

RPCS

RESEARCH PROGRAMME IN THE STUDY
OF MUSLIM COMMUNITIES OF SUCCESS

Insights and Perspectives

No. 009 - June 2023

Chat-GPT, Muslim Cyberspace and the Construction of a Critical Islamic Epistemology (Part 2)

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Introduction

In his book “Computer Power and Human Reason”, Joseph Weizenbaum, who famously invented the first chatbot called *ELIZA*, ironically argues that technological devices are not neutral tools but are carriers of biases that can have a harmful impact on society. He contends that the increasing reliance on technology and the belief in its infallibility is a dangerous trend that could lead to a loss of human autonomy and critical thinking.¹ It brings into conversation with Heidegger’s argument that the calculative heuristics of modern technology has reduced everything to a “standing reserve” (Bestand) of resources that are available for human use and exploitation. For Heidegger, the problem with this way of thinking is that it veils us from the essence of the world and disconnects us from deeper dimensions of human existence.² It is for this reason that Weizenbaum calls for a critical examination of the impact of technology on society and the formulation of ethical guidelines to ensure that it is used responsibly. His work has had a significant impact on the development of technology today, particularly on Artificial Intelligence. More importantly, his ideas serve as a good starting point for approaching novel issues related to technology that is mindful of the potential risk and ethical implications on society.

Between Rejectionism and Instrumentalism

Addressing novel issues is always challenging as underlying these advancements are different moving parts, which can be potentially catastrophic if misunderstood. These are issues that have an impact on essential concepts such as life, death and human dignity. In the context of Islam and science, we can generally see two prevailing orientations in the Muslim public sphere.³

The first group of Muslims subscribe to a rejectionist attitude that views any advancements in the modern world as an extension of a hegemonic Western paradigm, which naturally engenders an inward-looking and reactive understanding of Islam. The second group of Muslims adopts an instrumentalist viewpoint that reduces every scientific innovation to a *da'wah* opportunity without considering the ecological implications of technological developments, as mentioned above.

Although these strains are polar opposites, they produce in many ways the same heuristics that are disengaged from critical thinking and reflects the presumed anxieties of Muslims when confronting modernity. The middle ground between the two dominant positions need to be

[1] Weizenbaum, J. (1977). *Computer Power and Human Reason: From Judgement to Calculation*. W.H. Freeman.

[2] Huttunen, R., & Kakkori, L. (2021). Heidegger’s critique of the technology and the Educational Ecological Imperative. *Educational Philosophy and Theory*, 54(5), 630–642. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00131857.2021.1903436>

[3] Adeel, A. (2011). Modernity and Muslims. *American Journal of Islam and Society*, 28(1), 1–44. <https://doi.org/10.35632/ajis.v28i1.345>

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broadened--one that views Islam as a thinking religion and be able to confidently engage modernity without compromising on values that make us human in Islam. However, this confidence comes with knowledge and experience, which is why a critical Islamic epistemology could unravel new frontiers of human thought and understanding in Islam. The case of *Chat-GPT* can ontologically produce a critical engagement with information based on the *Qura'nic* imperative:

“
 O you who have believed, if there comes to you a disobedient one with information, investigate, lest you harm a people out of ignorance and become, over what you have done, regretful.
 (Qur'an 49:6)
 ”

Developing a Critical Islamic epistemology

Epistemology is a branch of philosophy concerned with the nature, origin, and limits of human knowledge. It seeks to address questions such as: What is knowledge? How do we acquire knowledge? What are the sources of knowledge? As Muslims, these questions form the basis of our epistemological framework, and the tradition has provided us with the necessary tools to discern information on multiple levels. These tools are summarised and encapsulated in the introduction of *Imam Al-Nasafi's* creedal tract, *Aqa'id al-Nasafi* (The Articles of Belief in Islam), that can be used as a contemporary framework in our approach to emerging *AI* tools such as *Chat-GPT*. According to *Al-Nasafi*, the means of acquiring certain knowledge (*asbab al-ilm*) for humankind can be divided into three: 1) Sound sense of perception (*al-hawas al-salimah*); 2) Verified reports (*al-khabar al-sadiq*); 3) Intellect (*al-aql*).⁴

Firstly, having a complete understanding of our senses can help us to evaluate the information critically and make informed judgments about its accuracy and reliability. For example, a sound perception would allow us to recognise patterns and discrepancies in the information. If the information appears to contradict other established knowledge or contains logical fallacies, a sound sense of perception can recognise these inconsistencies and question the validity of the information. On a deeper level, complete submission to our senses would provide us with a metaethical foundation that informs our connection with God and inject life with meaning and purpose. It entails willing servitude (*ubudiyyah*) that starkly contrasts the view of humans as "*homo dominus*" who is the master of their destiny and free to exploit the world's resources as he wishes. In this regard, we should avoid using emerging technologies irresponsibly as it may enable corruption (*fasad*) and destruction (*tadmir*).

