Islam, Revolution and Radicalism: The Co-Constiution of Reality and Virtuality

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ABSTRACT

New forms of information technologies are revolutionizing politics in the Muslim World. This article presents political analysis of the complex global and historical socio-cultural impact of new media specifically social media by exploring two cases, i.e., the green movement during the Iranian presidential elections during 2009 and al-Qaeda’s radicalism in the virtual world. The analysis finds that Islam and Muslim societies are compatible with new forms of information technologies and that the difference between real and virtual is blurring in the modern Muslim World.

Keywords: al-Qaeda, Green Movement, ICT in Developing World, ICT in the Muslim World, Iranian Presidential Elections

INTRODUCTION

The political potential of new forms of information technologies – social networking, text messaging, blogging, phone cameras, viral messaging, You-Tube, and e-marketing – became more than evident in the Presidential elections in 2008. Ariana Huffington, the Editor of Huffington Post observed “Were it not for the Internet, Barack Obama would not be president. Were it not for the Internet, Barack Obama would not have been the nominee” (Miller, 2008). Barack Obama out reached, out messaged and raised much more money than John McCain to become the first black man and perhaps the first wired President in the White House. While the spectacle of his victory was captivating, it was not too surprising because by now the world had a very good idea of the potential of E-Politics, they were just relishing its realization on such a grand scale (Davis, 1999).

The new technologies are clearly transforming how news and ideas are disseminated and consumed, creating new producers and new consumers and in the process transforming the demographics of political players and the nature of politics itself. The vast reach of the new technologies, the relative low cost to start and maintain them, and their continuous and immediate global accessibility has both
democratizing as well as transformative impact on society, politics and policy.

Compare the time, expertise and investment required to set up a blog like Huffington Post and a newspaper like Washington Post and then reflect on the fact that former is read by as many if not more people than the later in the cyberspace. Make the same comparison between V-blogs disseminated through YouTube and marketed via Twitter, Facebook and CNN and you will understand the promise of true democratization that E-politics presents.

New technologies in conjunction with global finance, global markets, neoliberal economic ideologies and global transport have truly ushered in the structures that facilitate globalization. Add to this the globalization of Diasporas and you have the highways in place for rapid globalization of identities, consciousness and values. Islam is perhaps one of the biggest beneficiaries of these new highways to globalization and Islamic ideas, identities, agencies and interests are now pervading the fabric of global society capitalizing on the new forms of networking. Two conditions – global Muslim presence and the new technologies that link them in varied ways – have made Islam and Muslims a global force that is shaping and re-shaping both Muslim as well as global realities.

Pioneering scholars like Dale Eickelman, Jon Anderson, and Gary Bunt among others have done an excellent job of describing how Muslims use the Internet and other new technologies to connect, to network, form interpretative communities, discussion groups, mobilize for political action and engage in producing and distributing knowledge (Bunt, 2003; Eickelman & Anderson, 2003). Islam is a major topic in every form of digital media and both Muslims and non-Muslims now engage in studying and spreading it. National Public Radio did an excellent survey of Islam on the Internet ("Islam on the Internet", 2002) and drew attention to the emerging debates on Islam and between Muslims.

Since the mid-nineteenth century, the Muslim World has been experiencing revivalist movements that have sought to unify the Muslim Ummah (nation), revive its Islamic spirit and restore its past glory. These revivalist movements have had a steady impact on Muslim consciousness making many Muslims pan-Islamic and igniting a desire for a unified Muslim presence on the global stage. Using various issues, such as the Palestinian cause, anti-colonialism and even the call for restoration of Islamic laws as mobilizers, Islamist elites have sought to unite the Muslim World. Islamic revival however has had the opposite effect. Instead of unification it has led to diversification and the revival of not one type of Islam but all former manifestations of Islam across the board. Thus we now see the revival of traditional Sunnis, Salafis, Sufis, rationalists, philosophers, modernizers and even the extremist Kharijites in the form of al-Qaeda. And all of these former trends within Islam now thrive and bloom with a global reach on the World Wide Web. Thus the Internet is nurturing Islamic networks and simultaneously uniting Muslim communities and diversifying Islamic manifestations and Muslim consciousness.

