Digital Rhetoric and Gatekeepers of Knowledge: AlMaghrib Institute, Islamic Pedagogy, and Authority in Neoliberal America

Ali M. Rahman, University of California Santa Barbara

This selection from my mix-methods project focuses on the Muslim American community and the new class of authority that has risen—a digitally savvy rhetorical authority as opposed to the traditional Islamic model with a developed pedagogy. Online information credibility and digital literacy research has shined light on the heuristic strategies of the general populace as it becomes increasingly taxing for an individual to sift through misinformation. Even digital native millennials have been found to overestimate their literacy skills seen in studies of college-aged students, something that is corroborated in my own work. I build upon these findings to determine the implications of the digital search for Islamic knowledge and the extent to which literal interpretations of the faith have forced their way into mainstream discourse through neoliberal and hyper-capitalist ideologies, skewing the notion of religious normativity in America and degrading Islamic knowledge to a form of intangible capital, useful only for its passive transfer and ability to produce data for the new class of authority. I examine closely one organization in particular, AlMaghrib Institute, which utilizes this specific type of digital rhetoric.

Capitalist Pedagogy

Tradition in Islam has become an increasingly politicized term, one that can be used by groups of varying orientations (perhaps most notably *Salafi* and *Wahhabi* groups that make literal interpretations of religious scripture) to establish themselves as the more genuine Islamic authority. The irony of the modern interpretation of the term is that it often paints the traditional group as being antiquated and in numerous other ways outdated. And yet tradition is not some kind of stagnant status in Islam, rather it refers to a very much alive practice that has changed over a period of over 1400 years. Islamic tradition can then be viewed as the rhetorical form around knowledge transfer, passed down from the Greeks and built upon by Muslim intellectuals, and does not refer solely to the substance of the knowledge. Rhetoric goes hand-

in-hand with knowledge traditions, regardless of whether or not it is used in a noble process of transfer. While Aristotle (1957) despised the use of "empty speak" rhetoric by sophists in their condemnation of Socrates, he would validate, as all scholars of rhetoric must, its close relationship to knowledge. As Patricia Bizzell and Bruce Herzberg (2000) explained, "rhetoric is synonymous with meaning, for meaning is in use and context, not words themselves. Knowledge and belief are products of persuasion, which seeks to make the arguable seem natural, to turn positions into premises—and it is rhetoric's responsibility to reveal these ideological operations" (p. 14). Thus, in order to understand the state of Islamic society and its relationship to knowledge, you must look at the rhetorical practices around it—which reveal its "ideological operations" which I interpret to include its motivations. Furthermore, it is necessary to focus on digital rhetoric given its pervasiveness in modern discourse—be it political or religious in nature. As Barbara Warnick (2009) called for more case studies of online political mobilization and "rhetorical criticism of positive instances of the use of new media technologies," an area of criticism that she characterized as "noticeably under-researched" (p. 19). I would add that it is also necessary to examine the use of digital rhetoric as a means to replace traditional pedagogical forms—i.e. online education that removes key components of Eastern knowledge traditions like Islam. Extending this to Muslim Americans, we can see a pattern in which Islamic authorities treat the individual as receptacle of information (or producer of data to be used later for their own purpose) and not a carrier of knowledge.

In the following sections, I will first give a brief overview of recent influence over Islamic pedagogical and rhetorical traditions as well as the neoliberal reality that has consumed all things digital. I will then highlight several aspects of my case study on AlMaghrib Institute, a hybrid educational organization that relies heavily on digital rhetoric, while utilizing the work of Warnick (2007), Gary Bunt (2009), Douglas Eyman (2015), and Richard Lanham (2007) to unpack the rhetorical and capitalist motivations behind their digital practice. I argue that a neoliberal sensibility has subverted traditional Islamic pedagogical practices. Accordingly, Islamic organizations have turned to a kind of digital rhetoric orientated toward "attention economics" as Lanham would say. I end this paper with my call for online Islamic educational organizations to turn to rhetoric, communication, and writing scholars in order to avoid the pitfalls of shoddy, myopic, and capitalist-motivated pedagogy.

