

Assessment of the Quality of Hadith Information on the Internet

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Abstract

The convenience of the Internet in providing access to a vast amount of information about Islam is no longer deniable even among students and faculties in Islamic Studies. The Internet has been frequently used by this category of people to seek information about Islam. On the other hand, the issue relating to the quality of the information made available on the Internet is of great concern. In Islam, it is indeed very important that any *fatwa* and any scholarly works on Islam should be based on original and reliable sources of information. The question is if the Internet is continued to be one of the major source of information and reference for Islamic Scholars, how do they assess its quality? How do they justify its use? And how do they utilize the information? Using a case study approach with qualitative data gathering technique, this study was conducted to understand the use, perceptions, and opinions of several postgraduate students and faculty members of the department of Arabic and Islamic Studies of the University of Maiduguri, pertaining to information about *Hadith* on the Internet. The findings indicated that almost all participants have referred to the Internet to get information about *Hadith*. The analysis of the interviews has revealed the purpose of use, method of assessment used and the underlying issues involved as perceived by the participants.

Keywords: Hadith, Information, Quality, Assessment, Internet.

Introduction

The Internet has become a major source of reference for students and academics alike. The Internet facilitates people with information through millions of websites. Although the Internet is widely used and has become the most effective communication tool and information provider, questions are raised regarding the quality of the information provided. The accuracy of the information is not guaranteed. People can provide any kind of information as many as they want on the Internet (Adams & Clark, 2001). On the other hand, there is no regulation regarding the publication of information on the Internet and no one controls who creates the information or how the information is displayed. This is even more so in an environment like Nigeria which lacks a comprehensive and sustained information policy. It is up to the users to evaluate the information in terms of its accuracy and reliability. Conversely, the reliance on the Internet as a primary source of information is growing exponentially. The Internet is observed to be providing information even on matters pertaining to religion and its practices. Millions of websites can be found giving information about religion, particularly on Islam. It is somewhat interesting to find out how such information is utilized especially among scholars in the Islamic field. This study is, therefore, conducted to investigate the perception and nature of Internet use as a source of information for scholars in searching for information about *Hadith*, one important component of Islamic knowledge.

The position of *Hadith* in Islamic knowledge

In Islam, knowledge is divided into two types; Islamic and Worldly knowledge. Islamic knowledge is derived from two important sources, namely, *Al-Quran and Sunnah* (also known as *Hadith*). For

Muslims, both are very important and are considered as guidance in leading to the right path (Al-Qardhawi, 2000). Al-Quran is the first source of knowledge in Islam. Whoever holds it and follows its teaching is promised to be in a straight and right direction. The verses could not be changed or re-made by any creatures in this world. Allah has stated that He will preserve Al-Quran from any alteration until the end of the day (The Day of Judgment). "We have, Without doubt, sent down the message: and we will assuredly guard it (from corruption)" (15:9).

Hadith literally comes from the Arabic word *Hadatha* means "story" and "news." Technically it is any word, deed, approval, and physical or moral description attributed to the Prophet, whether truly or supposedly even the moves and rests in the awakening or sleep (Waheed, n.d.). Most of writers who have written on *Hadith* showed that there were strong agreements on what a "*Hadith*" is and its categories according to the reliability and memory of the reporters (Al-Mubarak, 1983; Ibn Kathir, 1987; Ibn Salah, 1978). *Hadith* has been categorized into *Hadith Sahih, Hasan, Da'if, and Maudu'*. Each category of *Hadith* is defined as follows (Hasan, 1994, p. 49):

- 1) *Al-Sahih* (Authentic). Literally means the Arabic word '*Sahih*' (authentic) which means to be genuine, to be true. Theoretically, it refers to the *Hadith* whose chain of narrators is carried by truly pious persons who have been distinguished by uprightness and faithfulness with freedom from eccentricity or blemish.
- 2) *Al-Hasan* (Good by its own virtue). Literally refers to the Arabic word '*Hasan*'

(good and beautiful). It is a descriptive adjective derived from *al-husn* (goodness and beauty). Technically it is a *Hadith* whose persons who carry its narration have been reported to be less pious than persons reporting *Hadith Sahih*, without eccentricity or blemish.

