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Deborah Wheeler

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Islam, Technology and Community: September 11th and Its Global Meaning

Posted on October 1, 2001 by Editor

By Deborah Wheeler

Introduction

As a Berglund Center for Internet Studies Faculty Fellow, I have been asked to contribute research and training on Muslim ideas of community, education and change in the Internet Age. Before the terrorist attack on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon on September 11, 2001, I had intended this essay to be a detached, academic analysis of the dialectic between new technologies and old cultures. It was to be a continuation of my previous research, which had stressed that much of the ideology used in the West to sell the Internet revolution, was in fact potentially incompatible with the norms and values on which Islamic societies had rested for the past six centuries (Wheeler, 1996, 1998, 2000, 2001a, 2001b, 2001c). The data for this study was to be web based Muslim legal commentaries on cyberdating. Yet now, such a focus seems trivial at best.

A collision of technology (airplanes, cell phones, the Internet… ), identity (Islam, and the cult of al-Qa’ida), and social action (declaration of war against the United States) was involved in creating “Black Tuesday,” and thus we are compelled to explore its links with Muslim communal values, and the violation thereof. That the terrorists, acting in the name of Islam, used the Internet in part to coordinate their efforts makes the need for scrutiny in this context all the more pertinent, especially for those concerned with the social impact of the Internet, not to mention Islam. It is our job as scholars and educators to provide analysis that might remove misunderstanding and encourage ethical behavior because, in the words of Richard McCormick, president of the University of Washington, “the preservation, advancement and dissemination of knowledge are powerful means of striving for a world in which despicable acts of terrorism do not take place.” (e-mail correspondence, September 11, 2001). And so, although I would rather close my eyes and pretend that September 11 was just a nightmare and shouldn’t be considered within the realm of legitimate Muslim consciousness, I feel morally compelled to do what I can in these pages to provide some kind of an explanation.
As this case study reveals, the Internet and religion are tools subject to multiple meanings and uses. As illustrated below, we have a coalition of terrorist groups (al-Qa’ida) who act and organize in the name of Islam, often using web based technologies to coordinate, recruit, and distribute their ideas of community and calls for action. On the other hand, we have Muslims all over the world using information resources like email, listserves, chat rooms, and more traditional print, and electronic media to denounce al-Qa’ida and their alleged acts on September 11. Thus while we are horrified that an everyday technology can be misused in the service of killing innocent men, women, and children, at the same time we see that the same technology supports discussion, consensus building, and hope for the future. The Internet can help to promote war between East and West at the same time that it supports processes of discussion that serve to break down some of the barriers and misunderstandings between Muslims and non-Muslims. Thus, just as there are as many expressions of Islam as there are believers, there is a parallel possibility of as many uses of the Internet as there are those with access.

This possibility raises many moral concerns which scholars of Internet studies must struggle with. Are there some technologies, whose possibilities of misuse are so threatening that careful monitoring is a requirement, even if such policing is a threat to democratic values? Because we live in a global community with increasingly common flows of bodies, money, information, culture, religion, etc. across national boundaries, how are we to protect ourselves from the networked types of war that September 11 has brought to the surface? These issues are considered in more detail below.

Terrorism, Technology, and the Ethic of Responsibility

The images will be with us for a long time. The trauma of our vulnerability and the costs in human life that resulted from the collapse of the World Trade Center and the attack on the Pentagon will not go away easily. Our desire for revenge is all too human. Such feelings were an element motivating the perpetrators as well. Blind rage has a way of removing ethical considerations from the equation, and that is why we cannot afford to respond in the heat of passion. We need to think about constructive ways to both take care of our human need for vengeance while at the same time taking care of the circumstances that enabled a community of Muslims to grow and organize on the basis of hate. The task is daunting, for any response seems to carry with it the possibility of increasing the ranks of those who oppose us.