Islamic Tradition and the Unavoidable Neoliberal Tinge

During the late 19th and early 20th centuries, Western presence (be it through direct colonial governments or indirect trade and political influence) brought

with it an education system designed to "educate Muslims in their own lands against everything that Islam stood for" (Nasr, 2012, p. 10). A blatant Orientalist and missionary-like message in the classroom was paired with increased and cheaper production of Western literature (due to the paradigm-shifting power of the printing press)—all leading toward the deeply rooted inferiority complex that plagues most post-colonial lands. The result was a dual education system, creating a disparate view of Islamic and Western knowledge in society. Islamic Studies scholar Seyyed Hossein Nasr (2012), himself having been a student and teacher in both styles of education, remarked on this divide and its importance to the Muslim world today:

Since Islam is a religion based upon *tawhid*, upon unity, you simply cannot continue to train students according to two different worldviews and also with a compartmentalized mind; it is crippling. Nearly every student in American universities today has a compartmentalized mind, and religion remains intellectually on the margin [....] The integration of knowledge has been destroyed. (p. 11)

A compartmentalized mind as Nasr described it results in a modernist group of Muslims and modernist style of education that is actually secularized. Muslim Americans might consider themselves to be "orthodox" or "conservative" theologically, yet their minds operate in a purely secular and "scientistic" manner. I would add that this "scientistic" mindset of modern Muslims in America has melded with neoliberal ideology that "subsumes and consumes all of previous history" (Fisher, 2007). In this sense, the "God" they worship is not just science but the actual attainment of wealth, prestige, power, and societal status. Indeed, imbued in the digital rhetoric of Islamic institutions like AlMaghrib and their most prominent scholars (many of whom have dual educational background like Nasr, often from both American and Islamic schools and often times in STEM and religious fields) is a hyper-capitalist mindset that de-emphasizes traditional pedagogical practices.

The marketization of Islam is not unique, nor is the neoliberal framework through which I critique the rhetorical practices of Islamic authority (see Bunt, 2009 for his critique of what he calls the modern "Islamic Knowledge Economy" that exists largely in cyberspace). And to be clear, when I utilize a neoliberal critique of the Internet and digital rhetoric, I am not stating that all digital media are engrained in a white American hyper-capitalist mindset. Non-white cultures must be given credit for their contributions to digital me-

dia. For example, Angela Haas (2007) wrote about wampum belts in Indigenous American cultures situating Native Americans as techno savvy and with a long intellectual tradition.

It is then more prudent to take a critical look at the overriding influence of a white, western ideology like neoliberalism, which envelops other cultures (and really, everything) in its purview much like colonial powers once did to the Other nations (and of course this influence still manifests through postcolonial economies, education systems, etc.). This all-encompassing nature is the reason neoliberalism becomes the appropriate manner of viewing American Islamic authority. Neoliberalism has done something to us, individual humans—not just the various technologies and online spaces we navigate. As Wendy Brown (2017) wrote in her own critique: "neoliberal rationality disseminates the model of the market to all domains and activities—even where money is not at issue—and configures human beings exhaustively as market actors, always, only, and everywhere as homo economicus" (p. 31). Brown's term "homo economicus" is essential in understanding why neoliberalism is the framework for which we must now understand all social developments. The term indicates a disintegration of the individual human (as seen in metadata aggregating processes of web-based platforms like Google, Facebook, and Twitter), and I would agree with Brown's deeply affective statements that underline her thesis: that "neoliberalism is the rationality through which capitalism finally swallows humanity" (p. 44). The de-emphasis of the individual here directly undermines the Islamic tradition's high value on student-teacher relationships, that is face-to-face and human-centric interactions. This de-emphasis is paired with a number of other neoliberal transformations of society, one being the concern for speculative value over actual tangible currency. Ironically, neoliberalism strives to undermine authority by gaining popular support as an anti-elitist, pseudo-populist, and increasingly anti-intellectual movement. It despises regulation and gatekeeping of any sort, which once again disrupts Islamic tradition and its explicitly laid out terms like *mujtahid*—a difficult-to-attain title charged as being a custodian of knowledge. Neoliberalism opposes any such closed and opaque structure—deeming it as anti-freedom and anti-democratic. As Nathaniel Tkacz (2005) wrote in his work focused on Wikipedia and online consensus-based platforms: "neoliberalism is one response to the closed society. . . one articulation of openness" (p. 179). For a tradition like Islam that has relied on a strict gatekeeping structure through the religiously trained elite (*'ulama* in Arabic) with its various categories of authority, neoliberalism and indeed digital technology at large threaten the previously held pedagogical paradigm. The marketization of all spheres of life displaces traditional pedagogy and changes how Muslims view knowledge in a 21st century digital environment.

