

Muslims and the New Information and Communication Technologies: Notes from an Emerging and Infinite Field – An Introduction

Thomas Hoffmann and Göran Larsson

“Islam is the message!” “The medium is the message!” These two mottos – the former deriving from the modern Islamist camp, the latter from Marshall McLuhan’s classic work *Understanding Media* – seem as pertinent as ever in the new millennium (McLuhan 1964). As sociologist of religion Lorne L. Dawson puts it in his comment on McLuhan’s motto, “[m]edia are not neutral or passive conduits for the transfer of information. They mold the message in ways that crucially influence the world views we construct. They adjust our self-conceptions, notions of human relations and community, and the nature of reality itself” (Dawson 2004, 385). Hence, if we add ‘Islam’ and ‘Muslims’ to medium, we begin to realize the far-reaching and profound implications of this religious add-on, not only for the academic study of Islam but also for the believers, the Muslims and their communities. Furthermore, we should take into consideration the observation already put forth in mid-1990s that, so Dale F. Eickelman and Jon W. Anderson, “[i]ncreasingly [...] large numbers of Muslims explain their goals in terms of the normative language of Islam” (Eickelman 2003, 7). Given that this proliferation is facilitated and moulded to a high degree by New Information and Communication Technology (henceforth ICT), we begin to grasp the relevance of an Islam & Muslim-orientated approach. Various definitions of the term ICT exist, some of which are highly technical, but for our present purposes we use it as the wider term for any communication device or application, which comprises access, transmission, storage, and manipulation of information. Different from what could be called classical ICT, such as books and

T. Hoffmann (✉)

Faculty of Theology, Section for Biblical Exegesis,
University of Copenhagen, Copenhagen, Denmark
e-mail: tho@teol.ku.dk

G. Larsson (✉)

Department of Literature, History of Idea, and Religion,
University of Gothenburg, Göteborg, Sweden
e-mail: goran.larsson@religion.gu.se

newspapers, New ICT is characterized by a high degree of digitalization as well as convergence of data-, tele- and mass communication, the latter not necessarily restricted to conventional mass media like TV (stations) or film (industry) but extending into various so-called social media.

To be sure, the intensification of Islamic sensitivities is part and parcel of the Islamist resurgence that has been unfolding at least since the late 1970s. Thus, it is claimed from a wide variety of observers that a new Islamic public sphere is coming to the fore – not least reinforced by a growing number of Islamic satellite TV channels and new globalising Arab-Muslim TV stations like Al-Jazeera and al-Arabiya.¹ But not only in the sense of an Habermasian public sphere (*Öffentlichkeit*) steeped in critical and dialogical communication, but also as a public sphere that nests more semi-intimate, private and even furtive communication in various forms of social media and devices (SMS, chatrooms, blogs, Facebook and Twitter, cryptological information et cetera). Eickelman and Anderson's claim, then, should not be taken as an exceptionalist diagnosis regarding Islamic communities but should be seen in relation to a general, globalised 'return of the religious' or what Jürgen Habermas have identified as the emergence of a post-secular society.²

Of course, this does not imply that religion and media as such constitute unprecedented fields of attention, but rather that religion and media (and its producers and consumers) have caught our attention with a new urgency – not least with respect to Islamic studies. Not just our scholarly attention – whether humanities, the social sciences or theology with their host of scholarly programmes and publications – but also a wider public attention and awareness concerning the interrelatedness of media and religion.³ To put it in the words of Gordon Lynch: "Public awareness of religion is framed through the media, and some of the deepest controversies around contemporary religion are bound up with the content and uses of media" (Lynch 2010, 549). Hence, it is clear that public attention has been particularly concerned with the representation of Muslims in migration debates or with more security driven interests (terrorism and 'the war for Muslim minds'). This state of affairs certainly owes much to the rise and convergence of new digital media and their more and less observable effects in terms of identity and community construction, socio-political negotiations and cultural formations. ICT encompasses and exploits a wide variety of technologies and platforms such as computers and smartphones, internet, mobile telephony, CD-ROM and DVD, cable and satellite TV, media streaming sites like YouTube and other so-called Web 2.0 social media like Facebook, Twitter and *wikis* (various forms of wiki-Islams are now online⁴), all of which expand, converge, overlap, and mutate in rapid and innumerable ways.

