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Twenty years ago, around the time of Gary Bunt’s first book on Islam and the internet and before the bursting of the dot com bubble, I attended a conference where professor Bunt gave a talk on the subject of his research: Islam and the internet. It was pioneering work, and just as investors in tech companies were in a state of euphoria, so were researchers in the study of religion (and other cultural studies) because of the alluring promises of the virtual. During the first decade of the new millennium, professor Bunt published Virtually Islamic: Computer-Mediated Communication and Cyber-Islamic Environments (2000), Islam in the Digital Age: E-Jihad, Online Fatwas and Cyber Islamic Environments (2003) and iMuslims: Rewiring the House of Islam (2009). His new book Hashtag Islam: How Cyber-Islamic Environments are Transforming Religious Authority follows more or less in the same footsteps as the previous books examining the impact of Cyber Islamic Environments (CIEs). Even the period he covers in the book begins right after the time of the previous book and examines the development since 2009. Hashtag Islam consists of an introduction, six chapters, a conclusion, and a very extensive notes section documenting all the cases he references. The main text is 150 pages long and the notes section 50 pages. In the Introduction, Bunt mentions that the book can be read and searched in its e-book format, and part of my comments in this review may very well owe to the fact that I have read the paper version.

Focusing on 2009–2017 is in many ways logical and quite suitable because, as the book documents, social media are significant game changers (20) integrating the digital even more into the everyday life of Muslims (and everyone else). One of the virtues of the book is the fact that Bunt now focuses more on media literacy than on access. Although many in the developing world are still offline, a number of technological innovations have reduced the access gap. In relation to authority, it is increasingly interesting to see how the digital media literacy gap is handled. His many cases document that the digitally literate often subverts the traditional

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model of religious authority to the extent that authorities critical of the new technologies cannot ignore the challenges. Specific responses have been the development of Islamic alternatives to platforms like Facebook or Tinder.

Bunt wants to “explore the ways in which, through the influence of the internet, a significant shift in forms and styles of Muslim religious discourse within global and local contexts affect issues of faith and authority” (3). His many cases, and the lengthy list of primary sources in the notes show the highly varied use of everything digital by all kinds of Muslims. Nevertheless, I have some problems with the book: First, I find its use of theory lacking; second, I find it difficult to identify its audience; and finally, I cannot find a discussion of (and answer to) the subtitle’s implied question: How are cyber Islamic environments transforming authority?

The first chapter is a theoretical chapter, but it leaves much to be desired. There is no discussion on the concept of religious authority (or on authority in general). Most of the chapter only hints at theory of any kind. The 4.5 pages on media and communication introduces Dewey, McLuhan, Baudrillard, Foucault, Barthes, Habermas, Giddens, Rheingold, and Castells. Habermas takes up almost two of these four pages, and it is needless to say that several of these theorists might just as well have been omitted, for instance the single sentence on Michel Foucault. The theoretical approaches section then zooms in on approaches to religion, media and the internet, and within the span of a single page another eight researchers are introduced. In the last theoretical section Bunt focuses on Islam, Muslims, and the internet. It does not mention a lot of researchers in the text, but the 2.5 pages long section contains no less than 28 endnotes on Islam and internet studies. This makes for a very abrupt reading. Short staccato bursts of one sentence descriptions of existing studies. Instead of these very short presentations of what exists, it would have been preferable to know more about the results of these studies in relation to the overall argument that Cyber-Islamic Environments are transforming religious authority. Additionally, we never return to or use these theories in the rest of the book. Admittedly, Habermas and McLuhan are mentioned again: McLuhan’s idea of “the medium is the message” is mentioned in six sentences throughout the book and his concept of the “global village” is used once. The same goes for Habermas and the concept of ‘the public sphere’, which is mentioned five times. Baudrillard and Barthes is mentioned once, but none of these references are used analytically as a way of engaging with the material. And Castells, Giddens, Foucault and many
more do not appear outside of the theoretical chapter. Of the 30+ studies on Islam and new media that he mentions in the theoretical chapter, none of them are used afterwards. Several of these studies would have been relevant to use in a discussion of religious change in general and especially with regard to religious authority. Studies on Islam, Muslims, and the Internet by researchers like Miriam Cooke, Bruce Lawrence, Smeeta Mishraab, and Heather Marie Akou to mention a few would have been relevant to bring back into a discussion of religious authority. This leads to my second problem: who is the audience. I ended up reading the book as a documentation (more than a theory driven analysis) of the great diversity of how Muslims use the internet and digital technologies. Consequently, I think the book will be most relevant for people who do not know a lot about contemporary Islam (and perhaps also about contemporary media use among the younger - or media literate - generation). I would assume that politicians (especially politicians from the developed world) would be a very relevant audience for this book. As documentation of events, trends, and patterns in a certain period of time in world history I also think that the relevance of this book will only increase over time. It is a comprehensive snapshot of a constantly changing world, and Bunt's enormous work saving these digital traces of our time for both the near and distant future is commendable. Already today, the time before web 2.0 (not to mention the time before the dot com bubble) seems very far away.

If the book is seen as documentation addressing these audiences, the final problem is not that problematic. However, as a scholar of media and religion I missed a discussion about authority in relation to the internet in general. The book is most interested in the production side of digital content, and whenever the reception or consumption of Islamic content is mentioned, it is taken from other content. It would be interesting to hear how Muslims who do not blog or tweet or snap their faith themselves use blogs, tweets and snaps as part of their religious identity. Furthermore, there could be given more room for discussing the impact of (non-cyber) environments on how CIE is transforming religious authority. Does it matter (and if so, how) if Muslims are in the majority or the minority? The book shows numerous examples of how regimes (and religious elites) in the Muslim world want to control and use social media, and there are many examples of how Muslims in both the Muslim and the non-Muslim world use media to circumvent control, and how they use media in creative and innovative ways. Unfortunately, the book does not dig deeper into the many examples that it documents, and it does not really address...
what happens to authority. Finally, the book could have pointed out that this is not only happening to Islam. I acknowledge that it is a book about Islam, but focusing on how the cyber-Islamic environment transforms authority misses the impact of the cyber-part of that environment, that is, how the internet, digital technologies, and social media transform religious authorities in all religious traditions.