Extending this to Islamic organizations, we can see a similar pattern in which these digital age authorities treat the individual as receptacle of information (or producer of data), and not a carrier of knowledge. This neoliberal paradigm relegates the individual even while it markets itself as empowering. It was not until the years in which Islamic authority began taking form in America (as the majority of second generation Muslim American immigrants came of age in the 90's, correlating with the tech boom of the 90's) that a shift from the "traditional" and person-to-person education system in Islam to a re-mediated digital companion started to occur. While some authority felt comfortable engaging in a pluralist rhetorical tradition (like Zaytuna College that draws upon Western rhetorical tradition as well), producing Islamic knowledge in a specifically American context, others looked to modernist movements from the Muslim world (*Salafi*, *Wahhabi*, and other "revivalist" philosophies) and paired them with a specifically American ideology—namely the hyper-capitalist and neoliberal policies creating what Mark Fisher (2009) would call "capitalist realism" in which no other options exist. One such institute I examine prefers the term "orthodox" to establish themselves as unchanging, established, and widely accepted—and yet they do no acknowledge the obvious modernist influence, be it from the Saudi institution that educated its founder and many of its teachers or the neoliberal ideology woven into its fabric.

A Neoliberal Institute

AlMaghrib was founded in 2002 by Ustaadh Muhammad Alshareef, who is based in Ottawa, Canada. It has operated in several countries, although most of their activity remains in the United States. As Bunt (2009) mentioned in *iMuslims*, Alshareef founded the institute seemingly focused on Muslim youth growing up in the West (US and Canada at first) as evidenced in their use of vernacular: "AlMaghrib in MEmpHIS: Everyone's Saying Yyyyyeaaahhhh!!!!" (p. 122). Indeed, given the language used it appears clear AlMaghrib targets a younger audience, using pop culture as a backdrop for cultivating community. For example, their site lists one of its teachers with this description: "Shaykh Kamal El Mekki has been dubbed the Black Belt of Dawah." For Richard Lanham (2006), this type of vernacular persuasion that so directly speaks to a certain youth culture in an "economics of attention." Lanham, a scholar of rhetoric who turned his sights to the "information economy," stated plainly that "attracting attention is what style is all about. If attention is now at the center of the economy rather than stuff, then so is style" (p. xi-xii). This assessment of modern rhetoric amounts to the same kind of "empty speak" that Aristotle warned us about, though it does not preclude the ideological

substance beneath the style. Lanham went on to describe that "style and substance, fluff and stuff are loose and baggy categories but useful ones even so" (p. 157). The fluff is the stuff. When AlMaghrib uses culture references and social media-speak, the pervasiveness of such a rhetorical style is actually revealing the organization's true motivations. It is noteworthy then that this style can be seen all throughout AlMaghrib's digital presence. The organization is closely associated with numerous websites and social media accounts through their instructors and administrative leaders, linking to each other for various events, articles, seminars, etc., forming an extended network, or as Eyman (2015) would call them "ecologies of circulation," of like-minded digital Islamic authorities. Eyman in fact made the connection between digital text circulation and sophistic rhetoric, that is rhetoric that avoids stable knowledge and is instead veers towards fallacy or outright deception.

Eyman (2015) drew upon the economic aspect of circulation (utilizing but differentiating from the Marxist understanding of circulation that includes production, distribution, exchange, and consumption):

[W]hile circulation ecologies represent the places, spaces, movements, and complex interactions of digital texts as they are produced, reproduced, exchanged, or used, the exchanges and uses that take place within those specific ecological circumstances are governed by the economics of circulation (which in turn are subject to the constraints and affordances offered by the situated ecologies in which the texts circulate). (p. 84)

> In other words, the circulation of digital texts via AlMaghrib's extended network and the various platforms on which the organization is active must be situated in its particular context (an American business enterprise competing with other business). This context is evident in their rhetorical choices, with an example on their website under the subheading "Our Experience":

> Knowledge can be read from a book, and listened to on MP3. Why then would you sacrifice your time and money to attend a weekend or two onsite with an instructor and a group of people?

> Simple. Because knowledge needs to be lived and experienced in real life as opposed to just listened to on the side. We guarantee you our unique, trademark style of the perfect blend of mind-blowing academics, pure spirituality, and lively classroom interactions. It's addictive, it's enlightening, it's real brotherhood and sisterhood, it has you crying one mo-

ment and laughing the next, and it's potentially life-changing. We apologize in advance, but you will experience withdrawal symptoms after the class finishes until the next one comes along!

The marketing angle is hard to avoid here. Like other educational institutions (or entities in a neoliberal environment), AlMaghrib is competing to get as many people to attend their classes as possible, but they are also selling a good time, not just intellectual stimulation. They want potential students to know that they will have fun with the "mind-blowing academics" and "pure spirituality" to go along with "real brotherhood and sisterhood" and will be wanting more since their classes are so "addictive."