[4] Elder, E. E. (Trans.). (1950). *A commentary on the Creed of Islam: Sa'd al-Din al-Taftazani on the creed of Najm al-Din Al-Nasafi*. (p.15) Columbia University Press.

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Secondly, corroboration can be a valuable tool in assessing the authenticity of information generated from *Chat-GPT*. This process involves cross-checking the information from multiple sources to ensure that it is accurate and reliable. Studies have shown that *Chat-GPT* has a knack for generating fake references. Therefore, corroboration can help evaluate the accuracy and authenticity of the information provided by *Chat-GPT*.⁵ If the information provided by *Chat-GPT* is consistent with other established facts, then it is more likely to be accurate. However, it is essential to note that the evaluation and corroboration of information alone are not enough to make *Chat-GPT* a transformative tool for religious discourse.

The above deliberations reveal the need for a critical epistemological framework that establishes a meaningful relationship between the sacred texts and our contemporary realities. This can be achieved by first recognising that the world is interconnected, a matrix of complex systems where a singular action can have planetary implications. Therefore, a multiplex approach is greatly needed to understand the complexities of life, the relationship between the human person, action, and social structures. It forces us to operate on the margins, between intersections, to investigate how the systems in place have shaped our reality, decisions, and actions. For instance, having the awareness on how the predominance of an economic system like capitalism influences the ways we perceive and identify ourselves and others. Additionally, algorithms collecting data on us can challenge our innate sense of free will, fundamentally altering our human experience by limiting our exposure to diversity and creating filter bubbles.

Accordingly, our belief of Islam being a 'living tradition' should mean that we ensure the tradition remains engaged with the past and future, avoiding stagnation. It is in this light that the discourse on Islam and modern technologies, including *Chat-GPT*, can be approached. It would enable a mode of discursive religious thinking that can creatively and critically construct a meaningful life without losing sight of the end goal directed towards a transformative common good. Nonetheless, for this to materialise, it is crucial to create a space for conversations between religious experts of the text (*ulama nusuh*), scientists, practitioners and grassroots activists (*ulama waqi'*). This would allow the formation of a functioning intellectual class that serves as a voice of critique to impede the acceleration of the "Death of Expertise" and ensure that the technology is used for human flourishing. This intellectual class was indirectly recommended by Dr Zulkifli Al-Bakri, Malaysia's former Minister of Religious Affairs, in a recent event in which he posited that *Chat-GPT* could be used to facilitate the process of fatwa making with the condition that a group of experts would provide oversight.⁶ In essence,

[5] Hillier, M. (2023, March 10). *Why does chatgpt generate fake references?* TECHE. Retrieved April 6, 2023, from <https://teche.mq.edu.au/2023/02/why-does-chatgpt-generate-fake-references/#:~:text=ChatGPT%3A%20The%20fake%20references%20in,similar%20to%20the%20training%20data>.

[6] Tarmizi, Z. W. A. (2023, March 14). *Wujud Kumpulan semak Maklumat Chatgpt Berkaitan fatwa di Malaysia*. Utusan Malaysia. Retrieved April 6, 2023, from <https://www.utusan.com.my/berita/2023/03/wujud-kumpulan-semak-maklumat-chatgpt-berkaitan-fatwa-di-malaysia/>

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Chat-GPT is not a suitable reference for religious queries. However, it can be resourceful as a general reference for those with deep knowledge of the discipline.

The deliberations above indicate that there is no bias-free technology as embedded in every development in human society is an epistemological, political, or social bias. Technology cannot be a way for people to evade their responsibilities. It must be human-centric, and to be human is to capitalise on the technologies of the self to make our own ethical decisions. It should not dictate how society functions and the way we live. Thus, we should assume our roles as the "best of creations" by using our intellect to critically understand what we "consume" and not just be a spectator of a technological dystopia that would eventually make us obsolete.

About Author

Ustaz Sheikh Mohamad Farouq Abdul Fareez is an Associate Research Fellow in the Research Programme in the Study of Muslim Communities of Success (RPCS). He earned his first degree in Comparative Religion and Usuluddin from the International Islamic University of Malaysia. Furthering his academic pursuits, Ustaz Farouq holds two master's degrees, the first from Hamad Bin Khalifa University in Islamic Thought and Applied Ethics, and the second from Nanyang Technological University in Asian Studies with a special focus on inter-religious relations in plural societies.

Ustaz Farouq's research interests revolve around the intersection of religion, human development, and ethics. Currently, he is actively engaged in a research project that delves into the intricate interplay between Artificial Intelligence (AI) and Islam. The aim is to ensure that emerging technologies are not only compatible with Islamic principles but also contribute to human flourishing and the common good.

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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