historical changes in approach toward how information about Islam and Muslims is processed, networked, and disseminated. As access to the Internet increases exponentially—through a diversity of interfaces and sociocultural contexts—the demand for an academic discourse about these developments intensifies.

A critical consideration is whether the Internet has become the ideal networking tool among dispersed Muslim communities and individuals. This book acknowledges that many Muslims remain unaffected by the Internet, at least directly, while recognizing that for others it has become a crucial adjunct to self-expression and religiosity. In discussing how Islamic ideas of the sacred and of religious identities manifest themselves in complex ways in cyberspace, *iMuslims* considers whether this in some ways reflects the continuum of Muslim understandings located in the nondigital world. This book investigates which elements of Muslim societies might have been transformed through this cyber interaction. It highlights how certain perspectives have raised their profiles via the Web or had their views altered and/or reinforced through values transmitted through the Internet.

iMuslims explains how these changes are taking place in a number of different ways, including through social networking websites and the blogosphere. In this book, I discuss how these resources can be approached and interpreted, incorporating a comparison between and within diverse political-religious frameworks. Blogging has been chosen because it has given access to immediate online publishing and social networking for a vast number of readers and writers. For users with access, the tools are usually open source and free to use, linking into a range of other social networking options. It is an area that rapidly refined itself in terms of subject specialization and achieved opportunities for the articulation of worldviews that have transcended, in many cases, traditional forms of regulation and censorship. Blogging has challenged conventional media, and as language tools have opened up discourse in Farsi, Arabic, and other “Islamic” languages, blogs have become a major conduit of opinion within cyber-Islamic environments.

Jihadi cyberspace, in its multifaceted forms (including blogs), has been chosen for discussion in *iMuslims* because it represents transformation of a different kind. The Internet has dramatically influenced jihad-oriented campaigns by networks such as al-Qaeda and made a significant difference as to how forms of Islamic activism and radicalization have been engendered. *iMuslims* provides a framework through which the Internet output of jihadi organizations can be analyzed. This book draws on practical examples taken from a variety of sites, especially those associated with digital jihadi battlefields in Iraq and Palestine. Jihadi networks and organizations have been using the Internet as a logistical and publicity tool for many years, but after 9/11, attention and speculation surrounding these platforms focused on their Internet presence.⁴ Adept application of the net, especially in terms of use of free web space, encryption, and anonymizing tools, allowed al-Qaeda and others to skilfully manipulate press agendas and public opinion across the world in order to promote their worldviews. For some, this represented Islam in its entirety on the Internet. This book seeks to demonstrate that while jihadi output is an important aspect of Muslim expression, and that it requires as much attention and understanding as possible, it is by no means the full picture relating to Islam and cyberspace.

I conclude the book by determining the way forward for the articulation and transformation of diverse understandings of Islam online and describing how Muslim networks will be further shaped through their relationships with the Internet.

The term “iMuslims,” which I introduce here, is a synonym for cyber Muslims but focuses on the mercurial *i*. The *i* primarily represents the Internet in its many forms. The *i* may refer in a wider sense to information technology and interactivity. It can also refer to the term “interoperability,” evoking the sense of a variety of programs functioning together in a compatible way. There is also a link with a number of popular computer products, such as Apple’s iPod, iMac, iPhoto, iTunes, iLife, and iMovie.

The term “Muslim” is applied in this book to describe any person who identifies himself or herself as a believer in Islam. iMuslims are those followers of Islam who function in some capacity in CIES, that is, within the complex variety of digital contexts that Muslims use to articulate Islam. The central question of this book is: how do iMuslims utilize CIES in contemporary contexts? To answer this question, one must also understand how the environments themselves shift and evolve in response to changes in technology and the development of new forms of Muslim networks.