

**THE IMPACT AND PERCEPTION OF ISLAM AND AUTHORITY
ONLINE AMONG MUSLIM UNIVERSITY STUDENTS IN ST. JOHN'S,
NEWFOUNDLAND AND LABRADOR**

by

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Abstract

Within the context of the digital age, this thesis examines how the Internet has influenced the religious lives of Muslim university students in the North Atlantic city of St. John's, Newfoundland and Labrador by asking two primary questions: First, how is the Internet perceived and what benefits, challenges and concerns does this digital technology raise? And second, what strategies do participants use to religiously authentic Islamic websites? To answer these questions I draw upon fifteen qualitative interviews conducted with Muslim university students in St. John's about their online activity and how they navigate Islam-related websites. My participants expressed concerns with online radicalization and the current securitization climate, but their primary concern was with authenticating Islamic websites. In this regard, they relied on online religious leaders, religious texts, and the ideology of a unified Islam (and rarely on formal Islamic institutions). Paralleling research by Campbell (2007), these authorities were used by my participants to authenticate Islam-related websites and ultimately helped them navigate the complexities of Islam online.

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Chapter 1: Introduction

Introduction

I first met Oswald¹ late one evening at Memorial University's cafeteria in the Student Centre in the middle of campus. The building was empty and all the vendors had closed for the day. Two janitors had begun emptying the garbage bins and arranging tables and chairs. When I arrived, Oswald was waiting for me in the middle of the cafeteria. Oswald is a 28 year-old computer technician and a recent convert to Islam. He has always lived in Newfoundland. Since his conversion he has struggled explaining his faith to his non-Muslim friends and family. As our conversation began, for the first few questions, he remained guarded, answering everything with a formal tone. He offered no small talk and he did not veer off topic. But, when we reached the subject of radicalization, Oswald began to open up. He said:

If I want to go to the Middle East for a vacation I want someone to ask me questions, I want someone to know that I am not coming back here as a terrorist but I also want to be allowed to go. If I wanna go to Greece for a vacation then I should be able to go. Question me all you want and I am okay with that. Do what you need to do to make sure I am safe. But in the end if you don't find anything, you have to let me go, right?

When I asked him about the Internet and the role it played in his religious life he mentioned that he avoids discussing his faith online for fear that anything he posts may be used against him. He said, "I don't think that I am free to say what I want. Online I think

¹All names and identifying information have been changed to anonymize my participants.

... I am very careful about what I say online because if it is there, it's *there*." Following this interview, I became increasingly aware about the tangible impacts of the current securitization climate in Canada in the pressure Muslims feel when they interact online.

For my participants, the Internet is a complex discursive arena with instant experts, competing orthodoxies, and vast networks of Islam-related websites, all claiming to have the correct interpretation of Islam. This thesis examines how the medium of the Internet impacts the spiritual and religious lives of Muslim university students in the city of St. John's, Newfoundland and Labrador. Broadly, I pose these two questions: firstly, what are the benefits, challenges, and concerns perceived by Muslims about their online activity? And secondly how do Muslims come to trust Islam-related sites as authoritative?

Cowan and Dawson (2004) argue that the Islamic tradition faces a "crisis of authority" in that websites offer Muslims new venues to both challenge and reinforce their personal beliefs and practices. My research seeks to address this so-called crisis through a case study of Muslims in St. John's, Newfoundland and Labrador (NL). This research contributes to the scholarly literature on Islam and the Internet by analyzing qualitative interviews in order to develop a more complex understanding of how the online platform impacts their personal constructions of Islamic authority. The interviews I conducted with Muslims in St. John's inquired about their online experiences with Islam-based websites and the impact this online material had on their faith. I begin by briefly contextualizing this study.

The Muslim Population in Canada

Islam is the second largest and fastest growing religious tradition in Canada, a predominately Christian nation. According to data from Statistics Canada's 2011 National Household Survey, Christians represent 67% of Canada's population with just over 22.1 million individuals. Muslims represent 3.2% of the population with just over 1 million members. In Canada, between 1991 and 2001 the Muslim population increased by 128.9%, making Islam the fastest-growing religious group in Canada (Selby 2008).

Canadians spend 45 hours a month online, which is almost double the world average (24.4 hours per month) ("Canadian Internet Registration Authority" 2013). For this reason, one can assume the Internet plays a role in the quotidian lives of Muslim Canadians. It is difficult to gauge how many Canadians use the Internet for religious purposes. In fact, few studies on Canadian Muslims (with the exception of Ramji 2014) focus on digital technologies among this population or religious communities in general. This thesis aims to respond to this research gap.

The Muslim Population in St. John's, Newfoundland

The second largest religious group in St. John's, following Christianity², is Islam. The Muslim population of Newfoundland and Labrador is composed of approximately 1,200 individuals, of which 1,020 members reside in the capital city of St. John's

² Like the rest of Canada, Newfoundland and Labrador is predominately Christian, but with a smaller percentage of non-Christian; almost 97% of the population identifies with Christianity (Statistics Canada 2001; Downie 2013).

(Statistics Canada, Census 2011). The first documented Muslim presence in the province dates to 1964 when Dr. Muhammad Irfan joined the Physics Department at Memorial University. Eighteen years later in 1982, the Muslim community established the Muslim Association of Newfoundland and Labrador (MANAL), which built the first and only mosque in the province in 1990, the Masjid al-Noor. In the next section I discuss the Muslim institutions located in St. John's.

Masjid al-Noor

MANAL's proposal to establish a mosque in Newfoundland became a reality in October 1992 when the construction of the mosque was completed. Today the local non-denominational mosque, Masjid al-Noor, serves approximately 200 families, many of whom are students and faculty who attend and work at Memorial University ("Muslim Association and Newfoundland and Labrador" 2015). According to MANAL's website, the prayer hall in the mosque can accommodate 150 people but with the growing Muslim population this facility needed to expand or be relocated. When I first visited the mosque in November 2014, there was talk among members that MANAL was planning to build a second mosque in addition to the first mosque, nearly double the size of the Masjid al-Noor. According to their website, they still intend to expand and continue to raise funds for the new building and a cemetery.³

This mosque is a place of worship where Shi'a and Sunni Muslims pray together. Today, several male Muslims are responsible for leading the *jumu'ah* prayer while the

³ During my visit to Masjid al-Noor, along with a group of second-year students at Memorial University in an Introduction to Islam course, I toured the prayer hall, the six classrooms used for Islamic workshops, the library and social hall in the basement.

mosque's committee continues to consider whether to hire an imam. In my research project, I focused on the MSA (the Muslim Students' Association) at Memorial University. Their executive members were the first to express their concerns about the nature of the project and to follow up on my request to interview their members. Members offered suggestions to make participants feel more comfortable, like providing participants with sample questions beforehand and contacting potential participants for me.

The Muslim Association of Newfoundland and Labrador (MANAL)

In 1982 the Muslim community officially established the Muslim Association of Newfoundland with the purpose of serving the religious, cultural and social needs of Muslims in the province. The association is a registered charity with the federal and provincial government. During its early years the association suffered financial constraints due to the small and transient nature of its membership. One of the first objectives of the association was to build a mosque (Newfoundland Islamic Center 1994: 7). In lieu of an official Islamic center the Muslim community relied on Memorial University and local churches to accommodate them. Before MANAL was formed and the mosque was built, *jumu'ah* prayers and religious events, such as Ramadan prayers and Eid festivities, were held in various locations which included the University, residential houses, and rented facilities like churches. Without a permanent building, the group did not have an office, a library or a classroom to hold religious education classes. Despite these obstacles and its limited resources the association raised enough funds to purchase

land and construct “the first house of Allah” in the city in 1990 (Newfoundland Islamic Center 1994: 6).

Today MANAL operates both online and offline. Their online mission statement expresses their commitment to the welfare of the Muslim community as it endeavours to adhere to its Islamic values while contributing to the community of St. John’s as a whole. Fundraising continues as the organization raises money for a new cemetery project, which aims to hold 500 gravesites, relocate 40 Muslim graves, as well as build a parking lot, last rite ritual buildings, and a memorial park (Newfoundland Islamic Center 1994: 6). The estimated cost is \$400,000 (Muslim Association and Newfoundland and Labrador, information accessed on June 2015). This project is outlined on their website, MANAL.com, which includes information about the history of their organization, general teachings about Islamic principles as well as information about upcoming events, like educational workshops. The website facilitates online donations that go toward mosque maintenance and its expansion projects. Their website is user-friendly and, according to those interviewed, it acts as an information tool which informs them about local prayer times and the Ramadan schedule. In short, MANAL uses their website as an information tool, keeping its members up to date about local Islamic activities.

Muslim Students' Association (MSA)

The Muslim Students' Association (MSA) is a student-based organization at Memorial University, established in 1976 by faculty advisors Dr. Mohammed Irfan (Professor of Physics) and Dr. Aziz Rahman (Professor of Engineering). Today the MSA hosts a variety of Islam-related activities, which include Islam Awareness Week (IAW), Ramadan Iftars, a *da'wa* booth and various social events, like movie nights and pizza parties. All MSA social events are gender segregated. Since its conception, the MSA has established a well-organized community whose goal is to support the Muslim community and incoming Muslim students. Today the MSA has over 150 active members on campus and online their Facebook group has 961 members and continues to grow ("MSA-Muslim Students Association Public Group," Accessed April 2015). The association has two web pages, one through the university ("Memorial University - Muslim Students Association," Accessed April 2015) and the other is a Facebook page. The university webpage offers information about the association, its history, its mission statement, its executive body as well as contact information and upcoming events. The MSA Facebook page is less formal and includes information about upcoming social gatherings and serves as a platform for candidates who are running for a position on the MSA executive committee.

The MSA and Memorial University have played a significant role in the Muslim population's expansion in St. John's by recruiting and providing incentives for over 1,500 international students from over 90 countries to come and study in St. John's (International Student Advising. Accessed April 2015). Today the MSA has access to

three rooms on campus: in the engineering building (open for daily prayers); on the second floor of the University center (Muslim males use this room for the *jumu'ah* prayer); and a small classroom across from the MSA office on the sixth floor of the University Center (used by female Muslims for the *jumu'ah* prayer). In 2012, the *jumu'ah* prayer was held in the campus chapel. At the time of writing, this location is under construction and is no longer available. The site is under renovations to become an inter-faith chapel to accommodate MUNs growing diversity. The MSA office is on the sixth floor, alongside many of MUN's student societies. On the two occasions I attended the *jumu'ah* gathering there were four, sometimes five female Muslims upstairs while the male Muslim gathering usually had an attendance of approximately 50 members.

The MSA executive served as my primary resource for finding participants for this project and the students running the office would also inform me by email about Muslim events happening on and near campus. Thirteen of my fifteen participants are or were MSA members. Indeed, due to my focus on Islam and the Internet, I had difficulty recruiting Muslims for this project. Without the support of the MSA, recruitment for this project would have been much more difficult, especially within the current context of a heightened sense of securitization. When I spoke with some of the committee members of the MSA about this recruitment challenge they informed me that many members were already aware of my project, from recruitment posters and pamphlets around campus, but that they remained reluctant to volunteer because they had concerns about the intentions behind the project. They expressed fears that their interview may be taken out of context and used against them. Some students suspected I worked for the Canadian Security

Intelligence Service (CSIS) and that my research may harm them and the MSA. My best strategy was to explain the background and intention of my project face-to-face. In-person contact allowed me to recruit a few participants, who remained cautious in the interview setting.

The Chilling Effect of Recent Securitization in Canada

This section briefly surveys the relevant literature on the intensification of security in Canada in the post 9/11 context and its impact on Canadian Muslims (for more on this post 9/11 context in Canada, see Bahdi 2003; Fekete 2004; Forcese and Roach 2015; Helly 2004, 2010; Jamil and Rousseau 2012; Khlema and Wannas-Jones 2003; Naber 2006; Razack 2008; Sheridan 2006). Muslims today face a sense of increased scrutiny from the Canadian government as new anti-terrorism policies become law. A climate of fear and suspicion towards Muslims was arguably compounded in Canada following the Iranian Revolution 1979 and intensified following the 9/11 attacks (Selby 2008). This climate has and continues to frame Muslims as “dangerous,” in general, and as a threat to national security (Razack 2008; Dawson 2014). Within this security context the Canadian government (paralleling the government policies passed in Europe and the United States) decided to implement stronger anti-terrorism legislation to help fight the ‘War on Terror.’ In December 2001, Prime Minister Jean Chrétien’s administration passed the Anti-Terrorism Act (Law C-36) in cooperation with the American government (Lyon 2006; Whitaker 2003). The rationale behind Law C-36 was to strengthen border security and disrupt ‘terrorist activity.’ In 2002 the Immigration and Refugee Protection Act (IRPA)

passed, which focused on foreign nationals and was used to deport individuals deemed a threat to Canadian interests (Kruger et al. 2004: 77). Legal scholars (Bhabha 2003; Roach 2002) argue that these policies, despite not identifying any specific groups, carry the potential to discriminate against vulnerable populations in Canada based on their ethnic, racial and/or religious backgrounds.

In Canada, the social impact of the securitization climate on Muslims has been significant, as individual Muslims face suspicion, discrimination and police profiling. This climate of fear, generated in part by government action, has instilled a sense of fear within Muslim communities across the country that reinforces community silence. As Smith (2010: 32) notes, “People [in Muslim communities] were wary of speaking openly for fear of government surveillance and the possibility of being labelled as “the enemy within.”” Crocker et al. (2007) argue that Muslims in Atlantic Canada are cautious about their public image because they were afraid to be associated with terrorism. Crocker et al. (2007) describe one male participant who says he no longer prays with Muslims of Middle Eastern origins because he does not want to risk being associated with terrorism (2007: 49). The primary data set for Crocker et al. (2007:25) includes 58 in-depth interviews, conducted in 2005, from six different cities (approximately 10 participants from each city). The six Atlantic cities included Halifax (the research team base), Charlottetown, Fredericton, Moncton, Saint John and St. John’s. The participants were clients of immigrant service agencies, immigrants, refugees and ethnic community men and women (Crocker et al. 2007: 25). Among the ten participants from St. John’s, none describe any hostility toward Muslims or immigrants. However, they do express the

concern that Canadians, in general, are becoming more skeptical and fearful of immigrants (Crocker et al. 2007: 42). It is important to note that this study was conducted before the Toronto 18 arrests (June 2, 2006), the Charlie Hebdo attacks in Paris (January 7, 2015), and the two lone wolf attacks in Quebec (October 20, 2014) and Ottawa (October 22, 2014), which I discuss in more detail below.

The Chilling Effect of Bill C-51

Two months before I began conducting interviews with local Muslims in October 2014, two ISIS-inspired “lone wolf attacks” occurred in Ottawa and Quebec (Forcese and Roach 2015). In Quebec on October 20, 2014 Martin Couture-Rouleau committed vehicular homicide, killing warrant officer Patrice Vincent and injuring another soldier. It was later revealed that he publically supported ISIS on his Facebook profile. Two days after this event, Zehaf Bibeau shot and killed Corporal Nathan Cirillo as he stood on sentry duty, in front of the Canadian National War Memorial in Ottawa. Bibeau then entered the main building of the Parliament where he was ultimately shot by RCMP officers. The fear of future terrorist attacks on civilians in Canada further increased after the Paris attacks on the Charlie Hebdo satirical magazine offices in January 2015. These attacks heightened concerns among the public and the Canadian government about online radicalization and recruitment of terrorists (Forcese and Roach 2015). Prime Minister Harper has mentioned these attacks in his administration’s rationale for new anti-terrorist legislation. Harper argued that:

Violent jihadism is not just a danger somewhere else. It seeks to harm us here in Canada, in our cities, and in our neighbourhoods through horrific acts like deliberately driving a car at a defenceless man, or shooting a soldier in the back as he stands on guard at a War Memorial. Canadians are targeted by these terrorists for no other reason than that we are Canadians. They want to harm us because they hate our society and the values it represents (cited in LeBlanc and Hannay 2015).

In May 2015, at Montreal's Pierre Elliott Trudeau International Airport, ten young people were arrested on the suspicion of joining ISIS fighters in Syria by flying into Turkey and crossing the border ("RCMP Arrests Ten Youths" 2015). Today, anti-terrorist legislation thus attempts to identify and diminish cyber recruitment and violent jihadi propaganda online.

Within this context the Harper government tabled new anti-terrorism legislation (Bill C-51) in January 2015, which passed through the Senate in June 2015. Under Bill C-51, the Canadian Security Intelligence Service (CSIS) was granted the authority to monitor/police online material, make preventive arrests, revoke passports and place names on the 'no fly' list (the Passenger Protection Program). The strategy of this Bill is to act quickly in order to disrupt terrorist activity with immediacy. In 1984, when CSIS was established, it acted strictly as an intelligence-gathering agency and its sole purpose was to collect and share information with the RCMP (Royal Canadian Mounted Police) and act in an advisory capacity. As of June 9th, 2015, CSIS is now able to physically disrupt acts of terrorism.⁴ Forcese and Roach (2015) argue that the disruption strategy will not be effective and suggest terrorist prevention as an alternative. They argue that it

⁴ "Terrorist activity" can be defined to include acts of violence, and activities that, according to Schneiderman and Cossman (2011), cause "substantial property damage" or acts that seriously disrupt essential services.

is long-term, de-radicalization measures that the anti-terrorism legislation fails to emphasize.

Schneiderman (2015) also suggests that Canada's legislation regarding terrorism is too ambiguous and may conflate radical and non-radical groups. For example, under Bill C-51, inciting violence online is not the only feature of 'terrorism in general,' it also includes activities that cause "substantial property damage" and "serious disruption of an essential service." A number of pundits have therefore argued that these vague categories put unions, environmental groups and protesters among others at risk of being labeled terrorists. In fact, Schneiderman (2015) suggests that the Bill's ambiguity may create a "chilling effect" – a phenomenon that occurs within a climate of securitization, forcing people to remain silent and unwilling to express their opinion in public or online. In addition, this climate may deter participation in de-radicalization programs (Forcese and Roach 2015). In relation to recruitment for this qualitative research, this climate generated by the vagueness in defining "terrorists activity" in government policy contributed to deterring potential participants with engaging with my interview-based questions that dealt with the role of the Internet and, even if only in a few questions, the rise of online violent jihadi propaganda.⁵

Based on a UK-based study between 2001 and 2012, Forcese and Roach (2015) predict that "false positives," or being falsely arrested as a terrorist, may increase in Canada under this anti-terrorist legislation. In the United Kingdom, anti-terrorism

⁵ According to Dalgaard-Nielson (2010: 807), the Internet plays a modest role in the rise of violent jihadism. Dalgaard-Nielson argued that "peer group leaders" secure recruitment and the Internet acts as an avenue of communication, connecting like-minded extremists.

legislation has led to approximately 1,500 arrests of individuals under the suspicion of terrorism, but only 34% were actually charged with a crime (Horne and Gavin 2012). Critics also demonstrate that peace bonds, a policy issued by judges to restrict the travel of suspected terrorists (a part of Bill C-51) is ineffective. Forcese and Roach (2015) suggest long-term, de-radicalization measures need to be part of anti-terrorism legislation. The case of Ali Mohamed Dirie (member of the so-called Toronto 18) shows the need for de-radicalization prison programs and the limited efficacy of peace bonds.⁶ Ali Dirie served two years in prison, but became more radicalized. Even without a passport, he died in Syria while serving under ISIS command (“Toronto 18 Member Ali Mohammed Dirie” 2013). It is predicted that, under Bill C-51, preventive arrests, false positives and peace bonds would increase without any plans for long-term preventative measures against radicalization. In the context of my own study on Islam online, therefore, this climate of securitization of Muslims generates contempt, suspicion and fear.⁷

In this context it is important to reflect on the words of Ronald Dworkin who states that we must recognize that the post-9/11 environment in Canada challenged the balances of security and liberty and that Muslims faced (and will continue to face) undue scrutiny (2002). This burden on the Muslim community increased under the potential

⁶ The so-called Toronto 18 case refers to two terrorists plots that were stopped during the summer of 2006. One of the plots targeted the Toronto Stock Exchange and the other was an attempt to create a large al-Qaeda type cell in Toronto with the intention of using terrorism to scare the Canadian public into withdrawing Canadian troops out of Afghanistan. According to the CBC, “Seven adults admitted guilt in the affair. The courts also convicted four men, one of whom was a minor at the time of his arrest. Charges against seven other individuals were stayed or dropped” (“Toronto 18: Key Events” 2008; also see Dawson 2014).

