

# What Do Sheikh-Google And Facebook-Mufti Preach? (Theological Issues in the Muslim Blogosphere and Mobile Apps)

Rezeda Safiullina-Ibragimova\* and Inessa Beloglazova

Kazan Federal University, Russia

**Abstract:** The article discusses what the Islamic segment of the Ru.net came to with for the twentieth anniversary of its existence. Using the communication theory of J.Habermas and based on the analysis of Gary Bunt's work on cybernetic presence of Islam, it is considered how the development of the blogosphere and social networks change the communication and form the special type of Islamic public sphere through the personal pages of preaches - what topics and questions raised and how this commutation formulates the modern Russian Muslim's vision. The effect of the social and cultural issues of the Muslims rules have been studied in the literature review. The Internet is turning into a kind of platform for expressing theological ideas, notation Mazhabic priorities and functioning models of the Muslim Ummah.

**Keywords:** Internet, social network, Islam in Russia, cyber-imam, Muslims.

## INTRODUCTION

Islamic segment of Russian-language net (Islamnet) celebrates its 20<sup>th</sup> anniversary this year. One of the first Russian sites was «Muslima» founded in 1999, but more popular site was Islam.ru, which developed rapidly - at first there were sections: The Islamic faith, How to convert to Islam, Worship questions - later added sections on Halal, Question to Alim, and a Forum. At the same time, <https://umma.ru/> was created and its imam Shamil Alyautdinov became the author of a new "question-answer" format. According to the famous writer and publicist Ainur Sibgatullin assessment Islamnet included more than 400 sites in 2010. Among the available Internet resources, he identified three main site's types: missionary (focusing on the propaganda of Islam), practical (intended for practicing Muslims), Islamic studies (providing information of a scientific and analytical nature). On the Runet, the most common are the first two directions, which focus not on the academic study of Islam, but on its spread.

Six years later, Adul Kalil Khan Jamil (Abdul Kabil Khan Jamil, 2016), a researcher of mass communications and the image of Islam in the Runet, divided Islamic resources into four segments, on the basis of a religious and social nature and where "any user can get acquainted with the principles of Islam, get competent answers to questions about Islam etc.":

- 1) Official sites of the central religious organizations (Ex: site of the Spiritual Administration of Muslims of the Russian Federation

<http://dumrf.ru/>, Central Muslim Spiritual Board of Russia <http://www.cdum.ru/> etc.)

- 2) Internet version of religious Islamic periodicals and sites, such as <http://www.islam.ru>, <https://as-salam.ru>
- 3) Social networks: "Vkontakte", "Facebook", "Odnoklassniki", "Twitter" and "YouTube". In 2005-2015 the LiveJournal online diaries platform <https://www.livejournal.com/> became a popular format. For example, Damir Mukhetdinov (<https://damir-hazrat.livejournal.com/> (last publication in 2017)), a member of the Public Chamber of the Russian Federation and First Deputy Chairman of the Spiritual Directorate of Muslims of the European part of Russia, was a well-known blogger on LiveJournal.
- 4) Mobile applications: «Muslim Pro application: Azan, Quran, Qibla», «Quran – translation», «Halalgide» etc. Islamnet is full of various applications from Halal food ordering, Muslim dating, to education (Arabic language courses, reading the Quran, How to pray Allah? How to wear a hijab?).

The main concern of the muslim roles under the facebook and digital area have been discussed in the previous studies (Kabanov *et al.*, 2018; Stier *et al.*, 2020). The researches evaluate the criminals and social effect of these rules among the various cultures.

E-mail, chat rooms, message services, forums, blogs, online communities are all manifestations of the dynamics of the unfolding and steadily gaining momentum of electronic information exchange.

\*Address correspondence to this author at the Kazan Federal University, Russia; Tel: +7917-92-72, +7919-645-17-00; E-mail: [vivi.borisov@bk.ru](mailto:vivi.borisov@bk.ru)

Concepts as online mosque and “cyber-Muslims” are being introduced into circulation, which are active communicating on forums, blogs and social networks. The Russian audience of social networks is 49% of the total population, which means that there are about 9.8 million active users of social media among Muslims in Russia

## METHODS

As a methodological approach of this report was used the concept of the public sphere by J. Habermas. It's a communication theory, where mass media are viewed as a regulator of public life and as a special platform for shaping public opinion through meaningful discussion, constituted on the principles of accessibility and equality of subjects, taking place within the framework of the rules established and adopted in the process of interaction (Habermas, 1991).