Each one of these currents within the global and historical socio-cultural complex called Islam, is growing and evolving because of the availability of new information technologies, but it is also reaching out to give the World Wide Web a very distinctly Islamic flavor (Bunt, 2003, pp. 205-211). The Internet is now a virtual university where one can acquire a great deal of Islamic education. One can partake in an Islamic Internet economy; one can enjoy a virtual Islamic culture in groups and social networks. One can connect with political movements and join the digital Jihad, or join a digital Tareeqa (Sufi tradition), or learn Arabic, or improve your Quranic recitation. Just as the scope of activity on the Internet has infinite possibilities, so does Islamic presence on the World Wide Web. The most important of these virtual manifestations, in our view, is the possibility of the Internet and the virtual technological domain opening new avenues and arenas for politics in Muslim societies that are authoritarian, which restrict free speech, free assembly, and political action. We believe that the Internet has become the site
where the cutting edge of technology and the emerging Muslim aspirations meet to escape the constraints of authoritarian reality and generate a realm of virtuality that makes meaningful politics possible. Therefore, in this article, we limit our study to the role of Internet and new information technologies in the emerging new E-politics in the Muslim World.

VIRTUAL POLITICS, REAL POLITICS

Eickelman and Anderson (2003, pp. 1-18) argue that new media in the Muslim world has created a public sphere where Muslims can engage in debates and dialogue and in information sharing, education and exchange of ideas. The explosion of Internet usage in conjunction with talk shows on radio and satellite television has given birth to a Muslim public sphere. Clearly the emergence of Aljazeera, the Qatar based satellite station broadcasting in Arabic to the entire Middle East, and the opportunity it provided Muslim intellectuals to engage across borders and discuss policies in various Muslim countries without fear was revolutionary. Aljazeera provided two public goods. It provided an environment where people could discuss Arab politics freely and it also provided connectivity to Arabs across borders and in Diasporas and enabled them to have a common political consciousness. Virtually overnight, Aljazeera became the de facto venue and means through which most of the opposition to US foreign policy in Iraq in post September 11, 2001, era was voiced (Lynch, 2005). But that is old news. The political reality in the Muslim World has gone far beyond the mere emergence of a cyber public sphere. Today we are witnessing the emergence of portals that are connecting virtual politics with real politics.

In this paper, we shall explore the phenomenon where the virtual public sphere has matured to the extent that the politics it is generating on the web is instantaneously transferable to the realm of real politics. We are also witnessing how the potential of virtual politics continues to invite political actors to go digital. We examine the dynamics between virtual politics and real politics by exploring two cases. In the first case, we examine the role that Internet and new technologies played in transforming the political reality in Iran during the summer of 2009. In the second case, we examine how under attack in Iraq, Pakistan and Afghanistan, al-Qaeda has retreated to the Internet where it seeks to continue its Jihad more through virtual politics than real politics. In both cases, we highlight the fluidity between the virtual and the real and underscore the centrality of the Internet and new technologies to politics, which has now eliminated the distinction between the real and virtual political spheres. Reality and virtuality now co-exist in the emerging Muslim E-politics, often obfuscating the boundaries between what is real and what is virtual.

THEORETICAL FOUNDATIONS AND METHODOLOGY

Before we begin the discussion of our cases, we wish to point out that most studies that examine the role of the Internet in politics are often guided by tacit or overt assumptions of technological determination (Agre, 2002). In simple terms this means that the nature of politics and its scope is determined by the nature of the technology that is deployed. This approach would imply that if identical technologies are deployed then it should more or less have the same impact everywhere. We do not find this approach compelling. It is both reductionist and has a simplistic view of ontology. This view may have its utility in limited circumstances, where one is studying the impact of technology on a very narrowly defined dependent variable such as organizational structure or productivity, but socio-political reality is too complex for mono-causal explanations.