⁷ With these issues in mind, it is not surprising that the Harper administration ignored The Government of Canada Response to the Commission of Inquiry into the Investigation of the Bombing of Air India Flight 182 report (2010) on disruption measures as an ineffective way to make Canada safer or prevent violent radicalism. The bill is more likely to threaten Canadian rights and target Canadian Muslims in the process (Roach and Forcese 2015).

enforcement of Bill C-51. It increased the climate of securitization in Canada and deterred people from talking openly about the issues surrounding online radicalization.⁸ This “chilling” social climate has certainly impacted my own qualitative research and the recruitment phase of this study.⁹ As the concerns expressed by my participant Oswald demonstrate, this climate in Canada is a growing reality and is experienced by Muslims in St. John’s Newfoundland.

Thesis Overview

Within this securitization context, this thesis explores how Muslims in St. John’s perceive the Internet and navigate Cyber Islamic Environments (CIEs). In the next chapter, I survey the relevant literature regarding Islamic authority online. I discuss the literature on Islam in Canadian contexts, highlighting findings from Rubina Ramji’s (2014) case study which examines the relationship between online and offline practice. I investigate the evolution of digital religion studies and explore the findings of Gary Bunt’s research (2000, 2003, 2009) on Islam and the Internet. In this second chapter I position my research in the current scholarly dialogue on Islam, Canada, and the Internet to expose what I see as specific research gaps.

After situating my research in the relevant literature, I outline my theoretical framework and detail my methodology. First, I focus upon anthropologist Talal Asad’s understanding of Islam as a discursive tradition, among other theoretical considerations. I

⁸ On July 6, 2015 the Canadian Civil Liberties Association (CCLA) announced that they will present their concerns, regarding Bill C-51, to the UN Human Rights Committee in Geneva (“CCLA Presents Concerns” 2015)

⁹ I would argue that my own thesis and the New Muslim Public Spheres project (see Chapter 3) reflects this era of securitization insofar as it targets Muslim communities and asks questions regarding online radicalization and online habits.

then describe the background of this project and my qualitative data collection. Finally I review the content analysis approach and its challenges or limitations.

In Chapter 4, I introduce two findings, namely: (1) my participants' perceptions of the Internet and CIEs and (2) the challenges and concerns of CIEs that include online radicalization and securitization. In the final section of this fourth chapter, I focus on how local Muslims authenticate CIEs. In the final chapter I provide my concluding remarks and outline the limitations of this study. I also suggest future research directions and emphasize the importance of digital religious studies in developing a more nuanced understanding of Islamic discourse within a digital landscape.

Conclusion

In this chapter I have introduced the two research questions this thesis seeks to answer. First, what are the perceived benefits, challenges and concerns among Muslim University Students in St. John's, Newfoundland and Labrador? And second, how do they authenticate Islam-related websites? To contextualize these questions I have discussed the Muslim population in Canada and specifically, St. John's Newfoundland and Labrador. Here I have provided information about the local Majid Al-Noor, the Muslim Association of Newfoundland and Labrador (MANAL), and the Muslim Students' Association (MSA). I have concluded by offering a general survey of recent securitization measures taken in Canada and discuss the chilling effect this has had on Muslim communities. In the final section, I have introduced an overview of this thesis. In the next chapter, I situate my research in the current literature on digital religion and Islamic authority online.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

Introduction

This chapter surveys the relevant literature regarding Islamic authority online. First, it discusses the qualitative-based research on Islam in Canadian contexts, specifically Rubina Ramji's (2014) case study on Islamic identity online and offline and her work examining second-generation Muslim youths in Canada (2008). Second, it explores the literature on religion and the Internet by discussing the new sub-field of digital religion. Here I highlight the term "digital religion" and explore the philosophical positions within this area of study, known as the two grand trajectories. I then investigate the evolution of digital studies by reviewing its development, as it unfolds in three distinct waves, as categorized by Hojsgaard and Warburg (2005). In discussing the current wave of scholarship, I focus on Heidi Campbell's (2007, 2010, 2013) work on what she calls networked religions. Third, I examine the Internet and Islam by drawing on Gary Bunt's research (2000, 2003, 2009), focusing on his notion of Cyber Islamic Environments (CIEs), and his discussion on the complex digital landscape 'iMuslims'¹⁰ must navigate within the post-9/11 context of securitization. This literature review aims to expose research gaps and contextualize the current dialogue on Islam, Canada, and the Internet.

¹⁰ iMuslims is a reference to the Macintosh "i" brand. The rationale to associate Muslims with Apple merchandise is unclear (Maybe he was hoping for sponsorship and a free iPhone).

Islam and Canada

In this section I discuss the literature on Islam and Canada, focusing on the findings of Ramji (2014), Beyer (2013; 2014) and Karim (2009). Previous research on Islam and Canada predominately focuses on media representations (see Canas 2008; Hirji 2006; Karim 2009; Sharify-Funk 2009), and law (see Beaman 2011; Brown 2010; Korteweg and Selby 2012) in larger urban cities (see Abu-Laban, Qureshi and Waugh 1983; Beyer 2005; Beyer and Ramji 2013; Dossa 2009; Macfarlane 2012; Moghissi, Rahnema and Goodman 2009; Moghissi 2009; Zine 2001, 2012). Only a few studies (Downie 2013; Akter 2010; Williams 2015) discuss the minority Muslim populations in St. John's, Newfoundland and Labrador. My own research aims to contribute to the scholarly literature by firstly looking at interactions between online and offline contexts and secondly analyzing how they influence one another in a smaller Canadian setting like St. John's, Newfoundland.

Ramji's (2014) study entitled "Maintaining and Nurturing an Islamic Identity in Canada" offers valuable insights into the role the Internet plays among young, second generation Canadian Muslims. Based on the transcripts from ninety-three participants, Ramji finds that the second-generation interviewees draw from multiple sources to increase their knowledge about Islam. The Internet is the primary source of this information because Muslims tend to be ambivalent about asking for information from offline sources and they tend to prefer to do their own individual research (see also Caidia and MacDonald 2008: 35; Greifenhagen 2014). Offline support systems are 'out of touch' or judgmental. Sometimes they will seek support from Muslim Students'

Associations but rarely will they find support offline from sources like parents, imams, and community or mosque leaders. Participants also know the answers they are looking for are easily accessed online (Ramji 2014: 116-117). Ramji notes that these findings are similar to second-generation Muslims living in Great Britain, Germany, France, Denmark and the Netherlands (Ramji 2014: 117). Ramji is one of few scholars who focuses on Canadian Muslims and digital technologies.

As part of a national study on second-generation (born in Canada or had arrived before the age of 11) non-Christian minorities, Beyer's (2013) chapter on Canadian Muslims draws from interviews with 35 university-educated Muslim males. The median age for Beyer's study was 21.4 years old. His results show that his participants share similar values with non-Muslim Canadians. These values include: (1) individuality, (2) a positive attitude towards diversity (religious and cultural), (3) an insistence on inclusion in society, (4) the outlook that inclusion is beneficial to society as a whole, and (5) a critical understanding that more can be done to strengthen diversity and inclusion in Canada (Beyer 2013: 110-111). Based on the values expressed by his participants, Beyer sees no major barrier impeding Muslims from becoming full members of Canada. Using the same data set, in a separate publication Beyer (2014) notes that he found little evidence supporting extensive radicalization among Muslim young men in Canada and found that online radical rhetoric had no noticeable impact on his participants.¹¹

Another scholar who investigates Muslims in Canada is Karim Karim (2009) who compares Muslims in Canada, the United States and the United Kingdom in an attempt to

¹¹ I discuss Beyer's (2014) study on radicalization in greater detail in Chapter 4.

understand Muslims' changing views on Islamic authority. His analysis examines focus group discussions with Muslims in Ottawa, Montreal, Washington DC, London, Manchester and Leicester, between 2004 and June 2005 (Karim 2009:8). He finds that support for traditional religious authorities has declined. Many of Karim's participants were critical of religious leaders and wanted their imams to demonstrate a practical perspective regarding Islamic belief. Some of his participants even question the relevance of foundational texts to adequately respond to today's context (Karim 2009: 30). Notably, Karim's (2009) study focuses solely on major urban areas and not smaller cities like St. John's, NL. This thesis aims to contribute to this discussion and ultimately seeks to address this research gap of Muslims living in smaller centres.

Religion and the Internet

To contextualize the impact of the Internet on Muslim communities in St. John's, I turn to scholarly literature on Islam in Canada and Islam online. In this section I introduce the study of digital religion and unpack the meaning behind its title. Here I also address the problem regarding the vagueness surrounding usage of the term 'religion.' I draw on El-Nawawy and Khamis (2012) to explore philosophical positions within digital religion. These positions have emerged over three waves of scholarship, and to explore the current wave I focus on the work of Campbell (2007) and her understanding of religious authority and networked religion.

The term ‘digital religion’ surfaced in 2012 at several conferences (the Digital Religion conference University of Colorado Boulder and the Digital Religion Symposium in Finland at the Donner Institute) and in several book projects (see Chenog et al. 2012; Hoover 2012). In Digital Religion: Understanding Religious Practice in New Media Worlds, media scholar Grieve (2013) provides a detailed definition for this new term. He shows that digital religion is not the simple ‘repacking’ of traditional religious ideologies into a new medium but is a new and unique phenomenon – the culmination of non-scientific meta-narratives and technological ideologies mixed within the context of global capitalism. It is a term that highlights the essence of digital religion studies, as a deeply reflective investigation that focuses primarily on the social aspects of the Internet and its capacity to change the face of religion. His definition of religion (offline) rests predominately on the work of Lyotard (1974) while his understanding of the digital age is based on Bauman’s (2005) concept of ‘liquid modernity’ - a dynamic and uncertain world shaped by global capitalism. According to Grieve, digital religion is a unique phenomenon tailored to a contemporary Western/North American context. In short, a “digital religion” refers to a religious tradition that extends itself through a communication technology.

The term ‘digital religion’ is commonly used by Campbell (2013) and her interlocutors (see Cheong 2012; Grieve 2013). Digital religion studies is a relatively new scholarly field and combines approaches from religious studies, sociology, psychology,

and media studies.¹² The terms “e-religion,”¹³ “cyber-religion” and “digital religion” have been used throughout the field’s history but today ‘digital religion’ has become common place. The term ‘cyber-religion’ emerged in the mid-1990s and was initially used by Bauwens (1996), Brasher (2000) and Dawson (2000) as a way to challenge traditional understandings of religion within a new technological context. But for Campbell, “cyber-religion” was too vague and since it is linked to the concept cyberspace it advanced the assumption that virtual religion is somehow a less authentic form of religiosity. The decision to move from ‘cyber-religion’ to ‘digital religion’ appears to be a conscious effort made by scholars to legitimize this new sub-field as deeper examination of “the actual contribution ‘the digital’ is making to ‘the religious’” (Hoover 2012: ix).

I argue that the use of the term digital religion is important because it captures the embedded nature of the Internet within religious traditions while acknowledging the contribution new technologies have on spiritual and religious practices and beliefs. But I also argue that this definition of ‘religion’ is an unsatisfactory generalization and does not fully capture its complexity. Defining religion in such vague terms, as non-scientific meta-narratives, is far too vague but not surprising when you consider that the majority of these scholars writing about online or digital religion have backgrounds in media and communication and not religious studies. My research aims to better situate Islam in this discussion by drawing on anthropologist Talal Asad and his post-colonial critique.¹⁴

¹² In 2004, Lorne L Dawson writes, “A new dimension of unknown significance has been added to the study of religion: cyberspace” (2004: 1).

¹³ The term ‘e-religion’ was used infrequently (see Karaflogka 2006).

¹⁴ His theoretical framework is discussed in greater detail in Chapter 3.

In the next section, I discuss ‘the two grand trajectories’ (Hoffman and Larsson 2013: 5) of social media in digital religion studies. These two ideas are philosophic and theoretical positions that attempt to predict the role of the Internet will have in the future.

The Two Trajectories of Information and Communication Technology

In media studies, the Internet is considered a ‘New ICT’, or a new Information and Communication Technology. ‘New,’ compared to ‘Classic ICTs,’ which refer to non-digitalized media such as books, magazines, and cassette tapes. New ICTs include various digital platforms like televisions, smartphones, CD-ROMs, DVDs, the Internet, social media and other computer-mediated communications (CMC). Scholars conceptualize ICTs in two ways: (1) those who portray New ICTs as a continuation of modernity and (2) those who argue that New ICTs are post-modern technologies (see Baurdillard 1983; Hoffman and Larsson 2013: 3). The French post-modern ‘radical break’ view is not widely accepted among scholars. This latter position argued that social media signals a “revolutionary tipping point” that will move society beyond our current social structure and help us generate new epistemologies (Hoffman and Larsson 2013:3).

The evidence for the ‘radical break’ understanding points to social media’s role during the wave of revolutions throughout the Arab world, known as the Arab Spring (Hoffman and Larsson 2013). It is worth questioning the role social media actually played in countries like Libya, Tunisia, Egypt and Iran (see El-Nawawy and Khamis 2012b). Social media played a critical role during the Arab Spring but the Internet was not the driving factor. It is useful to avoid “technological determinism” when discussing the Arab

Spring because it emphasizes the medium (the Internet) over the context. According to El-Nawawy and Khamis (2012b), social media is only as effective as the users who manipulate it. For example, in Iran, Twitter helped protestors reach a broad audience at incredibly speeds but as a very public medium, information posted online was exposed to government censorship. The Iranian regime operates one of the most sophisticated online filtering systems in the world, surpassed only by China, and they employ highly skilled workers who suppress information posted to the virtual world. In Egypt, Facebook allowed users to have safe space to meet, converse, and share important information but in the final days of the revolution, Egypt's regime realized that social media was a growing problem, and for six days shutdown all Internet and mobile service for the entire country. The loss of social media did not stop the revolution; protestors carried on using flyers, meeting in mosques, and gathering in public spaces and succeeded in toppling the Mubarak regime (El-Nawawy and Khamis 2012a). In both instances, utilization of the virtual world helped accelerate revolutions, but in the end, it was up to people in the real world to lead a well-organized and deeply networked revolution on the ground level. For El-Nawawy and Khamis (2012a) it is important to not exaggerate the power of social media and understand that if society desires change, relying solely on one's technology will not bring about revolution.

To view the Internet as solely a liberating, revolutionary tool that helps increase transparency while holding governments accountable is a belief known as "cyber-utopianism" or "the Google Doctrine" (Morozov 2011). Social media and new ICTs are technologies subject to suppression and manipulation, like any other medium. This cyber-

utopian philosophy describes the Internet as an enabler of reform and change, a position that tends to downplay a government's ability to filter, infiltrate, and track "netizens."

'Netizens' is a category referring to young and politically aware citizens that use the Internet for political activism (see El-Naway and Khamis 2012a). Baudrillard's argument may be correct, in time, but I would argue that in the 2015 context "cyber-realism", the rejection of the concept that the Internet alone will transform the structures of society, is far more accurate and yet minimized in digital religion studies. At its best social media has the power to act as an accelerator for reform but it still needs a ground level structure, fuelled by motivated individuals, to work properly (Bennett 2003). The downplaying of government surveillance online is said to generate a mindset known as "cyber-naïveté", a position that overestimates the Internet's power and its ability to change reality (Morozov 2011). In contrast, my research embraces the philosophy of cyber-realism and brings government surveillance online into the current dialogue on Canada, the Internet and Muslim communities. In the next section, I will briefly examine the unfolding of digital religion studies over the past twenty years.

The Evolution of Digital Religion

Euro-western-focused studies of digital religion generally unfold in three separate waves: (1) the descriptive wave; (2) the categorical; and (3) the theoretical wave (see Hojsgaard and Warburg 2005; Loveheim 2003). During the descriptive wave, scholars discuss the Internet's potential to unshackle individuals from authoritarian religious power and radically transform the way human beings live their lives (Grievies 2013: 110).

Throughout this period, scholars debated the nature of cyberspace.¹⁵ Some described the Internet as the twenty-first century printing press (Brasher 2001; Castells 2001: 1-3; Eisenstein 1979; Mandaville 2001: 155-156; O’Leary 1996; Wertheim 1999) while others see it as an authoritarian weapon (Kinney 1995; see also El-Naway and Khamis 2012a). Today the initial excitement for the Internet in scholarly literature is dwindling, and a more refined attitude is being adopted by scholars. Lawrence (2002) remarks that this emotional response repeats itself throughout Internet history and reminds us to curb our technological enthusiasm:

Each new Internet technology from the World Wide Web and portals in the 1990s to social media in the last decade is first greeted as liberation technology, enabling alternatives, and empowering those who grasp them. Then skepticism sets in as the new online social formation are found to draw on old offline resources – not to be so revolutionary or liberating as initially hyped – or not to have quite the online resonances as expected (Lawrence 2002: 240).

Indeed, digital religious studies should not overemphasize the benefits of the Internet because in doing so it downplays the negative effects of Internet use (i.e. surveillance, privacy issues). The aim of digital religious studies is to move away from cyber-utopian/cyber-dystopian discourse and move towards a more cyber-realist perspective. My research rectifies this research gap by addressing both the benefits and concerns/challenges surrounding the Internet.

¹⁵ The term cyberspace was first used in the science fiction novel *Necromancer* by William Gibson in 1984. For Gibson, cyberspace was a collective hallucination experienced by billions of operators in every nation, and every person, with access to a computer. He described it as being unthinkably complex and as a constellation of data. Today the word cyberspace is linked to the Internet, the Web, and its infinite quality (Karaflogka 2006).

The second wave moves away from these generalizing features and begins systematically categorizing the types of religious phenomenon found online.¹⁶ During the second wave scholars make the distinction between “religion online” and “online religion.” ‘Religion online’ is defined as a website displaying religious information and ‘online religion’ addresses interactive webpages that allow users to practice and discuss their religious beliefs in cyberspace (Helland 2000; also see Maxwell 2002; Karafloka 2002). Numerous scholars (see Hadden and Cowan 2000; Dawson and Cowan 2004; Helland 2000; Hojsgarrd and Warburg 2005) focus on offline religious traditions and their online presence. Recent scholarly books about Christianity (Apolito 2005), Judaism (Campbell 2005), Paganism (Cowan 2005) and Islam (Bunt 2000, 2003) reveal new research questions, asking about the ways the Internet shapes identity, community, and authority in these traditions. This move away from utopian/dystopian discourses, towards a more refined investigation, sets the stage for the third wave of digital religion studies.

The Current Literature on Digital Religion

The third wave is “a new, more theoretical turn” (Grieves 2013: 113) in which scholars focus on the relationship between online and offline contexts. This shift pivots on the development of Web 2.0 technology and social networks that produced Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, blogs, Second Life, Instagram, and other social media formats.¹⁷ Web 2.0 is defined by Helland (2000) as the expansion of the Internet’s social dimension.

¹⁶ The categorical wave “was more realistic, focusing on categorizations and typologies in order to pinpoint common trends...” (Greifenhagen 2014: 2).

¹⁷ Second Life is a multi-user virtual environment where users create characters and socialize online (See Derrickson (2008) for more information on Islam and Second Life).