¹ See e.g. Mellor et al. 2011; Lynch 2006; Rugh 2004.

² The term was first used in a lecture which Jürgen Habermas gave on March 15, 2007 at the Nexus Institute of the University of Tilberg, Netherlands.

³ For an overview, see e.g. Stout and Buddenbaum 2002, journals like e.g., *Journal of Media and Religion*; anthologies like Eickelman and Anderson 2003; Larsson 2006; and monographs like Bunt 2009.

⁴ For an investigation of the anti-Islamic variant of wiki-Islam, see Larsson 2007.

Our use of the adjective ‘new’ in ‘New ICT’ should not be taken in the sense of something utterly new – the Internet has been around for over 20 years by now – but rather as an accumulation, an added element into the continuum of what was once *New ICT*, such as writing, postal systems, print (from block print to the rotation press), electrically based media (e.g., telegraph, telephone, gramophone, radio, fax-machine, photography, and film). This historical dimension is also reflected and investigated in Göran Larsson’s recent book on *Muslims and New Media: Historical and Contemporary Debates*. Indeed, accumulation or convergence should be keywords if we wish to understand media and religion.⁵ Stewart M. Hoover, one of the pioneers in religion & media studies, sums up: “We no longer have to limit ourselves to the possibility that religion is influencing media behaviours or vice versa. Both are happening, and the evidence would suggest that in their interaction, new ways of understanding both media and religion in the life of viewers and adherents emerge” (Hoover 2001, 59). This sweeping observation indicates that all scholars of religious studies as well as media studies now have to consider seriously the interplay between religion and media as well as the interaction between information technologies and human actors.

Much of the philosophical and theoretically driven research regarding New ICT can be grouped along two grand trajectories, namely those who view the New ICT in continuity with modern (perhaps even pre-modern) ICT and those who view New ICT in term of a radical break with past epistemologies and social structures, ushering in a watershed of epochal dimensions.⁶ The former, including theorists like Jürgen Habermas and Anthony Giddens, maintains the view that the world is basically unchanged in its deep epistemological and systemic structures – all other things being equal.⁷ The rise and impact of the New ICT should therefore be construed as part and parcel of larger patterns of social developments. New ICT may bring in new structural and epistemological elements but they function as accumulations rather than revolutionary tipping points.⁸ As for the latter theorists, often labelled as postmodernists, they argue for a real/virtual tipping point, inaugurating nothing less but a whole new universe, a cyberspace or a Internet paradigm (overwriting the so-called Gutenberg paradigm), with new playful, anarchistic or dystopic ‘rules’ of (hyper) reality, multiple selves and cyborgs. Postmodernist French philosophers like Jean Baudrillard, Paul Virilio, and Gilles Deleuze have been particular apt to advance and inspire radical theories of cyberspace, all of which seem to transcend the ordinary hallmarks of modernity.⁹ Baudrillard even made some kind of impact on Middle East studies with his writings on the first Gulf War (1990–1991), in which he argued that the war in Iraq had become so edited and ‘mediatized’ by US forces

⁵ See also Anderson 2008.

⁶ See Webster 2002.

⁷ See e.g. Giddens 1990.

⁸ Some cyber-culture theorists even argue that the New ICT are particularly apt to reconnect to pre-modern religious systems, e.g. Davis 1993.

⁹ E.g. Baudrillard 1983; Virilio 1980; Deleuze and Guattari 1996.

and embedded journalism that it actually eluded the real war (Baudrillard 1995). However, since the launching of global Arab media platforms like Al-Jazeera Baudrillard's argument seems less persuasive. The overall impact of postmodernist thinking on the nexus of ICT & Islam is to this day still extremely marginal. The recent revolutionary events in the Middle East and the unprecedented use (and partial success) of social media in organizing, mobilizing and propagating the oppositions' cases is certainly another strong argument to counter the view that the Middle East is a passive and silent victim *tout court*. The impact of new media on the overthrow of regimes in the Middle East and North Africa in the wake of the Arab spring is still very much an open field for studies and we need both more empirical data and more thorough analysis to understand how the media were used in this process.

