

“GAINING KNOWLEDGE”  
SALAFI ACTIVISM IN GERMAN  
AND DUTCH ONLINE FORUMS\*

by

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*Recent years have witnessed an expansion of Salafi activism into computer-mediated environments like online discussion forums. Forum activities are part of the activists' endeavour to access the religious sources (Quran and Sunnah) and, through these sources, the lives of the prophet Muhammad and the first generations of Muslims. The prophet and the first generations embody the perfect model of a (Muslim) life which Salafi Muslims strive to emulate. This article analyses the knowledge practices of Salafi Muslims in Dutch and German discussion forums revolving around the religious sources. Knowledge practices are understood as meaning-making activities that tell people how to behave and how to “be in the world”. Four aspects are central to Salafi knowledge practices in Dutch and German forums: (1) Fragmentation and re-alignment form the basic ways of dealing with digitized corpus of Islamic knowledge and (2) open the way for Salafi Muslims to engage in “Islamic argumentation” in the course of which they “excavate” behavioural rules in form of a “script” from Quran and Sunnah. (3) These practices are set within the cognitive collaboration of forum members and part of a broader decentralizing tendency within Islam. (4) And finally, narratives and sensual environments circulating in forums help activists to overcome contradictions and ambiguities while trying to put the script, which tells them what to do in which situation, into practice.*

**KEYWORDS**

*Salafism, Germany, Netherlands, knowledge practices, online forums*

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## 1. INTRODUCTION: SALAFISM AND COMPUTER-MEDIATED ENVIRONMENTS

Domain names like “salafishare”, “salaf” or “selefienederland” indicate a development that has taken place over the last years and is still continuing: the migration of Salafi-Islamic knowledge into computer-mediated environments.<sup>1</sup> Computer-mediated activities of Muslims inspired by Salafism take place in the broader context of the emergence of Salafism as a socio-religious movement in Europe and elsewhere.<sup>2</sup> Salafi activists are Muslims who actively strive to emulate the life of the prophet Muhammad and the first generations of Muslims (*al-salaf al-salih*, hence the term Salafism or *salafiyah* in Arabic) as the perfect Muslim model in every part of life. Salafism implies a return to the original sources, mainly Quran and Sunnah,<sup>3</sup> in order to know how Muhammad and his companions have actually lived and to be able to follow them. Knowledge practices of Salafi activists center therefore on Quran and Sunnah.

This endeavor is nowadays facilitated by digital technologies and computer-mediated environments. They co-exist with the more established environments of Islamic knowledge production like study groups, mosques and university classes. The recent emergence of Salafi activism on the internet is by no means the first time that Islam “goes digital”. Over two decades ago in the 1980s Muslims with the necessary skills and access to the Internet carried their interests in Islam into the web.<sup>4</sup> Most of them were part of student and professional diaspora in Western countries. They started to re-edited religious sources like the Quran, the collected traditions of the prophet and authoritative works of Quranic exegesis (*tafsir*) as digital databases that can be accessed nowadays in manifold ways: through wikis, DVDs, CD ROMs, interactive websites or simple online databases. Later, they were joined by Muslim religious scholars, the *ulama'*, who provide authoritative content and answers to Islamic questions.<sup>5</sup> These Islam-related

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<sup>1</sup> Computer-mediated environments or computer-mediated communication (CMC) feature communicative transactions involving networked computers. Examples of CMC are chat rooms, e-mails, online forums, instant messages and complete social environments like Second Life.

<sup>2</sup> Wiktorowicz, Q. 2006, 'Anatomy of the Salafi Movement', *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism*, vol. 29, no. 3, pp. 207-239.

<sup>3</sup> The Sunnah includes transmissions of what the prophet Muhammad has said, done and not done. These transmissions are called *hadith* (plural *ahadith*). Evaluating the authenticity of the transmissions is the domain of hadith scholars who, with the help of certain theological-scientific procedures, try to make sure that what a hadith says about the prophet is true.

<sup>4</sup> See Bunt, G. R. 2003, *Islam in the Digital Age. E-Jihad, Online Fatwas and Cyber Islamic Environment*, Pluto Press and Anderson, J. W. 2003, 'New media, new publics: Reconfiguring the Public Sphere of Islam', *Social Research*, vol. 70, no. 3, pp. 887-906.

<sup>5</sup> Anderson, J. W. & Gonzalez-Quijano, Y. 2004, 'Technological Mediation and the Emergence of Transnational Muslim Publics' in *Public Islam and the Common Good*, eds. A. Salvatore and D. Eickelman, Brill, Leiden, pp. 62-65.

Internet practices of Muslims and the increasing access to technologies relocate Islam in multi-dimensional and computer-mediated environments. The digital databases form the foundation of the interpretational work and conversations carried out by thousands of Muslim users in chat rooms, online forums, e-mails and many other computer-mediated environments. Within the last years the composition of those using new media technologies in order to engage with Islam has diversified due to the expansion of new media technologies into everyday life.

What sets Salafism apart from other forms of Muslim activism is the centrality of the religious sources closely linked to the lives of Muhammad and the *salaf al-salih* as the perfect Muslim example as envisioned by God and, in line with that, to reject all innovations that have entered Islam since its early foundational period. This inclination to “purify” Islam and Islamic practices puts potentially everything that has been written and done by Muslims since the death of Muhammad and his companions under scrutiny. Everything needs to be tested and checked whether it is in accordance with the sources which are the ultimate authorities. Therefore, Salafi knowledge practices build upon the notion of purifying the legacy of Islam accumulated in the centuries after the *salaf al-salih*.