Colloquial language fills the site, fitting Lanham's framework of "attention economics" while also evoking other specifically American ideas:

Our mission is simple: to empower people through the best Islamic learning experience possible in order that they live more fulfilling lives in this world, and be better prepared for the next life.

We do this based upon an ethos of excellence and a refusal to accept excuses for poor quality. We offer trademark double and single-weekend degree-level seminars centered on a comprehensive academic curriculum, and taught by the leading and most engaging instructors in the West.

We are the pioneers in professional English-language Islamic education being first on the scene, but we are always learning. That is because there is always room for improvement. Using the best multi-media materials around, helped by hundreds of volunteers across the entire AlMaghrib family, and supported by a dedicated admin and logistics team, it is no wonder we have raised the bar and continue to raise it on how knowledge is not only addictively sought…but also loved!

While the word "pioneer" might cause a natural pause given its settler colonial connotation, more striking is the "ethos of evidence" that avoids any substantial explanation of academic pedigree and/or credibility on the various topics the organization teaches. Instead they utilize the reinforcement of how addictive and sought out their style of education is. It mirrors a sort of con-

sensus-based and sophistic idea of the truth—because so many people trust us, you should too, and we are going to use that circular logic to convince you. They also make clear that they have "the best multi-media materials around" hence the "excellence." Using and advertising its use of digital media is obviously a big component of AlMaghrib's strategy, and in fact the organization has some of the most streamlined and sophisticated looking interfaces of any Islamic organization I have seen, which in turn feeds into the ethos question. When entering a digital space, the audience must judge the *ethos* behind the rhetoric and its source(s). This is complicated by the fact that many websites do not clearly state the author/source so the audience must then utilize other heuristics. Warnick (2007) cited a study of Indymedia (an open publishing network of journalist collectives) finding that users judge site *ethos* by factors such as visual design and layout, information structure, and usefulness rather than by who wrote site content. Since AlMaghrib's site looks sleek and professional, and they claim to "refuse to accept excuses for poor quality" they must be credible, right? As Warnick summarizes: "The notion of field dependence can be shown to function very effectively as a mechanism for explaining how epistemological contexts and the evaluation standards that grow out of them play a role in online knowledge production practices" (p. 67). The implication here is that AlMaghrib, while seemingly unaware of digital pedagogy work within Writing Studies and Rhetoric and Composition, is well aware of how their digital rhetorical strategies play a role in the audience evaluation of their credibility.

Scholar Zareena Grewal (2014) pushed this assessment further and labeled AlMaghrib's approach as "indoctrination" of Muslim youth (p. 330). Regardless of whether indoctrination is the right manner in which to describe AlMaghrib (I prefer to label them as more didactic), it is clear that their focus is on the effectiveness of their outreach to Muslim Americans. This points to the more business-minded side of the institute, giving credence to Bunt's (2009) description of the "Islamic knowledge economy" and how various entities take part in a capitalistic endeavor for market dominance (p. 45). In fact, AlMaghrib claims to have taught "over 80,000 unique students" around the world with that number growing every day, in addition to being "the leading Institute teaching premier Islamic education in the West with the largest on-site student body." The institute states clearly its goal of making Islam as easy as possible to teach while not taking away from the quality of the instruction. As for its mission, or "vision" as listed on the website:

> The vision of AlMaghrib Institute is to become the largest and most beneficial learning system in Islamic history. We envision our learning system entering every nation of the

world, and being accessible to all people who seek to gain a
deeper understanding of Islam.

The language here indicates a capitalistic motive—to be "the largest" institution inherently means they want to beat out their competitors. They want to enter "every nation of the world" like a multi-national corporation. They are not just interested in altruistic knowledge production and transfer like one might naively believe of an educational institute, they want a monopoly. As Mark Fisher (2009) writes: "Over the past thirty years, capitalist realism has successfully installed a 'business ontology' in which it is *simply obvious* that everything in society, including healthcare and education, should be run as a business" (p. 17). It is this kind of mentality that encourages an abandonment of "tradition," i.e. pedagogical tradition that has been developed over hundreds of years. This works in unison with Lanham's (2007) argument that the Internet is "a pure case of an attention economy" (p. 17). The competition is not for some kind of knowledge-based search for truth, but instead for eyeballs, clicks, retweets, etc. which in turn means power in the information economy.