Trading back and forth between these two poles, we find various theoretical and methodological positions depending on general outlook, analytical and empirical interests. Some hold a bleak and almost apocalyptic view on the New ICT and argue that the technology will bring to life a new surveillance society going far beyond the neo-classic visions of Foucault's Panopticon and George Orwell's *1984*.¹⁰ For Muslims living in authoritarian states as well as for some Muslims living in democratic post-9/11-states, this is not a future scenario but rather the realities of a vigilant and modernizing *al-mukhabarât*, 'the intelligence services', cracking down on everything from pornographic surfing, distribution of illegal political material, indecent or 'subversive' chat rooms et cetera.¹¹ Others hold a more optimistic view (though admitting the risk of intervention or surveillance of the intelligence services) and argue that the New ICT as useful short-range tools of subversion, rebellion and mobilization, sometimes labelled e-activism or DIY-media (i.e., Do It Yourself), but also as more 'slow', probably irreversible, tools for democratisation and liberal values.¹² What has been called Egypt's "Facebook revolution" and Iran's "Twitter uprising" belong to the more dramatic examples.¹³ Here, we should keep in mind the ambivalent and sinister effects of New ICT, for instance its use by authoritarian regimes or by ultraconservative, illiberal or militant groups taking advantage of the technologies (from Iran's shi'ite cassette-revolution in 1979 to jihadi desktop publishing, YouTube-sermons and other e-forums). Since 9/11 the research on ICT-related jihadism or 'dark web' has been staggering and we can only guess how much of the research has been done clandestinely by the intelligence services. Dark web research pursued by civilians and civil enterprises and open, unclassified work presented by military academics, is also proliferating, e.g., The Combating Terrorism Center at West Point, The Jamestown Foundation, MEMRI etc.¹⁴

¹⁰For a good overview of surveillance studies, see Lyon 2007.

¹¹Numerous studies on this topic have been produced but an article by Dale Eickelman puts the New ICT in continuity with earlier forms of censorship, see Eickelman 1999.

¹²Studies in this field proliferate. See e.g. Seib 2007; Norton 1999; Alterman 1998; Howard 2010. See also the Harvard University based project *The Internet & Democracy Project* targeted at the Middle East, <http://cyber.law.harvard.edu/research/internetdemocracy>. Accessed 22 March 2013.

¹³See e.g. Nawawy and Khamis 2012.

¹⁴For a good overview of "Militaristic Jihad in Cyberspace", see Bunt 2009.

For our present purposes, we should consider the relevance of these mainly cyber-related trajectories with regard to Islamic studies. Do the New ICT define a watershed for Islam and Muslims with regard to textual, exegetical, and legal authority or should we rather search for continuities and gradual developments? For instance, with regard to Muslims' (self)image *as* individuals and community-anchored Muslims (along with other, non-religious elements of selfhood) in a globalised world, in Islamic majority nations, in diasporas (e.g., Western Europe and the English speaking world)? Or do they merely reflect or magnify larger societal developments already well under way? Do New ICT in the Muslim majority nations differ substantially from the impact of the printing press, the rise of journals and newspapers and the relative demise of the religious authorities, *al-'ulamâ*', during the twentieth and nineteenth centuries?

Perhaps the answers to these questions are a 'both-and', depending on the specific subject and issue under scrutiny: for instance, studies on online communication in Saudi Arabia and the Gulf seem to indicate something like a small-scale gender revolution with respect to more unregimented communication between the otherwise strictly segregated sexes.¹⁵ This is but one aspect of wider questions about intimacy and virtual community due the possibilities of more or less uninterrupted and safe communication. To be sure, chatrooms, emails, SMS and MSN, Blue Tooth and other appliances can develop and nurture new intimate, virtual social spaces. The bestselling chic-lit novel *Girls of Riyadh* (Alsanea 2005/2008) by Saudi author Rajaa Alsanea was composed as a number of email postings and reveals to the reader a sense of the social importance of the web in a deeply conservative and highly gender segregated country like Saudi Arabia (Ramsay 2007).

