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THE DEATH OF A VIRTUAL MUSLIM DISCUSSION GROUP

ISSUES AND METHODS IN ANALYSING RELIGION ON THE NET

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It is often stated that the new information and communication technologies have changed the world. With the development of the Internet, for example, it has become much easier to communicate with loved ones and business colleagues, no matter when or where. From this point of view, these new technologies have proved theorists such as Roland Robertson and Zigmunt Bauman right in their predictions about processes of globalisation.¹ Today the world is truly one globalised space, at least for those of us who have access to, and know how to make use of, the new technologies, as well as enjoying the ability to travel all over the world. Together with economic and social changes, it is also clear that the new technologies have changed the world of religion. For example, with the help of a computer with access to the Internet, it is nowadays possible for an individual to explore an almost unlimited number of religious homepages providing both plausible and implausible world views. On the one hand this development can be seen as an opportunity to liberate the individual from his or her social context or cultural bonds. On the other hand, the same development can be seen as a threat to theological order and religious authority. From this point of view, the Internet is merely fostering relativism and sectarianism, thus leaving the individual in an existential void. With the help of information downloaded from the Internet, it is both easy and safe to create one's own interpretations by cutting and pasting. In general, to be able to choose one's own way of life and world view is something positive. However, and this is the reverse of the coin, making a choice is often difficult and painful. According to Anthony Giddens, the necessity to make a large number of choices, not only in relation to mundane questions but also about how to live one's life, is creating growing anxiety among many people in the west.²

Although the impact of the Internet on western society is clear, many researchers in the emerging field of religion and media studies are asking for more empirical data before formulating grand theories on how the Internet is affecting and changing religious milieus and

¹ See for example Bauman 2000; Robertson 1992.

² See Giddens 1991.

discourses. As a response to this question, it is necessary to ask basic questions, such as what kind of web pages are out there? What kinds of information can be found on religion? In what ways is cyberspace being used to perform online rituals? What is the relationship between online and offline activities? To be able to answer some of these questions, it is first evident that we must continue to collect more data from the Internet and refine our theories and methods for analysing information in cyberspace. Secondly, the focus should not be on online activities alone. To develop research on religion and the Internet, it is also essential to combine online research with traditional fieldwork, participant observation and interviews. Only by combining online and offline research will it become possible, for example, to say anything substantial about how Internet users are bringing information and experiences from real life into cyberspace. Life on screen should therefore not be understood or analysed separately from experiences in real life. But it is also important to understand and document how and in what ways online discussions or information taken from the Internet are put to use away from it, in other contexts. For scholars interested in Islam and Muslims, for example, it is of great importance to determine the degree, to which Muslims follow, adhere to and make use of theological advice and *fatwas* that can be browsed and downloaded from the Internet.

Aims

This chapter focuses on activities and discussions that are formulated and articulated within an asynchronic Swedish Muslim discussion group on the Internet called *Sveriges Förenade Cyber Muslimer* (Sweden's United Cyber Muslims, henceforth SfCM). My aim is to analyse and contextualise the discussions that took place in this virtual site during a period of five months, from June to October 2004. How many messages were posted to SfCM? What kind of information did they contain? I shall also examine why the SfCM e-mail list seems to have lost much of its attraction over the past year. Are we therefore looking at a dying discussion list? The information used for this chapter is mainly taken from the messages posted to SfCM, but I have also conducted interviews with list administrators and the most active participant in the list.³

³ By 'most active', I am merely referring to the fact that this informant has posted most messages to the list during the five months that I followed the discussion group. However, the frequency of posting is not automatically an indication that the messages posted are of high quality. It is also possible to be an active member of SfCM without posting messages. A member who reads all the messages posted to the list could also be described as an active member. However, this kind of activity is not possible to measure merely by looking at the posted messages.

Ethical Considerations

To protect the integrity and identity of the members of SfCM, I have used fake identities when referring to specific discussions or posted messages. However, the name SfCM is authentic. To use the real name of the group poses no problems while the forum is closed. To be able to read or post messages to the group, however, it is necessary to be a member.