We know that both Egypt and Iran have access to the same social networking tools and the same Internet but the role of these same technologies in the politics of those respective countries is quite different. We believe that local cultures, the extent and depth of democratic
structures and the motivation and sophistication of agencies that are interacting with and using the technologies also have an impact on the role of the Internet in politics. Lincoln Dahlberg (2004) is one of many who recognized the reductionist nature of technological determinists and suggested that social determination and patterns of usage can also have an impact on the role that technology plays.

Our theoretical perspective is constructivist (Khan, 2004). We maintain that both social structures and agencies have an impact on political outcomes. Agents and structures are mutually constitutive and they act and shape each other. Agencies have the capacity to shape, and even transform structures and structures both enable and disable agent behavior. Informational technologies are like social structures; they constitute agencies but are in turn shaped by agent action. They have a dual nature—enabling and disabling—and through a structuration process in which neither structure nor agency enjoys exclusive deterministic capacity, social reality is produced. Thus while Internet can help globalize ideas, and Facebook can help generate vast networks, user ingenuity matters too. Therefore the Obama campaign in 2008 had markedly more success than McCain’s. That is why Facebook and cell phones had such an impact during the Green Movement in Iran but not during the Kifayyah movement in Egypt.

This approach to the study of Information Technology, relying on the constructivist perspective and the structuration theory of Giddens, is not new. It has been employed in the past by many including Dan Robey (Orlikowski & Robey, 1991), who probably was the first to incorporate structuration theory (Giddens, 1984), in the study of Information Sciences. Emma Murphy, who looked at the role of information and communication technologies in the Arab public sphere, acknowledged the mutually constitutive functions of structures and identity in the emerging public sphere in the Arab World (Murphy, 2009). Murphy’s findings support our conclusions about the importance of recognizing the play of the structuration process as technology and political activism in the Muslim World create a realm where real and the virtual mutually constitute each other.

We examine two cases, the first of which is the Green Movement in the summer of 2009, when the Iranian population exploded in spontaneous protests against the regime accusing it of stealing the Presidential election of 2009. The mass protests, frequent rallies and often unexpectedly large crowds captured the imagination of the entire world. The role of new media and information technology was key to the spontaneity and widespread nature of the Green revolution. Our second case is the role of the Internet in the evolving nature of al-Qaeda, which is using the new media to create a virtual Afghanistan on the World Wide Web to radicalize, recruit and deploy young Muslims in its wars against the West and Muslims. We study how realities on the ground and the opportunities presented by the technology transformed the politics in Iran and for al-Qaeda.

Case I: The Green Movement in Iran

On June 12, 2009, Iranians went to the polls to elect their next president. Twenty four hours later, the Islamic Republic News Agency—Iran’s official media outlet—announced incumbent candidate, Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, had won the election with 62% of the votes cast, defeating his chief rival, former Prime Minister Mir Hossein Mousavi, who received only 34% of the returns (Worth, 2009). Iran’s Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamanei immediately declared Ahmadinejad’s victory a “divine assessment.” Upon learning of election results, supporters of Mousavi took to the streets to cry foul. The next day, protests spread, as did reports of violence. Two days later, protesters took to the street to greet Mousavi at his first post-election appearance (Bower, 2009). By this point, the United States had joined the United Kingdom and the European Union to express their concern about allegations of voter fraud.

The response heard around the globe, however, was that of the Iranian people, who mobilized online and in the street to demand

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Ahmedinejad’s removal from office. They wore green – initially the symbolic color of Mousavi’s campaign – to unify a movement that dared challenge both the election and the ruling regime. A global audience then watched as scores of Iranian demonstrators were clubbed, whipped, arrested and shot by hard-line thugs in a violent effort to re-establish control during one of the most severe crises in Iran since the Islamic Revolution of 1979. Reports of atrocities soon followed. Messages posted on Facebook and Twitter began to provide a relentless stream of updates and links to photos and videos that gave the rest of the world a sustained glimpse of the unrest. Since that time, government officials have declared victory against the Green Movement, which was forced off the streets by police and the Basij militia—a paramilitary volunteer militia loyal to the Supreme Leader. Nevertheless, the current lack of real world activism and street protests belies the movement’s persistence. This velvet revolution lives on in the same virtual nexus of the Iranian blogospheres, Facebook and Twitter that stoked the first flames.

