

**RPCS**

RESEARCH PROGRAMME IN THE STUDY  
OF MUSLIM COMMUNITIES OF SUCCESS

# Insights and Perspectives

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## **Chat-GPT, Muslim Cyberspace and the Construction of a Critical Islamic Epistemology (Part 1)**

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**Introduction**

The emergence of new digital technologies has revolutionised the way information is disseminated, making it easier for people across the globe to communicate and connect instantly. The *laissez-faire* infrastructure of these tools has also created an unprecedented ecology in which the democratisation of information enables anyone to consume and share data regardless of background. It consequently empowers people to share and exchange ideas leading to a plethora of opinions on different subject matters to proliferate. While information diversity can be seen as a boon to the formation of a more informed public, the 'new media ecology' has inadvertently accelerated the diminishing reliance on and dismissal of experts by laypeople.<sup>1</sup> It may deceive people by providing an illusion of intellectual triumph through indulgence in a limitless supply of information that might not necessarily be factual yet perilously framed as an 'expert opinion'. One of the digital tools blamed for this disruption is the advanced AI chatbot, *Chat-GPT*.

**Chat-GPT a Disruptive or Transformative Technology?**

*Chat-GPT* is an AI-powered chatbot developed by *OpenAI* based on the *GPT* (Generative Pretrained Transformer) language model. It is designed to generate human-like responses to natural language inputs, using a large corpus of text to learn patterns and relationships in language. *Chat-GPT* can perform a wide range of language-related tasks, such as translation, content generation and even human-like conversations. It has been trained to analyse vast quantities of data from across the Internet and has demonstrated remarkable accuracy and creativity to generate human-sounding text and detailed responses to questions.<sup>2</sup> It was reported that the AI tool gained one million users in a record five days after its launch in November last year. It is considered by tech experts as a remarkable feat considering that other popular digital platforms such as *Facebook* and *Netflix* took longer to reach the same user mark.<sup>3</sup> Moreover, the huge acquisition by *Microsoft* of *Open AI*, the creators of *Chat-GPT*, is indicative of its potential to significantly enhance human productivity and improve our lives in many ways. Nonetheless, it is not without its limitations. There have been reports of students using *Chat-GPT* to generate written assignments like term papers, and it is paradoxically indifferent to factual truths as it can hallucinate outputs that can be irrational. It goes to show that as much as it is essential for technology to augment the quality of life,<sup>4</sup>

[1] Nichols, T. M. (2019). In *The Death of Expertise: The Campaign Against Established Knowledge and Why It Matters* (p. 106). essay, Oxford University Press.

[2] Millson, A. (2023, March 15). *What is CHATGPT-4 and how to use it now: Everything you need to know*. The Straits Times. Retrieved April 5, 2023, from <https://www.straitstimes.com/tech/what-is-chatgpt-4-and-how-to-use-it-right-now-everything-you-need-to-know>

[3] Buchholz, K., & Richter, F. (2023, January 24). *Infographic: Chatgpt Sprints to One Million Users*. Statista Infographics. Retrieved April 5, 2023, from <https://www.statista.com/chart/29174/time-to-one-million-users/>

[4] Sundar, S. (2023, February 7). *Chatgpt 'may make up facts,' OpenAI's chief technology officer says*. Business Insider. Retrieved April 5, 2023, from [https://www.businessinsider.com/chatgpt-may-make-up-facts-openai-cto-mira-murati-says-2023-2?utm\\_campaign=tech-sf&utm\\_source=facebook&utm\\_medium=social&fbclid=IwAR0eG0F2adpcHoTFIF-LKSLbl1d6Fwr1POoKd9Sq9hy1fgmP2g2tmxuB0oE](https://www.businessinsider.com/chatgpt-may-make-up-facts-openai-cto-mira-murati-says-2023-2?utm_campaign=tech-sf&utm_source=facebook&utm_medium=social&fbclid=IwAR0eG0F2adpcHoTFIF-LKSLbl1d6Fwr1POoKd9Sq9hy1fgmP2g2tmxuB0oE)

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it is equally important to understand that underlying every development in human society is an epistemological, political, or social bias. Sometimes that bias is to our advantage; sometimes, it is not. According to the late American social critic, Neil Postman:<sup>5</sup>

“

.....  
...technological change is not additive, it is "ecological", and that in order for us to comprehend, manage, and even embrace the rapid changes brought on by the technological advancement happening all around us, we need to understand that technology does not just add to society, it transforms it.