Background

SfCM was founded in 1996 by three Swedish converts to Islam who believed that the Internet should be used to spread what could be viewed as accurate information about Islam and Muslims. The driving motive behind SfCM was to create a platform and portal for Muslims and people interested in Islam to come together on the Internet. The founders were also eager to help other Muslims to establish themselves in cyberspace and spread information about Islam, no matter what their theological outlooks. The forum is therefore open to both Sunni and Shia Muslims.⁴ An online discussion list was registered to Yahoo groups on 06/11/1998. Today, that is, in December 2004, the number of members is 169 and the first language is Swedish.⁵ However, messages are regularly posted in Danish, Norwegian and English, too.

To join SfCM and to take part in the discussions, it is necessary to be accepted by the list administrator. Although SfCM is not an open forum, the policy seems to be rather relaxed and welcoming.⁶ However, to become a member, one must send a letter to the list administrator and state why you are interested in questions about Islam and Muslims. If you are not accepted or do not follow the guidelines posted by the group, you can be denied access to or be excluded from the forum. I have been a member of SfCM's discussion list since 01/11/2002, although – as already mentioned – this study is based on a close reading of the messages posted between June and October 2004. Nonetheless I believe that my long-term experience with the group is helpful in the analysis.

⁴ In general there are few conflicts between Sunni and Shia Muslims in SfCM, but during October tensions could be observed between two particular members, which among other things related to the fact that one of the members was a Sunni and the other a Shia. However, this way of putting the argument and stressing differences between Sunni and Shia Muslims was criticised by another member, who argued that it was only God who could judge man. See message posted on 10/25/2004.

⁵ This information was retrieved from the website of SfCM on 12/13/2004.

⁶ This analysis is both supported by Schmidt 1999, 109, and the SfCM statement published on the website of the group.

Messages

The great advantage with most electronic discussion forums on the Internet is that the posted messages are preserved and are often available in digital archives. The capacity of computers to preserve a large quantity of data makes longitudinal analyses and studies much easier. For example, if messages are preserved, there is no problem in determining the number of messages posted or who is posting them or in retrieving their contents. Despite this possibility and the fact that SfCM has been analysed and discussed by scholars before this chapter, to my knowledge there is no systematic study of the messages posted to SfCM over a long period.⁷ All in all SfCM has been active for a period of seven years, but if we look at the number of messages posted to the group, its activities are declining.

	Jan	Feb	Mar	Apr	May	Jun	Jul	Aug	Sep	Oct	Nov	Dec
2004	62	14	54	23	5	34	24	6	30	74	85	54
2003	62	140	63	54	125	145	167	190	204	207	142	93
2002	93	57	96	162	123	33	29	44	66	108	120	188
2001	223	429	191	135	70	235	93	63	276	202	210	61
2000	285	301	169	200	297	149	61	130	194	241	128	170
1999	207	95	170	140	213	112	126	78	95	261	247	221
1998						23	6	15	67	132	169	166

Table 1. Message history for SfCM from June 1998 to 12/14/2004. Source: <http://uk.groups.yahoo.com/group/sfcm/>

From the above table, it can be concluded that the number of messages posted has varied over time. In February 2001, 429 messages were posted and activity was intense. A high level of activity was more or less maintained until November 2003. From December 2003 activity fell, and during most of 2004 the number of messages posted was below fifty per month. However, during October and November 2004 a heated debate broke out between two members, and the number of messages went up. But the tone in the discussion was, according to some members, hostile and negative, especially since the verbal battle was fought during the month of Ramadan, a period of peace and reconciliation for most Muslims.⁸

⁷ SfCM has been studied by Schmidt 1999 and Larsson 2004.