This article focuses on how these knowledge practices are “done” in online discussion forums, a computer-mediated environment extensively used by Salafi activists in Germany and the Netherlands. The thoughts presented here result from my on-going research on Salafism and the new media.<sup>6</sup> In the following I am going to sketch out four aspects of Salafi knowledge practices in online discussion forums which I consider central to the understanding of Salafism in Germany and the Netherlands: (1) the continuous fragmentation and convergence of Salafi knowledge, (2) the mastering of “Islamic argumentation”, (3) the de-centralization of Salafi knowledge production and the emergence of group-based cognitive collaboration and (4) narratives as well as sensual environments as ways to deal with contradictions and ambiguities. They are all part of a “Salafi epistemology”, the way Salafi activists process knowledge, within computer-mediated environments. Before I engage with these aspects in part three of this article, let me

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<sup>6</sup> My project focuses on chat rooms and online forums. Data is gathered through participant observation and interviews in computer-mediated and offline environments (mosques, homes of activists etc.). Additionally, I resort to discursive material (graphical, audio-visual and text) used and circulated by Salafi activists. I should mention that I have no access to environments that are restricted to Muslims or a closed group of people. This refers mostly to environments with “Jihadi” tendencies. Research ethics I subscribe to do not allow to employ false identities, like pretending to be a Muslim or Jihadi, in order to gain access to a closed environment.

first clarify a few theoretical underpinnings of knowledge practices in computer-mediated environments.

## 2. KNOWLEDGE PRACTICES WITHIN CMC ENVIRONMENTS

Intuitively, most people link knowledge practices to the established fields of knowledge production like academia, the publishing market or expert/intellectual debates. However, I understand knowledge practices in a much broader way. They are a crucial component of everyday life and embedded in all social practices. According to Casas-Cortés et al. knowledge and knowledge practices range from “things we are more classically trained to define as knowledge, such as practices that engage and run parallel to the knowledge of scientists or policy experts, to micro-political and cultural interventions that have more to do with “know-how” or the cognitive practice that informs all social activity and which vie with the most basic social institutions that teach us how to be in the world...”<sup>7</sup>

I suggest that especially the latter aspect of “how to be in the world” is important if we want to understand the behavior of people in everyday lives and the decisions they make. Knowledge includes knowing what is right and what is wrong, what is socially appropriate and what kind of behavior applies to which situations. This knowledge expresses itself in different ways, as ideologies, stories, narratives or in bodily behavior. Everybody learns “appropriate” behavior during her or his life, in school and through family. Knowledge very often carries the notions of true/false, good/bad, beautiful/ugly, permitted/prohibited or in the case of Salafi activists Islamic/un-Islamic, *halal/haram*<sup>8</sup> etc. This knowledge is our normative baggage or, in Foucauldian terms, our social dispositions, that tell us how to inhabit the world as social persons, very often without us being conscious of this “baggage”.

However, knowledge is not static and unchangeable once it has been acquired. Knowledges — I prefer the plural since it indicates the multiplicity and diversity of knowledge — are re-produced, modified and enacted in knowledge practices. Every re-enactment and appropriation of knowledge opens up possibilities of transformation because knowledge has to be adapted to the context and circumstances of a situation. An obvious example of knowledge practices is the enactment of gender. The current dominating idea of the heterosexual order is daily practiced in different socio-cultural

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<sup>7</sup> Casas-Cortés, M. I., Osterweil, M. and Powell, D.E. 2008, 'Blurring Boundaries: Recognizing Knowledge-Practices in the Study of Social Movements', *Anthropological Quarterly*, vol. 81, no. 1, p. 21.

<sup>8</sup> *Halal* designates things and behaviour that is permissible according to Islamic law. The opposite is *haram*.

contexts in different forms. At the same time this gender notion is, sometimes playfully, undermined by it through transgender practices or, on the other side, strict gender segregation.

Knowledge practices produce cognitive schemata that orient and guide the perception of events. Whether we understand an economic crisis as an opportunity for renewal or reform or as a catastrophe destroying our lives is a question of the cognitive schema we apply in this situation. These schemata are part of our dispositions and represent knowledge stored in memory and “activated for the interpretative task of making sense”<sup>9</sup> of situations and events. Knowledge practices produce therefore truths and subjectivity (“how to be in the world”).

This constructivist approach to knowledges and knowledge practices also implies that they are situated rather than universal. Knowledge is generated or constructed under specific circumstances and in the course of the interaction of different actors. This draws in our case the attention to the technological environments where this knowledge practices take place. Since I am concerned with knowledge practices within the specific material structure of online discussion forums the conjunction of knowledge practices with this specific material structure is important. In the transdisciplinary field of science and technology studies we encounter the notion of non-human actors within the actor-network theory. Most prominently Latour postulated the agency of artifacts including technologies as non-human actors. He incorporated their agency in the notion of interobjectivity according to which subjects are embedded in changeable networks of human as well as non-human, but nevertheless socially relevant, actors. It is not intersubjectivity (communication between human beings) alone that drives social action and development. Rather, inter-objectivity as the routinized relation between human and non-human actors (artefacts)—which includes intersubjectivity—accounts for social structures and behavior.<sup>10</sup> Works like Woolgar's research on how computers configure the user<sup>11</sup> capture this idea of non-human agency.