Disposition of the Book

As the subtitle of the introduction indicates, the topic of Muslims and the New ICT could very well be defined as an emerging field. However, the term 'emerging' is somewhat of an understatement given the extreme growth rates of the New ICT and its penetration into almost all spheres of global society (even when having taken the so-called digital divide into consideration). Given the fact that the New ICTs are being increasingly used as social media, and given that the social – to paraphrase Max Weber – is infinite, we are facing a task that is nothing less than tremendous. In light of such pervasive and invasive societal transformations the temptation to give in to grand theorizing and sweeping prognostication is considerable. However, as editors we have chosen to focus on more specific and case-orientated issues, even though this does not preclude some prognostication and guesswork.

Consequently, this anthology taps into what has been labelled Media Studies 2.0.¹⁶ This second wave of media studies is first of all characterized by a new focus on

¹⁵For further references on the gender aspects, see Wheeler 2008.

¹⁶See e.g. Gauntlet and Horsley 2004.

everyday meanings and ‘lay’ users, which is in contrast to earlier emphases on experts or self-acclaimed experts. The lay adoption of ICT and the subsequent digital ‘literacy’ is certainly noticeable among Muslims. According to some global estimates, one in ten internet users is a Muslim living in a populous Muslim community. These aspects are, for example, explored and discussed by Daniela Schlicht in her chapter on Muslim university students who go online to debate both German and Islamic issues which relate to their own individual lives. In Egdunas Raciū’s contribution we find a related analysis of a Muslim online discussion forum. Resembling Schlicht’s approach, this chapter also illustrates how an online forum can help build identity (in this case especially among converts to Islam). Mona Abdel-Fadil covers a somewhat similar aspect of mundane activity in an online environment (i.e. IslamOnline) and its online marital counselling service that targets Muslims who suffer various marital difficulties.

Besides mundane activities, one should also note that a new kind of moderation with regard to more sweeping and avant-gardistic claims is yet another feature of Media Studies 2.0. Moderation combined with a keen attention to empirical material is undoubtedly something that this anthology bears witness to. Furthermore, interest in various qualitative research techniques is growing simultaneously with the development of numerous quantitative techniques. In this anthology, Jonas Svensson explores, for example, how new media call for a development of new theoretical and methodological approaches in the study of Islam and Muslims. In his chapter YouTube-clips relating to the popular but also controversial ritual practice of celebrating the Prophet Muhammad’s birthday, *mawlid*, are analysed by means of new computer programs. Svensson provides new empirical data as well as new theoretical and methodological insights as how to study religious practice in the twenty-first century. It is also evident that the technological developments have had an impact on more classical studies of Islam and Muslims. In his chapter on the digitalization of the text of the *Qur’ān*, Andrew Rippin includes a critical discussion of how the new technologies impact the religious status and study of Islam’s classical texts – among the believers as well as secular scholars. As clearly pointed out by Rippin, scholars working on the ancient and classical texts of Islam must also be updated on the latest information and communication technologies if they want to develop their studies. Thus, Qur’ānic studies must develop its scope and skills in relation to the emerging field of so-called Digital Humanities.

Research inspired by 2.0 studies also tend to pursue studies in audiences and platforms other than the purely Westerns one (whether in spatial or ethnic terms), something this anthology patently bears witness to. Web journals like *Cyber Orient*, scholarly websites like Gary Bunt’s *Virtually Islamic*, academic journals like *Journal of Arab and Muslim Media Research* attest to an intensified focus on Islamic issues. Scholars of Islam and the Islamic world have always be engaged and entangled in their object of study and this has led to deliberate interventions as well as unintended corollaries. Consequently, the developments within ICT have also affected how scholars take part in and influence public Islamic and