Assalaamu alaykom (peace)

Happy Ramadan, all sisters and brothers in SfCM! It is not funny to see what kind of messages are being posted to the list. I do not think that we should write or read such angry messages, especially not during the month of fasting. There is nothing that weakens your faith more than to observe Muslims fighting Muslims, when brothers and sisters in faith are persecuted, oppressed, starved, tormented and dying all around the world! We should be preoccupied with other things than fighting over the Internet.⁹

Even though it is difficult to find a single driving explanation behind the reduction in the number of members, it is possible to suggest some preliminary explanations. According to Fatima, the list administrator, the activities in SfCM have declined for two reasons. First, the terrorist attack on the United States on 09/11/2001 is believed to have had a negative impact on the discussion climate. Although the number of messages was high after 09/11 – more than 200 were posted from September to December 2001 – according to Fatima many contributors became more cautious in discussing Islamic issues on the Internet. Some participants also warned members of SfCM that they were not alone in cyberspace and that non-Muslims could easily monitor the discussion forum, especially individuals with critical or negative views of Islam and Muslims or the security police. However, in another study I have shown that 09/11 also gave rise to a more active climate of discussion among Muslims in Sweden. After 09/11, for example, it became more important to discuss the essence of being Muslim.¹⁰ But the discussions documented in this study were mainly reserved for internal debates and arguments in mosques or among Muslim friends. Even though SfCM is a closed forum, most members are well aware of the fact that online discussions can easily be monitored and that others may use fake identities to become members. To discuss delicate and complex issues on the Internet might therefore be dangerous or difficult, and the information could easily be used to discredit Muslims living in Sweden.

A second reason given by Fatima is that the number of discussion forums has increased, with many Muslims joining other online groups in Sweden and around the world.¹¹ Although this development has drained the climate of discussion in SfCM it is an illustration of how competition between various Muslim interpretations and branches is fertilising Islamic discussions in Europe and the United States. Because of migration, a large variety of Islamic interpretations co-exist side by side today in most western cities. The multicultural society

⁸ Three messages were composed on 10/22/2004 on this subject.

⁹ Message posted to SfCM on 10/22/2004.

¹⁰ On how Muslims in Sweden were affected by 09/11, see Larsson 2003a. In this study there are data supporting the fact that the climate of discussion had been affected and encouraged by the terrorist attack on the United States; see Larsson 2003a, 33-4; Larsson 2005.

¹¹ Personal e-mail from Fatima dated 09/14/2004.

therefore accommodates both pluralism and competition, as well as tensions and conflicts. Although this is a complex process to analyse, the growing number of transnational Islamic organisations appears to have been stimulated by migration, the rise of the multicultural society and the use of new information and communication technologies.¹² But this competition is by no means restricted to cyberspace, and similar developments can easily be observed among Islamic institutions in Europe and the United States. The growing number of Islamic institutions and the diversity of Islamic opinions that can be located on the Internet is, in all its complexity, an illustration of the fact that Islam as a religion is truly globalised and transnational. The growing competition and diversity of Islamic voices can be understood either as something positive and liberating for Muslims or as a serious problem that is destroying religious authority and Islamic traditions. On SfCM, therefore, criticism of what are considered wrong interpretations of Islam is often voiced.¹³ In a message posted on 09/09/2004, for example, Fatima criticises another Swedish discussion forum for Muslims called *Simbad*.¹⁴ In her view, this site is not good for Muslims because it fosters Islamism and radical interpretations of Islam. According to Fatima, the opinions articulated within *Simbad* are destructive for the whole Muslim community and give Muslims a bad name in public discourse because it depicts Muslims as nothing but fanatics and radicals.¹⁵

However, to be able to say anything substantial about SfCM, it is necessary to refine our tools and develop a typology to analyse the messages.

The Typology

Although a typology might be a helpful analytical tool, it is my firm belief that we should not regard typologies as fixed: they should always be open to criticism and modification. It is also important to remember that the boundaries between the categories are floating and open to interpretation. Having said this, I suggest that the messages posted to SfCM be divided into five broad categories corresponding to Wendy Griffin's typology for analysing online discussion groups. In her study of the Goddess Net, Griffin divides her data up according to a typology consisting of five discourses: a discourse of purpose; a discourse of activism; a

¹² See, for example, Mandaville 2003, 141; Eickelman & Andersson 2003.

¹³ This issue was especially debated during October and November 2004.

¹⁴ See website of Simbad at <http://www.sindbad.se/phpBB2/>.