There is much more left to say about actor-network theory and the notion of interobjectivity. However, for our purposes the notion of non-human actors that interact with human-actors and thereby form practices stands central. The online forums where Salafi activists engage with each other and

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<sup>9</sup> Johnston, H. 1995, 'A Methodology for Frame Analysis: From Discourse to Cognitive Schemata. in *Social Movements and Culture*, eds. H. Johnston and B. Klandermans, Routledge, London, p. 217.

<sup>10</sup> For the notion of interobjectivity in general see Latour, B. 1991, *Nous n'avons jamais été modernes: essai d'anthropologie symétrique*, La Découverte, Paris.

<sup>11</sup> Woolgar, S. 1994, 'Rethinking the dissemination of science and technology', CRICT discussion paper, Brunel University.

with the body of knowledge do not determine the process of knowledge production. However, the technological properties of these computer-mediated environments do partly account for the different ways through which knowledges can be gathered, handled or simply “practiced”. They describe the potentialities inherent in these particular computer-mediated environment regarding social activities like knowledge practices. Which potentialities actually become “reality” is a question of the interaction between the human and non-human actors. They will be taken into account in the following sketch of the “epistemology” of Salafism in online forums.

### **3. EPISTEMOLOGY OF SALAFISM IN ONLINE DISCUSSION FORUMS**

In the following, I will lay out the general communicative properties of online forums and link them to the “epistemology” of Salafism. By “epistemology”, I refer to the ways a person thinks, perceives, organizes, remembers and enacts knowledge. The central questions regarding Salafi knowledge practices are thus: What do the activists regard as knowledge? How do they acquire knowledge in CMC environments? How do they incorporate and embed the acquired knowledge into their everyday life? As mentioned before, I argue that there are four important aspects of knowledge practices that come to the forefront in online forums where Salafi activists discuss: (1) fragmentation and convergence of knowledges, (2) appropriation of “Islamic argumentation”, (3) the decentralization of knowledge production accompanied by interpersonal cognitive collaboration among activists and (4) narratives and sensual environments.

#### **3.1. FRAGMENTATION AND CONVERGENCE OF SALAFI KNOWLEDGE**

Looking at the structure of a Salafi online forum, and of online forums in general, reveals an important property of communication: fragmentation and re-alignment or convergence. Knowledge is categorized and compartmentalized into so called subforums. These subforums are defined by the administrators. Forum participants who want to start a discussion must choose a subforum that they see best fit for their topic. Moderators and administrators may relocate the discussion to another subforum if they consider it “off-topic”. It depends of course on the administrators and moderators how strictly they handle rules concerning off-topic discussions. However, it is difficult for participants to escape the categorization of discussions according to the pre-configured subforums. The names and spe-

cifications of subforums indicate what forum administrators and moderators consider to be important knowledge and central information.

Salafi forums typically feature subforums on *aqidah* (creed), *manhaj* (method or practice) and *fiqh* (jurisprudence). Furthermore, one will often find subforums on news events, the history of Islam, *bid'a* (not permissible innovations) and deviations, *tazkiyah* (purification of body and soul), entertainment (poems and *anasheed*<sup>12</sup>), conversions to Islam as well as on Islam viewed by modern sciences. Usually, the discussions start either with a call for advice in a specific situation, or with a concrete question relating to religious rituals, with a comment on a recent (news) event, with a fatwa or with a statement about not permissible innovations (*bid'a*) which threaten the purity of Islam.

The fragmentation into subforums continues also in the central element of discussion forums, the thread. A thread consists of a sequence of contributions that refer to each other and together form the discussion about a specific topic. Discussion participants are able to refer to the initial question, to a contribution of another writer or to several contributions that are cited into the post. This often leads to a branching out of threads since participants can take up any given sentence and continue the debate from there. This fragmentation is simultaneously accompanied by a re-alignment of bits and pieces into one line of argument. Many different media forms (audios, videos, text, graphics etc.) converge in one post thanks to hyperlinks and copy/paste functions. Furthermore, the discussion participants employ different expressive and literary styles. They range from essayistic, academic-epistemic, poetic, and journalistic to casual and also inappropriate language like cursing or abusing. Some posts are written in a style that (Muslim) readers will associate with fatwas. They all evoke different forms of "authority" and claim-making. The long sentences, religious vocabulary and the abundance of citations and references to religious sources typical for fatwas try to generate the infallible authority of the religious and the divine. Scientific language is used to evoke credibility and cogency attributed to the modern sciences and scientific facts.

Most forum rules forbid abusing and cursing among forum members since it is not compatible with the *adab*, the good and dignified manners of the prophet and his companions which are testified in Quran and Sunnah. Cursing, swearing and abusing however do occur in discussions on forums where either non-Salafi Muslims form the majority or where some members

<sup>12</sup> *Anasheed* (singular: *nasheed*) are songs that refer to an "Islamic" ethos. Traditionally, they are sung a capella. This musical style is characterized as Islamic because many religious scholars regard the use of musical instruments with the exception of percussion instruments as not permissible.

challenge the dominant discourses. Especially in discussions with Muslims who Salafi activists label as “*ahl al-bid'a*” (the people of non-permissible innovation) debates quickly heat up and curses become part of the conversation. In forums that clearly lean towards the *salafiyah* abusive language among like-minded discussants is rarely seen. However, other forms of language deemed inappropriate is a contested issue and its handling closely linked to the authority of the discussants involved. In the case of people who are considered to have more knowledge than the rest of the contributors inappropriate language is rather seen as a slip of the tongue and a small, temporary misbehavior that was triggered by the apparent lack of knowledge or misbehavior of those involved in the discussion. It is comparable to a teacher confronted with a somewhat dull student and who becomes impatient. Those who are more skilled in using the religious sources and presenting the knowledge in a coherent way often react harsh and remind members of the forums to come up with evidence and not to post opinions based on their wishes and own comfort.

