Hashtag Islam: How Cyber-Islamic Environments are Transforming Religious Authority

Değerlendiren/Reviewed by: Benjamin Ale-Ebrahim[1]

Gary Bunt's *Hashtag Islam* presents a survey of how diverse communities of Muslims around the world are using internet-based technologies to "fulfill spiritual, mystical, and legalistic agendas" (3). Through an investigation of what he defines as "cyber-Islamic environments (CIEs)" - a broad category of analysis encompassing everything from social media posts, online *fatwa* (Islamic legal opinion) services, transnational media conglomerates, and digitally-published magazines, to name a few examples - Bunt argues that the internet has played a critical role in transforming the ways in which Muslims engage with religious authorities, allowing greater access to religious knowledge beyond the bounds of traditional Islamic scholarship and providing a platform for alternative or minoritarian approaches to Islamic practice. *Hashtag Islam* is Bunt's fourth book on digital media in Islamic contexts, focusing on recent developments in the spread of internet communication technologies between 2009-2017 in the Muslim-majority world.

Bunt employs a theoretical approach inspired by scholars of media like Marshall McLuhan and Jürgen Habermas in order to understand the nature of media in relation to its informational content as well as the role of media in allowing for public debate about important religious and societal issues (10-18). He focuses his analysis on the relationship between "faith, command, and control" (2) in several different cyber-Islamic environments around the world. Bunt argues that the technical affordances of internet-based communication technologies like social media and blogs, including the possibility of rapid dissemination of information across borders and the potential for direct communication between the average Muslim and prominent religious leaders, have drastically reshaped how religious authority is enacted in Islamic contexts. Internet-connected Muslims are blogging, tweeting, and posting content online that challenges religious interpretations promoted by state-sponsored institutions in countries such as Saudi Arabia and Iran (chapter 2). Muslims around the world are using the internet to read the Qur'an, enhance their *hajj* pilgrimage experience, arrange romantic relationships outside traditional channels, and build transnational communities in Sunni, Shi'a, and Sufi contexts (chapter 3). Well-established sources of religious authority, including the Darul Ifta Deoband in India and Ayatollah Sistani in Iraq, are adapting to the widespread use of internet-based technologies among Muslim communities, establishing online platforms for the dissemination of religious rulings in order to reach their audiences more effectively (chapter 4). Bunt demonstrates that skillful use of algorithms and hashtags are becoming just as critical in the creation and dissemination of Islamic knowledge as an extensive study of the Qur'an and hadith.

In the last two chapters, Bunt discusses the role of the internet in radicalization and the spread of jihadist ideologies (chapter 5), particularly how supporters of the

[1] Doctoral Student, Indiana University, Bloomington, e-mail: benalebrahim@gmail.com, orcid.org/0000-0002-7889-2761

so-called "Islamic State" (ISIS, ISIL, or *da'esh*) make use of the internet to spread their influence worldwide (chapter 6). While many other scholars and policymakers have discussed the role of the internet in facilitating the spread of extremist ideologies, especially how terrorist groups such as al-Qaeda and ISIS use encrypted messaging services like WhatsApp and Telegram to communicate among themselves, or how these groups make use of servers hosted on the dark web to plan and encourage lone-wolf attacks, Bunt's important intervention here is his discussion of how ISIS members are adept at using seemingly innocuous styles of communication popular on the internet more generally in order to make their ideologies and tactics seem normal and mundane. One striking example of this is a Twitter account operated by an ISIS-supporter dedicated to sharing photos of militants posing with cats (124-125). Using the widespread appeal of cute cat photos, ISIS attempts to assert the normalcy of life in their so-called "caliphate." Another ISIS blogger from Britain posts photos documenting the availability of cappuccinos and other global consumer commodities in ISIS-controlled territory in order to encourage Western recruits (129-130). These "cute" and "normal" images, alongside the brutally violent videos of beheadings and executions more familiar to observers of ISIS's media output, are important to consider in order to understand the complex nature of this terrorist group's public relations strategy.