¹⁵ Message posted to SfCM on 09/09/2004.

discourse of shared information; a discourse of theology and meaning; and a discourse of care and connection.¹⁶

In the first category, discourses of purpose, we find messages containing information about demonstrations, educational classes, teaching materials, online references (links, videos, and articles) and practical information for Muslims living in Sweden. Since this is a general and broad category, it received a large number of messages during the five months that I was closely following SfCM. In this category we find, for example, messages recommending homepages that contain ‘good’ examples of recitations from the Koran, that is, audio files,¹⁷ information about offline study groups that read Imam an-Nawawî’s *Kitab al-Adhakar*,¹⁸ and information about *hijab*-exchange parties for Muslim women.¹⁹ One example that belongs to this category was posted on 10/2/2004:

I hope that this letter finds you well! I am posting information about a girl camp that will focus on integration – martial arts – health. The last camp I organized was a great success, and both Muslim and Swedish girls came together and connected nicely. The main purpose was to put an end to the prejudice that all Muslim girls are suppressed.²⁰

In category two, the discourse of activism, we find messages that call for activism and for general moral uplift among Muslims. Here we find, for example, messages questioning the legal basis and political position of the Saudi Arabian regime. Its theological foundation is frequently discussed within this category. In relation to this topic, we also find references to several global and international Muslim networks that have joined together in their criticism of the Saudi Arabian government. For example, on 06/04/2004 an appeal from the Supreme Council of America was posted with an appeal for a “Halt to Saudi desecrations: secret campaign to destroy revered monuments from time of Prophet Muhammad”.²¹ Although the external material – links and homepages referred to in the discussion of SfCM – comes from a large number of different political and theological contexts, this material is of great importance in our analysis. With the help of this information, it is possible to re-create and obtain a picture of the theological milieu that dominates or hold an important place within the discussion group. What kind of theological interpretations and groups are being discussed, and what kinds of interpretations are the members of SfCM supporting? Although this

¹⁶ See Griffin 2004, 196-200. The fourth category in Griffin’s typology is called ‘a discourse of thea/ology and meaning’, but since this does not apply to Islamic discourses I have slightly modified the typology and simply called it a discourse of theology and meaning.

¹⁷ Message posted on 06/20/2004.

¹⁸ Message posted on 06/22/2004.

¹⁹ Message posted on 09/29/2004.

²⁰ Message posted on 10/02/2004.

material is important, it is necessary to be cautious in our interpretation. For example, a reference to a certain group or a specific theological interpretation should not automatically be taken as a sign that all members in the discussion forum uphold or share the same references. Nonetheless it is important to document and analyse what kinds of sources are being referred to and which theologians are being mentioned in the messages posted.

Documenting and analysing the sources used in the debate is vital because it says a lot about the prevailing theological and political context and the formulation of living Islam in Europe. In the debates that take place on SfCM's discussion list, for example, it is possible to follow and analyse the tension between so-called traditional views of Islam and reform interpretations of Islam, especially ideas belonging to the Salafiyya tradition.²² Arguments between followers of the *philosophia perennis* and traditional Sufis are another source of conflict and debate within SfCM.²³

Although these kinds of tensions and discussions are by no means limited to cyberspace, online discussion groups provide important material for documenting and analysing the tensions and internal arguments that are taking place in Muslim communities today. It is also of particular importance to analyse online forums because the discussions that take place in cyberspace are not only run by educated theologians. In cyberspace, ordinary Muslims have a new opportunity to participate and contribute to the discussion alongside the *ulama*. As already mentioned, this development contains both new possibilities and new problems, especially for the *ulama*, who believe that they will lose control over the theological message and its interpretation. Although information and communication technologies potentially provide the individual with new opportunities to be his or her own interpreter, it is necessary to remember that gender, age and education also play important roles in cyberspace. From a critical point of view, it is necessary to be cautious and critical of the most euphoric voices who argue that the Internet will remove all restrictions and solve all problems for humankind. The technology does not make all people equal and neutral; this is a utopian misunderstanding based on expectations, not hard evidence.

If we turn now to Griffin's third category, the discourse of shared information, we find both questions and answers being posted to SfCM. Contrary to Griffin's findings, it is quite usual for members to ask for advice or direct information about a specific Islamic topic. A message posted on 4 October may serve as an illustration of this: "I would like to get hold of a

²¹ Message posted on 06/04/2004.

