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Islamic Book and Information Culture: An Overview

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"There is no better friend in the world than the book;
In the house of grief in this time there is no better consoler,
Every moment a hundred kinds of peace come from it
In the corner of loneliness and it never hurts the heart."
--Mollā Jāmī (d. 1492) of Herat (Schimmel, 1995)

"The book is not only a vehicle of communication, it is first and foremost the outstanding expression and reflection of a culture."
(Atiyeh, 1995)

Abstract

This overview, the second article in an exploratory study of the information seeking (IS) behavior of a group of eighty-four reference librarians from Egypt and the USA, is intended to assist readers less familiar with Islamic history to better understand cross-cultural influences on Arab IS behavior. A description of pre-Islamic poetry and orality precedes a discussion of the importance of the Koran and Islamic traditions on the development of a religious, scribal society. Oral transmission of mysteries omitted from texts leads to procedures in establishing the authenticity of scholarly works, which result in high standards of manuscript production. Reasons for Muslim resistance to the printing press are discussed, followed by a chronicle of European invasions that eventually convince Islamic authorities of the need to adopt printing to resist colonial pressure. The early years of publishing see the emergence of distinct centers of publishing in Egypt and Lebanon, and reasons for the quick acceptance of lithography are examined. The acceptance of printing by Muslim clergy marks the beginning of religious publishing. The Arab Awakening is a movement to compel the general Arabic population to take notice of public dialogue in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. The role of printing in the age of self-rule leads to a discussion of current information dissemination in Arab countries. Memorization, orality, Arabic as a linguistic vehicle, illiteracy, and the Arabization of science are discussed as issues in the transmission of knowledge in the modern Middle East.

Keywords

Information seeking behavior; Reference librarians; Islamic book and information culture; Orality; Printing; Publishing in the Middle East; The Arab Awakening; Memorization; Illiteracy; Arabization of science; Information dissemination

Introduction

This article discusses some basic concepts gleaned from works on the history of Arab Islamic book and information culture. Doing justice to something as complex as a major aspect of a worldwide culture is beyond the scope of a short article, but it is hoped that this overview will serve, especially for readers less familiar with Islamic history, as a starting point to a better understanding of cultural influences on Arab information seeking (IS) behavior. This is the second of three articles in an exploratory study of the cross-cultural, cross-language IS behavior of a group of eighty-four academic and public reference librarians from Egypt and the USA ([Hover](#), 2006).

An examination of a specific aspect of individual cultures is a useful tool in the multi-leveled research model needed for cross-cultural interdisciplinary work. Such a study is daunting, however, considering the dynamic nature of culture, and one must be especially thoroughgoing when attempting the study of a culture not one's own. One can nevertheless learn from traditional research resources found in the mature corpus of Islamic civilization area studies, and much effort has been made to ensure a balanced and factual approach in this article.

Pre-Islamic poetry and orality

Orality is prominent among the traditions that nurtured Arabic book culture, beginning with recitations among desert Bedouins before the advent of Islam. Stories of the exploits of the tribes were set to highly developed poetry of legendary beauty and complexity. Every tribe had its poets: "A narrator, or *khatīb*, needed to command every shade of meaning of which his language was capable in order to uphold the honor of his tribe when recounting its heroic deeds, and he had to have a large fund of knowledge that others could inherit from him." ([Pedersen](#), 1984)

The Holy Qur'ān

The Qur'ān (Koran), the holy book of the Muslims, was revealed to Muhammad early in the seventh century. It is remarkable for its linguistic beauty and originality, and also for its oral transmission. "The revelation of the Qur'ān was auditory before becoming crystallized in a written text . . . The whole experience of the Qur'ān for Muslims remains to this day first of all an auditory experience and is only later associated with reading in the ordinary sense of the word." ([Atiyeh](#), 1995). It is regarded literally as the word of God, and thus a miracle of linguistic perfection ([Pedersen](#), 1984).

During the twenty year period of transmission of the Qur'ān, the Prophet also showed exemplary wisdom in regulating the affairs of mankind. The accounts of this wisdom, called *hadīth* ("tradition"), are in addition to the recitations of the Qur'ān, and their importance in the history of Arabic books is far-reaching. They have become fundamental to law and doctrine in Islam, and have generated a huge corpus of scholarly works. They also have had a tremendous impact on the history of other books in the Arab world in another way, for there was a need to establish a preliminary, essential fact: was the saying or deed authentic? Only when the tradition's origin could be traced to the Prophet through a direct link to his closest companions was it considered acceptable. Later, other books followed this pattern.