3) *Al-Da'if* (Weak). Its Literal meaning comes from the Arabic word '*Da'if*' (weak). Weakness is either factual or abstract. What is meant here is the abstract weakness.

4) *Al-Maudu* (Fake). *Maudu* is defined as fabricated and forged, the term applied to a *Hadith*, the text of which goes against the established norms of the Prophet's sayings, or its reporters may include liars.

Several conditions were set to categorize *Hadith* into the above categories. One important condition is on the narrators of the *Hadith* and the factors that cause weakness in a *Hadith*. The authenticity of *Hadith* depends on the reliability of its reporters, and the linkage among them (Hasan, 1996). A *Hadith* may be considered less authentic in quality if the chain of narrators is interrupted, if there is an opposition by a lesser authority to a more reliable one or a text is found containing a vulgar expression, if there is an unreasonable remark or obviously-erroneous statement, if an expression or statement is proven to be an addition by a reporter to the text, and if there is a hidden defect found in the text of a *Hadith*. Special exception is given to *Hadith* narrated by Bukhari and Muslim. Scholars

had agreed that their authenticity is considered as the most reliable sources of knowledge after Al-Quran.

Hadith performs significant tasks in explaining some words and statements contained in the Quran and it is used to specify the general meaning of the Quran, for example how to pray and how to perform ablution. Therefore, Muslims have to follow both due to their complementary nature. The Quran did not explain in greater detail how the followers could practice the religion (Al-Qardhawi, 2000). In this regard, it is crucial that Muslims be made aware of the authenticity of both sources of Islamic knowledge, particularly *Hadith*.

There are ways through which the quality of information in the Internet can be assessed. Among the criteria that have been suggested for evaluating the quality of information on the Internet are accuracy, authority, currency, coverage/purpose, (Brandt, 1993; Kapoun, 1998; O'Neil, 2002; Tillman, 2003; Beck, 2004), comprehensiveness, currency (Williams & Nicholas, 1999) and audience (Adams & Clark, 2001), maintenance of a source, accessibility of a source, cost, copyright, reliability of access and ease of finding sources (Cooke, 1999), usability (O'Neil, 2002), affiliation, stability and organization of content (Lamb, 2004), author identity and objectivity, content and form and appearance (Perry & Schneider, 2000). While many of these criteria have been used to evaluate websites, the issue remains where none of these criteria are applicable for evaluating information about *Hadith*. On the other hand, assessment through the content criteria is perhaps the most useful among the criteria suggested in the literature. Such criteria as suggested by Lamb (2004) may include:

- a) Does the website contain accurate, high quality content

- (i.e., interesting, useful resources)?
- b) Is the authority of the website clear?
 - c) Are the content objective, opinions identified, and perspectives balanced?
 - d) Are authentic resources used (i.e., reviewed materials, established sources, primary materials)?
 - e) Is the content relevant, useful, and meaningful to the intended audience?
 - f) Is the content presented in an efficient and effective manner?
 - g) Does the depth of content match the varied audience needs (i.e., levels of pages or information beyond the entry page)?
 - h) Is the content logically organized?
 - i) Is the writing clear and appropriate for the developmental and reading level of the audience?

The evaluation criteria for a *Hadith* are different from the criteria mentioned earlier. Al-Shafi'e stated the following requirement for a *Hadith* to be acceptable:

“Each reporter should be trustworthy in his religion; he should be known to be truthful in his narrating, to understand what he narrates, to know how a different expression can alter the meaning, and report the wording of the *Hadith* verbatim, not only its meaning. Moreover, he should be a good memoriser if he happens to report from

his memory, or a good preserver of his writings if he happens to report from them. He should not be a *mudallis*, who narrates from someone he met something he did not hear, nor should he report from the Prophet contrary to what reliable sources have reported from him. In addition, the one who is above him should be in the same quality, until the *Hadith* goes back uninterrupted to the Prophet or any authority below him” (Hasan, 1994, pp. 44-45).

Siddiqi (1996, pp. 72-73) also stated that:

In order to check the *isnad* (the chain of transmitters), it is necessary to know the life and the career as well as the character of the various persons who constitute the various links in the chains of the different *isnads*. And in order to understand the exact significance of the *matn* (text), and to test its genuineness, it is necessary to know the meaning of the various expressions used (some of which are rare and out of common use), and also to learn its relation to the text of the other traditions (some of which may be

either corroborated or contradicted by it”.