²² See Larsson 2005.

²³ This issue was intensively debated during October and November 2004.

copy of the book *Kitab manzil as-sa'irin*, by Shaykh Abdullah al-Ansari al-Herawi. If anyone recognises it and knows how I can get hold of it, please contact me.”²⁴

Although the difference between my study and Griffin's should not be exaggerated, one explanation could be that Muslims are more used to raising questions concerning their beliefs. For example, the issuing of *fatwas* is very important today, especially for Muslims living in Europe and the United States. To raise questions or ask a more knowledgeable person something is an essential part of Islam and Muslim identity. This development is evident on the Internet, and today it is easy to find a large number of Islamic homepages providing and issuing *fatwas*. The homepage of IslamOnline.net, which is located in Cairo and Qatar, is one important example of a site that provides this service. At the time of writing, this site's fatwabank contains approximately 12,000 *fatwas* in Arabic and 3,000 *fatwas* translated into English.²⁵ Together with offline institutions such as the *European Council for Fatwa and Research* located in Dublin, Ireland, IslamOnline.net seems to be one of the most important forums for Muslims in the west.²⁶ If we return to the typology, the following Muslim man asking for advice from SfCM before going Turkey on vacation provides an example illustrating the discourse of shared information.

My wife and I are thinking about going to Turkey this year, and we know that there are places where beaches and cities are not packed with westerners who party, but also quieter places, even special hotels for Muslims with separated bathing facilities for men and women (as in Dubai), and even Islamic entertainment. Is there anybody who knows of this kind of place, especially hotels in Turkey...?²⁷

This question is likely to be of great significance to the individual, but this does not normally cause much debate or dispute inside the group. Nevertheless, the ability to raise and answer questions online is important in the creation of identity and for individual guidance. Contrary to offline milieus such as mosques or Koranic schools, the Internet is an environment in which all individuals may claim to possess knowledge or authority for both good and bad. It is also possible to remain anonymous on the Internet, thus making it easier and safer to raise difficult questions. But the possibility to become a cyber *'alim* without possessing 'true' or classical knowledge of the sciences of Islam, that is, knowledge transmitted via mosques or Islamic institutions of learning, is often questioned or disputed by Muslims. According to opponents, information and communication technologies tend to undermine theological

²⁴ Message posted on 10/04/2004.

²⁵ Interview with Ali Halawani, head of the Shariah unit in Cairo, Egypt, on 06/14/2004.

²⁶ For IslamOnline.net, see <http://www.islam-online.net/english/index.shtml>; for the homepage of the European Council of Fatwa and Research, see <http://www.ecfr.org/>.

authority. In the words of Sheikh Muhammad Muslim, the theological leader of *Sidratul-Muntaha*, a Sufi-oriented group in Sweden that makes much use of the Internet, there is no *adab*, courtesy or rules, for using the Internet.²⁸

In the fourth category, the discourse of theology and meaning, Griffin places messages that have the potential to become arguments. Within this category, most arguments occur when a particular message makes assumptions about the uniformity of beliefs of other list participants.²⁹ In the case of SfCM, this kind of assumption was made quite often about list members following the ideas of Salafism or traditionalist interpretations. The methodologies applied by various scholars in defining the essence and truth of Islam is one of the most common themes discussed within SfCM. A debate between a follower of Sufism (*tasawwuf*) and *philosophia perennis* can serve as an illustration:

Warning! Beware of the poison that is being spread by some of the so-called perennialists. Their interpretation of Islam is a deviation from the *aqida* (faith) of the Sunni Muslims. It has nothing to do with *tasawwuf*. It is a religion in its own right that has taken some of its terms and names from Islam. Those of us who are looking for a diamond should beware of glass pearls. May Allah protect the Muslims and humankind from false interpretations of our religion. Allah knows best.³⁰

The quotation also shows that the climate of discussion can be very hard. For example, after a long and critical discussion between two members, the sincerity of one of the participants in SfCM was even questioned in public: 'Maybe you are not a Muslim? Only Allah knows.'³¹

Category four is complex to analyse, and it is often difficult to maintain the boundaries between the typologies applied by Griffin and myself. Messages that belong to category two, the discourse of purpose, for example, are frequently developed into questions of theology and meaning (i.e. category four).