An ardently religious, scribal society flourished that produced exquisite manuscripts for more than a millennium. The primacy of oral learning, combined with strict conventions governing manuscript production and education, contributed to the maintenance of the social power of the cleric and scribal classes, and in turn sustained an indigenous culture.

Secrets in Arabic manuscripts

There are secrets in Arabic manuscripts. Certain thoughts were purposefully omitted, most notably in Sufi texts, and mysteries were fashioned around these exclusions. These are mysteries, not in the popular Western sense of detectives or romantic thrillers, but in the sense of profoundly spiritual inscrutabilities. Embedded in some of the most erudite works created by mankind, the delight in discovering these insights has enthralled countless seekers of enlightenment. Although this practice helped to perpetuate the status of the learned classes, the Islamic concept of hiding knowledge is less in the nature of keeping secrets from rivals, and more in the religious duty of divulging secrets only to those truly seeking them: "Thus, person to person transmission was at the heart of the transmission of Islamic knowledge. The best way of getting at the truth was to listen to the author himself." ([Robinson](#), 1996)

If the Chinese are fond of comparing their works of literary heritage to the number of drops in an ocean, so the Arabs may allude to their manuscripts as being as numerous as grains of sand in a desert. Books were the work of pious men. Students seeking information became vehicles of social interaction, maintaining the scholar's position and providing him with livelihood in this world and salvation in the next. This scholarly tradition produced knowledge, art, and articles of faith, and opened portals to the mystical domains of Sufism. There existed "a particular ethos toward knowledge that prevailed in the Islamic classical age . . . the pursuit of knowledge (*talab al-'ilm*) is an essential component . . . Integral to this ethos was the conviction that the pursuit of knowledge was a religious and ethical act." ([Abou El Fadl](#), 2001). In addition to religious services, government business, courts, education, and every aspect of intellectual life transpired in the mosque. It was to be expected that, amidst such highly evolved traditions, honed intellects accustomed to traversing vast caliphates would establish strict and intricate norms of scholarship. A mistrust of books without lineage evolved. The accepted way to establish the authenticity of both oral transmissions and accompanying texts was to prove the *isnād*, or "chain" of transmitters, all of whom must have *ijāza*, "authority" from the author and subsequent links in the chain.

The process of *kharrāja*, "publishing," was more complicated still, with six public dictations by the author and various readers. As manuscript production was thus very time-consuming and subject to extraordinary scrutiny, a class of *warrāq*, "bookmen," came forward to manage the process in all its details, including transcribing, proofreading, and binding. These bookmen worked in the *sūq*, the marketplace, known from the Persian as "*bazaar*" in English, which was built around the mosque. Economic activity flowing from mosques was important to the fabric of Muslim society, and marketplaces were the natural convergence of religious men and family.

Resistance to the printing press

Printing was forbidden in the Middle East soon after its invention, and Islamic societies resisted the printing press for several centuries. The most powerful Muslim ruler of the time, the Turkish Sultan Bāyazid II, banned the possession of printed matter as early as 1485, and his decision was enforced in 1515 by Selīm I. ([Pedersen](#), 1984). The earliest printing press located in the Arab world was established in North Lebanon in 1610 at the Maronite monastery of St. Anthony. Only one book, a psalter, was published there. This press was tolerated because it was not considered by the Ottomans to be of any relevance, nor does it seem to have influenced the Muslims of the area.

Learned Muslims continued to delay the advent of the printing press. Their arguments were based on time-honored, well-reasoned grounds, but much unfounded criticism in the West has nevertheless attended the fact. Demeerseman, in a treatise entitled *Les donnéés de la controverse autour du problème de l'Imprimerie* (Points of Argument in the

Controversy Concerning Printing), gave short shrift to such vacuous criticism. He dismissed the argument that Muslim resistance to printing was proof of intellectual stagnation with a curt "it would be difficult to be more superficial than that." ([Demeerseman](#), 1954). He went on to remind readers of the common mistake of looking carelessly at Eastern culture through Western eyes, saying that the avenues of East-West history are lined with half-comprehensions and flagrant misunderstandings that weigh heavily on the reciprocal relationship.