Given the stringent rules in assessing the quality of a *Hadith*, it is rather interesting to investigate the nature of use of such information in the Internet by the Islamic scholars and their point of views pertaining to issues related to quality in this new Internet environment.

Objectives of the Study

The aim of this study is to investigate the nature of use and perception of the Islamic scholars on the use of the Internet to get information about *Hadith*. Specifically, the study hopes to achieve the following objectives:

- a) To find out how Islamic scholars use Internet to get information
- b) To determine how Islamic scholars assess the quality of the information about *Hadith* in the Internet
- c) To determine the Islamic scholars' perception on the use of information related to *Hadith* on the Internet

Research Questions

The following are the research questions derived for the study:

- a) How do the Islamic scholars use the Internet to get information about *Hadith*?
- b) How do the Islamic scholars assess the quality of information about *Hadith* in the Internet?
- c) What are their perceptions on the use of information related to *Hadith* on the Internet?

Methodology

For this research, the case study approach was adopted. In this study, the case was University of Maiduguri, Borno State and the unit of analysis was Department of Arabic and Islamic Studies. A group of

participants consisted of 5 faculty members and 5 postgraduate students were chosen due to their expertise in *Hadith*, their level of study, and engagement in research, teaching and formulation of *fatwa*. The researchers used sequence of procedures while conducting the case study. These procedures were as follows:

- a) Participants were chosen among those who have background and knowledge in *Hadith*
- b) Questions were structurally prepared and pre-tested
- c) Interviews were conducted on a one-to-one basis
- d) The conversations were tape recorded
- e) The recorded data were transcribed into texts
- f) The data were analyzed using qualitative approach

All questions for the interviews have been structurally constructed and pre-tested to answer the proposed research questions. The design of the interview questions was then adjusted accordingly. Questions designed for faculty members were slightly different from the questions designed for the students. The questions were divided into five parts.

The first part of the questions collected demographic information. For faculty members, information such as academic position, departmental affiliation, teaching experience, and courses taught were gathered. While for students, additional information on the level of study and programme majored were acquired.

The second part was to investigate their experience in using the Internet to access information. Questions asked were as follows: How often do you use the Internet? For what purpose do you use the Internet? How do you get information about *Hadith*? Have you ever accessed the Internet to get information about *Hadith*?

The third part was questions that investigate the websites that the participants normally used to find information about *Hadith* and to determine whether they were satisfied with the information provided. Among questions asked were: If you were to use the Internet, what websites would you visit? How do you get to know about these websites? Were you satisfied with the information about *Hadith* on the Internet?

And the fourth part was to discover whether they have ever evaluated the quality of information on *Hadith* that are available on the Internet and the evaluation criteria that they had used. Questions asked include: If you were to use the Internet to get information about *Hadith*, how do you assess the quality of the information provided?

For the last part of the interview, participants were asked about their point of views or perceptions on the use of information related to *Hadith* that are available on the Internet. Among questions asked were: If people were to get information about *Hadith* on the Internet what would be the issues involved? In your opinion, what is the impact of the Internet in any field of study that involves the use of *Hadith*?

All participants were interviewed individually and had given their full support during the interview sessions despite their busy schedules. Finally, the recorded data were transcribed into texts and analyzed using qualitative approach.

Data analysis was conducted following suggestions made by Miles and Huberman (1984). The process involved memoing (recording reflective notes about what the researcher can learn from the data) whenever the researcher has ideas or insights; transcribing the data gathered from interviews in which the researcher would type the text (from interviews and memos) into word processing documents; locating

meaningful segments; and then coding them into various logical categories guided by the study objectives and research questions. Coding is defined as marking the segments of data with symbols, descriptive words, or category names. Lastly, the researchers summarized the results through an enumeration or counting process, a process of quantifying data, after which the final conclusion can be made (Miles & Huberman, 1984; Lacey & Luff, 2001).

Findings and Discussions

This section presents the results of the analysis from the interviews and discusses the findings accordingly. In general, results are presented in two parts. Part one presents and discusses the background of the participants. The second part discusses the results from the analysis of the interview texts in an attempt to answer the proposed research questions.