Continuing with their youth-oriented outreach, AlMaghrib also holds conferences and events like "IlmNight" and "IlmFest" ('*ilm* being the Arabic word for knowledge). Even here the language on the website can be characterized as informal, but more noticeable is their advertising that "[everyone you know will] be talking about it for months afterwards, so just make sure you can say that you were there." If AlMaghrib can make itself essential to its congregation/customer base much like social media platforms, it will become the powerful, monopolistic force of Islamic knowledge it proclaims to be. In this sense, AlMaghrib is quintessentially American in its hyper-capitalist approach while it forgoes traditional Islamic pedagogy.

Digitally Responsible Pedagogy

While it is of course impossible to remove technology and digital rhetoric from the modern pursuit of knowledge, the manner in which certain organizations and scholars go about utilizing digital tools begs to question their understanding of digital pedagogy. To go back to Bizzell and Herzberg (2000): "rhetoric is synonymous with meaning, for meaning is in use and context, not words themselves. Knowledge and belief are products of persuasion, which seeks to make the arguable seem natural, to turn positions into premises— and it is rhetoric's responsibility to reveal these ideological operations" (p. 14). Without a metacognitive understanding of how digital knowledge transfer works, i.e. a well-developed digital pedagogy, organizations such as Al-

Maghrib are imparting substandard knowledge upon their congregation in pursuit of attention. Knowledge, much like the humans seeking it, is devoured by the capitalist forces and motivations underlying an educational authority's mission. In order to avoid perpetuating a degradation of knowledge, American Islamic authority must turn to experts within the field of digital rhetoric or else risk being absorbed into neoliberalism entirely. As James Porter (2010) wrote about this existential question concerning the digital economy and the practice of knowledge transfer:…is it possible that rhetoric can help shape and influence the digital economy and social networking? My answer to that question can be summed up in two phrases: "information" and "knowledge work." If the basis of a digital economy concerns (a) the development of "information"—and not just information as a static product, but more important the transformation of information into useful knowledge; and (b) if the digital economy concerns the delivery and circulation of information via social networks in ways that create value for users, then writing teachers, communication scholars, and rhetoric theorists certainly have a lot to offer this discussion. (p. 190)

If Islamic institutions want to engage in responsible digital scholarship in a neoliberal environment, they must turn to writing and composition scholars in order to understand more than just how their audience understands ethos in cyberspace, but also how to engage in a more positive relationship with digital rhetorical practices. It they do not, Islamic knowledge will undoubtedly be reduced to bits of data, merely transporting from one passive receptacle to the next while the authorities themselves are primarily concerned with attention, and in turn their power and influence.

References

About Us. (n.d.). *AlMaghrib Institute.* Retrieved July 11, 2019, from https://www.almaghrib.org/about

Aristotle. (1957). *On the soul; Parva naturalia; On breath*. (W. S. Hett, Trans.). Harvard University Press.

Bizzell, Patricia, & Herzberg, Bruce. (2000). *The rhetorical tradition: Readings from classical times to the present* (2nd ed.). Bedford/St. Martin's.

Brown, Wendy. (2017). *Undoing the demos: Neoliberalism`s stealth revolution*. Zone Books.

Bunt, Gary R. (2009). *iMuslims: Rewiring the house of Islam*. Hurst & Co.

Eyman, Douglas. (2015). *Digital rhetoric: Theory, method, practice*. University of Michigan Press.

Fisher, Mark. (2009). *Capitalist realism: Is there no alternative?* Zero Books.

Grewal, Zareena. (2014). *Islam is a foreign country: American Muslims and the global crisis of authority*. New York University Press.

Haas, Angela. M. (2007). Wampum as hypertext: An American Indian intellectual tradition of multimedia theory and practice. *Studies in American Indian Literatures*, *19*(4), 77–100. https://doi.org/10.1353/ail.2008.0005

Lanham, Richard. A. (2007). *The economics of attention: Style and substance in the age of information*. University of Chicago Press.

Nasr, Seyyed H. (2012). Islamic pedagogy: An interview. *Islam & Science*, *10*(1), 7–14. http://web.a.ebscohost.com/ehost/pdfviewer/pdfviewer?vid=1&sid=89551a0e-49e4-40eb-93d2-a4dd26f65761@sdc-v-sessmgr02

Porter, James E. (2010). Rhetoric in (as) a digital economy. In Stuart Selber (Ed.), *Rhetorics and technologies: New directions in writing and communication* (pp. 173–97). University of South Carolina Press.

Tkacz, Nathanial. (2015). *Wikipedia and the politics of openness*. University of Chicago Press.

Warnick, Barbara. (2007). *Rhetoric online: Persuasion and politics on the World Wide Web*. Peter Lang.