One of the problems with knowing how to respond to security issues raised by Black Tuesday is that the technologies that made it possible are a latent part of everyday life. When used ethically, or “normally,” technologies like the Internet, cell phones, credit cards, rental cars, airplanes, box cutters, etc. make life efficient, pleasurable, and democratic. In the same way that ordinary cold casualties are an important ingredient in the creation of Methamphetamine and the mixing of fertilizers and other everyday chemicals can make highly destructive bombs, normal everyday technologies can be easily turned into lethal weapons of destruction. In this case, we see an Islamic movement whose definitions of community, and the anthesis, “combine two seemingly incompatible sources of strength: a conservative interpretation of Islam and a comfort with
aspects of the modern world that have given birth to a highly mobile, popular, wealthy, technologically savvy transnational enterprise.” (Washington Post, September 16th 2001). Brian Jenkins, a terrorism expert at the Rand Corporation observes, “What is extraordinary about this episode is that these people were preparing for their missions for months, leading normal lives with wives, taking the garbage out, taking kids to McDonalds, taking flying lessons, living in comparatively pleasant places, all the while knowing that on some date they were going to kill themselves and thousands of people” (Quoted in Washington Post, September 16, 2001). In this analysis, we see how Islam and the Internet can actually aid in the perpetration of un-Islamic behavior (terrorism), and even support an ideology/movement that convinced a group of Muslim men that it would be in line with the faith to kill more than 6,000 men, women, and children.

**Black Tuesday and the Use of Islam**

Islam is the professed religion of those involved in the al-Qa’idah (the base) movement headed by Osama Bin Laden. As demonstrated below, it is a brand of Islam not embraced by the majority of Muslims. Al-Qa’ida is alleged to be responsible for the World Trade Center and Pentagon attacks as well as the bombing of the US embassy in Kenya, the U.S.S. Cole bombing in Yemen, the Khobar Tower’s bombing in Saudi Arabia, and the bombing of the World Trade Center basement in 1993. The two documents analyzed in this section enable us to grasp the role of Islam within the movement, as well as to begin to understand the particularistic world view of al-Qa’ida members. Al-Qa’ida, Osama Bin Laden’s network organization has cells in an estimated 30-60 countries. Despite geographic diversity, this is a tightly networked and socialized movement that is in part made possible by the Internet, satellite telephones, air travel, fax machines, leaflets, etc. Hatred of the United States is a prime unifying factor, as is guerilla training in Afghani camps, and ideological socialization where such hatred is solidified and is prepared for channels of destructive expression.

In document 1, The Ladenese Epistle Bin Laden declares war on “the Americans occupying the land of the two holy places” in Saudi Arabia. The text begins with the customary witnessing, or shahada, that states that there is no God but God and Muhamad is his messenger. He cites verses from the Quran, including a passage from Sura An-Nisa, (4:1) in which Muslims are reminded to guard their ties of kinship. Another verse cited (al-Imran, 3:110) expresses a desire for reform and God’s direction in facilitating reform. There is a call to all Muslims to heed the Prophet’s words that God will punish them if they “see the oppressor and yet fail to restrain him” (Ladenese Epistle, p. 1). Bin Laden uses the Quran to define the boundaries of Muslim community in terms of oppressor (America) and oppressed (Muslim believers everywhere who are bound together by kinship networks). He uses the Quran to motivate believers to be vigilant in their opposition to America.

The Epistle argues, “Clearly after belief, there is no more important duty than pushing the American enemy out of the holy land.” (Ladenese Epistle, p. 2). Bin Laden cites Ibn Taymiyyah, a well-known Classical Islamic reformist, to support his call to action against the U.S. Inspired by
Ibn Taymiyyah, Bin Laden claims that “to fight in defense of religion and belief is a collective
duty.” He elaborates that “the enemy should be fought with one’s best abilities.” Elsewhere Bin
Laden has been quoted as saying “you cannot defeat the heretic with this book alone [Quran],
you have to show them the fist.” (Quoted in Washington Post, September 18, 2001). In 1998,
Bin Laden was quoted as saying that in terms of weapons of mass destruction, “if I seek to
acquire such weapons, this is a religious duty, and how we use them is up to us.” (Washington
Post, www.washingtonpost.com/wp-srv/world/binladen/words.html.) In these passages, we see
that Bin Laden advocates armed struggle, and reserves little space for dialogue and compromise
with the West.