Background of Participants

The participants comprised five faculty members and five postgraduate students. Four have Ph.D. and one has a master's degree. Distribution of faculty members based on teaching experience revealed that they have long years of teaching experience. The first respondent has 14 years of teaching experience, second 8 years, third 5 years, fourth 13 years, and the fifth respondent has 9 years of teaching experience. None of them have taught for less than 5 years. Three of the students are majoring in Arabic and the other 2 in Quran. The first participant was in the 3rd semester, the second and the third participants were in the 1st semester, the fourth one was in the 6th semester and the last participant was in the 2nd semester.

Internet Use

Table 1 shows the distribution of the participants according to frequency of Internet use. The result provides the

evidence that all of the respondents have used the Internet at some point. Six out of ten participants were using the Internet every day. This also indicates that the participants were not only aware about the Internet, but were also its frequent users. When asked, they also indicated their independency in navigation and getting information they needed in the Internet environment.

Table 1: Distribution of Participants According to Frequency of Internet Usage

| Frequency of Internet Usage | Faculty | Students | Total no. of Respondents | Percentage (%) |
|-----------------------------|---------|----------|--------------------------|----------------|
| Every day | 4 | 2 | 6 | 60 |
| Twice a Week | - | 1 | 1 | 10 |
| Three Times a Week | - | 2 | 2 | 20 |
| Sometimes | 1 | 0 | 1 | 10 |
| Total | 5 | 5 | 5 | 100 |

Table 2 provides information about the source of information about *Hadith* that participants used. All participants used their own collection of CDs for searching information on *Hadith*. Examples of CDs that they used were *al-Maktabah al-AlFiyah li Sunnah Nabawiyah*, *Al-Bayan Al-Hadith* and *Shuruh Hadith*. Seven participants responded that they also referred to books on *Hadith*. Majority of the faculty members had a completed collection of books on *Hadith*. On the other hand, nine of the participants indicated that they had used the Internet as one of the source of information. Only one faculty member had never used the

Internet to find information about *Hadith*. It is rather surprising to find out that this group of scholars was indeed also referring to the Internet for information about *Hadith*.

Table 2: Distribution of Responses According to Sources of Information on Hadith

| Sources | Responses from Faculty | Responses from Students |
|--------------|------------------------|-------------------------|
| Own CDs | 5 | 5 |
| The Internet | 4 | 5 |
| Books | 3 | 4 |
| Lecturers | - | 3 |
| Articles | - | 1 |
| Radio | - | 1 |

Websites Visited

The participants were asked to name the most common websites that they normally visited to get information about *Hadith*. Table 3 shows a list of websites commonly used by the respondents. Islam Online (www.Islamonline.com) was found to be the most popular website with six participants who indicated their experience visiting the site. Upon investigation, it was found that the website was popular for getting information about Islam and current news and events from the Islamic countries. Information about *Hadith* can be found in this website through articles and contributions by known scholars. Most of the articles provided proper citations of the *Hadith* used by referring to their primary sources (such as Tirmizi and Bukhari). The majority of the websites were published in English. Two websites were owned by the Anti-*Hadith* groups named Storm-Loader.com and Submission.org. Among the main purposes for the use of the Websites were to assist in teaching, research, thesis writing, and writing assignments. Some indicated their visits as part of their leisure activities. Most of the information about

Hadith was found coincidentally as a support to various writings on Islam and the related topics.

Table 3: Lists of Websites Commonly Used by Participants

| Names of Websites Commonly Used | Responses from Faculty | Responses from Students |
|---------------------------------|------------------------|-------------------------|
| Islam Online | 3 | 3 |
| Al-Ahkam) | - | 1 |
| Al-Iman | 1 | - |
| Al-Islam.com | 1 | - |
| Al-Muhaddith | 1 | - |
| Al-Qardawi | - | 1 |
| Arabia.com | - | 1 |
| Ar-Raddadi | 1 | 1 |
| e-Bacaan | - | 1 |
| <i>Hadith</i> Encyclopedia | 1 | - |
| Islam Today | 1 | - |
| Islamic Web | 1 | 1 |
| Salafi.com | - | 1 |
| Shaikh Al-Bani | 1 | - |
| Storm-Loader | - | 1 |
| Submission.org | - | 1 |