The following section outlines how the characteristic forum features of fragmentation and realignment are used by Salafi activists to appropriate “Islamic argumentation”. “Islamic argumentation” is a key interpretive process wherein the religious sources are put into current contexts

### 3.2. “ISLAMIC ARGUMENTATION”:

#### RE-APPROPRIATING THE RELIGIOUS SOURCES

From the point of view of most Salafi activists, a pure “Islamic argumentation”<sup>13</sup> has to start with a proper and clear understanding of the actual situation which has triggered the question. This situation is then linked to a similar situation in the life of the prophet Muhammad or his companions or to a statement in the Quran and the hadiths. This necessitates an interpretation of the actual situation in order to be able to make a proper analogy to the life of the prophet and the *salaf al-salih*.<sup>14</sup> The religious sources that are deemed to be applicable need to be explicated in order to find the “Islamically” right way to deal with the situation. The following short discussion consisting of seven contributions taken from a German forum might clarify my point. In the initial post the topic starter asks whether it qualifies as *kufir* (godlessness, unbelief) if “someone who lives in an Islamic state wants to overthrow it or fight against it”. The following two posts ask for further contextual information explaining the reason why this person would want

<sup>13</sup> Many activists use this term. In Dutch they talk about “islamitische bewijsvoering” and in German they name it “islamische Argumentation”.

<sup>14</sup> Wiktorowicz, Q. 2006, 'Anatomy of the Salafi Movement', Studies in Conflict & Terrorism, vol. 29, no. 3, p. 215-216.



to fight. According to the second poster fighting against an Islamic state is synonymous with fighting against Islam and the person fighting can therefore not be a Muslim. In the forth posts the topic starter asks for evidence from Quran and Sunnah for this assertion. Further, he adds that the reason for fighting could be to reform the state and bring it back to Quran and Sunnah. "Is it obligatory", so the poster specifies his questions, "to obey the caliph even if he is at fault?"<sup>15</sup> The contextualization of the situation (a caliph at fault) leads to two cases: the person fights against an Islamic state because he/she is against Islam or he/she fights against an Islamic state because its leader, the caliph, is not ruling according to the religious sources. In the following three post, different links are made to Quran and Sunnah in order to find evidence. According to the discussant, if the person fights against an Islamic state because he/she wants to fight against Islam every Quranic verse on "open *kufir*" is applicable since fighting against Islam is the epitome of *kufir*. This person is at war with Islam and her actions thus qualify as *kufir*.

As for the second case, one of the posters in the thread, who is also one of the administrator of the forum, interprets the current situation in the light of this question: "Well, as is generally known, there is no Islamic state nowadays. May Allah taAla help us to get one because the lack of such a state is the biggest problem of the Muslims today. And when inshaAllah there will be one we can discuss potential problems." He then comes to a conclusion regarding rebellion against an Islamic ruler which he later bases on a hadith: "But the worst unjust ruler is still much better than that what exists at the moment and the rebellion against an Islamic caliph is not permitted, even if he is a dhaalim [tyran] or faasiq [sinner]. He will have to do many things wrong before the scholars come together in order to discuss his possible dismissal. And that is also an *ijtihad*<sup>16</sup> question for the scholars. We are not supposed to participate in this discussion." In order to provide evidence he refers to the hadith collection of Bukhari: "You should listen and obey [your ruler] even if he is an Ethiopian and his head looks like a raisin." He argues that in this case rebellion might not be considered *kufir* as in the

<sup>15</sup> All translations of research data (German/Dutch/Arabic to English) are mine unless stated otherwise.

<sup>16</sup> *Ijtihad* is a term of Islamic law. It describes the process of arriving at a judgement through the independent interpretation of the religious sources. The opposite of *ijtihad* is *taqlid*, imitating and following a ruling without going through its argumentation. *Ijtihad* is the domain of religious scholars of Islamic law. Salafi activists consider themselves not knowledgeable enough to be able to engage in *ijtihad*. Furthermore, they reason that many questions have already been answered in the course of the centuries after the prophet's death. It is therefore more beneficial to follow these rulings and to restrict oneself to ensuring that this rulings are based on authentic hadiths.

first case, however it is forbidden to rebel since the prophet ordered to obey and listen to the rulers.

In this example we find the most important parts of an Islamic argumentation: an initial question/ problem, the interpretation of the current situation and its context and finally the link to the original sources that then provide the answer. The answer varies according to the interpretation of the situation, here the reasons for rebelling.

Although Salafi activists very often take over the ruling of a recognized religious scholar (*alim*, pl. *ulama'*) they consider it a duty to make sure that they are following a ruling based on authentic (*sahih*) hadiths. "If the basis is wrong", so I was told by an activists, "it is our problem because with the Internet we have access to all sources so that we can verify and correct each other." During a discussion on a Dutch forum about the permissibility of removing body hair, a generally appreciated contributor states: "There are scholars who say that music is permissible, alcohol, gold for men and that women are allowed to dance or even participate in movies. There are scholars that say that a woman does not need a mahram<sup>17</sup> for traveling... and I could continue like this for hours. What I want to say by this is that you always have to test their claims on the basis of Quran and Sunnah." Those who are suspected of accepting rulings without making sure that they do not contradict Quran and Sunnah are pejoratively called "*muqallid*", somebody who follows blindly a ruling.