The use of the Internet has simultaneously expanded and fragmented communication contexts. Therefore, as J. Habermas writes, on the one hand, “the Internet has a subversive effect on authoritarian regimes in the public sphere.” On the other hand, “the horizontal and less formalized formation of communication networks simultaneously emasculates the achievements of traditional public spheres.” The function of the latter within the framework of political communities was to “focus the attention of an anonymous and scattered audience on certain selected messages, so that citizens at the same time could be busy with the same critically filtered topics and statements in their connection”. As a result, the Internet promotes universal equality is “decentralization of access to unedited statements”.

In addition, examples taken from the Internet are considered in connection with Gary Bunt's analysis of the cybernetic presence of Islam, which is reflected in his book «Muslims: Rebuilding the House of Islam», «Hashtag Islam».

Along with the optimistic forecast of Habermas in political sociology, one of the most relevant is the discussion about the relationship between public spheres and citizenship in the post-secular world, since the growing religious differences call into question the possibility of forming a single discursive space between all citizens (Yudin, 2017).

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Concepts as online mosque and “cyber-Muslims” are being introduced into circulation, which are active communicating on forums, blogs and social networks. Moreover, they are conducted as by well-known Islamic figures, writers and journalists, as well as by users who is simply interested in their religion. This has an overarching transformational impact on the perception of Islam, presentation of Islam, practice Islam and how Muslims perceive themselves and other Muslims/groups of Muslims. Along with the fact that it concerns the interpretation and understanding of the Quran or the practical implementation of Islamic duties and rituals, “the cyber-Islamic environment exposes Muslims to radical influences outside the traditional spheres of knowledge and authority, causing paradigmatic shifts at the grassroots level within societies” (Bunt, Gary, 2009). Nowadays not all public communication are regulated by the mainstream media, information also passes through various spontaneously developing publics, including those that are spontaneously formed by the Internet within the social media (Chelini Pont, Blandine, 2013; Yarskaya-Smirnova & Romanov, 2013).

Muslim's officials (Centralized religious organizations) in Russia are trying to fight competitors in the religious field, calling it a fight against “radical interpretations of the Quran on the Internet” relying on the government support. “The problem in the Islamic world appeared where book-printing became widespread [...] today it has become aggravated with a new information stage of development - the Internet,” says Kamil Samigullin, Chairman of the Spiritual Administration of Muslims of the Republic of Tatarstan and expresses concern that “The so-called “Sheikh-Google” or “Mufti-Facebook” (URL:<http://islamio.ru>) are beginning to influence the minds of young people more than traditional scholars. The free interpretation of the sacred texts creates chaos and radical groups that have nothing to do with Islam. Today, the interpretation is spurred on by the Internet in different ways”. Spiritual administrations of Muslims alone cannot cope, because “Sheikh-Google” or “Mufti-Facebook” is a real force. Therefore, “order in the understanding of the Quran,” according to official religious figures, is achievable only in conjunction with government agencies and a whole range of preventive measures”. But the audience is unlikely to leave “Sheikh-Google” or “Mufti-Facebook” at the first request of official spiritual board leaders -

and from despair (urgent need) they start their own channels / pages (Ex: Kamil Samigullin, the leading Telegram channel [https://t.me/kamil\\_hazrat](https://t.me/kamil_hazrat) 2.5K subscribers; Instagram @kamilhazrat 42 K subscribers).

Along with the "information revolution", the development of blogging, etc., appeared instant message applications (WhatsApp, Telegram etc.) - systems for exchanging messages and media files, including voice and video communications.

Content of 35 Telegram channels (5 are Sunni content, 18 are pseudo-Salafi content, 6 channels that do not refer themselves to any group or trend of Islam, 6 Tatar-speaking channels), 8 WhatsApp groups, as well as content related to Islam on the pages of a number social networks, sites and online publications are revealed that it is diverse, and one can observe a wide range of topics (from sermons and moral and ethical instructions to teaching recitation and memorization of the Quran, doctrine, Islamic law, etc.), and doctrinal, legal schools (from the apologetics of the Hanafi madhhab and the Ashari-Maturidite creeds to the denial of madhhabs). The researcher of trends and sects in Islam D.A. Shagaviev in 2014 argued that more than 60% of religious Islamic applications for electronic devices are Wahhabite and pseudo-Salafist, such as the application "200 Questions on the Doctrine of Islam" (collection of answers to questions about the doctrine. The application contains the views of Ibn Taymiyyah, Muhammad ibn Abdulwahhab, Ibn Buzza, etc.), "Tawhid - Self-Study".

