

The Shadow of the Technorati

Hyperlinks, Social Media, and Muslims

By Anas Coburn

March 1, 2009

Over the last few years, we have seen a growing and welcome trend of American Muslim involvement in the civic affairs of the United States. The internet is being used increasingly by American Muslims, and has allowed new ways of organizing and taking action, some of which are arguably superior to methods at our disposal in earlier years. As increasing numbers of Muslims become involved with this trend, it is worthwhile to consider some of the other effects of internet use: disorientation, increased anxiety, impatience, loss of focus, and difficulty being alone. Many traditional supplications ask Allah to bless our movements and our stillness. Even as we are grateful for the blessing the internet can bring to our movements, we must keep careful watch over its effects on our stillness.

Cell Phones, Social Media, and Gaza

When Israel blocked journalists from entering Gaza during its recent attacks there, use of the internet and social networking applications played an important part in getting news and images of what was taking place there out to the world. As Yasmin Qureshi writes, (<http://www.indybay.org/newsitems/2009/01/21/18565007.php>) this had the effect of galvanizing Arab youth in the San Francisco Bay area, who were active in demonstrations against the war. But as Juan Cole contends, demonstrations are mostly useless in the face of single issue lobbies like those Israel enjoys in the United States. He counsels better use of 'Web 2.0.' (<http://www.juancole.com/2009/01/on-uselessness-of-street-protest-and.html>) in working toward changing the current American foreign policy with respect to Israel, and outlines how he thinks this could work. Both these articles see the use of the internet as a positive force for social change.

Computers and the End of Patience

However, all tools have costs associated with them. It is important to be aware of the ways in which our use of the internet may be affecting us, especially if this use affects our practice of Islam. The spread of pornography through the internet is a well known phenomenon. The extent to which this disease has spread among Muslims is probably under-appreciated, but some of the leadership in the American Muslim community have commented on it.¹ (http://www.zaytunacollege.org/download.php?f=Yusuf_-_Climbing_Mount_Purgatorio.pdf) Our concern here is with far less obvious effects that emerge with internet usage.

Consider, for a moment, how interaction with the computer and the internet has influenced your perception of time. As technology speeds up, we also speed up our expectations. *In The End of Patience*, David Shenk writes,

(<http://www.amazon.com/End-Patience-Cautionary-Information-Revolution/dp/0253336341>)

“What if I told you that there’s no such thing as a fast modem, and there never will be? That’s because quickness has disappeared from our culture. We now only experience degrees of slowness. ... As long as you are psychologically running in the technology rat race, you will never, ever be winning that race – you will always be losing it. And as long as the pace of change is as blistering as it is today, many of us are stuck with the feeling of falling behind even as we stand still.”²

This matters because, as John E. Orme writes,

“The physical universe is basically rhythmic in nature. The moon revolves around the earth, the earth around the sun, and the solar system itself changes spatial position with time. All these phenomena result in regular rhythmic changes, and the survival of biological species depends on the capacity to follow these rhythms.”³

As our lives tend to be increasingly spent in man-made environments, we lose touch with these rhythms – and these are the rhythms upon which our prayers, and our fasting, and the Hajj are based.

Information Overload and Anxiety

Loss of harmony with natural cycles of time is an effect common among city-dwellers. Use of the internet exacerbates that effect. A second issue that arises is generally known as information overload. As David Shenk puts it, “Nope, you’re not imagining it--the tsunami of information pounding away at us is making all of us more anxious, less effective, and sometimes even sick. Knowing why is step one toward recovery.” There are a number of harmful effects arising from information overload, including impact on the nature of identity itself. The problem of how to control one’s information flow is central to taqwa. The life of the world is not simply a way to pass time, and our heritage contains much of a cautionary nature about becoming distracted from our purpose.

Hyperlinks and Distraction

Recently a third kind of problem arising from internet use has begun to receive attention. From David Carr’s *Is Google Making Us Stupid?*
(<http://www.theatlantic.com/doc/200807/google>)

“For me, as for others, the Net is becoming a universal medium, the conduit for most of the information that flows through my eyes and ears and into my mind. The advantages of having immediate access to such an incredibly rich store of information are many, and they’ve been widely described and duly applauded. “The perfect recall of silicon memory,” *Wired*’s Clive Thompson has written, “can be an enormous

boon to thinking.” But that boon comes at a price. As the media theorist Marshall McLuhan pointed out in the 1960s, media are not just passive channels of information. They supply the stuff of thought, but they also shape the process of thought. And what the Net seems to be doing is chipping away my capacity for concentration and contemplation. My mind now expects to take in information the way the Net distributes it: in a swiftly moving stream of particles. Once I was a scuba diver in the sea of words. Now I zip along the surface like a guy on a Jet Ski.”