The second half of this document is a call to action against the leadership of the Kingdom of
Saudi Arabia, who are said to have committed two mortal sins (suspension of the Islamic
Shariah, and allowing “the American crusader forces to occupy the land”) and nine other sins.
Prominent among them are:

1. Intimidation

2. Human rights violations of Islamist community and oppositional leaders

3. Using the state run media as a dis-information tool

4. The state’s inability to provide basic human services to the population of Saudi Arabia

5. The state’s failure to run a viable economy.

clarifies his call to action by stating, “The ruling to kill the Americans and their allies—civilian and
military—is an individual duty for every Muslim who can do it in any country in which it is possible
to do it, in order to liberate the al-Aqsa Mosque and the Holy Mosque (Mecca) from their grip.”
see the agenda of liberation broadened to include not only Saudi Arabia, but Palestine as well. He
explains in this document that “all these crimes and sins committed by the Americans are a clear
declaration of war on God, his messenger, and Muslims”. (Bin Laden, 1998, p. 1). Citing
Medieval commentary, Bin Laden argues that “nothing is more sacred than belief, except
repulsing an enemy who is attacking religion and life.” (Bin Laden, 1998, p. 2). The call to action
in this document is quite explicit. Bin Laden states, “We (al-Qa’idah)—with God’s help—call on
every Muslim who believes in God and wishes to be rewarded to comply with God’s order to kill
the Americans and plunder their money wherever and whenever they find it.” (Bin Laden, 1998,
p. 2).

History is rife with examples of the exploitation of God and religion in the service of war and
destruction: the Crusades, Nazism, the Armenian holocaust, ethnic cleansing in Bosnia, the
Palestinian-Israeli conflict. Bin Laden and his al-Qa’idah movement provide another illustration of
the ways in which technology and religion are tools subject to many uses. In terms of the meanings of Muslim community provided by his writings, we see that Bin Laden has defined his war in terms of the Americans and their allies on one side (Zionists, and the regimes of the Arab world who collaborate and cooperate with the “crusaders and Zionists”), and all believing Muslims, the ummah, on the other. He calls into question the faith of any Muslim who is not willing to kill the enemy (which includes any American, men, women, children, the enemy’s military forces, its financial resources, as well as anyone who collaborates with the enemy) wherever and whenever they are able. He also says that anyone who is able to take a stand for his or her faith will be richly rewarded in the world to come (the afterlife), while those too weak in their faith to do so will be punished.

While al-Qa’idah remains a fringe movement within the big picture of Muslim consciousness and action, unfortunately, as Fawaz A. Gerges observes, “Bin Laden’s rhetoric has sunk deep roots in Arab soil. Hatred toward American foreign policy has become solidly entrenched in Arab popular culture as well as intellectual circles. Public discourses in the mosques and newspapers are full of references to America’s legacy of aggression, manipulation, and subjugation of the Arabs. Arab children are being indoctrinated to hate Americans, thus providing a fertile breeding ground for Bin Laden’s foot soldiers. (http://www.csmonitor.com/2001/0918/p9s1-coop.html).