Threads—or to be more precise the potentialities of the technology within forums—allow Salafi activists do engage in this process of verification: to look at an argumentation in all its detail, to take it apart, to go back and forth between different sections and to put the argument back together. These cognitive practices involve fragmentation and realignment which is greatly facilitated and also intensified by the structure of the forum and the different means of convergence (hyperlinks, copy/paste, citation tools etc.).

Quran and Sunnah are not the only sources people resort to in order to further their argument. Knowledges that are not specifically Islamic or that are simply "common sense" are quite often used. Excerpts from generally approved dictionaries ("Van Dale" in Dutch and "Der Duden" in German) are pasted into postings in order to clarify the meaning of words. One thread discussed the question whether home schooling was advisable in order to keep children away from the influence of a *kafir* system, a system build on disbelief and the rejection of faith. The ensuing debate followed the

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<sup>17</sup> A *mahram* is a blood relative with whom a marriage (sexual intercourse) is forbidden or haram. Based on evidence from religious sources Salafi activists believe that women are not allowed to travel beyond a certain range around their house without a *mahram*.

same lines one would expect to occur in a debate on home schooling in a Christian or non-religious context. Many voiced their skepticism on home schooling since children need to socialize in order to learn how to live in a society or, as somebody wrote, in order to know the enemy. This thread included no reference to the religious sources. This is not surprising since home schooling is a modern phenomenon and a reaction to a public schooling system. One post featured a link to the web page of the interest organization "Thuisonderwijs".<sup>18</sup>

Non-Islamic sources seem to be acceptable if they do not contradict or question Quran and Sunnah and can be understood as supporting "Islamic argumentation". There is thus a hierarchy of sources: The purer, meaning the closer to Quran and Sunnah, the better. Very popular is what Hess calls "counterexpertise":<sup>19</sup> the knowledge of people, who are initially not part of one's own group, but whose statements verify the group's claims. Classic examples in the literature on anti-nuclear power movements are nuclear scientist publicly speaking out against the danger of nuclear power. Their claims carry authority since they belong to the adversary camp and are therefore conceived to be negatively biased. The fact that even they come to the same conclusion and cannot dismiss it is seen as evidence for the truthfulness of the group's claims. This form of evidence supports Salafi activists in their belief and is experienced as empowering: If even the adversaries have to admit it and even convert to our belief we must be on the right path. Subforums with (modern, secular) scientific evidence supporting the truthfulness of the Islamic sources or conversion stories feature this form of counterexpertise. Especially the latter, conversion stories, are seen as strong witnesses to the truth of Islam. Activists I have talked to describe the persuasive power and beauty of God's message that resounds in these stories.

Discussion forums exhibit a general bias in favor of digitized knowledge. This is, of course, partly due to the digital nature of the technology. On the other hand, forum administrators and moderators constantly remind participants to provide evidence or indicate sources. Failing to do provide "acceptable" sources can have disciplinary consequences like blocking the thread, censor posts, unsubscribe the participant or deleting the thread. *Dalil* (evidence) is crucial to "Islamic argumentation" according to the Salafi understanding. "If people just talk and they do not know anything about Islam, that is bad for Islam. Bad things and innovations will enter the religion

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<sup>18</sup> Dutch for home schooling.

<sup>19</sup> Hess, D. J. 2007, 'Crosscurrents: Social Movements and the Anthropology of Science and Technology', *American Anthropologist*, vol. 109, no. 3, p. 469.

and corrupt it. Muslims have to base their knowledge on evidence," so I was told by an activists.

### 3.3. DE-CENTRALIZING SALAFI KNOWLEDGE PRODUCTION AND COGNITIVE COLLABORATION

The duty to provide evidence and to use the evidence in an acceptable way puts a huge burden on activists. They are asked to do what religious scholars have to study for many years. On the other hand, it implies a certain level of empowerment: online forums grant activists access to the religious sources and enable them to search with the help of wiki-like databases or simple search functions within Quran and Sunnah for the pieces they need. Salafi activists taking part in an online forum are not expected to have a huge corpus of Islamic knowledge learned or memorized—in contrast to established religious scholars. However, they establish their authority by knowing where to access this knowledge when needed.<sup>20</sup> The *ulama'* have not become superfluous. To the contrary, they are still of great importance for Salafi activists as hadith scholars. However, they have lost their role as sole mediators between the sources and the believer since Salafi activists do not only go back to the now digitized sources with the help of online forums. They have also appropriated "Islamic argumentation" from the monopoly of the religious scholars.

Many researchers have interpreted this process of "de-monopolization" as a sign of democratization or pluralization leading to more openness and tolerance. Mandaville, however, rightfully points out that we should rather regard these processes "as the intensification of a tendency towards decentralized authority that has always been present in Islam."<sup>21</sup> These developments are therefore yet another shift in the debates about meaning and knowledge in Islam. Other authors have analyzed similar shifts that usually appeared in the aftermath of the introduction of new technologies and media. Hamzah provides an interesting account of the introduction of print mass media and the ensuing changes within the concept of religious authority triggered by the emergence of the "Muslim publicists".<sup>22</sup> Similarly, Anderson analyses the shift from classic mass media to Internet within the

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<sup>20</sup> Schiltz, M., Truyen, F. & Coppens, H. 2007, 'Cutting the Trees of Knowledge: Social Software, Information Architecture and Their Epistemic Consequences', Thesis Eleven, no. 89, p. 100.

