Internet Islam: An Analysis of U.S.-Based Websites Dedicated to Promoting an Islamic Viewpoint in the Post 9/11 World

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This dissertation titled

Internet Islam: An Analysis of U.S.-Based Websites Dedicated to Promoting an Islamic
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ABSTRACT

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This research examined the phenomenon of Islamic content on the Internet. Five websites, based in the United States were showcased in this study. The purpose was to highlight the content and activities of the websites. The management practices of the websites were also analyzed in order to assess sources of funding and financial performance. A framework to compare and contrast the teachings of a traditional religion through a contemporary media source was developed in this project.

Guided by diffusion of innovations and social network theories, this study used qualitative content analysis and interview techniques to investigate websites with Islamic content. Nine participants representing Islamic websites were selected for this project. The first part of this study examined Islam on the Internet, Muslims in the West and western media coverage of Islam. The second segment of open-ended interviews appraised the contributions by Islamic websites to Islamic content on the Internet.

The findings of the study highlighted ways in which the websites aimed at educating and informing readers about Islam and about its message. Websites with an Islamic content categorize themselves as active members of the community. Donations and membership dues represent critical ways through which their activities are financed. The intersection of religion and media has witnessed a rapid evolution from traditional media sources to newer and more complex communication and information technology
platforms. An innovative method of worshipping is emerging in Islam. This new approach is utilizing the power of the Internet as a mass communication apparatus. Religious material is now posted online and is accessible to anyone with an Internet-ready computer. *Imams* are no longer only found in mosques but are accessible through various media forms including online forums. The Internet is also enhancing the learning culture of Islam by making it easier to research and locate information. This has led to the emergence of a new Islamic movement in the United States – a movement that utilizes emerging communication technologies and allows its followers to practice Islam in a liberating environment, free from strict or controlling religious authorities.

Approved: _____________________________________________________________

Steve Howard

Professor of Media Arts and Studies
TO ABDEL MONEIM, KAWTHER, SARA, AHMED, SALEH AND MIMI
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CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

Overview

This is a dissertation to study the growing phenomenon of communicating Islamic knowledge on the Internet. More specifically, the dissertation aims at unraveling the spectacle of Islamic representation online. A number of Islamic websites are highlighted and their content, activities and performance are critically analyzed and evaluated. In addition, the management practices of these websites are also considered. This will comprise administrative applications, including sources of funding and financial performance. The websites to be assessed are all based in the United States. This will provide a discourse for the appraisal of Islamic websites operating in a western context. The study also allows for the development of a comprehensive framework by which to compare and contrast the teachings of Islam through traditional means, and the application of the Internet as a new and advanced method of Muslim scholarship. In effect, this is a study that aims at researching the teachings of a traditional religion as communicated through a contemporary media source.

The advent of the World Wide Web and the rapid spread of the Internet have led to the explosion of online media sources. Especially in the West, the reliance on the Internet as a medium of communication and a source of information has reached unprecedented levels and proportions. The Internet has become an indispensable tool for updates on politics, the economy, weather, sports and a host of other events and activities. Bunt (2000) pointed out that “from scholars to casual browsers, millions of people,
Muslims and non-Muslims, now use the Internet as a primary source of information” (p. 3). Electronic communication, most notably the Internet, has revolutionized communication technologies. The Internet has clearly changed our way of life and has expanded our horizons beyond means that would have been incomprehensible just ten years ago. In addition, whereas traditional media – such as radio, television, newspapers and magazines – requires considerable capital outlay, the Internet has quite simply revolutionized the way we regard media. Anyone with a computer and Internet connectivity is in a position to upload and disseminate material to a worldwide audience.

Nevertheless, it will be a misconception to conclude that electronic communication has affected life in western society only. In the Muslim world, the Internet has also had a profound impact on peoples’ ways of life. Electronic communication, including computer technology, is by no means available to all individuals, especially so in the Muslim world. The digital divide – between the electronic rich and poor – is ever present giving rise to polarity that exists between groups thus concentrating media in the hands of the educated elite.

Statement of the Problem

In recent years, western media coverage of Islam has often been negative. Karim (2006) pointed out that “of the innumerable events in a day involving the one billion Muslims in the world, only those that dramatically break laws seem to appear on the front page and at the beginning of newscasts” (p. 116). It is to this effect that a number of Muslim organizations are constantly attempting to improve the image of Islam, particularly in the West. One way these organizations are attempting to do so is to
develop online initiatives. This is taking place through websites. Today, the presence of Islamic websites on the Internet has become a common occurrence. Islamic websites represent an efficient and effective communication medium. The Internet is ubiquitous and remains free from the control of any state or individual. It is relatively easy to access and use whether to post and publish material or to access information published by others. There is little doubt that the Internet has revolutionized communication technologies and has provided an outlet for the broadcast of messages previously unheard of and well beyond the limits of traditional broadcasting systems (Flournoy, 2004). It is to this effect that this dissertation project aims to review and critically analyze the content of a number of websites with Islamic context. Additionally, this research also seeks to scrutinize the management practices of these websites because in doing so, the researcher – and the reader – will acquire an insight into the crucial world of communication and religion.

Research Questions

In light of the above, there are two research questions that this study aims to address:

**RQ 1** How has the learning culture of Islam been extended through the possibility of the Internet?

**RQ 2** How do websites with Islamic thrusts emerge, develop and sustain themselves in the current global context?
Purposes and Objectives

The purpose of this research is to critically examine a number of websites with an Islamic context and to analyze the way their activities are conducted. The main objective of the paper is to develop a framework for the understanding of the operations of selected Islamic websites based in the U.S. Imperative to the development of this framework is the researcher’s intention to deconstruct Said’s (1997) notion of how the West covers Islam and to update this theory for Internet purposes in order to present a clearer view of Islam vis-à-vis western media. In effect an analysis is to be conducted on five Islamic websites on the Internet: cair.com, IslamiCity.com, isna.net, masnet.org, and mpac.org. This is by no means an exhaustive list, but one that will nevertheless provide a cross-section of some of the American-Islamic activity that can be found online. Furthermore this research seeks to analyze the management practices of these websites or of the organizations that operate and maintain these Islamic websites. In doing so, the researcher aims at answering questions relating to why these communication media exist and what is the overriding purpose of their very existence.

The first website to be studied is cair.com. This is the official website of the Council on American-Islamic Relations, a Washington, D.C.-based non-governmental organization. The IslamiCity.com website is operated by Human Assistance and Development International, a non-profit organization interested in socio-economic, scientific and educational development based in Culver City, California. Isna.net is the third website and is the online initiative for the Islamic Council of North America, based in Plainfield, Indiana. Masnet.org is the website for the Muslim American Society
located in Falls Church, Virginia. In the case of mpac.org, this is the website for the Muslim Public Affairs Council, based in Los Angeles, California. Conducting a textual analysis on these websites will enable the researcher to gain knowledge and understanding into the operations of the organizations running and supporting these websites. It will also provide the reader with a comprehensive understanding of the kind of published material that currently exists and that pertains to Islam. Since these websites are based in the United States, their existence in western society is of particular interest. It is clear that the aims and objectives of these Islamic websites are to inform, educate and proselytize. Their intent is to promote – in a positive light – the name and image of Islam to Muslims and to non-Muslims alike. Roy (2004) stressed that Islam has become “globalized” in its nature and in its reach, leading many Muslims in Europe and North America to form “imagined identities” with Islam at the center of these identities (p. 18-19). In conducting a detailed assessment of these websites, an analysis of their operations and activities will be performed to determine in what way(s) they seek to project a positive image of Islam to their viewers.

The research is divided into several parts including a review of literature on Islam and Islamic websites, observations, remarks and comments on the topic. The overriding purpose of this project is for the researcher to digest and report on information published by the websites under study. The themes that emerged from this critical analysis are outlined, highlighting the most significant aspects and trends found on these websites.
Significance and Justification of the Study

Islamic content on the Internet is a relatively new phenomenon. Researching such content thus provides a raw field of study on issues such as content, authority, objectivity and community activity and participation. This research attempts at studying Islamic presence online while taking a closer look at its structure including interfaith and education practices. This refers to the ‘enlisting’ of new Muslims as well as tutoring them on their new religion. In addition, this dissertation also scrutinizes the issue of authority in Islam – a relevant and pertinent issue. The issue of authority happens to be a significant one because it is one of the major areas of contention in Islam. The questions of who is in charge and who speaks for the faithful are ones that demand attention and scrutiny. Examining Islamic websites represents a new area of research and seeks to fill a gap concerning this segment of the media. In filling this gap, some questions to keep in mind will be: What is the nature of the phenomenon to be investigated? What kind of issues need to be explained? What is the purpose of the research? What data generation method(s) is/are appropriate? The objective behind asking these questions is to ensure that the research proceeds in the right direction and that the researcher formulates a holistic picture of Islamic representation online. This study also helps to position Islam in its current global history. One significant question to ask at this juncture is what are the implications for the faith of Islam being communicated in this manner? Studying Islamic content online therefore provides a lens through which to examine ways Islam has evolved as a traditional religion while taking advantage of a modern communication technology such as the Internet.
The results of this study are significant because they will add a fresh dimension of analyzing Islamic discourse on the Internet. The research is not final and contributes to literature available in the fields of humanities and social science. It also broadens the study by combining Islam and online communities in a single assignment.

This type of research will also be a challenge as far as examining Islamic media in a non-Muslim setting. This will expose the intricate workings of these websites and reveal their agenda in an open and democratic society. Islam has come under considerable scrutiny in the U.S. particularly after September 11. Richardson (2006) pointed out that Muslims have been “subject to a high level of suspicion, inequity and outright discrimination for a considerable period of time – practices that have increased since 11 September 2001” (p. 104). Islamic media have had to remain diligent in order to gain acceptance in society and to dispel any doubts still lingering that the majority of Muslims are peace-loving and carry no militant agenda. Kamrava (2006) stated that in recent times there has been a rebirth of “a highly vibrant discourse of Islamic reformism, one whose roots go deep into the history of the religion” and one that is bound to prosper should it receive the “appropriate forms of institutional support, political and otherwise” (p. 3).

Another factor behind examining Islamic websites is that this represents new territory in which little previous research has been undertaken. Examining Islamic websites represents cutting edge research in the fields of Islam and media. The examination of their mode of operation and analyses of their message will help us to understand the changing contemporary Islamic teachings. Moreover, this research also highlighted the fact that Islam is a teaching religion and outlines the differences between
traditional teaching methodologies and Islamic proselytizing online. An important part of this research therefore develops new practices for old purposes.

This research aims to move beyond rudimentary understandings of posting religious content on the Internet. It seeks an in-depth studying of Islamic online communication keeping in mind that Islam’s early steps and subsequent evolving occurred as a teaching religion. The combination of Islamic teachings and online communication strategies thus represent an exciting project and affords Islam channels through which to disseminate and broadcast its messages to a considerably larger audience. This research also allows for grasping on a theoretical and practical basis the trajectories of Islamic identity formation on a new and dynamic communication platform, whose potential is still being uncovered.

It is important to keep in mind that websites, often times, do not exist as a separate entity. They usually are the online initiative of media firms. For instance, the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) existed as a broadcasting medium for many decades. Only recently though, did the BBC establish a website on the Internet with the purpose of expanding its online activities and providing a new dimension to its news dissemination activities. Likewise, a media entity such as Time Warner began as a publishing house. Over the years, however, it has expanded its activities to include cable television, content distribution and through its merger with America Online has become involved in the provision of Internet services. As an added aspect of its operations, AOL/Time Warner now maintains a website that includes all the information that one might need to know about the company. Traditionally, if you were a potentially new subscriber shopping for cable service for instance, you will probably either call Time
Warner or visit their offices to inquire about the existing services they have in your area. A sales person will duly inform you of their available ‘packages’ and their corresponding prices. Based on this information, you as a consumer will then make a choice. Today, all you have to do is visit their website to gain access to all of this information. You can even fill out an online form to make an appointment so that your service can be installed. In a sense this exemplifies the changing dynamics of the telecommunications industry. More and more companies seek to compliment their traditional activities by either developing online initiatives or by developing other cost-cutting measures.

Habermas (2001) pointed out that people strive to participate in critical discussion in a ‘public sphere’ away from the influence of the government. Websites with Islamic content began to appear online in order to participate and to take advantage of the public sphere. This public sphere represents a meeting place open to the public. The public is free to exchange thoughts and ideas. However, a central issue to keep in mind at this point and one that should be mentioned when discussing freedom of speech is censorship. Bunt (2006) pointed out that some Saudi ‘dissidents’ have established the Internet as a forum “to broadcast lectures and facilitate discussions on Islam, aimed against members of the Saudi royal family” (p. 158). One such entity is the Movement for Islamic Reform in Arabia and is based in London, U.K. The government of Saudi Arabia employs the latest technology in order to filter such content and to prevent it from being accessed in the country. This provides a clear indication that authoritarian regimes have no tolerance for any kind of opposition, particularly in the area of religion. It also offers a significant reminder of the sensitive role played by religion.
Today thousands of Islamic websites exist in the West, particularly in the U.S. and in the U.K. Islamic Port, an Internet directory featuring Islamic websites, claimed that there are over 4,000 Islamic websites on the Internet. Many of these websites were established and are maintained in the West because they are free from any government restrictions and scrutiny and can effectively publish any kind of content that they desire (provided that this content is decent). The democratic nature of western systems has enabled them to become a true public sphere for dialogue. In addition, their users can access these websites and interact without fear of reprisal, retaliation and/or content blackout from the state.

It is essential to consider the democratic quality enjoyed by western countries as an advantage to Islamic websites based in the West. The majority of Muslim countries lack democratic governance. In the Middle East for instance, only Lebanon, Israel and Turkey bear some semblance to democracy. Democratic governance hence allows Islamic websites to enjoy a considerable amount of freedom in the way they operate.

Organization of the Dissertation

This dissertation is divided into five chapters. Chapter One provided an introduction to this research. It includes an overview of the study to be conducted, purposes and objectives of the study and research questions that this study attempts to answer. Chapter Two is a review of relevant literature pertaining to the topic. An integral part of this research requires an introduction to Islam and its communicative aspect. In attempting to answer the research questions, this research will first and foremost provide a historical background on Islam. Next, current issues pertaining to Islam are highlighted.
and discussed in order to provide a relevant context for this study. In addition, a theoretical framework is developed to link available literature to this research. Chapter Three detailed the research methodology employed in this study, including qualitative systematic reviews and content analysis methods. In collecting data used in answering the research questions, a qualitative method of research is relied upon, utilizing interviews with key members of the organizations that run the above-mentioned websites. The researcher’s background, experience and familiarity with the topic are also discussed. In Chapter Four, I reported my findings and provided an analysis section that is developed in order to assess the data collected from the interviews. In assessing the data collected, a number of broad themes are identified and information extracted from interviews and from the websites is used to construct the main arguments made in this chapter. Finally, Chapter Five provided a summary of the study conclusion and recommendations for further research. The final chapter also included a commentary on the future of online Islam as it seeks to take advantage of the Internet as a mass media tool.
CHAPTER 2: REVIEW OF LITERATURE AND THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Introduction and Background

This chapter provides a synopsis of scholarly literature available in the field and provides a theoretical framework for this study. Since the study of websites with Islamic themes is a relatively new area, the literature reviewed encompasses Islamic representation in other media forms such as television, film and text books. By dissecting Islamic representation in these traditional media forms, this research aims at providing a broad view and a clear illustration of how Islam is scrutinized and discussed.

In the wake of the Iranian revolution of 1979, Edward Said (1997) sought to clear the myth about Islam by ensuring that the West gains enough knowledge and understanding of the religion. Said was certain that Islam was misunderstood in the West and stressed that the negativity that surrounds the religion is due to two main reasons. First, the regimes in Muslim countries are largely responsible for the negativity associated with Islam. Muslim rulers have, for a long period of time, subjected their citizenry to repressive and unrepresentative rule of law. The West deems this undemocratic nature of Muslim rulers to Islam. The media plays a crucial role in this issue by supporting ruling regimes, since most of the media is state owned and/or controlled. The independent media that exists is subjected to harassment and unjust treatment. Second, Said pointed out that western media play a significant role with the pessimism surrounding the religion by constantly displaying negative images of Islam. Said noted that western media filters out most of the positive news about Islam and seeks to portray the religion in a negative light. For instance, Said (1997) continues, instead of
portraying Islam as a religion in which men and women are equal, the western media’s focus and representation is skewed as it directs its audience’s attention to women wearing *hijab*, or veil as a sign of repression and inequality in Islam.

Armstrong (2000) pointed out that the “western media often give the impression that the embattled and occasionally violent form of religiosity know as “fundamentalism” is a purely Islamic phenomenon” (p. 164). This, continues Armstrong, is not the case. In fact, fundamentalism is a global occurrence that has been associated with other religions, including Christianity and Judaism. “There is fundamentalist Judaism, fundamentalist Christianity, fundamentalist Hinduism, fundamentalist Buddhism, fundamentalist Sikhism and even fundamentalist Confucianism” (p. 164). Nevertheless, the term fundamentalism “surfaced first in the Christian world in the United States at the beginning of the twentieth century” (p. 164). By the time Islam began to display some fundamentalist ideologies, Christianity and Judaism had already experienced fundamentalist tendencies. Ramji (2003) added that the news media and the film industry contribute to misinterpretation of Islam and Muslims by their negative portrayals.

In the last few years, Islam has been severely criticized and leaders in Muslim countries – such as Egypt and Saudi Arabia – have come under extreme pressure from the West. Following the events of 9/11, many Islamic websites reported an increase in traffic, particularly as non-Muslims sought to understand the impetus behind the attacks (Bunt, 2006). While many Islam-centered websites consider themselves to be the utmost authority on Islam on the Internet, some regard themselves as part and parcel of an effort aimed at educating non-Muslims about Islam in an effort to provide a comprehensive educational experience to online users.
This represents a clear demonstration of what Samuel P. Huntington (1996) posited in *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order*. Huntington’s basic hypothesis is that the age of ideology has come to an end following the end of the Cold War, the breakup of the Soviet Union and the subsequent collapse of communism. Henceforth, the world has reverted to a state of affairs characterized by cultural conflict along religious and cultural lines. Huntington further argued that wars involving the disintegration of Yugoslavia, and the conflicts between India and Pakistan, are a further sign of intercultural clashes. Huntington is adamant that the greatest cultural divide occurs when the West meets Islam and that “the problem for Islam … is the West, a different civilization whose people are convinced of the universality of their culture and believe that their superior, if declining, power imposes on them the obligation to extend that culture throughout the world” (p. 217-218). In addition, Huntington went on to show how the West had used the United Nations Security Council to impose sanctions against Muslim countries pointing out the Iraq/Kuwait crisis of 1990-1991 and tensions regarding the blowing up of a PanAm airliner over Lockerbie, Scotland in 1988.

Mazrui (2006) agreed with Huntington’s analysis to a large extent and pointed out that “there is indeed a clash of civilizations” but disagrees with him “about the nature of that clash and about how long it is” (p. 11). Mazrui stressed that the clash of civilization did not begin with the end of the Cold War but “is much older” and that “the chief cultural transgressor has throughout been the Western world” (p. 12).

It is important to point out that there exists a clash between traditional Islam and radical Islam, a clash within Islamic society, and one that continues to shape Islam today. However, in order to fully understand Islam and the implications of its effects it is useful
to provide a brief background to the religion: how it began and where it is heading as well as to examine some issues that currently pertain to Islam.

The Islamic Faith

The developers of the Islamic Internet websites have a basic understanding of Islam’s history and beliefs. Armstrong (2000) provided a useful chronology of the history of the religion of Islam. The Prophet Muhammad first received revelations from God through the Angel Gabriel sometime between the years 610 and 632. Gregorian (2003) stated that the basic message of Islam is that there is only one God and that He alone is worthy of worship. He is the almighty, the all-powerful and the Creator. Muhammad is his prophet and messenger and the one who publicized the spread of the religion. The word Islam means peace. It entails the peaceful surrender to the will of God. A follower of Islam is thus a Muslim or one who is peaceful and submissive in nature, which underlines the basic tenant of the religion.

Islam’s foundation rests on five main pillars: the belief that there is only one God and that Muhammad is his messenger; the performance of five daily prayers; fasting during the month of Ramadan, if one is able to do so; giving of zakat, or alms to the needy in society; and pilgrimage to the Muslim holy places in Mecca (Saudi Arabia) if one is physically, mentally and financially able to do so. Most Islamic Internet websites include an outline of these fundamental principles.

By the time of the Prophet Muhammad’s death in 632, the Arabian Peninsula was united under Islam. Thereafter, his followers began expanding into neighboring areas, specifically into modern day Syria, Iraq, Jordan and Lebanon (Asian, 2005).
Muhammad’s death did not weaken the religion as many had anticipated. On the contrary, his followers gained more resolve and vowed to carry out the expansion of the Muslim empire.

Lapidus (2002) made the point that “the life of Muhammad and the rise of Islam have to be understood in terms of both religious vision and worldly impact” (p. 18). The Qur’an represents the scripture and is believed to be God’s words and the way that human beings should behave and conduct themselves. Muhammad himself began the process of assembling the Qur’an, but the final version of the book was not compiled until some twenty years after the Prophet’s death. In addition to the Qur’an, there is the *hadith*, or sayings of the Prophet. These saying were collected over time by Muhammad’s followers and were used to provide guidance and inspiration during times of “ritual, moral and other religious matters” (Lapidus, 2002, p. 18). Whereas the Qur’an represented the word of God revealed over time, the *hadith* were the actions and sayings of the Prophet when dealing with actual and concrete situations. This, stressed Lapidus (2002), allows us to see Muhammad not as one “propounding a fixed system of beliefs” but rather we see him as a man who was “a judge rather than a legislator, a counselor rather than a theorist” (p. 19).

The spread of Islam and the expansion of the Islamic empire brought great wealth to its rulers and to its citizens. One of the major positive aspects of Islamic conquests was that Muslim rulers allowed for the integration of other religions into their empire and did not force non-Muslims to convert to Islam (Brown, 2004). Simons (2003) noted out that during its first millennium, “Islam was the world’s most powerful engine, agent, and vehicle of globalization” (p. 3). It was during that time that Muslims established an
expansive empire that included present day Middle East, North Africa, India, parts of China and southeast Europe. Moreover, that period of time also provided Muslims with “golden ages” or a period of time where they experienced great wealth, power and prosperity.

Lawrence (2002) estimated today’s Muslim population at 1.4 billion people or 20 percent of the world’s inhabitants. It is also estimated that Islam is the world’s second largest religion and its fastest growing. The contemporary nature of Islam is such that only 18 percent of Muslims live in the Arab world, while 20 percent live in sub-Saharan Africa and 30 percent live in the Indian sub-continent. Indonesia represents the country with the largest Muslim population, at some 160 million people (Lawrence, 2002).

Providing a history of Islam lays the foundation for this research. Although this dissertation analyzed Islamic representation online, the basic tenants of the religion should be clearly outlined in order to establish the fundamentals of Islam. This also explains the teachings of Islam and connections that the websites studied have as far as establishing the issue of authority in the Islamic context.

Knowledge in Islam

This section of the dissertation offers an explanation on the importance of acquiring knowledge in Islam. A famous hadith by the Prophet Muhammad urged Muslims to seek knowledge even if it be in China. This statement has great significance for Muslims. During the time of the Prophet, China was considered to be a distant land, and getting there required long travel and great hardship. The fact that the Prophet encouraged Muslims to seek knowledge in a land as far away as China symbolizes the
importance of going to great lengths to search for knowledge. The Prophet Muhammad, through numerous sayings, placed considerable emphasis on learning and urged his followers to seek and acquire knowledge. As Hodgson (1974) pointed out, “students and scholars both travelled about very widely, searching for new intellectual milieus to explore or new fields to conquer with their learning” (p. 444). An emphasis was, therefore, placed on the pursuit of knowledge.

The Qur’an contains a number of verses that urge Muslims to attain knowledge. The first revelation of the Qur’an was the word *iqra*, instructing the Prophet Muhammad to read or to recite. The Qur’an also reveals how Adam was taught “all the names” soon after he was created. The word *ilm* – a term meaning knowledge and education – and its derivatives (such as pen, ink, book, etc…) are mentioned in the Qur’an hundreds of times. “Whoever is given wisdom and knowledge is blessed with bounties in good abundance” (Qur’an, 2:272) is a Qur’anic *aya* that signifies the importance of *ilm* in Islam. The Qur’an also mentioned that “Allah elevates to high positions those from amongst you who are faithful and those who have acquired knowledge” (Qur’an, 58:11). Another *aya* in the Qur’an made the point that “He has taught you that which [heretofore] you knew not” (Qur’an, 2:239). The Qur’an makes it clear that all Muslims should search for and obtain *ilm*.

Commenting on the tradition of preserving education among Muslims between 1258-1503 CE, Hodgson (1974) noted:

At the core of any cultural tradition, not least in a time of conservatism, is its method of educating the young. The bent of this education will express the culture, of course, but at the same time not merely reinforce it but determine, with
some autonomy, the forms in which change in the culture can most readily take
place. (p. 438)

Ilm is, therefore, an important concept in Islam. Muslims are always encouraged
to acquire knowledge and pursue an education. Traditionally, Islam has held scholars in
high esteem, while Islamic cities such as Baghdad and Cordoba had expansive public
libraries. Furthermore, Islamic rulers preserved and protected ancient civilizations that
were part of their empire and encouraged their citizens to learn. Muslims such as Ibn
Sina diagnosed and treated meningitis as early as the 11 century. Muslim scholars
devised and developed algebra and made contributions to arts, architecture, humanities
and the sciences. (IslamiCity.com).

Contemporary Issues in Islam

This section of the paper examines issues affecting Islam in the world today
touching upon some criticism the religion has had to endure. First and foremost though,
it is essential and critical to critically analyze the terms ‘Islam’ and the ‘Muslim world.’
Gregorian (2003) commented that to speak of these two terms as a monolith is extremely
deluding. The world’s approximately 1.4 billion Muslims are “as diverse as humanity
itself” (p. 2).

With the above in mind, it is imperative to note that Islam faces some serious
issues in today’s world and has come under considerable pressure. To begin with, the
religion has no established or accepted central figure of authority. Unlike Catholicism for
instance, Islam has no recognized head and no central authority. In many ways, this has
led to the fragmentation of the religion and the emergence of a number of sects and
factions. Moreover, the absence of a central unifying authority has led to divisions within the religion (Esposito, 1999). Islam today is divided into two main factions: Sunni and Shiite. Sunni Muslims make up the majority of Muslims. Following the death of the Prophet Muhammad, Sunnis firmly believed that his successor should be the most knowledgeable and the most learned Muslim. Shiites, on the other hand, supported the notion that the Prophet Muhammad’s successor should be his direct descendant. This indecisiveness regarding succession issues led to divisions between the Sunni and the Shiite sects soon after the Prophet’s death – divisions that have lasted ever since (Schimmel, 1992).

Nevertheless, the lack of central authority has not been detrimental to the overall development of the religion over the centuries. Factions and divisions did develop but these took place in the first century following the Prophet’s Muhammad’s death. Since then, Muslims have learned to live with and accept their differences and the absence of a leader of the Muslim nation seems not to affect Muslims. Lawrence (2002), however, does not refer to the Sunni-Shiite divisions as differences, but prefers to refer to them as diversity within Islam.