”

.....  
In short, the sophistry of technology has enhanced our ways of living to the extent that the possibilities to empower society may appear limitless. However, at the same time, it eats away at its fabric too. Thus, it is crucial to consider the ethical considerations and ensure that technology is being used in a way that benefits everyone. While much of the deliberations on *Chat-GPT* have generally been focused on its usage, limitations and benefits, not much has been discussed on how it affects the digital ecology of religious communities, particularly the Muslim digital sphere, as it is still in its early days.<sup>6</sup>

### New Muslim Public Sphere

Since the 1990s, the Internet has become a significant driver in social identity and community life for Muslims globally. Sociologists view this as the formation of a "new Muslim public sphere" and have discussed the ways in which it has impacted the way people think about and practice religion.<sup>7</sup> An advantage that the Internet has provided is the ready availability of Islamic resources, which benefit groups with limited access to traditional structures of religious authority such as mosques and *madrasas*. This has led to the proliferation of cyber-*muftis* and Islamic websites that have produced varying degrees of consensus, divergence, and negotiation in multiple contexts and across different discourses.<sup>8</sup>

Such developments have their drawbacks. In an avalanche of information induced by the Internet, digital consumers may perceive religious opinions as another element of their social media feed rather than necessarily spending time to reflect or responsibly act on the

[5] Postman, N. (1998). Five Things We Need to Know About Technological Change. Colorado. Retrieved April 5, 2023, from <https://web.cs.ucdavis.edu/~rogaway/classes/188/materials/postman.pdf>.

[6] Azaria, A. (2022). *ChatGPT Usage and Limitations*. <https://doi.org/10.13140/RG.2.2.26616.11526>

[7] Eickelman, D. F., & Anderson, J. W. (1999). *New media in the muslim world: The emerging public sphere*. Indiana University Press.

[8] Caeiro, A. (2019, March 26). *Cyber-muftis, digital fatwas - the ongoing transformation of Religious Authority*. Daily Sabah. Retrieved April 5, 2023, from <https://www.dailysabah.com/op-ed/2019/03/27/cyber-muftis-digital-fatwas-the-ongoing-transformation-of-religious-authority>

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information received. It is important to note that more information does not necessarily translate into in-depth analysis and nuanced readership. Conversely, studies have shown that the digital natives' information-seeking behaviour can be problematic due to a lack of careful consideration in digesting information.<sup>9</sup> In other words, they are prone to digesting information without verifying it properly. The key features of Bloom's Taxonomy that systematically promote higher-order thinking are gradually displaced in favour of rapidly produced opinions that have turned profound human activities into banal objects. As a fast-growing AI tool, *Chat-GPT* is not immune to the ecological effects of the 'new Muslim public sphere'. The following sections will outline some challenges that necessitate a healthy degree of 'epistemic disobedience'<sup>10</sup> to prevent a technological dystopia and create space for critical reflection on the digital world we are building.<sup>11</sup>

### The Death of the Author

In his essay "The Death of the Author", the French literary critic Roland Barthes challenges the traditional view of literary analysis that privileges the author's intentions and milieu as the primary source of meaning in a text. Barthes argues that the meaning of a text is not fixed by the author, but rather is created through the interaction between the reader and the text itself. Thus, Barthes posits that we should dispense with the notion of the author since they have no authority. Instead, the author should be thought of as a mere scribe who collects words and marks the blank pages. While the author may influence the text, they do not decide how it is understood.<sup>12</sup> Similarly, in many ways, *Chat-GPT* can be seen as an embodiment of the "death of the author." Instead of distancing a text from the authority of a single author, it effectively severs and reconfigures countless texts from their authorial sources. This presents a problem when tracing the genealogy of ideas that contravenes the epistemological framework of acquiring knowledge in Islam.<sup>13</sup> The verification of truth and the proper management of knowledge are essential components of Islam.

