

The online ummah

As Ramadan ends, we publish three articles on changes in the Islamic world: on the impact of digital technology, on religious observance, and on the role of alcohol



For one household a cannon blast signals the end of the daily fast during the holy Islamic month of Ramadan, just as it has done for many years. For another the beep of an iPhone does the job, thanks to a smartphone application called Ramadan Times. The app sets the fasting times depending on the location of the device. People are surprised at their smartphones' capabilities, says Arif Hisam, head of PakData, the Pakistani company that created the app.

Islamic hardliners may have issued a slew of fatwas against digital technology, including chat programmes (they could lead to flirting) and the use of Koranic verses as ring tones (disrespectful). But Muslims have embraced the internet and smartphones just as the rest of the world has—and, in some ways, even more.

A recent survey by Ipsos, a market-research firm, found that rich Muslim-majority countries boast some of world's highest rates of smartphone penetration, with the United Arab Emirates ahead at 61%. But even in poorer Muslim lands adoption is respectable: 26% in Egypt, not much below Germany's 29%. More than a third of people in the Middle East now use the internet, slightly above the world average.

Muslims use their gadgets in much the same way as everyone else: they text, they use social networks, they buy online. But the adoption—and Islamification—of the technology has a deeper meaning, says Bart Barendregt of Leiden University, who has studied South-East Asia's growing digital culture. "Muslim youngsters are adopting technology to distance themselves from older, traditional practices while also challenging Western models," he argues.

Many smartphone apps cater to religious needs. Some show mosques and halal businesses close to a user's location. Salah 3D is an iPhone guide to how to pray. Another app, Quran Majeed, includes text and audio versions of the Koran not only in Arabic, but other languages, making the holy book more accessible to Muslims whose first language is not Arabic. It has been downloaded more than 3m times.

Websites tailored to Muslims also abound. Artik Kuzmin, a Turkish entrepreneur, will soon launch Salamworld, a Facebook for Muslims. "People told us that they worry about moral standards on the internet. They don't feel it is safe for them," he says. Salamworld's

moderators will try to allay such fears by taking down photographs with too much flesh and deleting swear words. Online dating services are multiplying. "Far more is permissible in Islam than people think," explains Abdelaziz Aouragh, who runs Al Asira, which claims to be a sharia-compliant sex site, from the safety of Amsterdam.

Social media's role in the Arab spring has been widely discussed. But even more important may be how the technology is changing Islam itself by creating a virtual version of the ummah, the single nation of Muslims that Islam's followers consider themselves to be part of. All kinds of online forums allow open discussion of religious questions.

For the first time, lay people can easily separate religious commands from tradition by looking at holy texts and scholarship rather than relying on their local preachers. "The digital revolution has given a voice to young Muslims. It is allowing us to criticise the religious establishment and create our own interpretations," explains Amir Ahmad Nasr, a 25-year-old Sudanese blogger. He says that discovering the internet was the reason for his personal journey from devout Muslim to atheist and then to Sufi, adhering to a mystical version of Islam—an experience he describes in a forthcoming book, "My Isl@m".

Faith in progress

Facing a threat to their authority, some Islamic scholars have called for a ban on certain sites, and a handful even a ban on the entire internet. But many more are embracing new media to avoid being sidelined. Muslim scholars at al-Azhar University in Cairo run an "Islamic Hotline". Users call or e-mail a question, which is answered within 48 hours. Other muftis upload lectures to YouTube.

The internet's impact is even greater for Muslim women. "You can look after your family, have a job, and avoid workplace problems with the hijab [veil]," says Kimberly Ben, a convert and freelance copywriter in Alabama, who publishes tips for Muslim women (sometimes called Muslimahs) on running a business from home on MuslimahsWorkingAtHome.com.

Being able to study religious teachings for themselves, Muslimahs are also chipping away at the predominantly male, orthodox domination of Islamic thought. The Prophet's first wife, Khadija, for instance, has become something of a role model. She is said to have been a successful businesswoman when she married Muhammad. Last year, in protest against Saudi Arabia's ban on women behind the wheel, Manal Al-Sharif uploaded a video to YouTube showing herself driving (which duly went viral and earned her nine days in detention).

As always, however, technology cuts both ways. Long before social media helped to usher in the Arab spring, jihadis used ghastly video clips and online forums to attract foot soldiers to their cause. More recently, the internet has led to shows of rabid intolerance. Earlier this year, when Hamza Kashgari, a Saudi writer, was deemed a blasphemer by his country's authorities for a poem, the internet was filled with hate speech against him.

Yet as more and more Muslims buy smartphones and get online, it is unlikely that radicals will benefit most. Hatred and extremism fester in closed polities, whereas the internet tends to strengthen the tolerant and open-minded. Mr Nasr, the Sudanese blogger, even thinks that digital media will be to Islam what the printing press was to Christianity—and ultimately lead to a Reformation. "We're still in the early stages," he says, "but we're going to see many eclectic versions of Islam."

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