In all social networks which were analyzed, except for some channels, an increase in the audience is observed, in some of them it almost doubled. Some of the studied channels in telegrams have ceased to be updated, or have moved - there is a decrease in subscribers on them, which indicates that interest in groups with Islamic content that is different in form and content is of interest.

Personal channels of Islamic preachers have become a distinctive phenomenon in recent years. Today, the phenomenon of "cyber imam" is very relevant - not having a parish and parishioners, not being attached to a certain mosque, but if you "have knowledge and good presentation, with a minimum budget you can broadcast from anywhere and be useful to anyone. "For a more detailed examination of this phenomenon, we present 2 channels -" Shariah Issues ", which gained their distribution initially in the

Volga region, the author of which is Zakir Sharif, who positions himself as a moderate Hazrat who does not classify himself as either Salafis or modernists. And the second is the channel of Shamil Alyautdinov, the imam of the memorial mosque in Moscow, who has more than 10 years of Internet experience and, as a result, a wider audience, and is also the creator of the Trillioner business training <https://trillioner.life/> , based on the Quran and Sunnah.

### Case «Sharia Issues»

Created in 2018 on WhatsApp and has gained great popularity group «Sharia issues». Due to the quantitative limitations of WhatsApp (no more than 250 members in a group), several groups have already been created: two for women and 1 for men in WhatsApp, 1 group in Telegram (681 subscribers in 2019, 914 in 2020) <https://t.me/shariatvopros> ZakirSharif. In addition, there is also a paid group where the author posts lectures 2-3 times a week (4 videos for 10 minutes or 2-3 videos for 15 minutes). Group members are users not only from Kazan and Tatarstan, but also from different regions of Russia and the CIS. According to the Zakir Sharif, one of the members of the group, who lives in a remote village in the Kazakh steppe, there is no mosque, no madrasah, no mosque schools, wrote that these videos are for them, for the entire village, and for the nearest auls - salvation, that according to these lessons they really get an education.

The main questions asked by the group members relate to worship: why does ritual purity deteriorate / does not deteriorate, questions about halal / haram in food. Less often, questions related to belief: about predestination, the meaning of life, some kind of indignation ("why is this world so arranged?").

Very intimate questions come to the "Direct Message". As the leader of the group says, "It's a real outlet for women. They noticed that I don't have complexes, so they ask very frank questions about sexual life, complaining about husbands, or husbands complaining about wife in matters of sexual life". Many questions come about the divorce proceedings: how to get a divorce, the husband does not give a divorce, what to do? Or, the husband announced a divorce, and now we both regret and don't know what to do. The group leader notes that divorce issues are very complex, and admits that "at first I made a lot of mistakes in answering all this. Now I have gained a lot of experience and become more careful".

The fact is that the leader of the group answers incoming questions in audio format. It is noted that there are very few qualified imams who can answer a wide range of questions and do it quickly. Moreover, not everyone has the patience, as "many repetitive questions come, many stupid questions are asked, comments begin. Basically, the responding imams can't stand it". According to him: "Salafis" or "zealous Hanafis" dropped out. There are just good, ordinary Muslims who don't really understand either Abu Hanifa or Salafi, they just need an adequate answer, close to reality, adapted to the modern life of Russia, helping them worship the Creator".

He admits that over the years of working with such groups, he has developed the ability not to be surprised at anything. He characterizes it: "I saw the interior of Muslim life. And now I can give people some advice, which is adapted to human life. And through these groups, I really saw that Muslims, are weak, a person is weak, there is nafs, a shaitan, a person fights him endlessly. At the same time, he tries to be a Muslim, pray and be righteous. This helped to understand what problems need to be raised. The imams don't talk about them. Because they only say that prayer is needed, what is possible and what is not".

The imam (author of the channel) received his first religious education in the early 90s of the twentieth century in a madrasah in Central Asia after that he studied at the Tunisian University "Az-Zaytun" and received a bachelor's degree in Islamic sciences in the direction of "Sharia".

According to him, while studying at the university, he received very good knowledge of the Arabic language and a broad outlook on Islam, on Islamic civilization: "not a narrow, fanatical view, but we were given freedom to study madhhabs, works of various scientists, types of aqidah."