This is not the first time that revolution in Iran has been driven by technology. Long before the advent of Facebook or Twitter, in the 1970s, Ayatollah Khomeini used a simple stencil-duplicator and an audiocassette recorder to transmit his sermons while exiled over fourteen years in France and Iraq. His followers in Iran distributed these tapes and pamphlets through the mosques, shrines and bazaars, effectively communicating his revolutionary message to the masses, inspiring them to rise in rebellion against the Shah of Iran and precipitate an Islamic revolution that has continued to have an impact on regional and global politics until now (Sreberny-Muhammadi, 1990).

In 2009, three decades later, at the time of the vote and during the subsequent protests, communications technology has again served an important function in Iran. Its effects have been magnified by exposure provided by traditional international broadcasting services that picked up the torrent of content suddenly rendered available online. Facebook and Twitter were used to provide blogs with videos and photographs of the protests as they occurred. On June 13, as the protests began to escalate, the Iranian “Twitterverse” exploded with activity. While Iranian state newspapers were thick with blank space where censors had redacted headlines and copy, Twitter provided breaking news on the street level, in real time (Grossman, 2009). Inevitably the best information came from people on the ground. For his part, Mousavi’s official campaign (“ghalamnews”) announced events and posted words of caution for his supporters: “Only official march today is valli asr. others may be a trap - avoid others - #Iranelection” (McElroy, 2009). U.S. State Department recognized the site’s importance to demonstrators and requested that Twitter delay standard maintenance during the post-election protests to ensure uninterrupted access and reach for the cyber rebels. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton went on record to defend the use of Twitter as “very important” to the movement of Iran (Tapper, 2009). This represented the first time a US government agency explicitly recognized the potential role of social media platforms in an international event (Burns, 2009). The experience of 1979 established the power of modern media technology in mass mobilization and its capacity to evade the intrusive power of authoritarian states. The audiocassettes in 1979 had generated an “invisible public sphere” in which one charismatic figure communicated with millions. In 2009, the technology now provided a “globally visible and audible public sphere” in which millions of inspired activists communicated with millions of others at the same time.

International broadcasting services also played an important role in disseminating information about the protests. Satellite TV stations, particularly BBC Persian and Voice of America’s Persian News Network Service provided the traditional media bulwark after the elections. Traditional news outlets became both the contributor and recipient of news. Following the election, PNN was the recipient of some 300 videos per hour from ordinary Iranians (Mottaz, 2009). International broadcast media
became the megaphone that amplified what was being fed through Facebook, Twitter and blogs, leveraging domestic and international pressure on the Islamic Republic.

However, Iranian viewers were looking for more than local coverage of events outside their windows. They were also concerned with how the news was being received by the United States government. Appropriately, the PNN network audience increased during the post-election period, and the website had an 800 percent increase in the number of visitors, and, even with increased censorship, 4,600 followers on its Twitter page (Mottaz, 2009). Despite their attempt to stifle political insurrection, new media effectively prevented the Iranian government from securing their monopoly on interpretation of how history was unfolding.

Iran boasts one of the world’s largest and most active blogospheres, with an estimated 60,000 regularly updated blogs (Landler, 2009). Blogging took off in Iran in response to increased censorship of traditional forms of media over the last decade, although the Iranian government has since moved to target bloggers and block blogs deemed controversial, as well. Since the election, the Iranian blogosphere continued to prove itself as a vital intermediary for updates from Iran to share with fellow countrymen and the rest of world. Perceptions of Iran, both at home and abroad, are now mediated through the Iranian blogosphere.