A second serious criticism faced by Islam is the constant accusation of its being ‘harsh’ in nature in the sense that women do not receive the appropriate and equal treatment that they deserve. Abu-Laban (1991) noted that early Islamic law “specified protections and rights for women” (p. 8) including inheritance rights, property rights, divorce and child custody among others. Additionally, many arguments have emerged regarding the undemocratic nature of the religion. Critics of Islam have stressed that the religion is ‘backward’ in nature and neither fosters nor encourages democratic behavior
and governance. As stated above, early Muslim rulers practiced democratic tolerance among their subjects. One way they did that was to allow for the peaceful coexistence of other religions into their empire without compelling non-Muslims to convert to Islam (Brown, 2004). Moreover, Islam was the first universal civilization, stretching across three continents early in its history and encompassing a remarkable diversity of people and cultures. Lewis (2002) emphasized that “Islam itself was indeed coterminous with civilization” (p. 3) and had scaled heights in the arts and sciences at the time the West was struggling to read and write. Abdo (2006) further asserted that “few Americans know that world-class Muslim scientists, philosophers, and other scholars produced significant works during the Middle Ages, when Christian Europe was shrouded in darkness, disease, and ignorance” (p. 6).

Mazrui (2006) admitted that the gender issue raises some questions in Muslim countries while segregation of the sexes in public places has often led to the marginalization of women. However, it should be noted that not until 1920 were women allowed to vote in the United States while in Switzerland women did not vote in national elections until as recently as 1971. In contrast, Muslim women had been casting ballots in Afghanistan, Iran, Iraq and Pakistan “for decades” by the early 1970s (Mazrui 2006, p. 245). Moreover, while the United States has never had a female president, Muslim countries such as Bangladesh, Pakistan and Turkey have been ruled by democratically-elected female heads of state in the past. Furthermore, Uddin (2006) noted that “men and women are equal in Islam in terms of responsibilities, rights, and duties. Islam places a strong emphasis on family values, dignity, justice, and fair play in the social, economical, and political life of individuals or societies” (p. 13).
Perhaps the harshest criticism Islam received from the west followed the September 11 attacks (Mamdani, 2004). Muslim clerics, governments and authorities rushed to the defense of Islam in order to distance the religion from such atrocious acts. However, Friedman (2002) contended that some Muslims rejoiced following September 11 and no outright condemnation of these actions was forthcoming from Muslim leaders in the days immediately following these horrible events. However, Pintak (2006) pointed out that the Organization of the Islamic Conference – an entity whose members include all predominantly Muslim countries – condemned the September 11 attacks in the “wake of the bombings” (p. x). Abdo (2006) stated that “nearly every Islamic organization in America condemned the events of 9/11 and other forms of violence, but the media rarely captures their voices and they go virtually unheard” (p. 6).

Nevertheless, no section addressing contemporary issues in Islam will be complete without making reference to militant Islam and to the issue of terrorism. Hoffman (2006) provided an intriguing definition of the term terrorism and pointed out that a distinction should be made between international war crimes – that are punished through entities such as the International Court of Justice – and acts of international terrorism carried out by individuals and organizations whose members refuse to adhere to rules of warfare and codes of conduct. Islam, it should be noted, has existed for many centuries, and for most of its history it produced neither suicide attackers nor terrorists. The problem lies with radical Islam and its narrow interpretation of the Qur’an. In my analysis of the five websites studied in this dissertation, I seek to highlight the educational and informational characteristics of these websites and the role they play in reflecting Islam in a positive light.
Muslims in the West

This section of the study addresses issues pertaining to Muslims living in the West. In particular, this segment explores the affairs and concerns with regards to Muslims in the U.S. and some western European countries. The purpose of this part is to highlight the affairs of Muslims in the West as well as to bring to light some issues that Muslims face in these countries. First though, it might be useful to quote some statistics pertaining to population size in some western countries. According to the BBC, the U.K. has some 1.6 million Muslims, constituting 3.5 percent of the populations. Germany has a total of 3 million Muslims, about 3.6 percent of the population, while French Muslims are estimated at between 5 to 6 million, representing between 8 to 9.6 percent of the total population (British Broadcasting Corporation). In contrast, Muslims in America are estimated at between 6 to 7 million, or 3.5 percent of the population (Council for America-Islamic Relations). Table 1 below provides a breakdown of Muslim Americans by indigenous background.

Table 1

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Background</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Arab</td>
<td>32.7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>African American and European American</td>
<td>29.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>South Asian</td>
<td>29.3%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Armstrong (2000) stated that the “spectre of Islamic fundamentalism sends a shiver through Western society, which seems not nearly so threatened by the equally prevalent and violent fundamentalism of other faiths” (p. 176). This behavior has affected the attitudes of non-Muslims whenever they come in contact with Muslims, particularly in the West. Mamdani (2004) added that following September 11, the Bush Administration sought to make the distinction between “good Muslims” and “bad Muslims.” Whereas “bad Muslims” promoted fundamentalist acts and were responsible for the September 11 attacks, “good Muslims” constituted the overwhelming majority and were eager to support the war on terror. Nevertheless, continues Mamdani, “this could not hide the central message of such discourse: unless proved to be “good,” every Muslim was presumed to be “bad”” (p. 15). Muslims were henceforth under scrutiny to prove that they were moderate in nature and that they condemned such horrendous activities.

Furthermore, Fekete (2006) argued that some European countries are seriously pondering the establishment of databases on foreigners, “particularly foreigners from ‘the Islamic world” as they constitute a threat to Europe (p. 37). In Germany for instance, security services have developed a list of potential suspects whose only crime is being from an Islamic state. These systems of setting up of religious profiles have resulted in increased policing of Muslim neighborhoods, including the searching of mosques and meeting places. Similar acts against Muslims have also taken place in Denmark, Norway and the U.K. with entities like Amnesty International strongly denouncing such acts of racial profiling. Armstrong (2000) pointed out that Europe has witnessed many cases of religious clashes involving Muslims in the past. In Germany for instance, Turkish
immigrants have been killed in riots while in France girls who wear hijab – the veil – “have received extremely hostile coverage in the French press” (p. 176). Recently, France went as far as to forbid girls from wearing hijab in public schools, ostensibly to maintain a secular atmosphere, an effort protested by many French Muslims.

Poole (2006) conducted a study which dealt with British media coverage post 9/11 and the war on terror. One of the conclusions the study reached was that “Muslims are a threat to security in the UK due to their involvement in deviant activities” (p. 101) and that “Muslims are a threat to British ‘mainstream’ values and thus provoke integrative concerns” (p. 102). Karim (2006) contended that one of the root causes of such negativity surrounding Islam is that media “articles on terrorists claiming to act in the name of Islam tend to be illustrated with photographs depicting men bowing in prayer at a mosque” (p. 118). This negative coverage can only be unfavorable to the depiction of Islam and of Muslims in western media sources.

Lapidus (2002), in assessing Muslims in the U.S. noted that:

Prosperity and freedom attracted Muslims to America, but they are alienated by prejudice, discrimination, suspicion, and the negative attitudes of Americans toward Islam. As a result of the Iranian revolution, the Rushdie affair, the Gulf War, the rise of the Taliban in Afghanistan, and the September 11 attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon, the anxieties of Muslims have increased. While many Americans have attempted to reassure them of their welcome, Muslims find the present atmosphere hostile to Islam. Muslims are also challenged by the American demand for civic and patriotic assimilation. For Muslims there are special problems concerned with voting, participation in the
military, differing marriage and divorce laws, and banking and business practices. Muslims are also challenged by the absence of provision for Muslim holidays in American work and school regulations, and by the American social mores, including less controlling social practices toward girls and dating, and the weakness of patriarchal authority. (p. 812)

It is essential to highlight some of the problems faced by Muslims in the U.S. since the websites studied in this project are all U.S.-based. U.S. society has traditionally been little informed about Islam as a religion and about Muslims as its followers, causing many Muslims difficulties in integrating into U.S. society. Following 9/11, Islam has faced increasing scrutiny in the U.S. In addition, since the U.S. is largely a non-Muslim country, Muslims have found difficulties in dealing with issues such as children’s education and upbringing, banking (Islamic banking stipulates interest-free banking) as well as dealing with issues such as marriage, divorce, funerals, burials and the like. A Muslim society’s dealings with these issues vary tremendously from those of a western society.

Western Media Coverage of Islam

This segment will examine and analyze coverage of Islam in some western media outlets. I will draw on Edward Said’s *Covering Islam: How the Media and the Experts Determine How We See the Rest of the World* first published in 1981 and later revised in 1997. As stated earlier, one of the objectives of this research is to attempt to examine Said’s theory and to update it for Internet purposes in order to present a clearer view of Islam vis-à-vis western media.
Said (1997) was critical of western media and of its coverage of Islam. He noted that this distorted coverage is driven by “unrestrained ethnocentrism, cultural and even racial hatred” (p. li). At the heart of this deformed coverage according to Patai (1976) is the misunderstanding and misrepresentation that is associated with the use of the terms Muslim and Arab by westerners. The misconception associated with the use of the two terms interchangeably gives rise to the tendency to blur the lines between these two, thus leading to deep flaws in the situation.

Islam is thus gravely misconstrued in western news media systems while so-called experts regularly “pontificate on formulaic ideas about Islam on news programs and talk shows” (Patai, 1976, p. xi). Western media has the inclination to treat Islam as a backward and medieval entity and as a result western journalists reporting on the Arab world already have a predetermined notion of the region. Pintak (2006) pointed out that much of the misunderstanding arises from the fact that U.S. media organizations in particular fail to “allow their reporters to put down roots in order to gain expertise in the region” (p. 33). Ramji (2003) asserted that “many elements of the news media and an increasing number of Hollywood films represent all Muslims as Islamic fundamentalists” (p. 65). Such stereotyping has influenced U.S. policies toward Iraq, Afghanistan and the Palestinian-Israeli issue.

Said (1997) commented that Islam has become “a kind of scapegoat for everything we do not happen to like about the world’s new political, social, and economic patterns. For the right, Islam represents barbarism; for the left, medieval theocracy; for the center, a kind of distasteful exoticism” (p. xv). Very little is known about the Islamic world that meets the approval of the West. Furthermore, the modern western media and
its experts distort and control the perception of Islam and the Muslim world. In addition, the western media taints the image of Islam in a negative manner by predetermining what images of Islam are broadcast. Often times, women are shown wearing hijab as a demonstration of the repressive nature of the religion, while books are burned to as a show of backwardness and anti-intellectualism.

Mazrui (2006) pointed out that western media coverage of Islam and the West’s misunderstanding of the religion is due to the existence of a cultural distance between the West and Islam. That cultural distance however, is much narrower than the West assumes. Mazrui stressed that:

Islam is not just a religion, and certainly not just a fundamentalist political movement. It is a civilization and a way of life that varies from one Muslim country to another but is animated by a common spirit far more humane than most Westerners realize. (p. 243)

Media in Muslim Countries

The previous sections of this chapter provided some insight with regards to the Islamic faith in general, including pertinent issues that face Islam today. Stereotypes associated with Muslims in the West were discussed, including western media coverage of Islam. This section of the dissertation highlights the content of media outlets in some Muslim countries. While examples are drawn from a variety of media sources in multiple countries, specific attention is paid to the programming content of Al-Jazeera, the most significant media outlet in the Middle East.
Augustus Richard Norton (2003) stated that regimes in Muslim countries take advantage of Islam to further repress their people. In Egypt for instance, the government of Hosni Mubarak has been in power since 1981. Mubarak and his tight circle of allies rule the country with an iron fist. The parliament that exists is largely symbolic and has no effective power to oppose the president. When the government sought to further limit the power of the media, it passed Law 93 that aimed to subject journalists found critical of the government to harsh punishments. The lower house of parliament duly rubber stamped Law 93 and passed it on to the upper house of parliament. It was at this point that the journalists’ syndicate fiercely opposed the law. A debate ensued and while the upper house of parliament was trying to resolve the issue, journalists were being persecuted. Eventually, concluded Norton, Mubarak had to step in and shelve plans for Law 93, ensuring a rare victory for democracy in Egypt (Norton, 2003).

Print journalism is not the only medium under close government scrutiny in Egypt. According to Armbrust (1999), the film industry, a popular form of entertainment not only in Egypt but in the entire Arabic-speaking region, has long been under government control and supervision. Government-appointed censors ensure that no movie or soap opera is fit for public consumption until it stirs clear of government criticism, indecent material and religious debate. In the 1980s and 1990s, Egyptian directors such as Youssef Chahine used movies to reflect on the realities of life faced by the common folk. In his 1991 production, Cairo Enlightened by Its People, Chahine documented such modern-day phenomena facing Cairo’s inhabitants as “unemployment, sexual frustration, dirt, dilapidated public housing projects, seedy foreigners on sex vacations, and the ever-present lurking menace of fundamentalism” to highlight everyday
incidents and occurrences (p. 110). This movie at once cast Chahine as a villain in the
eyes of many Cairo inhabitants.

If *Cairo Enlightened by Its People* cast an unfavorable shadow on Chahine, *The
Immigrant* turned him into an outright outlaw (Fawal, 2001). Released in 1994, *The
Immigrant* chronicled the life and travels of the Prophet Youssef. The visual portrayal of
a Messenger of God was seen by many Muslims as blasphemous and led to Chahine’s
public condemnation, especially by film critics. Ironically, *The Immigrant* turned out to
be another success for Chahine at the box office.

Abu-Lughod (2005) identified a communication culture that has been ingrained in
peoples’ lives for more than thirty years. She stresses the importance of soap operas and
how closely tied they are to pertinent issues in Egyptian and Arab society. These soaps
not only seek to entertain but also to educate society about religious issues, gender
balances and everyday life instances.

Friedman (2005) has written extensively on two of the most critical issues that
shape our world today: globalization and Islam. Friedman argued that we live in an
increasingly “flat” world, not in the literal sense, but in the understanding that
globalization has introduced communication aspects that have in effect made the world
“smaller” in terms of distance. Electronic communication, most notably the Internet, has
revolutionized communication technologies. The Internet has clearly changed our way of
life and has expanded our horizons beyond means that would have been
incomprehensible just ten years ago.

Friedman’s formula for a more open and democratic society in the Muslim world
is simple: empower the middle class, liberate the media, privatize the economy and
introduce democracy. Arab economies have been especially stagnant due to high birth rates and declining output. A comprehensive analysis of the situation is provided by the United Nations Development Programme in its Arab Human Development Report, pointing out that the entire Arab world produces less goods and services in a given year than Belgium. Furthermore, the Report drew attention to the low levels of Internet access and availability in Arab countries and confirmed that the wealthier nations such as Qatar and Kuwait have higher Internet usage among their population than the poorer countries such as Yemen and Sudan. The Report was written by Arabs who are therefore familiar with the problems taking place in their own backyards (United Nations Development Programme, 2005). In addition, Rabasa et al. (2007) pointed out that “London is the intellectual, cultural, and media center of the Arab world. In 2004, more books in Arabic were published in Britain and France than the entire Arab world” (p. 91).

Friedman’s position on media liberalization is particularly intriguing. Clearly this is the exact same point of view of the Emir of Qatar. About fifteen years ago, the Emir removed his father from power and crowned himself the new ruler of this tiny, oil-rich kingdom. According to Miles (2005), one of the first actions undertaken by the new Emir was the abolition of the Ministry of Information, the propaganda arm of the regime. Such a move was unprecedented in the Arab world. Next, the Emir set up Al-Jazeera, a commercial, independent and liberal satellite news channel. Broadcast in Arabic, Al-Jazeera soon made a name for itself in the region by challenging authority. For the first time, Arabs were able to listen to criticism of their ruling governments (Miles, 2005). Additionally, live programs included phone-in segments, which provided forums for further government criticism. Soon, Arab governments voiced their complaints and for a
simple reason. These undemocratic regimes had previously ruled unchallenged but were now ridiculed by their own citizens on satellite television.

El-Nawawy and Iskander (2002) have also written extensively on Al-Jazeera’s rise to fame and the dominant role it plays in democratizing Arab and Islamic media. According to them, Al-Jazeera’s formula for success was straightforward: report the truth about current events without being opinionated. When the second Palestinian Intifada broke out in 2000, Al-Jazeera beamed live footage of violent Palestinian-Israeli clashes; and when U.S. and allied forces invaded Afghanistan in 2001 and Iraq in 2003, Al-Jazeera’s recordings on the field were again shown across the world. In addition, the channel became the preferred communication medium for the militant Al-Qaeda organization whenever it sought to broadcast its messages. Soon, Al-Jazeera was on everyone’s blacklist: Arab regimes were adamant that the station had CIA links; the U.S. administration was definite that it had ties to Al-Qaeda; and Saddam Hussein connected it to Israel. Despite all these allegations, Al-Jazeera remains an independent news organization whose main aims are to promote democracy in the region and to expose the repressive actions of ruling regimes in the Arab world (El-Nawawy and Iskander, 2002).

At its inception, the initiative behind this television network was to target the Arabic-speaking population of the region and act not only as a counter-balance to western media, but also to provide a forum for constructive debate and criticism to Arabs (Zelizer & Allan, 2002). One way by which Al-Jazeera seeks to promote healthy public discussions is through one of its shows, Religion and Life. Sheikh Yusuf al-Qaradawi, a native of Egypt, is neither the show’s presenter, nor an employee of Al-Jazeera, although he makes regular appearances on the show. A highly respected Muslim cleric, al-
Qaradawi often speaks at length during the ninety minute show and discusses issues facing Muslims from a religious point of view. Often times, the Sheikh discusses a wide range of subjects, from politics to traditions and values to sex, drawing upon his understanding of the Qur’an (Miles, 2005).

The popularity of *Religion and Life* owes much to al-Qaradawi’s modern interpretation of Islam. The Sheikh’s commitment to ‘modernize’ the religion in order to incorporate new and fresh social developments has earned him admiration and praise in the Arab world. Moreover, al-Qaradawi’s contemporary analysis of Islam is in stark contrast to those of traditional and conservative authorities. In one memorable episode of *Religion and Life*, the Sheikh shocked conservative viewers by first stating that the Qur’an forbids parents from marrying off their daughters against their wishes. Al-Qaradawi did not stop here. He went on to declare his liberal views on sex by pronouncing that sex between consenting adults is not wrong (Miles, 2005). Viewers are drawn to al-Qaradawi’s thorough understanding of Islam and are impressed by the Sheikh’s contemporary illustrations of Islam – a rare spectacle in the Middle East. Furthermore, al-Qaradawi is a passionate advocate of modernity and of modern communication systems and is an avowed believer in the power of the Internet as a communication and an educational tool for Muslims (Randeep, 2004). In addition, al-Qaradawi has integrated the use of the Internet as a communication tool and has relied on its power and far reach in order to preach a moderate version of Islam. For instance, on his personal website he has repeatedly denounced the use of violence against civilians as preached by Islam (Bunt, 2006).
Al-Jazeera’s ‘opinion and the other opinion’ motto has been such a resounding success that other news channels such as Dubai-based Al-Arabiya have sought to emulate its accomplishments. Shapiro (2005) wrote that the war of words between the two channels has reached unprecedented heights, with Al-Jazeera accusing Al-Arabiya of imitator tactics, while Al-Arabiya stressed that it wants to report substantial news items devoid of any personal opinion.

The Al-Jazeera and Al-Arabiya cases are not the only examples of media outlets that have made an impressive impact in the Muslim world. Huq (2003) noted that a new phenomenon is taking shape in Bangladesh. This occurrence involves the publishing of Islamic romantic novels in that country. The objective behind the publishing of these novels is twofold: to educate the population about Islam, and to encourage reading in order to expunge illiteracy. These Islamic novels, continued Huq, have become a resounding success since they are written in simple language and are accompanied by attractive cover designs and illustrative drawings and photos. Additionally, the romantic nature of these novels adds an extra dimension by capturing the reader’s curiosity and attention. Furthermore, these Islamic novels deal with a variety of pertinent issues in society such as health, socio-economic concerns and education.

Islam on the Internet

As little as 20 years ago, Anderson (2003) revealed that the concept of Islam online did not even exist. In universities, research labs and among either government or business institutions, the Internet was hardly having an impact on Islam. Through what he refers to as “technological adepts,” (p. 894) Islam gradually began to make its way to
the Internet. This mainly involved the introduction of Internet technology by Muslim students who studied in the West, by Muslim professionals who sought jobs and by Muslim political exiles overseas. Initially, excerpts of the Qur’an and basic information about Islam were placed on online databases.

Gradually, as the Internet became widely available and as users become more sophisticated, the Islamic content became more sophisticated as well. I use the word sophistication as a descriptive term to indicate the quality of content being shared by Internet users. Simple email messages involving text only were first used, but soon, chat rooms, file sharing techniques and message forums began to emerge (Bunt, 2004). Anderson (2003) argued that the Internet provides for a significant new medium that provides “opportunities for alternative expressions, networking, and interpretations that draw on and extend its techniques” (p. 56).

Gary Bunt’s Islam in the Digital Age: E-jihad, Online Fatwas and Cyber Islamic Environments (2003) provided a good starting point for this study. The book gave a detailed and useful account of the use of the Internet as an important communication tool for Islam. During the past decade, the web has emerged as an integral media system and Bunt pointed out that an increasing number of websites relating to Islam and to Muslims is now easily-accessible to anyone in any part of the world. Information regarding Islam is now readily available to Muslims and to non-Muslims alike. The Internet has in effect revolutionized the religion and Muslims are able to access online sources in order to keep abreast with issues, discussions and debates taking place in the Islamic field. Moreover, Islamic websites provide the opportunity for people of other faiths to access such forums.
to educate themselves about Islam and to become more knowledgeable about the religion (Anderson, Fall 2003).

Eickelman and Anderson (2003) have also written extensively about new media forms in Muslim settings and have addressed the issue of the Internet as a communication tool for Islam. According to them, the Internet seeks to “occupy an interstitial space between the super-literacy of traditional religious specialists and mass sub-literacy or illiteracy” of the masses (p. 9). The middle class is the driver of this new Internet technology and has led to the creation of the above-mentioned ‘technological adepts.’ This term refers to Muslims who have migrated to the West either to study or to work. In order to keep in touch with their homelands and their cultures, this group of emigrants turned to the Internet to fill that void. The Internet provided them with discussion forums and chat rooms in which they conversed with other Muslims on topics of mutual concern.

Furthermore, Gonzalez-Quijano (2003) pointed out that in societies limited by political control, the Internet offers “the possibility for communicating with a wide public at a cost considerably lower than that of other media” (p. 68). One is therefore left in no doubt that Internet technology has greatly expanded the public sphere of communication and afforded the possibility of communication through mediums previously underutilized. This realization can only be beneficial to the publishers of Islamic online content as well as to the users of Islamic online content.

**Hijab**

This part of the research introduces the reader to the term *hijab*. The objective of this segment is to explore and investigate a significant part of Islam and of Islamic dress. It is important to introduce this term and to highlight the traditional connotation of the
word *hijab* and to juxtapose that with the contemporary use of the term today. The purpose is to define the term *hijab*, making the distinction between its traditional Muslim meaning and the way it is understood in western society. Furthermore, this section will also highlight the phenomenon of wearing the *hijab* as a fashion statement by Muslim women. In so doing, a few websites will be introduced in order to touch upon and demonstrate the significance of this mode of dress. The websites to be explored are virtual shopping malls where Muslim women purchase *hijab* and other accessories.

*Hijab* is the Arabic term for ‘to cover’ and is based on the noun *hajb* meaning to veil or screen. Esposito (2003) pointed out that in western terminology, the word *hijab* refers primarily to a woman’s head cover. In Islam, however, *hijab* signifies modesty and privacy. Nevertheless, the ongoing debate in many Muslim quarters centers around the significance of wearing *hijab*. Khan (2006) pointed out that while in some predominantly Muslim countries like Saudi Arabia and Iran the wearing of *hijab* is compulsory, in other countries such as Turkey, women are given the freedom of choice to dress as they please but are prohibited from wearing *hijab* in government buildings, schools and institutions. In other majority Muslim countries such as Egypt and Sudan, wearing of *hijab* is neither mandatory nor is it prohibited.

A recent phenomenon concerning the wearing of *hijab* has to do with the emergence of websites that sell such traditional Islamic attire. Conducting a simple search on Google by typing in ‘*hijab*’ and ‘buying *hijab*’ yields a number of such websites. The majority of them are located in the U.S. including sites such as *hilalplaza.com* (California), *hijabsonline.com*, and *alhannah.com* (Connecticut) and *hijabs-r-us.com* (Colorado). Some of these online malls such as *thecanadian muslim.ca*
(Canada) and thehijabshop.com (England) can be found in other western countries. Although these represent only a handful of websites available and that adhere to women’s hijab, it nevertheless represents a significant and new issue that has been made possible and expanded by the availability of the Internet and of the advancement in communication and information technologies.

These websites have clearly established a niche market for themselves. By targeting Muslim women, they have been able to distinguish themselves from other websites that sell ‘mainstream’ type clothing or websites that simply discuss Islam and Muslim topics. This unique position allows websites that sell hijab to market and distribute a wide array of clothes that adhere to specific segment of the Muslim population. A brief glance at any of the above-mentioned websites will immediately inform the observer that these are well-organized business entities judging by the design and outlay of the websites and by the ease of which one will be able to make an online purchase by placing items in a shopping cart and checking out with your purchases simply at the click of a button.

Although hijab has been worn by Muslim women for a considerable amount of time, its evolution over the centuries provides an analogy of its significance today. In addition, wearing of the hijab is not merely regarded part of being a Muslim by women, but the younger generation has used this attire to make an acceptable fashion statement. The fact that hijab can be purchased online through a number of websites further draws attention to the growing trend that tradition and technology are able to co-exist. One significant theme of this research is to stress the evolution of Islam and its ability to
embrace modern communication means. The emergence of online malls that sell hijab is further proof that Muslims are able to develop and to embrace contemporary technology.

Strategic Planning

Introduction

This segment of the research deals with strategic and management planning. Since one of the objectives of this research is to identify the management and financial practices of Islamic websites, this section will serve the purpose of introducing the most significant strategic management practices in the field. It is significant to include this section in the research since Islamic content on the Internet is a relatively new phenomenon. In carrying out an examination of the management and financial practices of Islamic websites, the researcher is better able to deconstruct the websites and hence gain further understanding of the way they operate.

The websites studied in this research exist as online communication initiatives of several organizations. The organizations responsible for publishing and updating the content of these websites adhere to a set of business strategies. These strategies stem from the vision and the mission statements of these organizations and are in line with the administrative and financial policies of the organizations. Yanow (2000) drew a comparison between organizations and cultures and stresses that members of an organizations can be equated to members of a certain culture. The culture of each organization is considered to be unique and distinct, with members of each organization as a unique set of individuals. As such, it is an important part of this dissertation not only to study the websites and the organizations running these websites, but also to devise a
certain context by which to define a framework that dissects the everyday workings of the organizations.

Simply defined, strategy represents a plan to achieve a goal. This plan should be long-term in order to effectively allow for time and space so that the strategy works out. There has been considerable confusion with regards to the use of the word. Not surprisingly, we hear of terms such as ‘acquisition strategy’, ‘sales strategy,’ ‘marketing strategy’ and ‘expansion strategy.’ But are these really strategies? Or are they merely misused expressions?

Michael E. Porter is perhaps the leading authority on strategy. Porter has written extensively on competitive strategy in particular and on what makes the firm achieve operational effectiveness. Porter’s earliest work on strategy involved his Five Forces model. In this scenario, Porter (1979) identified buyer power, suppliers, barriers to entry, threat of substitutes, and rivalry. Rivalry was placed right in the center. This is where competitive advantage becomes prevalent. Since perfect competition does not exist in the marketplace, rivals jostle with each other to gain a competitive advantage over each other and thus increase their margins. Furthermore, a company’s strategy should distinguish it from others. This ensures that the firm’s successes are not replicated by others and its core competencies differentiate it from the competition.