Social media platforms created a more open, interactive online environment and allowed users to contribute to the virtual community. In the late 1990's Web 2.0 revolutionized the relationship between religion and Internet, transforming the way people accessed online information. Over the next decade, the Web moved from being a massive data storage hub to a social space, where people can share thoughts, ideas and beliefs with a 24/7 global community (Helland 2013: 36). My project's subtitle, "Islam 2.0," acknowledges the extraordinary impact Web 2.0 has had on the Internet users and their socio-religious lives.

Web 2.0 technology is increasingly accessible to Muslim youth in first world countries like Canada where it can be available for free in public schools and libraries (Bunt 2003: 8). Today, access has also increased and is enabled by the prevalence of smartphones. Of course access to the Internet is not equally distributed around the globe or to all classes. Computer technology is expensive and is generally controlled by those who can afford it. Bunt (2009: 283) describes this social class accessibility problem as "the digital divide," the idea that the Internet is not equally accessible to all Muslims. The Internet is primarily controlled by literate wealthy elites who can afford bandwidth, and all necessary hardware devices. Bunt suggests ways of closing this gap by making the Internet cheaper through government subsidies and argues that the advancement of voice recognition software and touch screen technology will help bring the illiterate into cyberspace (Bunt 2009: 283). The third wave also marks the renewed focus on shifting authorities and the Internet's ability to reform religious traditions.

Campbell (2011) argues that within digital religion studies *shifting authority* remains one of the most important objects of inquiry as scholars attempt to gauge the Internet's influence on "networked" religions (see Bunt 2009; Campbell 2011; Lawrence 2002). For Campbell (2011) and others (see Marsden 2000; Roof 2000), Western culture has become a networked-based society, driven by information and supported by a technical/social infrastructure. It is a decentralizing space where traditional hierarchies are flattening, and traditional authorities are being challenged (Campbell 2011:5). Campbell (2011:11) writes that, "the Internet facilitates the rise of "instant experts," allowing people to rise to positions of influence through perceived expertise online while bypassing time-honored training or prescribed initiation rites that would establish their position offline." Influenced by Jon Anderson,¹⁸ Campbell (2011) and others (Beger and Ezzy 2004; Herring 2004; Krogh and Pillfant 2004; Possamai and Turner 2014; Thumma 2000) argue that the Internet is a sphere of renegotiation, where a new class of religious authorities are given a platform.¹⁹ These new authorities include webmasters, bloggers, online forum moderators, and those capable of producing online content. Conversations that had been held in committees or any "closed door" events are now debated online and made public, side-stepping traditional chains of authority. Information on religious websites challenge sacred knowledge and offer new interpretations. These new religious

¹⁸ Jon Anderson (2003) was one of the first English-language writing academics to recognize ways the Internet was reshaping Islamic discourse: "The Internet is a significant new medium in expanding the public sphere, where Islamic discourse is altered by new positioning and new interpreters" (Anderson 2003: 56).

¹⁹ Anderson (1999, 2003) refers to the members of this new class as 'creole pioneers,' 'postmodern nomads,' 'contending elites,' and 'new interpreters.' Other labels include 'techies' and 'geeks' (Possamai and Turner 2014; Campbell 2011).

authorities online has lead Campbell (2014:13) to question their power and influence offline:

Shifting religious authority in the Internet age raises important questions not only about who has the true and legitimate voice for a particular religious tradition or community but also their status and realm of influence in a larger social sphere.

The empowerment value of the Internet manifests itself in many ways and remains a major issue throughout the literature (e.g. Bunt 2009; Campbell 2011; Piff and Warburg 2005; Turner 2007; Helland 2008; Timmerman, Leman, Roos and Segavert 2009).

In Campbell's (2007) article "Whose Got the Power? Religious Authority and the Internet" she uses qualitative data to explore how members of Christianity, Islam and Judaism describe religious authorities in relation to the Internet. This research relies on a small data set of seven Christian students, seven Muslim students, and seven Jewish students, all from Universities in Israel.²⁰ Her findings show that Christians and non-religious practicing Jews express little interest in their religious figures' unlike religious Jews and Muslims who appear keen on following their religious figures instructions about the Internet. For example, Muslim participants describe their local imams as important authorities who advise them about their Internet usage and instruct them about the positive and negative sides of the Internet. She also finds the religious texts received the least amount of attention in interviews, except with Muslims who used the Qur'an to justify their use of this new technology in religious settings. This study employs qualitative interviews to capture the relationship between online and offline authorities. However Campbell's sample size (seven Muslims) is too small and her scope is too broad

²⁰ These institutions included a Sufi Muslim college in Baqa al Garbia, Israel and the University of Haifa in Israel (Campbell 2007).

(Christianity, Islam and Judaism) to make any definitive conclusions about the relationship between online religious authorities and major religious traditions. My research thus builds onto Campbell's understanding of authority (see Chapter 3 for more details) by providing more qualitative data to test its relevance.

Islam and the Internet

In this section I discuss the literature on Islam and the Internet by drawing on Gary Bunt (2000; 2003; 2009) and his concepts of Cyber-Islamic Environments and the benefits, challenges and concerns they raise in the post 9/11 context.

Bunt (2009: 275) describes his work on digital Islam as an investigation that combines two momentous elements of the twenty-first century in the West: Islam and the Internet. Cyber-Islamic activity continues to gain attention in the 'West', particularly following the Second Gulf War and the September 11, 2001 attacks (Bunt 2009: 38). In his work, Bunt mentioned that he uses the term 'the West' reluctantly, describing it as ambiguous and redundant (Bunt 2003: 206). Yet, when he does use the term, he is often referring to Western broadcasters, like CNN and the BBC (see Bunt 2003: 246). Canadian contexts are not considered in Bunt's research as well as the fears of government surveillance. This lack of scholarly discussion about the potential impact of surveillance within a Canadian context and the fears of government surveillance (along with fears of being radicalized) is a research gap my research intends to address.

In the 'West', terrorist attacks led to a dramatic increase in online government surveillance as well as hacker attacks and hate mail being sent to a number of Muslim

websites (Bunt 2003:88). Along with hacking and hate mail, a number of websites and news stations started to propagate misconceptions and stereotypes about Islam. Bunt (2003: 206) is particularly concerned with the stereotype that Muslims are technologically less sophisticated than non-Muslims:

There is, of course, no reason why Muslims should not use and apply technology, although some orientalist stereotyping would suggest otherwise and some observers have been surprised by the technological sophistication found in Cyber Islamic Environments.

In response, new Islam-related websites were produced to inform the public about the misconceptions surrounding the Islamic tradition (2003: 207). In the media, clandestine groups (e.g. Al-Qaeda) and online violent jihadi discourse quickly became a news spectacle. This sensationalizing of violent jihadi discourse is growing in prevalence as ISIS attempts to use online content to recruit new soldiers from around the globe.²¹ Within this post-9/11 context of securitization we find a chaotic mix: radicals using the internet for recruitment, the media sensationalizing terrorist recruitment online, government agencies conflating radical and non-radical online activity and individual Muslim users fearing online radicalization as they try to navigate complex Cyber Islamic Environments (CIEs).

²¹ The so-called terrorist group ISIS (Islamic State of Iraq and Syria), sometimes referred to as ISIL, has been in the news since September 2014 for using online propaganda to recruit non-Muslims and recent Muslim converts in Canada (see “Terrorist Group ISIS using Online Propaganda” 2014).

Cyber Islamic Environments

Bunt (2003: 5) describes Cyber Islamic Environments (CIEs) as “an umbrella term that can refer to a variety of contexts, perspectives and applications of the media (of the Internet) by those who define themselves as Muslims”. I agree with Kort (2005: 372) who argued that Bunt’s work on Islam and the Internet offers the most in-depth and comprehensive English-language investigation of Islam in the digital age. Bunt’s work shows that Muslim cyberspaces continue to grow and expand. Forcing his research methods to constantly adapt (Bunt 2009: 276).²² Within CIEs, Islamic discourse deals with a variety of issues that include globalization, multi-interpretation, degrees of religiosity, language, diversity, debate and conflict. CIEs manifest themselves online through a variety of platforms including blogs, file sharing site, search engines, social media (Facebook, YouTube, Twitter and Instagram feeds) and emailing lists (see Bunt 2000, 2003, 2009). In his work, he describes blogs as tools for commentary and information exchange.

Bunt began investigating Islamic authority in the mid-1990s by looking at the flow of communication in Islamic communities, which used print media, cassettes and, to a lesser extent, email. Since 2000 Bunt has documented the decentralizing of authority in CIEs by its users: “*Any person* who deems themselves (or is proclaimed) an authority can make a pronouncement and upload on a website” (Bunt 2009: 278). In this context *any*

²² Methodologically, Bunt’s research collects, documents and analyses massive quantities of data which includes everything from screenshots of webpages to tracking and recording RSS feeds (now referred to as ‘news feeds’) on popular websites. He describes crashing his university’s server on multiple occasions during the 1990s (Bunt 2009: 82).

person refers to tech-savvy Muslims, which Bunt calls ‘iMuslims,’ in reference to Macintosh computer products as well as the interconnection and interactivity amongst Muslims in the online world (Bunt 2009: 277). Bunt identifies thirteen sub-types of iMuslims who range from Muslims who spend several hours a day online to Muslims who do not use the Internet but encourage its use in the *ummah* (the Islamic community) (Bunt 2009: 280). Today iMuslims have the potential to be online at any time or at least have regular access to online content. The Internet allows iMuslims to see the Islamic community in a very different way compared to previous generations. Bunt (2009) describes this new perspective as “Islam always being on,” arguing that ‘information overload’ is a new challenge for Muslims who live in the digital age. Information overload is a challenge that all Internet users must navigate.

The Internet’s Impact on Religious Authority

For Bunt, the Internet is an active, multifaceted tool offering a variety of services, from challenging authority, to reinforcing dogmatic beliefs and sometimes improving public relations.²³ For example, in the UK the Tablighi Jamaat²⁴ movement made the Internet its main tool to inform people about their organization and in its campaign to build a mega-mosque in East London in 2007 (DeHanas and Pier 2011: 809; Bunt

²³ I would argue that his philosophic position reflects that of a cyber-realist.

²⁴ The Tablighi Jamaat movement started in 1926 by Muhammad Ilyas al-Kandhlawi in India. Tablighi Jamaat has claimed to avoid electronic media and has emphasised face-to-face communication for proselytising. However in 2007, during the ‘Olympics Mega-Mosque’ controversy the movement decided to use the Internet to manage its image and curtail public anxieties about their ‘isolated’ and ‘secretive network’ by creating an online network. The Internet allowed them to gain control and redefine themselves in the public sphere, creating their own account separate from the news media (DeHanas and Pier 2011: 809).

2011:74). Their website, tablighijamaat.org, received a great deal of public attention which has helped them increase their public presence and real estate lobby within an increasingly religiously pluralistic landscape. The Tablighi Jamaat example reflects a global pattern happening in technology/information driven societies. As Bunt (2011:74) summarizes:

Religious authorities recognize their power is being usurped or challenged by online platforms and interlopers and realize that the situation necessitates an urgent engagement with the very digital media they might have previously distrusted.

In the 2010s, mosques in Britain increasingly engage with online communities in order to maintain authority and public acceptance (Bunt 2011: 80-81). In some cases the Internet gives rise to multiple voices and provides new angles on important debates and issues in the Muslim world. It offers a new public space for negotiation.²⁵ It even has the power to de-sensationalize journalism by challenging the media coverage and informing the public. For example, in 2006 during the invasion of Lebanon Muslim bloggers were able to generate enough ‘online chatter’ to attract mainstream news agencies. Even Israeli news stations began to cover the event from new angles, forcing the news media to discuss the event from multiple perspectives (Bunt 2009: 285).

The Internet therefore gives rise to new interpreters, new arguments and provides the “peripheries” of society with voices. Without an outlet to express themselves these minorities found a voice online: “New technologies of communication and publication

²⁵ Media scholars Possamai & Turner (2014: 203) argue that the Internet has a special impact on Islam because of its traditional reliance on individual scholars and the collective *ummah* (Muslim community) which has no centralized authority, exposing Muslims to more heterogeneous debate.

also enable those who hold minority views, including extremists, to join forces with like-minded people elsewhere to accomplish common goals” (Eickelman 2003: 42). In other words, the Internet has the potential to displace authority, but it also has the power to maintain authority. Islamic authority online is open to experimentation and is more fluid than offline authority. The Internet is thus a complex discursive arena with ‘instant experts’, competing orthodoxies, and vast networks of Islam-related websites all claiming to have the correct understanding of Islam. Related to this project, Muslims must be cautious when looking up information about their faith online because everyone is competing for authority (El-Nawawy and Khamis 2009: 73).

Overall, Islamic radicalization continues to receive government attention through securitization measures and as a consequence government surveillance policy online is strengthened. However discussions about the fears of radicalization and government surveillance among young Muslim users in Canada are overlooked and understudied. In the next final section, I outline the three research gaps my thesis aims to address.

Research Gaps

This thesis addresses four specific research gaps within this scope of digital religion and Islamic studies: (1) the underrepresentation of smaller Muslim populations in Canada and their use of digital technologies, (2) the vague definitions of religion and Islam in digital religious studies, (3) the lack of scholarly discussion about government surveillance online within a Canadian context and its impact on Muslim communities and

(4) the absence of qualitative research regarding online activity. The following section addresses each of these discrepancies.

After examining the literature on digital Islam it becomes clear that its most prominent scholars have a tendency to focus their attention on larger European and Middle Eastern urban centers, like Britain (see Bunt 2011) and Israel (see Campbell 2007). In Canada, the study of Islam and digital technologies is limited to larger urban cities in Canada, specifically Ottawa, Toronto and Montreal (see Beyer 2014; Dawson 2014; Ramji 2014) and the few small thesis-based studies (Downie 2013; Akter 2010; Williams 2015) that do focus on St. John's, Newfoundland do not investigate the Internet's impact among these communities. My thesis helps fill this empirical disparity by examining the online habits of individual Muslim youths in St. John's, Newfoundland.

The second gap within this literature addressed by my research is the lack of theoretical framing regarding the concepts of religion and Islam. In Bunt's work there is no reference to communication theory (a critique made by Weimann 2010:492), or religion. In many instances, the term religion is defined using Geertz's symbol-based theory²⁶ that ignores surrounding politics and social contexts (e.g. Campbell 2013; Grieve 2013). For example, Campbell (2010: 7) relies on Clifford Geertz's framework to explain the concept of religion, which has been criticized by postcolonial theorist Talal Asad.²⁷ Bunt's work (2009) does address the securitization climate in the United States (2009)

²⁶ According to Geertz, religion is "(1) a system of symbols (2) which acts to establish powerful, pervasive and long-lasting moods and motivations in men (3) by formulating conceptions of a general order of existence and (4) clothing these conceptions with such an aura of factuality that (5) the moods and motivations seem uniquely realistic" (1993: 90).

²⁷ In Chapter 3, I discuss Talal Asad and his approach in more detail.

and he expresses his concern regarding government intervention online and its impact on the Muslim community, especially in a post-9/11 context. The securitization climate needs to be addressed in all contemporary digital Islamic studies.

The discussion of religion and technology has led to a downplaying of government surveillance online, known as “cyber-naïveté.” Studies that do focus on the potential impact of government surveillance tend to highlight Middle Eastern and South East Asia regimes (see El-Naway and Khamis 2012a; Cheong 2013). Bunt (2011:127) appears to be the exception – he looks at North America, predominately the United States but not Canada. In light of the passing of Bill C-51 and the potential damage it may have on further stigmatizing Muslim communities in Canada (see Ling 2015), it is important that my research discuss the impacts (both real and imagined) of securitization on Muslim communities within a Canadian context.

The final gap in the current literature on digital Islam and religion is its overemphasis on analyzing website content and Internet traffic (see Bunt 2003; 2009; 2011). In contrast, my approach focuses on individual Internet users and asks them how *they* perceive the Internet. Using qualitative data over quantitative is an approach that will add depth to digital religious studies, that is currently lacking especially within the scope of the question of religious authority.

Conclusion

In this chapter I have reviewed the existing social scientific English-language literature within the scope of Islam, Canada, and Internet studies. In broad strokes, the

Internet's impact on Muslims can be characterized both positively and negatively: firstly, the Internet has the potential to enable individualism, undermine dogmatic authority, generate dialogs, and even alter stereotypes. Secondly, the Internet can reinforce authoritarian regimes, and dogmatic views and act as a platform for violent jihadi discourse. Cyber Islamic Environments (CIEs) are complex discursive arenas that challenge and inform many young Canadian Muslims, within the context of securitization. In the next chapter, I outline the methodological approaches and theoretical frameworks I use to support my collected data interviews.

Chapter 3: Methodology and Theoretical Approach

Introduction

In this chapter, I outline my thesis' theoretical framework and detail my methodological approach. Firstly, I focus upon postcolonial thinker Talal Asad and his understanding of Islam as a “discursive tradition” and his conceptualization of orthodoxy. Secondly, I detail the project's background and my qualitative data collection. Thirdly, I review the content analysis approach, and consider its limitations.

Theoretical Frameworks

A social constructionist approach undergirds this project. In thinking through this perspective, I draw primarily upon the theories of contemporary anthropologist and post-colonial thinker, Talal Asad (1986, 1993). In his book Genealogies of Religion: Discipline and Reasons of Power in Christianity and Islam (1993), Asad examines the emergence of “religion” as a historical product of Western culture. Using Nietzschean and Foucauldian approaches to question the genealogy of the concept of religion, Asad demonstrates how the genealogy of the term “religion” frames it as an inherently Christian term. In addition, Asad does not accept the previously central Geertzian symbol-based definition of religion and criticizes it, given how it ignores the issues of power and politics. In a recent interview Asad (2015) explains his critique:

I do not criticize religion as such, but I criticize the concept and the definition of “religion”—as I said in *Genealogies*. I am not looking for a better definition. I'm not criticizing how people experience what they might call spirituality. I am

interested in looking critically at something else—at how people use their language to articulate theories about something they call religion.

With this in mind, Asad (1993:32) shifts the common analysis of religion from a universal, metaphysical system to a discursive practice. For Asad, the most valuable way to understand religion is to frame it as a living tradition, with an evolving set of discourses that are tied to a history and built upon foundational texts. Asad notes that his approach towards religion, Islam in particular, is focused more on the progression and development of the tradition and not analysis of a fixed abstraction (cited in Scott 2006: 270).

Asad and the Category of Islam

Similar to Foucault's (1984) understanding of sexuality as a construct, the category of religion emerges from a particular social milieu and mutates with each new context. From this perspective a transhistorical de-contextualized definition of religion is not viable: "There cannot be a universal definition of religion... because that definition is itself the historical product of discursive processes" (Asad 1993: 29). For Asad religion is not a unique social structure like any other hermeneutic system. It is a tradition with a history. There is no blueprint for religion, no essentialist structure. Here are only changing discourses which evolve within social contexts. From this constructivist understanding of religion, Asad is able to develop his anthropological approach to Islam.

Asad argues that Islam should be understood as a discursive tradition, where tradition is an evolving set of practices that instructs individuals how to act "properly" or as "good." It is a process where a person is inducted into Islam through an instituted

practice which is set within a particular society and tied to a particular history. Muslims become Muslims through Islamic discourse that is taught and authorized by other Muslims, from learned Islamic scholars to untutored parents (Caton 2006: 43). For Asad, Islamic practices are authorized by liturgical discourse emerging from official texts (i.e. the Qur'an, the *hadith*, and *fiqh*) and a physical practice related to a particular history. Again, for Asad, Muslims do not need to imitate or replicate an Islamic tradition, so long as the practitioner thinks the act is connected to the discursive tradition.

The “tradition of Islam” is embedded into material life and characterized by its own styles of reason. It should not be considered an unchanging doctrine, replicating the past, but instead should be understood as a ‘social embodied argument,’ extending through time into new social contexts: an arena of discourses that link the past, present and future. Authority in a tradition ultimately comes from the people who transmit it (Asad 1993:522). Authority and authenticity come from “traditionalism” which Graham (1993) describes in Arabic as *ittisaliya*, meaning a continuity with the past. For Asad, tradition is a connection to the earlier Islamic experience and its foundational texts (i.e. the Qur'an and *hadith*).