He also has a secular philology master's degree. In the 2000s, for more than ten years he worked as an imam and teacher of a mosque in one of the Russian cities. From 2012 to 2015, he improved Sharia education in Egypt, staying there with his family and attending classes of Egyptian theologians.

Due to the fact that most of the group members are residents of Tatarstan, representatives of the Spiritual Administration of Muslims of the republic drew attention to it. After analyzing the content of the answers given

by him, concern was expressed that the founder of the group, answering the questions of the participants, cites the conclusions of various madhhabs, not adhering to a certain legal school, moreover, he doesn't adhere to the Hanafi madhhab, traditional for Muslims of the Volga region, and leads the opinions of famous Wahhabi scholars to the questions, such as Ibn Taymiyyah, Ibn Useimin, Muhammad Said RaslyanSuleiman Ar-Ruhaili, etc.

### **Case «Umma.ru - Authentically about Islam»**

Another example of a successful preacher in the Internet space is Shamil Alyautdinov, who began his Internet activity in 1999 with the opening of the site «Umma.ru - authentically about Islam». Alyautdinov can be called a specialist on Muslim youth in Russia, he literally gathers full halls at his trainings, which take place outside the walls of the mosque. Alyautdinov studied Islam at the Al-Azhar University of Cairo. In 1997, at the age of 23, he became the imam of the Memorial Mosque in Moscow.

Alyautdinov not only became a popular preacher of this mosque, but also published a number of books on Islam; in addition, he is active in the media, including the Internet. His numerous works are devoted to a variety of issues - from the Russian translation of the Quran (in four volumes) to the role of Islamic law in private and family life, as well as describing the ideal Muslim life. On his website umma.ru, Alyautdinov regularly answers thousands of questions that come to him from Russian-speaking Muslims around the world. Since 2002, he has held the post of deputy mufti of the Spiritual Administration of Muslims of Russian Federation for religious issues. Alyautdinov quotes not only the Quran and Sunnah, but also a significant number of influential Islamic authors.

According to A. Bustanov (Bustanov & Kemper, 2016), Shamil Alyautdinov is the main representative of the new modernist trend in Russian Islam. Modernization (apart from individual ethnic, in this case Tatar traditions), popularization and Russification are the most significant tools, with their help he addresses a wide Russian-speaking audience, including new converts and young Muslims who ask questions about the connection between religion and science due to which the integration of scientific, especially psychological literature into religious discourse takes place. The preacher conducts his activities not only on his personal website, which is undoubtedly his main

information resource, but also on all social networks - Telegram channel [https://t.me/umma\\_ru](https://t.me/umma_ru) (32 884 subscribers), group in VKontakte <https://vk.com/faceumma> (about 93K subscribers), Facebook [https://www.facebook.com/faceumma/about/?ref=page\\_internal](https://www.facebook.com/faceumma/about/?ref=page_internal) (about 62K subscribers). And if the Facebook and VKontakte are intended more to promote visual content with the Quranic verses, hadiths, Muslim "wisdom", then the telegram consists of audio answers to questions and lectures. Questions are devoted to religious, family, sexual, etc. Imam's approach to answers has a religious secular nature - short answers (3-5 minutes on average) without quoting the Quran / hadith in an edifying manner aimed at fostering a modern outlook on life, applying Islamic norms, taking into account realities.

## SUMMARY

The above examples are just a drop in the bucket of Islamnet, but nevertheless, the trend is easily visible, the audience of cyber imams is growing every day, social networks allow users to shorten the distance imam-parishioners, find information in an accessible format and, if desired, maintain anonymity.

This also applies to intra-religious disagreements. In the Muslim public sphere, one can find examples of the creative use of the Internet and IT applications by various groups of Muslims to promote and disseminate their views, representing different, even contradictory views and interpretations of Islam and Muslim culture, for example, Islam of intellectuals and Islam of ordinary people, Islam of "traditional" and "Non-traditional", "true Islam", etc.

Thus, we see that in the Islamic environment by now a boundless and self-reproducing space has already formed, where everyone is free to publish their opinions.

The Quran and the Sunnah are discussed in popular forums, which is strikingly different from the situation, for example, in the 10th century AD, when it was the lot of a narrow circle. Tariq A. Ghanem, editor of the department of contemporary problems of IslamOnline, writes that, for all its usefulness, this process has pitfalls - excessive simplification and vulgarization (Sibgatullin, 2010).