Porter defines strategy as what sets a company apart from its competitors. A firm must identify what its core competencies are and concentrate on these in order to distinguish itself from competition. In order to so, the firm must formulate its overall strategy by keeping a number of factors in mind. These factors include a company’s product, the external environment, customer needs and pricing issues. Additionally,
Porter states that strategy involves providing good fit for the firm vis-à-vis its resources (Porter, 1996). Only in doing so is a firm able to devise a strategy that fits with its operations and help guide it in the right direction.

To a large extent, Hamel and Prahalad (1994) agreed with Porter. To them, strategy is the overarching concept that defines a company. Strategy is a long-term issue. Strategy should direct the company to places it wants to go and in achieving its objectives. Strategy should encompass the firm’s activities and should be known by all employees. A sound strategy will lead to advantages in the marketplace and sustained profits.

Hamel and Prahalad (1994) further revealed that in order to stay competitive in the marketplace, managers must constantly adjust their firm’s strategy in order to remain aggressive. Most often, we hear of companies undertaking restructuring initiatives in order to downsize and achieve efficiency. This, according to Hamel and Prahalad, is a misguided effort. Restructuring does not introduce any fundamental changes to the business. At best, it buys you time. A more advisable approach to follow will be to reengineer the activities of a firm. This will lead to more radical changes, while keeping an eye on overall strategy. Furthermore, Hamel and Prahalad pointed out that layoffs occur as a result of restructuring efforts and consider these downsizing efforts as mistakes by managers who have fallen asleep at the wheel and thus missed the turn to the future.

In his approach to defining strategy, Mintzberg (1987) outlined his Five Ps. These are plan, pattern, ploy, position and perspective. To begin with, Mintzberg stated that for any firm that aims to attain success, it must devise a plan. This plan is its winning formula and provides a set of rules and guidelines. Without a plan, a project is
bound to fail and is doomed from its onset. Pattern represents consistency. Any firm must be consistent in what it does. A firm’s strategy will not succeed if executives keep tinkering with it and frequently changing direction. Wal-Mart for instance insists on ‘always low prices.’ In the telecommunications industry, Fox News states that its coverage is always ‘fair and balanced.’

The third P is ploy. Ploy is a maneuver or a tactic that the firm pulls off from time to time. The ploy’s aim is to set the firm apart and to distinguish it from competitors. Position refers to the firm’s situation with respect to the external environment. Where does the firm stand now? Where does it aim to stand next year? Next two years? It is important that any firm is aware of its position at all times. Lastly, perspective is how the firm sees itself. What should it focus on? Verizon for instance acquired MCI and called the new venture Verizon Business, clearly aiming to serve the business sector.

The approach that Kim and Mauborgne (2005) used in defining strategy employs an interesting comparison. The authors refer to red oceans as the competitive markets that exist today. These markets are characterized by low margins and low profits. Competition is intense and little room is available for any firm to distinguish it from others. Blue oceans, on the other hand, represent untapped markets. These are characterized by high margins and high profits. Blue oceans are what companies should seek to exploit. Blue strategies are the only means by which firms can steer clear of competition and gain a competitive advantage in the marketplace.

In his book Good to Great: Why Some Companies Make the Leap and Others Don’t, Collins (2001) undertook an extensive study of over 1,400 companies for a period
of 30 years. The aim of the study was to uncover the myth behind why some firms are successful while others are not. Collins states that companies who made the leap from good to great were those that consistently outperformed Wall Street estimates and beat market indices several times over. Only 11 firms were classified as being great at the end of the study. Among these were Kroger, Walgreens and Wells Fargo.

Collins (2001) was disappointed to discover that there was no secret, or no single underlying factor that made companies great. Rather, a combination of factors and characteristics played a part in the transformation process. Chief among them are dedication, discipline, focus, hard work and self-motivation. Having the right leaders and employees is, of course, very integral to the success of the firm. In addition, Collins asserted that a firm does not become great out of the blue. Instead, he uses the flywheel notion to demonstrate his point. He stated that in pushing a big, heavy flywheel, one is definitely bound to struggle at first. Gradually, however, the flywheel gains momentum picks up speed and starts spinning faster and faster. According to Collins, this represented a dedication to commitment, perseverance and determination in order to accomplish what one sets out to achieve and put their company on the right path to success.

Donald Sull’s (1999) research concentrated on the reasons behind good companies going bad. According to him, this change does not occur overnight. The prevailing factor however is what Sull calls “active inertia” (p.42). Sull explained by stating that successful, profitable companies are the last to change their ways. This is because no one wants to tamper with a winning formula. Managers are reluctant to
instigate change in profitable companies. While this phenomenon is understandable, Sull stressed that it does not work in today’s ever changing marketplace.

The model presented by Kim and Mauborgne appears to be the most appealing and here are two demonstrative examples why. Al-Jazeera satellite channel, based in Qatar provides an excellent example of blue ocean strategies. The channel was established in an area of the world not know for its democratic system of governance. Al-Jazeera sought to break this barrier by providing a truly democratic discussion forum on its airwaves. State-owned media systems in the region traditionally provided news items that were strictly censored. Al-Jazeera’s news was uncensored and was often times broadcast live over the air. The channel became an instant success and was therefore able to carve a niche market for itself.

Another example from the telecommunications industry is that of CNN. Started by Ted Turner in 1980, many analysts predicted immediate failure. No cable channel had previously provided news only, 24 hours a day. However, CNN managed to establish a niche market and distinguish itself from all other news providers. Today, its worldwide operations ensure that it has correspondents in almost every part of the world and that it can broadcast live vital events at a moment’s notice.

Strategy models presented by Porter, Hamel and Prahalad, Mintzberg and Kim and Mauborgne provided valuable and constructive approaches for modern day managers. This section provided insight on both terminological concepts associated with strategic management and leading practitioners in the field. The second research question that this dissertation attempts to answer is: How do websites with Islamic thrusts emerge, develop and sustain themselves in the current global context? To answer this
question, I find it essential to examine ways by which the websites are consistently able to attract information seekers to their pages and provide a service that consumers find indispensable. In my interview guide, one question that I asked of all respondents is how they distinguish their website from others. In answering this question, respondents provided an insight into strategies that their websites adopt in their day-to-day operations.

Theoretical Framework

This section of the research paper identifies two theoretical frameworks and attempt to link them to this study. Scholars and critics in the field of communication agree that the rapid rate of the Internet’s development – particularly in the last decade or so – has created an expansive body of knowledge on the role the Internet has played within a social context framework. As such, I have identified two theories – diffusion of innovations and social networking – that are a best fit for this study and that would further help to understand the phenomenon under study.

Diffusion of Innovations

The diffusion of innovations theoretical framework was first formalized by Everett Rogers and has become synonymous with his name. Rogers (2003) argued that getting a new idea adopted is a difficult and laborious process, even though this idea might have certain obvious advantages. According to him, diffusion is the process of communicating a new idea or innovation through certain channels. Over a period of time, members of a social system will eventually become exposed to this new innovation and will either accept it or reject it.
In considering the diffusion of innovations model, it is imperative to underline that decisions are not authoritative or collective. Rogers (2003) noted:

An innovation presents an individual or an organization with a new alternative or alternatives, as well as new meanings of solving problems. However, the probability that the new idea is superior to previous practice is not initially known with certainty by individual problem solvers. Thus, individuals are motivated to seek further information about the innovation in order to cope with the uncertainty that it creates. (p. xx)

Hence, each member of the social system and his/her adoption of the innovation will depend on their awareness, interest, evaluation and trial among other characteristics. Rogers’s theory stressed that in order for the diffusion process to occur there are five characteristics that have to be addressed. This five-step process is as follows:

1. Knowledge – person becomes aware of an innovation and has some idea of how it functions,
2. Persuasion – person forms a favorable or unfavorable attitude toward the innovation,
3. Decision – person engages in activities that lead to a choice to adopt or reject the innovation,
4. Implementation – person puts an innovation into use, and
5. Confirmation – person evaluates the results of an innovation-decision already made.

Rogers further pointed out that it is only about 10-25 percent of the members of society who adopt an innovation relatively quickly. Once that is done, the remaining members of society will follow suit and embrace the new technology. Moreover, Rogers theorized that any new innovation will spread through society in an S curve (Figure 1). The lower part of the S curve indicates the early adapters of the new innovation, as the
innovation is first introduced. Rogers states that “the S-shaped adopter distribution rises slowly at first, when there are only a few adopters in each time period. The curve then accelerates to a maximum until half of the individuals in the system have adopted. Then it increases at a gradually slower rate as fewer and fewer remaining individuals adopt the innovation” (p. 272). As more members of society adopt the new innovation, the new technology becomes more common and is accepted into society.

Figure 1. Bell Curve and S Curve.

Source: Adapted from Rogers (2003). Diffusion of Innovations.

The single most important factor that prevents users from adopting a new technology is uncertainty. Members of any society would like to be given the assurance that a new innovation will ultimately work in their favor but will undoubtedly like to avoid the risk associated with any new innovation (Rogers, 2003).
Diffusion of innovations theory can effectively be linked to the research topic of Islam online. The Internet as a technology has been in existence since the early 1980s. However, it did not become part of mainstream communication systems until the introduction of the World Wide Web in the mid 1990s. Even then, it took a few more years for the Internet as a technology to be adopted by users, as concerns regarding security and privacy arose (Flournoy, 2004).

Nevertheless, as the rapid adoption of the Internet became apparent, diverse forms of information began to make their way online. Islamic organizations have been keen to adopt this new and emerging initiative and utilize it to develop websites on the Internet. As far as this study is concerned, the case can be made that Islam online is being adopted as a relatively new phenomenon. Traditionally, Islam has always been a ‘local’ religion, in the sense that one grows up with it and is taught the religion as a youngster either at home or at the local school or mosque with an imam. However, for Islam to be accessible online through websites adds a new dimension that had previously been unavailable and unheard of. Islam is able to transcend its traditional barriers and to be readily available in an online context to a variety of audiences and information seekers.

**Social Network Theory**

First studied by J. A. Barnes in the early 1950s, Social Network Theory studies social relationships around an individual, or a group or an organization. Social network theory produces an alternative to traditional sociological studies, placing less emphasis on individual characteristics and more attributes on relationships and ties with other actors in the network. Wasserman and Faust (1994) stressed that in social network theory, the unit
of analysis is not the individual, but an entity consisting of a collection of individuals and linkages among them.

An integral part of social network theory is that it regards social relationships in terms of nodes and ties. Whereas nodes are the individual actors within the network, ties constitute the relationships between these actors. Multiple ties between the nodes might well exist. In addition, the shape and size of the network indicates social capital. Smaller, tighter networks usually imply a closer knit group, which ultimately benefits their members. Larger, more open networks, on the other hand, may develop some loose connections. One way of grasping a clearer comprehension of social network theory is by trying to envisage it as a mapping process that measures the dynamics on a number of levels between people, groups, organizations, countries and host of other entities (Scott, 1991).

Social network analysis aims at studying and decoding patterns behind people’s interaction. By studying specific patterns, network analysis aims to uncover important features that make individuals behave in a certain way. The underlying assumption of the theory is that a better understanding of relationships will lead to a thorough and better explanation of social phenomenon. Social networks have also been used to examine how organizations interact with each other, through staff members and through their executives. This collaboration could either be formal or informal. One respondent from mpac.org points out that: “As an organization, MPAC’s mission has been to never go it alone…There are a number of staff members, about three or four, who volunteered and worked with MAS in the past and another staff member who is an ex-intern with CAIR. We have working relationships as well as personal relationships with other
organizations”. This point illustrates the partnerships that exist between the websites under study and the organizations behind them.

As far as this research is concerned, social network theory can be linked to the study of websites with Islamic content. The websites under study are primarily involved in educating their users and spreading information about Islam. Since the websites are based in the U.S. (a predominantly non-Muslim country), their users turn to them in search for information about Islam. The websites therefore act as a central meeting place for information seekers and also represent some kind of authority on Islam to their users. The flow of information is in this relationship is two-fold: information and knowledge from the website to the user, and information from the user to the website in the form of either asking a question or feedback. This situation is best represented in the diagram below. The three individuals on the right are seeking information from a central point (in this case a website), while the two individuals on the left are involved in two-way communication with a website, either in the form of asking a question or providing feedback.
Rogers’s diffusion of innovations theory is explicity-linked to social networks and their role in influencing the spread of new ideas and practices. Change agents and opinion leaders often play significant roles in encouraging the adoption of innovations, although factors inherent to the innovations also play a role.
Figure 3. Two examples of social networks

Source: Adapted from www.worldpress.com
With the advent of the Internet, the appearance of online social networks is becoming commonplace. One of the most popular of these online forums is MySpace.com. The website’s popularity had soared to such an extent that it had over 22 million registered voters and was adding 1 million more each month. At one point, MySpace was generating more web traffic than Google. By 2005, MySpace was bought out by News Corp., Fox’s parent company (Rosenbush, 2005). Stelter (2009) pointed out that Facebook.com is another popular social networking website, with an estimated 175 million active users worldwide.

Summary

This chapter provided a summary of relevant literature in the field. I provided a background of Islam commencing with how the religion started, how it spread and what its main sects are. Since this dissertation studies websites with an Islamic theme in the U.S., literature reviewed also included how the West regards Islam. This provided insight into who constitutes Muslims in the West and how western media covers Islam. One of the aims of this research project is to examine the management practices of these websites, and a section of the literature review was devoted to strategic planning, highlighting major strategies employed in business enterprise administration. Finally, this chapter outlined the theoretical framework employed by this study. Both theories used by this dissertation provided information that helped to understand the phenomenon under study. Diffusion of innovations theory highlighted ways in which a new innovation is adopted by society. In this research, I placed emphasis on how Islam
online, as a new concept, is adopted by Internet users in the United States. Social network theory further demonstrated the behavior of Internet users and their interaction with the websites. While some users visit the websites to collect information, others interact with the websites through providing feedback or through asking a question.
CHAPTER 3: RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Introduction

The previous sections described the purposes and objectives of the study, reviewed relevant published literature and stated questions that this research will attempt to answer. In this section of the paper, the methodological framework is outlined in detail. In order to answer the research questions, a relevant data collection technique is identified and utilized. This enables the researcher to gain an in-depth understanding of the nature of the phenomenon to be studied. It will also allow for conclusions to be reached with regards to the research questions.

As discussed in Chapter One, my research questions are:

• How has the learning culture of Islam been extended through the possibility of the Internet? and

• How do websites with Islamic thrusts emerge, develop and sustain themselves in the current global context?

For that purpose the appropriate data collection technique to answer those questions would suggest a qualitative methodology. The objective in devising this research is to collect information through a qualitative process of information gathering. The researcher believes that a qualitative method of data collection is best suited to this project in order to collect the kind of information desired. A combination of content analysis and in-depth interviews procedures are to be utilized. This is a captivating issue but is also a complex one. The use of more than one method to study the phenomenon at
hand will permit the researcher to better gain some deeper understanding of the intricacies of how Islamic communication online functions.

Content analysis allowed the researcher to conduct a meticulous and systematic investigation on the five Islamic websites. This also allowed for the scrutiny of the websites without interference or any type of emotional display from an informant. Gilbert (2001) stated that “qualitative research focuses on the understanding and exploration of sometimes emotionally laden human phenomenon” (p. 11). A content analysis methodology thus enabled the researcher to engage in data gathering without any “outside” interference. Interviewing on the other hand, provided the researcher with intimate contact with the informant and made for better understanding of subjects from their frame of mind.

Babbie (2004) stated that qualitative analysis is “the nonnumerical examination and interpretation of observations, for the purpose of discovering underlying meanings and patterns of relationships” (p. 370). Denzin and Lincoln (2000) defined qualitative research as a field of study that involves:

the studied use and collection of a variety of empirical materials – case study, personal experience; introspection; life history; interview; artifacts; cultural texts and productions; observational, historical, interactional and visual texts – that describe routine and problematic moments and meanings in individual’s lives. (p. 5)

Flick (1998) posited that qualitative research is “inherently multidimensional in focus” and represents an attempt to “secure an in-depth understanding of the phenomenon
in question” (p. 230). However, Flick added that “objective reality can never be captured. We know a thing only through its representations” (p. 230).

The choice of qualitative research method is thus subjective. The overriding principle was to construct a relationship between the researcher and what is studied in order to formulate answers to questions that provide meaning to specific experiences. Islam online represents an interesting and a comparatively unknown research topic. It also represents a new and evolving research agenda. The combination of Islam and online media is a relatively new area of study. In conducting research on the issue, one is bound to learn more about Islamic representation online and become more knowledgeable and better informed on a significant topic. Therefore the researcher believed that the use of a qualitative method of data collection represented the most suitable way of information gathering for this research project.

The Researcher

The researcher in this case is a doctoral student in mass communication. He has taught undergraduate students for the past two years in the field of mass communication and media studies. The researcher also had the opportunity to work in the telecommunications field for a period of five years. The combination of field work and involvement in academia has fostered the researcher’s keen interest in exploring a subject that stands at the cross-roads of tradition and new media. The fact that a religion that is 1,400 years old is utilizing new communication methods such as the Internet is a case worthy of study and worthy of critical analysis and assessment.
In conducting this research, the researcher maintained research objectivity at all times. In addition, the researcher’s background as a Muslim intensified the matter of access to the literature and to Islamic websites and hence acted as a qualifying factor in helping to carry out this research. Hignett (2005) noted that “objectivity in qualitative research is generally not an issue as the goal is not usually to seek neutrality but to recognize the researcher’s effect on the research, making explicit how this may affect the interpretation and findings” (p. 117). Moreover, due to the researcher’s expertise, familiarity with the language and familiarity with the terminology, the issue of the researcher as an instrument should not be a subject of concern. In fact, the researcher’s position should be seen as a significant advantage in successfully conducting this research.

Observer Bias

Angrosino and Mays de Perez (2003) stated that “the possibility of “observer bias” looms large in the thinking of both sociologists and anthropologists in the ethnographic tradition” due to the fact that “each person who conducts observational research brings his or her distinctive talents and limitations to the enterprise” (p. 112). Although the researcher did not carry out any observation in this research, it was imperative that any element of bias be removed from the reporting of the final findings and from the analysis. This is inherent because “the complete observer was one who has to all intents and purposes removed from the setting, and who functioned without interacting in any way with those being observed” (p. 113). Likewise, whilst conducting interviews with key informants, the researcher asked questions that warranted frank and
sincere responses and avoided leading questions. Researcher objectivity was maintained at all times.

Furthermore, King (2004) pointed out that whereas “in a quantitative study…the researcher’s concern is to obtain accurate information from the interviewee, untainted by relationship factor,” in qualitative data collection techniques, “the researcher is seen as a ‘participant’ in the research, actively shaping the course of the interview rather than passively responding to the interviewer’s pre-set questions” (p. 11). In qualitative research therefore, the researcher-informant relationship is bound to exist and should not be regarded as a diversion from the goals of the study but rather as a compliment to the overall outcome of the project. As Mazrui (2002) argued “in order to understand fully some aspects of a society, it is not good enough simply to observe it; you have to be a member of it” (p. 7). My strength as an insider researcher was inextricably linked to the fact that being a Muslim, I am in a suitable position to not only critically analyze and examine these Islamic websites, but also understand the underlying religious language and discourse involved. I strongly believe that my familiarity with the language used by these websites should be seen as an advantage rather than a shortcoming.

Data Collection

Deciding on data collection techniques constitute an integral part of any research. Glesne and Peshkin (1992) stated that in qualitative research, data gathering methods include interviews, participant observation and document analysis. Hignett (2005) pointed out that qualitative data is collected through three different ways. The first is interviewing, which entails asking questions, making use of peoples’ knowledge and
understanding interpretations. The second method of qualitative data collection is observation which requires watching the transactions that take place between different members. The third and final method involves collecting data from documents by examining and reading the papers. This is important because “the written words, texts, documents, records or aspects of social organization are meaningful constituents of the social world themselves” (p. 120). In this study, the researcher used both content analysis to study the websites and in-depth interviews as methods of data collection inquiry. This enabled me to gain a holistic view of the phenomenon of Islamic websites. By using two data collection techniques, I am able to gather credible data and thus gain a better understanding of the phenomenon under study.

Content Analysis

Since the phenomenon to be studied entails Islamic websites, two methods of data collection were employed in this research. The first method involved a complete and comprehensive content analysis of the five websites. Babbie (2004) defined content analysis as:

the study of recorded human communications. Among the forms suitable for study are books, magazines, Web pages, poems, newspapers, songs, paintings, speeches, letters, email messages, bulletin board postings on the Internet, laws, and constitutions, as well as any components or collections thereof. (p. 314)
Content analysis, continues Babbie, is “well suited to the study of communications and to answering the classic question of communications research: ‘Who says what, to whom, and why, how, and with what effect?’” (p. 314).

The content analysis technique was employed in this instance to yield greater information about the phenomenon to be studied. It represents an efficient method to collect data from the websites. However, it is important not to rely only on content analysis as a data gathering technique but to use it in conjunction with another data collection method. As Silverman (2003) points out, texts on their own do not represent organizational routines clearly but are only social productions. Hence it is imperative to use content analysis in collaboration with another data collection scheme, which in this case is in-depth interviews.

In-depth Interviews

Silverman (2003) asserted that “for the qualitative-minded researcher, the open-ended interview apparently offers the opportunity for an authentic gaze into the soul of another, or even for a politically correct dialogue in which researcher and researched offer mutual understanding and support” (p. 343). Interviews were carried out with the aim of exploring issues with informants rather than to test their knowledge or to categorize. Most of the questions asked during the interview process were open ended in order to allow the participant to provide in-depth explanations rather than to limit them to ‘yes’ or ‘no’ answers.

It was the aim of the researcher, however, not to lead the informants by asking specific questions in order to receive specific answers. Rather, the interview participants
were allowed to express their honest and candid opinion in response to questions asked. Additionally, interviews are perhaps the most sociable way to collect data and are more personal than surveys or questionnaires.

It is of the essence to keep in mind that one of the research questions that this study aims to answer attempted to comprehend the inner workings of the organizations that publish the Islamic websites. Gabriel and Griffiths (2004) stressed that “stories enable us to study organizational politics, culture and change in uniquely illuminating ways, revealing how wider organizational issues are viewed, commented upon and worked upon by their members” (p. 114). Gabriel and Griffiths (2004) further pointed out:

by collecting stories in a particular organization, by listening and comparing different accounts, by investigating how narratives are constructed around specific events, by examining which events in an organization’s history generate stories and which ones fail to do so, we gain access to deeper organizational realities, closely linked to their members’ experiences. (p. 114)

One vital aspect in conducting face-to-face interviews is to “seek” stories from key informants in order to answer the research questions that this research aims to answer.

**Primary Data**

Primary data was gathered using in-depth personal interviews. Interviews act as the principal source of gathering information in this research project. One researcher who has written on data collection methods in qualitative research is Nigel King (2004). His main focus has been in gathering evidence through interviews. According to him, it is necessary to first identify which type of interview the researcher will conduct; in-depth,
exploratory, semi-structured or unstructured. Next, it is imperative that the researcher defines the research questions. Again, these will act as guidelines in order to steer the interview in a certain direction as identified by the researcher. Also, it is important to create an interview guide. This guide will ensure that the interview will remain on a course established by the interviewer. It will also ensure that the interviewer remains in control of the interview process. Additionally, the interview guide allows the researcher to stay focused on gathering the information needed for the project by asking specific questions.

The next step is the recruitment of the participants. The choice of interviewees is tied to the research subject, and the participants are hence chosen accordingly. Finally, continues King, the participant can then carry out the interview (King, 2004). In conducting this research, it was important to keep these points in mind as they represent crucial guidelines when gathering data using interviews.

Secondary Data

The secondary data used in this research project came mainly from printed material and online sources. Printed material included books, academic journal articles, official publications and the like. In addition, online sources included Islamic website databases such as www.musalman.com a catalog containing the top 100 Islamic websites on the Internet. This categorization was achieved by tracking the number to users and, subsequently, devising the appropriate statistics.

Interview Questions Construction

The interview questions for this study were developed based on the themes that arose from the initial research that was conducted. In addition, some questions that were
asked of respondents were not contemplated in advance but arose out of the information revealed in the interview as it developed. In many instances during the interview process a sentence or even a single word triggered the next question or series of questions. The researcher was aware that the interview guideline set previously was not fixed and hence allowed for some flexibility.

*Interviews Timeline*

Interviews with key informants were conducted when carrying out the field work segment of this research. Key informants included those responsible for aspects such as editorial oversight and/or design of the websites. The researcher also conducted interviews with a Muslim woman who wears the *hijab*, known in Arabic as *muhajahah*. The phenomenon of online so-called *zay islamy*, or Islamic dress sales, is a major commercial success. Since this Muslim woman in this instance purchased *hijab* from online stores, this helped the researcher shed more light on a new trend that has recently taken place in Islam.

The researcher conducted the interviews in the spring, summer and fall of 2007. This timeframe provided the researcher with ample time to conduct the interviews intended for this dissertation. No additional interviews were conducted following the first round of interviews. The initial interviews conducted presented the researcher with enough material to conduct his analysis and to dissect these websites. Since the websites studied are hosted in the U.S., conducting of interviews represented a logistical advantage to this research project, and enabled the researcher to gather the necessary data in a relatively short period of time.
Furthermore, Fontana and Frey (2003) pointed out that “virtual interviewing, in which Internet connections are used synchronously or asynchronously to obtain information” (p. 97) represents another possibility through which modern communication tools have facilitated methods of data collection. Morgan and Symon (2004) stated that “electronic interviews are research studies that use electronic communication facilities to access and communicate with participants [and] can be held online, in real time, using the Internet” (p. 22). Ease of access to email and telephone communication allowed the researcher to contact his interview participants and to conduct interviews in a relatively straightforward manner.

*Interview Schedule*

A total of nine interviews were conducted for this research study. The initial aim of the researcher was to conduct fifteen interviews, three with staff and executive members of each website. However, as the project progressed, it became clear that *hijab* was an important topic to consider. Although this did not constitute part of the original plan, this addition was warranted because an increasing number of Islamic websites were becoming involved in women’s clothing sales. The researcher therefore felt that the inclusion of *hijab* in this study merited special mention and would ultimately shed more light on the issue of Islamic representation online.

Hignett (2005) noted that “the sampling strategy for any research project should be defensible with respect to the appropriate relationship (or logic) of the sample and the intellectual questions” (p. 120). For this research, the original number of fifteen interviews to be carried out for this project was scaled back to nine. This was so because it proved extremely challenging to recruit all fifteen interviewees from the five websites.
Mason (1996) pointed out that “sampling is one of the key dimensions in defining qualitative methodology. Inductive reasoning is used in qualitative analysis, to interact with the data and drive the sampling” (p. 99). After some deliberation, the researcher settled on interviewing nine informants for the entire project. Three of the interviews conducted were face-to-face with the remaining six carried out over the phone. The interviews conducted lasted between one and a half to two hours. All nine interviews that were conducted with staff members of the websites were carried out during the day. This meant that interviewees were asked to respond to questions while in their offices. All interviews were conducted in English and transcribed carefully so as to reflect the original interview as closely as possible.