In her gloss of Asad's contribution to the anthropology of Islam, Nadia Fadil explains that: “The Muslim tradition is, however, not understood in a homogenous way, but is rather viewed as a discursive arena that is traversed by a set of conflicting perspectives over what counts as ‘good practice’ (Fadil 2011: 93; see also Asad 1986). In other words, Islam is a living tradition consisting of Muslims, who debate textual sources in an attempt to build a coherent set of normative practices. In this way, the Islamic tradition is filled with conflicting perspectives, debating what counts as authoritative.

Asad and the Category of Orthodoxy

Like the category of “religion”, the term “orthodoxy” is a historical product emerging from a Judeo-Christian context (Wilson 2009: 171). In earlier Islamic studies, the word orthodoxy was commonly misused, leading to the oversimplification of Islamic beliefs and practices. The term “orthodox” has deep Christian roots and was initially used to distinguish Roman (Catholic) and Eastern Patriarchates (Wilson 2009: 171). In most cases, orthodoxy serves as a binary in Islamic studies, separating the reformists from their opponents (the ‘orthodox’). For Asad, orthodoxy is not the heart of Islam but it should be accounted for. Here Asad (Asad 1993: 15) explains its linkage to power:

[Orthodoxy] is not a mere body of opinion but a distinctive relationship—a relationship of power. Wherever Muslims have the power to regulate, uphold, require or adjust correct practices, and to condemn, exclude, undermine, or replace incorrect ones, there is the domain of orthodoxy.

Though Asad minimizes the importance of orthodoxy as a theological position and tends to focus more on social contexts, religious texts and power relations, he still acknowledges the possibility of orthodoxies in Islam. Asad’s acknowledgement of multiple orthodoxies is important because his approach reframes the role of orthodoxy within the social and political contexts. He moves away from abstraction and focuses on its dynamic nature, a perspective I would argue better reflects the reality of how Muslims live their religious lives online and offline.

A number of scholars (Wilson 2009; Caton 2006) have deemed Asad’s reworking of terminology regarding orthodoxy as providing both clarity and confusion. Wilson (2009: 185) critiques Asad’s lexicon, noting that it acts more as “a stumbling block than a

launching pad.” Due to its complexity he suggests that academics distance themselves from Asad’s framework. In my view, Asad’s position allows academics to view orthodoxy and heterodoxy in more constructivist terms than the assumed categories commonly used today, such as conservative and liberal or radical and reformist (Wilson 2009: 185) that are too often decontextualized or apolitical.

Fadil’s overview of Asad’s approach (2011:93) argues that strict orthodoxy has less to do with conservatism and more to do with epistemological procedures. Indeed, Asad explained that orthodoxy is a particular understanding of sacred texts. For example, a heterodox point of view deconstructs Islamic texts as ‘historical products’ that emerge from a specific time and place while the strictly orthodox tend to interpret the sacred texts as the obligatory word of God, unbounded by space or time. These epistemological positions draw on charismatic figures and sacred texts (primarily the Qur’an and the Sunna) in different ways and these positions debate over what counts as ‘apt performance’ (Asad 1986: 15). For Asad, orthodoxy is not a fixed ideology justified by elite Islamic institutions, but is a dynamic process established by individual Muslims (independent of class or education) who claim the authority to establish the “correct” version of Islam. In sum, following Asad, I view authority as a contested social category, which Muslims and Islamic institutions can only claim to represent (Schielke and Debevec 2012: 6, 19). In the next section, I situate my thesis project within a larger national project and discuss my data collection techniques.

Data Collection

My research was conducted in coordination with a national study titled, “New Muslim Public Spheres in the Digital Age: Identity, Community, Diversity and Authority in Canada.” The principal investigator on this project is Dr. Roxanne Marcotte (Université de Québec à Montréal) and one of the co-investigators is my supervisor, Dr. Jennifer Selby (Memorial University of Newfoundland). In general, this nation-wide project aims to examine how Muslims in Canada use the Internet and the role it plays in their lives (“New Muslim Public Spheres” 2015).

One of the goals of this five-year project is to collect approximately 250 in-person interviews, by coordinating the resources of four universities: Memorial University, Université de Québec à Montréal, the University of Regina and Cape Breton University. Each university’s aim is to analyze this qualitative data by focusing on a specific theme (identity, community, diversity and authority). Dr. Selby and I focused on Islamic authority online. In the summer of 2014, I started working as one of the research assistants on this project while carving out research questions on Islamic authority to form the basis of my own research. During this time, the ICEHR (Interdisciplinary Committee on Ethics in Human Research) approved my ethics application to conduct in-person interviews for this thesis project (see appendix 4). In August 2014, I attended a workshop at the University of Regina to discuss this larger project with the principal investigator, co-investigators and their research assistants. During this workshop, we revised the interview schedule (see appendix 3), discussed the transcribing and coding

processes, and learned how *NVivo*²⁸ software can identify patterns and manage transcripts. I conducted and transcribed 15 interviews, with self-defined Muslims over the age of 18 (and under 40).

Conducted between December 2014 and May 2015, these interviews asked semi-directed questions that touched on the topics of identity, authority, community, and diversity. I was responsible for recruitment, interviewing, and transcribing. As I described in the previous chapter, due to the relatively small size of the Muslim population in St. John's and the nature of this study dealing with issues of online habits and Islam in a period of securitization, recruitment for this project proved to be challenging. The snowballing recruitment method was largely ineffective. Face-to-face recruitment yielded the best results and helped lower people's suspicions about the project. My ethical clearance for this study was obtained from UQAM (Université du Québec à Montréal) and Memorial University of Newfoundland's ICEHR (Interdisciplinary Committee on Ethics in Human Research) committee. Due to the 15-participant sample size and my focus on the city's university student population, it must be noted that the data collected for this research may not be representative of the larger Muslim population in Canada or in St. John's. Nevertheless, the purpose of this research is not to make representative claims but to instead investigate individual Muslim's experiences as case studies in order to examine the Internet's impact on their religious lives.

²⁸ Nvivo is a software program (PC and MAC compatible) created by QSR International as a digital workspace for qualitative analysis, offering its users a variety of tools (from coding to graphing) in order to analyze large amounts of unstructured data. Its role is to support the users already established methodology and not act as its replacement.

The Primary Data

The principal material collected for this research project comes from two sources: (1) two publically available websites: IslamQA.org and IRF.net (Islamic Research Foundation); and (2) one-on-one semi-directed interviews. My criteria for choosing Islamic websites was based on the semi-directed interviews. Collecting data on websites sometimes proved to be difficult because respondents could either not recall which sites they used or were only able to provide general locations on the web, such as Facebook, Google and/or YouTube. The websites mentioned in this research were accessed in the winter of 2014 and the spring of 2015.

In considering the sites' objectives, mission statement, and background, I draw on Daniel Varisco's (2007) notion of "participant web-servation." In other words, I examine the discourses used by Muslims in St. John's from an anthropological perspective. This case study approach to individual web pages is a commonly used methodological approach within Islam and the Internet literature (see Bunt 2011; Kort 2005; Sisler 2006; Ramji 2014; Chawki 2010). As previously mention in Chapter 1, the current literature on digital Islam and religion focuses on analyzing websites. In contrast, my approach privileges qualitative data and focuses on individual user and asks them how they use the Internet. Few studies in digital religious studies utilize this perspective. For these reasons, I have limited my web-servation to two websites (IslamQA and IRF). I chose these two because they were mentioned by multiple participants (I discuss these webpages in more detail in Chapter 4).

During the first few months of recruitment, I relied upon public advertisements, using posters (see appendix 2), pamphlets (see appendix 5), Facebook posts, and university newspaper advertising space. I attended Friday *jumu'ah* prayers in the Engineering Building on campus and visited the daily public prayer room (approximately 10 visits), where I handed out pamphlets and put up posters. I also attended a MSA (Muslim Students' Association) organized interfaith lecture (March 10, 2015) and a PSA (Pakistani Students' Association) variety show (November 2015). Aforementioned, I relied a great deal on the MSA, which was the first group to inform me about their concerns about the project. Face-to-face meetings with members of the MSA encouraged me to recruit participants by providing them with interview questions beforehand to make participants feel more comfortable with the project. Since many of my questions were open-ended, the duration of interviews was largely dependent on the interviewee and the amount of time, interest, and effort they wished to give to the project. For these reasons, the interviews ranged in time between half an hour to two hours. In the next section, I explore the demographics of those who participated in this project.

Overview of the Participants

I chose to examine university students given that much of the social scientific research on Muslim universities students in the West tend to fall outside the scope of digital religious studies (see Smith and Haddad 2002; Markovi and Yasmeen 2014; Joseph and Nağmābādī 2003). The fifteen university students in this study varied in their educational backgrounds, ethnicities, countries of origin, gender, and levels of religiosity and online engagement. Out of the 15 respondents 9 were male and 6 female. Their ages

ranged between 18 and 37, the average age being 24. All participants had obtained a high school education, and the majority were in the process of obtaining a Bachelor of Arts or a Master's degree at Memorial University. Their countries of origin included Iraq, Kuwait, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Jordan, USA, and Egypt, and two participants were Newfoundlanders who converted to Islam in their early twenties, one of whom follows the Shia tradition. The majority of participants identify as Sunni Muslim but preferred not to make the distinction between the traditions and Islamic schools of law. Macfarlane's (2012) study made a similar observation. Using a data set that included interviews with forty *imams*, she found that the majority of *imams*/religious leaders made the point to adopt the ruling of whichever Islamic school proved most appropriate. To quote one *imam* from a qualitative study on the use of Islamic law in Ontario, "We are not here to be Hanafi, Maliki and so on – but to be a human being" (Macfarlane 2012: 37).²⁹ In the next section, I outline the methodological approaches I utilized to analyze this data and discuss four overarching themes that emerged from this data.

Data Analysis

I use a content analysis approach to examine frequently mentioned websites and all the interview transcripts. Content analysis is an umbrella term, sometimes referred to as thematic analysis, and is a blend of qualitative, quantitative, and interpretive methodologies. It maps the recurrence of patterns, using a process in which the researcher

²⁹ Within classical notions of Islam there are particular schools of jurisprudence or *madhhabs*. Madhhab is a term that refers to a school of thought or jurisprudence within Sunni Islam. The distinctions between these schools of thought refer to practical and philosophical differences (Kreinath 2011).

consistently tags words associated with specific concepts, a process known as “coding” (Andersen and Taylor 2009; Bernard 2005). Its aim is to reduce qualitative data into a series of variables that can be examined for correlations. However, this method has limitations. For example, as Bernard (2005) explains, “a single coder may tag words consistently with the same concept, but may also make systematic errors in deciding which concepts to use in tagging certain words” (330). Despite this weakness, the main strength of this method is that it can present an overview account of themes and issues that might be immediately clear to a researcher (Andersen and Taylor 2009). I did this coding by hand and not through qualitative software, reading the 15 typed transcriptions from my interviews, which I had also transcribed.

Campbell’s Codes

My rationale for using content analysis is based on a similar study, “Whose Got the Power? Religious Authority and the Internet” (2007) conducted by media scholar Heidi Campbell. Campbell specifically focuses on Internet authority online related to Abrahamic traditions. In Campbell’s (2007) article she examines the multiple ways authority is defined. To make her point she surveys the *Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication* looking at scholarly articles that focus on religious authority online. Out of 104 articles that mention authority only one article³⁰ attempted to define it while the other works employed it in various ways.

³⁰ The one article that attempted to define authority in media online was Ruggiero & Winch 2005 who vaguely define it as the power to construct existence (cited in Campbell 2007).

In response, to create a more systematic definition of authority, Campbell builds upon Max Weber's (1947) definition, which explores three types of authority: (1) legal – loyalty to a legally established order; (2) traditional – obedience to persons in sanctioned positions and; (3) charismatic – devotion to an individual with exemplar qualities. The codes I use are drawn from Campbell (2007), and distinguish four different types of authority. These types include: (1) hierarchy - the roles of religious leaders; (2) structure - systems of formally organized institutions; (3) ideology - the image of a global religious community and; (4) text – religious and sacred books. These categories of codes helped me identify patterns in my data. In other words, Campbell's use of Weber's approach allowed me to distinguish between the means of authority and the results of authority. To clarify, Campbell's work offers a systematic approach to deal with religious authority online and offline. I argue that Campbell's codes are effective for analyzing the transcripts of my participants but her research requires more qualitative data to prove its usefulness as an accurate description of authority. This research thus builds onto Campbell's categorization by providing more qualitative data to test its relevance. Campbell's four types of authority are useful for they capture the complexity of authority in both a tangible and efficient way.

In addition to manual coding, the process of data analysis was facilitated by the use of Nvivo software that helped store and manage PDF articles, transcriptions, web page screenshots, and coding references. I transcribed each interview, working with Sound Organizer software and I also manually coded transcripts using Nvivo as a way to quickly manage and cross-reference themes. Primarily drawing upon Campbell (2007) and Asad (1993) helps me formulate themes that include references to religious leaders

and scholars, religious communities and institutions, competing ideologies and doctrines, and the Qur'an as a foundational text of authority. These broad codes help me identify sub-themes and more manageable discourses to address in this thesis. I explore these codes in more detail in the next chapter.

Conclusion

In conclusion, this chapter has outlined my project's methodology of content analysis and my theoretical framework that relied on Asad's understanding of Islam as a discursive tradition. Firstly, I discussed Asad's category of religion, Islam and orthodoxy. Secondly, I explored the process of data collection and my primary data which stemmed from a data set of fifteen Muslim university students and two websites (IslamQA.org and IRF.com, which I analyzed using Varisco's (2007) notion of "participant web-servation." And thirdly, I reviewed content analysis and the coding system of Campbell (2007) for religious authority. In the next chapter, I reflect on the participants' perceptions of Internet and the ways they use Islamic authority to authenticate CIEs.

Chapter 4: Participants' Perceptions of Internet and Islamic Authority Online

Introduction

This chapter examines three components of my results: (1) the participants' perceptions of the Internet and CIEs, (2) the related concerns of online radicalization and the climate of securitization, and (3) the major concern of authenticating online Islamic authority.

In the first place, I examine how my participants perceive the Internet and its impact on their religious lives. Using 'contexts' described by Campbell (2004), I consider how university students who are Muslims in St. John's use CIEs as information spaces, and where CIEs are framed in utilitarian terms, used as a tool to gather desired information and knowledge. Then I explore the perception that CIEs are a social-spiritual network, a space beyond information and social engagement, which enables a spiritual or religious transformation.

In the second place, I highlight the concerns and challenges Muslims in St. John's encounter online in CIEs. Here I discuss (1) online radicalization, (2) securitization and (3) online *fatwas*. This section discusses the challenge of online propaganda and the participants' exposure to ultra-conservative, literalist material online. I also explore the concerns about privacy online, government surveillance and the contemporary climate of securitization in Canada. And finally I describe concerns about online *fatwas* as identified by my participants.

Lastly, in the third place, I discuss the discourses used by Muslims in St. John's to authenticate these CIEs. I frame these discourses using the codes of authority, outlined by Campbell (2007), that emphasize four means of religious authority: (1) religious leaders, (2) institutions, (3) ideology, and (4) text. These four means of authority play an important role in the authentication of CIEs among my participants as they describe ways of determining trust with specific CIEs. Put differently, although they have different backgrounds and varying usage on the World Wide Web, all my participants indirectly reference these four types of authority in their online usage.

Participants' Perceptions of the Internet

In this section, I examine how Muslim university students in St. John's perceive the Internet and its impact on their religious lives. Again, using discourses described by Campbell (2004, 2005), I explore how participants use CIEs as (1) an information space and (2) a spiritual-social network.

As previously mentioned, scholars such as Bunt (2009) have noted that new computer-mediated communications (CMCs) have the potential to transform religious traditions. The impact of the Internet on religious expressions and beliefs may be subtle rather than overt, and they may be the result of a combination of factors that makes quantification of this effect difficult (Bunt 2009: 4). The aim of my research is not to provide quantifiable measurements that gauge the Internet's influence on Muslims' behavior and value systems. As Bunt (2009:4) explains, such a study would take years, require teams of academics, across various disciplines, and a great deal of access to

participants' private personal web-surfing habits. Indeed, assessing the Internet's impact on an individual or community will always be problematic. For example, the information on CIEs can have a variety of outcomes on the user: the knowledge online could be life changing, entertaining, or may act to satisfy only a minor curiosity. How do we measure participants who rarely use CIEs and rarely use the Internet to look up information about religion? And how do you gauge the amount of time users stay online without constant online monitoring? Also, the Internet is integrated into many Canadians' daily lives. Thanks to smartphones and commonly available Internet services, the online and offline spheres can begin to blur, making measurements of time online more difficult.

Bunt argues that we may never know the impact of video sermons, online *fatwas* or the influence of other online material (Bunt 2009:128). With this caveat in mind, my research focuses on the Internet's impact from the point of view of the participant.

The Internet as an Information Space

For thirteen of the fifteen participants, the Internet is framed in utilitarian terms, used as 'a tool' to gather desired information and knowledge. As Campbell (2005: 12) notes, this discourse emphasizes the Internet as an instrument, a neutral artifact, which can be used for religious purposes, entertainment or work. It is dependent on the motives and desires of the user. Campbell describes this discourse as "a tool to promote religious practice" (2005) and as "an information space" (2004: 212). She writes, "Here the Internet is often referred to as the realm of pure information and the World Wide Web is seen as its holding house. The Internet exists for the utilitarian purpose of transferring

messages or data” (2004: 212). Framing the Internet as an information space was a recurring pattern throughout the interviews, however in two cases (for Jazmin, 23 year-old female, and Akria, 20 year-old female), the Internet was perceived as an empowering and spiritual space. Campbell (2004: 222) describes this type of discourse as “a spiritual-social network”. Describing the Internet as a spiritual-social network or spiritual network means the user perceives the Internet as a space beyond information and social engagement – it is a space enabling a spiritual or religious transformation.

Thirteen of my participants in this study saw the Internet as a ‘tool’ with a variety of purposes, dependent on the user. This was most evident with Basim, 37, a married family man, who works as an Internet technician and is a MUN graduate with a BA in computer science. I met with Basim in the Religious Studies Graduate room at the University after he responded to a recruitment poster on campus. Basim was the oldest participant in the study. He reports that he mostly uses the Internet to remind him of prayer times and to keep himself updated about upcoming religious events. Basim works full-time at a telecommunications company as an online help service person. Outside of work he tries to separate himself from the Internet as much as possible. For him, the Internet is how he makes his living and a way to support his family. It is a means of communication and, with email and smartphone reminders, a way to remind himself when to pray throughout the day. He sees the Internet as a way to manage his time, and find out information about community events. For Basim, the Internet plays a minimal role in his religious life but a helpful role nonetheless.

His experience parallels that of Yusuf, 25, another family man, who uses the Internet in a similar fashion. Yusuf works at a pizza restaurant and met with me on his day off. He moved to St. John's six years ago from Pakistan, by himself, to receive a Bachelor's degree in business. During those six years he finished his degree, married his roommate and started a family. When I asked how important the Internet is in his religious life he responded by saying, "To be honest, not that important" because as a father he no longer has time for 'web-browsing' or as he jokes, "looking up porn." He mainly uses the Internet to send emails, look for work, and occasionally uses it as his news source. For Yusuf the role of the Internet is perceived as a minor tool that he uses for communication and gathering news, but does not play a major role in his religious practice or belief.

Mohammed, 21, mentions that he avoids discussing religious matters online because he feels pressure to present a positive image of Islam online. He notes that, "it is a responsibility, I would say cause you have to give a good image with all the things happening, elsewhere. It's kinda hard, yeah". For him, posting online (as a Muslim) is a public act and a difficult responsibility because he believes he needs to counter negative stereotypes.