## CONCLUSIONS

Nevertheless, today the Internet is no longer just one of the main channels for disseminating information about religion, but also an important platform for information and communication exchange within the Muslim community and one of the means for an individual to realize his cultural and religious identity. The Internet is turning into a kind of platform for the expression of theological ideas, designation of madhab priorities and a model for the functioning of the Muslim ummah.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The work is performed according to the Russian Government Program of Competitive Growth of Kazan Federal University.

## REFERENCES

- Abdul Kabil Khan Jamil. (2016). *The Image of Islam in Russian Online Information Space*. The Image of Islam in Russia. International conference. Uppsala Centre for Russian and Eurasian Studies 6-8 October 2016. URL: [https://www.ires.uu.se/digitalAssets/658/c\\_658768-1\\_1-k\\_abstracts-and-biographies.pdf](https://www.ires.uu.se/digitalAssets/658/c_658768-1_1-k_abstracts-and-biographies.pdf)
- Bunt, Gary R. (2009). *iMuslims: Rewiring the House of Islam*. The University of North Carolina Press, 358 p. ProQuest Ebook Central, URL: <http://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/umichigan/detail.action?docID=454813>
- Bunt, Gary R. (2018). *Hashtag Islam. How Cyber-Islamic Environments Are Transforming Religious Authority*, The University of North Carolina Press, 233 p. <https://doi.org/10.5149/northcarolina/9781469643168.003.008>
- Bustanov, A.K., & Kemper, M. (2016). *Islam in Russian: an analysis of modern Islamic literature in Russia: a tutorial St. Petersburg*. state un-t. - St. Petersburg: Presidential Library, 134 p.
- Chelini Pont, Blandine. (2013). *Relationship between Stereotyping and the Place of Religion in the Public Sphere*. [https://doi.org/10.1057/9781137342676\\_7](https://doi.org/10.1057/9781137342676_7)
- Habermas, J. (1991). *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*. — Cambridge Massachusetts: The MIT Press.
- Kabanov, P., Khairutdinova, L., & Bulanova, L. (2020). Criminological Characteristics of Migrant Crimes: Russian and Foreign Practices. *International Journal of Criminology and Sociology*, 9, 16-25. <https://doi.org/10.6000/1929-4409.2020.09.03>
- Markham, Annette. (2013). Fieldwork in Social Media. *Qualitative Communication Research*, 2, 434-446. <https://doi.org/10.1525/qcr.2013.2.4.434>
- "Sheikh-Google" and "Mufti-Facebook": Spiritual Directorates of Muslims promise to fight radical interpretations of the Koran on the Internet.— URL:[http://islamio.ru/news/society/sheikh\\_google\\_i\\_muftiy\\_facebook\\_dukhovnye\\_upravleniya\\_musulman\\_obeshchayut\\_borotsya\\_s\\_radikalnymi\\_to/](http://islamio.ru/news/society/sheikh_google_i_muftiy_facebook_dukhovnye_upravleniya_musulman_obeshchayut_borotsya_s_radikalnymi_to/)
- Sibgatullin, A.A. (2010). *Tatar Internet*. N. Novgorod, S. 6. URL: <http://kitap.net.ru/sibgatullin/islamnet.pdf>

Stier, S., Bleier, A., Lietz, H., & Strohmaier, M. (2018). Election campaigning on social media: Politicians, audiences, and the mediation of political communication on Facebook and Twitter. *Political communication*, 35(1), 50-74.  
<https://doi.org/10.1080/10584609.2017.1334728>

Yarskaya-Smirnova, E.R., & Romanov, P.V. (2013). *Public sphere: research agenda. Public sphere: theory, methodology, case*

*study: team*. monograph (Library of the Journal of Social Policy Research): LLC "Variant"; TsSPGI, 356 p.

Yudin, G.B. (2017). Book Review: Habermas J. *Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere: Research on the Category of Bourgeois Society* (2016). *Philosophy. Journal of the Higher School of Economics*, 1, 123-133.

---

Received on 25-10-2020

Accepted on 27-11-2020

Published on 17-12-2020

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.6000/1929-4409.2020.09.201>

© 2020 Safiullina-Ibragimova and Beloglazova; Licensee Lifescience Global.

This is an open access article licensed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution Non-Commercial License (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/3.0/>) which permits unrestricted, non-commercial use, distribution and reproduction in any medium, provided the work is properly cited.