The sample size of nine participants was deemed to be adequate for this research. Glesne and Peshkin (1992) stated that “qualitative researchers do not need to depend on a particular numerical basis for generation of generalizations” (p. 27). Patton (2002) further added that “qualitative methods typically produce a wealth of detailed data about a much smaller number of people and cases” (p. 227). Moreover, to ensure credibility of the research, Rubin and Rubin (2005) argued that “interviewees should be experienced and knowledgeable with regards to the topic they are providing information on (p. 64). Since the objective of this dissertation is to study a certain phenomenon, namely Islamic representation online, participants who were key players were chosen in order to provide in-depth knowledge and information.

Interview Guide

The interview guide formulated for this study consisted of a series of questions devised by the researcher. Needless to say, the design of the interview guide aimed at
attaining the maximum amount of feedback and information. As stated above, the interview guide was prepared in such a way so as to allow for flexibility during the interview. In many instances, a question or a series of questions were asked that were not in the interview guide but came about as the interview progressed. In such instances, the researcher felt it necessary to ask an additional question(s) in order to obtain further details and information.

Consent

Most of the data collected for this project came from interviewees. Informants represented employees of the websites studied. Ethical standards of conducting research and collecting data stipulate approval from the Institutional Review Board (IRB). Each respondent took part in this research project at their own will and upon their consent. Participants in this project were given the time to consider their participation in the research and to ask questions about the research. Although respondents were not made to sign consent forms, they were made aware of the fact that this research was conducted for academic purposes only and for the sole purpose of completion and attainment of a doctoral degree. In future, however, the opportunity might arise whereby the author publishes all or parts of this project. Nevertheless, voluntary participation was obtained from all participants.

It is also important to stress that the use of human subjects in any kind of research is extremely critical. This is especially so when one considers the ethical dimension of such use. Denzin and Lincoln (1998) pointed out some aspects to adhere to when conducting such research, including “mutual respect…and the belief that every research act implies moral and ethical decisions that are contextualized” (p. 21). In light of the
above, seeking consent from participants was considered very important prior to the start of the research.

Islamic Websites

Islamic websites are defined as those whose content addresses matters of faith in practice, history, theology, morals and tradition. These websites are either published in Arabic – the language of the Qur’an and of Islam – or in English. In fact, many Islamic websites are published in a multitude of other languages, including Farsi, Urdu and even Japanese. Although Arabic is the ‘official’ language of Islam, the country with the largest Muslim population is Indonesia, where Bahasa is the main language (Central Intelligence Agency, 2006). This study examines five Islamic websites based in the U.S. and whose content is in English.

These five websites were chosen based on the reason that they advertise a more ‘moderate’ brand of Islam. Moderate Islam can be defined as having aspects that are overwhelmingly peaceful, that have consideration for the role of women and that do not promote tension with the West.

The researcher was keen to avoid conducting any kind of investigation on any website that leans one way or the other as far as Islamic divisions and sects are concerned. With the above in mind, the five websites examined in this research are considered to be part of the mainstream in the general body of Islam. These websites – as will be demonstrated in this study – exhibit a high degree of involvement either in their local communities or on the national scale. In addition, and even prior to conducting any interviews with staff members of these websites, a good deal of information was
available about these organizations on their websites. Information pertaining to
organizational mission and vision, staff bios, contact information as well as the activities
carried out by these organizations is all to be found on their websites.

As mentioned previously, it is imperative to point out that, although this research
aims to study five Islamic websites based in the U.S., an examination of the organizations
that maintain and publish these websites has to be carried out. This will aid in providing
a holistic picture of the websites and of the organizations behind the websites. In so
doing, the researcher is confident of providing a comprehensive overview of the websites.
For these websites do not exist in a vacuum and are supported by organizations that
broadcast these websites as a communications medium for their activities.

Islamic Websites Studied

This section of the dissertation identifies the websites examined in this research in
some detail and provides a brief description of their content. These Islamic websites are
analyzed to compare and contrast their content drawing upon similarities and differences.
The overriding aim of this research is to formulate what Geertz (1973) referred to as
‘thick description’ of our complex surroundings. Communication techniques represent a
part of our surroundings and the way we interact with one another. Islamic websites are
an integral part of this communication arrangement and provide insight into a religious
world.

The first of the websites to be studied is cair.com. CAIR’s offices are located in
Washington, D.C. although the organization has chapters throughout the U.S. Another
website to be examined is isna.net, whose offices can be found in Plainfield, Indiana.
In the case of cair.com this website was chosen for this content analysis study based on previous knowledge. In other words, the researcher had previously come across this website although he had not conducted a content analysis on it. However, it is imperative to add that websites analyzed in this paper had been mentioned by Bunt (2004) as being ‘moderate’ in nature and of helping to advance the cause of Islam. As stated above, moderate Islam is defined as having aspects that are overwhelmingly peaceful, that have consideration for the role of women and that do not promote tension with the West. The selection of these websites to be studied was therefore a convenience sample. Using this procedure, the websites to be studied were chosen arbitrarily and not in any structured manner. Nevertheless, it should be pointed out that the websites represent a select category that suggests different tendencies. In addition to been moderate in nature, the websites belong to large Islamic organizations and hence have been mentioned in various media outlets over the years. Additionally, some senior staff members of some of the websites to be studies have appeared on and been quoted in a number of U.S. media systems, such as CNN, Fox News and the Washington Post.

The second website chosen for this study, isna.net represents the Islamic Society of North America. This organization has been in existence since 1963 and is considered by Bunt (2004) to be one of the more moderate voices of Islam in North America. The researcher first became familiar with this organization in 2004 through an Islamic brochure at the local Athens mosque.

The researcher came across the masnet.org website while conducting an online search on Islamic material at Ohio University’s Alden Library. The fourth website, IslamiCity.com is considered to be a portal and contains a wealth of information as well
as activity for Muslim interaction online. *IslamiCity.com* is a busy and vibrant website and no online research covering Islam would be complete without it. It is therefore a useful website to study in order to gain some insight into the world of Islam online.

The fifth and final website to be studied is *mpac.org*, the website for the Muslim Public Affairs Council. *Mpac.org* is an organization that seeks to enhance the civic and political participation of Muslim Americans. The organization seeks to actively participate in society through their four departments: Capitol Hill, Media, Community Outreach and Hate Crime Prevention.

The content analysis approach employs the interpretation of texts in relation to their cultural context. The aim of content analysis is to deconstruct the text to attain a full understanding of the phenomenon one is studying. Fair (1996) stressed that “texts are open and…can take on many different meanings, though one meaning may dominate; and interpretations themselves are subject to interpretation. Hence, textual analysis does not provide ‘the meaning’ of texts but strives to render texts meaningful by placing them within a relevant interpretive framework” (p. 8).

Bunt (2004) stated that “in order to enhance their position in the cyber market-space, those with appropriate financial and technical resources can apply wide ranging communication management strategies and utilize specific forms of religious symbolism and language,” and “the investment in user-friendly interfaces is intended to encourage readers to develop their interest in Islam” (p. 127). From the above, one is able to reach the conclusion that Islamic websites aim to utilize the most efficient management techniques available in order to enhance their market position and values.
Merriam (2002) went further to stress that ‘quality’ qualitative research should adhere to certain criteria. First, the research should have internal validity. Internal validity can be achieved by using a method such as triangulation. This could involve using document analysis, interviews and observations in order to ensure internal validity. Member checks and peer reviews are also encouraged. Secondly, Merriam stated that reliability is an important factor, i.e., if the study were carried out again, will the same results be achieved? The issue of replicability is obviously of importance here. Finally, external validity should not be compromised, i.e., to what extent can the findings obtained be applied to other situations? This research intends to address these three issues in order to ensure quality.

Cair.com

The Council on American-Islamic Relations (CAIR) is a non-profit civil rights and advocacy group based in Washington, D.C. (Council on American-Islamic Relations). This organization has been in existence since 1994 and aims to enhance the image of Muslims in the United States through education, lobbying and advocacy. Since CAIR is a registered organization in the U.S., its website represents one part of its communication strategies. A list of staff members is provided on the website and the organization stresses that its activities are transparent and open to review from the appropriate authorities.

In conducting a content analysis, the researcher scrutinized the contents of cair.com and tried to provide a thorough analysis of this website. This entailed performing a detailed visual assessment of the website. The assessment required opening all the links on the website’s homepage and reading all items posted under those links.
The links on the left hand menu of the website are probably a permanent fixture. This area includes links such as ‘Civil Rights,’ ‘Political Empowerment’ and ‘Outreach.’ Two links, ‘Publications’ and ‘Jobs and Internships,’ have the labels ‘NEW’ next to them. Needless to say, these must have been new additions to this menu. These menu items have – in some cases – multiple links attached to them. For instance, the link entitled ‘Challenging Hate’ has internal links that carry titles such as ‘Condemning Terrorism,’ ‘Hate Hurts America Campaign’ and ‘Not in the Name of Islam Campaign.’ Each of these internal links opens up into an internal page containing yet more information.

*CAIR.com’s* website is neatly laid out, is professionally designed and is simple and easy to use and to follow. On the left hand side of the homepage is a menu that guides one through the website and includes links such as ‘Civil Rights,’ ‘Political Empowerment,’ ‘Outreach’ and ‘Islam.’ These same links – with some more additions – can also be found toward the bottom of the homepage. Underneath them are additional links to internal pages in the website. On the middle of the homepage is a picture of Ibrahim Hooper, CAIR’s communications director, as he recently appeared on an interview on CNN. Hooper has become a spokesperson for Islam over the past few years. He has increasingly appeared on mainstream media channels and the researcher has watched a number of television interviews in which Hooper made appearances and was asked to clarify matters pertaining to Islam. According to [www.cair.com](http://www.cair.com), Hooper made three appearances on national media outlets (CNN and FOX) in July 2007 alone.

In September 2007, CAIR debuted a new website, one that underwent a remarkable facelift. Since CAIR claims to be the nation’s largest Muslim civil liberties group, the new and technologically-sophisticated website enhances Bunt’s (2004)
assumptions that financially able Muslim organizations are in a position to invest in “user-friendly interfaces...intended to encourage readers to develop their interest in Islam” (p. 127). The new website further enhances CAIR’s reputation as a vibrant faith-based organization that seeks to enhance the image of American Muslims.

_IslamiCity.com_

As one might imagine the numerous Islamic websites that exist range from those that are fundamental in nature to those that adhere to a more liberal view. Each type of website typically has its own following and its own set of supporters. _IslamiCity.com_ for instance, based out of Culver City, CA is a website that adheres to the Muslim faith. According to Bunt (2004), the website is registered to Human Assistance and Development International, a Saudi Arabian organization.

The website provides a host of information and multiple links on its home page. As is the case with many Islamic websites, a number of links are usually devoted to educating the reader about the religion of Islam. These include links relating to the history of Islam, the prophets, the main characteristics of the religion, prayer times and other basic information regarding Islam. _IslamiCity.com_ also has links to services such as Arabic e-learning, Arabic-language television, community and social events, yellow pages, live radio, business and financial news coverage, airlines and even a shopping bazaar. As Bunt noted, this website has a major office in Lebanon and its ‘experts’ answer online queries from both the U.S. and Lebanon. This feature indicates the ‘internationalness’ of the website and brings into sharp perspective the global nature of the telecommunications business. _IslamiCity.com_ is, in effect, a web portal offering a
range of services on its pages. One can listen to live radio feed, recitations from the Qur’an, and even access cooking recipes.

Isna.net

The headquarters for the Islamic Society of North America (ISNA) are located in Plainfield, Indiana. According to their website, they are one of the largest Muslim organizations in North America (Islamic Society of North America). ISNA seeks to integrate Muslims into U.S. society. It does so by conducting a wide range of activities. For instance, the organization’s community outreach program seeks to keep Muslims in one huge network to provide one close-knit unit in order to enhance cooperation between its members. Additionally, ISNA has a leadership development center that aims at developing leadership potential in men and women in order to better prepare them to face future challenges.

As was the case with cair.com, isna.net has a professionally designed homepage that contains a great deal of information. On the left hand side of the homepage is a list of services provided by ISNA. These include ‘Aging and Counseling,’ ‘Domestic Violence Forum’ and ‘Youth Center.’ Immediately below this list is another more comprehensive list of news articles. The news articles segment has up-to-date news items and it is apparent that these are updated daily. The top center of isna.net’s home page is taken up by some banner ads advertising ISNA’s conferences, conventions and leadership development programs. The bottom half of the home page is dedicated to more press releases and announcements.
**Masnet.org**

The Muslim American Society is located in Falls Church, Virginia. According to their website, this is a non-profit organization involved in charitable and socio-cultural activities aimed at community development (Muslim American Society). Founded in 1992, this organization seeks to educate Muslims and non-Muslims alike about Islam while promoting understanding between communities of differing religions. In addition, masnet.org aims at promoting peaceful coexistence between community members while encouraging human values of equality, justice and compassion.

*Masnet.org’s* website is similar to cair.com and to isna.net in that it provides a combination of current news items as well as information regarding Islam. A section of the website is entitled ‘Islam in Your Life-Contemporary Issues’ and aims at addressing current issues facing Islam in the world. This segment deals with concerns facing society and raises issues such as Islam and democracy and the western view on Islam.

**Mpac.org**

The Muslim Public Affairs Council (MPAC) is a non-profit organization headquartered in Washington, D.C. According to its website, mpac.org seeks to protect the civil rights of American Muslims and to integrate Islam into America through peaceful and positive means (Muslim Public Affairs Council). MPAC was established in 1988 and has sought to promote a constructive and productive American Muslim community. The organization aims at promoting Islam beyond stereotypes in order to encourage harmony and peaceful dialogue. MPAC realizes that negative stereotypes against Islam are on the ascendancy mainly through miseducation, misinformation and the misinterpretation of the Qur’an and of the word of the Prophet Muhammad. MPAC is
therefore currently rolling out its Project Islam initiative. This project seeks to educate citizens at the grassroots level by providing seminars that aim to inform and educate about Islam and its basic beliefs.

Limitations

The first drawback is that little information is available in the literature regarding the analysis of Islamic websites. Only a handful of researchers have explored the issue of Islam online. Since Islamic content on the Internet is a relatively new discipline, this shortcoming is perhaps understandable. While this represents a challenge, it gives the reader a good idea on the topic. This reality first and foremost tells the reader that this is a relatively new – and hence – exciting topic and that further research is needed in order to fill the gap in literature. The researcher’s aim is to focus on Islamic websites in the U.S., providing insight into their complex workings and activities. Furthermore, a comparison between Islamic websites in the U.S. and other ‘traditional’ media structures in the Muslim world was conducted in order to provide the reader with a reference point with regards to the websites examined in this study.

Another limitation of this topic is that Islamic websites on the Internet are skeptical about publishing information regarding their management practices and their financial activities. As mentioned above, Islam has come under severe scrutiny in the last five years, and this has led Islamic organizations to go on the defensive with regards to their activities. Although cair.com, for instance, freely publishes the names of its executive officers, little mention is made of the source(s) of the majority of its funding.
One other limitation consisted of recruiting interviewees from the websites that were studied. Initially, the researcher aimed to conduct a total of fifteen interviews. However, difficulties arose in securing that number, and eventually, nine interviews were conducted.

Nevertheless, these limitations did not prevent this research from being conducted. In fact, the lack of abundant available information on the topic represents a gap in the literature that the researcher aimed to investigate and to make the focal point of this dissertation. By investigating other types of media in Muslim countries, such as the movie industry in Egypt and satellite television in Qatar, this research aims at drawing a big picture of media systems in the Muslim world and then focusing on the Internet as a communication and proselytizing tool.

Summary

This chapter highlighted the methodology used in collecting data used for this research study and the rationale behind using the methodology. Using a qualitative inquiry method, the researcher seeks an in-depth understanding of the workings and intricacies of these websites with an Islamic content. The researcher used a combination of content analysis to study the websites and in-depth interviews to collect data from participants. The chapter also included a brief description of the websites studied as well as the methodology used to select the research participants. Finally, limitations associated with this methodology and this study were also underlined.
CHAPTER 4: ISLAM AND NEW MEDIA IN AN AMERICAN CONTEXT

Introduction: Religion in the Media

This chapter will analyze the data collected and formulate an understanding of websites with Islamic contexts. The websites researched in this dissertation are communication initiatives of several organizations dedicated to serving the community with information on Islam. As such, these websites do not represent stand-alone media, but are evaluated as part of the organizations they represent. Horsefield (2004) pointed out that:

One of the major developments in the area of media and religion in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries has been the growing awareness in the West of the presence and difference of Islam as a religious, cultural and political presence. The various ways in which the different manifestations of Islam relate to and interact with western media and cultural products, and to their own media, is a huge and complex area. (p. xxi)

Studying websites with Islamic content allows for a thorough dissection of the interaction of a traditional religion with a new medium form. It would also be inappropriate to examine these websites without assessing the organizations behind them.

Studying religious content on the Internet is a relatively new phenomenon, since the web as a digital medium is itself relatively new. Hoover and Park (2004) contended that “religion online is the self-conscious use of the online context by religious organizations or movements for purposes of publicity, education, outreach, proselytization and so on” (p. 122). A website like isna.net or cair.com, according to this
definition, qualifies as an effort by a religious organization to publicize its message about Islam. Hoover and Park added that “religion online is conceptualized as the online resource to which an audience member turns to embrace his/her beliefs in traditional, established, institutional, religious systems” (p. 122). Helland (2000) defined religion online as “an organized attempt to utilize traditional forms of communication to present religion based upon a vertical conception of control, status and authority” (p. 207). Helland also stressed that the Internet offers religion extraordinary possibilities for growth, development and expansion. This research seeks to identify ways in which Islamic websites seize the enormous potential offered by the Internet and apply this potential to a traditional religion like Islam.

The two questions that this dissertation aims to answer are:

- How has the learning culture of Islam been extended through the possibility of the Internet?
- How do websites with Islamic thrusts emerge, develop and sustain themselves in the current global context?

The analysis of data collected resulted in the emergence of themes and categories. Three themes were identified by the researcher and will be used to analyze the data collected. These themes are: finance and administration of the websites (traffic volume, membership dues and donations), community activities and involvement with inter-faith organizations (collaboration and grass roots initiatives) and communicating the organization’s vision and mission (objectivity and authority). Data was collected for this project utilizing qualitative methodology through content analysis of the websites and in-depth interviews with staff members who maintained and updated the websites. The use
of more than one data collection technique allows the researcher to gather credible data and therefore better provide answers to the research questions. The three themes were not pre-determined but emerged from the research.

Hoover and Park (2004) provided an interesting perspective regarding the study of religious content online. According to them, individuals who gravitate toward online sources in search of religious content do so because they ‘seek’ something specific. Hoover and Park added:

At its most basic, it [seeking] replaces other structures of motivation and action with a process whereby the individual is self-consciously and reflexively engaged in a process of cultural-, identity- and meaning-construction…As an emergent religious practice, seeking expresses itself across a wide range of traditions and sensibilities. More important…is the relationship of seeking to the online context. As a religious/spiritual practice, seeking fits well with this context. The marketplace of symbols and contexts on the web is open to the seeker. There is no priesthood, no dominant tradition or doctrine. There are no barriers to entry or participation. Further, the web is a place of tremendous creativity, variety and volubility. It is typified by playfulness, invention and novelty. (p. 124)

The issue of ‘seeking’ lies at the heart of social network analysis. Through social networks, members connect to a website to gain access to specific information. If a member is satisfied with the information received, then the likelihood that a member will return to the website for more information is high. In fact, a member will even contribute to the growth of the website by inviting his/her friends. The loyalty of a returning member is the kind of commitment that Islamic websites look for in visitors to their
pages. When a website like IslamiCity.com offers services like an online bazaar or an online marriage service, their objective is to create a forum that attracts visitors, thereby increasing web traffic. The notion that barriers to entry or participation do not exist is particularly striking to seekers. In this regard, seekers in Islamic websites are free to search for information without being overawed by a dominant figure or a religious tradition.

I conducted interviews with members of the organizations and tried as much as possible to talk to both senior and junior staff. A content analysis of the websites was also conducted in order to deconstruct the sites and scrutinize their content. Flournoy (2004) stressed the internet’s capability of serving both as a mass medium and as a tool for interpersonal communication. It is imperative to examine the mass media capacities of these websites and to analyze their messages as well as the connection they establish with each unique visitor and the chance the visitor gets to provide some feedback. Porter (2001) pointed out that “Internet technology provides better opportunities for companies to establish distinctive strategic positionings than did previous generations of information technology” (p. 65). The five websites studied in this dissertation have recognized the advantage provided by Internet technologies in providing a new set of tools that can be used to broadcast their messages. One respondent from isna.net best summarized the importance of their website to the organization as an effective communication tool when he stated that the website is “continually being enhanced and we are dedicating some budget for the website because we feel that the website is an important tool for our existence” (Interview with a website’s Director of Membership and MIS, April 2007).
Hoover (2002) argued that “the intersection between religion and media first came to public scholarly attention in the middle of the twentieth century” when a problem arose in “the emergence of religious broadcasts not sanctioned by religious and secular authorities” (p. 1). At the time, continued Hoover, the view was that religion and media were regarded as:

Separated and separable entities that could be seen as acting independently of one another and as having an impact or effects on one another. In this view, ‘religion’ and ‘the media’ are autonomous, independent realms, and the central questions involved a kind of competition between them. (p. 1)

Today, however, a different view exists. Communication technologies have allowed religion to be broadcast on multiple media outlets. The ulama – religious scholars – have given websites with Islamic content under study their blessings to reposition Islamic content from traditional to online media sources. Both IslamiCity.com and masnet.org, for instance, have an online imam who fields questions from the general public.

Hoover (2002) shed more light into this convergence of religion and the media when he points out:

The realms of both ‘religion’ and ‘the media’ are themselves transforming and being transformed. Religion today is much more a public, commodified, therapeutic, and personalized set of practices than it has been in the past. At the same time, the media (movies, radio, television, print and electronic media, and more) are collectively coming to constitute a realm where important projects of “the self” take place – projects that include spiritual, transcendent, and deeply
meaningful “work.” This means that, rather than being autonomous actors involved in institutionalized projects in relation to each other, religion and media are increasingly converging. They are meeting on a common turf: the everyday world of lived experience. (p. 2)

The intersection of religion and media has witnessed a rapid evolution from traditional media sources to newer and more complex communication and information technological platforms. This chapter analyzes data collected and explores the ways in which the Internet is consistently being used by these organizations to deliver information about Islam to the community. Since these websites were designed and are maintained in the United States, their aim is to educate and inform the American consumer about Islam and about its message. When asked what messages about Islam his website is aiming to communicate, one informant underscored his organization’s activities by stating that: “Simply put, the image we want to portray is that we are Muslims but also Americans. We are not individuals for destruction but, rather, for progress and for mutual understanding and development of our society.” (Interview with a website’s webmaster, May 2007)

Finance and Administration: Sustainability of Islamic Websites

According to IslamiCity.com’s Chief Technical Officer his organization’s website was set up in 1995 “for the sole purpose of creating a web presence for Muslims and for Islam and to give accurate and proper information about the Muslim faith to a worldwide audience.” IslamiCity.com was created by Human Assistance and Development International (HADI) in 1995. HADI, according to IslamiCity.com, is “a non-profit
organization working for the socio-economic, educational and scientific development of people worldwide” (Interview with a website’s Chief Technology Officer, March 2007). 

*IslamiCity.com’s* Chief Executive Officer pointed out that HADI first started experimenting with the technology known as *Bulletin Board*, “the precursor to the web.” This technology, according to him “used dialup technology, where people could dial into the system and read simple text-based information, and the number of people that could access the information depended on the number of phones” (Interview with a website’s CEO, March, 2007). This took place in 1993-1994 and it gave people the ability to read news and to generally keep abreast of events in the Muslim community.

*BULLETIN BOARD* was an idea that was developed by HADI and utilized the technology available at the time. By late 1994 and early 1995, the development of the World Wide Web started to progress steadily and HADI realized that they needed more cutting edge technology than *Bulletin Board*. It was at that point in time that the organization registered the *www.islam.org* domain name and developed it into “an electronic real estate for anyone who wants to provide information about Islam” (Interview with a website’s CEO, March, 2007). Today, if one types *www.islam.org* into their web browser, they will be automatically redirected to *IslamiCity.com*.

As far as establishing an online presence and setting up a website, this represents an interesting point. *IslamiCity.com* is clearly a pioneer in the use of modern communication technologies, setting up a website as early as 1995, at a time when the Internet was barely making a name for itself as a new mass communication medium. The acronym “*hadi*” means ‘calm’ or ‘peaceful’ in Arabic, an important Islamic attribute.
Hadi also means guide or leader, a trait that distinguishes IslamiCity.com as a pioneer in the field of Islam online.

The Islamic Society of North America (ISNA) can also be considered a pioneer in the field of online technologies. The isna.net domain name was registered in late 1995 and the organization developed and posted its website in 1996. Although isna.net came online about a year or so after IslamiCity.com, the timeframe during which these two websites were established is a testament of the commitment of Islamic organizations in pursuing and developing Internet technologies. One has to keep in mind that these organizations did not just set up websites for the sake of developing a website, but rather for communicating and disseminating information through an efficient and effective approach. As a respondent from isna.net commented, the organization had numerous aims when setting up their website:

To disseminate information to members and affiliate organizations, information about moon sightings, information about different fiqh∗ issues and information about their day to day needs, but over a period of time it has grown quite a bit so we are now offering e-services, such as our e-library and also a lot of e-commerce on the website such as online registration, online donations and online memberships. (Interview with a website’s Director of Membership and MIS, April 2007)

As mentioned above, IslamiCity.com is considered a pioneer in the field, since it adopted online technologies at an early state. In fact, one respondent from the organization noted:

We saw that the web is able to blend print, audio and video into the same source and we saw the potential of it and if you look at the goals we established for ourselves and predicting how things will come about and even today it is the initial stages of the Internet and what people will be doing ten years from now it is just the beginning. The field is wide open, so when we saw that potential of the

∗ Fiqh refers to Islamic teachings and thought that help one to understand the fundamentals of the religion.
media and we compared how Muslim civilization kind of lagged behind in media right from the inception of the printing press, we had every obligation to use this media to provide the objective of a comprehensive view of Islam from a Muslim perspective and not just for Muslims to rely on perspectives from CNN or other sources that might be available to a wider audience. (Interview with a website’s CEO, March, 2007)

The respondent above indicated that Muslim civilization has fallen behind as far as media is concerned. Safi (2003) is among the Muslim scholars who have realized that “it is no longer sufficient to study only the Qur’an and hadith” but made the point that twenty-first century Muslims need to be conversant with modern-day thinkers and writers in order to develop and evolve in their thinking and in their view of the world (p. 15). An-Na’im (1990) further noted that Muslims today no longer find themselves living in isolated societies that are cut off from the outside world. Some factors, such as globalization and migration, have brought Muslims into close proximity with the non-Muslim world. Yet the ulama – religious scholars – still rely on a body of historically dated shari’a laws to rationalize and guide the social relations among Muslims. It is no surprise then that Islam and Muslims have fallen behind in media development among other disciplines. Muslim religious authorities seek to take advantage of emerging technologies such as the Internet to reach a broader audience, especially the youth who are conversant and comfortable with using new media. The websites under study recognize this potential and seek to make the Internet a meeting place of new ideas and an outlet for information dissemination.