Caitlin Downie (2013) also shows numerous examples of Muslims in St. John's taking on the responsibility to educate non-Muslims about Islam. Unlike some scholars (see Jouili 2006) who argue that the educator role is part of the Islamic tradition (referring to *da'wa*), Downie (2013) finds that her participants use education as a strategy to combat negative stereotypes, and not as a way to proselytize. The Muslims I spoke with shared

this view, acting proactively, self-appointing themselves as representatives to educate others about Islam as a peaceful religion (Downie 2013:77; also see Marcotte 2010; Halafoff 2011).

For Seyed, a 26 year-old computer science major at MUN, the Internet has had no impact on his religious life, but it is his main resource for information regarding schoolwork. He does not discount the importance of the Internet in Canadian society in general, but for him it is an instrument and its impact depends on the user. When asked if the Internet has made religious life better or worse, Seyed responded by saying, “It is better if you use it in a better way and it is worse if you use it in a worse way.” In Seyed’s interview, this perception of the Internet as a ‘neutral’ technology recurred.

Idris is a 28 year-old MUN graduate with a Master’s degree in business with a specialization in oil. He has lived in St. John’s for three years, after emigrating from Bangladesh, by himself, to receive an education. He shares Seyed’s opinion about the Internet, saying that the Internet does not influence his religious life. For Idris and Seyed, therefore, the impact and outcome of the Internet depends entirely on the user and his or her desires. Idris uses it as his main source of information, a tool that allows him look up all kinds of information, religious or otherwise, but as a Muslim, the effect has been minimal.

For these participants, the impact of the Internet on their religious beliefs and practice are subtle and do not generate a great deal of enthusiasm. Of course, not all the participants perceive the Internet as having little or no impact on their religious lives. For

a few, the Internet and the information it provides has enhanced their religious lives, in both minor and drastic ways.

For Salma, a 19-year-old MUN student, who moved to St. John's to attend high school and later attend Memorial University after spending her youth in Michigan and Florida, the Internet has enhanced her faith. She perceives the Internet as an important resource, giving her access to information about Islamic belief. For example, the Internet has helped her in social situations, specifically when she attended public schools in St. John's. Salma notes:

Living here there is like a lot of atheists and agnostics and they usually ask me questions and I usually try to stay out of it but then I always want to know the answers to some of the questions myself. So from the Internet, like looking at scholars or papers, you kind of see the different points of views from different people.

As a Muslim in public elementary and high school, her non-Muslim peers constantly bombarded her with questions. The Internet acted as a support system, helping her garner information to better respond to the questions she was constantly being asked.

Liesha, an 18 year-old MUN student and the youngest participant in this study, described how YouTube videos about Islam have enhanced her faith. Liesha moved to Canada seven years ago, and has lived in St. John's for almost a year. She was born in Iraq in 1997 and spent her childhood growing up and traveling through Yemen, Oman, Dubai and the United Emirates before moving with her parents to Ontario. Today, she watches sermons and Islamic educational videos to remind herself why she practices Islam. As with Basim, the Internet has the capacity to serve as a touchstone to uphold her religious beliefs and practices. It has also helped Liesha navigate a balance between

modesty and fashion. With the information Liesha finds online she is able to feel more comfortable experimenting with new styles, wearing colourful hijabs and expressing herself in new ways.

For these participants, the Internet has acted as an information space that provides desired information when needed. For some, the Internet's role in their religious lives is minor and for others still, it can be non-existent. However, according to Jazmin and Akira, the Internet's influence is much more dramatic.

The Internet as a Social-Spiritual Space

For Jazmin, the information she found online "saved her spirituality". Jazmin was born in Egypt but has spent eleven years in Canada. She is 23 years old and moved to St. John's from British Columbia with her husband to work on her Master's degree at Memorial University. Jazmin suggests that the Internet gave her the opportunity to challenge the offline religious authorities in her life and empowered her with the knowledge to disagree with ideas that the people within her Muslim community shared. I chart Jazmin's relationship with the Internet as moving beyond the 'Internet as a tool' framework. Her perception is more accurately described as a "spiritual-social network," which Campbell (2004:222) defines as a space enabling a spiritual or religious transformation.

The knowledge the Internet provides Jazmin gives her the confidence to make decisions independent from her family and peers. During our interview, she described an entire summer she spent collecting online *hadiths* and reading Islamic blogs and forums.

This research exposed her to a variety of new ideas and differing opinions about Islam. In Jazmin's case, the Internet's impact was significant when compared to other participants. As she mentioned, "[the Internet] helped me take my faith into my own hands." The information she found on the sites she visited played a major role in her decision to leave the Islamic community she grew up in and alter her beliefs about Islamic practice. When Jazmin moved to St. John's from British Columbia with her partner, she stopped wearing the hijab and replaced her daily prayers with walking meditation, acts which she explained helped her better connect to her understanding of Islam. In this instance, therefore, the Internet's impact was substantial, and combined with the support of her husband and other like-minded peers, she was able to "liberate" herself from the practices of her old life and start something new. As we sat in the graduate office in Field Hall on campus, and spoke about the changes in her life, it became clear that this interview was an opportunity for her to talk about the Internet and the positive impact it played in her life. Bunt (2009) notes it is difficult to gauge the transformational power of new ideas that come from the Internet. But for Jazmin, the ideas she found online "saved" her spiritual life and helped support her in making some significant life changes.

This notion of social-spiritual space stemming from online material was expressed by another participant, Akria, a 20-year-old female convert to Islam. Akria currently works in food services but in her off time she works part-time as a paid Islamic blogger, writing about the issues that matter to her – LGBT rights and female equality in Islamic institutions. Akria is an unapologetic liberal with serious concerns about the Islamic tradition and the way Western media portrays Islam and Muslims. For her the Internet is

one way to circumvent 24-hour news media outlets, which she describes as products of the “US war Machine.” People in her offline social network never seemed to come to terms with her decision to convert to Islam and her attempts to engage with the small Muslim community in St. John’s (the Mosque and the MSA) only created more tension and challenges for her.

As a young, white, female convert in the Islamic community of St. John’s, Newfoundland, Akria felt alone. And as an outspoken political activist, with strong beliefs regarding feminism and LGBT rights, she ended up feeling disconnected from her peers, family and the Muslim communities of St. John’s. With only a handful of peers offering her support offline, she moved her religious life into the cyber realm. Today, Akria’s religious life is almost entirely online. It is the basis of her community, identity, her place of worship and reform, or as she describes, “the foundation of my religious life.” The Internet is as linked to her understanding of community, in the same way the mosque is to many of the participants in this study. She describes it as a space to socialize with likeminded peers –a space to learn, interpret, debate and transform the discourses happening within Islam. The Internet is a location for her support system and her outlet for religious expression.

For the majority of my participants, however, the Internet serves a utilitarian purpose. Today many Muslims like those interviewed use a variety of Islam-related cellphone apps. These act as reminders for daily prayers, as a directional compass (showing them the direction of the Kabaa in Mecca), and for instructional videos, like to recall all the steps of prayer and ablutions, for instance. For most participants in this

study, the Internet is perceived as a ‘neutral tool’ but for two, Jazmin and Akira, CIEs are perceived as social-spiritual networks, a space for religious transformation.

As Bunt (2009: 128) writes, assessing the Internet’s impact and influence on the lives of iMuslims is difficult. For the majority of my participants the impact of the digital world on their religion is subtle, shaping a handful of issues and helping with questions about practice and belief. For Jazmin and Akira, the Internet has done more than enhance a few aspects of their religion. It has dramatically changed the way they think and their understanding and practice of Islam. In the next section I explore the concerns and challenges discussed by the participants of this study.

The Concerns and Challenges of CIEs

As previously mentioned, the Internet acts as a space of information and as a social-spiritual space. However in both instances the Internet remains a space that is used cautiously. It is a space of consumers and producers and this constant flux of information, provided by ‘instant experts,’ institutions, and various groups raises concerns about religious authenticity and authority. Navigating misinformation, and out-dated *fatwas*, and inauthentic discourse, however defined, on Cyber Islamic Enironments (CIEs) is a challenge with which all my participants navigate. Many of my participants expressed concerns about the Internet and provided examples about their encounters with online ultra-conservative, literalist, and radical discourses in relation to their own beliefs. They described the related issue of the current Canadian political climate of securitization and their concerns about privacy and surveillance online. They also were concerned about

fatwas. In this section, I explore these concerns and challenges, starting with the concern of online radicalization.

The Concern of Online Radicalization

In Beyer's (2014: 119) study on "home-grown terrorism" he discusses the radicalization of young Muslim men in Europe and North America. Here he questions the causal factors of radicalization and asked how widespread radicalization is among young Muslims in Canada? His preliminary findings show little evidence supporting extensive radicalization among Muslim men in Canada.³¹ Beyer's (2014) study examines 35 university aged Muslim males and compared their profiles to the five factors of radicalization, as summarized by Al-Lami (2009). The five factors of radicalization as described by Al-Lami (2009) include (1) socio-deprivation, (2) search of identity, (3) social affiliations, (4) political marginalization, and (5) radical rhetoric (also see Bartlett et al. 2010). Beyer finds that his participants do not see themselves as socio-economically deprived. They are not pessimistic about constructing an adult identity and did not affiliate with groups that may encourage a sense of living outside the mainstream. Few express political grievances and even though most of the participants were active online and most likely had access to radical CIEs, online radical rhetoric appeared to have no impact.

Similar to Beyer's conclusions, my participants perceived online radical rhetoric as a minor concern. For example, when I posed questions (see appendix 3. Question 47)

³¹ It is important to note that Beyer (2014) mentioned that an absence of radicalization does not mean that radicalization may manifest itself in the future (also see Dawson 2014).

about online radicalization, Basim, the 37-year-old computer technician, expressed a general concern about the Internet, referring to it as a “dangerous place.” Throughout our conversation he made the case that radicalization online is not only a problem for Islam and Muslims but is a danger for all human societies. Beyer also notes that Islam appears to have no consistent relationship with radicalization (Beyer 2014: 141-144).

In Dawson’s (2014: 68) study on the common traits among what are known as the “Toronto 18,” he considers the role religion plays in the process of radicalization. For Dawson, the role of religion in this instance needs to be examined on a case-by-case basis and not separated from context and individual experience. In the Toronto 18 case, the role of religion is not clear. The group members primarily came from religiously moderate backgrounds and their radical rhetoric manifested as a disorganized mix of fundamentalist talking points, which was grounded in anti-imperialist gangster rap culture. Dawson concludes by suggesting that the group’s actions had less to do with Islam and more to do with their age and naïve and adventurous attitudes. In short, youthfulness seemed to play a larger role than religion. Again, this conclusion is based on this particular case and is not applicable to the radicalization process in general.

When I posed Akria the same question, she questioned my use of the word ‘radical’. For her, this term was problematic because there was an assumption that it was connected to violence. Before and during the interview, Akira told me about the Facebook groups to which she belongs, namely Islamic groups where the word “radical” appears in the title.³² These ‘radical’ groups are not violent and express legitimate

³² I do not name the group Akira belongs to on Facebook for reasons of confidentiality.

concerns about sexuality and gender roles in Islam. Akira describes these CIEs as sanctuaries for pro-LGBT and pro-feminist interpretations and discussions. At various points throughout the interview, Akira felt she had revealed too much about these groups and asked me to reassure her that everything she said would remain anonymous: “I am afraid that someone listening to this, will go to my group and get exposed. But no, it’s only you and me that will hear this.” Even after I explained the project’s goals, the ethical guidelines, and emphasized the confidentiality she remained reluctant to discuss her online activity with these groups in any detail. There was a sense among many participants concerning privacy issues and the underlining fear that their online habits, when taken out of context, may get them in trouble.

Encounters with violent jihadi websites were infrequent and extremely rare among my participants. Some recalled seeing graphic videos, ISIS beheadings and execution videos but through online news media and not on violent jihadi recruitment websites. None of my fifteen participants reported coming across - accidentally or purposefully - an ISIS website or a violent jihadi recruitment website using English language browsers or search engines. In fact, one participant stated that he once tried to access an ISIS website out of curiosity but was unable to find anything. Of course, due to the current political climate and the nature of this research, it is difficult to say how comfortable participants would feel about discussing their online encounters with terrorism with a total stranger and outsider, even if confidential and academically based. This concern about privacy is related to another concern raised by the participants regarding government surveillance online.

The Concern of Government Surveillance

Aforementioned, concern with government surveillance was first brought to my attention during the recruitment phase of my study. Finding self-described Muslim volunteers to talk about their online habits, with questions about online radicalization, proved to be more difficult than anticipated. When I first met with Zada, a 22 year-old MUN student at the MSA, I was wandering around trying to find some volunteers. Zada and her friends were kind enough to speak with me. This group of five people informed me that they had heard of my project (and even read my pamphlet on the project) but were still suspicious of it, fearing that saying “the wrong thing” or having something taken out of context would get them or the MSA in trouble. I argue that the securitization climate in Canada and its ‘chilling effect’ exists in St. John’s to a certain extent. The MSA and its members feel safer remaining quiet instead of voluntarily talking to a researcher. This is of course an understandable concern and reaction, especially in the wake of Bill C-51.

Few participants went into much detail about the concern and those who did, preferred to speak off the record. Recall Oswald, a 28-year-old computer technician and recent convert to Islam. Oswald has lived his entire life in Newfoundland, moving to St. John’s five years ago for work. Oswald grew up in a very religious, Pentecostal household where different religions were not discussed. He describes his religious background:

At a young age I was forced to go to Sunday school and Pentecostal churches. And then when I got... twelve I stepped away from it then I was basically

agonistic/atheist 'til I was about twenty. And then I became Christian again and then slowly morphed into Islam. [I have been a Muslim for] about four years.

For Oswald, security was a major concern. He was not shy about discussing it with me. I asked Oswald how much he contributes or interacts online. He responded:

Zero. Only because of fear. I don't think that I am free to say what I want. Online I think... I, I am very careful about what I say online because if it is there, it's there. But I think that is more watched and listened to than your phone calls, and I am not a conspiracy theory guy.

The climate of securitization in Canada is an intensifying reality for Oswald and as a young, male, Muslim convert he feels exposed online, and fears that that one click on "the wrong" thing could get him in serious trouble. He explained:

I mean Harper did change laws to detain people easier and stuff. It is very frightening to think that someone could look at something I accidentally clicked on or read something just because it is so crazy online. And they think this is the stuff this guy is reading and then all of a sudden you are in Guantanamo Bay [Laughter].

In Naber's (2006) ethnographic research on Arab communities in San Francisco she discusses similar experiences with her participants. She argues, drawing on Foucault's notion of the Panopticon,³³ that recent government action has created a culture of fear or "an intense, internalized sense that one is being watched and could at any time be attacked, deported, or disappeared" (Naber 2006: 255). The impact of this fear on Oswald continued to reveal itself throughout our conversation.

³³ The concept of the Panopticon was discussed by Michel Foucault in *Discipline and Punish* (1975) to describe modern society's use of surveillance to gain power over individuals by creating a sense of permanent visibility.

During this interview with Oswald, after he was open enough to express these opinions with me, his concerns about online security started to shift and his suspicion fell toward my research motivations. He said,

Even here, to be honest, I am skeptical because I am so afraid. It seems ridiculous because I am Canadian, and I am okay and I should be safe. But who says I am not going to say anything wrong?

Of course, I quickly attempted to reassure him about the project, going as far to say that I do not work for CSIS, trying to counter his reference to Prime Minister Stephen Harper and the Conservative Party's anti-terrorism legislation. For Oswald, however, the securitization climate in Canada and online security/surveillance is more immediate, relative to online radicalization. In Oswald's opinion, Canada is still a welcoming country to Muslims but "it is definitely going to change."

Idris and Liesha also expressed similar concerns about the issue of privacy online but I sensed they were uncomfortable discussing this issue with me in any detail. Idris noted that he is "sensitive about the issue of privacy," saying that "the feeling of anonymity it's not there for me online." Liesha told me that she is afraid to discuss the issue of ISIS online because she feels that the Internet (including her cellphone) is not safe. When I asked her if she avoids any topics online she responded saying: "Talking about ISIS, I guess." I continued questioning, why ISIS? "Yeah ...I'm afraid. It's not secure."

When I asked Zada, "what information online is most helpful in your offline life?" she responded saying,

I just try to avoid [the Internet] because I don't trust the people online. The people I am talking to, I am just talking to them on, even when it comes to religion, I don't talk about religion online. I don't know the person in front of me, his ideas or whatever... I don't join anything.

These concerns of radicalization and securitization were two concerns raised by multiple participants but the most commonly mentioned challenge regarding online activity relates to the authentication of CIEs.

The Challenge of Authenticating Islamic Authority Online

In this third section I investigate the challenges my participants dealt with when authenticating CIEs. Here I pay particular attention to one particular Islamic leader (Dr. Zakir Naik) and to the online *fatwas* on IslamQA.org as case studies. I also discuss the discourses used by Muslims in St. John's to authentic these CIEs. I frame these narratives using the codes of authority outlined by Campbell (2007) that emphasize four means of religious authority: (1) religious leaders, (2) institutions, (3) ideology, and (4) text. These four means of authority play an important role in the authentication of CIEs for the participants as they describe ways of determining trust with specific CIEs.

When I asked participants how they determine whether an "Islamic" site is authentic or not, respondents often remarked on the importance of determining authenticity. They all noted the caution needed when searching for Islamic information online. Bunt notes the democratizing element of the web: "Any person who deems themselves (or is proclaimed) an authority can make a pronouncement and upload on a website" (Bunt 2009: 278). As discussed in the previous section, there was a sense from the participants in this study that the Internet was a complicated space and that Islamic

authenticity and authority were significant issues. As described in Chapter 1, these concerns are not surprising considering the current political climate in Canada, which has emphasized the dangers of online radicalization on the Internet. This sense of caution when using CIEs was thus not lost on the participants and many spoke at length about the strategies they used to determine the authoritative nature of a website.

The Authority of Religious Leaders among Participants

In this section, I discuss my university-based participants' perceptions of religious leaders or authority figures in relation to the Internet, specifically examining the case of Dr. Zakir Naik.³⁴ It has been argued (see Possamai and Turner 2014: 203) that online authorities have a special impact on Islam because of the tradition's reliance on individual scholars and the collective *ummah*. Put differently, with no centralized authority, Islam is more exposed to heterogeneous debate.³⁵ Using the Internet as a sphere of renegotiation and as a new platform of influence scholars argue that Islamic discourse is being shaped by online contexts.³⁶ In short, even in small communities in St. John's, Islamic practices and beliefs are changing because of the Web. I argue that the nature of the Internet, which

³⁴ Naik was referenced by three participants - Jamal, Yusuf, and Seyed who stated that he acted as their way of determining a CIE's authority.

³⁵ This argument is debatable and reflects a debate among scholars regarding the orthodoxy of Islam. Goldziher (1910) was one of the first scholars to question 'orthodoxy' as it relates to Islam. Other scholars would follow (W. M Watt 1985; Eickelman 1981, 1982), arguing that since Islam lacks a formal decision-making body it cannot establish proper consensus. Wilson (2005) argues that this is a very Christian biased comparison and that no religion is able to establish a universal orthodoxy but 'dominant discourses' are possible.

³⁶ Of course, it should be noted that the questioning of online sources is not exclusively a problem for Muslims users. According to Campbell (2009) and Anderson (1999), the Internet gives rise to creole pioneers and creates a new class of interpreters and religious 'experts.' These experts are defined as "techies": webmasters, designers, bloggers, YouTubers, and online moderators.

produces new experts on a daily basis, gives rise to an environment that requires all users to exercise caution when encountering new sources of authority online. During the interviews, participants remarked that Muslims in Canada use the Internet in the same manner as any other group and that the online world offers challenges, concerns and benefits for all online users.

