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A conversation with Gary R. Bunt

Author of *iMuslims: Rewiring the House of Islam*

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Q: When did you become interested in this subject?

A: My interest in computers goes back to the early days of personal computers. In the early 1990s, I linked my computer interest to my studies on Islam by researching online sources such as discussion groups and email listings. During my fieldwork in Pakistan, Malaysia and the UK, I observed there was some early Internet engagement between religious scholars in disparate locations about issues of Islamic interest and interpretation. I also observed the ways that 'grassroots' individuals and small groups were starting to use the medium to promote specific forms of Islam. After my Ph.D., I continued to map online developments, integrating interests in religious authority with those of online communication, while exploring the impact of the Internet at many levels in various Muslim contexts. My interest was also stimulated by the integration of online sources into my teaching. Frequently my students have brought interesting online resources into their own work. As a result, and in order to help my students determine the origins and veracity of source materials, I set up a web guide called [Islamic Studies Pathways](#).

Q: How did you conduct your research for this book?

A: Undertaking this research has required the development of a number of new skills and methodological approaches. These are still evolving, and I have sought to refine my own techniques while seeking to chronicle online developments at a critical period in Islamic history. Clearly, there's been a lot going on, and one cannot observe or record everything—but this process does give me a sense of the many developments occurring in cyberspace in relation to Islam, Muslims and Islamic societies. It's a dynamic and innovative space to write about, and keeps my interest, although I have to keep reminding myself to take screen breaks as it is also very time consuming to monitor, record, and analyze material.

At times, events drove me in specific directions, such as 9/11, the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, and developments in Palestine. I was also conscious of a need to

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observe reactions towards various technical developments, in particular blogs, as well as new Web 2.0 tools in a variety of 'Islamic' contexts. I trawl and archive online resources on a regular basis and have a network of sources, feeds, and tools with which to acquire various snapshots of online activities. I recognized that there is a definite need to record online developments, as so much material goes 'missing' and is not formally archived. Depending on what I am working on, I regularly visit email groups, discussion forums, blogs, websites, and multimedia channels. I have talked to a number of Muslim individuals and groups over the years, on and offline, who have also provided invaluable perspectives. Some of the raw data for this book appeared on my [Virtually Islamic blog](#), which has been one way of establishing a chronology and continuity across disparate subject matter.

Q: What is digital Islam, why do we need to understand it, and where can we find examples of it?

A: There's no single definition. It can mean many different things to different people, depending on their perspective. To some, the term may even be a misnomer or an inherent contradiction. It depends in part on how one defines Islam, and whether elements within that definition have a digital edge. Digital Islam may be explicitly online, in a website, blog, YouTube video, or—more recently—an entry in Twitter. It may be explicitly 'religious' in orientation, relating to specific practices and concepts associated with core Islamic values and precepts. However, the articulation of digital Islam may also relate to specific cultural and political causes, which may be implicitly 'Islamic' in orientation.

With these caveats in mind, there are hundreds of thousands of possible avenues for locating ideas associated with digital Islam. It is essential to drill down from top-level search engine results on Islamic terms, which is something I have sought to do with this book, while also recognizing that there are certain key influential players who have attained a dominant place in cyber Islamic environments. There will be a webpage for *iMuslims* which will offer a place for readers to start their exploration, but in the meantime, examples of digital Islam can be found throughout my research website and blog [virtuallyislamic.com](#)

Q: How has the historical tradition of Muslim networks and connectivity contributed to a 'wired' Islam?

A: Historical Muslim networks now often have some form of online space, and/or use the Internet as a networking tool for dispersed communities and members. Even the previously most reluctant and quietist platforms—who resisted what they perceived to be the 'dangers' of the Internet—have adopted a level of pragmatism and established a presence online. What we are often looking at are a series of networks and communities reflecting diverse traditions and perspectives (albeit with a common theme at times), rather than a single, monolithic network.

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Q: When did the Internet become an important networking tool in Islam?

A: It is common to suggest that 9/11 had a galvanizing effect on online Muslim discourse, but—while that is a significant milestone—in some contexts the Internet was already an important adjunct to the Islamic information flow following the development of early browsers in the mid 1990s. Until the beginning of the twenty first century, online Islamic communication had remained largely in the hands of an educated, English speaking elite—many of whom were based in North American and European universities. The emergence of Arabic and other software tools certainly increased the significance of the Internet in Islam. The medium's adoption by important centers of Islamic learning, such as Qom and al-Azhar, which invested considerable resources into online activities, represented another networking milestone. The recognition by groups and individual scholars that, through online discourse, reputations could be built (or lost) and new networks established led to a sustained expansion in the beginning of this century. The significance of digital Islam increases as more communities have Internet access and enhanced online literacy. The digital divide is reduced in some places, in particular through the use of cell phones to access the Internet. Early adopters have benefited from establishing themselves in the Islamic information marketplace and by diversifying their products in many languages.