As for the last category, the discourse of care and connection, SfCM provides hardly any example of this kind of message. However, sometimes new members are welcomed to the group, and converts to Islam have received special support. An illustration of this category is when a member gives his support to another member and reveals that he also finds the question of authenticity of the *hadith* problematic and important to discuss in a critical and open way.³² Unlike participants who strongly uphold the position of the *hadith*, this message

²⁷ Message posted on 06/14/2004.

²⁸ Interview with Mohammad Muslim, Göteborg, Bok- och Biblioteksmässan, on 26/09/2003.

²⁹ See Griffin 2004, 197.

³⁰ Message posted on 10/16/2004.

³¹ Message posted on 10/21/2004.

³² Message posted on 09/19/2004.

is written with care and connects with the person who raised the question. But in general the messages posted to SfCM contain little or no information of a personal character, and from this point of view my findings are different from Griffin's.

When Griffin's typology is applied, it becomes painfully clear that the boundaries between the categories are floating and very difficult to maintain. A message could easily be placed in more than one category at the same time. This said, the 168 messages posted between June and October 2004 can roughly be divided as follows:

Category	Posted messages
Discourse of purpose	43
Discourse of activism	11
Discourse of shared information	43
Discourse of theology and meaning	62
Discourse of care and connection	9
Total	168

Table 2: Typology of messages posted between June and September 2004

The problem in maintaining Griffin's typology also illustrates the fact that a typology is only a tool for analysing the data collected, not an exact instrument that solves all methodological problems.

Another way of analysing the data is to focus on who is posting messages and why? This makes it clear that most messages to SfCM have been posted by just a few individuals. During the five months in which I was following the discussions closely, the average member of SfCM posted only one or two messages. This is an indication that most discussions were run by just a few members. Between June and October 2004, the most active participants had the following posting profile:

Name	Number of posted messages	Messages as a percentage
Abu Bakr	47	28%
Umar	34	20%
Fatima	10	6%
Uthman	9	5%
Ali	4	2%
Hussein	4	2%
Total	108	64%

Table 3: The six most active members in SfCM between June and September 2004.

In total six individuals, those mentioned in the table, posted 108 messages out of a total of 168. In percentage terms, communication by these individuals made up 64 % of the total number of messages posted to SfCM. Although this information says something about the climate of discussion and the importance of driving members, the data need to be analysed with care. For example, it is possible to be a passive or silent member and still take part in the discussions by reading messages without posting any. But this kind of activity is impossible to measure just by looking at the number of messages posted. To develop this discussion further, it would be necessary to conduct interviews with both active and passive members.

What about the Members?

To develop the analysis further, it is clear that the members themselves must be approached and asked why they are active or passive and what they think about the discussion group. However, for this study I have only been in e-mail contact with the list administrator and Abu Bakr, the member who posted the most messages during the five months that I have been following SfCM. I have also tried to make contact with Umar, the second most active member, but he has not returned my mail.

Even though Abu Bakr's contribution within the group is considerable and important, it should be stressed that his profile and answers should not be seen as typical or representative of all members of the discussion group. In her study of SfCM, Garbi Schmidt concludes that the average member is a young convert to Islam.³³ Although this conclusion is plausible, one

³³ See Schmidt 1999, 120.

must be cautious in interpreting the data. For example, it is not possible to conclude whether a member is a Muslim or not just by looking at the nicknames used in the discussion group. On the Internet it is very easy to use fake identities, especially in discussion groups. By doing so it is easy to hide one's true identity, gender or age.³⁴ The true identity of Abu Bakr has even been questioned by another member in SfCM, the critic being doubtful whether Abu Bakr is even a Muslim,³⁵ a charge which is, of course, refuted by Abu Bakr.