Aforementioned, Campbell (2007) finds that her Muslim participants place more authority on their religious leaders compared to the Christians in her study. For example, Muslim participants in her small qualitative study describe their local *imams* as important authorities who advise them about their Internet usage and instruct them about the positive and negative sides of the Internet. She shows how Christian pastors in the US are perceived as failing to show any interest in the Internet and were taken less seriously by their followers (Campbell 2007:1043).

Among those I interviewed, there appeared to be a higher engagement with online authorities compared to local, offline, authorities like the mosque, parents, friends and religious leaders. For Akria, “[Religious leaders] definitely influence my spirituality but again a lot of my religious leaders are online.” In one case I had to continually ask the participant if the scholar he kept talking about was someone he knew personally. He was referring to Dr. Zari Naik (born 1965), a popular Islamic authority he had seen on YouTube.

Below, I provide a brief case study on Dr. Naik³⁷ and his online authority. Here I describe how social media enables Naik to gain Islamic authority not through extensive Islamic training but through professional status, branding and YouTube. The aim of this brief case study is not to assess whether Naik is right or wrong. Rather, I aim to consider how he establishes his authority among those who trust him as an Islamic authority.

A Case Study of Dr. Zakir Naik

At the time of writing, Dr. Naik's Facebook page has over 8.6 million likes and his official YouTube channel has over 160,000 subscribers and houses over 1,000 videos; it is updated daily. For three participants - Jamal, Yusuf, and Seyed - having an easily accessible online presence, or having a popular brand, was their way of determining a CIE's authenticity. These three participants are all young, well-educated Muslim males who recently immigrated to Canada from India, Pakistan and Bangladesh – demographics that reflect Naik's primary fan base (Haqqani 2011).

When asked how they determine whether a CIE is appropriate or not, all three participants independently made specific reference to Dr. Zakir Naik. Jamal, a 24 year old emigrate - from India, describes him as “the biggest scholar in Islam, presenting internationally.” According to Haqqani (2011), Zakir Naik is one of the most popular Muslim preachers on YouTube and within the Indian subcontinent today and yet only two

³⁷ Participants also mentioned Nouman Ali Khan and Mohammed Knight, but Dr. Zakir Naik was referenced most frequently.

academic studies (see Haqqani 2011; Sadouni 2013) address the rising popularity of Dr. Zakir Naik.

Dr. Zakir Naik (born 1965) is an Indian Islamic preacher based in Mumbai. He has been able to gain popularity among Sunni youths, initially in South Asia, and now internationally, fuelled by social media and satellite television (Haqqani 2011:71). Naik emphasizes reason, science and technology in his broadcasts related to contemporary issues in Islam. He is easily accessible online, especially on YouTube where one can find his video lectures and debates where he addresses large audiences. By training he is a medical doctor. He has received limited training in Islamic studies and comparative religion. Sadouni (2013) suggests that Naik only received three months training (from Ahem Deedat, a self-taught, conservative, Sunni Muslim evangelist from South Africa) in preaching techniques in comparative religion and religious polemics. Based in Mumbai, Naik's audience are mostly Indian Muslim Students who are university educated and English speaking (Musthafa 2014:19).

Naik's authority emerges from multiple sources, including: his connection to religious leader Deedat, his professional background as a medical doctor, his connection to IRF (the Islamic Research Foundation) and his online/television presence (Haqqani 2011:71). As Haqqani (2011) describes, Naik's popularity reflects the transformation of the concept of authority in Islamic societies, he demonstrates that a lack of traditional training in Islamic theology is not of great importance. For those participants who trust him, there is a sense that he has an extensive and knowledgeable background in comparative religion but in my research this appeared not to be case. Instead, his online presence and use of

TV channels, social media and websites (broadcasting in Urdu and English) are of more importance to his audience. Naik has increased his online exposure, strengthened his brand, and gained the authority of his followers by embracing technology. He uses his status as a medical doctor to discuss science alongside religion. And yet, despite Naik's limited Islamic training, participants often describe him as an authority regarding all religions. Jamal responded saying:

He is a person who has not just learned Islam but has learned all the other religions. Like he has by heart all the religious scriptures, so if you ask him anything he can quote you from the Bible, from Qur'an, from Vedas, just name it.

While Jamal only makes reference to his videos, Yusuf and Seyed also mention his website IRF.net (Islamic Research Foundation). Naik is founder and president of IRF, a non-profit organization, established in 1991, as a way to promote 'proper' Islamic principles, understandings for both Muslims and non-Muslims. His association with the IRF adds to his authority and is another way for him to appeal to his audience.



Figure 1 IRF.net accessed July 2015

The IRF website is English based and describes itself as a non-profit public service geared towards the promotion of Islam as a faith adhering to modern technology and science (“Islamic Research Foundation” 2015). The IRF website acts as the central hub for Dr. Naik’s social network, focused less on providing information and more on providing hyperlinks to his social network. The homepage displays a picture of Naik receiving the King Faisal International Prize³⁸ from King Slaman Bin Abulaziz Al-Saud, of Saudi Arabia. The prize was awarded to him for his dedication to promoting science within Islam. In essence the website acts as a promotional platform for his profile: it includes his biography, his awards, his publications, and links to his TV shows, his Twitter feed and his YouTube channel. The website describes itself as space to hold open discussions about Islam. In reality the website does not have an interactive component and primarily serves to raise the user’s awareness of his work and character, not Islamic belief or practice. Naik is an example of how online platforms are able to provide leader figures with a sense of religious authority. In the next section, I discuss the limited authority of institutions among Muslim youth in St. John’s.

The Authority of Islamic Institutions among Participants

Institutions such as the IRF, MANAL and the MSA (as previously discussed in Chapter 1) were some of the authoritative organizations noted by participants. Generally,

³⁸ Founded in 1977, this annual award is presented to Muslims who make a contribution to Islam in Islamic studies, science, medicine, Arabic language and literature, It is sponsored by the King Faisal Foundation, a legacy of the third king of Saudi Arabia, bin Abdulaziz Al Saud (Haqqani 2011).

however, institutions were rarely discussed as an important means of knowledge regarding Islam. Online religious leaders, religious texts, and ideologies were far more important for my university participants. Campbell's (2007) discussion on religious structures shows similar results. She notes that her Jewish participants were more likely to cite institutions and religious structures as a primary source of authority.

This is not to say that all my participants avoided all offline authorities. Some did seek support from the Muslim Students' Association at MUN but it was uncommon to seek support offline from parents or community leaders. And there are many reasons for this: some expressed a generational and cultural gap with their parents; many students mentioned that the mosque was just too far out of the way. For Salma, the reason had to do with the size of the Muslim community in St. John's. As she explained:

I know there are a lot of people that have questions and they want answers and a lot of time they don't feel comfortable asking people at the mosque because ... in such a small group you are scared it will go around or that people will think differently of you.

As previously mentioned in Chapter 1, Ramji's (2014) study entitled "Maintaining and Nurturing an Islamic Identity in Canada" offers valuable insights into the role the institutions play among young, second generation Canadian Muslims (2014: 98). Her study finds similar results to my own. Sometimes young Muslims will seek support from Muslim Students' Associations but rarely will they find support offline from traditional sources, like parents, *imams*, and community or mosque leaders. Offline support systems are 'out of touch' and participants know the answers they are looking for are easily accessed online (Ramji 2014: 116-117). Again, these experiences are similar to second

generation Muslims living in Great Britain, Germany, France, Denmark and the Netherlands (Ramji 2014: 117).

The Notion of the ummah among Participants

In the previous section, I explored the limited role of institutions as religious authorities among Muslims in St. John's. Here I discuss the notion of the *ummah*, specifically the ideology of a unified Islam, not bound by the common Sunni schools of Islamic Law.

The description of a site's ideological positions played an important role for participants when determining the trustworthiness of a CIE. The majority of those I interviewed identified as Sunnis. But, as I mentioned in Chapter 2, those who did identify as Sunni noted that legal schools and divisions in Islam are not a major issue for them and personally they would rather be identified as 'a Muslim', and linked not to a specific school or sect. As Oswald describes, "I don't really consider myself anything but if someone pointed and said pick something, pick something, I would have to say Sunni". In fact, for some respondents CIEs and online *fatwas* that ignored the divisions within Islam acted as stronger means of authority.

Lawrence (2002) argues that the Internet has a tendency to emphasize a sense of unity among Muslim users. Sisler (2011) also argues that Islamic immigrant culture is – thanks to the web -- transforming into a transnational culture providing Muslims living in non-Muslim societies with the opportunity to reconnect with their religion in a global online *ummah*. The global *ummah* online has become a major development in Islam and

has dramatically transformed Islamic immigrant culture, breaking down many of the pre-established divisions among Muslims. I would argue that this online global *ummah* has played a significant role in the way Muslim youths create their identity.

For Akria and Jazmin, for example, a CIE that offers its users a plurality of interpretations is one of the ways they determine the trustworthiness of a website. As Jazmin describes it, this offering of multiple opinions shows that the CIE respects the user and trusts in the user to make the decision for his or herself. Jazmin described: “Respecting their [the users] intellectual abilities by presenting different opinions, not treating them like children.” When I asked Akria how she decides to trust a website or not, she responded with enthusiasm:

This is hilarious, I love this question...I basically have a litmus test of concepts that I will look for and if it doesn't give a nuanced view of it, even if it will say something but then offer well this is controversial because some people argue this, then it is legit. You know? As long as they offer the other side. Basically that's how I differentiate if it's a good source or not.

Jazmin shared the same critical response regarding the authentication of CIEs. When I asked her about how she determines if a website is authentically Islamic or not she responded by saying that websites that use threatening and demeaning language act as a sign for her to be cautious and critical:

I think at this point in my life, I have a pretty good radar for bullshit, and usually by the third sentence I can tell if this is going to jive with me or not. And it has a lot more to do with the argument style, what they use to argue their point. So it is not so much to do with the *hadith* they are using or the verse they are using but what they are trying to say. So if I read something and it seems like they are trying really, really hard to persuade you of something ‘Do this or you are going to go to

hell!’ They are desperate for you to believe what they are saying... I’m going to be very critical [Laughs].

Jazmin also raised concerns about online Fatwas and emphasized the danger of exclusivity and the lack of plurality in interpretation of Islamic law.

For Jazmin, her family and her local mosque in British Columbia always directed her and their members to online *fatwas*, specifically IslamQA.org. At times, she disagreed with what it said but she was reluctant to be critical because her offline community approved of their use. But as she became older she started to realize that this ‘trusted’ site was “out of touch”. As she explained, “I began to see it in a different way. And I began to see that a lot of the responses were, kinda what I was talking about earlier, like this is the right way and if you don’t do it exactly this way [Laughs] you are going to go to hell.”

IslamQA.org

IslamQA defines itself as an “Islamic Law”, “*fatwa*-issuing” website. It connects to over twenty different websites and includes “instant experts” and online religious scholars, from around the global, including the UK, Australia, South Africa, Saudi Arabia and Toronto, Canada. IslamQA.org is not a visually impressive or highly interactive website (it is built on WordPress freeware) but as a *fatwa*-issuing space, it covers a wide variety of topics that range from the broad (i.e. marital issues) to the mundane (i.e. the ethics of “playing with one’s beard”). It serves as a *fatwa*-hub and provides its users with a search engine that is connected to over thirty different *fatwa*-issuing websites. These linked websites all describe themselves as Sunni, within the Hanafi, Shafi’i, and Maliki

legal schools. IslamQA provides no information about its founders, background or its intended purpose. It is solely a *fatwa*-issuing websites.

One of the sites linked to IslamQA is Askimam.org, a Hanafi website registered in South Africa. The website is English-based but relies heavily on Arabic when describing an issue or ruling. The website is interactive but new users must register in order to ask a question. Kutscher (2011) describes this website's *fatwas* as "reserved" when addressing controversial political or women issues. The questions are usually very personal in nature. The website notes that its rulings are context specific and directed towards a particular question only. The focus of the website is to help Muslims who are struggling in European and North American contexts.

Oswald and his wife Jenna, who I interviewed separately, also mentioned that they use the website IslamQA often. Jenna is a 19 year-old Lebanese student at MUN who volunteers at the MSA and is currently working on her Bachelor's of Arts degree in

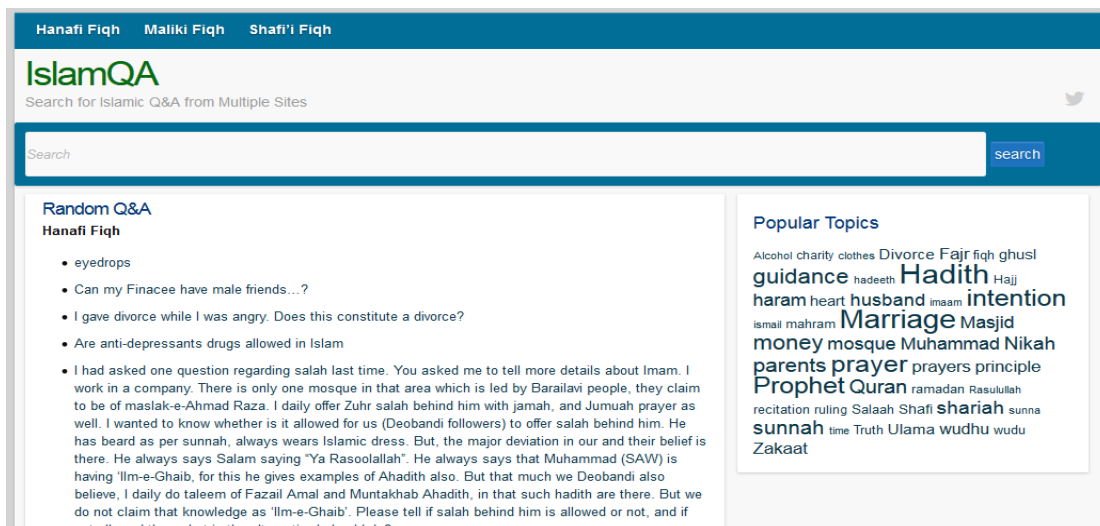


Figure 2 IslamQA.org accessed April 2015

Social Work. However Oswald and Jenna but did not express the same concerns about the website as Jazmin. Oswald revealed that:

At least every two weeks you are looking up something that you are not sure about and usually... there is a website [IslamQA](#)... you type a few questions and it will answer anything....

Idris, 28, expressed concern about out-dated ideologies, manifested as Islamic *fatwas* that continue to find an online audience. He noted that the online *fatwas* he encountered mainly provided old-fashioned information. He explained:

Someone might give you a link and you might click on it, and you realize their interpretation or views of the religion is ultra-conservative... or most of the time, the people who give this kind of jurisprudence or give this kind of verdict are probably taken out of text that was penned maybe sixty or seventy years ago. And because this person who is a very eminent scholar they think it is still valid today even though a lot of things have changed.

The existence of out-dated *fatwas* online, which fail to address contemporary issues, require users to carefully pay attention to these rulings, and not simply take them a face value.

Before the Internet, *fatwas* typically focused only on individual cases but today they reach a global audience and discuss a variety of topics and issues.³⁹ According to scholars such as Bunt (2009) and Chawki (2010: 168), online *fatwas* raise major concerns among scholars and the global community. The Internet (and other ICTs like satellite television, radio, etc.) are transforming the nature of *fatwas* from a localized style of counselling into a transnational enterprise (Messick 1996). Government-affiliated muftis are now struggling against “private muftis” (and other types of popular scholars) in order

³⁹ For example, online *fatwas* can address daily issues that deal with fashion, diet, and religious practice. Chawki (2010:166) also explores more outlier topics, like the elimination of the Pope, Mickey Mouse, and irreverent videogames.

to gain transnational attention and Islamic authority. These challenges come in many forms and promote a variety of ideologies. Some websites promote the moderation of Islam, some speak for the marginalized while others are advocating radicalization. In the next section I discuss the role of religious texts as a means of authority.

The Authority of Religious Texts among Participants

Not surprisingly, based on Asad's (1993) emphasis on foundational texts to understand the Islamic tradition, the Qur'an was described by all my participants as this central source of authority - both offline and online. Other modes of authority, like religious leaders, institutions, and ideologies were always described as secondary to the authority of this religious text. This finding fits within Asad's understanding of Islam as a discursive tradition. However, in the digital age, it could be argued that the materiality of the Qur'an and other religious texts are less significant compared to the past. During my interview with Akria, she discussed the importance of the Qur'an when assessing the validity of a CIE. "So I find if it contradicts the Qur'an I will not pay attention to it... I wouldn't call myself a Qur'anist but it is my go-to". For Jamal, trusting a CIE relies strictly on the use and authority found in the Qur'an. He recounts:

Mostly I follow those people who give quotations exactly from the scripture. Like if they say something, they say this, I am saying this from the book of so-on and so-on. I don't follow blindly people, one of my friends, colleagues use to say this is what my teacher use to say, I don't listen to them. I just follow those people who give quotations from the Qur'an.

Zada shared a similar view, describing the *hadiths* and the Qur'an as the signs of authenticity. Zada is a 22 year-old Chemistry major at Memorial University who was born in Jordan but grew up in Canada. She describes herself as very religious and wears the hijab. She spoke of signs, "the *hadiths*, the ayah, these are signs that show you whether it's really authentic or not". For Zada, the foundational texts of Islam are key to authenticity. After our interview we discussed an article (see Krever 2015) we had both read online about an ISIS hostage who talked to reporters about the extremists and how the group did not even have a Qur'an. For Zada, this narrative serves to strengthen her belief that ISIS is inauthentic and lacks any Islamic authority because of its removal of the Qur'an.

On this point, Salma describes her main concern for CIEs being Qur'anic literalism and the interpretation of the Qur'an without historical context. Salma said:

I usually read a little and if sometime it seems very extremist, their points of view, and they don't really have anything to back it up with, no proof whatsoever, or they take the Qur'an too literally, when it is written in a very poetic way so it is meant to make you think. But people take it very literal so then you know this isn't right.

For Salma, the ideology of literalism is inauthentic and a mark of extremism. This approach takes away from the poetic beauty of the Qur'an which is meant to inspire.

For all the participants, the Qur'an remained a central source of authority in Islam, relating to all matters, both offline and online. Other modes of authority, like religious leaders, institutions, and ideologies were always second place to the authority of this religious text. However, in the digital age, it could be argued, the materiality of the

Qur'an, and religious texts seems to be less significant, compared to the past. Not surprisingly, all the participants reported accessing the Qur'an and other religious texts online, many right from their smartphones. From the perspective of the informants, it could also be argued that Mohammed as an authoritative figure was conflated with the Qur'an. In short, the Qur'an remains a strong and influential source of authority among those interviewed.

Conclusion

In this chapter I outlined the participants' perceptions of the Internet and explored their concerns and challenges that dealt with radicalization, securitization and the authentication of CIEs.

The participants contextualized the Internet in two ways: (1) as information spaces, as a tool to gather desired information and knowledge and (2) as a social-spiritual network, a space beyond information and social engagement, which enabled a spiritual or religious transformation. The vast majority of participants described the Internet in practical terms and only two participants used the Internet to maintain or change their religious mindset. In general, this perception of the Internet contextualizes online activity as a positive and beneficial tool or space. However, concerns and challenges were conveyed.

The general concerns expressed by my participants regarding online activity fell into two categories (1) radicalization and (2) securitization and surveillance. Encounters with violent jihadi websites were infrequent and extremely rare, according to my

participants. Some recalled seeing graphic videos, ISIS beheadings and execution videos but these were usually reports in online news media and not material they found on violent jihadi recruitment websites. In fact no one reported coming across an ISIS website or a violent jihadi recruitment website but the concern about violent online radicalization was expressed. The backlash of terrorism, in the form of government surveillance, was another concern raised by participants. Some participants expressed the fear that the Internet is not a secure environment and limit their online activity because their online habits or posts maybe taken out of context and used against them. But similar to the findings of Beyer (2014) online radical rhetoric only posed a concern and had no real impact on their offline context. Overall the major challenge posed by my participants dealt with authenticating CIEs.

