Internet
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Hadith On-Line
Writing Islamic Tradition

With the vastly expanding use and popularity of the world wide web in the closing decade of the 20th century, Muslims began presenting themselves on the web through sacred texts, images and stories. This transmission includes *hadith*, the sayings and acts of the Prophet. Studying the transmission of the *hadith* through the internet and its function in the Islamic on-line discourse helps in understanding the conception of a new discourse of Islamic jurisprudence. Through the description of different formats of *hadith*, it is possible to analyse the complex relation between the texts and the new medium.

The relation between text and medium changes over time and space, because of the varying cultural systems in which messages are produced and the ongoing development of information technologies employed to transmit it. The technical characteristics of a medium determine formats, uses of a text, as well as the competences necessary to transmit it. A comparison between the printed and on-line *hadith* is necessary for understanding in which way the 'real' and 'virtual' traditions differ, but that is not enough. A tradition is also a transmission protocol, so a description of technical characteristics of the internet can be useful for understanding how the information circulates and by whom it is produced and consumed.

Hadith means news, but in this particular case it denotes the news about the Prophet transmitted by way of his companions and later generations of Muslims. As the imitation of Muhammad's example is a moral and legal principle, *taqlid*, the *hadith* constitutes next to the Qur'an one of the most important sources of Islamic jurisprudence and theology.

The oral transmission of the *hadith* was soon replaced by written transmission, being a more efficient means of communicating them over the rapidly expanding Muslim world. In written format it was also easier to control their authenticity and limit the production of apocrypha. The scrutinizing of the *hadith* led to the composition of a number of canonical *hadith* collections, known as the *kutub as-sitta* – the six books – commonly considered as authentic, or *sahih*.

A traditional *hadith* is composed of two parts: the chain of transmitters, *isnad*, which is the guarantee of authenticity, and the message or text, *matn*. But in printed works, as in oral discourses, they are often introduced by 'the Prophet said/did' without citing the chain of authorities. This use makes it difficult to verify whether the *hadith* are actually taken from one of the classical compilations.

Hadith on the web

On the web can be found either complete compilations of *hadith*, the *kutub as-sitta*, or individual or small collections of the Prophet's acts and sayings without the chain of transmitters being given. Bibliographical references are often incomplete or totally lacking. Thus it is not always possible to check their authenticity and to control the production of new apocrypha. The *hadith* are available on the web as images or audio files, and

are sometimes used for decorating a web site and electronic postcards (www.jannah.org). They are produced in colourful and animated icons, which is partly in line with more traditional uses; some *hadith* and verses of the Qur'an have been used since early Islamic times for decorating mosques and objects. For centuries they have been used in elaborate calligraphy. More recently, they can be found written on walls as political slogans.

Apart from presenting their CVs, Muslim authors sometimes present themselves on personal homepages with a collection of *hadith*, in particular when they explain the main features of Islam and its civilization. Sometimes even *hadith qudsi* – the holy or divine sayings attributed, albeit indirectly, to God – are presented (see www.ifrance.com/abchir-m). The

most original aspect of the *hadith* available on the web is that they are published in different formats, simple text and colourful icons, and with different purposes, all through the same medium. Outside of the virtual world each format is realized by a particular means, either through writing, calligraphy, architecture or popular art. On the web a certain level of competence in computer science is sufficient to use and present this religious literature in a variety of ways. A web designer is able to realize what editors, architects or artists in the real world do through different media, but with much less effort and funds. Nonetheless, computer hard- and software should be readily available and that is why most Muslim virtual designers are Muslim students living in the US. They have not only the means, but also a strong motivation to use cyberspace both as a way to re-create and keep up with the Muslim *umma*.

Texts and authors

Before analysing the authors and texts, it is appropriate to give a measure of the presence of on-line *hadith* in the main languages (based on the author's research): in English 212,686 *ahadith* are available on 22 web sites, in Arabic there are 62,078 on 6 sites, and in French 2,487 on 8 sites have been found. Considering the limits of search engines and the instability of the web, these figures indicate the most visible *hadith* and not their totality. The prevalence of *hadith* in English may be due to the fact that the internet was born in the USA, arriving later in Europe and only recently becoming more common in Asia and the Arab world. Considering the sheer magnitude, it is impossible to

analyse all the texts and verify the quality of the translations. The same is true for establishing whether the *hadith* concern existing printed collections that have been published on-line without any modifications.

