Mohammed el-Nawawy and Sahar Khamis (2009). Islam Dot Com: Contemporary Islamic Discourses in Cyberspace. New York: Palgrave Macmillan. ISBN: 978-0230600355

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It is intriguing to note the extent to which the internet and social media – such as Facebook, Flickr, Twitter, YouTube and the like – have proven to be newsworthy topics in their own right within press coverage of the dramatic uprisings underway across the Middle East. For example, a *New York Times* article, 'A Tunisian-Egyptian link that shook Arab history,' observed:

> As protesters in Tahrir Square faced off against pro-government forces, they drew a lesson from their counterparts in Tunisia: "Advice to the youth of Egypt: Put vinegar or onion under your scarf for tear gas."
> The exchange on Facebook was part of a remarkable two-year collaboration that has given birth to a new force in the Arab world — a pan-Arab youth movement dedicated to spreading democracy in a region without it. Young Egyptian and Tunisian activists brainstormed on the use of technology to evade surveillance, commiserated about torture and traded practical tips on how to stand up to rubber bullets and organize barricades (*The New York Times*, February 13, 2011).

The article proceeded to explain that the revolt in Egypt was years in the making, a point frequently overlooked in more triumphalist treatments. Bold claims about digital technologies have featured prominently in impassioned discussion across the mediascape, where they are often heralded as tools of liberation responsible for ushering in near-instant revolutionary change. Contrary voices tend to be sharply dismissive, insisting that conventional forms of political mobilisation and protest are being glossed over in the hype of cyber-enthusiasts. More recently, more measured assessments have begun to focus on the structural imperatives underpinning these ostensibly spontaneous eruptions of dissent. Such efforts are adding nuance to otherwise starkly rendered assertions, thereby helping to produce fresh perspectives on the complexities involved – even if their insights are less likely to be regarded as newsworthy by Western news media.

Readers seeking to delve into the issues at stake will find much to contemplate in *Islam Dot Com: Contemporary Islamic Discourses in Cyberspace* by Mohammed el-Nawawy and Sahar Khamis. Published in the distinguished book series edited by Philip Seib addressing international and political communication, it offers a perceptive engagement with a number of pressing concerns that resonate deeply in current events. Guiding the authors' enquiry into the growing proliferation of Islamic websites are several questions, such as: have Islamic websites 'weakened or consolidated the control of the mainstream Islamic establishment over the production and distribution of religious information?' Can these sites 'provide a forum for resistant voices that can challenge sources of internal public authority, such as governments in the Muslim world, as well as forces of external hegemony and domination? How far do these sites act as a platform for the display of collective identities within the realm of the "virtual *umma*" (Islamic community) in the digital age?' (p. 1). Informing the exploration of these and related questions is el-Nawawy and Khamis's commitment to discerning the potential of these sites to contribute to discursive spaces for interaction, namely the collective projection of a 'new Islamic virtual public sphere' or even spheres. In their words, the book aims to 'examine the different ways through which members of the Muslim *umma* are capable of creating, intersecting, overlapping or clashing identity positions and subjectivities around various issues and discourses in cyberspace today' (p. 2).

Islam Dot Com is made up of six chapters, the first three of which are largely conceptual in nature in order to provide the necessary backdrop for the author's interpretation of the findings derived from the empirical study presented in the latter chapters. The first chapter introduces the concept of the 'public sphere.' Initially formulated by the German sociologist Jürgen Habermas in the 1960s, it has proven to be a productive basis for exploring public opinion formation in European scholarship. Here the authors draw upon it with a view to elaborating their framework to investigate processes of identity (re)construction in a virtual community likened to a bustling marketplace, where divergent ideas, views and opinions find expression. Of interest to them are the factors contributing to the fragmentation of 'traditional religious authority in postmodern Islam,' as well as the emergence of 'new religious intellectuals,' which together helped to give rise to new Islamic public spheres. Chapter Two examines religion in this virtual realm, devoting particular attention to the role of Islamic websites and online discussion groups in engendering a shared sense of community. Much of the discussion revolves around Muslim public perceptions of the relatively poor quality of much of the information available in these spaces, raising concerns about ritual, accessibility and trust as they pertain to larger debates about the digital divide. Rounding out this section of the book is Chapter Three's consideration of the concept of *umma*, with special reference to its historical development. Public sphere criteria are brought to bear in the authors' evaluative assessment of its relationship to wider discourses of democratization, pluralism and otherness.