The challenge of authenticating CIEs was described by participants in the terms of authority. Using the codes of authority, outlined by Campbell (2007), that emphasize four means of religious authority: (1) religious leaders, (2) institutions, (3) ideology, and (4) text, I described the role each of these factors played in the authentication process. Here I pay particular attention to Islamic leader Dr. Zakir Naik and the online fatwas (IslamQA.org). Among those I interviewed, there appeared to be a higher engagement with online authorities compared to local, offline authorities like the mosque, parents, friends and religious leaders. Institutions such as the IRF, MANAL and MSA were some of the organizations of authority noted by participants. Overall, institutions were rarely discussed as an important means of knowledge, compared to online religious leaders, religious texts, and ideologies. Ideology played an important role for participants when

determining the trustworthiness of a CIE. The idea and recognition of a global Islam, without division, was expressed by most participants as authoritative. In most cases, specific school or sects were not important. The Qur'an remained a strong and influential source of authority among those interviewed but the materiality of the Qur'an, and religious texts seems to be less significant. In fact, the Qur'an was most commonly accessed through cellphone apps (i.e. Quran Explore, Qur'an Touch HD, Muslim Pro).

I argue that the findings on authority are related to the category of youth. As Edmund and Taylor (2011) note, as a whole, Muslim youth are less attracted to hierarchical structures (i.e. leaders and formal institutions) and are more likely to rely on their own judgement when it comes to trusting an authority. They are also more interactive and engaged with the digital, which may help explain why the participants most commonly access religious texts from their cellphone and almost never from printed media. Furthermore, Edmund and Taylor describe Muslim youth as a global generation, highly aware of transnational events and primed to view Islam as a connected global community. Age, and not the specific offline context or community, seems to play a larger factor on the online behavior of my participants.

Chapter 5: General Conclusion

General Conclusions

Throughout this thesis I have examined how my participants, Muslim university students in the city of St. John's, perceive the impact of the Internet on their spiritual and religious lives. In this thesis I have posed two broad questions: First, how is the Internet perceived and what benefits, challenges and concerns does the Internet produce among my participants? And second, what strategies do local Muslim university students in St. John's use to religiously authentic CIEs? To address these research questions I relied on a data set of 15 semi-structured interviews.

I initially considered these two questions within the scope of the existing literature on digital Islam. I then outlined the historical emergence of digital religion and examined scholarship treating Islamic authority online. These factors included the trajectories of ICTs, the complexities of CIEs as conceptualized by Bunt (2009), and the means of authority as outlined by Campbell (2007). More theoretically, I drew from an Asadian understanding of Islam as a discursive tradition. I also contextualized my finding within the current Canada political context that has promoted securitization. Undertaking qualitative interviews with fifteen participants, this approach revealed the benefits, concerns and challenges raised by my participants. Based on my participants' perceptions of the Internet I found that the Internet helped these users gather knowledge. For two participants, the web provided a social-spiritual network to support their beliefs in ways they could not mobilize offline. Concerns raised by my participants included fear of

inadvertently locating terrorist propaganda online and the Canadian government's recent response to online radicalization. Together these factors create a chilling effect that underscore the sense that online activity is not secure and this in turn profoundly affected the recruitment of participants to this study.

A second finding in this thesis relates to how Canadian Muslim university students authenticate Cyber Islamic Environments (CIEs). Young Muslims in St. John's used a variety of techniques to determine the level of authority behind an Islam-related website. In general, participants did not look towards Islamic institutions for authority, instead they turned to religious leaders online and relied on their own individual judgment. Significantly, they did not rely on formal Islamic offline institutions and other offline support systems like parents and local leaders or *imams*. This understanding of Islamic authority was linked to the notion of a global Islam, or *ummah*, and was undivided by schools of Islamic Law. It was also bolstered by a reliance on digital religious texts, specifically a dematerialized Qur'an.

The purpose of this research was not to make representative claims but to investigate how individual Muslims perceived and interacted with the Internet in a specific context. This focus aimed to address a gap in the qualitative research within digital religious studies and the scholarly underrepresentation of smaller Muslim populations in Canada. My interviews also shed light on the current securitization climate, particularly following Bill C-51. For that reason, I also provide some critique of how current security concerns foster a potentially discriminatory political context for these young Muslim university students.

Considering the existing literature on cyber-Islam and these findings, I now conclude by arguing that the Internet has altered the way these young Muslims perceive, utilize and access religious authority. Significantly, this alteration had less to do with the offline context (i.e. St. John's, Newfoundland) and more to do with their age and generational cohort of my participants. The majority of my participants were born and grew up in the digital age. Their generation came of age during a technology and communication revolution, arguably as dramatic as the invention of the printing press (Anderson 2003). During their formative years these young Muslims experienced the launching of Web 2.0 (Facebook in 2004, Youtube in 2005, Twitter in 2006) and with these technological advancements their world became smaller, more interactive and, arguably, less hierarchical (Edmunds and Turner 2005: 569). This generation has a significantly different engagement with religious authority, partially enabled by their use of Web 2.0.

Scope and Limitations

As mentioned above, there are important limitations attached to this project. For instance, due to the sample size and my focus on the city's university student population, it must be noted that the data collected for this research may not be representative of the larger Muslim population of St. John's. My sample includes a disproportionate number of highly educated individuals who received their post-secondary education from the same institution, Memorial University. That many of them are not Newfoundlanders may also make them more likely to use global networks online. Also, this study does not include a

range of individuals with varying the levels of religious commitment. Among the participants, many are Muslims who describe themselves as practicing Muslims. Unfortunately, few non-practicing Muslims were interviewed for this project. My sample is diverse in many others ways (i.e. countries of origin, marital status, gender, average hours of online engagement per day). Other limitations emerge from my methodological approach.

As I previously mentioned in Chapter 3, content analysis that blends qualitative, quantitative, and interpretive methodologies also has methodological limitations. For example, reducing religious authority to four codes (leadership, institution, ideology, and religious texts) may not fully capture the reality of Islamic authority. What elements of authority are not taken into account? And would this coding system work in all contexts? Qualitative data also has limitations. For example, how is the researcher to effectively gauge the validity or the reality behind a person's response to questions? How accurate is this information, especially when you consider how integrated the Internet is in our daily lives? Thanks to a new generation of smartphones and Internet services, the online and offline spheres are blurring to the point that the user may not even be fully aware of the effects the Internet has on his or her life. In fact, we may never know the impact of online material on belief and practice (Bunt 2009:128). In short, assessing the Internet's impact on an individual or community will always be problematic

Future Research

In conclusion, I see this study's use of Talal Asad's theoretical framework is an important starting point for thinking about digital religion within a social, political context like St. John's, NL. One solution may be to bring post-colonial frameworks into the discussion and address the lack of scholarly discussion about the government surveillance online within the scope of digital religious studies. The field of digital religion has tendency promote a "cyber-naïveté" but this could be improved on by acknowledging the serious technological concerns, such as the digital divide, privacy issues, and online surveillance in an era of increased securitization.

This study has attempted to rectify specific research gaps in the field of digital religious studies. I suggest that the research gaps outlined in Chapter 1 could be important pathways for further research within the scope of digital religious studies. The current literature on digital Islam and religion focuses primarily on analyzing websites and measuring Internet traffic. Continuing on the third wave of scholarship, future research needs a more academically rigorous engagement with qualitative in order to develop a more nuanced understanding of Islam within a digital landscape.

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Appendices

Appendix 1. Consent Form

Title: Constructing Islamic Authority Online: A Qualitative Examination of Islam 2.0 in St. John's, Newfoundland and Labrador

Researcher: Liam Harvey-Crowell
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(709) 330-7216

Supervisor: Dr. Jennifer Selby
Department of Religious Studies
Memorial University of Newfoundland
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(709) 864-8059

You are invited to take part in a research project entitled "Constructing Online Islamic Authority: A Qualitative Examination of Islam 2.0 in St. John's, Newfoundland and Labrador."

This form is part of the process of informed consent. It should give you the basic idea of what the research is about and what your participation will involve. It also describes your right to withdraw from the study. In order to decide whether you wish to participate in this research study, you should understand enough about its risks and benefits to be able to make an informed decision. This is the informed consent process. Take time to read this carefully and to understand the information given to you. Please contact the researcher, Liam Harvey-Crowell, if you have any questions about the study or for more information not included here before you consent.

It is entirely up to you to decide whether to take part in this research. If you choose not to take part in this research or if you decide to withdraw from the research once it has

started, there will be no negative consequences for you, now or in the future. **If you any ethical questions about this project please feel free to contact ICEHR if they have issues with the researcher, research or if you feel that you have been treated unfairly.**

Contact: ICEHR at icehr@mun.ca or by telephone at 709-864-2861.

Introduction

My name is Liam Harvey-Crowell, I am a research assistant at Memorial University of Newfoundland. I am originally from Miramichi, New Brunswick, and completed my undergraduate studies at St. Thomas University in Fredericton, NB. As part of my Master's thesis, I am conducting research under the supervision of Dr. Jennifer Selby. Dr. Selby is an Associate Professor at Memorial University of Newfoundland. Her research focuses on contemporary Islam and secularism in France and in Canada. This research project is funded primarily by a Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council Insight Grant, as part of a nationwide study titled "New Muslim Public Spheres in the Digital Age: Identity, Community, Diversity and Authority in Canada."

This research aims to help foster a more complete understanding of Canadian Muslims' religious experiences that moves beyond fear and Islamophobia. In short, this project seeks to understand the modern Muslim experience in St. John's Newfoundland during the digital age.

Purpose of study:

The purpose of this study is to collect information on how digital technology and the Internet might shape Islam, how local Muslims are using the Internet, and what they are accessing online. The project will address this question through four related research areas: (1) sense of identity; (2) sense of community; (3) sense of diversity; and (4) religious authority. Each of these four areas of research will pay particular attention to the impact of digital technology on women, youth, and religious leaders.

What you will do in this study:

Your participation consists of taking an individual semi-directed interview during which time you will be asked questions about your experience with digital technology and the Internet as a Canadian Muslim (or former Muslim). The interviews will be in English.

Length of time:

With your permission, the interview will be digitally recorded to ensure we do not misinterpret your statements. The interview should take between one to, no longer than, three hours of your time. The place and time of the interview are to be agreed upon by interviewer and interviewee.

Withdrawal from the study:

Your participation in this study is entirely voluntary; this means that you are accepting to participate in this project without any obligation or external pressures. Moreover, you are under no obligation to answer any question. **The deadline for withdrawal from this project is April 30, 2015. Before this date, you have the right to withdraw your participation, for any reason, without having to provide any justification for doing so. Upon your withdrawal all the information pertaining to you, which has been securely stored in locked filing cabinets of the university offices in the Religious Studies Department, will be immediately destroyed (unless you say otherwise).**

Your consent to participate in this project also means that you consent that the research team uses the collected data (see above, Anonymity and Confidentiality) for the purpose of this research and the dissemination of research results (articles, theses, dissertations, conferences, scientific communications, books, etc.). **The deadline for this withdraw is April 30, 2015.**

Possible benefits and risks:

Your participation will contribute to the advancement of our knowledge of the place digital technology and the Internet play in the lives of Canadian Muslims. We hope to gain a better understanding of the importance, the roles and the functions that digital technology and the Internet play in shaping Canadian Muslims' experiences and understanding of ethno-religious identities, communities, diversity and religious authority. Your contribution will help researchers and the general public to better understand Canadian Muslims' points of view.

Possible risks:

Your participation to this interview should not lead to any significant discomfort or harm. However, issues might revive unpleasant emotions associated with past experiences you may have had, in which cases, you remain free to refuse to answer any question that you may find uncomfortable, and this, without having to justify your refusal to answer. You should also know that there are no "right" or "wrong" answers to the questions we ask.

The Chairperson of Memorials ethics committee can be reached if you wish to discuss your situation (icehr@mun.ca or 709-864-2861).

It is the responsibility of the interviewer to interrupt or terminate the interview, if the interviewer feels that your well-being is at stake. If this were the case, the interviewer would help you in finding useful resources to assist you. **Should you require assistance with your emotional state after participating in or during this research, you will be directed to the appropriate resources.**

The following services are available in St. John's:

- **24-hour mental health crisis line: 737-4668 (local) or 1-888-737-4668 (province-wide).**
- **Mobile Crisis Response Team: 1-888-737-4668 St. John's Region.**
- **Psychiatric Assessment Unit: 777-3021 or 777-3022 24 hour Walk-in Crisis Service at the Waterford Hospital Site on Waterford Bridge Rd.**
- **Health Sciences Emergency Department in St. John's 777-6335.**

Confidentiality

Information collected during the interview is confidential. Only members of the research team will have access to this data, i.e., (the recording and transcripts of your interview). Data that identifies participants will be preserved by research team co-applicants in a secured place separate from that of the files of digital audio recordings and transcripts of interviews and online questionnaires.

Anonymity:

Whatever you say will remain confidential. Nowhere will we identify you by name or by any other means. Only participants who have clearly stipulated in writing (in this consent form) that their name be mentioned could be identified (or left anonymous) in research outputs or research publications.

Recording and Storage of Data:

All collected data – i.e., files of digital audio recordings of interview, together with the files of transcripts and online questionnaires – will be put on external hard drives **and securely stored in locked filing cabinets of the university offices in the Religious Studies Department.** Data will be kept for a minimum of five years, as required by Memorial University policy on Integrity in Scholarly Research. ”

Reporting of Results:

The data collected will be used in a Master's thesis and will use direct quotations but will not provide personally identifying information. **As mentioned above, this research project is funded by a Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council Insight Grant, as part of a nationwide study titled “New Muslim Public Spheres in the Digital Age: Identity, Community, Diversity and Authority in Canada” and the data collected will be published in their report.**

Sharing of Results with Participants:

All theses at Memorial University are available to the public once completed.

Questions:

You are welcome to ask questions at any time during your participation in this research.
If you would like more information about this study, please contact:

Liam Harvey-Crowell

Email: lshc78@mun.ca or contact me by cellphone (709) 330-7216

Or my supervisor Dr. Jennifer Selby

Email: jselby@mun.ca or phone (709) 864-8059

ICEHR Approval Statement

The proposal for this research has been reviewed by the Interdisciplinary Committee on Ethics in Human Research and found to be in compliance with Memorial University's ethics policy. If you have ethical concerns about the research, such as the way you have been treated or your rights as a participant, you may contact the Chairperson of the ICEHR at icehr@mun.ca or by telephone at 709-864-2861.

Consent:

Your signature on this form means that:

- You have read the information about the research.
- You have been able to ask questions about this study.
- You are satisfied with the answers to all your questions.
- You understand what the study is about and what you will be doing.
- You understand that you are free to withdraw from the study without having to give a reason and that doing so will not affect you now or in the future.
- **The deadline for withdraw is April 30, 2015**
- **You understand that any data collected from you up to the point of your withdrawal will be retained by the researcher.**
- **Following the point of withdrawal from the project, your information from you will be destroyed.**

If you sign this form, you do not give up your legal rights and do not release the researchers from their professional responsibilities.

Your signature:

☐ I have read what this study is about and understood the risks and benefits. I have had adequate time to think about this and had the opportunity to ask questions and my questions have been answered.

☐ I agree to participate in the research project understanding the risks and contributions of my participation, that my participation is voluntary, and that I may end my participation.

I agree to be audio-recorded during **the interview**

☐ Yes ☐ No

I agree to be video-recorded during **the interview**

☐ Yes ☐ No

I agree to the use of quotations.

☐ Yes ☐ No

I allow my name to be identified in any publications resulting from this study.

☐ Yes ☐ No

A copy of this Informed Consent Form has been given to me for my records.

Signature of participant

Date

Researcher's Signature:

I have explained this study to the best of my ability. I invited questions and gave answers. I believe that the participant fully understands what is involved in being in the study, any potential risks of the study and that he or she has freely chosen to be in the study.

Signature of Principal Investigator

Date

Appendix 2. Recruitment Poster

Memorial University of Newfoundland

Department of Religious Studies

***PARTICIPANTS NEEDED FOR A STUDY OF
CANADIAN MUSLIMS AND THE INTERNET***

We are looking for Canadian Muslim participants (over 18 years of age) to take part in a study on the role of the Internet and digital technologies in the lives of Canadian Muslims.

As a participant in this study, you would agree to be interviewed about your use of the Internet and its impact on the related issues of identity, community, (intra-/inter-religious) diversity, and religious authority.

Your participation is voluntary and would involve a semi-directed interview.

contact:

Liam Harvey-Crowell – *M.A. Candidate*

(709) 330-7216

Email: lhsc78@mun.ca

Dr. Jennifer Selby - Supervisor

Associate Professor of Religious Studies

(709) 864-4046

Email: jselby@mun.ca

The proposal for this research has been reviewed by the Interdisciplinary Committee on Ethics in Human Research and found to be in compliance with Memorial University's ethics policy. If you have ethical concerns about the research, such as the way you have been treated or your rights as a participant, you may contact the Chairperson of the ICEHR at icehr@mun.ca or by telephone at 709-864-2861.

This research project is funded primarily by a Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council (SSHRC) Insight Grant.