Clearly, new media is powerful but not sufficient to precipitate change. The Green Movement demonstrates an admirable freedom and desire to express one’s political perspective. However, it was not completely successful in bringing about the change it desired. With Iranians largely contained, Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei has declared victory. However, it is now clear that Khamenei and his ruling cadre of mullahs have suffered a significant loss of legitimacy (Sadjadpour, 2009). Social media tools are successful because they are difficult to control. In the case of the Iranian protests, they subverted the government’s attempt to effectively contain them. Information was highly accessible and the networks proved scalable in their ability to handle ever-increasing demands for communication. Because Twitter, Facebook and mobile phone short message service (SMS) are highly decentralized by their very nature, it was generally difficult for the Iranian government to isolate and control specific sources. The media produced by the opposition was notable given the fact that it was all produced locally, by average Iranian citizens, and not by professional members of the traditional news media. Activists were able to generate content quickly and in such abundance that it was impossible to filter it effectively. Moreover, successful attempts to tamp down communication by blocking media were met with considerable international criticism.

The key to the power of the new media is content generation and instantaneous propagation. During the Green Movement in Iran, the content was produced simultaneously in the streets and on the World Wide Web as cell phone based videos and pictures posted instantly from phone teleported the events from Iran’s streets to the global information highways. The manner in which content was generated merged the distinction between cyber politics and real politics. For once, the World Wide Web and the Bazaar were one.

For its part, the Iranian government leaned on conventional, state-run media to first denounce then threaten the opposition. These efforts were ineffective. Never before had the citizen’s voice surpassed the state’s reaction. Enduring images captured by digital cameras and cell phones played on YouTube. The world watched as angry citizens marched before the burned out wreckage of cars and buildings. Demonstrations spontaneously arose around the globe, in solidarity with the Green Movement.

The most powerful, enduring, tragic yet impactful moment of the Green revolution was the brutal death of Neda Agha Soltan. On June 20th, 2009, Neda Soltan, a young Iranian woman, was joining a protest in support of Moussavi and she was shot in the chest by security forces. Her death was captured on video by bystanders and was broadcast on the Internet. It was widely watched globally and it
became iconic symbol of the Iranian protests against the hijacking of Iranian democracy by the current regime. While rules were imposed to bar independent, international media from taking to the streets to report on the unrest, the people of Iran documented her death and beatified their martyr (Connett, 2009). Symbols are powerful cultural and political instruments. They are not easy to produce. Neda Soltan became an instant icon and her symbolic value was produced at the nexus where the real and the virtual merged.

While the Green Movement lives on in cyberspace, it has become apparent that, ultimately, such technology can have its own drawbacks. Sadly, reassured by their own online echo chambers, activists and participants have allowed their optimism to wildly inflate itself beyond its means (Morozov, 2009). New technology cannot replace old-fashioned social infrastructure. Although it is fondly recalled that Khomeini triggered a revolution through his tape-cassette revolution, it is less remarked upon that Khomeini spent the previous decade developing a grassroots organization of devotees who were ready, willing and able to distribute his cassettes and pamphlets, while building a larger network of ordinary Iranians who shared his vision and opposition to the unpopular Shah (Ramazani, 1980). Khomeini is best remembered for his fiery rhetoric and spiritual vision but the success of his revolution can be attributed to his intense commitment to community politics (Sreberny-Muhammedi, 1990). Ironically, if the Islamic Republic is going to experience reform, the people must follow his precedent.

The advantages of new media and virtual social networks are clear. When they are permitted to operate, they will reduce messaging costs and increase efficiency and the timeliness of social movement response. As was the case in Iran, new media also effectively disseminated information about the events taking place both to those rallying against President Ahmedinejad’s disputed victory, and to international audiences, watching events unfold. There is a special irony to the fact that today’s Iranian strongmen have taken a page from the Shah’s book – whose regime that threatened or arrested anyone who copied or distributed Khomeini’s communications. Today, Khamanei’s men are employing the same tactics, but are doing so to preserve the Islamic Republic. Now they must target phones and computers, not tape-cassettes and mimeographs. History has an uncanny knack of repeating itself in unexpected ways.

Peaceful, democratic change is possible in Iran. The Iranian people are dissatisfied, to a great extent, because of restrictions on the freedom of speech, freedom of assembly, and freedom of the press. There is now an ongoing, informed and digital discussion in Iran between people who care deeply about what is happening. “100 Million Facebook Members for Democracy in Iran” will not unseat an authoritarian regime, but it will sustain a movement. Real change demands more than virtual revolutions.