The shift from Bulletin Board to www.islam.org as far as IslamiCity.com is concerned was expedited by the fact that the Internet provided unlimited potential in terms of communication possibilities. IslamiCity.com is a vibrant and dynamic website.
I use these descriptive terms in order to indicate the website’s attractive design and the wealth of information available, especially on the homepage. *IslamiCity.com* is considered to be a portal, indicating that it contains a plethora of facts, information and details. Porter (2001) pointed out that the Internet is a persuasive device and “an enabling technology – a powerful set of tools that can be used, wisely or unwisely, in almost any industry and as part of almost any strategy” (p. 64). As such, *IslamiCity.com*, as early as 1994, was able to recognize the Internet’s potential and hence to gear its strategies toward utilizing this powerful apparatus. Looking at the website indicates to the user that the latest technology employing up-to-date software was used in its design. In addition, the website offers a range of services and as a senior manager with the organization revealed the focal purpose for setting up the website was two-fold: 1) “to provide a non-sectarian holistic view of Islam to a global audience” and 2) “to provide information and services to a Muslim and non-Muslim community” (Interview with a website’s CEO, March, 2007). *IslamiCity.com* attempts to provide a balanced view of Islam, making sure that information seekers to its website understand Islam’s basic message as reflected in the *Qur’an* and the *hadiths*.

The *IslamiCity.com* homepage offers a unique and attractive design allowing any visitor to the website access to considerable amount of information. Information pertaining to Islam can be found under several links on the left hand side under the heading Discover Islam. Typical to many of these websites are services like ‘Understanding Islam,’ ‘Prayer Times,’ ‘Mosque Locator’ and ‘Qu’ran Search.’ Islam is not only a religion, but a way of life, and has always been a teaching religion, where
information has traditionally been passed from one generation to the next. Lapidus (2002) contended that:

We commonly say that in Muslim societies, state and religion are unified and that Islam is a total way of life, which defines political as well as social and familial matters. This is the Muslim view embodied in the ideal of the Prophet and the early Caliphs, who were rulers and teachers, repositories of both temporal and religious authority, and whose mission was to lead the community in war and morality. (p. 815)

IslamiCity.com, cair.com, masnet.org and isna.net painstakingly draw attention to the fact that Islam is a way of life by providing extensive information on their websites about Islam. As a Muslim, it is essential to perform prayers at their proper times. If a person moves to a new location, typing in the new zip code will provide the new prayer times for that particular location. In this way, new prayer times can be noted and observed. IslamiCity.com, for instance, provides a ‘Mosque Locator’ tab on its pages, where directions to the nearest mosque can be obtained, and where one is required to perform Jum’aa, the weekly Friday prayer.

By clicking on any of these links, the viewer is directed to an internal page that contains yet more information. The ‘Understanding Islam’ link to be found on the pages of IslamiCity.com, for example, opens up into an internal page that contains pictures of Muslims in prayer in an attempt to explain to the viewer the meaning of Islam. On that internal page can be found numerous links such as ‘What Do Muslims Believe,’ ‘What is the Qu’ran,’ ‘How Do Muslims View Death’ and ‘How Does Islam Guarantee Human Rights?’ It should be further noted that these links contain information that is aimed at
providing information in a clear, concise and comprehensible manner. *IslamiCity.com*, through its interpretation of the above-mentioned links in its website, seeks to educate and inform both Muslims and non-Muslims alike. This clarification of how to behave and how to interpret the Qur’an arises out of the need to develop Islam and modernize it to an evolving religion – not in the sense of altering its original meaning – but to make its message readily available through a new communication technology such as the Internet.

*Isna.net*’s website contains information pertaining to Islam in a similar fashion. Of more interest though is the fact that *isna.net* has a number of links that deal with social issues and provide information to its readers on a variety of issues. For instance, under a link labeled ‘Domestic Violence Forum,’ the website offers information – mostly to women – with regards to domestic abuse and how to handle such cases either by contacting a lawyer, reporting the case to the appropriate security authorities, or seeking refuge through other means.

Another link that was of interest and that was found on the *IslamiCity.com* website was one that was simply labeled ‘Donate.’ Under this heading are two links: ‘Online Donation’ and ‘Car Donation.’ If a visitor to the *IslamiCity.com* decides to make a donation, a list of ongoing projects is provided so that one is aware as to who benefits from these donations. Another main heading to be found on the left hand side is ‘Multimedia’. Under this tab, one can watch the Al Jazeera television channel and listen to Islam City Radio among other services. This is yet another example of the pioneering role played by *IslamiCity.com* in the field of communicating Islam online. The website is able to engage in media convergence, the act of blending or integrating traditional media
– television – and combining it with a newer one – Internet – thus creating a new technology (Campbell et al., 2008).

Two more tabs are to be found on the left hand side of the IslamiCity.com website. The first of these is ‘Services’ under which one can engage in a range of activities from subscribing for membership to reading articles to accessing cooking recipes. The final heading is entitled ‘Explore IslamiCity’ under which can be found a few links. One of these links is ‘Communications’ where a visitor to the website could provide feedback, join a discussion board or sign the guest book. Another link under Explore IslamiCity is the ‘Finance Center.’ Under this link the website visitor can access information regarding Islamic banking as well as economic development from an Islamic point of view among other things.

The Muslim American Society’s website, masnet.org, under a section entitled ‘About MAS’ defines itself as “a charitable, religious, social, cultural, and educational, not-for-profit organization. It is a pioneering Islamic organization, an Islamic revival, and reform movement that uplifts the individual, family, and society” and lists the following objectives:

- To present the message of Islam to Muslims and non-Muslims, and promote understanding between them,
- To encourage the participation of Muslims in building a virtuous and moral society,
- To offer a viable Islamic alternative to many of our society’s prevailing problems,
- To promote family values in accordance with Islamic teaching,
- To promote the human values that Islam emphasizes: brotherhood, equality, justice, mercy, compassion, and peace, and
- To foster unity among Muslims and Muslim organizations and encourage cooperation and coordination amongst them. (Muslim American Society, Objectives)
The Muslim American Society’s website acts as a communication tool for the organization to broadcast its objectives. One interviewee notes:

The website that we have is both generic in terms of a news vehicle but is also very specific in terms of the work of MAS. I think that the real distinction is not in the graphics or the look of the site which we’re always looking at trying to improve but rather the site will contain local, national and international news…specific things relative to the MAS, interviews with people…so the website is specifically about our organizational work. (Interview with a website’s Director of Human and Civil Rights Division, April 2007)

*Masnet.org* acts as a communication medium to convey the organization’s messages. These messages are designed to promote Islam and to emphasize its core values and beliefs. The website also promotes MAS’s work in the Muslim community and its involvement with the greater society. Another respondent added:

[The website’s objective] is to reach a broader base of constituents and basically to get whatever message that we have out to people. It is just another avenue of media just like radio, television, publications…it is just doing it with more technology now and the purpose of that is to get more information out and to get some communication and feedback from the public. So people can come to our website and hear about civil rights issues, human rights issues and things that are going on in the Muslim world and things going on in American that are not pertaining to Muslims like immigration, homelessness, AIDS, poverty, hunger. (Interview with a website’s Technical Director, December 2006)

A director with *masnet.org* made the point that his organization seeks “the integration of Muslim values into a comprehensive program that would address all aspects of the lives of the community” (Interview with a website’s Director of Human and Civil Rights Division, April 2007). Like the other four websites studied in this project, *masnet.org* recognized the potential of the Internet in broadcasting its message. Porter (2001) noted that:
It has been widely assumed that the Internet is cannibalistic, that it will replace all conventional ways of doing business and overturn all traditional advantages. This is a vast exaggeration. There is no doubt that real trade-offs exist between Internet and traditional activities. (p. 73)

One example that Porter uses is that of Walgreens, which adopted a successful strategy of allowing their customers to order their prescriptions online. While websites with an Islamic content and focus are not in the retail industry, certain similarities can be highlighted. IslamiCity.com for instance has an online bazaar and relies on Internet traffic to generate income from selling its products. Masnet.org has an online section entitled ‘Ask the Imam’ through which anyone can ask its resident religious scholar questions pertaining to Islam. Isna.net has a ‘services’ segment that deals with social issues such as marriage, death, funeral services, addiction and counseling. Isna.net is also a popular destination for Muslims during the month of Ramadan – the Muslim fasting month – as it publishes alerts regarding the commencement and end of fasting every year. One respondent, employed by the Muslim American Society commented:

We are living in an electronic internet age where a huge amount of vital communication is done on the Internet and the idea of doing a website of course is that it gives us a presence in the national and international community in terms of a communication vehicle but it also enables us to get feedback from our constituents...so for example on the current website we have a guestbook which enables people to sign in and give comments and the website is not viewed only by Muslims but is a communication vehicle for the large community. (Interview with a website’s Director of Human and Civil Rights Division, April 2007)

As such it becomes imperative to see the connection between the Internet and the avenue of opportunities that it opens up for these websites. Isna.net, IslamiCity.com and the others recognized the potential that the Internet and online communication afforded
them and set about refining their strategies to take advantage of this tool. It is also interesting to note that websites with an Islamic content are aware of “competition” in the field. I place the word “competition” in quote marks because the five websites studied as part of this project are all part of non-profit organizations. As such, they are not in direct contest with each other. Nor are they jostling for consumer dollars. Nevertheless, figure 3 below provides a representation of how Internet strategies shape the industry structure. However, it would be a mistake to discard the diagram below as not being applicable to websites with an Islamic content. Despite the non-profit nature of these organizations, they want to create a large traffic volume to their websites. This increased volume helps them generate much-needed donations that are critical to these organizations and that help them sustain their activities and upgrade their services.
Figure 4. Michael Porter’s Five Forces

Source: Adapted from Porter (1980). Competitive Strategy.
The fact that the Internet has enabled the websites studied in this dissertation to expand their horizons in order to broadcast their messages to a larger audience represents a fundamental aspect of Islam and of the Qur’an. As Moosa (2003) noted:

The Qur’an itself prefigures a community of listeners and participants: without this audience it ceases to be the Qur’an…Literally, the word *qur’an* means a “recitation.” As a revelation it is recited by the human voice and heard by the human ear. In the final instance the message must both be heard and understood by the “heart,” as the Qur’an literally puts it. In all this a fundamental presumption persists: the Qur’an as revelation requires an audience of listeners and speakers. In other words, a community is integral to it being a revelation. If one does not take that audience and community seriously, implicitly one has not taken revelation seriously. This audience is not a passive audience, but an interactive audience that engages with a performative revelation, (p. 124)

This demonstrates the importance of the Internet and of online communication to the websites studied in this project. Islam encourages its followers to be active participants in their communities and in their lives and this is communicated in the Qur’an. Additionally, Muslims are encouraged to be engaged rather than passive members of the community. The Internet provides websites with an Islamic context with the necessary ammunition to further communicate with the Muslim community. As one interviewee highlights:

As we develop an electoral empowerment initiative to rally and organize the Muslim community as a political force, we also give information in the website about that but what we also want to do is to provide general and useful information to the Muslim community about the broader human and civil rights aspect of our organization and also civil and human right updates and a number of
features about specific campaigns on the website. This not only brings the human rights work of the human foundation to the Muslim community but also it enables non-Muslims to really see what the Muslim American Society is doing and what our vision is. (Interview with a website’s Director of Human and Civil Rights Division, April 2007)

Eickelman and Piscatori (1990) noted that “Muslim communities, like all religious communities, are *imagined*. They are created – and knowable – through the vision, faith and practices of their adherents” (p. 4). Websites with an Islamic focus seek to utilize the power of the Internet in spreading the word of the Qur’an and in educating both Muslims and non-Muslims about Islam. These websites also aspire to get in touch with their readers in order to encourage them to take part in community activities and to participate in civic duties such as voting in an election or volunteering for a worthy cause. This makes Muslim communities active, knowledgeable and informed on societal issues.

For its part, the Muslim Public Affairs Council, according to a high-ranking official with the organization, was established in 1988 as a wing of a local Islamic center to “engage and dialogue with the government, locally and nationally and to engage with law enforcement and the media to correctly represent Muslims and to make sure that if any issues that were relevant to Muslims came up then there was a source to turn for advice and consultation” (Interview with a website’s Webmaster, May 2007). In addition, *mpac.org* provides the following description with regards to the organization’s purposes and objectives:

The Muslim Public Affairs Council is a public service agency working for the civil rights of American Muslims, for the integration of Islam into American pluralism, and for a positive, constructive relationship between American Muslims and their representatives. Since 1988, MPAC has worked diligently to promote a vibrant American Muslim community and enrich American society
through exemplifying the Islamic values of Mercy, Justice, Peace, Human Dignity, Freedom, and Equality for all. Over the years, MPAC has built a reputation as a consistent and reliable resource for government and media, and is trusted by American Muslims as an authentic, experienced voice.

In all its actions, MPAC works diligently to offer the public a portrayal that goes beyond stereotypes in order to elucidate that Muslims worship God, abhor global terrorism, stand against oppression, and are part of a vibrant American pluralism. MPAC operates on the core belief that change in U.S. policy requires more from our community than attending meetings. It requires organized, sustained efforts in coalition with like-minded groups both at the grassroots and national levels. It requires a strong voice in the media, thoughtful analysis and authentic dialogue. (Muslim Public Affairs Council, About MPAC)

From the above passage, it is important to note that MPAC uses the terminology ‘American Muslims’ and not ‘Muslim Americans.’ This is an important expression and it underscores the fact the organization regards itself – and it followers – as Americans first and Muslims second. This is highlighted by an mpac.org interviewee who stated that “we are an American organization and we want to make sure that the Muslim community understands that” (Interview with a website’s Webmaster, May 2007). This classification strongly suggests belonging to America is a core value to MPAC and that one can be an American and a Muslim in a multi-religious and tolerant society. Moreover, the objective of this dissertation is to study websites with an Islamic content in the U.S. It is therefore important to recognize that these Islamic organizations identify themselves as American and underscore their American identity, thus typifying a sense of belonging or fitting into the society in which they operate.

MPAC regards itself as an organization that emphasizes its engagement with other American Muslims in dialogue in order to dispel misconceptions about Islam. The organization also explains that, from the onset, it had a clear mission that guides its
activities while seeking to showcase what Muslims are capable of doing to benefit the society as a whole. As one respondent noted:

The Muslim Public Affairs Council is a very proactive organization, proactively engaging other Americans who happen to be Muslims. The main purpose is to dialogue, interact and engage with the intention of clarifying any misconception that maybe arise within the society, as well as showcasing what we are capable of doing as Muslims to benefit the society as a whole. (Interview with a website’s Webmaster, May 2007)

Rabasa et al. (2007) argued that “American Muslims have a potentially important role to play in building moderate Muslim networks and institutions” (p. 89). Cair.com, mpac.org and the other organizations studied in this dissertation have all indicated – either through interviews or on their websites – that they regard their activities as moderate in nature and solely geared toward civic engagement, social construction and positive participation in society.

The author earlier defined moderate Islam as having aspects that are overwhelmingly peaceful, that have consideration for the role of women and that do not promote tension with the West. The United States, continued Rabasa et al. (2007), “has been more successful in integrating its Muslim population than European nations – the United States is historically a country where successive waves of immigrants have reinvented themselves as Americans” and a place where “the vast majority of American Muslims hold values that reflect the democratic and pluralistic political culture of the United States” (p. 89).
Table 2

*Years of Operation Organizations Studied have been in Existence.*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Organization</th>
<th>Year Established</th>
<th>Years in Operation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>ISNA</td>
<td>1960s</td>
<td>Over 40 years</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MPAC</td>
<td>1988</td>
<td>21 years</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MAS</td>
<td>1993</td>
<td>16 years</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CAIR</td>
<td>1994</td>
<td>15 years</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>IslamiCity</td>
<td>1995</td>
<td>14 years</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The above table highlights the five organizations studied in this dissertation and the years each of these organizations has been in operation since their establishment. It is important to observe that ISNA is by far the oldest of the five, having been in existence since the 1960s. That gives ISNA over 40 years of experience in the field of advocacy, Islam and civic engagement. As mentioned above, ISNA is the premier destination for American Muslim for information about Ramadan. One respondent noted:

*We see a large increase in the traffic [to isna.net] two times a year where everybody comes to look for information about the start of Ramadan and the end of Ramadan and the two *Eids,* where traffic can reach up to 3 million visitors in a month.* (Interview with a website’s Director of Membership and MIS, April 2007)

In fact ISNA is so engrained into American Muslim society that it has sister organizations across the border in Canada, as well as numerous chapters in the United

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*Eid* marks two major festivites in the Islamic calendar, one at the end of Ramadan and the other to signify the conclusion of the annual *hajj.*
States. Later in the chapter, Table 4 provides further details regarding the number of chapters and offices that each organization operates. Lapidus (2002) pointed out that ISNA “provides nationwide educational materials, libraries, workshops, a housing and marriage bureau, trust funds, and publications” (p. 812-813), in recognition of the breadth of activities conducted by ISNA in the U.S. and Canada.

With the exception of ISNA, the other four organizations studied in this project have been engaged in American Muslim life for considerably shorter periods of time. Of the remaining four, MPAC has been in operation for 20 years, and over that period of time it has “worked diligently to foster a vibrant Muslim American identity and to represent the interests of Muslim Americans to decision makers in government agencies, media outlets, interfaith circles and Hollywood studios” as its website states in a recently-published timeline celebrating its 20-year existence (Muslim Public Affairs Council, 2008).

MAS, CAIR and IslamiCity complete the list of five organizations. These three were all established in the 1990s. CAIR is the only other organization – beside ISNA – that has a Canada presence, although that office is governed by its own board. It is of importance to underline that CAIR’s head office is located just blocks away from the U.S. Capitol in Washington, D.C. The significant implication here is that CAIR seeks to work closely with lawmakers and with the federal government in order to enhance the image of American Muslims. A number of CAIR officials have been invited to address the public through mainstream media outlets such as CNN and FOX News.
Membership

*IslamiCity.com* offers membership to subscribers who wish to benefit from the numerous services that the website offers. There are four membership types available. The first is an Individual Membership, at an annual cost of $89.95 or a monthly cost of $7.50. A Family Membership costs $99.95 per year or $8.33 per month. Student subscribers are given discounts and can subscribe to *IslamiCity.com* for $44.95 per annum or $3.74 per month. The final membership plan available is the Life Time membership. For a onetime fee of $1,500 a subscriber never has to worry about renewing their annual subscription. A Life Time member is also given a free IslamiCity Edition iPod.

Table 3

*Breakdown of IslamiCity.com’s Membership Plans and Rates in 2008*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Membership Type</th>
<th>Annual Rate</th>
<th>Monthly Rate</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Individual Membership</td>
<td>$89.95</td>
<td>$7.50</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Family Membership</td>
<td>$99.95</td>
<td>$8.33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Student Membership</td>
<td>$44.95</td>
<td>$3.74</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Life Time Membership</td>
<td>$1,500.00*</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* One time fee.

Source: *IslamiCity.com*
In return for paying a membership fee, IslamiCity.com subscribers are able to enjoy a number of benefits. A member is given access to the Al-Jazeera satellite channel, in both the Arabic and English language services. This access is given through a computer simply by logging on to IslamiCity.com. In addition, members also receive access to IslamTV, an educational and informational television station providing documentaries and lectures about Islam. As a member, one can also create a profile for themselves on ICMarriage.com – a service in the mold of match.com and eharmony.com – that offers to connect Muslims seeking partners. Moreover, a member receives other benefits through IslamiCity.com such as discounts of up to 50 percent when purchasing items through the online bazaar and half-off when subscribing to a magazine called Azizah, which is mainly targeted towards women.

Besides IslamiCity.com, isna.net is the only other organization that offers membership to the public. For a $50 payment, a husband and wife duo can gain annual membership to isna.net. The organization encourages Muslims to become members stating that “working together as one body with faith and righteousness” will help “in building a better future for your children and generations to come” (the Islamic Society of North America). The annual ISNA membership provides its member with:

- Right to vote during ISNA elections
- Free Islamic Horizons* with paid membership
- Hijra calendar
- Discount at ISNA annual convention
- Shahadah* certificates (upon request)
- Marriage certificates (Upon request)

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* Islamic Horizons is ISNA’s bimonthly publication
* Shahadah is the belief that there is no God but God and Muhammad is his prophet, upon which one officially becomes a Muslim.
As far as membership in concerned, ISNA states that its members total into the thousands comprising both individual members as well as organizations. The organization holds an annual convention, attended by about 35,000 people, while in terms of web traffic, *isna.net* receives in the region of 1 million hits a month. *IslamiCity.com* by comparison has between 5,000 and 6,000 paying members. *Mpac.org* receives between 15,000-25,000 visitors to its pages every month. *Cair.com* and *masnet.org* have no members who subscribe to their website and therefore neither charge nor collect membership fees. All five websites however, publish newsletters that are free of charge to subscribers. All one has to do is provide an email address for the newsletter to be transmitted to their email account.

While conducting this research, the researcher subscribed to newsletters from all five websites and these newsletters usually provide news items pertaining to Islam and to the Islamic community in the U.S. A story of national proportions usually gets attention in all five newsletters. In the week commencing October 19, 2008 for instance, newsletters from all five websites carried comments by former Secretary of State Colin Powell in which he made favorable remarks toward Islam and Muslims concerning the Presidential race. Secretary Powell made an appearance on NBC’s *Meet the Press* in which he stated that an endearing value that made America an all-inclusive democracy was the fact that the country rewarded those who strived to improve their lives, irrespective of race, sex or religious affiliation. Concerns had been raised that Barack Obama was a Muslim (even though he had stated several times that he was a practicing Christian) and Powell made the argument that it should not matter if Obama were a Muslim or not because there are many Americans who are Muslims and that it was un-
American to demonize a person due to religious affiliation. The websites studied in this dissertation all praised Secretary Powell for his remarks. *Isna.net*, for instance, published an article entitled ‘ISNA Commends General Powell’s Statement on Muslims’, while *mpac.org*’s statement had the title ‘MPAC Commends Secretary Colin Powell for Remarks on Muslim Americans.’

**Financing**

According to *IslamiCity.com*’s Abdul Aleem, his organization generates some 60 percent of its revenue internally. That comes from the organization’s online bazaar – selling items such as books, home décor, perfumes and household items – membership subscriptions and advertising. Advertising dollars are generated through businesses that rent out space on *IslamiCity.com*. This feature is common with many websites featured on the Internet and is known as banner advertising. The remaining 40 percent of *IslamiCity.com*’s revenue is dependent on donations, although Abdul Aleem is content with these figures and proudly declares that “you would be hard pressed to find this kind of model because most of the others rely mostly on donations” (Interview with a website’s CEO, March, 2007). By the ‘others,’ Abdul Aleem is referring to other religious websites who are similarly engaged in educating and sensitizing. Saemaldahr, another *IslamiCity.com* respondent presses home the issue of his website’s successful business model by revealing that “we never really relied on external funding. We are self-sustaining by adding value to the site so we never relied on a single source of revenue or external funding” (Interview with a website’s Chief Technology Officer, March 2007).
Moreover, Abdul Aleem further contends that many of these religious websites rely on external funding either through donations or funding in order to maintain their operations. Although IslamiCity.com relies on donations for 40 percent of its income, Abdul Aleem is adamant that his organization’s business model is sound and represents a viable option. As Table 4 indicates, the other four organizations are heavily reliant on donations to sustain their operations. Only IslamiCity.com is currently in a position to generate more than half of its income through the sales of goods and services. Nevertheless, one has to keep in mind that IslamiCity.com is a portal, unlike the other four websites.

In addition, IslamiCity.com estimates that about 98 percent of donations are collected locally in the United States. IslamiCity.com compares its model – as far as donations are concerned – to the NPR and PBS models whereby users are urged to donate in order to keep the media outlet on sound financial footing.

IslamiCity.com’s model and the way it conducts its activities represents a distinctive and forward-thinking financial adaptation and demonstrates the organization’s business acumen. Evidence of the website’s success is apparent by the increase in the number of visitors to its web pages and by the amount of media recognition that IslamiCity.com has received over the years.

The Muslim American Society (MAS) was established in 1993 and is a non-profit religious organization aimed at promoting the religion of Islam as well as presenting a better understanding of the religion in society. The researcher conducted a total of two interviews with members of this organization. The first interview was with Ayyub Hanif, the Technical Director and the person charged with overall responsibility with regards to
the upkeep of the website, masnet.org. The second interview was carried out with
Ibrahim Ramey, Director of the Human and Civil Rights division of MAS. Both
interviewees were employees of MAS but worked for the Freedom Foundation, a project
of MAS.

Table 4

Sizes of organizations in terms of number of chapters/offices, staff strength and sources
of financing

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Organization</th>
<th>Number of Chapters</th>
<th>Means of Funding</th>
<th>Employees at HQ</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>MAS</td>
<td>55 chapters in 33 states</td>
<td>Donations/contributions</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CAIR</td>
<td>32 chapters in 20 states</td>
<td>Local community/donations</td>
<td>27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MPAC</td>
<td>5 chapters in 5 states</td>
<td>Local donations</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ISNA</td>
<td>2 offices nationwide</td>
<td>Donations/contributions, Membership dues, Federal grants for some projects</td>
<td>25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>IslamiCity</td>
<td>1 office</td>
<td>Membership dues, Donations</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

One commonality that all five organizations had was their sources of funding. As
Table 3 indicates, all organizations studied as part of this project rely heavily on
donations to finance their operations. Actually all five websites had a ‘donations’ link through which one could make a contribution. Only two exceptions could be found. Firstly, *IslamiCity.com*, being a portal, relied less on donations than the others due to the fact that it has an online bazaar through which it could sell a variety of items and thus raise money. The second exception was *isna.net* which received grants from state and federal governments, although these grants were for specific projects and did not constitute a large part of the organization’s budget. As one respondent stated “we get some grants, not that big in comparison and that is for some projects only” (Interview with a website’s Director of Membership and MIS, April 2007). However, these grants do not constitute large amounts of money and are mainly geared toward programs that involve community activities and collaborations with security services and inter-faith organizations. These two exceptions aside, donations formed a large part of these organizations’ budgets. Nevertheless, as one respondent from *mpac.org* notes, the major challenges facing that organization are resources, especially finances and manpower. As the websites rely primarily on donations to finance and sustain their operations, raising capital through donations constitutes a hurdle to some of these websites as they are constantly soliciting donations from the community. *Mpac.org*’s respondent further comments that:

> We actually refuse to accept any money from overseas, simply because we are an American organization and we want to make sure that the Muslim community understands that and the weight of Muslim Americans to move forward is through ourselves. We can’t rely on foreign organizations for funding for work that needs to be done for Muslim Americans. So we rely solely and I mean solely on local donations. Funding and donations come from within the United States. (Interview with a website’s Webmaster, May 2007)
This statement confirms that mpac.org’s sources of funding are primarily through donations. What is interesting, though, is that no donations are received from abroad. MPAC regards itself as an American Muslim organization and hence makes sure that it receives donations from within the United States. None of the four other websites that are part of this study place such a restriction on the source of their donations. In comparison, isna.net also relies on donations as a means of raising funds. However, donations account for about 50 percent of the organization’s budget. An isna.net interviewee notes:

About half [of our revenue] comes from donations from individuals in the U.S. and the other half from other programs like conventions, conferences and activities, membership raises some money. (Interview with a website’s Director of Membership and MIS, April 2007)

One CAIR responded pointed out that “the overwhelming majority of our funding comes from contributions. I would say over 90% if not over 95% comes from contributions and from local community members” (Interview with a website’s Columbus, Ohio Executive Director, March 2007). A masnet.org employee noted that his organization receives “not just donations, but people who donate time, programs, make fliers and didn’t get paid for that, and to make press packages and things like that” (Interview with a website’s Technical Director, December 2006). Financing is a particularly sensitive issue when studying Islamic websites. Following 9/11, the federal government has closely observed the activities of Muslim organizations, suspecting that some might be receiving ‘terrorist money.’ The websites studied as part of this dissertation have had no problems in dealing with security agencies. In fact, some of
them even collaborate with such security agencies, as I note in the next section of the chapter.