academic discussions.¹⁷ Programmes and centres more broadly committed to ICT-studies, such as *The Berkman Center for Internet and Society* at Harvard University, regularly pursue studies on various ICT-related issues in relation to the Islamic world. Finally, in 2.0 studies we notice a shift from viewing ICT-audiences as a passive and somewhat homogenous mass to a recognition of the active, digitally literate user engaged in various DIY-dynamics, a more flexible negotiation of identity and a pronounced interest in ‘narrowcasting’ and niche-like communities. It is also clear that the technological development has yielded new possibilities to combat and question essentialistic and hostile images of Islam and Muslims. One example of a so-called counter narrative is explored in F. V. Greifenhagen’s contribution which takes up the Canadian sitcom *Little Mosque on the Prairie*. This TV show is analysed as an intervention in the contested field of Canadian Muslim identity construction, thus demonstrating how new media can be used for questioning identities and for debating social issues in new ways. However, it is also evident that new media can disseminate hate messages and present opinions that are clearly false or highly prejudiced and be perceived as offensive or threatening to certain individual or groups. This poses a challenge to scholars’ ethical and political commitments. Should the scholar intervene as a so-called public intellectual and – quoting Said who quoted a Quaker expression – speak truth to power? One example of decidedly anti-Islam/Muslim communication is analysed in Göran Larsson’s chapter on the Dutch politician Geert Wilders’ movie *Fitna* that was launched and disseminated on the internet. Another example is provided by Niklas Bernsand who analyses an identitarian Swedish blogportal, which argues that assimilation and integration of immigrants and Muslims pose a threat to Swedish society. Both Larsson’s and Bernsand’s chapters alert us to the fact that while new platforms and channels for communication can encourage progressive and critical endeavours, this in no way immunises against longstanding traditions of ethnic and religious polemics and Othering.

In conclusion, the academic study of these new information and communication technologies, their impact on Islam, Muslims and Islamic studies, is still in its very infancy and there is thus a great need for the development of adequate and fresh theories and methods. To be sure, we need to collect more empirical data before we make any general conclusions. We also need to develop methods for handling the vast amounts of data that is accessible within a few clicks or by means of various software programs.

Lastly, a caveat must be issued! It should be clear that we should not get blinded by the novelty of the so-called technologies. Many factors and problems in relation to the ICT are not that new but quite constant or recurrent in terms of human societies and their way(s) of dealing with technological change. In this perspective Islam as a historical and social phenomenon and Muslims as human actors should not be viewed as exceptional and insulated cases, but rather as part and parcel of human

¹⁷See e.g., Varisco 2011.

history and society. Neither should we become blinded by the categorical powers of the terms ‘Muslim’ and ‘Islam’ – Muslims are not and do not act as Muslims all the time. ‘Islam’ is of course ‘Islam’ all the time, but the way it is ‘Islam’ is legio. This means that we also need to keep track on other academic disciplines, both when it comes to theoretical and methodological developments. These issues are strongly stressed in Sune Haugbolle’s analysis of a popular TV show in contemporary Lebanon. Instead of stressing the novelty of the media, Haugbolle argues that it is essential to do both ethnographic fieldwork (e.g., watching the shows with the audience in their very own living rooms or in the cafés) and that we need to ‘return’ to class analysis.