<sup>21</sup> Mandaville, P. 2007, 'Globalization and the Politics of Religious Knowledge. Pluralizing Authority in the Muslim World', Theory, Culture & Society, vol. 24, no. 2, p. 102.

<sup>22</sup> Hamzah, D. 2006, 'From 'ilm to sihafa or: the genealogy and epistemology of the Salafi turn. Muhammad Rashid Rida (1865-1935) and his journal al-Manar (1898-1935)' paper presented at the conference 'Global Communication of Fundamentalist Knowledge', 14 – 16 December, Trondheim.

realm of Muslim knowledge production. The significance of this shift is, according to him, that new groups, are able to enter the debate. Just like Mandaville, he carefully avoids the term democratization.<sup>23</sup>

It should be noted here that “Islamic argumentation” in the understanding of Salafi activists does not involve the application of human intellect or logic which Salafi activists decry as rationalism. Wiktorowicz observes that “Salafis operate as though the Quran and hadith are self-explanatory: if the scholar has enough training and knowledge, then the vast majority of derived rulings are clear and indisputable.”<sup>24</sup> The main function of religious scholars is to “unearth the truth from the original sources and immerse themselves in an “archeology of divine texts”.<sup>25</sup> It is a very positivist approach to knowledge operating with the binary of forbidden/allowed (or *haram/halal*) and good/bad.

Decentralization is also intensified by inter-group communication increasing a person's imaginative interaction with the self. In computer-mediated environments identity, be it collective or individual, becomes a highly cognitive creation. Since previous knowledge and physical cues about a person one encounters online is usually lacking identity needs to be reconstituted.<sup>26</sup> One is constantly put before the task to define oneself, be it by filling in online forms with drop down menus or by positioning oneself in a online discussion. This requires conscious “identity work” and ignites intrapersonal processes in the course of which a person constructs a consistent narrative of herself, her life and her ideas in order to be able to communicate. This process is not only intrapersonal, that is an internal process taking place within a person. On online discussion forums people share these intrapersonal processes or jointly construct ideas through cognitive collaboration. This online collaboration fosters a small-group and vanguard feeling: the imagination to be elected and invested with the “Truth”. Salafi activists talking about their internet use confirm this. They do not only appreciate the knowledge that is available—“Internet is knowledge”, as one activist put it—they also support each other and enjoy the process of intensive joint collaboration when trying to find the Islamic answer to a problem. One activists summed this jokingly up with “Yes, we are nerds. And we enjoy it.”

<sup>23</sup> Anderson, J. W. 1999, 'The Internet and Islam's New Interpreters' in *New Media in the Muslim World: The Emerging Public Sphere*, eds. D. F. Eickelman and J. W. Anderson, Indiana University Press, p. 45—60.

<sup>24</sup> Wiktorowicz, Q. 2006, 'Anatomy of the Salafi Movement', *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism*, vol. 29, no. 3, p. 210.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid.

<sup>26</sup> See Shedletsky, L.J. & Aitken, J.E. 2004, *Human Communication on the Internet*, Pearson Education, Boston.

One activity underlines both the playfulness and seriousness that the last statement exhibits and that is quite characteristic of the cognitive collaboration among Salafi activists. Question-answer quizzes are quite popular among Salafi activists and, according to them, a fun way to learn collectively. A quiz is usually started by a forum member who poses a question the answer to which can be found in Quran and Sunnah. A typical example taken from a German forum is: "Who is the sahabiyyah [a female member of the *sahaba*, the companions of the prophet in his lifetime, C.B.] to whom the name "the one with the two waistbands" was given?" Participants will find the answers in the religious sources and are asked to provide evidence. The person who comes up with the right answer may then ask the following question. The whole quiz develops in a thread that can include over 1000 single postings and be active over a period of four years. Quizzes are especially popular and active during Ramadan. There is something "nerdy" in this activity: Participants pursue the search for the right answer quite passionately and competitively. "The more difficult, the better", so one participant reacting on the question whether the quiz should go on, "...we are here to stimulate and challenge each other and to learn from each other with reference to our deen [religion]." Three aspects of cognitive collaboration appear in this reaction: A certain competitiveness (who finds the best evidence, who can explain things best etc.), mutual support in finding (Islamic) answers to questions and the idea of collective learning. The role of collectivity and social interaction in these activities differ from the general notion of a "nerd" who is usually seen as a loner and not very sociable. Collective learning is also very much present in offline environments where activists come together in self-organized study groups or lectures in order to teach each other and together read the works of established religious scholars. However, in computer-mediated environments like forums cognitive collaboration is intensified through the possibilities of fragmenting and re-aligning knowledge collaboratively. At the same time, these environments foster some sort of group-feeling based on cognitive collaboration that accelerates the de-centralizing tendencies within Islam since no higher instance regulates or even sanctions the knowledge practices of these groups.

### **3.4. DEALING WITH AMBIGUITY: NARRATIVES AND SENSUAL ENVIRONMENTS**

As we have seen, Salafi activists are able to appropriate knowledge about the ultimate model of a Muslim life inscribed in the lives of the prophet Muhammad and the first three generations (*al-salaf al-salih*). In the forums

(and other environments) they unearth the script of an ideal Muslim life telling them what should be done in which situation. Some activists liken it to a manual or a guideline, guiding them on the right path. However, following the notion of performativity as developed by Judith Butler<sup>27</sup>, a script needs to be performed and embodied in order to claim authority. The knowledge gained by activists needs to be “done”, put into practice or translated into the social actions of everyday life.