The Internet and the Muslim Community’s Response to Terrorism

The shock of Black Tuesday has invited much Muslim commentary on Bin Laden’s definitions of Islam and community, much of it supported by the same electronic networks that helped facilitate the act itself. Even Islamist conservatives, like Yussif al-Qaradawi, who incidentally has his own web site, (www.islamonline.net), and who may share in Bin Laden’s indightment of the West and its corrupting presence in the Muslim world, strictly condemn al-Qa’idah’s advocacy of violence. In Qaradawi’s words, “Islam, the religion of tolerance, holds the human soul in high esteem, and considers an attack against innocent human beings a grave sin.” (Yusif al-Qaradawi, www.islamonline.net/English/News/2001-09/13/article25.shtml) Qaradawi supports his interpretation with a verse of the Quran, “Whosoever kills a human being for other than manslaughter or corruption in the earth, it shall be as if he had killed all mankind, and whosoever saves the life of one, it shall be as if he had saved the life of all mankind.” (Al-Ma’dah: 32) Qaradawi then draws from the Sunna and explains that The Prophet (PBUH), is reported to have said, “A believer remains within the scope of his religion as long as he doesn’t kill another person illegally.”

This same spirit of condemnation of Bin Laden’s views and actions by Muslims around the world is documented on listserves, in on-line discussions, on television, in the print media. On the Islamicity web site (www.islam.org), a discussion session yields the following words of comfort and condemnation:

I don’t know where to begin….I just want to say to all those people Whose lives have been shattered, that my heart bleeds for you. Nothing
Justifies the killing of innocent people. What a cowardly, shameful, and Horrendous act. To top it all off, they claim to do it for the sake of God. God has nothing to do with it, they only follow their vain desires. May Allah grant you the strength, patience and perseverance to live Through this difficult time. Ameen

A Muslim

Echoing these sentiments, Imam Isak-el-M. Pasha, a Muslim chaplain with the New York City Police Department is quoted in the Washington Post as saying, “those who do these dastardly deeds claim our faith... .We are Muslims, but we are Americans. We stand with our country against all who would come against us. We are members of one human community, one human worth (Washington Post, September 24, 2001). A Kuwaiti colleague who is Muslim sent me the following e-mail, which provides yet another demonstration of Muslims around the world denouncing this event:

I really can’t believe what’s happened in the USA last Tuesday. It’s too big a tragedy to understand. The United States has been targeted by a ruthless and dastardly attacker, and many innocent people have been killed. In all my thoughts and prayers, I’m with all the people of the USA, all the victims... and I know all people in the whole world are in their thoughts with victims of the tragic and barbaric crime that was committed on 9-11-2001. It will never be forgotten. This is such an enormous loss of innocent lives through mindless violence... The people of Kuwait still are in a state of shock. No one could believe ever that something that horrible could be initiated against the mother of democracy, the USA. (e-mail correspondence September 17, 2001).

Internet provides not only a means by which terrorists can organize and create acts of violence in the name of religion, it also sustains electronic communities in which acts of violence and hatred can be condemned and discussed openly so as to build trust and understanding among people of different faiths and geographic regions. Thus, although we are repulsed by the senseless loss of life on September 11, we are encouraged and optimistic that justice will prevail; that the electronic footprints left by the terrorists will teach us more about how to decrease our vulnerability to the misuses of the Internet; that the renewed dialogue between civilizations created globally by the tragedy will help to diffuse conflict in the future.

The Digital Divide and the Geography of Muslim Cyberspace.

The question of access to the Internet is relevant to this analysis. In previous sections, discussions proceed as if universal access to the Internet is a fact for all Muslims, and this is misleading. The Muslim world has been one of the slowest sectors of global civil society to transition to the Information Age. Three quarters of the world’s poor live in the developing world, and a significant portion of the developing world is Muslim, so economics is a factor influencing access. Weak infrastructure due to government reticence to privatize the telecommunications
sector, as well as a lack of cash to finance large connectivity projects also slows transitions to the information age. In Egypt, those with access to the Internet and the computer and linguistic skills required to use it are less than half a million out of a population of 68 million. Even in the oil rich Gulf, the number of Internet users is less than 5 percent of the population (including expatriots). These figures suggest that when examining Muslim communal values in the Internet age, we must ask whose cyberpractices/values we are considering? The answer is generally, a handful of literate, educated, relatively wealthy, cosmopolitan, young, mostly male, Muslims. The people surfing the net and doing so with Muslim purpose (whether evil or ethical) are the future innovators, entrepeneuers, and leaders of the Muslim community. What they think and do is representative of what lies ahead in a more broadcast way. This is why September 11 is not something we can afford to take lightly, even if it is not representative of what most Muslims think or would do. Most Muslims’ actions don’t register on a global scale. Cyberspace enables us to see what more Muslims think. September 11 enables us to see what a relative handful think, and how dangerous ignoring such anger and hatred can be.