References

- Alsanea, Rajaa. 2005/2008. *Girls of Riyadh*. London: Penguin Books.
- Alterman, Jon B. 1998. *New media, new politics? From satellite television to the internet in the Arab world*. Washington, DC: Washington Institute for Near East Policy. <http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/new-media-new-politics-from-satellite-television-to-the-internet-in-the-ara>. Accessed 22 Mar 2013.
- Anderson, Jon W. 2008. Convergence, next phase of the information revolution. NMIT working papers. Working papers on New Media & Information Technology in the Middle East. <http://nmit.wordpress.com/2008/09/06/convergence-next-phase-of-the-information-revolution/#more-56>
- Baudrillard, Jean. 1983. *Simulations*. New York: Semiotext[e].
- Baudrillard, Jean. 1995. *The Gulf war did not take place*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press. (orig. pub. 1991.)
- Bunt, Gary. 2009. *iMuslims: Rewiring the house of Islam*. London: Hurst & Co.
- Davis, Erik. 1993. *Techgnosis: Myth, magic and mysticism in the age of information*. London: Serpent’s Tail.
- Dawson, Lorne L. 2004. Religion and the internet: Presence, problems, and prospects. In *New approaches to the study of religion. Vol. 1. Regional, critical, and historical approaches*, ed. Peter Antes, Armin W. Geertz, and Randi R. Warne, 386–405. Berlin: Walter de Gruyter.
- Deleuze, Gilles, and Félix Guattari. 1996. *A thousand plateaus: Capitalism and schizophrenia*. London: Athlone Press. (orig. pub. 1982.)
- Eickelman, Dale F. 1999. Communication and control in the Middle East: Publication and its discontents. In *New media in the Muslim world*, ed. Dale F. Eickelman and Jon W. Anderson, 33–44. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.
- Eickelman, Dale F., and Jon W. Anderson. 2003. Redefining Muslim publics. In *New media in the Muslim world*, ed. Dale F. Eickelman and Jon W. Anderson, 1–13. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.
- Gauntlet, David, and Ross Horsley. 2004. *Web.Studies*. London: Edward Arnold.
- Giddens, Anthony. 1990. *The consequences of modernity*. Cambridge: Polity Press.
- Hoover, S. 2001. Religion, media, and the cultural center of gravity. In *Religion and popular culture: Studies on the interaction of worldviews*, ed. D.A. Stour and J.M. Buddenbaum, 49–60. Ames: Iowa State University Press.
- Howard, Philip N. 2010. *The digital origins of dictatorship and democracy: Information technology and political Islam*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Larsson, Göran (ed.). 2006. *Religious communities on the internet*. Uppsala: Swedish Science Press.
- Larsson, Göran. 2007. Cyber-Islamophobia? The case of Wikiislam. *Contemporary Islam* 1(1): 53–67.

- Larsson, Göran. 2011. *Muslims and the new media: Historical and contemporary debates*. Farnham: Ashgate.
- Lynch, Marc. 2006. *Voices of the new Arab public: Iraq, Al-Jazeera, and Middle East politics today*. New York: Columbia University Press.
- Lynch, Gordon. 2010. Religion, media and cultures of everyday life. In *The Routledge companion to the study of religion*, ed. John Hinnells, 543–557. New York/London: Routledge.
- Lyon, David. 2007. *Surveillance studies: An overview*. Cambridge: Polity Press.
- McLuhan, Marshall. 1964. *Understanding media: The extensions of man*. New York: McGraw Hill.
- Mellor, Noha, et al. (eds.). 2011. *Arab media*. Cambridge: Polity Press.
- Nawawy, Mohammed El-, and Sahar Khamis. 2012. Political activism 2.0: Comparing the role of social media in Egypt's "Facebook Revolution" and Iran's "Twitter Uprising". *CyberOrient. Online Journal of the Virtual Middle East* 6, Iss. <http://www.cyberorient.net/article.do?articleId=7439>. Accessed 22 Mar 2013.
- Norton, Augustus Richard. 1999. The new media, civic pluralism, and the struggle for political reform. In *New media in the Muslim world*, ed. Dale F. Eickelman and Jon W. Anderson. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.
- Ramsay, Gail. 2007. Speaking up with Yahoo: An Arabic e-mail novel. In *Studia Semitica Upsaliensia*, vol. 23, ed. Bo. Isaksson, Mats Ekshult, and Gail Ramsay, 179–190. Uppsala: Uppsala University.
- Rugh, William. 2004. *Arab mass media: Newspapers, radio, and television in Arab politics*. Westport: Praeger.
- Seib, Philip. 2007. New media and prospects for democratization. In *New media and the new Middle East*, ed. Philip Seib, 1–18. New York: Palgrave MacMillan.
- Silverstein, Adam. 2007. *Postal systems in the pre-modern Islamic world*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Stout, Daniel A., and Judith Buddenbaum. 2002. Genealogy of an emerging field: Foundations for the study of media and religion. *Journal of Media and Religion* 1: 5–12.
- Varisco, Daniel. 2011. Climbing the virtual Minbar of cyberspace. *Review of the Middle East Studies* 45(2): 182–191.
- Virilio, Paul. 1980. *The aesthetics of disappearance*. Los Angeles: Semiotext[e].
- Webster, Frank. 2002. *Theories of the information society*. London: Routledge.
- Wheeler, Deborah L. 2008. Working around the state. Internet use and political identity in the Arab world. In *Routledge handbook on internet politics*, ed. Andrew Chadwick. London: Routledge.