**Case II: al-Qaeda and Radicalism in the Virtual Sphere**

The value of new media and information technology has not escaped radicals and would be terrorists. New information technologies such as the Internet provide new communication channels for the spread of ideas, networking and information by the terrorists both at broad, ideological level, and at a more focused, practical level. This spread of ideas and information range from organizing groups and attacks to teaching people how to make bombs, rockets, improvised explosive devices and chemical weapons. Internet has become an indispensable medium for radical groups. Over the years, the usage and dependence on the Internet and the new media has evolved more on World Wide Web and less in real world.

The Internet plays an important role in radicalization of people. FBI Director Mueller observes about the threat of terrorism: “The threat exists not only in the mountains of Pakistan, but also in the shadows of the Internet” (Mueller, 2007). al-Qaeda has experienced three waves of radicalization and the Internet has become a significant characteristic of the
new generation of terrorists, especially since September 11, 2001 (Sageman, 2008; Hoffman, 2006). The first wave of terrorists consisted of mostly well-educated, middle-class Arabs who came to Pakistan and Afghanistan to fight with the Soviets in the 1980s. The second wave consisted of young Middle Eastern elites, who went to Western countries to attend universities but, upon radicalization, they traveled to al-Qaeda training camps in Afghanistan in the 1990s (Sageman, 2008, p. 38).

Unlike the first two waves, the third wave includes individuals who do not have a direct, physical and formal connection with al-Qaeda. Sageman (2008, p. 41) classifies the new generation of terrorists as “third-wave wannabes” since this group consists mostly of would-be terrorists who are angry at the US invasion of Iraq and wish to join al-Qaeda. After al-Qaeda was forced underground in the post-September 11, 2001 era, linking up with the al-Qaeda Central is almost impossible for these people. They instead formed self-financed, self-trained informal networks without any physical headquarters (Sageman, 2008, p. 38; Hoffman, 2003, 2006). This is “a scattered, decentralized social structure—a leaderless jihad” (Sageman, 2008, p. 39).

Although the Internet provides an environment for the emergence and the existence of this decentralized structure of new generation terrorists, the Internet by itself is not sufficient to make anyone a terrorist. The Internet needs to have agencies who generate information and ideas that foster radicalism. It also needs agencies that are predisposed to and demand such radical ideas. al-Qaeda, it appears, understands this complex reality of the Internet inspired self-radicalization and its new strategy reflects this recognition of centrality of Information technology.

As a result of the US war in Afghanistan that was a response to the September 11, 2001 attacks, al-Qaeda lost its operating headquarters and much of its leadership (Alden & Fidler, 2006; Zakaria, 2010). These headquarters in Afghanistan used to serve as a haven, a “real domain” for al-Qaeda where recruits were trained in camps and the organization was managed. However, the US-led military operations weakened al-Qaeda and its activities in Afghanistan, and Pakistani cooperation with the US enhanced the constraints on its authority to act freely. The new circumstances now have taken away al-Qaeda’s “real domain” and pushed it into the “virtual domain”. Finding itself weakened and restricted, al-Qaeda found this change to “virtual domain” to be a necessary change in strategy (Azzam, 2006; Zakaria, 2010). Given the pressure that is being applied to al-Qaeda in Afghanistan, Pakistan and elsewhere, the probability that it will in future really more on the Internet is evident. Ironically, as Western technology and creativity drives the growth, potential and reach of the Internet, it will also enhance the capability of al-Qaeda to reach and radicalize.

al-Qaeda changed its strategy by adopting a more flexible, decentralized structure rather than its old, hierarchical structure (Kohlman, 2008). In this new strategy which works in, “virtual domain” the use of Internet offers a new way of finding young individuals and mobilizing them into action (Kohlman, 2008, p. 97; Brachman, 2006, p. 153; Weimann, 2010). This mobilization process was aimed at generating “a self-financed, self-trained, and self-motivated terrorist cells” and “bin Laden’s aides began ardently working to spread their expertise and practical skills through the Internet” (Kohlman, 2008, p. 98; Brachman, 2006; Weimann, 2010). Moreover, al-Qaeda also aims to encourage regional affiliates and jihadist networks for a global agenda, and uses “both the Internet as a means to distribute propaganda and telecommunications infrastructure to plan attacks and coordinate movements” (CRT, 2010, p. 12). The most common formats that al-Qaeda uses to spread its ideology and practical skills through the Internet are communiqués, terrorism handbooks and videos.