According to Ibn Sirin: "This knowledge is a religion, so consider from whom you receive your religion."<sup>14</sup> It is for this reason that pre-modern scholars went to great lengths to authenticate

[9] Taylor, A. (2012). The Information Search Behavior of the millennial generation. *Ubiquitous Learning: An International Journal*, 4(3), 85–98. <https://doi.org/10.18848/1835-9795/cgp/v04i03/40341>

[10] Mignolo, W. D. (2009). Epistemic disobedience, independent thought and decolonial freedom. *Theory, Culture & Society*, 26(7-8), 159–181. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0263276409349275>

[11] Walter Mignolo's idea of an 'epistemic disobedience' can be useful to scrutinise, reflect and evaluate the epistemologies and ecological effects of the digital revolution.

[12] Huang, S. (2023, February 26). *Chatgpt and the Death of the Author*. *New Statesman*. Retrieved April 6, 2023, from <https://www.newstatesman.com/the-weekend-essay/2023/02/chatgpt-death-author-big-tech-artificial-intelligence>

[13] Hamdeh, E. (2020). Shaykh Google as Ḥāfiẓ al-'Aṣr. *American Journal of Islam and Society*, 37(1-2), 67–102. <https://doi.org/10.35632/ajis.v37i1-2.851>

[14] Sunnah.com. (n.d.). Hadith - Mishkat al-Masabih - Book of Knowledge - Sunnah.com - Sayings and Teachings of Prophet Muhammad Retrieved April 6, 2023, from <https://sunnah.com/mishkat:273>

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knowledge, such as the hadith compilation of *Sahih Bukhari*, which is regarded as the most reliable collection of hadith<sup>15</sup> and Ibn Khaldun's historical criticism approach in analysing the veracity of historical events which he outlined in his magnum opus, *Muqaddimah*.<sup>16</sup> With the introduction of tools such as *Chat-GPT*, traditional understandings of knowledge-seeking practices in Islam have been challenged in profound and unprecedented ways. It gives people an illusion<sup>17</sup> that they are learning by prompting *Chat-GPT* to generate responses, but in reality, they are more likely to open the floodgates of unmediated data that may cause more confusion and eventually an intellectual death by information overload.

Reading information from such prompt-based tools does not necessarily equate to understanding. Studies have shown that searching behaviours on the Internet impact our cognitive ability to analyse data and lead to an inflated sense of erudition. This group of users may have fallen victim to a cognitive bias known as the Dunning-Kruger effect, in which they overestimate their knowledge of the subject and underestimate how much they do not know. The lack of intellectual humility is dangerous as it veils us from the language of learning and cultivates a narcissistic form of compounded ignorance (*jahl murakkab*). The language of learning is not just reduced to the act of relaying information; instead, it is the embodiment of moral capital that can only be transmitted through conscious, sentient beings that AI technologies may never compete with. In his book *Ta'lim Muta'alim*, Imam Al-Zarnuji emphasises that learning is not just the transference of knowledge and skills. It significantly transfers character-building values that can only be materialised through a student-teacher relationship.<sup>18</sup> Conversely, the absence of the teacher or self-study may result in intellectual superficiality and is perhaps amplified in today's era of the immediacy of information and instant gratification. It is an extension of a phenomenon that sociologist George Ritzer describes as the *McDonaldisation* of society.

### McDonaldisation of religious discourse

George Ritzer's concept of "McDonaldisation of Society" refers to the phenomenon of the fast-food industry's principles becoming the dominant model for organising and rationalising various aspects of social life. Ritzer suggests that the fast-food industry represents a particular

[15] Zaman, M. (2020, October 19). *Can we trust hadith literature? understanding the processes of transmission and preservation*. Yaqeen Institute for Islamic Research. Retrieved April 6, 2023, from <https://yaqeeninstitute.org/read/paper/can-we-trust-hadith-literature-understanding-the-process-of-transmission-and-preservation>