As a wide-ranging survey of how diverse communities of Muslims have made use of internet-based communications technologies over the course of nearly a decade, Bunt is successful in synthesizing a vast amount of material into a concise narrative about the importance of new media in reshaping Islamic religious authority. Due to the sheer amount of data he is interested in and the global scope of this book, Bunt is primarily concerned with presenting an up-to-date overview of some of the most important aspects of digital media use in contemporary Islamic contexts, avoiding extensive theoretical discussions and jargon-heavy writing. He leaves space for other scholars to analyze in greater detail the case studies he presents here. Indeed, in the introduction, Bunt writes that he hopes this book "will provide a springboard for further exploration and understanding, given that the multidisciplinary and interdisciplinary subject area has plenty of opportunities for further research" (5). While reading, I found myself thinking that several case studies in this book could be entire chapters or dissertation projects in their own right. Anyone new to the field of Islamic digital media studies, including students, researchers, and policymakers, will find this book a useful and accessible introduction to the various ways in which new media technologies are reshaping authority and religious practice in Islamic contexts worldwide.

In addition to serving as a recent survey of "cyber-Islamic environments" over the past decade, *Hashtag Islam* performs important work in disrupting dominant narratives promoted by major Western media outlets and government entities that tend to associate the use of new media technologies in Muslim-majority contexts only with jihadism, terrorism, and violence. Bunt demonstrates how internet-based communications technologies like social media platforms, blogs, and smartphone apps are reshaping norms of Islamic religious authority on a fundamental level, affecting all aspects of life for contemporary Muslims everywhere, not just the miniscule minority of Muslims around the world who promote violence. In this book, Bunt attempts to counter the widespread Islamophobic emphasis on the potential for violence enabled by these new media technologies by taking a global, *ummah*-wide view of new media use. He shows his readers that although violent groups like al-Qaeda and ISIS are employing the internet to achieve their goals, this is only a small but highly visible aspect of global Muslim internet use. The internet has also reshaped how the vast majority of Muslims around the world engage with Islam and Islamic authorities such as interacting with an *imam* in a more direct manner, questioning some interpretations of Islamic law related to women and LGBTQ, and meeting a potential spouse on a dating app designed specifically for Muslims.

While Bunt is successful in synthesizing some of the most important recent trends in digital media use among Muslims worldwide, challenging Islamophobic policies around Muslim internet use that overly emphasize the potential for violence enabled by digital platforms, one of the weaknesses of this book is that Bunt does not spend significant space analyzing his examples in detail. I would have liked to have seen Bunt discuss why, for example, ISIS militants have taken up the genre of cat photos in particular rather than some other seemingly-innocuous internet meme and how they are adapting this genre to fit their interests and political goals. Performing this sort of finer-grained analysis would enhance his arguments about the relationship between Muslim internet use and broader trends of internet activity worldwide. Though this book is intended as a global summary of recent trends, and Bunt wants to leave room for other scholars to take up his arguments and pursue their own research agendas, I think his argument could have been enhanced by including a few key examples in which he performs a closer read of the data he has gathered.

Hashtag Islam is a useful book for scholars and policymakers seeking an introduction to the complex ways in which Muslims around the world have made use of digital media over the past decade, especially the role of the internet in everyday Muslim life to facilitate religious worship, disseminate religious knowledge, shape Islamic identities, initiate romantic relationships, and build transnational communities. Bunt demonstrates that violent terrorist groups represent only one small but highly visible group of internet users in the Muslim-majority world; most Muslims worldwide are using the internet in non-violent ways to find answers to religious questions, connect with family and friends, and develop connections across borders. *Hashtag Islam* demonstrates that the internet has become a crucial site for the exercise of Islamic religious authority in the contemporary world, presenting numerous case studies of how both traditional and non-traditional, normative and alternative Muslim actors are adapting to the increasing popularity of internet-enabled communication in unexpected ways.