It is common knowledge that the West is indebted to Muslim poets, philosophers, physicians, and other scholars for the transmission of the Greek classics. A curious thing about the Muslim rejection of the invention of printing is that it occurred while other Far Eastern inventions of comparable consequence were accepted and transmitted to Europe. Printing alone was rejected from among gunpowder, the magnetic compass, silk, porcelain, musk, and paper. There were cultural, artistic, social, moral, doctrinal, economic, and political explanations for this. Abandoning manuscripts would be cultural treason, for copying is considered a kind of prayer. Every manuscript was a link in the chain of authority with the past, an assurance that one would not be drawn far from the source of truth. Printing would not only be a gesture of impiety, but rather an act of infidelity that strikes at the heart of Islamic civilization. Artistically, movable type would never be able to produce calligraphy of the beauty and passion that the Arabs-and the rest of the world-prize. Even Gutenberg, it will be remembered, felt it necessary to emulate the artistic, masterful European manuscripts with which he was competing. It was estimated that 80,000 copyists would lose their jobs if printing were permitted, causing a severe social problem. Printing would also entail the abandonment of the traditionally intensive peer review that took place in the mosques. Finally, print would not be acceptable because of something as basic as the movable type, which "made the '*ulamā*', the Sultan and others oppose the use of a metal object, coming from Christendom, to reproduce the honored language of revelation." ([Atiyeh](#), 1995).

The severity of the clergy's opposition to democratic ideas originated in the fact that they were a product of Christian Europe, one could even say of the crusades. Above all, the clergy wanted to protect the people from the mortal dangers of such contagion. The Turkish Sultans, however, were not that concerned about an "awakening" to democratic ideals, for the Ottomans were at the height of their power, clearly superior to Europe at that time. They simply did not need printing. Europe was at the threshold of its own awakening -the Renaissance- and printing, as powerful a role as it would soon play, was still in its infancy. What should the Muslims think of an invention that was clearly capable of insultingly mangling the Qur'ān, and was even used against them in an overtly aggressive way?

European invasions

As history shows, the giant Ottoman Empire weakened while Europe strengthened. The growing threats of European colonial pressures on the borders of the Ottoman Empire were eventually put forward in the arguments to urge the Sultan to permit printing. It was clear that in order to counter technologically advanced powers, Muslims would have to use those technologies in their own defense, and print was seen as one of the most effective. The history of the development of Muslim printing is concurrent with a succession of European occupations of Arabic territory. Permission to print was granted in 1727 (about a year earlier than Benjamin Franklin's press in Philadelphia), but this did not mean the protective grip of the clergy on religious matters was relaxed. Only material related to secular subjects was allowed to be printed. Formally, this restriction lasted one hundred years, but informally it lasted longer, especially in more conservative Arab nations.

Scientific topics, mostly those useful to the military, spearheaded the acceptance of printing.

The threat of invasion proved to be real. Napoleon Bonaparte brought printing presses and movable type to Egypt in 1798. Fifty savants, historians, geographers, engineers, linguists, and physicians came along to write books about the country. The foreign army invasion left a lasting impression, but French printing, like Christian and Jewish printing before it, seems to have had little influence on the advancement of the press in Muslim society. It might have prepared the way for Muhammad 'Alī Pasha's (c. 1770-1849) Būlāq Press in Egypt a quarter century later. Muhammad 'Alī used the press to help build a modern state that he hoped would keep not only the European powers but also the Ottoman sultan at bay.

Lithography and the early years of publishing

The story of lithography in the Middle East reflects much about Islamic culture. Lithographic printing constitutes an intermediate technology that proved accommodating to many of the Muslim objections to movable type. Invented in 1796 by the Bavarian Senefelder, lithography could have been made to order for the Arabs. The technique of printing from a plane surface such as a smooth stone obviates the objections to movable type. Although printing had already found its way into Muslim countries before lithography, the latter was embraced with a sort of kinship never afforded type. The Muslim artist's objection that calligraphy was irreproducible with movable type was overcome with the lithographer's brush. Another consideration was that Arabs are fond of commentary, which is taken to great lengths in the margins. Comments were slanted at different angles to the text in a serious, scholarly fashion, quite unlike the scribbling of students, and comment writing soon became a genre in itself. This posed no problem to skilled lithographers.

During the early years of publishing, between the early eighteenth century and the late nineteenth century, Turkey and Egypt printed government publications on scientific and military topics, and Lebanon was concerned mostly with Christian material published by individuals. The geographic centers of printing in Egypt and Lebanon that evolved in this period have continued into modern times. While Egypt underwent a long on-again off-again history of governmental printing, a lasting spirit of competition was engendered in Lebanon when protestant missionaries established presses to counter the Catholics. This trend later resulted in university presses. The American University of Beirut (first called the Syrian Protestant College) was established in 1866, followed by the Catholic St. Joseph University, founded in 1874. This competition encouraged plurality and coexistence, as each wanted to excel in certain subjects ([Atiyeh](#), 1995).