The most common collections on-line comprise, in order of importance, the following:
– The complete Bukhari collection, *As-Sahih*, is to be found on two web sites: Al-Islam, (www.al-islam.com) in Arabic; and the Muslim Student Association (MSA) of the University of South California's site (www.usc.edu/dept/MSA) in English, translated by Muhsin Khan. Fifteen other web sites copied or linked their pages to this address. In French no complete collection was found, even if there are two printed translations of it.
– The complete Abu Muslim collection, *As-Sahih*, is available in Arabic on the Al-Islam site and, translated into English by Siddiqui Abdul Hameed, on the MSA site. Thirteen web sites are linked to the latter. In French there is no full collection as it has not been completely translated.
– There are three web sites that publish the Imam An-Nawawi's *Forty Hadith* in English, translated by Denis Johnson Davies and Ezzeddin Ibrahim. In Arabic there is only one site, Al-Islam, and in French, two (Le Centre Islamique de la Réunion, www.islam.ifrance.fr/islam; and Les Ressources Islamiques, www.chez.com/abuhamza) translated by The International Islamic Federation of Students (Kuwait).

The language-author ratio is similar to that of the printed production of *hadith* in Western languages. Most of the on-line *hadith* are in English and the Imam Bukhari's *As-Sahih* is certainly the most published collection – on the web as well as in print. Most of these web sites are created by Muslim students in the US or are hosted by American servers. The most important centres of production of English books, however, are located in the Indian Subcontinent and managed by professional editors.

It must be noted that a web site can be composed of pages, located at the same address or domain name; or by pages kept together by electronic links, in which case they appear as a one web site but are actually located at different addresses. In the latter case, the webmaster has to check the links periodically because web pages often change contents and address.

These diverse 'statuses' of texts do not exist in printed works. All the pages included in a book have the same 'reality'; the author and publisher have control over the entire text.

Muslims from all around the world are using the internet to communicate, to present their beliefs and their practices. The *hadith* are an important part of their 'virtual image'. A new tradition is taking shape following the technical characteristics of the new medium and its uses. The main difference between printed and on-line *hadith* lies in the medium and not in the texts themselves, because they use basically the same texts. However, centres of production, editors' competences, formats used and means of diffusion are completely different. Cultural and religious changes in the information era are not always voluntarily caused by authors but by the *medium* itself.[1]

The internet is creating another language that is neither written nor oral,[2] it is a 'world wide web' made of images, sounds and written words. Moreover, in cyberspace there is no memory because sites that shut down do not leave a trace of their existence, and all the efforts made to keep track of such a site can suddenly fail.

Some effects of the new media become evident in discussions about the sanctity of the fundamental texts of Islam. The MSA web site (www.usc.edu/dept/MSA/) hesitantly suggests that a digital copy of the Qur'an is as sacred as a printed one. This means that a good Muslim should perform the necessary ablutions before reading a digital copy of the Qur'an. On the contrary, the Dar al-Hadith (www.al-muhaddith.com) refuses to publish the *hadith* and the Qur'an on-line because they do not consider the internet a 'suitable' means for its publication. Thus, considering that a protocol of transmission of religious knowledge, *ʿilm*, is not yet formulated and accepted, it seems to be too early to affirm that a 'virtual Islamic tradition' has been born. However, if one considers how much the increased circulation of the *hadith* and other fundamental texts in printed form contributed to the religious and political developments over the last century, one may wonder what the potential of the spread of these texts in a growing number of languages through the new media will be. It appears, as yet, that changes are not determined so much by new contents, but by the new medium itself.

Notes
1. Marshall McLuhan, *Understanding Media: The Extension of Man* (New York: McGraw Hill, 1965).
2. Walter J. Ong, *Orality and Literacy: The Technologizing of the Word* (London, New York: Meuthen, 1982).

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