Cyberspace is also the ultimate forum for presenting an idealised image of the individual. For example, in a Muslim discussion group it may be important for a member to emphasise his or her belief in Islam. What contributors say online should therefore not automatically be taken as a guarantee that they are following and practising the same ideals offline. However, both the history of the discussion group and communication within SfCM support the view that a large number of members are converts to Islam, like Fatima, the present list administrator, and Abu Bakr, the most active member.³⁶

Although much research on the use of information and communication technologies supports the idea that young people are more frequent users than older people, one should be cautious in analysing these findings. In an earlier survey sent out to a large number of Swedish Muslim homepages, for example, the average age profile of the webmasters was between thirty-four and thirty-five.³⁷ Although this is a small sample and the study being referred to had several methodological problems, I believe it suggests that older Muslims are also using the Internet nowadays to search for information on Islam. For example, Abu Bakr, the most active member in SfCM and the member who posts most messages to the group, is over fifty. This indicates that we should not automatically draw the conclusion that only young Muslims can use the new medium.

Conclusion

The fact that a Muslim group in Sweden is using the Internet to communicate and share information about Islam illustrates the globalisation of Islam. Not only the choice of communication media, but also the number of languages used and the topics discussed within SfCM indicate that Muslims in Sweden are part of a globalised and transnational Muslim

³⁴ On the use of nicknames in Muslim discussion forums and on the Internet, see Barak 2002.

³⁵ Message posted on 10/21/2004.

³⁶ Personal e-mail, dated 10/04/2004.

³⁷ See Larsson 2003b, 230.

community. By using information and communication technologies, members of SfCM are on the one hand linked to the rest of the Muslim world and on the other hand contributing to the creation of Muslim space in northern Europe. To be able to understand and analyse Muslims in Sweden, it is not sufficient to confine one's studies to the Swedish context alone. We should also use data from the rest of the Muslim world, a fact clearly illustrated in my analysis of SfCM.

New information and communication technologies, such as satellite television, telephone, radio and the Internet, have allowed the world to come to Sweden and made the world a much smaller place. What happens in Bosnia, Saudi Arabia or Palestine is repeatedly being discussed on SfCM. Global events such as 09/11 and developments in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict are today global news with a strong impact on local religious and ethnic minorities living in the west. Although the majority of Muslims living in Sweden are not followers or supporters of Usama bin Laden, it is evident that the terrorist attacks on the United States had a negative impact on most Muslim communities in Europe and the United States. Consequently, after 09/11 the level of discrimination against Muslims skyrocketed in most countries in the west.³⁸ This indicates that the new information and communication technologies contain both opportunities and problems for Muslim communities.

Only time can tell whether SfCM will disappear or become a permanent virtual institution for Swedish Muslims. According to Lorne L. Dawson, time is also an important criterion in deciding whether a discussion group should be called a virtual community. An investment of time and care is essential in establishing a community on the Internet. From the data discussed in this chapter, it is not possible to say whether SfCM should be labelled a virtual community or not. Nonetheless it is evident that the discussion forum has been around for a long time. When it started in 1998 it was one of the first Swedish Muslim sites on the Internet, its founders having been pioneers in using the new information and communication technologies to spread information about Islam in Sweden.

Although SfCM was the first Swedish Muslim discussion group, it is not the only homepage that has been around for a long time. Many Swedish Muslim homepages have existed for quite a long time, several since the end of the 1990s. Abu Bakr, the most active member of SfCM, is an illustration of the continuity. For example, he has been a member of SfCM for more than five years.³⁹ Although it is impossible to say whether he is representative of the discussion group or of Swedish Muslims using the Internet, he is an example of a Muslim

³⁸ See Larsson 2005.

³⁹ Personal e-mail, dated 10/05/2004.

who is using the Internet to search for information about Islam and to articulate his Muslim identity. All in all, the messages posted to SfCM and my contact with Fatima and Abu Bakr support the idea that Muslims are going online because they are eager to discuss and meet other Muslims in cyberspace. From this point of view, SfCM could be used as a tool for creating an identity and solidarity among Muslims living in Scandinavia.⁴⁰

⁴⁰ See Schmidt 1999, 119-20; personal e-mail from Fatima, dated 09/14/2004; personal e-mail from Abu Bakr, 10/05/2004.

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