Clergy accept printing

A change in religious attitudes towards printing seems to have occurred in Iran. Although reluctant to adopt the press, the clergy -literate, numerous, and influential- became aware of the power of printing as an instrument for propagating Islam by the time of the Iranian Tobacco Rebellion of the 1890s. Although little is understood of what caused this transformation, by the turn of the century religious works were outselling other publications in Iran ([Albin](#), 1995). Once religious works were put into the hands of the populace, printing became self-financing, enabling its proliferation in Egypt, Iran, and Turkey.

In the early days of printing in North Africa, there are stirring stories of religious leaders who went from traditional power bases in the desert to wield printing as a tool to sway regional and international opinion. The Moroccans, like the Ottomans, were under heavy

pressure from Europe. In the 1840s, the French defeated the Moroccans at the Isly river near the Algerian border. About fifteen years later, Spanish forces invaded Northern Morocco and took control of Tetuan. Abdulrazak makes this point about Morocco: "Whatever major social, economic or political changes were taking place in Morocco between 1865 and 1912 could be readily linked to a direct or indirect interference from Europe in Morocco's internal affairs, rather than to printing technology." ([Abdulrazak, 1990](#)). After 1912, Morocco came under French management.

The Arab Awakening

Changes of fundamental importance took place as a result of the desperate game of military catch-up. There was a movement to compel the general Arabic population to take notice of public dialogue in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. In this period, known as the Arab Awakening, newspapers and journals played powerful roles. Nowhere was the press more active in soliciting public opinion than in Egypt, and the intellectual output of Cairo dominated Arabic culture. Writers, journalists, and publicists from across the Arab world used the printing press to reach a wider readership. Coffee and tea shops were centers of information dissemination, where the literate spread news orally to their fellows. New concepts emerged, and older notions on society, the State, and the individual were revived ([Kelidar, 1981](#)). By the end of the nineteenth century Lebanon had 20 presses, but when Ottoman censorship tightened there, many Lebanese left for Egypt. This was an unusual move, since Lebanese printing had always differed from other Arab countries in that most Lebanese presses were privately owned instead of government-run. The convergence of the two Arab nationalities had a long-lasting and invigorating effect, emerging as a common thrust for modernization.

Rather than abandoning the field to modernists, religious authorities countered with Islamic fundamentalist movements. However, when European outsiders forced themselves onto the scene, opposing secular and religious indigenous groups sometimes joined forces, working against foreign control, as in for example the British occupation of Egypt after 1882. On the other hand, during the modernization of the Middle East there were people with pro-European attitudes as well. It was not always an "either-or" situation. Opposition to the Ottoman rule persuaded many to support westernization. The French campaign and occupation of the country, for example, is speculated by some to have been responsible for the beginning of the Egyptian renaissance after centuries-long Turkish rule ([Tadrus, 1982](#)).

Self-rule and the press

When change came in world politics, printing functioned as an essential tool in accomplishing self-rule for Arab and Islamic countries. Printing technology may have been introduced in the Middle East from Europe, but it was not necessarily a manifestation of, or vehicle for, Westernization. The case of India expresses this well, where the press contributed largely to the Indian renaissance. The governmental nature of Egyptian publishing gradually gave way to commercialization, even though it was nationalized after the 1952 revolution. Today, although commercial enterprises are flourishing, the government remains the largest publisher. Book fairs are held on an annual basis. In Lebanon, publishing houses are still largely private businesses.

Both centers are large publishers of religious materials, and modern publishing serves to propagate the Islamic faith. There are two major types of religious publishing: *turāth* (heritage) works, most often reprints of classic works in the Islamic sciences, and *da'wāh* (piety or propaganda) works, including sophisticated intellectual commentary on the spiritual and cultural life of Islam ([Albin, 1995](#)). The sheer number of religious works being published in Arab countries is the most convincing evidence of traditional influences on modern books.

Modern information dissemination

Arab countries are developing local publishing industries, along with television, computer, and Internet technology. However, the United Nations Development Program considers them insufficient for adequate knowledge production. There are many challenges. Piracy is a problem in the printing industry, but censorship is said to be the greatest agony suffered by Arabic publishers. Although Muslim society is described as largely self-censoring, in searching for the roots of censorship in Arabic countries, one should not look for indigenous causes alone. Foreign invasion brought and is still bringing much thought-control with it.

