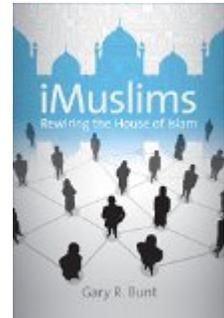**Gary R. Bunt.** *iMuslims: Rewiring the House of Islam.* Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2009. 358 pp. $24.95, paper, ISBN 978-0-8078-5966-7.

**Reviewed by** Sune Haugbolle

Not so much a "new media" anymore, after twenty-odd years the effects of the Internet are discernable everywhere. It is spewing out an outrageous amount of information, which has become part and parcel of our daily lives linking phenomena in the real world with virtual information and representations, just as it is linking people with each other in truly different ways than before. Some things remain the same, however, and scholars of Internet-based media face the basic problem of the social scientist. Namely that, since as Max Weber said, social reality is infinite, the most difficult choices are methodological. What do we do with all this information, and how can we study media flows, the incessant stream of ephemeral material, in a way that provides more than a snapshot of the media? One answer is to adopt an approach modeled on the Internet itself by forming research networks that document and analyze particular phenomena on the Net. Others link the Internet to an emergent historiography of mass media and modernity dating back to the printing press, which can be a healthy antidote to

the hype about new media. Finally, with regard to other mass media like cassette tapes and television, anthropologists such as Charles Hirsckind and Lila Abu-Lughod have adopted an ethnographic approach that goes close to the processes of production, usage, and network formation.

To date, hardly any research of this sort has been done on the Internet in the Middle East, although the topic is often commented on, particularly in relation to Islam. Gary Bunt's *iMuslims* should therefore be welcomed as one of the first major works that tries to develop a coherent analyses of the ways in which Muslims around the world use the Internet and the impact it is having on the duties and rituals of Islam. Building on his own work of more than a decade published in *Virtually Islamic: Computer-Mediated Communication and Cyber Islamic Environments* (2000, also the name of his Web page), and *Islam in the Digital Age*: *E-jihad, Online Fatwas, and Cyber Islamic Environments* (2003), as well as the limited existing literature, Bunt explores diverse aspects of online Islam, from Islamic textual sources to

blogging and jihadism. *iMuslims* is more grounded in the age of Web 2.0; hence the reference to mobile media like iPhones and iPods, and more broadly to the integrated role of information technology and mediatized social networks in the life of Muslims in the book's title. Bunt clearly shows that as scholars of Islam and the Middle East, we cannot afford to ignore the Web, or to treat is as incidental to politics, culture, and social life. The Net revolution must be constantly analyzed. As Dale Eickelman, Jon Anderson, and others pointed out in the mid-1990s, the Internet has from the very beginning transformed how Muslims interact and practice their creed. Since then, Internet media have become increasingly user-oriented and mobile, and more and more people even in developing countries have gained access to their riches, resulting in ever more Islamic material online.

The Muslim Internet, writes Bunt, is essentially a number of venues, or environments--playgrounds where new actors are drawn into the discursive and symbolic contestation over Islam. His term for these virtual places for Muslims to communicate and engage in reformulations of their creed is "cyber-Islamic environments," or CIEs. The first chapter, "Locating Islam in Cyberspace," includes a spider web-like diagram illustrating the complex ways in which Web 2.0 is giving shape to CIEs. Although it is hard to distinguish where non-Muslim media end and Muslim media begin in this diagram, it is clear that everything from chat rooms, blogs, and vlogs (video blogs), to social networking sites like Facebook, Myspace, and flikr can be given an Islamic coloring on today's Internet. Through this process, Bunt argues, Islam is developing into an open-source system that allows non-elites the opportunity to participate in the reformulation of their creed. To some extent, this transnational development in the age of globalization, theorized by Peter Mandaville, Olivier Roy, and others, can be seen as a return to the formative period of Islam when Islamic scholars collaborated across boundaries. The forging of new

interpretations, communities, and global networks brings with it a number of challenges and dangers, many of which are accentuated by the Internet.

At the same time, Bunt stresses the barriers that prevent the formation of a transnational community, in terms of language, sectarian orientation, and government censorship. While English was the language of choice in the early CIEs, today Arabic, Persian and Urdu, as well as numerous smaller languages compete for attention. None of them are likely to become a lingua franca, even if Arabic CIEs dominate. Furthermore, limited Internet access in most Muslim-majority countries means that only select social groups are connected to the new ostensibly open-source Islam. In terms of digital opportunity, the GCC countries rank as high as some European countries, while Yemen and Sudan are at par with most African countries. These unequal opportunities have serious implications, allowing some states to become power centers in the new Muslim public sphere, while others are backwaters, even if this power does not emanate from the state itself. Nation-states, even formally Islamic ones like Iran and Saudi Arabia, are busy policing CIEs, which engenders subversion. As Bunt argues, the latter is often the more important kind of activity online, as the Net gives otherwise marginalized groups a space for expression. Islamic bloggers and programmers, just like (and often in tandem with) secular ones, are finding ways to express dissent, even in repressive states like Syria.