As it is often the case when theory encounters social practices, not everything interconnects smoothly. Many discussions on the forums about failures to live up to the demands of the Salafi model bear witness to the difficulty of incorporating the model into everyday lives and practices. The gap between the social world as envisioned in Quran and Sunnah and the lifeworlds of Salafi activists living in Germany and the Netherlands is a constant challenge. It is for example close to impossible to uphold the norm of strict gender segregation at school, university, workplace or even in a bus or to reduce interaction with unbelievers and non-Salafi Muslims to the permissible maximum of *da'wa* (invitation to Islam). Furthermore, the religious sources do not always provide a clear-cut answer. Activists are often faced with contradictory rulings of the religious scholars which can all be traced back to authentic hadiths and the Quran. This ambiguity or equivocality of the sources is difficult to admit and to deal with since the sources are assumed to be internally logic and a clear guide for the believers.

Sometimes the rigidity of the sources causes uncomfortable feelings because what the sources “demand” may contradict beliefs, intuition or behavior of the activists. This form of cognitive dissonance<sup>28</sup>, a contradiction of two or more cognitions (idea, belief, behavior, feeling, experience etc.), leads to stress and challenges the consistent and conflict-free concept activists foster about their own selves. One strategy to overcome this unpleasant feeling of inconsistency would be to deny the claim that the source are intrinsically logic. This is however rarely done and forums or other computer-mediated environments are not the place to question the religious sources. Activists who talk about this kind of cognitive stress on forums usually ask

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<sup>27</sup> Butler, J. 1990, 'Performative Acts and Gender Constitution: An Essay in Phenomenology and Feminist Theory' in *Performing Feminisms: Feminist Critical Theory and Theatre*, ed. S.-E. Case, John Hopkins University Press. While Butler developed the notion of performativity with reference to gender roles and discourses, Saba Mahmood uses Butler's work in order to analyse the activities of women within the piety movement in Egypt. Mahmood, S. 2005, *Politics of Piety. The Islamic Revival and the Feminist Subject*, Princeton University Press, Princeton & Oxford.

<sup>28</sup> Cognitive dissonance is a concept rooted in social psychology. Originally articulated by Leon Festinger it was later reformulated by Elliot Aronson and others. For a good overview see Copper, J. M. 2007, *Cognitive dissonance: 50 years of classic theory*, Sage Publications, London.

the “sisters and brothers fi deen” (sisters and brothers in religion) to do *du’at* (invocation; sing. *du’a*) for them. This form of religious invocation is believed to convey strength and deepen the *iman* (belief) of a person. *Du’at* are taken from the religious sources and are believed to have been employed by Muhammad and the *salaf al-salih*. “I have noticed that the dunya [the here and now, the worldly matters as opposed to the afterlife, closeness to God] has intruded my heart far too deep and this is subhanallah [praise to God; often used to express disapproval] like poison for my iman [belief]”, a long-standing activist writes anxiously on a forum, “may Allah forgive you and me, guide us and give us al firdaws [paradise] and guide my family. I beg you all for du’a, please.” This statement is not unusual in its anxiety and feeling of urgency. In such cases, respondents post *du’at* that match the situation and write encouraging words, often referring to their own experience. Most forums host a subforum dedicated to posting *du’at*.

Another strategy to overcome dissonance and ambiguity are narratives which help to put the pieces together in a meaningful way and to encourage activists in their belief. Narratives string together single discourses and symbols so that they generate meaning and overcome the unpleasant feelings generated by ambiguities and contradictions. Narratives are in particular the domain of young imams, lecturers and also active bloggers and discussion participants who are able to tell a meaningful story by reproducing a series of events, information and details in a clearly structured and intrinsically logic form. These “narrators” have diverse backgrounds but share the interpretive skill to explain the world. They possess knowledge of local contexts because they usually share the life worlds of the activists and know about the contradictions and problems they face when practicing their religion. This gives them a unique position vis-à-vis the somewhat distant religious scholars. They are well informed about geo-political events and translate them into local context. By doing this, they frequently employ concepts of secular social movements like imperialism, global justice, exploitation and self-determination. They break the demanding Salafi script down into concrete rules, behaviors and actions.

These narratives are not only (re)produced and circulated as videos, audio files, pictures, poems etc. in the web. They are also appropriated by activists. I suggest that narratives and sensual environments are another form of knowledge practices in addition to the more textual discursive way of acquiring knowledge through “Islamic argumentation” described before. They also tell activists how to be or feel in the world and how to inhabit it. They rather address the nervous system and the senses without going



through a deliberate and conscious cognitive process as is the case in an argumentation. Stories about surprising conversions, poems, pictures of clouds forming the word "Allah", a video of a lion seemingly roaring "Allahu Akbar" or *anasheed* (Islamic music) are exemplary components of sensual environments that transport meaningful narratives. These sensual environments activate and organize cognitive access to the transcendental, an area that lies usually beyond discursive rationality and cannot be captured by instrumental logic. They organize access to the transcendental in the sense that they mediate and manifest the idea of God.