Appendix 3. Interview Schedule

INFO	QUESTION-TYPE
<u>DEMOGRAPHICS</u>	1. How old are you ? 2. Where were you born ? 3. Where did you grow up ? ----- ---
- Age	4. Where were your parents born (or lived before, if they immigrated) ? 5. When did your parents [<i>for immigrant parent</i>], or you come to Canada ? 6. Why was Canada chosen ? 7. Do you have any brothers and sisters ? a. [<i>If yes</i>] Where are they born ? 8. What is the occupation of your parents ? 9. What is your marital status ? [<i>e.g. single, civil union, married, separated, divorced, any children</i>] ----- ---
- Family	
	10. How would you describe your “ethnic” background ? [<i>e.g. Moroccan Berber, Pakistani, Indonesian, Egyptian, Iranian Kurd, etc.</i>] 11. How would you describe your “religious” background / identity ? [<i>e.g. very religious, atheist, liberal, traditional, Salafi, etc.</i>] ----- ---
- Ethnicity	12. Are you a <u>long term</u> or <u>short term</u> resident of Canada ? <u>Can you specify ?</u> [<i>e.g., Canadian citizen, permanent resident, international student, etc.</i>] ----- ---
- Religion	13. How long have you lived in Canada ? [<i><u>DO NOT SKIP</u> this question for Canadian born participants, some of them may have lived outside Canada for few years</i>] ----- ---
	14. What is your highest education degree ? [<i>e.g. PhD, MA, BA, College degree, High School leaving certificate,</i>]

	<p>---</p> <p>20. Do your faith – beliefs and practices – affect how you use the Internet and what you do <u>online</u> ?</p> <p>21. Do you have any faith-based limitations ?</p> <p>a. [<u>If yes</u>] In what ways ?</p> <p>i. Can you give some examples ?</p> <p>---</p> <p>22. Do you think the Internet –</p> <p>(i) enhances your faith,</p> <p>(ii) operates more as a distraction or</p> <p>(iii) changes your faith in any way ?</p> <p>23. For better or worse ?</p> <p>a. Can you explain or give examples ?</p>
<p><u>IDENTITY</u></p>	<p>24. What does it mean to you to be a Muslim living in Canada ?</p> <p>25. How do you identify yourself, religiously and nationally ?</p> <p>Do you see yourself as a Canadian Muslim, a Muslim Canadian, or other ?</p> <p>---</p> <p>26. Do you tend to have friends of the same “ethnic” or “religious” background as you, or not ?</p> <p>a. Any reasons why this might be so ?</p> <p>b. Has the circle of <u>your offline</u> friends changed as you grew older ?</p> <p>i. [<u>If yes</u>] In what ways ?</p> <p>c. Has the circle of <u>online</u> friends changed also ?</p> <p>i. [<u>If yes</u>] In what ways ?</p> <p>---</p> <p>27. Do you change your way of behaving depending on the “ethnic”, or “cultural” background of the group of friends you are with ?</p> <p>a. What about when you are with Muslim versus <u>non-Muslim</u> friends ?</p> <p>b. How so ?</p> <p>c. What about <u>online</u> ?</p> <p>---</p>

<u>IDENTITY</u>	<p>--- 28. Do you feel a generational, or cultural, or linguistic, or a religious gap with your parents ? How so ? [<u>young</u> participants – e.g., act differently at home as compared to outside the home] [<u>adults</u> not living with parents – e.g., act differently in the presence of their parents or of elders of the family]</p> <p>29. Would you discuss with them all your online interests and activities? a. [<u>If yes</u>] Can you give examples of things you discuss or share with them ? b. [<u>If no</u>] Why not ?</p> <p>----- ---</p>
	<p>30. Does gender play a role in how you socialize or do not socialize or interact with some people ?</p> <p>31. Who do you socialize with ? a. Mainly with the same gender ? b. Any ethnic, religious, or intellectual preferences ?</p> <p>32. Where do you socialize ? [ex. parks, coffee shops, community centers, bars, mosques, etc.]</p> <p>33. <u>If</u> you wish to remain gender segregated, <u>how</u> is this maintained <u>online</u> ?</p> <p>34. Do you find that <u>online</u> communities offer opportunities to find friends, companions, or a life partner / spouse ? a. Have you used online communities this way ?</p> <p>----- ---</p>
	<p>35. How has the Internet affected the way you feel connected to your Muslim and <u>non</u>-Muslim friends in Canada, or in other places ? a. [<u>If yes</u>] Which <u>online</u> communities or groups ? [e.g., local, national or international – country or countries]</p> <p>----- ---</p>
	<p>36. Does (i) information you find <u>online</u> and the (ii) communities or people you relate to <u>online</u> affect your religious practices and beliefs</p>

	<p><u>offline</u></p> <p>[e.g., since childhood, in the past 5 years] ?</p> <p>a. Can you explain or give examples ?</p> <p>-----</p> <p>---</p> <p>37. Do you use online media in the <u>practice</u> your faith ? For example, for...</p> <p>a. buying religious goods [e.g., for prayer rug, hijabs, etc.]</p> <p>b. accessing religious literature [e.g., for Qur'an recitation, religious sermons, scholars opinions concerning debatable issues, etc.]</p> <p>c. using applications (Apps) regularly [e.g. for the direction of prayer, the time to start fasting for Ramadan, etc.]</p>
<u>AUTHORITY</u>	<p>38. Does your usage of the Internet include visiting</p> <p>a. sites to read the Qur'ân ?</p>

Usage	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> b. sites that deal with Islamic jurisprudence (<i>fiqh</i>) ? c. hadith (prophetic sayings) search engines ? d. Islamic Blogs ? e. Arabic language instruction websites aiming to read the Qur'ân ? <p style="text-align: center;"><i>[for <u>non</u> Arabic speakers]</i></p> <p>-----</p> <p>---</p>
“Brand Names”	<p>39. How do you decide whether an “Islamic” site is authentic or appropriate, and that you can trust it ?</p> <p>40. What signs do you look for to ensure it is authentic, or appropriate ?</p> <p style="text-align: center;"><i>[e.g., use of language, cited sources, logos, references to known scholars, known Qur'ânic verses (suras) or hadiths, website interface, links, etc.]</i></p> <p>41. What are the “Islamic” websites that have had the most influence on you, or that affected your beliefs and practices?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> a. Can you give examples ? <p>-----</p> <p>---</p> <p>42. When you visit websites, are particular schools of jurisprudence (<i>madhhab</i>) important in your determination of their appropriateness ?</p> <p style="text-align: center;"><i>[Sunnis: Hanafi Hanbali Shafi'i Maliki Shi'as: Ja'fari Ismaili Zaidi]</i></p> <p style="text-align: center;"><i>[<u>IMPORTANT</u> to mention doctrines <u>OTHER</u> than the one of participant, <u>because</u> Sunnis <u>might</u> state they are <u>open</u> to other interpretations – i.e. other Sunni interpretations – <u>but not to</u> Shia, Ahmadi, or Sufi interpretations]</i></p> <p>43. If you attend a mosque – that is affiliated with a particular school of jurisprudence (<i>madhhab</i>,) – does it have an impact on your selection of Islamic websites ?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> a. <i>[If <u>no</u>]</i> Do you accept, or are you open to, all interpretations and doctrines? <p>44. What kind of information do you find most helpful in an <u>online</u> context ?</p> <p style="text-align: center;"><i>[e.g., in comparison with an offline engagements with your</i></p>

<p><u>AUTHORITY</u></p>	<p><i>religious beliefs and practices]</i></p> <p>45. Are there certain situations or moments where <u>online</u> spaces offer better support, or Islamic information <u>than offline</u> spaces ?</p> <p><i>[e.g., for more private matters, such as questions related to sex, alternative lifestyles, etc.]</i></p> <p>-----</p> <p>---</p> <p>46. What are your feelings encountering online interpretations that differ from, or conflict with your own beliefs or practices ?</p> <p><i>[e.g., Shia, Sunni, secular interpretations, etc.]</i></p> <p>-----</p> <p>---</p> <p>47. What would you consider a radical or very conservative websites ?</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> Have you encountered such radical or very conservative websites ? Do you think they are easily identifiable ? How ? How would you describe them ?
<p>Fiqh for Minorities</p>	<p>48. If you seek out Islamic jurisprudence (<i>fiqh</i>) <u>online</u>, do you believe that it should be interpreted for a Muslim minority context?</p> <p>49. Or, do you see interpretation of religious texts, such as the Quran, hadith, and legal fatwas, as unchanging, irrespective of place, time, or context ?</p> <p>50. Have your opinions to this end changed in the last 5 years?</p>

<p>COMMUNITY</p>	<p>etc.]</p> <p>a. [<u>If yes</u>] Is it for internal communication with members, promoting your local mosque or group, or for correcting misinformation about Islam ?</p> <p>i. How might the usage of the Internet be improved ?</p> <p>ii. Anything the mosque can do better to improve their usage ?</p> <p>b. [<u>If no</u>] Why might that be so ?</p> <p>i. How might their usage be improved ?</p> <p>-----</p> <p>---</p> <p>60. Is your Muslim community, or religious group, using the Internet adequately ?</p> <p>[e.g., local Islamic organizations, Muslim associations, MSA, etc.]</p> <p>a. [<u>If yes</u>] Can you explain how the Internet is used ?</p> <p>i. How might the usage of Internet be improved ?</p> <p>b. [<u>If no</u>] Why might that be so ?</p> <p>ii. How might their usage be improved ?</p> <p>-----</p> <p>---</p> <p>61. Do you use the Internet to you access information about Muslim events or gatherings ?</p> <p>[e.g., Muslim Fest, Islamic Spirit, Canadian Muslim Day,⁴⁰ international speaking tours of Muslim preachers or scholars]</p>
<p>Online interactivity</p>	<p>62. Are the online groups to which your <u>offline</u> friends belong different from yours ?</p> <p>[e.g. online forums, Facebook, chat rooms, etc.]</p> <p>a. Why is this so?</p> <p>b. Can you give examples?</p> <p>-----</p> <p>---</p> <p>63. Can you describe the type of activities in which you engage online with members of your group or faith community ?</p> <p>[e.g. mosque, Muslim association, Muslim Student Associations (MSA), transnational group, etc.]</p>

⁴⁰ Muslim Fest (www.muslimfest.com), Islamic Spirit (<http://www.revivingtheislamicspirit.com>), Canadian Muslim Day (<http://www.muslimday.info>),

<p>COMMUNITY</p>	<p>64. How much do you contribute and interact with others online ? [e.g., <i>commenting, posting, sharing articles, etc.</i>]</p> <p>-----</p> <p>---</p> <p>65. Have you joined Islam related self-improvement activities ? [e.g., <i>weekend seminar, leadership seminars, etc.</i>]</p> <p>66. Have you taken any <u>online</u> ? a. [<u>If yes</u>] What did they consist of ?</p> <p>-----</p> <p>---</p> <p>67. Have you ever changed some of your views before, or after joining a group, whether <u>offline</u> or <u>online</u> ? a. [<u>If yes</u>] Can you give examples ?</p> <p>-----</p> <p>---</p> <p>68. How do you evaluate the quality of your time spent online ? [e.g., <i>with individuals or with groups</i>]</p> <p>69. It is worth the time spent, or do you believe you are wasting too much time ?</p>
<p>Online community</p>	<p>70. Has an <u>online</u> community or a religious group ever a. helped deepen your understanding of an issue, or b. given you some solidarity when you may have disagreed with the teachings of your faith community or family ?</p> <p>-----</p> <p>---</p> <p>71. Have you found that the Internet has provided you with a faith community or a religious group that you otherwise might not have accessed ? a. Do you feel you share more or less with people <u>online</u>? b. Does anonymity help or hinder ? c. Have you ever moved on to meet others of an <u>online</u> group face-to-face ?</p> <p>-----</p> <p>---</p>

	<p>72. Have you ever left an online community or a religious group ?</p> <p>a. [<u>If yes</u>] Why ?</p> <p>b. Were there any conflicts ?</p>
<p><u>DIVERSITY</u></p> <p>Intra-religious dimensions</p>	<p>73. Do you have Muslim friends who are from groups or communities other than the one to which you belong ?</p> <p>[e.g. <u>non-Sunnis</u> IF you are a <i>Sunni</i>, etc.; how many, some / all]</p> <p>74. What about <u>online</u> ?</p> <p>75. What kinds of issues are discussed with them <u>online</u> ?</p> <p>[e.g., do you discuss beliefs, dogma, creationism, etc.]</p> <p>76. Are these similar or different from those discussed <u>offline</u> ?</p> <p>[e.g. <i>diversity within Islam, differences between Islamic doctrines, etc.</i>]</p> <p>77. Do you avoid – either online or offline – any topics or websites ?</p> <p>a) [<u>If yes</u>] Why?</p> <p>-----</p> <p>---</p> <p>78. What do you think about the different interpretations, different beliefs and practices within Islam and the Muslim communities ?</p> <p>[e.g., <i>Sunnis, Shi'as, Sufis, Ahmadis, Ismailis, Alevis, Alawiyya, Salafis, etc.</i>]</p> <p>-----</p> <p>---</p> <p><u>DIVERSITY</u></p> <p>Intra-religious dimensions</p> <p>79. What sources do you rely upon to inform you about diversity within Islam and the Muslim community ?</p> <p>[e.g., <i>mosque, family, friends, religious leaders, readings, the Qur'an, the hadiths, etc.</i>]</p> <p>80. And, what about the Internet ?</p> <p>[e.g., <i>websites of other Muslim groups, of religious scholars, social media, blogs, etc.</i>]</p> <p>81. How often do you access information on other Muslim groups or doctrines on the Internet ?</p>

	<p>-----</p> <p>---</p> <p>82. Have your beliefs or practices about differences that exist within Islam and the Muslim community changed in the last 5 years ?</p> <p>83. And, why do you think that is ?</p> <p>84. Has your Internet usage anything to do with this change ?</p>
<p>Inter-religious dimensions</p>	<p>85. Do you have friends who are <u>non</u> Muslim ? [<i>how many, some / all</i>]</p> <p>86. What about <u>online</u> ?</p> <p>-----</p> <p>---</p> <p>87. What do you think about living in a religiously plural society, and a society with secular values such as the Canadian society ?</p> <p>88. What kinds of topics are discussed with your non-Muslim friends <u>online</u> about inter-religious diversity ?</p> <p>89. Are these topics similar or different from those discussed with them <u>offline</u> ?</p> <p>90. When you are with <u>non</u>-Muslims – either off or online – do you avoid any topics or websites ?</p> <p> a. [<u>If yes</u>] Why ?</p> <p>-----</p> <p>---</p> <p>91. Have you been (i) involved in, or (ii) do you participate in any formal inter-faith groups or events – either inter-religious or intra-religious <u>offline</u> ?</p> <p> a. [<u>If yes</u>] can you explain and give examples ?</p> <p>92. Have you (iii) accessed <u>online</u> interfaith groups or blogs?</p> <p> [<i>e.g., interfaith Facebook, blogs, online forums, etc.</i>] [<u>If yes</u>]</p> <p> a. How much of an influence do they have on your personal faith ?</p> <p> b. What about on your public practice ?</p> <p> c. Do you feel they deepen your faith, or that they trouble it ?</p>
<p><u>DIVERSITY</u></p>	

Inter-religious dimensions	<p>-----</p> <p>---</p> <p>93. What sources do you depend upon to inform you about people of other religions ?</p> <p>[e.g., mosque, family, friends, religious leaders, readings, Qur'ân, hadiths]</p> <p>94. And what about the Internet ?</p> <p>[ex. websites of non-Muslim religious groups, of non-Muslim religious scholars, social media, blogs, etc.]</p> <p>95. How often do you access information on groups of other faiths on the Internet ?</p> <p>[e.g., always, often, rarely, never]</p> <p>-----</p> <p>---</p>
	<p>96. Have your beliefs or practices about differences between Muslims and <u>non</u>-Muslims changed in the last few years ?</p> <p>97. <u>If</u> your beliefs or practices about those differences <u>have changed</u>, ...</p> <p>a. Why do you think that is ?</p> <p>b. Has your usage of the Internet anything to do with it ?</p>

<p><u>Recap Questions</u></p>	<p>98. Is the influence of the Internet MORE or LESS importance than the influence of ... [<i>rank according to importance</i>]</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> i. religious leaders ii. religious text(s) iii. your parents/caregivers iv. your siblings v. your other relatives vi. your friends vii. printed media [<i>e.g. magazines, books, etc.</i>] viii. electronic media [<i>e.g., online TV, videos, audio</i>] ix. Other ? Please specify... <p>-----</p> <p>99. How important are the Internet and digital technologies for you as a Muslim living in Canada ?</p> <p>100. Can you explain further and give some examples ?</p>
<p><u>Additional Information</u></p>	<p>101. Is there anything else you would like to add – regarding your experience with the Internet and digital technologies as a Muslim living in Canada ?</p>

Appendix 4. Letter from ICEHR with Ethics Approval

ICEHR Number:	20150131-AR
Approval Period:	July 2, 2014 – July 31, 2015
Funding Source:	SSHRC Insight [Principle Investigator – Dr. Roxanne D. Marcotte, Université du Québec à Montréal]
Responsible Faculty:	Dr. Jennifer Selby Department of Religious Studies, Faculty of Arts
Title of Project:	<i>Rebooting Islam: An exploration of Islam and the Internet in St. John's, Newfoundland and Labrador</i>

July 2, 2014

Mr. Liam Harvey-Crowell
Department of Religious Studies, Faculty of Arts
Memorial University of Newfoundland

Dear Mr. Harvey-Crowell:

Thank you for your email correspondence of July 1, 2014 addressing the issues raised by the Interdisciplinary Committee on Ethics in Human Research (ICEHR) concerning the above-named research project.

The ICEHR has re-examined the proposal with the clarification and revisions submitted, and is satisfied that the concerns raised by the Committee have been adequately addressed. In accordance with the *Tri-Council Policy Statement on Ethical Conduct for Research Involving Humans (TCPS2)*, the project has been granted *full ethics clearance* to July 31, 2015.


If you need to make changes during the course of the project, which may raise ethical concerns, please forward an amendment request form with a description of these changes to icehr@mun.ca for the Committee's consideration.

The *TCPS2* requires that you submit an annual update form to the ICEHR before July 31, 2015. If you plan to continue the project, you need to request renewal of your ethics clearance, and include a brief summary on the progress of your research. When the project no longer requires contact with human participants, is completed and/or terminated, you need to provide the annual update form with a final brief summary, and your file will be closed.

The annual update form and amendment request form are on the ICEHR website at <http://www.mun.ca/research/ethics/humans/icehr/applications/>.

We wish you success with your research.


Yours sincerely,


Gail Wideman, Ph.D.
Vice-Chair, Interdisciplinary Committee on
Ethics in Human Research

GW/th

copy: Supervisor – Dr. Jennifer Selby, Department of Religious Studies, Faculty of Arts
Director, Research Grant and Contract Services

Appendix 5. Pamphlet

<p>TO CONTACT US</p> <p>If you're available for an interview, please contact us!</p> <p>Or, if you have any other questions or concerns:</p> <p>864-4046 (Jennifer's office); 330-7216 (Liam's cellphone)</p> <p>or by email:</p> <p>iselby@mun.ca</p> <p>lhcf78@mun.ca</p>	<p>Muslim experience in St. John's Newfoundland</p> <p>This research project is funded primarily by a Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council (SSHRC) Insight Grant, as part of a nationwide study titled "New Muslim Public Spheres in the Digital Age: Identity, Community, Diversity and Authority in Canada." This project aims to examine how Muslims across Canada use the Internet and the role it plays in their lives.</p> <p>MA. CANDIDATE: LIAM HARVEY-CROWELL SUPERVISOR: DR. JENNIFER SELBY</p>
<p>BROADER SIGNIFICANCE</p> <p>This project contributes to the broader understanding the Internet and role it plays in the lives of Canadian Muslims. Your contribution will help us detail the potential benefits and challenges that the new digital landscape introduces in the lives of Canadian Muslims. This research aims to help foster a more comprehensive understanding of Canadian Muslims' religious experiences that moves beyond Islamophobia and seeks to grasp the contemporary</p>	<p>QUESTIONS / CONCERNS</p> <p>This research project has been reviewed by the Interdisciplinary Committee on Ethics in Human Research (ICEHR) and found to be in compliance with Memorial University's ethics policy. If you have ethical concerns about the research (such as the way you have been treated or your rights as a participant), you may contact the Chairperson of the ICEHR at icehr@mun.ca or by telephone at (709-864-2861).</p> <div><p>Memorial UNIVERSITY</p><p>Newfoundland & Labrador, Canada</p></div>

ABOUT THE PROJECT

"Constructing Online Islamic

Authority: A Qualitative

Examination of Islam 2.0 in St.

John's, Newfoundland and

Labrador" aims to examine how

local Muslims use the Internet and

the role digital technologies play in

their lives.

We are interested in hearing from

Canadian Muslims (over 18 years

of age) who would agree to discuss

their usage of the Internet and

digital technologies and the role

their online activities may or may

not have in shaping their

experiences and understanding of

(1) identity, (2) community, (3)

(intra- and inter-religious)

diversity, and (4) religious

authority.

We will ask about how often you

use the Internet and how your

usage interacts with offline

religious beliefs and practices. For

example, how often do you use

the Internet – per day, per week,

per month? Do your beliefs and

practices affect how you use the

Internet and what you do online?

Do you think the Internet

enhances your faith life, operates

more as a distraction, or changes it

in any way? Do you feel that the

Internet has a positive or negative

impact on your life?

In sum, participants in this project

will have the opportunity to

discuss their technological and

religious experiences in St. John's.

YOUR ROLE

You can contribute to this study

by giving 40-60 minutes of your

time to answer some questions

about your religious life, your own

online experiences, how and

whether the the Internet shapes

your practice and belief of Islam.

The interview we will conduct will

be open-ended with a few

common questions. The time and

location of this conversation can

be scheduled for your

convenience.

CONFIDENTIALITY

This project will observe strict

rules of confidentiality. Records of

observations and conversations

will be kept private and used for

research purposes only.

Should you feel any discomfort in

answering questions, you may

refuse to answer any particular

question or withdraw from the

study altogether. Participants will

not be paid to participate in the

study.

ABOUT THE RESEARCHERS

Dr. Jennifer A. Selby is an

Associate Professor at Memorial

University of Newfoundland. Her

research focuses on contemporary

Islam and secularism in France

and in Canada.

<http://www.faculty.mun.ca/jeslby/>

Ian Harvey-Crowell is a research

assistant at Memorial University of

Newfoundland, currently working

on an M.A. thesis in Religious

Studies. He is from Miramichi,

New Brunswick, and has

completed undergraduate studies

at St. Thomas University in

Fredericton, NB.