The use of videos by al-Qaeda members is standard practice. al-Qaeda uses videos for various purposes ranging from training to ideological messages. In fact, even al-Qaeda’s leader, Osama bin Laden, made his statements through videos. However, the way these videos
are distributed has changed recently. Rather than producing these videos in VHS, CD or DVD formats, warehousing them in, say in London, then mailing them to customers, today Internet provides radical groups a cheaper and nearly anonymous ways to disseminate their ideas or messages (Kohlman, 2006, p. 117; Hoffman, 2006; Brachman, 2006). In this process, “high-speed Internet access, pirated video-editing software, and free file-upload Web sites (such as www.yousendit.com)” are some of the new technologies that radicals are using today (Kohlman, 2006, p. 117; Weimann, 2010).

The Internet provides a space for self-motivated terrorists who do not have any previous organic link to terrorist groups to act. Irbayy 007 (“irbayy” in Arabic means “terrorist”) is one of the most infamous “self-motivated” radical who did not have previous ties to any terrorist group or any history of radical activity before 2004. However, as he became angry at the US invasion of Iraq, he sought al-Qaeda through the Internet. His real name is Younis Tsouli and he is son of a Moroccan diplomat. At the time of his arrest in October 2005, he was a 22-year-old college student who resided in London.

In a period of two years, Irbayy 007 formed an “entrepreneurial terrorist network” by using various Internet chat forums (Kohlman, 2008, p. 106). His individual efforts received al-Qaeda’s notice in a short order. Then, he was made the Internet premier facilitator for a host of al-Qaeda terrorist commanders, most notably Abu Musab al-Zarqawi (Kohlman, 2008, p. 104; Weimann, 2010). His technological assistance and co-ordination of communication among different groups earned him high praise from al-Qaeda (Mueller, 2007). In the cyber space, he “taught not just the ideology, but the technology of terrorism” (Mueller, 2007). His entrepreneurial terrorist network moved beyond virtual networks into a physically real radical cell in Canada, known as “Toronto 17” (Kohlman, 2008, p. 106).

Another example of self radicalization on the Internet is a 46-year-old, Caucasian Muslim convert, named Colleen Renee LaRose, also known as Fatima LaRose or with her screen name “JihadJane” (Johnson, 2010; Urbina, 2010; BBC News, 2010a). She is a US citizen who lived in suburban Philadelphia (Johnson, 2010). Although she did not have a prior connection to any terrorist organization, she used the Internet to contact other people who were radicals. She allegedly recruited fighters to engage in violent jihad in many parts of Asia and also sought a spouse for herself. In her YouTube posting in June 2008, she said she was “desperate to do something for somehow to help” suffering Muslims (Johnson, 2010). After this post, she was approached by others who were sympathetic to terrorist activities (BBC News, 2010b). Over a period of 15 months, she exchanged e-mails to recruit fighters (BBC News, 2010b).

According to the Department of Justice, Ms. LaRose and five others “recruited men on the Internet to wage violent jihad in South Asia and Europe, and recruited women on the Internet who had passports and the ability to travel to and around Europe in support of violent jihad” (BBC News, 2010b). She was arrested in October 2009, after her return to the U.S. from Europe, and charged with providing “material support to terrorists and traveled to Sweden to launch an attack” (Johnson, 2010). Although very few women have been charged with terrorism in the US, LaRose’s case is indicative of how the Internet “produces” radicals and “enables” their extremist politics (BBC News, 2010b).