Community Activities and Involvement

This section of the dissertation attempts to draw attention to the involvement that Islamic websites have with interfaith organizations. Particular attention will be given to the collaboration between the websites under study and these interfaith organizations, while also highlighting grassroots initiatives between Muslim organizations and organizations of other faiths. Siapera (2006) contended that “the term network is understood in its rather loose sense: as an interconnection between communicating entities, without making any claims as to the depth or quality of this interconnection. Yet the mere presence of such a network is an important finding, as it indicates that Muslim community websites do no operate in isolation but rather build and maintain links with others” (p. 337). In addition, attention will also be given to cooperation that the websites have with other Muslim organizations.

The Muslim Public Affairs Council, over the years, has developed strong ties with organizations from other religions. As an mpac.org interview notes:

Since its inception MPAC has been part of interfaith work and we’ve developed relationships that go back 15-20 years even before the organization’s birth. The individuals that founded the organization have had a very strong foothold in involvement with interfaith community as well as other Muslim organizations and they developed and increased the interaction with interfaith and community organizations. There are churches we’ve had relationships with for 10-15 years, and the same with synagogues and with leadership in these Jewish and Christian communities. (Interview with a website’s Webmaster, May 2007)
MPAC realizes that their organization cannot exist without collaborating with other entities, but has to reach out and get involved with organizations from other faiths. As the above respondent indicates, MPAC’s founders have long-running associations with Christian and Jewish organizations and leaders and these relationships have prospered over the years allowing for collaboration in areas of benefit to the community.

One project that MPAC is involved in is called “New Ground.” This project is a collaboration with a Jewish organization. As one respondent noted:

…the second such project is called New Ground and is a project to develop and enhance Muslim-Jewish understanding. Again as Americans we seek to develop understanding with each other. There are generational differences on the Israeli-Palestinian issue but that doesn’t hinder our ability to interact with one another and this is the first such initiative of its kind in the U.S. (Interview with a website’s Webmaster, May 2007)

According to mpac.org, New Ground involves collaboration with an organization called the Progressive Jewish Alliance. The project brings together Muslims and Jews for discussions, collaborations and involvement in community activities. It is a bold program that aims to jumpstart dialogue and community building between American Muslims and Jews. The program intends to put forth a new initiative for creating a dynamic and constructive way to promote Muslim-Jewish relations (Muslim Public Affairs Council, 2008).

The Islamic Society of North America is also actively involved in community work and in collaboration with other organizations. As one respondent stated:

We work with other Muslim organizations throughout America and to a certain extent with other interfaith organizations as well… in terms of the program content and the speakers, we pull together speakers from various organizations that cover different topics, so for a program that talks about civil rights we have speakers from CAIR and for humanitarian causes and social activism we invite
speakers from organizations such as the Umma Clinic* in California so in that regard there is cooperation with other organizations. (Interview with a website’s Program Manager, May 2007)

Like MPAC, ISNA therefore represents another organization that has partnerships with Muslim and non-Muslim organizations. As the interviewee mentioned, ISNA even has ties to CAIR, another organization studied as part of this project. ISNA also has cooperation with the UMMA Community Clinic, an entity that provides medical services to those who need it, irrespective of religious affiliation or ability to pay for these services.

Additionally, ISNA is also involved in community activities. An interviewee from isna.net points out that:

A lot of the programs that we do are specific to Muslim American culture and Muslim American paradigms so it’s a lot of information presenting what we’re doing out to a greater public that isn’t necessarily versed in the kind of programs that we’re offering, for example like the cultural competency program or developing leadership skills or things like that. We’re dealing with the immigrant community, which is a big segment of the Muslim population, so in regards to that they’re not versed in these programs and don’t know what it is but they are versed with the Internet and finding out information there so if they connect to our website they are able to gain a bit of understanding of the services that we are here to offer and thus reach a better understanding of what it is that we do as an organization. (Interview with a website’s Program Manager, May 2007)

Another isna.net informant stated that:

We’ve had partnerships with other faith organizations and they have been helpful and cooperative in different projects that we did to benefit the greater American community. (Interview with a website’s Director of Membership and MIS, April 2007)

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* UMMA Community Clinic is a Los Angeles-based organization that provides medical help to the underprivileged in society.
Isna.net is used as a communication medium in order to disseminate information to Muslims with regards to certain programs or activities. As the above respondent indicated, there are a number of Muslim immigrants to the United States who might be unfamiliar with the culture and might therefore not adhere to certain norms. Lapidus (2002) noted that ISNA provides services and education geared largely toward “immigrant communities” (p. 813). Isna.net provides an outlet for services that are offered in the community and that might be helpful to these immigrants.

One isna.net respondent noted:

ISNA is an umbrella organization that provides training and guidance and advice to different Islamic centers in different Islamic communities in terms of providing them with training needs and a platform…and our mission statement is: ‘ISNA is an association of Muslim organizations and individuals that provides a common platform for presenting Islam, supporting Muslim communities, developing educational, social and outreach programs and fostering good relations with other religious communities, and civic and service organizations.’ (Interview with a website’s Director of Membership and MIS, April 2007)

This illustrates isna.net’s involvement with the local Muslim community. The organization’s mission statement recognizes the need to both develop and support Muslim communities in the U.S. Training is provided on the basics of Islam, on leadership and on everyday social activities and behaviors such as weddings, funerals, buying a home and so on. The same respondent further added:

We develop Muslim communities by providing service to the Muslim community and as a priority we have established Islam training on leadership and also working on getting youth involvement and sound financial base…any organization has to have a strong financial base to perform services. We are also working on improving the public image of Islam and also interfaith and coalition building where we work with interfaith organizations and creating alliances and also on community development to help communities on education on non-profit management governance and we’re doing this community and development work
for the past 10-15 years. (Interview with a website’s Director of Membership and MIS, April 2007)

ISNA recognizes that it has commitments toward the Muslim community. The organization is actively involved in a number of initiatives that enhance and develop the Muslim community. The website is regarded as a key communication tool to disseminate the organization’s messages. Even though ISNA has been involved in community work for the past 10-15 years, its website did not exist until 1996. However, isna.net has become an important media tool to the organization. The goal of improving Islam’s public image is a particularly vital, especially post 9/11 when the religion has come under public scrutiny.

Another isna.net informant also draws attention to his organization’s involvement with other organizations. These collaborations are both with Muslim organizations such as CAIR and MPAC as well as with non-Muslim entities:

ISNA being a national organization is more involved in national work with other faith-based organizations, for example we’ve had projects with CAIR and MPAC…we’ve also had seminars in the communities and in our annual conventions of about 35-40000 in which we have several parallel tracks where we have educational or training programs or workshops for different community and youth leaders and we also have faith organizations and we’ve had interfaith banquets where we’ve invited these interfaith organizations and they come and participate in that dialogue and discussion. (Interview with a website’s Program Manager, May 2007)

Collaboration with other faith-based organizations is therefore high on isna.net’s agenda. A large part of these partnerships and activities involves engagement in workshops and having conversations in order to benefit the community. Youth development and enhancement is another important area that isna.net devotes significant
attention to. On the website, an internal link is labeled ‘Youth’ and takes the visitor to a section of the website that is dedicated to youth activities. ISNA points out that it “have organized more than 30 camps, conferences, seminars and leadership retreats. These programs have served more than 3500 youth from around the United States and Canada” (ISNA, 2008). The significance of these activities are youth progress and advancement. These activities are also noteworthy in that they serve to bring together the youth in order for them to receive Islamic education.

The interviewee further noted:

[We are] fostering good relations with others in the religious community and with other faith communities, and with the civic involvement we’ve had good relations with the State Department and the Department of Justice and even the White House, where we have attended and participated in different activities. (Interview with a website’s Director of Membership and MIS, April 2007)

*Isna.net* considers collaboration with other organizations in the religious community to be important. Additionally, the organization has been engaged with different governmental agencies and has contributed to the on-going discourse on Islam and on how best to involve the American Muslim community in effective community participation.

The Council on American-Islamic Relations also collaborates with interfaith organizations to undertake various community activities. According to *cair.com*, “CAIR works in close cooperation with other civic and civil liberties groups such as the American Civil Liberties Union, Amnesty International, NAACP, Hispanic Unity, Organization of Chinese Americans, Japanese American Citizens League, Sikh Mediarwatch and Resource Task Force, among many others.” Additionally, “CAIR has successfully partnered with the National Council of Churches and held dialogue with
representatives of the National Association of Evangelicals” (Council on American-Islamic Relations, 25 Facts about CAIR, 2008). One interview from CAIR added:

One of our missions is to build coalitions to promote justice and mutual understanding and quite often we do that with various Muslim groups and other Muslim organizations like MAS, MPAC, the Muslim Student Association, the Muslim Alliance of North America, ISNA so anytime collaboration is possible we try to go out and do that and strengthen ties between the community and the various organizations. So we can help one another out but we also work outside Muslim organizations and when there’s various issues that we have common ground on with non-Muslim organization we certainly work with them and some of the predominant organizations will be the ACLU and also the NAACP and various churches and Christian groups as well as Jewish and other faith-based organizations. (Interview with a website’s Columbus, Ohio Executive Director, March 2007)

CAIR is involved with Muslim and non-Muslim organizations alike. Cair.com points out that “CAIR has conducted diversity/sensitivity training on Islam and Muslims for the FBI, US Armed Forces, several local and state law enforcement agencies, and many US corporations” (Council on American-Islamic Relations, 25 Facts about CAIR, 2008). An interviewee elaborated regarding community collaborations and activities:

Quite often it is workshops or discussions but whatever the project may be it could cover topics from education to outreach so our mission there is quite broad. We like to incorporate several aspects into what we do and some of those areas are media relations, civil rights and political empowerment. (Interview with a website’s Columbus, Ohio Executive Director, March 2007)

Rabasa et al. (2007) defined moderate Muslims as those “who share the key dimensions of democratic culture. These include support for democracy and internationally recognized human rights (including gender equality and freedom of worship), respect for diversity, acceptance of nonsectarian sources of law, and opposition to terrorism and other illegitimate forms of violence” (p. 66). Community activities and involvement with interfaith organizations as well as with law enforcement agencies – as
is the case of CAIR – are “an intrinsic component of…network-building initiative[s]” (p. 90). Rabasa (2004) also advocated strong support for what he terms “‘civil Islam’ – Muslim civil society groups that advocate moderation and modernity” (p. xxiv).

Organizations that promote civil Islam and dialogue and discussion within the community carry the responsibility of mirroring Islam in a positive light in a western community.

IslamCity.com is another Muslim entity that seeks to promote Islam in a constructive manner. Two interviews were conducted with staff members of IslamCity.com. The first interview was carried out with Mohamed Abdul Aleem, the Chief Executive Officer (CEO), while the second interview was conducted with Amr Saemaldahr the Chief Technical Officer (CTO). Both Abdul Aleem and Saemaldahr joined IslamCity.com at about the same time in the early 1990s and are co-founders of the organization and of the website. In addition to their official positions and their everyday involvement with the administration of the organization and of the website, they also serve on the Board of Directors of HADI, IslamCity.com’s parent organization.

As CEO, Abdul Aleem’s foremost role is “to make sure we can set project tasks and implement overall organizational objectives” (Interview with a website’s CEO, March, 2007). Abdul Aleem stressed that his and his organization’s main priorities are to make sure that “we do community outreach and making sure we do networking with media…and also making sure our team has all resources available to them to do their work.” (Interview with a website’s CEO, March, 2007). In order for them to realize these objectives, Abdul Aleem and his staff set about establishing a business model that is both viable and sustainable. IslamCity.com prides itself in being able to provide a total online
experience for a range of web browsers. The website contains plenty of information pertaining to Islam. In this way, information seekers are conveniently able to locate literature about the religion.

Along the same lines, mpac.org also seeks to give the online visitor a distinctive online experience. As mpac.org’s webmaster clarified:

We wanted to have a professional, clean cut image on the website so we decided not to go with a lot of flashy things or heavy imagery but rather simplicity in finding the information and simplicity in what we do upfront without having to search for it. So we made our website content-oriented so when people come they look at what we do and what we’ve been doing as opposed to the aesthetics of it. We’re also working on building up heavier audio and video content and that’s something that will make us distinctive and we’re still working on that right now to make it more interactive and easier to update. (Interview with a website’s Webmaster, May 2007)

Similarly, isna.net makes the point that it seeks to differentiate its website from that of others. Isna.net seeks to present information pertaining to Islam in a positive light in order that visitors to their website are able to see exactly what kind of services and information the organization presents. Isna.net aims at attracting the curiosity of Muslim web surfers, as one respondent noted:

I think perhaps one of the fortunate things for us is that the institution itself or the organization itself attracts people to the website to find out exactly who ISNA is and once they get on the website the content that’s on there presents an image about Islam and Islam in America and this is what the organization is doing and these are the services that we’re doing and all of this is catering to Muslims in America. (Interview with a website’s Program Manager, May 2007)

Another isna.net interviewee commented further on how his organization sees their website being different from others:

From the different other Islamic websites we believe we have a lot of information that we provide to the community that is of benefit for example the Center of
Aging and Tentology and different domestic violence information that we have on the website, so these are different services that we provide. We also have a youth section where we are developing a brand new website for the youth department so that is expected to have some benefit to have youth logging into the discussion forum and taking part in different online activities. (Interview with a website’s Director of Membership and MIS, April 2007)

‘A Guide for the Muslim Funeral’ is the title of a link to be found on the pages of isna.net. In that page, extensive information is provided relating to performing of funeral rites. In Islam, the body of a deceased person is first washed in a certain way and then wrapped in a piece of cloth, again in a prescribed way. A prayer is then performed and the body is carried to the cemetery for burial. The website gives information on each of these steps in a detailed and an informative way. This represents another way that isna.net seeks to provide information on its website. By providing information about funerals on its pages, isna.net is merely following the Islamic tradition of providing information and passing knowledge from one person to the other and this is important because people are beginning to forget the ritual details in secular society. All this information is provided on a website due to the degree of difficulty associated with obtaining this kind of information in the ‘real world,’ especially in a western country.

A content analysis of the five websites coupled with information gathered from the interviewees reveals different strategies that these organizations employ in order to distinguish themselves from other Islamic-oriented websites. Yanow (2000) was of the opinion that each organization seeks to employ distinctly diverse strategies in order for its website to appeal to media consumers. Websites with an Islamic content are no exception. The fact that their content deals with matters of faith – as opposed to entertainment or politics – is no indication that their strategies and cultures should grossly differ from those of other websites. Islamic-oriented websites – like other websites – are
also in the business of information dissemination, and they also seek to distinguish themselves in one way or the other.

An informant from isna.net underscores the above point by emphasizing the importance of his organization’s website, highlighting and the role it plays in spreading their message. The website helps them achieve a number of objectives including:

To disseminate information to members and affiliate organizations, information about moon sightings, information about different *fiqh* issues and information about their day to day needs, so it was more of an informational purpose. But over a period of time it has changed and grown quite a bit so we are now offering e-services, e-library and also a lot of e-commerce on the website such as online registration, online donations, online membership which are all done through the website. (Interview with a website’s Director of Membership and MIS, April 2007)

The *isna.net* website provides these services in order to educate and inform visitors to its pages. Donations for instance, have always been given in cash or in kind at the mosque. However, *isna.net* is moving that aspect of traditional Islam to an online forum, thus allowing visitors to its website to make that donation from home using a computer. By doing so, *isna.net* is making use of technology through its website by making it easier for people to donate. Donation is therefore not limited to the mosque at the *Jum’aa* prayer but can now be performed at any day of the week and during any time of the day.

**Communicating the Organization’s Mission and Vision**

According to Lawrence (2002), authority in Islam is:

Scriptural, since it upholds the Holy Qur’an as divine revelation. [Islamic authority] is charismatic, since it invokes hadith, which depicts the exemplary life
and words of the prophet Muhammad. It is also juridical, since it relies on a practical code, the shari’a, and also on the custodians of the shari’a, the ulama, who are seen to be faithful guides to Muslim norms and values.” (p. 237)

In analyzing the websites, attention was paid to the issue of authority in published content. It is important for Muslims to be aware of the source of authority, since Islam has no living universally-accepted central figure of authority.

This section of the project represents the third and final theme the researcher used in analyzing the websites, an assessment of organizational missions and visions. The segment will also dissect the issue of authority and objectivity as far as the websites are concerned. In doing so, the researcher is better able to comprehend and breakdown the approach taken by the five organizations in communicating their understanding of Islam.

Table 5 below provides each organization’s mission and vision which are available on the pages of each organization’s website. One of the themes of my dissertation deconstructs the mission statements and vision of these websites. During my interviews, I always made it a point to ask my informants about their respective missions and visions. Respondents from mpac.org and isna.net went as far as to read their missions and visions and stressed that these statements help guide their respective organizations in their everyday activities. Each of the statements is quick to recognize that theirs is an American Muslim organization that aims at enhancing dialogue among Muslims and between Muslims and non-Muslims. Specific attention is paid to education, information and community involvement. All of the statements below confirm the notion that the organizations are involved in promoting a moderate brand of Islam. Earlier, I defined moderate Islam as having aspects that are overwhelmingly peaceful, that have
consideration for the role of women and that do not promote tension with the West.

Additionally, the organizations overwhelmingly use their websites as a communication medium and as a tool through which to extend their message. An interviewee from cair.com had this to say about his organization’s efforts at communicating their message:

We communicate our message through the Internet, through the updates we give and we have our daily email reaching over 500,000 people and we have alerts that reach over 1,500 U.S. mosques and Islamic centers. In addition we have 10,000 government and media subscribers in our daily American Muslim briefs. We also have releases in Arabic that are received by over 110,000 activists, ministers, politicians and academics in the Arab world. So our information through the Internet is not just reaching Americans here but also policy makers worldwide. There is a whole department that is dedicated to compiling of the daily news letter. (Interview with a website’s Columbus, Ohio Executive Director, March 2007)

The same respondent added regarding communicating his organization’s mission and vision:

As time has gone on and as there has been a large void out there for Muslim organizations to step up to provide information and education and to empower our community, we’ve done what we can to stick within our vision and mission but also to incorporate different factors to better help us to fill that void. So I think although we’ve grown, we’ve also broadened our vision and mission and we like to stay true to our initial beliefs and what we want to be and what the organization wants to do but as any organization grows and you realize there’s a market out there that needs to be addressed, we’ve certainly taken that approach as an organization. When we see a need out there for an organization to promote anything specific that deals with Islam and Muslims and if it fits into our vision and mission in some capacity we would like to fill that void. (Interview with a website’s Columbus, Ohio Executive Director, March 2007)

A respondent from masnet.org made the following comments about how his organization communicates its vision and mission to the public:

I think we’re successful [in communicating the organization’s mission statement and vision] and of course saying that I also recognize that there’s always room for improvement and there are always things we can do better or differently. But I
would say that overall we have an active staff a very broad based national network, a good relationship with local and national media throughout the U.S. so we do not believe in the idea of an insular, self-contained Islamic organization. We think that Muslim organizations need to have allies and partners and one example I should mention is that right after the events of Hurricane Katrina at the end of summer 2005, MAS organized a national network of people who provided material aid and other services to the Katrina survivors many of whom at that time relocated to Houston, TX. So we do fund raising, we do humanitarian work not only in the context of the Muslim community but also in the broader national context and all these things are really a part of how we see ourselves as a national movement of engaged Muslims who are involved in civic charitable work, youth development work, political empowerment, human and civil rights work and so on. (Interview with a website’s Director of Human and Civil Rights Division, April 2007)

Another masnet.org employee comments on the success of his organization is communicating their mission statement and vision:

I think we’re making significant progress towards the goals that we had because when we read some the comments that we get that they’re proud of MAS and when we go to rallies and we have events and we get some of the responses that we see, it tells that we’re on the right track and to keep doing what we’re doing…like the recent election of Keith Ellison∗ these type of things tell us that there is some kind of progress been made. We feel we’re making positive progress toward our mission statement. (Interview with a website’s Technical Director, December 2006)

* In 2006 Representative Keith Ellison became the first Muslim to be elected to Congress. He is also Minnesota’s first African American congressman.
Table 5

*Table showing mission statement of each organization.*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Organization</th>
<th>Mission and Vision</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>CAIR</td>
<td>Mission: CAIR’s mission is to enhance understanding of Islam, encourage dialogue, protect civil liberties, empower American Muslims, and build coalitions that promote justice and mutual understanding. Vision: CAIR's vision is to be a leading advocate for justice and mutual understanding.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ISNA</td>
<td>Mission: ISNA is an association of Muslim organizations and individuals that provides a common platform for presenting Islam, supporting Muslim communities, developing educational, social and outreach programs and fostering good relations with other religious communities, and civic and service organizations. Vision: To be an exemplary and unifying Islamic organization in North America that contributes to the betterment of the Muslim community and society at large.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>IslamiCity</td>
<td>Mission: IslamiCity’s mission is to share with the world an understanding of Islam and Muslims and promote peace, justice and harmony for all people. Vision: IslamiCity aims to advance an understanding and dialogue among civilizations. We believe through emerging online media there is an opportunity to enhance awareness and knowledge leading to a better understanding and peaceful coexistence in our rapidly shrinking global village.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
| MAS | Mission: To build an integrated empowerment process for the American Muslim community through civic education, participation, community outreach, and coalition building; to forge positive relationships with other institutions outside of our community, that will ensure and facilitate the protection of civil rights and liberties for American Muslims and all Americans.  
Focus: Engagement of the following American institutions and organizations in order to build a broad based coalition that will enhance the religious political and social viability of the American Muslim Community (Media; Organized labor; Congress; Non-Muslim religious institutions; etc…)
|
| MPAC | Mission: MPAC is an American institution which informs and shapes public opinion and policy by serving as a trusted resource to decision makers in government, media and policy institutions. MPAC is also committed to developing leaders with the purpose of enhancing the political and civic participation of American Muslims.  
Vision: To establish a vibrant Muslim American community that will enrich American society through promoting the Islamic values of Mercy (21:107), Justice (4:135), Peace (8:61), Human Dignity (17:70), Freedom (2:256), and Equality for all (49:13).  
|

When asked how his organization and his website seek to uphold and promote their mission statement and vision, an *isna.net* Director of Membership contended:

In terms of our activities we are promoting those activities [organization’s mission statement and vision] and establishing partnerships and mobilize individuals and organizations for different activities and through our annual
conventions we are able to provide that common platform for different communities to come and grow and develop their educational programs. We’ve had annual education forums where we’ve had 600-700 teachers, school principals and administrators who come and participate in training and workshops. We also have social and outreach programs through our west zone office, where we have a west zone rep and they have an office for sheltering of battered women and we would like to improve that but we’ve started that as a pilot program. (Interview with a website’s Director of Membership and MIS, April 2007)

ISNA holds an annual convention which, according to isna.net, draws some 35,000-40,000 participants. The organization takes advantage of this huge gathering to organize workshops, training and roundtable discussions for participants. The convention also attracts participants from other religions groups. This annual gathering lays the groundwork for alliances that develop between interfaith organizations.

Masnet.org does not hold an annual convention but enjoys good relations and is involved in community activities as well. As one respondent noted:

A big part of what we do is grassroots activity and you have to be there with the local community. We hold rallies and we encourage people to come and support and it was shown on C-SPAN and we had people from the Arab community from the Christian community coming out in support and we had another rally outside of the Tunisian Embassy so we have a lot of grassroots campaigns that we do and that keeps us connected with the community and if we just discuss these esoteric issues and never really get to the people that’s not an effective way to effect change. (Interview with a website’s Technical Director, December 2006)

Masnet.org is involved in rallies that seek to raise the community’s awareness to a certain issue. As far as MAS is concerned, this represents one way in which the organization can involve itself in community activities in order to show support to different issues in society.
A respondent from IslamiCity.com made the following comment with regards to how successful his organization is in communicating its mission statement and vision:

There are factors [used to measure IslamiCity.com’s success in communicating its mission statement and vision] the first of which is our visitor base which is increasing every year. The second is to look at every comment that comes in and to categorize those comments; are they negative or positive and we also track different coverage that we get in the media about IslamiCity, how are they looking at the website. There is a link towards the bottom of the website called media recognition with comments highlighted audience. (Interview with a website’s CEO, March, 2007)

When asked the same question, another IslamiCity.com interviewee added:

If we were to measure success in our case in terms of web traffic and the number of feedback messages and emails that people send to us then we can say we are successful. So we have quadrupled and quintupled and every year our traffic increases. Obviously what we aim for is to increase our traffic tenfold and really make a difference and to do so means resources and within the resources that are available to us I would say we are tremendously successful. (Interview with a website’s Chief Technology Officer, March 2007)

The issue of feedback is one that Islamic websites take seriously. Feedback provides opinion and criticism and may provide direction for future advancement. IslamiCity.com’s staff sifts through these comments and categorizes them. Since my study did not entail audience research to get audience’s feedback on the websites, I relied on respondents to provide me with a feel for how well their websites are doing, mainly through reaction from their users.

As far the issue of religious authority is concerned one isna.net respondent commented:

[We rely on] The Fiqh Council of North American and the Islamic Shura Council of North America [and] these are the authoritative and religious organizations in the U.S. and Canada that have the religious authority and have the religious scholarship. We have scholars like Dr. Muzammil Siddiqi, Dr. Jamal Badawi, Dr.
Zulfikar Shah and Dr. Taha Jabber and there are 18 members of the Fiqh Council they are considered to be the religious party and we rely heavily upon them with regards to different religious issues. We also we have close relationships with them and we’re trying to empower them with the new website with more information tools and technological tools and we will be able to to get them more information and to get them mobilized to provide the religious guidance to the Muslim community in North America. (Interview with a website’s Director of Membership and MIS, April 2007)

The Fiqh Council of North America (FCNA) is an organization affiliated with ISNA and whose main task centers on “advising and educating its members and officials on matters related to the application of Shari’ah in their individual and collective lives in the North American environment” (FCNA, 2008). It is made up of members who “have come together and these are well known established scholars, who have been serving this community for a long time. These people have established their scholarship in this country and people know them and people respect them in that sense” (Interview with a website’s Director of Membership and MIS, April 2007).