Although almost all of the participants have accessed the Internet to get information about *Hadith*, more than half of them were not fully satisfied with the information provided. Various reasons were given to the unsatisfactory feeling. Most of them were due to the content of information provided which were not properly arranged; low relevancy of the information provided, and fear for information inaccuracy and questionable authenticity due to unknown Web host. Some were due to complications in using the Internet technology and finding the relevant information. Many respondents prefer to use the CD version to get more authoritative information about *Hadith*. The following are some of the participants'

remarks pertaining to their unsatisfactory use of the Internet:

P3: "It takes time to get the relevant information that I need".

P5: "I think some improvement should be taken into consideration. It is because I faced difficulty in finding a *Hadith* that I want, difficult to open the pages and *Hadith dha'if, maudu'* and *sahih* are mixed together. So, these *Hadith* have to be rearranged and clustered according to its type"

P6: "Not really because I had found some information that were untrue which has been manipulated by some people"

P9: "Not mostly, I prefer to refer more to CDs and books because we do not know the authenticity of the *Hadith*"

Assessment of the Quality of the Information about *Hadith*

Participants were asked if they have used the Internet to find information about *Hadith*, how do they assess the quality of the information available? The analysis of the interviews indicated that all participants were aware of the threat imposed by the Internet. Many of them applied their background in Islamic knowledge to assess the quality of information about *Hadith*. Eight participants assessed the quality by comparing the information provided in the Internet with the primary source of *Hadith* either at the Library or from their personal collections. Among the primary sources of *Hadith* were *Sahih Bukhari*, *Sahih Muslim*, *Sunan Sittah*, i.e. *Sunan At-Tirmidhi*, *Sunan An-Nasai*, *Sunan Abi Dawud*, *Sunan Ibn Majjah*, *Musnad Ahmad* and *Muwatta'*

Malik, and *Sunan Ad-Darimi*. If a *Hadith* referred in the Internet was available in the books of *Hadith*, users could know in which categories the *Hadith* would fit into, whether it is *sahih*, *hasan*, *maudhu'* or *dhaif*. The following were the quotes in relation to such assessment:

P1: "I prefer to use primary sources rather than any other sources"

P2: "I always compare the information on *Hadith* from the Internet with books"

P4: "I believe that for *Hadith* information, from *Al-Islam* and *Al-Iman* websites are accurate because the downloaded information is the same with the printed materials"

P5: "Personally, I think well-known books of *Hadith* are the very best sources that contain best quality of *Hadith*. 'Ilm *Al-Hadith* consists of many other branches of knowledge such as 'ilm *Rijal* and 'ilm *Jarh wa Ta'dil*. In order to check the authenticity of a *Hadith* one should take all these knowledge into consideration. And this effort is not easy and need a lot of time for searching its quality"

P6: "I have to do things twice. Once I got the information on *Hadith* from the Internet, I will refer back to the book"

P8: "I like to refer back to the books"

P9: "If there is vague information about the location of the *Hadith* and from which reporter it was taken, so refer back to the primary sources and CDs"

P10: "I have compared the information that is available on *Ar-Radadi* with the original books (*Sunnah Sittah*) and I found it is the same thing"

When in doubt, two participants indicated that they preferred to use the CDs to locate a particular *Hadith* and test for its authenticity. Other possible alternatives were by getting some assistance from colleagues or fellow lecturers when verifying the *Hadith's* authenticity. Other assessment approach was by determining whether the *Hadith* has '*Tashkil*' or signage, which was created in order to assist people to pronounce the words correctly and to check the *matn* (meaning and pronunciation), by evaluating whether the respective website provides good translation and arrangement, and by assessing the quality through *takhrij*. Evaluation through *takhrij* is done to investigate the position of a *Hadith* in its primary sources and to identify its grade, i.e. *dhaif* upgraded to *hasan li ghairih* based on the *matn* and the *sanad* of the *Hadith*. Two participants indicated they perform the *takhrij* by using the CD (*Takhrij Al-Hadith* and *Shuruh Al-Hadith*) or the book (*Mu'jam Mufahras li Alfaz Al-Hadith*).