Thus, we need to seek our understanding of Islam and its expression in Muslim behavior at many levels. We need to understand the disenfranchised because it is their sense of hopelessness that can trigger the desire for revenge. But more generally, we need to focus upon the meanings of moral order among poor Muslims because they are the majority, and their understandings of ethical behavior are potentially different from cosmopolitan Islam. We need to understand the values, ideals and actions of Islamist groups, and the contexts in which they act. We need to understand Muslim cyberpractices because a community of educated leaders and future leaders are using the tool to both organize and advocate a Muslim consciousness and value structure for the new millenium.

Conclusion

Even at the end of this analysis we are left with questions about whether or not there is something inherent in the religion (Islam) and the technology (the Internet) which acts to shape human behavior on-line, as well as the everyday practices in which such use is embedded. Elsewhere I have argued that technological innovation makes certain things possible that would not have been otherwise, and that for Muslims, these implications are recorded differently than for Christians or Buddhists. For example, enabling cyberdiscussions across gender lines would equal an innovation with profound effects in Saudi Arabia, where structures and institutions exist to prohibit such activities outside of the family, whereas such possibilities in the United States would not necessarily register an important impact (Wheeler, 2001a and b). Moreover, giving people the opportunity to invest in capital markets on-line could register a big impact in the United States, where hundreds of thousands of individuals are holding and trading stocks. But in Egypt, for example, where capital markets are just emerging, such possibilities for on-line day trading without a broker means little in terms of the broader community. Also limiting impact is the fact that only a small percentage of individuals in Muslim societies have access to the Internet, and access is the most important starting place for understanding potential impact.
We are also faced with ethical questions like how can human beings throughout the world work together to prevent the use of religion and technology to commit acts of terror, hate, violence, crime, and other universally unethical behavior. Moreover, how can we work together so that the march of technological change does not threaten the identity and communities of peoples throughout the world. We cannot assume that all individuals in the world community will use technology in the same way, thus we need to conceive of possible uses and misuses (rather than just the money that will be made by innovation of such technologies). We need to think not only in terms of sustainable development questions, but culturally sustainable innovations. If we could remove the stimuli that breed hatred, then we could also reduce the utility of religion and technology in the promotion of evil. The first step towards accomplishing this is to discuss and debate strategies for alleviating pain, suffering, hopelessness and misunderstanding in our world. As the last remaining super power, the United States bears the brunt of the burden for the success or failure of this healing enterprise. The tragedies in New York and Washington, D.C., were a wake up call. How the United States chooses to respond to this challenge will have either great or grave implications for the world as we know it.

**Bibliography**


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24 THOUGHTS ON “ISLAM, TECHNOLOGY AND COMMUNITY: SEPTEMBER 11TH AND ITS GLOBAL MEANING”
modele unghii cu gel
on January 29, 2014 at 4:17 PM said:

Thanks designed for sharing such a fastidious thought, paragraph is good, thats why i have
read it fully

modele unghii cu gel
on January 29, 2014 at 8:25 PM said:

Good post! We will be linking to this great post
on our site. Keep up the good writing.

Trooth.Midnightcheese.Com
on January 30, 2014 at 5:12 PM said:

Thanks for one’s marvelous posting! I quie enjoyed reading it,
you could be a great author. I will ensure that I bookmark your
blog and will often come back sometime soon. I want to encourage
you to continue your great posts, have a nice holiday weekend!