The significance of the Internet for the activism of the radicalized groups and individuals has become high priority with security agencies paving the way to more draconian policies by some governments. Terrorist use of the Internet is now a key issue in international meetings. Governments have started to tighten their policies with regard to the terrorist use of the Internet. For instance, the new EU directive on counterterrorism criminalizes “public exhortation to terrorist crimes, recruitment and training for terrorism purposes, including actions performed over the Internet” (CRT, 2010, p. 105). As a result, Sweden drafted a new
law to comply with the EU directive and the Swedish government introduced its proposed bill on December 21, 2009 (CRT, 2010, p. 105). Another example is from Austria. The Austrian government introduced a bill in December 2009 which considered the receiving terrorism training on the Internet as a crime (CRT, 2010, p. 65). UAE is another country which criminalizes the terrorist groups’ use of the Internet to promote their ideologies and finance their activities (CRT, 2010, p. 144).

Terrorist use of the Internet has also become a significant topic for international conferences. For instance, discussion of terrorist use of the Internet was one of the issues in the agenda of The Eighth International Meeting of the Heads of Special Services, Security Agencies, and Law-Enforcement Organizations, which the FBI, CIA, DOE, and the National center for counter Terrorism (NCTC) attended, and was hosted by Russia in June 2009 (CRT, 2010, p. 100). Another example is a joint Croatia–OSCE workshop that addressed cyber-security issues including terrorist use of the Internet was held in Zagreb in November 2009 (CRT, 2010, p. 71).

In short, following the US war in Afghanistan, al-Qaeda lost its “real domain” and decided to strengthen itself through a “virtual domain,” through the use of the Internet. This strategy change created a decentralized structure for al-Qaeda and helped the emergence of a new group of radicalized people including Tsouli and LaRose whose connection to al-Qaeda became possible only through the Internet. In this new structure, the Internet becomes the ground where suppliers and demanders meet each other. In order for this structure to work, there is a need for agencies to provide both the supply of information and ideas that foster radicalism and the demand for such concepts and content. Without the Internet, Tsouli and LaRose would not have become radicalized individuals. This issue has recently captured the attention of the states. Thus, states and their security agencies have begun to focus on the role of Internet for the radical groups’ activism by imposing more draconian policies in their territories and organizing international meetings on the terrorist use of the Internet.

CONCLUSION

In this paper, which explores the interaction between technology and politics, we have reached several conclusions. Our first finding was that despite assertions by many commentators that Islam and Muslim societies are incompatible with modernity, it appears that even Muslims living in near medieval circumstances can still understand and use cutting edge technology with creativity and deadly effectiveness. As is evident in the case of Iran’s Green Movement, Muslims have developed the transformative potential of seemingly innocuous technology like Facebook. Facebook was created to help college students keep in touch with each other. But the Iranian youth used it as vehicle for a spontaneous revolution. Islam and Muslims maybe incompatible with some cultural and political manifestations of modernity, but they are at home with the technologies of modernity. Perhaps Islamic rebellions are not ‘turning back’ away from modernity, but a manifestation of the emerging Postmodernity.

It is evident to us that the perspective of technological determination does not fully explain the dynamics between technology and political activism in our cases. We find that Gidden’s notion of the process of structuration, where agents and structures continuously shape and reshape each other as they produce and reproduce social reality provides a better understanding of the dynamics between new media and information technologies and Muslim activism. The reconstitution of Osama Bin Laden as a phantom operator who was real more in the virtual world than anywhere else, whose existence is manifest only in pixels and digital media, shows how agencies are reconstituted by the emerging potentialities of the technology, which acts as a social structure. The transformation of Facebook and Twitter into clarions of rebellion by Iranian protesters and the Internet itself as a global pulpit that radicalizes youth, is evidence of agency its ability to reshape structure and its functions.

The most interesting finding is the complex and inseparable intertwining of technology and politics. In some cases of radicalization
such as that of Jihad Jane, technology was the ultimate enabler. Perhaps technology can be labeled as an unindicted co-conspirator in her and many other cases. There is clearly a domain of E-politics in the Muslim World where the real and the virtual mix so well that one fails to see where virtuality ends and where reality begins. In this paper we have seen primarily how civil society and groups opposed to the state co-exist with technology in the realm of E-politics. We have not examined the dynamics between the modern State and new media and information technologies. That is another story, for another day.

REFERENCES


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