

**Islam Dot Com: Contemporary
Islamic Discourses in Cyberspace**

Mohammed el-Nawawy and Sahar Khamis
New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009. 280 pages.

The articulation of Islam with the new media, and the Internet in particular, has attracted the interest of many researchers. The Internet's openness and democratic potential may infuse Islamic discourses with a new dynamic or, alternatively, offer a new lease of life to such valued traditions as *shura* (consultation) and *ijtihad* (independent thinking). *Islam Dot Com* belongs to the line of thought that seeks to discover how the Internet has been associated with Islam and the extent to which it may be thought to contribute to its democratization by providing a truly public sphere in which interested people can participate. On the other hand, the authors are cognizant of the limitations of the concept of "public sphere" when applied to Islamic contexts. Part of the book's remit, therefore, is to examine how the Internet relates to

shura, *ijtihad*, and *ijma`* (consensus). At the same time, it seeks to relate these theoretical arguments to an empirical case study consisting of a textual analysis of three Islamic websites: www.islamonline.net, www.amr-khaled.net, and www.islamway.com. The book's structure comprises three theoretical chapters (chapters 1-3), two empirical chapters (chapters 4 and 5), and a concluding chapter (chapter 6).

The theoretical chapters develop and expand arguments concerning the public sphere and its relationship to Islam within the context of the new media. Specifically, in chapter 1 the authors look at this concept as developed by Jürgen Habermas and discuss its applicability in the Islamic context. Providing a historical overview, they then analyze the role of the ulama and other notable figures as well as the shifts to Islam and its public sphere in the context of late or postmodernity. In this chapter, the authors identify the book's basic theoretical thread: the notion of "objectification." First suggested by Eickelman and Piscatori (2004), this term refers to the idea that Islam becomes an object of objective thought, discussion, and reflection upon questions concerning Islamic faith and practices. This, in turn, redefines Islam and Muslim identities in the current historical context.

The other theoretical chapters refine and specify the arguments further by examining the articulations of the Internet with religion in general and Islam in particular (chapter 2) and addressing existing Muslim concepts (e.g., *ummah*) and their applicability in the context of the public sphere and the new media (chapter 3). These analyses reveal several interesting aspects of the new articulations of Islam, among them the development of new forums for *da`wah* and the propagation of, and the possibility for, participation in virtual rituals. These chapters provide a great deal of evidence for Islam's plurality and the variety of its voices, while also raising questions about the quality of the information offered and, more broadly, about the digital divide within Muslim communities. Chapter 3 asks, more specifically, whether we can think of the *ummah* as a public sphere. The answer offered is that since it is metaphorical rather than physical, since it purports to be universal, and since it is premised on equality among its members, it can qualify as a public sphere (p. 84). At the same time, this makes the *ummah* susceptible to a series of issues that need to be dealt with, such as re-Islamization, democratization, pluralism, and dialogue. Can the *ummah* deal with these successfully? As the authors put it, this remains to be seen (p. 112).

The empirical chapters concentrate on actual discourses in the above-mentioned websites' online discussion forums. Chapter 4 revolves around the question of how new collective identities are expressed in these websites: Are they compatible to Habermas' requirements for participation in the public

sphere and Dahlberg's operationalization of these for online environments? The short answer is a qualified "no," for while equality among participants and freedom from state and economic pressures are present, impartiality and rational-critical debate are not. *Ijma`*, in the ideal sense of achieving similarity (or harmonization, as Habermas puts it) is also not present. But this is not to say that all is lost, for the important political work undertaken on these sites allows for the development of critical, resistant voices, mostly vis-à-vis the Muslim leadership. Findings further indicate that discussions on these sites can be associated with important developments, such as the rise of Islamic feminism and the development of knowledge communities.

Chapter 5, on difference and divergence, presents a somewhat darker picture as to how each of the selected websites handles divergent identities and disagreements. These divergences are elaborated on the basis of four main parameters: diversity internal (Sunni vs. Shi'ite) and external to Islam (Muslim–non-Muslim faith), gender, and political differences. In most of these divergences, the findings again indicated the lack of several of the Habermas-Dahlberg criteria; in addition, these diverse identities often led to antagonistic confrontations and polarized debates. In the concluding chapter, the authors summarize their findings and main arguments. They argue that although there is some consensus and some divergence, the middle position of negotiation or deliberation between them is missing. More broadly, they have identified the lack both of a Habermasian public sphere and of the corresponding Islamic concepts of *ijma`*, *ijtihad*, and *shura*.

Undoubtedly this book makes an important contribution to the existing literature on Islam and the Internet. Its lucid discussion of theoretical issues will be an indispensable resource for students and researchers in this field. On the other hand, however, it could have been bolder in theoretical terms and question the normative premises on which the Habermasian public sphere is based. Indeed, it could be that the antagonism identified in chapter 5 contributes to a politics of agonism as discussed by Mouffe ("Deliberative Democracy or Agonistic Pluralism?" Institute for Advanced Studies, Vienna, 2007; available at: http://users.unimi.it/dikeius/pw_72.pdf). We may come across alternative normative frameworks within which to assess the findings, or indeed some newly emerging ones: for instance, the rise of new online media such as blogs may contribute to these. But this perhaps may be the subject of another book.

Eugenia Siapera (esiapera@jour.auth.gr)
Lecturer in New Media
Aristotle University of Thessaloniki, Greece