3mmc
on January 31, 2014 at 4:50 AM said:

Hey there this is somewhat of off topic but I was wanting to know if blogs use
WYSIWYG editors or
if you have to manually code with HTML. I’m starting a
blog soon but have no coding knowledge so I wanted to get advice from someone with
experience.
Any help would be enormously appreciated!
best biometric gun safe  
on **February 2, 2014 at 11:30 PM** said:  

What a material of un-ambiguity and preserveness of valuable know-how on the topic of unpredicted emotions.

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garment steamer reviews  
on **February 3, 2014 at 7:00 PM** said:  

Whoa! This blog looks just like my old one! It’s on a totally different subject but it has pretty much the same layout and design. Wonderful choice of colors!

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exercise bike reviews  
on **February 3, 2014 at 7:48 PM** said:  

I absolutely love your blog and find most of your post’s to be exactly what I’m looking for. Does one offer guest writers to write content for you personally? I wouldn’t mind producing a post or elaborating on some of the subjects you write regarding here. Again, awesome website!

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band saw reviews  
on **February 3, 2014 at 9:07 PM** said:  

My brother suggested I might like this web site. He was totally right. This post truly made my day. You can not imagine simply how much time I had spent for this information! Thanks!
Heya i’m for the primary time here. I found this board and I find It really useful & it helped me out a lot. I’m hoping to give something again and help others such as you helped me.

My brother recommended I would possibly like this web site. He was totally right. This put up actually made my day. You can not consider simply how so much time I had spent for this information! Thank you!

First of all I would like to say superb blog! I had a quick question which I’d like to ask if you do not mind. I was curious to know how you center yourself and clear your mind before writing. I have had a difficult time clearing my thoughts in getting my thoughts out. I do take pleasure in writing however it just seems like the first 10 to 15 minutes tend to be wasted just trying to figure out how to begin. Any ideas or tips? Thank you!

Great article! We will be linking to this particularly great content on our website. Keep up the great writing.
**best vacuum for hardwood floors**  
on February 4, 2014 at 1:22 AM said:

It’s perfect time to make some plans for the long run and it’s time to be happy. I’ve read this put up and if I may just I wish to suggest you few fascinating issues or tips. Perhaps you could write next articles referring to this article. I wish to read more issues about it!

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**induction cooktop reviews**  
on February 4, 2014 at 2:05 AM said:

What’s up Dear, are you actually visiting this web site regularly, if so after that you will without doubt get pleasant experience.

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**rifle scope reviews**  
on February 4, 2014 at 2:40 AM said:

Hmm is anyone else having problems with the pictures on this blog loading? I’m trying to determine if its a problem on my end or if it’s the blog. Any feed-back would be greatly appreciated.

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**scroll saw reviews**  
on February 4, 2014 at 3:00 AM said:

This page certainly has all the information and facts I wanted about this subject and didn’t know who to ask.

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**best electric tea kettle**
You ought to be a part of a contest for one of the best blogs on the net.

I will highly recommend this web site!

I haven’t noticed the movie but, given the focus of this site, I observed this quote from an Indiewire article interesting:

Good work...

I will quickly clutch your rss as I can not in finding your email subscription link or newsletter service.

Hello, i think that i saw you visited my website thus i came to return the want?.I am attempting to in finding issues to enhance my site!I guess its good enough to use a few of your concepts!!
best table saw
on February 4, 2014 at 8:12 PM said:

Hi there! This blog post couldn’t be written much better! Looking through this post reminds me of my previous roommate! He constantly kept talking about this. I most certainly will send this information to him. Fairly certain he’s going to have a great read. I appreciate you for sharing!

best shoes for crossfit
on February 4, 2014 at 10:12 PM said:

I like it when individuals come together and share ideas. Great site, keep it up!

Dalton Foscue
on February 5, 2014 at 10:38 PM said:

Thanks for all your comments. This means it was all organic traffic for this Hub and I did not even have to write about current events like SOPA and how blog commenting has seen a massive increase because of the stop online piracy act