The issue here is that the nature of internet use, even by mature adults, changes the way we think, deteriorating our capacity for sustained concentration. This assertion has not gone unchallenged. The Britannica Blog has a thoughtful and interesting series of responses to the article.

(<http://www.britannica.com/blogs/2008/07/this-is-your-brain-this-is-your-brain-on-the-internetthe-nick-carr-thesis/>) One response, (<http://www.britannica.com/blogs/2008/07/reading-in-the-open-ended-information-zone-called-cyberspacemy-reply-to-kevin-kelly/>) from Sven Birkets, (<http://www.britannica.com/blogs/author/sbirkerts>) gets at the central issue quite well:

“For whatever reason, I put the highest subjective value on focus, on the ability to prolong a thought, to hold a perception until its resonances come clear to me. I prize a sense of inhabiting my self-constituted boundaries as a distinct “I.” I aspire toward a recognition of the uniqueness and consequentiality of my experience, and yes, I fear that the steady centrifugal pull of the internet blurs me in these respects, makes it harder for me to achieve the subjective distinctness I am after.”

Social Media and Loneliness

An additional effect to consider is the way in which the use of the social media train us to avoid solitude. In his response to Nicholas Carr’s piece in the Atlantic, Robert Sibley muses:

(<http://communities.canada.com/ottawacitizen/blogs/ideas/archive/2008/07/05/does-the-internet-help-us-avoid-solitude.aspx>)

“There’s no question that the virtual world makes it increasingly hard to be alone in the real world (whether with a book or your own thoughts). But does the endless availability of songs, the constant chirrup of cellphones, the Facebook invitations, Twitter posts and RSS feeds, keep us from thinking too deeply? Or maybe the electronic media provides a psychological defence that allows us to avoid feeling alone. (The larger question, of course, is why we’re afraid to be alone, especially with our own thoughts.)”

“This is a troublesome possibility, both at the individual and the social level. Without time and space for silence and solitude it is difficult for anyone to engage in the kind of reflective thought necessary that sustains us intellectually and spiritually, whether as individuals or as a society.”

William Deresiewicz discusses (<http://chronicle.com/free/v55/i21/21b00601.htm>) the ways various technologies have had an impact on our sense of self. He notes

“The camera has created a culture of celebrity; the computer is creating a culture of connectivity. As the two technologies converge — broadband tipping the Web from text to image, social-networking sites spreading the mesh of interconnection ever wider — the two cultures betray a common impulse. Celebrity and connectivity are both ways of becoming known. This is what the contemporary self wants. It wants to be recognized, wants to be connected: It wants to be visible. If not to the millions, on *Survivor* or *Oprah*, then to the hundreds, on Twitter or Facebook. This is the quality that validates us, this is how we become real to ourselves — by being seen by others. The great contemporary terror is anonymity.”

That’s an important point: the contemporary self becomes real by being seen by others. This validation is necessary, of course, only to the extent that we are unaware that we are always seen by Allah.

And be steadfast in prayer and regular in charity: And whatever good ye send forth for your souls before you, ye shall find it with Allah. For Allah sees well all that ye do. (2:110 Y. Ali)

Deresiewicz has a lot more to say that is worth reading. The 60’s and 70’s, the age of television, trained people to be bored. In a similar fashion, the proliferation of social media is training people to be lonely.

The Search for Balance

Muslims have long struggled to balance their engagement in this world with their devotion to Allah. As Muslims in America become involved in the political and other social institutions of the dominant culture, those portions of our identity that are most distinctively Muslim can be eroded by the many aspects of contemporary culture that serve to disrupt our relationship with the natural world, disorient us in time, overload us with information that in the end is of no benefit, disrupt our capacity to reflect deeply, and leave us alienated from both our community and our Lord. As one increasingly engages with it, the influence exerted by contemporary culture on us increases. To stay in balance we must intensify our engagement with our Lord. The ways to do this are abundant and available,

because our Lord is Merciful and Generous. Nevertheless, we must make the effort to make use of them.

*O Allah, ...
You give victory to whomever You will,
And You are the All-powerful, the All-compassionate.
We ask Your protection, in movements and rests,
In words and desires and thoughts,
From doubts and imaginings,
And the illusions that veil hearts ...*

¹ For more on the Social Costs of Pornography see the complete set of papers here.
http://www.winst.org/family_marriage_and_democracy/social_costs_of_pornography/consultation2008.php

²Shenk, David (1999). *The End of Patience*, p. 41. Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press.

³ Orme, John E. (1978). "Time: Psychological Aspects." *Making Sense of Time*, Edited by Tommy Carlstein, Don Parks, and Nigel Thrift. New York: John Wiley & Sons.