[16] Kozhithod, S. (2018). Khaldunian techniques of historical criticism and their place in modern debates on Naqd al-Matn (content criticism) of Hadith. *Journal of Ibn Haldun Studies, Ibn Haldun University*, 3(2), 225–238. <https://doi.org/10.36657/ihcd.2018.46>

[17] Fisher, M., Goddu, M. K., & Keil, F. C. (2015). Searching for explanations: How the internet inflates estimates of internal knowledge. *Journal of Experimental Psychology: General*, 144(3), 674–687. <https://doi.org/10.1037/xge0000070>

[18] Huda, M., Jasmi, K., Mustari, I., Basiron, B., & Sabani, N. (2017). Traditional wisdom on sustainable learning: An Insightful View From Al-Zarnuji's Ta'lim al-Muta'allim. *SAGE Open*, 7(1), 215824401769716. <https://doi.org/10.1177/2158244017697160>

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form of rationalisation, which has become so pervasive in contemporary society that it has fundamentally transformed the way we think, live, and interact with one another. The *McDonaldisation* process has four key dimensions: efficiency, predictability, calculability, and control. Ritzer argues that the process of *McDonaldisation* has negative implications on society, such as the loss of creativity, criticality and authenticity.<sup>19</sup> It can be argued that the introduction of tools such as *Chat-GPT* has accelerated the process of *McDonaldisation* and affects how users consume religious discourse in several ways. Firstly, based on the principles of efficiency and predictability, *Chat-GPT* provides standardised and quick responses to users' prompts. In the context of religious discourse, this can lead to a preference for recycled or watered-down responses that are disengaged from deep philosophical thinking. Considering that issues today are multifaceted, it is crucial for religious discourse to embody what Paulo Freire describes as critical consciousness.<sup>20</sup> It provides a methodological framework to understand issues from multiple vantage points and brings about personal and social change.

Secondly, *Chat-GPT's* responses are generated through a centralised system, where a small group of individuals or organisations controls the data and algorithms that power the language model.<sup>21</sup> This level of centralisation is a permutation of the principle of control in *McDonaldisation*, where systems are designed to maintain predictability and standardisation. This degree of control can be an issue for religious discourse as it is totalising and can limit the plurality and disregard the ambiguities of the religious tradition. In effect, the language model may perpetuate stereotypes and reinforce existing biases.<sup>22</sup>

Lastly, as a generative *AI* tool, *Chat-GPT* is intrinsically designed to favour quantitative traits such as speed and quantity. It evokes the principle of calculability, which gives the impression that quantity equates to quality and makes users unable to see the value of things. It draws similarities with Rene Guenon's critique of how "horizontal knowledge" (quantitative knowledge of things of this world) has replaced "vertical knowledge" (qualitative knowledge that looks beyond this world) owing to the gravitational pull of modern materialism.<sup>23</sup> On this basis alone, it desacralises the search for knowledge. *Chat-GPT* has yielded a culture of immediacy and accessibility in knowledge production that has fractured traditional structures of knowledge and constructed new types of authority.

[19] Ritzer, G. (2019). *The McDonaldisation of society: Into the Digital age*(pp. 20-22). Singapore:SAGE.

[20] Freire, P. (2017). *Pedagogy of the oppressed* (pp. 104-109). London, UK: Penguin Books.

[21] Verma, P. (2023, March 14). *What to know about openai, the company behind chatgpt*. The Washington Post. Retrieved April 6, 2023, from <https://www.washingtonpost.com/technology/2023/02/06/what-is-openai-chatgpt/>

[22] Abid, A., Farooqi, M., & Zou, J. (2021). Large language models associate Muslims with violence. *Nature Machine Intelligence*, 3(6), 461-463. <https://doi.org/10.1038/s42256-021-00359-2>

[23] Partridge, E. (2022, November 22). Rethinking the World Brain. *Renovatio*. Retrieved April 6, 2023, from <https://renovatio.zaytuna.edu/article/rethinking-the-world-brain>