Against this conceptual backdrop, Chapter Four signals el-Nawawy and Khamis's turn to the evidence generated by their case study. Specifically, a qualitative textual analysis was conducted of three popular Islamic websites, www.islamonline.net, www.islamway.com, and www.amrkhaled.net, in order to examine the content of their discussion boards over a six month period (February to July, 2008). All three Sunni websites are described as 'mainstream' in their propagation of faith, and prioritise a 'dialogical approach' intended to foster civil engagement in discussion over issues of pertinent to participants. Despite their shared emphasis on unity and conformity, however, a continuum of sorts emerges between the three sites, with each positioned differently depending on the relative degree of its enforcement of rules, supervisory control and self-censorship. Significant tensions are revealed across the range of 'voices' taking part in the

deliberations, with the authors' careful explication of postings throwing into sharp relief the communicative dynamics of 'rational-critical' (Habermas) debate. Chapter Five's analysis of 'divergent identities' extends this line of critique further, throwing a contrasting light on relations of power and – crucially – resistance to established authority, including in governmental, religious and patriarchal terms. At the same time, however, the authors suggest that the 'identity-less' nature of the virtual *umma* 'meant that some participants in Internet discourses can hide behind the curtain of anonymity and obscurity and allow themselves to use the worst possible language [to express] feelings of hatred, ridicule, and contempt toward "the Other," on the basis of religious and/or cultural and ethnic differences' (p. 207). This observation, evidenced by deeply disturbing material quoted from the transcripts of discussion threads, underscores the extent to which certain issues spark profound disagreements. Examples such as the Palestinian-Israeli conflict and the Danish cartoons controversy are hardly surprising, but similarly shown to be bitterly contentious in certain circumstances are more everyday matters revolving around the social divisions and hierarchies associated with class, gender and ethnicity, amongst others. The authors' analysis shows how frequently the normative limits of any conception of 'community,' virtual or otherwise, can be undermined by prejudice.

The book comes to a close in Chapter Six, which pulls together key strands rehearsed over the preceding chapters before offering an insightful set of conclusions. Once again, Habermasian ideals inform the evaluative appraisal, with the authors contending that to the extent it was possible to discern a degree of consensus over contentious issues in the discussion threads, it 'emanated mostly from the participants' emotional uniformity and common subjectivity, rather than their objective, rational thinking' (p. 211). In contrast, threads that reflected divergent identities were often attributable to opposing ethnic, racial, religious and political ideologies. This diversity seldom encouraged sustained, focused discussion – rather, participants 'engaged in sharp disagreements and emotional confrontations, allowing their differences to stand in the way of creating a Habermasian rational-critical debate' (p. 213). One can detect el-Nawawy and Khamis's disappointment when they conclude that most of the threads they analysed were suggestive of a 'nondeliberative' public sphere, with little commitment amongst participants to a shared, civil discourse. Indeed, the 'antagonistic, dogmatic, and

assertive environment' dominating public forums is a cause for serious concern, easily rendering problematic familiar assumptions – widely expressed elsewhere in the scholarly literature – about the relative capacity of the internet to improve civic participation, especially when open deliberation is equivocated with democratisation.

To close, *Islam Dot Com* is an absorbing book, deserving of a wide readership. Its innovative approach is compelling, at once alert to the subtle contingencies of the material under scrutiny while simultaneously ensuring that the relevance of the ensuing findings is demonstrated in an accessible manner. Looking forward, I hope the authors will continue to develop this line of enquiry, not least with a view to tracing the evolving imperatives of these discussion boards – and related discursive spaces – over time in order to offer a genealogical perspective. Already, in light of the uprisings unfolding across the Middle East, the value of this study's insights has been enhanced. Reflecting on its contribution, one may be forgiven a certain cautious optimism that a virtual *umma* more richly enlivened by public participation committed to productive, mutually respectful deliberation is currently emerging. Time will tell, of course, but this book is certain to be an important resource for future assessments.