An interviewee from cair.com made these comments about the issue of authority in Islam:

When we speak about Islam, that’s our main area of objectivity and to give a true understanding and a real life picture of what Islam is and what is spoken in the Qur’an and the basic truths, teachings and tenants of Islam…so that’s where the objectivity comes into play as far as being a Muslim advocacy organization. A lot of people will say we’re very subjective in our approach and that’s a matter of necessity because when we’re out there promoting Islam encountering the negative stereotypes and misinformation out there, people view that as being subjective and as always any time we deal with Islam-related issues we try to be as objective as possible. (Interview with a website’s Columbus, Ohio Executive Director, March 2007)

A masnet.org informant made this comment regarding his organization’s handling of authority:

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In terms of quoting hadith for instance we quote the authority of [that particular] hadith but we are independent of any sort of narrow interpretation of any Islamic authority in the U.S. or globally so for example we don’t follow a particular sheikh or a particular school of judicial reasoning or fatwa. What we try to do is maintain our understanding of the centrality of Qur’an and hadith as the basic guide for what Muslims should be doing at any particular point. So MAS is not a sectarian organization in the sense of following only a particular line of legal or ecclesiastical authority vis-à-vis the reputation of Muslims [and what they] ought to be doing in a particular context. (Interview with a website’s Director of Human and Civil Rights Division, April 2007)

Another masnet.org interviewee notes:

We don’t get into the ‘deep’ Islamic discussions with the general population because there is no way we can speak for all of Muslims so some of the things we’re saying are general in nature and we may not go into specific laws as far as Islam but things that are accepted within the Muslim community. So we don’t get into the ‘controversial issues’ for example Prophet Muhammad (pbuh) I don’t think you can find any Muslim that will say he was not a compassionate man. No one will say he was untrustworthy or a tyrant we can feel confident in saying that. So those are the kind of things that we put forth so we present evidence from hadith but we don’t get into issues where there may be more than one right opinion. (Interview with a website’s Technical Director, December 2006)

Bunt (2000) pointed out that “when discussing Islam, care has to be taken to consider that there are many different interpretations of the concept of Islam” (p. 8). Respondents from cair.com and masnet.org made it clear that their organizations covered the ‘basic’ aspect of Islam. These fundamentals included the belief in one God, the belief in all His prophets including the last one, Muhammad as well as the belief in the five pillars of Islam – essentials that all Muslims agree on. However, when it comes to contentious issues such as how to behave in a western country or whether women should be veiled, then these are matters that lead to disagreements, because the question of authority in Islam is a contested one. As Lawrence (2002) pointed out “to say that there is authority in Islam, and to specify that authority as threefold – scriptural, charismatic,
and juridical – does not end the question of what counts as true Islam or who are the real Muslims. Rather, the question itself has to be pushed to another level of inquiry, at once more speculative and more precise” (p. 238). As a Muslim organization in a western country, cair.com tries to be as objective as possible in promoting the image of Islam. CAIR remains objective by quoting the authority of the Qur’an and by adhering to the basic teachings of Islam.

One of the first statements that Ayyub Hanif of masnet.org uttered was “we pride our self in being a kind of information portal” (Interview with a website’s Technical Director, December 2006). In other words, masnet.org is designed in such a way so as to provide information to Muslims and to non-Muslims alike. When I first embarked upon this research, I was of the view that Islamic-oriented organizations were all engaged in one form of da’wa – proselytizing – or another. But this, as I later found out, was not the case with these five organizations. As a matter of fact, informants interviewed all made the point that their organizations did not engage in any kind of da’wa whatsoever. (More discussion on the issue of da’wa is found later in this chapter). The common theme was that they were all in this ‘business’ for educational purposes. One respondent from MPAC stated that:

We did not want to have anything and everything on the website. As an organization we have specific and clear cut goals and objectives by which we exist and they are clearly dealing with engaging with the political process, engaging those who we had elected as officials to represent us, engaging law enforcement and media, community as well as leadership and now we are starting to engage with the entertainment industry. The information we have on the website are pertinent to these specific things. This is not a da’wa website. There are many websites out there that are great da’wa websites. On our website we have specific information detailing what we do and who we work with and it is very specific information and people come to our website for this reason. (Interview with a website’s Webmaster, May 2007)
The Muslim Public Affairs stresses that their organization and their website are not involved in da’wa. MPAC is interested only in disseminating specific information pertaining to the well-being of American Muslims and to the safeguarding of American Muslims and their participation in the public domain. MPAC is also actively involved in the political process and has become a source whose opinion is sought by public officials and the media. During 2008 for instance, MPAC ‘s Executive Director and Communications Director both made a number of appearances in national and international media outlets including CNN, Fox News and Al-Jazeera International.

In addition, a respondent from mpac.org pointed out that:

In all its actions, MPAC works diligently to offer the public a portrayal that goes beyond stereotypes in order to elucidate that Muslims worship God, abhor global terrorism, stand against oppression, and are part of a vibrant American pluralism. MPAC operates on the core belief that change in U.S. policy requires more from our community than attending meetings. It requires organized, sustained efforts in coalition with like-minded groups both at the grassroots and national levels. It requires a strong voice in the media, thoughtful analysis and authentic dialogue. (Interview with a website’s Webmaster, May 2007)

Mpac.org makes reference to the fact that Islam is a peaceful religion and clearly distances itself from violence that many have come to associate with Islam, especially post September 11. Mpac.org’s message is one through which it seeks to call for positive and constructive activities and involvement in order to benefit one’s community.

Isna.net, through an interviewee, made similar remarks in order to dispel the negativity surrounding Islam:

Post September 11, Islamic organizations and the Muslim community in general have had a very proactive approach to dealing with the problem, with the predicament that we were faced with, but I don’t foresee that we face a lot of
challenges because we are out there and we’re showing that this is who we are and this is what we’re doing and these are the services we’re offering to create a unique Muslim American identity. (Interview with a website’s Program Manager, May 2007)

Said (1997) made the point that Islam is often misunderstood in the West, due mainly to the fact that it is misrepresented in the media. *mpac.org* and *isna.net* are making concerted efforts to make information about Islam readily available in their pages. Respondents that I spoke to who represented both websites also made it clear that they are constantly communicating positive messages about Islam either online or through the community activities that they are involved in. They are trying to project an image of Muslims being well-rounded than the flat image projected in some media outlets.

One informant from *isna.net* offers the following comment:

The greatest message that we hope to communicate is that Islam can coexist here in American with the western culture as well as and to come together to create development and identity formation, so we can create a unique identity and there is a balance with the western society and the western culture but within the principles of Islam and I think that all our programs that we’re involved in as an organization caters to that notion that this identity is in fact achievable and we are now in the process of creating it. (Interview with a website’s Program Manager, May 2007)

Again, this goes back to the notion that Islam is a peaceful religion and that the websites under study are moderate in nature and are trying to reflect a positive picture about Islam. A respondent from *cair.com* made that point that and “there’s a lot of outreach and education work out there [by Muslim organizations] but I would think that CAIR would be a leading contributor to that outreach and education so we know we’re
making a difference” (Interview with a website’s Columbus, Ohio Executive Director, March 2007).

The websites are also demonstrating a great deal of effort in order to ascertain and advance what Mamdani (2004) referred to as their ‘good Muslims’ status. Mamdani further adds that following September 11, the Bush Administration sought to make the distinction between “good Muslims” and “bad Muslims.” Whereas “bad Muslims” promoted fundamentalist acts and were responsible for the September 11 attacks, “good Muslims” constituted the overwhelming majority and were eager to support the war on terror. Nevertheless, continued Mamdani, “this could not hide the central message of such discourse: unless proved to be ‘good,’ every Muslim was presumed to be ‘bad’” (p. 15). Muslims were henceforth under scrutiny to prove that they were moderate in nature and that they condemned such horrendous activities. It is important for these websites to create their own distinct Islamic identity while at the same time to prove that this Islamic identity is not only restricted to Muslim communities but can survive and flourish in a western environment.

IslamiCity.com

This section of the chapter focuses on IslamiCity.com. IslamiCity.com is a portal and its web pages represent an online marketplace. This distinguishes IslamiCity.com from the other websites studied in this dissertation. The section traces the history of the organization, including the establishment of its website. Parts of this section also highlight IslamiCity.com’s e-newsletter that I subscribed to in 2007 and 2008. A number of examples from the newsletters are showcased to provide a picture with the issues that the organization deems to be newsworthy.
IslamiCity.com was created by Human Assistance and Development International (HADI) in 1995. According to HADI’s website, the organization “works towards the long term social, economic, educational, and scientific development of people worldwide. HADI also provides short term domestic/international assistance and relief to the people in need” (Human Assistance & Development International, 2007). Established in 1991, HADI’s goals and objectives, according to Mr. Mohamed Abdul Aleem IslamiCity.com’s CEO, focus on “sustainable development projects in places which are disadvantaged like computer trainings centers in Bosnia, Albania, Croatia and agricultural development in the Middle East in Jordan, Lebanon, and done earthquake relief in Pakistan, building housing in earthquake areas and set up small sowing units for the widows of the tsunami in Indonesia.”

IslamiCity.com’s Chief Technical Officer went further to state that “HADI is a non-profit organization, and IslamiCity is a website that is a project of HADI, so basically HADI created IslamiCity.” In addition to its involvement and engagement in social, economic, educational and scientific development, HADI also has an information and research arm “involved in the collection, analysis & research of the socio-economic and scientific-technical developments” and carries out its work both domestically and internationally (HADI, 2007). Saemaldahr stated that “the website was setup in 1995 and it was setup for the sole purpose of creating a web presence for Muslims and for Islam and to give accurate and proper info about the Muslim faith to a worldwide audience.” Unlike IslamiCity.com which generates revenue in a number of ways mainly through memberships and donations, it is unclear how HADI raises money in order to finance it various activities.
In 1995, HADI set up *IslamiCity.com* with a mission of enabling “people to enrich their lives and maximize their potential by providing valuable information and services” (*IslamiCity.com: The Global Muslim Community*, p. 1). From the onset, the website aimed to distinguish itself from competitors and to establish a unique model through which broadcast its message and disseminate information. *IslamiCity.com* also seeks “to provide a non-sectarian comprehensive and holistic view of Islam and Muslims to a global audience” (*IslamiCity.com: The Global Muslim Community*, p. 1). Since its inception, *IslamiCity.com* claims that it has developed into a leading source for Islamic information online. This proclamation might well be true, and is reflected in the fact that *IslamiCity.com*’s website represents a vibrant and dynamic forum both for returning members and for first-time visitors alike.

*IslamiCity.com* stresses that the creation of its online initiative provides visitors to its website with an enhanced experience of Islam and of Muslim way of life. The organization further states that its website is viewed by millions every year. In fact, *IslamiCity.com* points out that its pages are viewed 10 million times each month by 1 million visitors sending a total of 11,000 messages and inquiries. *IslamiCity.com* also has some 85,000 registered members who subscribe to its weekly newsletter (*IslamiCity.com: The Global Muslim Community*). It should be further noted that *IslamiCity.com* has a total of nine employees involved in the website’s updating and maintenance as well as in the day-to-day administrative and financial running of the organization.

**Newsletter**

*IslamiCity.com* sends out a newsletter to 85,000 registered subscribers. This bulletin is sent out electronically once a week and arrives at the subscriber’s email inbox.
Subscribing to IslamiCity.com’s newsletter constitutes a simple process. On the homepage, a visitor to the website has the option to join the mailing list simply by providing a name and an email address. The subscriber is also given the option of receiving the weekly newsletter in either HTML or text format. Once that takes place, IslamiCity.com sends an email to the address provided asking the subscriber to confirm his/her subscription. As soon as IslamiCity.com receives a confirmation, that email address is added to a list of subscribers who receive the weekly bulletin. The whole process is simple and does not take more than a few minutes.

It should also be noted that in order to stop receiving the newsletter one simply has to click on a link at the bottom of the email that removes one’s email address from the list of subscribers. Subscription to the newsletter is free of charge and does not require any membership privileges. In order for this research to fully examine and comprehend the extent of IslamiCity’s website and the messages it broadcasts and in order that this research wholly analyzes the activities that the organization and the website participate in, the researcher subscribed to the IslamiCity.com newsletter and made it a point to keep abreast with news items emanating from that organization.

It should be pointed out that the practice of sending out newsletters is not exclusive to IslamiCity.com, nor is it associated exclusively with the other four websites studied as part of this research. It is very common for one to receive newsletters and bulletins from different websites in order to stay abreast with news and events in that field. Newsletters commonly constitute parts of websites containing material that deal with politics, economic, technology, weather, sports, health, science the environment and a variety of other subjects.
The objectives of the *IslamiCity.com* newsletter are to provide subscribers with information and updates with regards to Islam, the Muslim community as well as current events and news items taking place on a national and an international level. It is not a review of news events but rather a brief summary of a number of items. Not surprisingly, it brings to light issues facing Muslims. The newsletter is in effect an extension of the website and provides subscribers with a brief overview of some pertinent issues pertaining to the Muslim world. The newsletter is usually divided into three parts: IslamiCity Service, IslamiCity Feature and IslamiCity Presents.

*IslamiCity Service*

This section of the newsletter introduces subscribers to a new service each week, since IslamiCity.com’s newsletter is sent to subscribers’ email inbox on a weekly basis. The new service being introduced is tied to IslamiCity.com, as a way to enhance the website’s products and add value to the website.

On the April 9, 2007 issue for instance, a new service being introduced was icTunes Radio. According to the newsletter, this is a “24 hour Internet based Radio Station for Muslim Tunes from around the globe”(IslamiCity Bulletin: IslamiCity Service). The station features artists and this service can be acquired as a subscriber by paying the regular subscription fees. A link is provided so that members could directly connect to icTunes Radio without having to go through the IslamiCity.com homepage.

On the June 25, 2007 newsletter, the new service being brought to the subscribers’ attention was Al Jazeera TV. IslamiCity.com was alerting its members to the fact that they could now watch Al Jazeera’s broadcast in English over the Internet and on their computers. The English-language Al Jazeera broadcasts 24 hours a day from
multiple studios in Doha, Qatar, Washington, D.C., Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia and London, U.K.

IslamiCity Feature

This is the lengthiest part of the newsletter and as the name indicates centers around a feature story. The feature story could either be a news report on a specific news item or event, or a commentary. This section is usually written by a member of the IslamiCity.com team. On other occasions, however, this section is culled from another source and reproduced on the IslamiCity Feature section. Unlike the two other sections that constitute the newsletter, the IslamiCity Feature section is a full text article.

On the June 19, 2007 issue for instance, the feature story was entitled ‘A Little Mosque in Switzerland’ and focused on the debate over building a minaret for the local mosque in the Swiss city of Langenthal. Apparently, the city council had granted permission to the local mosque to construct a five meter minaret, only for the city inhabitants to protest.

On the May 14, 2007 issue, the feature story was entitled ‘Your Mother, Your Mother, Your Mother.’ Written by Dr. Ahmed Sakr a member of the Islamic Advisors of IslamiCity, this article serves as a reminder that the Qu’ran stresses the need for respecting parents and treating them with appreciation, kindness and respect. This feature story can be seen as an attempt at educating the reader about some basic virtues of Islam.

IslamiCity Presents

The final part of the IslamiCity.com newsletter is entitled IslamiCity Presents. This segment is usually in video format and introduces the reader to an interesting fact
and/or news item. One does not have to be a paying subscriber in order to take advantage of this service.

On the April 9, 2007 newsletter, this segment featured a two-hour video on Islamic culture and civilization. More specifically, the video examined the historical role played by Islam in the Middle East. The movie also paid particular attention to lessons that can be learned from history, while attempting to find general underlying themes connecting Islamic history to current Muslim life in the United States. This movie is especially relevant as Muslims try to find middle ground between practicing their faith and living and working in western society.

On the May 1, 2007 bulletin, the IslamiCity Presents feature addressed the issue of new Muslim converts in the United States. The lives of these new converts are scrutinized and they are encouraged to talk about the changes in their lives in an interview setting. The interview is conducted by Angela Collins, herself a convert to Islam. The video is entitled ‘The Sun is Rising in the West.’ The usefulness of this analogy and others published by IslamiCity’s newsletter is that it provides pertinent examples of American Muslims and the different ways in which they conduct their lives and daily activities in a western country.

Conclusion: Toward a Local Islam

This section of the dissertation aims at providing a comprehensive summary of the themes outlined in this chapter. In this section, the researcher’s objective is to take a further step toward assessing these websites and to incorporate some of the existing
literature in the field in order to better understand the role played by websites with an Islamic content and to assess how deeply they are ingrained and integrated into society.

Lawrence (2002) pointed out that IslamiCity.com is one website with an Islamic content that stands out on the Internet with a strong presence. According to him, this website represents a ‘city.’ Nimer (2002) also made reference to IslamiCity.com as a resource to both Muslims and non-Muslims, in the U.S. and around the world. Its pages include a bazaar, a marriage service, a television channel, a radio station as well as information about Islam, hadith and the Qur’an.

IslamiCity.com’s Mohamed Abdul Aleem pointed out that his organization’s main objective is to “see ourselves as a media organization and we want to make sure people understand Islam” and adds that they seek to “provide an objective, comprehensive non-sectarian view of Islam.” Amr Saemaldahr goes further to add that “our aims are to give accurate and proper information about Islam to a worldwide audience…so it is an informational site.” From the above statements and from conversations carried out with these two gentlemen, it is clear that IslamiCity.com regards itself as a website that aims to provide accurate information about Islam. The website does not provide such information to Muslims only but to non-Muslims as well, as Abdul Aleem stresses.

It is interesting to note that IslamiCity.com sought to utilize the power of the Internet as an online communication medium in order to broadcast its messages. The Internet’s ubiquitous nature allows for IslamiCity.com’s messages to be displayed to a worldwide audience and is not tied to a geographical location or space. Other traditional media outlets like terrestrial radio and television were bypassed while the Internet was identified as the most efficient and most effective medium to exploit. Nevertheless,
IslamCity.com has fully integrated the media convergence premise into its operations. Today, a paying subscriber has the opportunity to either watch live television or listen to radio broadcasts on the website.

The principle of media convergence – whereby an old media form like a newspaper is integrated into a new one like the Internet – has made access to media outlets and to information simpler than in the past. It is no longer necessary to purchase a hard copy of The New York Times when all one has to do is log on to www.nytimes.com and read the paper in its entirety online. Moreover, by going online one is able to read all sections of the paper including U.S. news, international news, business, technology, science, health, sports, arts, blogs and opinion. One can even search for jobs, check the weather forecast, have alerts and breaking news items sent to their cell phone and shop at the online store.

The assertion is that the convergence of media aided in providing information and bringing the latest news items right to the finger tips of consumers. To a large extent IslamCity.com has played an integral part in this revolution by making available information about Islam both to U.S. and international audiences. This is precisely the point Abdullahi A. An-Na’im was referring to when he indicated that “Islam has to be local and it has to be personal. Communities don’t practice Islam. Individuals do.” Dr. An-Na’im’s argument centers on the premise that it would be misleading to think of Islam as a global entity. Rather Islam should be practiced at the individual level (Dr. An-Na’im’s spring 2006, Ohio University in Athens.)

Websites such as IslamCity.com make available literature and a set of information that enables one to gain a better understanding of Islam and of its basic
teachings and beliefs. After all, a basic tenant of Islam is to follow God and to worship in a righteous manner, keep to one’s self and not to impose your will and opinion on others.

“Let there be no compulsion in religion” (Qur’an, 2:256) is a Qur’anic *aya* that is often repeated and one that was mentioned by one informant. The significance of this *aya* points to the fact that IslamiCity.com does not regard its activities as being engaged in proselytizing. One important statement that another interviewee stressed was that “unlike Christian missionaries who feel that they have a responsibility to save someone’s soul, we don’t have that responsibility. We just give the information and respect them for what their beliefs are and then we move along.” This proclamation epitomizes the essence of what Islam is about. The basic idea is that each individual is free to practice the religion of their choice. Inherent to this theory is the belief that only God has the power to punish one for their deeds.

The websites studied in this research project have sought to spread their message of education about Islam not through what Freire (2005) refers to as ‘banking’ with the educator making ‘deposits’ in the educatee, but rather through a continuous process of and emphasis on dialogue. For dialogue involves respect and does not involve one person or one party acting on another but rather as people working with each other. “In the banking concept of education” argued Freire “knowledge is a gift bestowed by those who consider themselves knowledgeable upon those whom they consider to know nothing” (p. 72).

* Cair.com is actively seeking to spread its positive message about Islam. As one respondent noted:
One of our recent initiatives will be the ‘Explore the life of the Prophet’ campaign and that was an educational initiative by CAIR and a lot of the work there was done on the Internet where you could go on our website and click on the link regarding that and then you could get information about campaign, the various press releases, read opinion on the editorial. And we also have a video archive on there and then you could also contact our speakers’ bureau in order to request a speaker and then also to help promote the information there you could sign up to receive the ‘Legacy of the Prophet’ DVD or a book on the life of the Prophet and both of those initiatives were through our website so we’re trying to be more web savvy and trying to keep up with the current technology and a lot of that is through updating the website. (Interview with a website’s Columbus, Ohio Executive Director, March 2007)

CAIR’s education campaign on Islam involves exploring multiple avenues through different media outlets. A central theme being explored by the organization is the use of its website. Through this medium, the organization is able to communicate its message, while raising awareness for its campaign about the life of the Prophet Muhammad.

During all interviews carried out, the respondents were eager to categorically state that they do not consider it their mission to engage in proselytizing but rather to educate and to correct the misinformation that people might have about Islam. Ashfaq Lodhi of isna.net flatly informed me that his organization is not involved in da’wa. Mohammed Abdul Aleem of IslamiCity.com stated that “we established this website to provide a non-sectarian holistic view of Islam to a global audience and at the same time providing information and services to a Muslim and non-Muslim community.” When asked whether his website or his organization is in any way engaged in proselytizing, an interview from IslamiCity.com’s response was:

Absolutely not…we do not see that as our ambition at all. When I do give presentations about IslamiCity, that is the first thing I point out…one thing we take to heart is let there be no compulsion in religion and at the same time we do
look at the sermons of the Prophet Mohammad (PBUH) where he said that those who listen to me shall pass my words onto others and those to others again and may the last ones understand my words better than those who listened to me directly a very direct message the Prophet has given that it is the responsibility of Muslims to make sure that people are aware of what Islam is about and that is a continuation of religion that came to us from Prophet Adam…unlike Christian missionaries who feel that they have a responsibility to save someone’s soul, we don’t have that responsibility we just give the information and respect them for what their beliefs are and then we move along…and if people of other faiths and if they want copies of the Qur’an and other types of literature we send them that literature and at the same time people who want to be contacted to know more about Islam because they want to talk to someone live, and they want to be contacted, they leave their phone number only then we will call and ask them if they had any questions and if they wanted information about different things and so on and in this process people are realizing peace in this faith and they are accepting Islam as their faith and that is what we are highlighting and it is a very fine line as an organization to not take the view of a missionary work for ourselves. (Interview with a website’s CEO, March 2007)

The events of 9/11 have pushed Islamic websites to become more transparent. This transparency involves financial transactions and community involvement. The websites have to be vigilant in order to dispel any myths about their activities. Becoming visible through the various media outlets is a strategy sought by the websites to improve community relations and educate others about Islam.

Conclusion

Marriage and Mitchell (2003) asserted that “in a world where global communications are easing discussions across time and space, new forms of media are facilitating conversations. The media have come to play an ever greater role in our religious and cultural understanding” (p. 1). This chapter provided an insight into some general characteristics of websites with an Islamic context. Five websites were showcased and interviews were conducted with staff members responsible for their
maintenance and upkeep. The first part of the chapter dealt with defining the concept of religion online. The Internet offers religion unlimited growth potential. Online interaction between those who publish religious material and those who consume such output has witnessed tremendous increase. Islamic websites seek to seize this growth opportunity to expand their reach and to influence a greater number of people. This project provides a useful experience of how Islam interacts with western media.

The second part of the chapter was organized around themes that emerged from the interviews. The first theme was finance and administration which provided a background to the websites as well as the organizations behind them. This included the different ways that the websites generated revenue to finance their operations, through donations or through membership dues. The second theme used to analyze data was community activities and involvement with inter-faith organizations. This included collaboration with other organizations as well as community developments and initiatives. The third and final theme used to analyze data gathered involved communicating the organization’s vision and mission statement. This included analyzing the aims and objectives of the websites and the ways the issue of authority was handled.

Websites with an Islamic content categorize themselves as active members of the community. They are involved in community activities and seek to collaborate with law enforcement agencies in order to progress the case for Islam. Donations and membership dues represent a critical way through which Islamic websites finance their activities. Islamic websites have revolutionized the way worship is carried out, using the power of the Internet as a contemporary communication medium. The next chapter provides greater examination of this phenomenon.
CHAPTER 5: ISLAM ONLINE: THE FUTURE OF FAITH-BASED WEBSITES

The media are a major barometer in constructing and deconstructing images and knowledge and promoting cultural understanding in today’s world. This study analyzed Islamic-mediated images as they pertain to Internet information dissemination. The first chapter of this dissertation introduced the topic and stated the problem to be studied. Chapter Two reviewed relevant literature, including the basics of Islam, media in Muslim countries, Muslims in the West, how western media covered Islam as well as introducing the theoretical framework for this study. In Chapter Three, I highlighted the qualitative methodology I used in collecting data. The fourth chapter reported and analyzed the data collected. This chapter is an examination of the new phenomenon of communicating Islam through the Internet. According to Bunt (2000), “traditional structures of authority and power can be reconfigured within the Cyber Islamic Environments, and new forces of authority are emerging” (p. 13). Bunt (2000) also noted that “the Internet is Globalizing the local, and localizing the global within Islamic contexts” (p. 13). This issue lies at the core of this project. Moreover, Bunt (2000) contended that “whilst analysing and observing this pluralism and globalization in the Internet landscape, perhaps a digital phenomenology of Islam can be constructed” (p. 13). An innovative method of worshipping is emerging in Islam. This new approach is utilizing the power of the Internet as a mass communication apparatus. The Internet has become ubiquitous and Islamic participation in it – in an American context – in effect, helps to fuel the
Americanization of Islam. Later in this chapter, I will discuss the Internet’s use by Islamic entities as an outlet for religious activity.

The Problem and the Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this research was to critically examine five websites that are dedicated to providing a viewpoint on Islam and to analyze the way their activities are conducted. Since a limited number of studies had previously been conducted on this area of research, the main objective of this dissertation was to develop a framework for the understanding of the operations of selected Islamic websites based in the U.S. Additionally, the project also contributed to an understanding of western media’s coverage of Islam.

This research analyzed the management practices of these websites to deconstruct the websites and gain further understanding of the way they operate. More specifically, the management practices of the organizations that operate and maintain these Islamic websites were examined, including financial activities and sources of funding. Furthermore, the dissertation also studied Islamic presence online while taking a closer look at its structural underpinnings including interfaith and education practices. This enabled the researcher to conduct a transparent and an in-depth examination of a select number of U.S.-based Islamic websites. This examination provides an understanding of the intricacies of these websites and an assessment of the importance of the Internet as a communication tool to Islam and to Muslims alike.
Major Findings

Case study data collected for this project came primarily from two sources: in-depth interviews with key members of the organizations responsible for the content update of the websites and content analysis of the websites. Data from interviews was collected from participants who are responsible for the research, upkeep and maintenance of the websites. This included professionals familiar with the technology and administrators whose duty was to provide the content published on the websites. This content published was itself analyzed by the researcher. Data collected was analyzed to answer the research questions, which were:

- How has the learning culture of Islam been extended through the possibility of the Internet?
- How do websites with Islamic thrusts emerge, develop and sustain themselves in the current global context?

Campbell et al. (2008) defined the Internet as “the vast network of telephone and cable lines and satellite systems designed to link and carry computer information worldwide” (p. 43). Siapera (2006) argued that “more readily available to people than the mass media, with a relatively low economic and technical threshold, the internet’s widening of participation has created an informal but significant public forum. What happens on the World Wide Web may be understood as public, since it is in principle available to all those with access to a computer” (p. 336). Administrators of Islamic websites realize the Internet’s potential and use its influence to disseminate their messages to a wider audience. As IslamiCity.com’s CEO noted “we saw that the web is
able to blend print, audio and video into the same source and we saw the potential of it [the Internet]” (Interview with a website’s CEO, March, 2007). A masnet.org informant added:

I think that the reason for it [developing a website] very simply is that we’re living in an electronic Internet age where a huge amount of vital communication is done on the Internet and the idea of doing a website of course is that it gives us a presence in the national and international community in terms of a communication vehicle. (Interview with a website’s Director of Human and Civil Rights Division, April 2007)

Especially in the U.S., developing and maintaining a website is a useful strategy, as Internet penetration rates are among the highest in the world. The U.S. has more people who access the Internet than any other country in the world. In 2006, 75 percent of American adults used the Internet (Campbell el al., 2008).