The oral tradition of reciting the Qur'ān lives on in the early experience of Muslim children. These traditional learning practices are under attack. The second and third pillars of *The Arab Human Development Report 2003 Building a Knowledge Society* ([AHDR](#), 2003) are concerned with the need to disseminate high quality education and indigenize science. Strong criticism is leveled at the Muslim tradition of memorization:

There are various means for conveying information: lectures, seminars, workshops, collaborative work, laboratory work and many others. In Arab countries, however, lectures seem to dominate. Students can do little but memorize, recite and perfect rote learning. . . . Communication in education is didactic, supported by set books containing indisputable texts in which knowledge is objectified so as to hold incontestable facts, and by an examination process that only tests memorization and factual recall. ([Farjani](#), 2003)

Although memorization and oral transmission have preserved core religious and cultural values, there has been much debate in the Arab world about their role in slowing modernity. Shifting to more sophisticated modes of knowledge production will take serious effort, and illiteracy is high. Also, many Arab national libraries or bibliographies are not yet adequately developed.

Another concern is the issue of advancing Arabic as a linguistic vehicle to accomplish the communication needs of a future knowledge society. It is considered a serious crisis of the Arabic language that there is no linguistic policy at the national level, and Arabisation of the sciences is going slower than expected. Translations are lacking and linguistic theory is stagnating. Importantly for pan-Arabic communication, matters are complicated by the fact that while there is one Arabic standard language, there are many colloquial Arabic dialects. Teaching Arabic is no exception to other education models in the Middle East, as it is still being done by rote memorization. Arabic electronic publication is being hindered by the lack of advanced Arabic software, and projects that exist are often duplicating efforts, as there is no clear communication across borders ([Farjani](#), 2003).

However, an historical change from obfuscation to elucidation occurred in writing style. As public literacy increased, and translations were made of scientific works requiring the introduction of foreign vocabulary, it became obvious that traditionally secretive writing styles were untenable. This has had the tendency to enhance clarity of texts. Also, traditional Arabic literary works tended to aspire to produce the final word on a subject. Although this phenomenon is found in other cultures, some postulate that in the case of Muslim society, it finds its origin in the belief that Islam is the final and perfect version of the revelation of God that was expressed, in a less complete form, in the earlier prophetic versions of Judaism and Christianity. Once print was generally accepted, authors no longer feared that their work would disappear because of limited manuscript production, and an exuberance of writing style was noticeable when authors realized that this necessity for "topping off," or completion, was no longer mandatory.

Having gone through these fundamental cultural changes in their mode of expression, it seems likely that Arab scholars will meet the present language challenges. Institutional and government support is needed to finance information science initiatives, such as machine cross-language information retrieval using Arabic as the target language. The [AHDR 2003](#) makes an appeal for pan-Arab cooperation, recognizing the nostalgia in Arabic society for a return to the state of intellectual sharing that existed in the vast Islamic empire of the golden years. There is a call for a serious campaign to promote lifelong learning and deal with illiteracy within the decade, calling it a "task for all Arab countries and joint Arab organizations." ([Farjani](#), 2003). Additionally, deepening the co-operation among Arabs in research and development will further indigenize science.

Summary and conclusion

Books in the Islamic world were devised to be one part of a multi-componential system of knowledge wherein oral transmission was essential to the attainment of wisdom. Such learning was accessible only to those who sought it. Printing, shorn of the traditional safeguards of oral transmission and memorization, was opposed with widespread intensity. Although objections eventually were overcome, many of these issues remain vigorous and exert their influences on the book and information dissemination culture of Arabs today.

One may discern through the years the expression of a profound spiritual strength in the Middle East. The Islamic world has produced enduring traditions, and these traditions have in turn resulted in the retention of fundamental institutions capable of sustaining the culture in the face of relentless pressures from other civilizations. The powerful influence of the Western world's printing press appears not to have dominated Muslim oral and scribal traditions. The strong grip of Islamic culture on education and intellectual pursuits has accomplished its purpose in preserving the core values of the society. With their own robust and intact heritage in hand, modern Muslims are able to choose on their own terms what they will use and what they will discard from the West.

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Missionaries and political expansion moved Islamic culture, but Islamic culture also traveled through trade. Caravans, groups of travelers who used camels to transport themselves and goods across land, were critical to the spread of Islam. Just as camels enabled the first caliphs to expand their empires, caravans allowed the Abbasids and other powers to expand their civilizations and enrich their cultures by linking provinces which were far from one another. Advanced road networks enabled caravans filled with soldiers, pilgrims, envoys, merchants, and scholars to travel across vast territories