An interesting question is to what extent subversion and disagreement has the potential to translate into actual debate about the common good (*al-maslaha*), be it political or religious, in a diffuse public arena like the Internet. This theoretical debate about a new (real or idealized) public sphere and the particular role of the Internet, has been dealt with extensively by, among others, Armando Salvatore and Dale Eickelman. Bunt is mainly concerned with the great multiplicity of

CIEs and less with power relations involved in the contestation over *al-maslaha*. For instance, in chapter 3 he discusses how the sources of Islam, the Qur'an and the *sunna*, have become mass-mediated and in the process are changing the way Muslims use these sources and construct expert knowledge. For example, Bunt details how the main duties of ordinary Muslims, the five pillars of Islam, have become reinterpreted through various software that makes it possible for more and more devout Muslims to connect and create a shared set of practices and beliefs. Equally, the Web facilitates praying, Muslim dating, fasting, and not least, counseling. Most of these are perfectly prosaic quotidian aspects of Muslim life which have become easier to perform because of the Net.

However, the Net also showcases conflicting interpretations, and this is where the question of *al-maslaha* becomes critical. Perhaps the most critical effect of new media on Islam is the way in which they challenge traditional religious authority. Men with less training than traditional *ulama* have emerged on television and computer screens, offering alternative roads to *fiqh*. Perhaps even more critical, Wiki counseling now makes it possible for a democratic concept of *al-maslaha* to emerge which bypasses Islamic institutions. Of course, *ulama* and Islamic centers of learning like al-Azhar University also use the new media to resists the challenge mounted against them. But CIEs generally favor dissenting voices. A recent example is the October 2009 *niqab* affair in Egypt, where the Grand Shaykh of al-Azhar University Muhmmad al-Tantawi's ban on *niqab*s was met with a virulent Internet campaign from devout Muslim students who ridiculed the learned man. Such (counter)public undermining of an Islamic authority would have been unthinkable before the Internet age.

In chapter 3, and throughout the book, one is left with questions about the political implications of the plurality that Bunt describes. Who stands to gain from the dispersion of Islamic authority? What is Saudi Arabia's role? What is al-Azhar's? Do the apparently organic developments of authority that Bunt describes dovetail with existing, highly politically charged attempts to create, maintain, or resist an Islamic international? These are obviously open questions, but not all of them are raised.

The last two chapters of the book deal with what Bunt calls jihadist online forums. The development of Al-Qaida from the mid-1990s has a close affinity with computer networks and is closely linked to the Web. The connection between jihadists, salafis, and the Internet is the most researched area of CIEs, often motivated by security interests. But even if jihadi research often takes place in a grey zone between academia and security services, its extensive use of collaborative research and number-crunching may still hold lessons for the study of other Internet phenomena. Through Bunt's insightful description of jihadi milieus online, it becomes clear that jihadi networks showcase both highly sophisticated network models for publicity and communication, and examples of how the Net has become an open-source entry to formulations of Islam. Jihadis put these tools to use most places in the world today, but particularly in Iraq and Palestine (treated separately in the book's final chapter). He provides plenty of examples of online radicalism, but also of the many intersections between Islamic radicals and groups with other agendas. Indeed, as Bunt stresses, the pressing need to map and understand cyber-jihadis should not make us blind to the many peaceful ways Muslims use the Net, or indeed the many other ways Muslims live their lives.

At the end of the day, many Muslims are first and foremost media users. In the emergent research on Islam and new media there is a tendency to fall into the old Orientalist trap of particularizing social processes which Muslims actually share with everyone else. In addition, Muslims

also use non-Islamic media, including Web-based ones. A case in point is the blogosphere, dealt with in chapter 4. As Bunt notes, Muslim blogs can sometimes be hard to differentiate from other blogs. What characterizes the blogs he describes is often not so much Islamic content as the way in which they interact with other CIEs. The interactivity--the creation of Islamic pathways on the Net through RSS feeds and other links--may be the key to understanding the effect of blogs. However, the fact that some blogs interact with other CIEs does not completely resolve the problem of particularizing. Many, if not most, of the bloggers quoted in Bunt's overview of the most vocal or active Muslim countries in the blogosphere, debate social affairs rather than religion as such. In fact, many Muslim bloggers prefer not to be identified as Muslims, but rather just young people, bloggers, or activists.

*iMuslims* is the best overview of the Muslim Internet to date. It is up-to-date, comprehensive, and should be compulsory reading for students and scholars of Islam, media, and politics in the Middle East. However, the paradox between, on one hand, identifying Muslim public spheres energized by new media, while, on the other hand, also admitting that they intersect with secular issues, aesthetics, traditions, and forms of expressions, is never completely resolved in *iMuslims*. Perhaps the most glaring illustration of the problem is when Bunt categorizes the communist, Shiite professor Asad Abukhalil, known as the Angry Arab, as part of the Islamic blogosphere (p. 173). Of course Abukhalil regularly comments on Islamic topics, but so do a large list of bloggers, hacks, and ordinary people on the Net. In fact, the Angry Arab is one of the most secular Arab blogs. Would Abukhalil mind being labeled an iMuslim? The term itself is not convincing; it sounds a little too much like a different species. Could we for example imagine a book called *iChristians*, other than perhaps about very fundamentalist Christians online? By subsuming every phenomenon in Muslim contexts, or related to Islam, under an Is-

lamic heading, we risk underwriting claims about Islam as the primary, sometimes the only valid, identity marker. The more interesting debate concerning mass media, perhaps, is how we as scholars can come to grips with contestations and intersections between revivalist Islam and secular modernity.

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