## **Mechanisation of Religious Discourse**

While the accessibility that the Internet provides has empowered individuals to make informed decisions regarding religious beliefs and practices, it presents a challenge for religious leaders or the *Ulama*, who traditionally serve as the gatekeepers of religious texts and interpretation. Opportunities to acquire knowledge about Islam have emerged through social media platforms such as *TikTok* and search engines like Google. In the same vein, *Chat-GPT* is an added capillary that fuels the emergence of new religious expressions and belonging.<sup>24</sup>

By prompting questions about religion on *Chat-GPT*, users no longer have to rely on traditional gatekeepers and experience its concomitant challenges in search of knowledge. Why is there a need to struggle for years when *Chat-GPT* can simultaneously consolidate themes in the *Quran*, Hadith and thousands of Islamic texts instantly? There is a greater utilitarian benefit that *Chat-GPT* provides, which drives a particular form of market reasoning that outsource morality and thinking to be defined by market forces. The neoliberal market is only interested in individual competition and has little consideration for the cultivation of the human through ethics and virtue (*homo-ethicus*). As *Rabbi* Jonathan Sacks aptly said, “When morality is outsourced to either the market or the state, society has no substance, only systems.”<sup>25</sup> This may have severe implications for the way in which Islam is learned, understood and applied to address the complexities induced by modernity. When religious discourse is only reduced to a set of systems, it becomes *kafkaesque* and loses its transformative power for human flourishing. According to *Imam* Al-Mawardi, in order to strive for the common good, it is imperative to incorporate a creative, ethical mode of thinking that is only possible through an interdisciplinary approach. He describes this method as one that fuses the truths of the jurists (*tahqiq al-fuqaha*) and the intricacies of the litterateurs (*wa tarqiq al-udaba*).<sup>26</sup> Al-Mawardi drew inspiration from the scriptural tradition of Islam but did not restrict his enquiry to these sources. Instead, he also drew on parables found in the writings of philosophers and poets to interpret the text. However, the main question is why didn’t he limit himself to a particular discipline? It is because restricting oneself while attempting to understand the problems of the world would be futile. In his words:<sup>27</sup>

“.....  
 The hearts take comfort in multiple disciplines (*funun*) and become bored  
 with a single discipline  
 .....

[24] Bunt, G. R. (2018). *Hashtag islam: How Cyber-Islamic Environments are Transforming Religious Authority*. (p.86). The University of North Carolina Press.

[25] Sacks, J. (2005). *To Heal a Fractured World: The Ethics of Responsibility*. (p.30). Schoken Books.

[26] Ali ibn Muhammad al-Mawardi (1882) *Adab al-dunya wal al-din*, (p.2). Qusannyah Maba’at al-Jaw’ib.

[27] Ibid.

## **Conclusion**

In short, learning multiple disciplines requires time and effort, and the totalising nature of *Chat-GPT* disregards these qualifiers in favour of convenience and utility. Even if it can produce a religious response that draws from multiple sources, it is imprisoned to the letter of the law and lacks the qualitative knowledge that prevents us from understanding its value. Nonetheless, it is crucial to note that it does not appear in a vacuum rather, it is also a product of factors that have reduced religion to a legal barometer.<sup>28</sup> When religion is reduced only to rituals, it will only act as a cog in a machine that can be replaced as long as the machine keeps running. This machine is the market, and there is a need to reconfigure our intellectual impulses to act as a countervailing force against the pervasive mechanisation of the world. The question then would be, how do we do it?

[28] Alkiek, T. (2020, October 18). Shari'ah: From diverse legal discourse to colonial misrepresentation. Yaqeen Institute for Islamic Research. Retrieved April 6, 2023, from <https://yaqeeninstitute.org/read/paper/shariah-from-diverse-legal-discourse-to-colonial-misrepresentation>



## **About Author**

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## **About RPCS**

*The Research Programme in the Study of Muslim Communities of Success (RPCS) is developed as part of Muis' efforts in advancing religious thought leadership for the future. The programme seeks to develop contextualised bodies of knowledge on socio-religious issues that are typical for Muslim communities living in secular states and advanced economies. The RPCS focus will be on developing new understanding, interpretations and application of Islamic principles, values and traditions to contemporary issues and challenges.*

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