P3: "I look whether the *Hadith* has the '*Tashkil*', the translation is ready, in good arrangement and using a simple words.

P3: I also use CDs such as *Takhrij Al-Hadith* and *Shuruh Al-Hadith* to know the location of the *Hadith* and to test the authenticity of a *Hadith* respectively"

P6: Sometimes, I will *takhrij* the *Hadith* by using *Mu'jam Mufahras li Alfaz Al-Hadith*"

Other assessment criteria for a good website suggested by the participants are: the authenticity of the web host, how well the information is organized, list of contributing scholars provided, detail information about the grade and the narrators, how sufficient is the explanation given, and the citation provided.

In general, this finding leads us to conclude that the participants did observe the Islamic verdict of quality for a *Hadith*. This is shown through their efforts in verifying the accuracy through comparisons with the primary sources, in verifying the reliability of the Web hosts, and in conducting detail examination of the narrators, organizations, citations, translations, and Arabic scripts used.

Perception on the Issues of *Hadith* on the Internet

In this section, the participants were asked to provide their point of view pertaining to information about *Hadith* on the Internet. In general, the results indicate that all of the participants have great concern with issues involving the content of the website. Among the content issues include the reliability of the web hosting organizations or individuals, the contributing scholars, the accuracy of the information, the mission of the website host (*da'wah* or propaganda), the detail elaboration on the narrators and the source of reference, the differences in the institution of *Hadith* (i.e. Anti- *Hadith* group), and the reliability of the translation. All of these were believed to be capable of misguiding the users particularly those who have limited knowledge in Islam. In general, all of the Islamic scholars who participated in this study would regard the information provided on the Internet as questionable and

need proper assessment as suggested above. On the other hand, the Internet was also being perceived positively when used for good causes such as providing beneficial and useful information to the users. In other words, it could be used to spread *da'wah* to all mankind. Some of the participants agreed that the Internet is useful, information can be downloaded easily, it is easy to use and most importantly it is free to be accessed by everybody.

Conclusion and Recommendations

This study provides insightful information about the use of the Internet to find information about *Hadith* from the perspective of the Islamic scholars. The compilation of their opinions allows for the establishment of a set of criteria for evaluation of Information about *Hadith*. Although the Internet has been used by almost all of the participants in the study, they have collectively agreed that certain criteria need to be applied to ensure that the information acquired is accurate and reliable. Among the important criteria for the novice users who have less knowledge in *Hadith* were: the need for regular comparisons and verifications with the primary sources; the need to verify the reliability of the Web host; the need to identify the contributing scholars; the need to verify the content through proper citation of the original source and the grading, and the need to consult with more knowledgeable people in the area of *Hadith*. Other more knowledgeable users may scrutinize the *Hadith* through *takhrij* (detail investigation of *Hadith* in various primary sources to determine its grade), investigate the translation provided, examine the availability of the '*Tashkil*' (reading aid signage), the *matn*, and various detail information about narrators (*sanad*) and the availability of citations from the primary sources. All scholars agreed that the Internet

may impose severe threat to a person's faith and believes if he/she relies solely from information provided on the Internet. In other words, the Internet should be treated as supplementary instead of as the only information resource available. Novice users need to properly assess information that contains *Hadith* through the assessment criteria suggested in order to reduce the risk of getting faulty information. The Islamic scholars were not totally against the Internet. Many of them thought of the Internet as convenient, easy to access, and free. The Internet has been seen to have great potential in spreading the word of Islam and through which the Information can reach millions of the world population inexpensively. However, the fear for misguidance and what the misleading information can do to the Islamic *Aqidah* (faith) might have led them to caution people of its use. Many of them were doubtful of the accuracy of the content, except for when the website is well known to them and to others in similar field, such as Islam Online and Islam.com. The users need to be made aware of the importance of getting the correct information about *Hadith* and the importance of evaluating the quality of any *Hadith* before consuming the information. This study should benefit the users of the Internet in their assessment of the accuracy of the content. With some guidance provided through the assessment criteria resulted from this study, the risk of using faulty information can be reduced. The recommendation in this study should allow them to make self-assessment and be additionally cautious with the information containing *Hadith* that they encountered.

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