Anderson (1999) pointed out that the Internet is a new medium that represents “by some measures a new public space, which enables a new class of interpreters, who are facilitated by this medium to address and thereby to reframe Islam’s authority and expression for those like themselves and others who come there” (p. 41). Islamic websites are used by organizations as communication, education and information tools. Since these websites are communication initiatives of Islamic organizations, the organizations that publish and maintain the websites were also analyzed. All of the websites’ managers describe their activities as moderate in nature and solely geared toward civic engagement, social construction and positive participation in society. I earlier defined moderate Islam as having aspects that are overwhelmingly peaceful, that have consideration for the role of women and that do not promote tension with the West. Respondents from the websites made it clear that they are constantly communicating
positive messages about Islam either online or through the community activities in which they are involved.

Islamic websites and organizations are actively involved in their communities. This collaboration stems from the scrutiny received by Islamic websites and the organizations behind them following 9/11. Rabasa et al. (2007) argued that “American Muslims have a potentially important role to play in building moderate Muslim networks and institutions” (p. 89). The websites aspire to get in touch with their readers in order to encourage them to take part in community activities and to participate in civic duties such as voting in an election or volunteering for a worthy cause. This is significant since it encourages Muslim assimilation in the wider society.

Websites with an Islamic perspective take advantage of what Hoover and Park (2004) referred to as “seeking.” Seeking and network analysis theory are intertwined in that members connect to a certain website to gain access to information. Anderson (1999) commented that “Internet discourse…migrated from less public to more public spheres by linking people, social networks, and modalities of thought in transnational networks of which they are in part the expression and part its builders” (p. 53). Satisfaction with an online experience often times results in successive visits to the website, thereby creating customer loyalty. When IslamiCity.com offers services like an online bazaar or an online marriage service, their objective is to create a forum that attracts visitors, thereby increasing web traffic. The notion that barriers to entry or participation do not exist is particularly striking to seekers. In this regard, seekers to Islamic websites are free to search for information without being overawed by a dominant figure or a religious tradition. This relates with Islam’s idea that the believer
should always be seeking knowledge and learning. It also resonates well with the rank of real authority figures, since everyone is an authority.

Islamic websites are funded primarily through donations. Very little public money is made available to them and they therefore have to rely on their members to raise money. Four of the five websites studied, cair.com, isna.net, masnet.com and mpac.org rely primarily on donations to sustain their operations and finance their various projects. But IslamiCity.com employs a financial model that does not rely heavily on donations. IslamiCity.com’s donations account for only 40 percent of its budget. The remaining 60 percent is generated through its online bazaar selling items such as books, home décor, perfumes and household items, in addition to membership subscriptions and advertising. Advertising dollars are generated through businesses that rent out space on IslamiCity.com. This feature is common with many websites featured on the Internet and is known as banner advertising.

Isna.net is the only website that receives state and federal grants. However, these grants do not constitute large amounts of money and are mainly geared toward programs that involve community activities and collaborations with security services (such as the police) and inter-faith organizations. Another point of note with regards to financing has to do with mpac.org which does not receive any donations from outside the U.S. Mpac.org regards itself as an American organization and does not accept contributions from abroad for work that it does for American Muslims.
The Future of Islamic Websites

According to Anderson (2003), the notion of Islam on the Internet did not exist as little as 20 years ago. In universities, research labs and among either government or business institutions, the Internet was hardly having an impact on Islam. Through what he referred to as “technological adepts,” (p. 894) Islam gradually began to make its way to the Internet. This mainly involved the introduction of Internet technology by Muslim students who studied in the East, by Muslim professionals who sought jobs and by Muslim political exiles overseas. Initially, excerpts of the Qur’an and basic information about Islam were placed on online databases.

In this project, I have tried to understand the Internet’s potential as a mass media tool. I have also tried to understand how religion has used this communication outlet to reach out to a broader audience. Bunt (2000) pointed out that “the Internet is a global provider of information, becoming more accessible to an increasing number of users” (p. 2). Islamic websites provide the unique opportunity of studying a traditional religion on a new mass media form. Islam is a naturally proselytizing religion, even though the websites studied in this project all stated that it is not their intention to engage in da’wa. Da’wa is the act of propagating or spreading of Islam. It is the accepted function, the obligation of every Muslim to do his/her part to engage in da’wa. In his analysis of Islamic society in the U.S., Lapidus (2002) asserted that “the absence of a single recognized authority or a tradition of hierarchy makes it difficult to unify Muslim communities and to define an Islamic identity transcending ethnic groups and sectarian differences” (p. 813). Esposito (1999) noted, “[m]any scholars, Muslim and non-Muslim, speak of Islam as a comprehensive way of life, and note the absence of ordained
priesthoods and the formal institutions of a “church”” (p. 4). By publishing Islamic content on the Internet, these websites are in fact engaged in *da’wa*. Islam is an active and rapidly expanding religion. It has a simple message and its practice is simple in essence. Conversion and belief are easy in Islam. The belief in one God and in His prophet Muhammad effectively makes one a Muslim.

Bunt (2000) commented that:

Contemporary examples of *da’wa* include varied print media such as books, newspapers and pamphlets, together with audio-visual media such as radio and television broadcasts, and recorded cassettes (and increasingly videos) of sermons, Qur’anic recitations and entertainment incorporating an Islamic message. The definition of *da’wa* can also incorporate aspects of personal and community behaviour, perhaps based around the example of Prophet Muhammad, thus creating a model that others might seek to emulate. At the micro-level, *da’wa* is still seen as part of a human interaction process, where individual Muslims and organizations seek to propagate Islam, often in association with a particular perspective or interpretation. The Internet now forms part of this process, with the Qur’an a central feature of Islamic computer landscapes (p. 17).

Bunt (2000) also noted:

The intended audience [of *da’wa*] may be non-Muslim, although *da’wa* can also have the sense of developing the beliefs of existing Muslims. Clearly, this has some implications in terms of the designs of Internet interfaces, as to whether an individual surfing a site is familiar with the Qur’an or not. Many sites centered on the Qur’an intended to establish a digital presence for this sacred text, in line with
websites from other religions. They may appeal to the curious non-Muslim, existing Muslim, and/or Muslims from outside the specific traditional and interpretative practices endorsed by a website’s authors (p. 17-18).

Traditionally, *da’wa* involved a process of personal interaction. The introduction of the Internet has changed that. Religious material is now posted online and is accessible to anyone with an Internet-ready computer. The Internet is making it easier to seek and access religious material. *Da’wa* by Islamic websites conforms to Islamic the tradition of acquiring and obtaining *ilm*, or knowledge. As Hodgson (1974) pointed out “the great purpose of all forms of Islamicate education was to pass on the cultural heritage from one generation to the next” (p. 438). The Prophet Muhammad urged his followers and all Muslims to actively seek knowledge and education. Islamic websites are actively pursuing that tradition by making information about Islam readily available through online means.

Islamic websites are also providing Americans with an accessible resource from which they can learn more about Islam, which completes and defeats the negative stereotypes about Islam. Feedback received from their readers indicates that both Muslims and non-Muslims visit their pages. A *masnet.org* informant offered this comment regarding the issue of feedback:

[Having a website] also enables us to get feedback from our constituents. So, for example on the current website we have a guestbook which enables people to sign in and give comments and the website is not viewed only by Muslims but is a communication vehicle for the large community. (Interview with a website’s Director of Human and Civil Rights Division, April 2007)
The organizations operating the websites studied in this project indicated that they publish information about Islam to anyone and everyone interested in consuming that information. But Bunt (2000) pointed out that “there is nothing extraordinary about the existence of Muslim platforms and perspectives online” since “the Internet has opened new opportunities for communication” (p. 139). Moreover, continued Bunt:

The methods in which that communication takes place may themselves now evolve further, contained within the broader parameters of information technology, and becoming further accepted as a means by which individual and group Muslim thought and expression can be presented to others. (p. 139)

Islamic websites utilize the Internet’s capabilities to form an online community. The websites are spreading the word of Islam through educating their readers about the religion. This is another suggestion of da’wa work performed by the websites.

The use of the Internet as a mass media tool by Islamic organizations represents an innovative way to disseminate information. Especially in the West – due mainly to technological advancement – the reliance on the Internet as a medium of communication and a mass communication tool is rapid. Bunt (2000) stated that, “from scholars to casual browsers, millions of people, Muslims and non-Muslims, now use the Internet as a primary source of information” (p. 3). The Internet has clearly changed our way of life and has expanded our horizons beyond means that would have been incomprehensible just ten years ago. Campbell et al. (2008) noted that “the Internet is a major medium for the global economy” and that its full impact is still evolving (p. 43). In addition, whereas traditional media – such as radio, television, newspapers and magazines – requires considerable capital outlay, the Internet has quite simply revolutionized the way we
regard media. As Hanson (2008) pointed out “the most interesting thing about the Web as a communication medium is that it opens up the world of publishing and broadcasting to anyone who has a computer, an Internet account, and something to say” (p. 340). Anyone with a computer and Internet connectivity is in a position to upload and disseminate material to a worldwide audience.

Bunt (2003) commented that there is “no reason why Muslims should not use and apply technology, although some orientalistic stereotyping would suggest otherwise, and some observers have been surprised at the levels of technological sophistication found in Cyber Islamic Environments” (p. 206). Islamic websites, like other websites on the Internet, employ the latest technological developments. Bunt (2003) made the point that “some Islamic sites are at the cutting edge of technological application” and “there is demonstration of substantial knowledge in the technology” (p. 11). Technical sophistication and expertise is becoming part of the way Islamic websites present themselves. This proficiency ensures safe online transactions (as in the case of IslamiCity.com) and encourages users to return to the website.

Nimer (2002) noted that “Muslim couples in North America usually lack the extended family support system that is strong in Muslim-majority countries” (p. 8). Traditionally, that void has been filled by imams at the local mosque. Increasingly though, imams are not only found in mosques, but are accessible through various media forms including online forums. Both IslamiCity.com and masnet.org have an ‘Ask the imam’ section that provides one such medium for interaction. Nevertheless, the issue of authority is a contentious one in Islam, especially when making decisions on issues such as how to behave in a western country or whether women should be veiled, then these are
matters that lead to disagreements. Bunt (2003) pointed out that “the substantial financial investment in the Internet by various Islamic organizations and platforms represents attempts to secure online ideological advantages” (p. 132). Still, websites studied in this project – such as cair.com and masnet.org – made it clear that they remain objective by quoting the authority of the Qur’an and by adhering to the basic teachings of Islam. Others such as isna.net stated that they seek advice from a recognized body such as the Islamic Circle of North America or they consult imams whose credentials and scholarship is well established. Over the past few years though, communication technologies have provided American Muslims with an outlet through which to seek guidance from religious authority. Services provided by Islamic websites through the Internet – such as a counseling service provided by isna.net – present a viable alternative to those who are unable or unwilling to physically seek those services from religious leaders.

It is important for Muslims to seek religious guidance in their lives. Islam guides its followers in their daily actions. From the moment a Muslim wakes up in the morning, till the time he/she goes to bed at night, God in remembered. Various activities such as greeting, eating, travelling and using the bathroom to name a few, are accompanied by prayers, or du’aa, that one must say. The underlying principle is that one must seek guidance and direction at all times.

Smith (1999) pointed out that “many Muslims living in the United States, both the more recently arrived and members of second- and third-generation Muslim families, do want to assimilate as much as possible into American culture and try not to emphasize elements of their identity that would differentiate them from others” (p. 179). This goes back to one point made by an informant from mpac.org about Muslims in America

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identifying themselves as Americans first and Muslims second. Another respondent from isna.net stressed that America’s Muslim community is significantly made up of immigrants. To these immigrants, the Internet provides an avenue through which information about Islam or about the community in general is readily available. The Internet also helps these newly-arrived Muslims better integrate into society.

In the U.S., Smith (1999) contended that American Muslims “are tired of what they see as the biased and unfair representation of Islam and Muslims in the American media and take the opportunity to correct these images by providing in their own lives public examples of what “real Islam” looks like when practiced by conscientious and faithful adherents” (p. 179). Collaboration with those outside of one’s religion constitutes a crucial part of communicating ‘real Islam.’ As such, it is important for the websites to be involved in community activities and with interfaith organizations. It is equally vital to effectively communicate organizational visions and mission statements to the larger community.

Nimer (2002) stated that “with the advent of the Internet, the nature of Muslim community media has been revolutionized. Not only has every major group and resource-rich Islamic center established a presence on the World Wide Web, a large number of electronic magazines have emerged – superseding by far the number of print media items now available” (p. 116). Ironically, a new Islamic movement is emerging in the United States, a western and non-Muslim country. This new movement utilizes emerging communication technologies and its followers practice Islam in a liberating environment, free from strict or controlling religious authorities. As Smith (1999) noted, “non-Muslim Americans can no longer talk about Islam as “foreign” or even as an
“Eastern” religion” (p. 186). Islam has become an important part of American life and Muslims constitute a growing minority in society. The election of Minnesota Representative Keith Ellison to Congress in 2006 was a groundbreaking achievement. He became the first Muslim to hold such high office in the U.S. Likewise, appearances by Ibrahim Hooper, CAIR’s National Communications Director and Edina Lekovic, MPAC’s Communications Director on national media outlets like CNN and FOX News are significant events. They give Islam a visible face and enhance its reputation.

The Internet is changing the way Islam is practiced. Bunt (2000) pointed out:

In the past, a scholar of Islam may have learnt about Islamic law through a set pattern of education, utilizing texts that had remained unchanged for centuries. New opinions could only be accessed through travelling long distances to sit at the feet of scholars. Books may have been rare, and hand-copied. The descendants of these scholars, whilst utilizing similar sources, can now access many of them from their desktop computers (p. 133).

The Internet is enhancing the learning culture of Islam by making it easy to research and locate information. No longer is one limited to information obtained from the local imam. Internet capabilities have expanded information availability and made it relatively simple to be well-informed about Islam. Gonzalez-Quijano (2003) commented that the Internet offers the ability to disseminate information to a large audience at a cheaper cost than afforded by other media forms. Hanson (2008) noted that “the World Wide Web has turned the Internet into a major mass medium that provides news, entertainment, and community interaction” (p. 355). As a mass media form, the Internet
has expanded the public sphere of communication. This realization can only be beneficial to both the publishers and the users of Islamic online content.

Islam has always had an issue with authority, since it has no recognized central figurehead. As Hoover (2003) noted, “in terms of the implicit challenge the media context poses to institutional authority, and in terms of its aesthetic and experiential characteristics, the media sphere must be seen as a place where the contemporary religious or spiritual quest for the self can be worked out” (p. 13). The Internet is becoming a new authority avenue since it has the ability to disseminate information to a large number of end users. Muslims in the U.S. are turning toward Islamic websites as a source of religious information and authority. This further enhances the argument that a new Islamic movement is surfacing in the U.S.

The Internet as a mass media outlet plays an integral part in fueling the growth of this new Islamic movement. Nimer (2002) added that “as a result of the influence of the Internet, the information gap about Islam and Muslims has narrowed. Muslims have been better able to connect with one another and with others in their own communities and around the world” (p. 116). This connection is increasingly happening in what Habermas (2001) referred to as the ‘public sphere’ away from the influence of the government. Anderson (1999) noted that “the Internet is a significant new medium in expanding the public sphere, where Islamic discourse is altered by new positioning and new interpreters” (p. 52). Additionally, Anderson (1999) continued, “the Internet is worldwide in its reach and rooted in, as well as rooting, a professional class not yet so widely represented but uniquely positioned to leverage the techniques to reshape the public sphere of Islam” (p. 52). This public sphere represents a meeting place open to the
public, one in which the public is free to exchange thoughts and ideas. The Internet as a growing and ever-expanding communication medium has expanded the capacity at which information is carried from one place to another.

Eickelman and Anderson (1999) noted the emergence of a new Muslim public sphere, one that “exists at the intersection of religious, political and social life. Facilitated by the proliferation of media in the modern world, the Muslim public can challenge or limit state and conventional religious authorities and contribute to the creation of civil society” (p. 1). This new Muslim public sphere has access to communication technologies, most notably the Internet. The increasing appearance of Islamic knowledge in online forums fosters debate among Muslims. It also gives rise to a new generation of Muslims, one that is at ease using the Internet to locate information about Islam, and one that is thirsty for information. The Internet has not replaced traditional forms of seeking Islamic knowledge, but it has made finding such information relatively easy. This is especially helpful in the U.S., since mosques are not as easy to find and since Islamic education is not taught in schools as in Muslim countries.

Bunt (2003) commented that when a new medium is introduced, conservative voices often become concerned with the role it plays and the changes it could bring. There is always the concern that tradition could be discarded. However, the Internet as a mass communication tool enhances Islam. Anderson (2003) asserted that the Internet is a significant new medium that provides “opportunities for alternative expressions, networking, and interpretations that draw on and extend its techniques” (p. 56). Among the many positive features of Islam online is one in which a technologically-savvy imam
is now in a position to surf the web and upload his *Juma’a* sermon, thereby increasing listenership.

Bunt (2005) pointed out “the importance and potential of the Web as a networking medium” (p. 246). Moreover, continued Bunt, “the influence of scholars, and of others giving advice based on Islamic principles, can be extended from their own (micro-) communities to a global audience. The analysis, observation, and recording of developments such as the online fatwa in cyber Islamic environments, where “real-world” decision making is informed through Internet discussion, represents a significant new area in Islamic studies” (p. 246). Islamic teachings are no longer limited by geography to one’s proximity to their local mosque or *imam*. The Internet has eroded boundaries that had previously made religious interaction a strictly face-to-face phenomenon.

Bunt (2000) contended that the “examination of some of the phenomenon associated with Islam and the Internet reveals some interesting manifestations of Muslim belief-systems, and an integration of digital technology with the primary foundations of Islam. For example, prayer, spirituality, the contemplative quest and ideas of the sacred are all available online” (p. 14). Information seekers are able to virtually communicate with religious authorities, without having to be physically present. The *Juma’a* is a weekly service that still requires Muslims to gather in mosques. However, many other aspects associated with practicing Islam are replicated in the world of cyberspace. Anderson (1999) pointed out “Islam on the Internet highlights not just new interpreters but also the presence of intermediate contexts that reflect a more nuanced diversity of views, settings, projects, and expressions of Islam today” (p. 53). In addition
to making available material about Islam online, the Internet represents a variety of views and opinions. As a mass media tool, the Internet provides Muslims with a resource-rich outlet which they can access for information.

The intersection between religion and mass media has allowed for the study of Islamic websites. Loeffler (1988) noted that “the exploration of what individuals make of their religion and what religion makes of them is obviously quite different from the elegant pictures presented by orthodox scholars” (p. 3). The Internet has allowed informal interaction to take place between established religious authority and information consumers. The Internet, commented Bunt (2000), has become “an environment where participation can be ‘identity-less’” (p. 12). Communication between information giver and information receiver is no longer confined to the local mosque, but is available online.

Kellner (1995) posited that globalization plays a critical role in influencing everyday aspects of our lives. New media and communication technologies are overcoming boundaries of time and space and permeate every feature of society thereby creating a global village. Anderson (1997) added that:

The Internet's impact comes in its ability to globalize existing forms, to magnify the impact and reach of communications that previously had limited reach, whether in the formal international conference or in the informal modes of discussion and consultation such as the majles, bazaar and madrassa and other informal networks through which communication flows and in which information is sought in the Middle East and Muslim world. (p. 11)
To a large extent, the Internet has fueled globalization’s drive and has aided in the development of this global village. This project adds a new dimension by its examination of the Internet as a mass media form and its ability to disseminate information about a 1,400 years old religion to a wider audience. As Bunt (2000) noted, “the desire to ‘publish’ online is unlikely to diminish, increasing the plethora of Islam-related sites” (p. 139). Education in Islam continued Bunt, “is seen as a key element in the development of identity and community. The transmission of knowledge is interpreted as a duty, and special status attributed to transmitters” (p. 142-143). Islamic websites can be regarded as a source of knowledge in a new environment that seeks to exploit the influence of communication technologies.

One area of concern that Islamic websites must address is funding. As stated above, with the exception of IslamiCity.com, all the other websites studied in this project rely heavily on donations to finance their activities. In the past, this had not represented a problem. In future, however, acquiring enough donations to keep their operations going could provide a challenge to the websites, especially during the current financial difficulties. Kim and Mauborgne (2005) pointed out the necessity of seeking “blue oceans” that represent untapped markets. These are characterized by high margins and high profits. Blue oceans are what companies should seek to exploit. Blue strategies are the only means by which firms can steer clear of competition and gain a competitive advantage in the marketplace. Although Islamic websites are non-profit entities, securing enough funding to continue their projects represents a reality that they must seek to attend sooner or later.
Recommendations for Further Research

The lack of literature on the subject matter contributed in adding some fluidity and flexibility to this research project. The fact that this was a new area of research put one in danger of trying to cover a lot of information. This project provided an initial basis for the study of Islamic content on the Internet. While the focus was on websites in the U.S., other media forms in Muslim countries were also analyzed. The websites are also introducing a new brand of Islam. This new brand of Islam involves less face-to-face contact with a physical *imam* and more interaction with a virtual *imam*. However, this research represents only the beginning of a process of providing a holistic view on the topic. The websites studied are all considered to be moderate in their activities and interactions with the community. My aim was to examine moderate websites and to analyze how they reflected Islam in a positive light. Future research is therefore required to present additional insight into this phenomenon.

The dissertation attempted to give a detailed and useful account of the use of the Internet as an important mass communication tool for Islam. The web has emerged as an integral media system and a number of websites relating to Islam are accessible to Muslims and to non-Muslims alike. The Internet has in effect revolutionized the religion and Muslims are able to access online sources in order to keep abreast with issues, discussions and debates taking place in the Islamic field. Islamic websites provide the opportunity for people of other faiths to access such forums to educate themselves about Islam and to become more knowledgeable about the religion.

Finally, it might be worthwhile to carry out a longitudinal study by replicating this project and studying a greater number of websites over a longer period of time. It might
also be useful to conduct an evaluation study, involving a team of researchers and investigating a number of websites in different languages and from different countries. Nevertheless, it must be noted that realities differ and that the uniqueness of investigators may have an effect of replication of this study.

Concluding Remarks

Gary Bunt is one of a few scholars who have written on the issue of Islamic representation online. His book *Islam in the digital age: E-jihad, online fatwas and cyber Islamic environments*, published in 2003 is particularly important because it analyzes this topic post 9/11. The Internet has evolved to become an essential mass communication medium and an integral part of Muslim life. E-mail is particularly popular and widespread in use. Flournoy (2004) claims that Americans alone send over four billion e-mail messages everyday. Additionally, $150 billion is spent each year buying and selling goods and services online. Eickelman and Anderson (1999) point out that “e-mail and the Internet foster new and rapid forms of communication and coordination for the religiously minded” (p. 4). Bunt (2000) notes that “computer-mediated communication has long-term implications in shaping Muslim communities” (p. 15). A new cultural phenomenon is unfolding, with an increasing number of Muslims making use of cyberspace in a variety of ways.

Islamic websites rarely publish information regarding their management and financial practices. To a large extent, this could be attributed to the criticism Islam has faced in the years following 9/11. Islamic websites studied in this project argue that their main objectives are to communicate the peaceful nature of the religion. Education and
information stand at the top of their agenda. While this might be the case, one is left in no doubt that additional research on the topic should be carried out in order to explore and analyze this subject in greater depth.

The number of websites studied in this dissertation by no means provides a complete view of Islamic online activity it nevertheless provides a useful first step into the subject and gives a broad overview on the topic. Although other media systems in Muslim countries were analyzed, there exists a plethora of Islamic websites – in many different languages – that were not addressed in this study. Nor was that the aim of this research.

In looking at these websites, the intention was to examine and assess Islam and Islamic activity through a western lens. The focus had always been to study a select number of websites and highlight their activities as a case study of Islamic content available in the U.S. The websites used in this research are communication initiatives of large American Muslim organizations. As such, these organizations are visible members of the community and their websites are closely studied and scrutinized. This research exercise gave the researcher the opportunity to gain in-depth knowledge about the process of qualitative research through content analysis and in-depth interviews on Islamic websites. It is the hope of the researcher that it contributed to the existing literature on the topic and provided useful information on the subject matter.
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APPENDIX A: INTERVIEW GUIDE

Please state name, organization’s name and official title.

Please provide brief background of your organization. When was it set up and for what purpose(s)?

At what stage/during which period of time did you as an organization decide to develop/adopt an online initiative and setup a website?

What were the aims of developing a website?

What did you aim to communicate? And what are you aiming to achieve?

And how do you distinguish your website from others?

What were some difficulties you faced when you first established an online initiative?

What are some difficulties/controversies/issues that you face in your line of work especially working for a Muslim website?

Islam has come under considerable pressure in the post 9/11 world. How do you remain objective in the face of such hostilities?

In light of the above, what messages about Islam are you aiming of communicate? How?

How is your working relationship with the local community?

How is your working relationship with other grass roots organizations?

How successful are you in communicating your vision?

How do you measure/assess your success in communicating this vision?

One of the things I deal with in my research on Islam in the issue of authority in the sense that when you speak in the name of Islam you have to refer to a religious authority such as an Imam, what kind of authority do you fall back to as far as publishing content on your website?

What kind of strategies do you employ in the day-to-day administration of your website?

Businesses and organizations often shift their strategies without losing overall focus of their goal. Does this apply to you? Or did you have to make changes following 9/11.
Where do you stand at the moment with regards to your initial objectives? Why/how?

How you finance your operations? What are your sources of funding?

How difficult has it been post 9/11 to obtain external funding?

What are some challenges you face? (hackers, financing, hostility)

Is there any additional useful information that you might like to add?
APPENDIX B: LIST OF RESPONDENTS

Adnan Mirza
Amr Saemaldahr
Mohammed Abdul Aleem
Ashfaq Lodhi
Milia Islam
Ayyub Hanif
Ibrahim Ramey
Hasnain Syed
Mariam Newsom
APPENDIX C: IRB APPROVAL

The following research study has been approved by the Institutional Review Board at Ohio University for the period listed below. This review was conducted through an expedited review procedure as defined in the federal regulations as Category(ies):

Project Title: Internet Islam: An Analysis of U.S. Based Websites Dedicated to Promoting an Islamic Viewpoint in the Post 9/11 World

Primary Investigator: Mohamed Salli
Co-Investigator(s):

Faculty Advisor: W. Steve Howard
Department: School of Telecommunications

Rebecca Cale, AAB, CIP
Office of Research Compliance

Approval Date: 5/21/09
Expiration Date: 5/20/10

This approval is valid until expiration date listed above. If you wish to continue beyond expiration date, you must submit a periodic review application and obtain approval prior to continuation.

Adverse events must be reported to the IRB promptly, within 5 working days of the occurrence.

The approval remains in effect provided the study is conducted exactly as described in your application for review. Any additions or modifications to the project must be approved by the IRB (as an amendment) prior to implementation.