Q: Are cyber-Islamic environments (CIEs) replacing traditional Muslim networks of exchange or simply supplementing them?

A: CIEs have diversified considerably since I first defined the term back in 2000. The recognition of the net's supplanting or augmentation of traditional media can be seen in the ways in which mosques, Muslim interest groups, and Muslim government departments have invested in a sustained way—in part as a response to popular public adoption of the Internet. In some cases, they have also retained their traditional media channels, such as print. Networks of exchange also rely on physical, traditional face-to-face meetings and interactions (although these may also now be advertised online and streamed and videoed for online consumption).

Q: Who in the Muslim world has resisted the Internet and who has embraced it, and why?

A: Again, this can be a contextual issue, and one has to consider which specific application of the Internet is being considered. Scholars might say that what is permitted (halal) in everyday life is halal online, and that what is forbidden in everyday life (haram) is haram online, and of course there are recognized points in between these two poles. Many Muslims will say that if the Internet encourages religiosity and facilitates participation in political, cultural and/or religious aspects of Islamic life, then it has to be a good thing. Understanding of the Internet has become more refined, and—as in many other contexts—fear of the Internet has been replaced by pragmatism. Similarly, as with other aspects of human life, there

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are areas of the Internet that are seen as a challenge to traditional Islamic values (however they are defined) or have required interpretation to determine their appropriateness and validity.

Good examples of platforms and individuals who have embraced the Internet include Muslim political platforms and special interest groups, and also some religious authorities and scholars, including those from non-traditional backgrounds seeking to present alternative perspectives on Islam. This latter category, reliant in the pre-digital period on the printing press and the fax machine, has benefited immensely from the immediacy and interaction of the Internet as a cost-effective and dynamic space that is difficult for authorities to censor. A great deal of technological innovation is occurring in the name of Islam, in order to maximize the perceived benefits of the medium.

Q: Have you found regional and sect differences between Muslims using the Internet?

A: Absolutely. These differences are based in part on levels of access to the Internet, and the intended audience(s) of web content. The diversity of Islam within different regions, the microcosms of religious perspectives, the levels of adherence, and the complexities of interests can often be found online. However, not every site comes with clear labels, so it is not always possible to position sites and sects on a regional basis. Some Shi'i Muslim platforms, for example, may have websites whose contributions come from the around the world, reflecting the diasporic and nodal nature of these networks. There are ways in which some perspectives are using the technology in different ways. Some are 'always on,' regularly update sites, and have online participation at every level—with the use of blogs, RSS and other feeds, and audio-visual material. The net is seen as an essential networking tool for some of these users.

Q: How has the Internet influenced jihadist movements?

A: It depends in part on the movement and also, of course, on how you define jihadist. If we are talking about militaristic interpretations of the jihad concept, then clearly for some factions, sects, and platforms the Internet has been a significant logistical and propagational tool. Again, this predates 9/11. Supporters of movements (not necessarily associated with one another) such as those linked to Chechen mujahideen, al-Qaeda configurations, Hamas and Islamic Jihad, Hezbollah, and the Taliban have all had significant net presences on a variety of web sites and platforms. The use by al-Qaeda affiliates of the Internet has led to innovative approaches to the presentation and distribution of jihadi media, and in many cases there has been a coordinated approach towards militaristic activities in the field and in publicity campaigns.

Intelligence communities have played catch-up to an extent, not immediately

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recognizing the influence and impact of the Internet as a dynamic and effective means of distributing jihadi rhetoric to a global audience. One should not overstate this, as it is a small component in a much larger picture of cyber Islamic environments—but it has had an impact at a strategic level for its proponents, and on a psychological and emotional level (in some cases) for its multifaceted audiences. Use of Internet tools has been promoted as part of jihadi training in camps and online. Specific campaigns have been directly influenced by jihadi propagation, through recruitment patterns, as well as through logistical and financial support.

Q: Why do non-Muslims so often equate Internet use among Muslims with terrorist activities and why is it important to counter that impression?

A: The fear of the Internet often combines with a fear of Islam and Muslims, and it does present many media outlets with dynamic and controversial headlines. In many cases, there has been distortion, which has its roots in pre-digital prejudice, misunderstanding, and so-called Islamophobia. The ideas articulated by Edward W. Said in his studies of orientalism and depictions of Islam in the media certainly have contemporary currency. This bias can detract from appropriate and objective reporting (and wider public understanding) on controversial applications of the Internet, for example by jihadi platforms. Of course, now Muslim outlets and individuals are also part of the paradigms associated with western media, although their influence many not always counter negative influences.