The narrative of the "*ghuraba*" (strangers) might serve as a good illustration of a narrative that circulates in audio-visual forms on forums. It is basically a *nasheed* (Islamic song)<sup>29</sup> whose text is based on a hadith. Activists have produced many different versions of the same *nasheed* mostly by connecting it to different geo-political events or to their own local contexts. They all provide an interpretation of the reality as perceived by many Muslims in order to form a powerful narrative of the marginalized people suffering from injustice but continuing firmly on their path against all odds. This narrative is based on two hadiths which depict the true Muslim as a stranger or traveler who resigns to destiny. The believers are solaced in their isolation from fellow humans—an isolation chosen in order to follow God's path and which pushes them to the margin of the godless society—with the good tidings that Islam began as something strange and will end as something strange.<sup>30</sup> This narrative is underpinned with pictures from conflicts and wars in Iraq, Afghanistan, ex-Yugoslavia, Chechnya and the Palestinian Territories and with evocation of the desolate state of humiliated Muslims in "the West" telling simultaneously the narrative of the marginalization of the (true) Muslims, the repression they face, their resoluteness and their superiority as people traveling on the path of the *salaf al-salih*.

<sup>29</sup> For those interested: videos of this *nasheed* can be found by typing "*ghuraba*" in the search field of youtube.

<sup>30</sup> Texts of the hadiths referred to: Muslim, *Kitab al-Iman* (The Book of Faith), book 1, hadith 270: "It is narrated on the authority of Abu Huraira that the Messenger of Allah (may peace be upon him) said: Islam initiated as something strange, and it would revert to its (old position) of being strange. so good tidings for the stranger.

Bukhar, *Al-Riqaq* (To make the Heart Tender), book 8, volume 76, hadith 425: "Narrated Mujahid: 'Abdullah bin 'Umar said, Allah's Apostle took hold of my shoulder and said, 'Be in this world as if you were a stranger or a traveler. The sub-narrator added: Ibn 'Umar used to say, If you survive till the evening, do not expect to be alive in the morning, and if you survive till the morning, do not expect to be alive in the evening, and take from your health for your sickness, and (take) from your life for your death."

#### 4. CONCLUSION

In this article I have sketched out four different aspects of knowledge practices which together constitute the epistemology of Salafism as encountered in Dutch and German online forums. Fragmentation and re-alignment of the digitized religious sources (Quran and Sunnah) are the basis of Salafi knowledge practices in forums. They are the tools that allow Salafi activists in general to access and appropriate “Islamic argumentation” that has usually been the realm of religious scholars and their students. Through this cognitive tool Salafi activists ensure that they follow the “true” model of Islam, as embodied in the lives of Muhammad and his companions. Furthermore, online forums render a tendency within Islamic knowledge production visible that has been at work for centuries and is pushed around another corner through the emergence of digital technologies: the decentralization of knowledge production. Decentralization is actually also achieved through interpersonal cognitive collaboration. Groups of activists work together within the environment of threads in order to “unearth the Salafi script” which, in their eyes, is essential for practicing Islam. And finally, narratives and sensitive environments rooted in the religious sources (*ana-sheed, du’at* etc.) help activists to overcome contradictions and ambiguities that occur for instance when the Salafi script, or the single rules deduced from the sources, collapse in the face of everyday life.

This list does not claim to be exhaustive. Many aspects have been left unexplored. The circulation of knowledge between computer-mediated environments, the construction of authority and the “use genres”<sup>31</sup> at play at the microlevel interaction between Salafi activists and the computer or interface are just some examples of important areas of knowledge practices that deserve further investigation.

Zooming out of the specific situation of Salafi activists in computer-mediated environments in Germany and the Netherlands and into the broader picture of contemporary Salafism, we see a very diverse picture: It is an ideology drawing on Islam and with a utopia embodied in the lives of the prophet and the *salaf al-salih*. As a social movement it is split into factions that seem to be irreconcilable. Fierce inner-Salafi debates are quite common. Issues revolve around participation in political systems (for example voting in parliamentary, “man-made” as opposed to “Islamic” systems), around the extent and conditions of jihad, the practice of *takfir* among Muslims (declaring somebody infidel) or very specific issues like the right body move-

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<sup>31</sup> For an excellent ethnographically grounded elaboration and discussion of the term see Bakardjeva, M. 2005, *Internet Society. The Internet in everyday life*, Sage Publications, London/ Thousand Oaks/ New Delhi.

ments during prayer. These debates take place around the globe and in translocal spaces. Within each group or network, knowledge is re-produced and embedded. However, in spite of all the diversity and even factional fighting, they all share one claim: to be rooted within the, in their views, unchangeable and not-interpretable texts of Quran and Sunnah.

As the case of Salafi activists in online forums has shown and as the broader picture of Salafism confirms, there is a difference between what people think they do with religious sources and what is actually happening during the processes of reading/hearing/viewing or otherwise consuming these sources. While Salafi activists claim that the religious sources should not be interpreted and not be subjected to human rationality, the various conflicting positions hinted above are all based on a reading of these sources. Salafism is another case in point exhibiting the conflicting nature of meaning generation. Knowledge encoded into text or any other physical form might be decoded in the process of consumption to reveal quite a different message than the encoder had in mind.<sup>32</sup>

The interesting question is then how these different messages come into being. What influences the process of decoding? How is the deciphering and the appropriation of knowledge mediated? This article has tried to shed some, however dim, light on some of these mediating factors within the specific situation of Salafi knowledge practices in computer-mediated environments.

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<sup>32</sup> Mackay, H. 1997, *Consumption and Everyday Life*, Sage Publications, London, p. 10.

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