Virtual Ayatollahs: The Expansion and Contraction of Religious Authority

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Abstract

Beginning the early 1990s the ways in which humans communicated with one another went through a rapid and irreversible evolution, based upon the invention and spread of the Internet. Reaching into all aspects of human life – communication, science, education and of course, religion – the structural changes that took place have impacted humanity in various ways. In Shi'ite Islam various competing religious authoritative sources have been created, and old ones have evolved to accommodate the newly free access to information made possible through the Internet.

Main Arguments

- The rise in computer and Internet usage in the Arab world has allowed Arab ayatollahs to expand their authority and challenge Iranian Shi'i hegemony.
- When ayatollahs use the Internet a paradox results where center-periphery dynamics result in a pull-pull effect on religious authority.
- Internet websites allow self-styled ayatollahs to proliferate and diverse centers of authority to form that are based exclusively on the Internet, creating new knowledge.
- This knowledge, once constructed, is proliferated through new media technologies and broadcast to a wider audience than perhaps even intended.
- It is this proliferation of knowledge that elucidates the important nexus between the production of knowledge and its application in the construction of socio-political authority.

Conclusions

The Arab Shi'ite leadership have remained largely localized in their political engagement, in exchange for substantial political gain in various nation-states where they live. Ayatollahs represent continuity and innovation as an authoritative religious institutional reference point for the Arab Shi'ites, paradoxically providing a source of communal cohesiveness and the potential for intra-sectarian fragmentation. Their engagement with the Internet and the outcomes that derive from their actions challenge previous understandings of the boundaries of Shi'i authority.
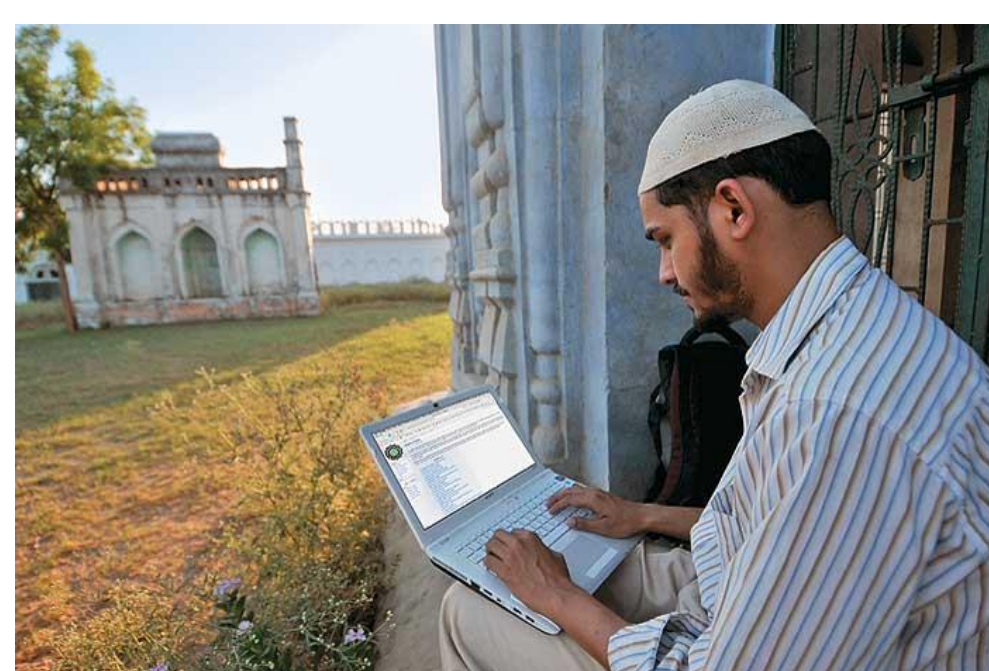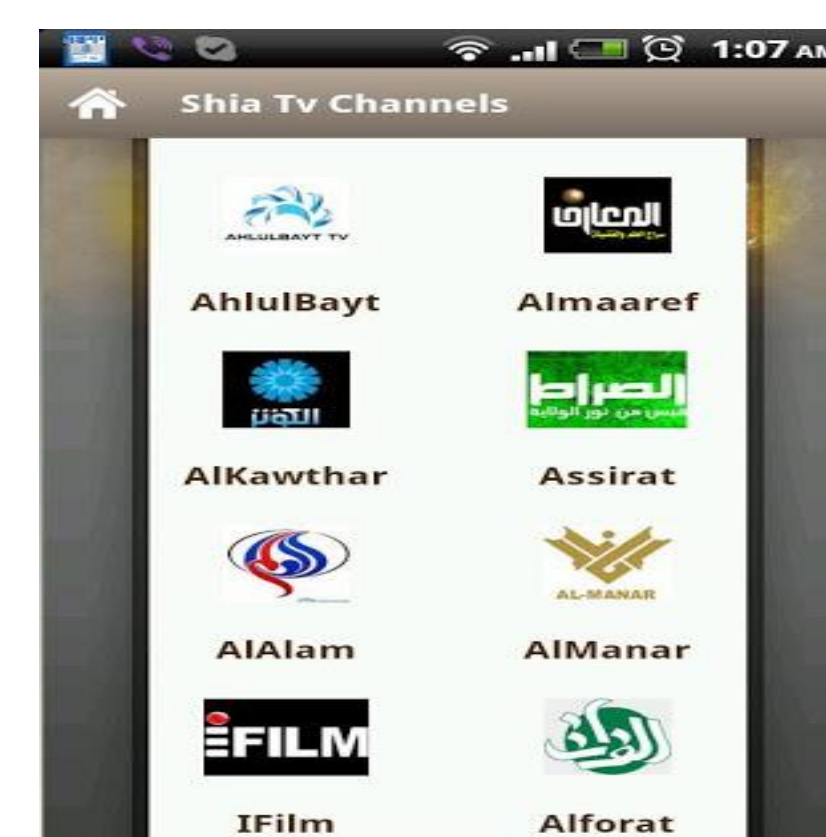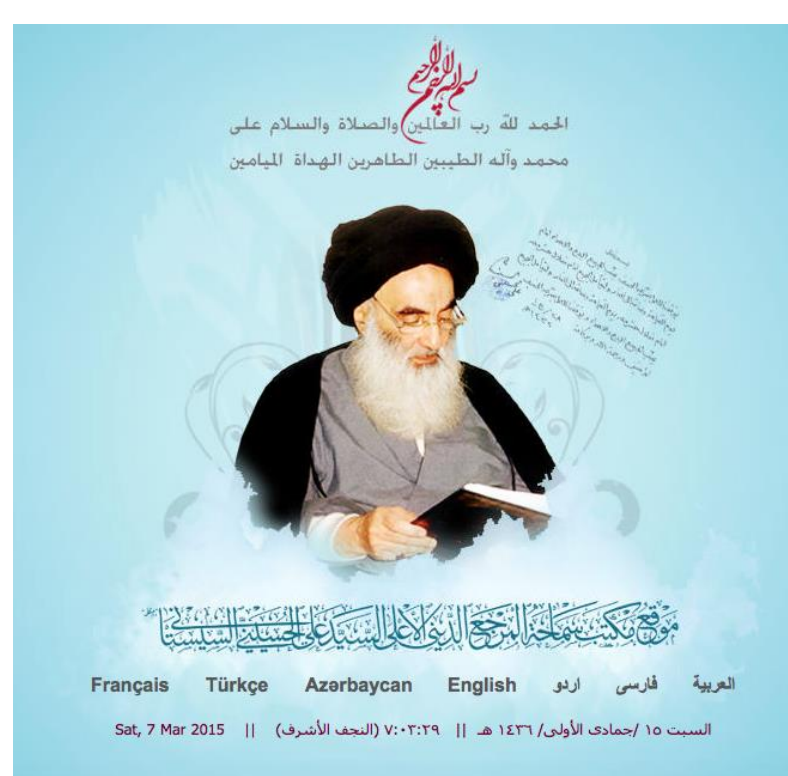
Research Questions

- Has the Internet dismantled historical structures of authority in Shi'ite Islam?
- Has the Internet changed how Shi'ite religious authorities articulate the relationship between the local and the global?
- What are the demographics of Internet users in Shi'ite religious institutions?
- How and to what extent has the Internet aided the construction and propagation of public knowledge by Shi'i religious authorities?

Theories and Research Methodology

- Qualitative evaluations of current websites and other online materials from Shi'ite religious sources.
- Analysis of website traffic in various Shi'ite communities to determine usage and demographics
- Theoretical Frames: Discourse Analysis, Actor-Network Theory, Globalization modeling

Selected References

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