Perhaps unsurprisingly, the less-sensational, mundane applications of the Internet in relation to Islam do not receive much coverage, although of course there are many examples of responsible and informed reporting in the 'western' media. I think that practical, everyday applications of the Internet that fall under the journalistic radar—for example, its use in the transmission and interpretation of religious knowledge, or its use in exchanges of information and perspectives—are very significant elements of digital Islam. I've tried to place emphasis on these applications in *iMuslims*.

Q: What impact do Muslim Internet communities have on the non-Muslim community?

A: It's difficult to measure, or to consider homogeneous communities in relation to this question. One primary impact is that it has enabled access to wider knowledge about Islam and Muslims, but the key issue is how that knowledge is mediated. Non-Muslim surfers relying on top-level Google searches or online open-source encyclopedia are not necessarily going to receive a comprehensive and balanced understanding of Islam and Muslims. Guidance on the different perspectives presented online is critical, but often lacking. There is a great potential for dialogues between diverse communities online, and of course efforts have been made in some quarters to enable this. It is a subject that requires further
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research in various online, regional, and cultural contexts.

Q: How has the Internet changed Islam from a psychological and social standpoint?

A: Islam as a religion itself appears unchanged in terms of religious conceptualization and practice. The Qur'an itself is unchanged in terms of the message and structure of the Divine Revelation. Islamic concepts have retained their continuity.

The critical psychological and social changes are associated with the presentation, interpretation and distribution of the Islamic message—which has undergone a digital revolution on a number of levels. One can consult translations of Qur'anic commentaries online, previously only available in specialist libraries, or undertake keyword searches on sources that previously were available only to scholars and experts. Whether individuals choose to undertake these searches, and what they do with the results is another matter. Traditional Islamic scholars may be challenged or feel they need to adapt to digital contexts, or lose some of their authority—although now many of those graduating from traditional seminaries may have taken courses on computers. Some people feel that they can use the Internet to ask questions and consult religious opinions, either through databases or direct questioning, with a level of responsiveness and accessibility previously unavailable. Some scholars complain about the levels of emails and questions they receive, that their opinions are neglected, and that consultation of Islamic question and answer 'fatwa' sites has become a pastime. However, some people think the Internet has brought them closer to Islam, and see it as a tool that can enhance communities. Whatever the impact of these and other developments, the role of traditional sources, mosques, and traditional authority networks has some continuity with the pre-digital age.

Q: Has the Internet influenced social or romantic relations among Muslims?

A: There are a number of matrimonial websites that are seen by some as positive developments and extensions of traditional marriage practices. They might fall under the parameters of the 'halal' web. There are also, according to some traditional interpretations, dating sites encouraging 'illicit' relations that are considered forbidden zones. There is, of course, plenty of evidence that the Internet has engendered a number of relationships, and specialist sites have emerged filtering participation by religious and cultural criteria.

The influence may also be seen in the depiction of social and romantic relations, given that the Internet, like other media, opens up different forms of relationships and idealized types of romance. Online anonymity has pushed traditional

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boundaries of interaction and been condemned by some online scholars. The issue of sexuality is also a complex but relevant one within this context; while gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender relationships may be condemned by many Muslim authorities, the Internet has in some cases facilitated networking and relationship-building in this sphere.

Q: How has the Internet influenced Muslim religious practice?

A: It depends on the practice, and whether we are looking at this from an individual, group, or network level (or points in between). Practice may intensify through exposure to online materials. Interpretation of the Qur'an may be influenced by consulting online materials. The timing of ritual practice, such as prayer or fasting during Ramadan, may be influenced by consulting an online database. Information about religious practice obtained online may be disseminated offline. I discuss ways in which a variety of practices might evolve through online interaction in *iMuslims*.

Q: In your experience, has the Internet contributed to or might it lead to social leveling in the Muslim world?

A: Not necessarily. Old hierarchies retain a currency and in fact may be reinforced through the Internet. The fact that they now have email addresses and web sites does not necessarily make them more accessible or less elitist. However, new networks and, in some cases, hierarchies have emerged through the Internet, represented by a decentralization of religious authority centers and sources. Scholars from previously marginalized contexts who have developed dynamic web content may enhance their status. For some individuals and groups, leveling occurs in terms of access to resources, but that is critically dependent on levels of access. For example, the growth in cell phone access to the web that short-circuits the need for using desktop computers to access the Internet will result in a further shift in the dynamics of cyber Islamic environments. It might not lead to forms of social leveling, but a recalibration in constantly shifting contexts.

Q: How do you feel about the book's cover?

A: I'm grateful to the Press for coming up with an eye-catching cover, combining historical and religious influences (represented by the mosque) with ideas of connectivity between diverse Muslims across digital spheres. As such, it conveys the key themes of *iMuslims*.

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