

Muslim Websites in South Africa – A Critical Review

Faranaaz Ismail

The Internet is a powerful tool for information, a means of communication and the new wave of the future. Everyone wants a piece of it and building websites has never been easier. There are programmes available that could help a first grader whip up their very own virtual home.

I will be evaluating five Muslim websites operating from South Africa. One must keep in mind that there are standard conventions when it comes to web design and that deviating from these conventions can lead to problems.

Links should always be obvious and the user should be able to recognize them instantly. They should also be descriptive; the user should always know where the link would take him. Dead links (links that lead nowhere) are very bad for a site as it loses credence and the user is less likely to return.

On the most basic level, a site should be easy on the eyes. The text should be easy to read; i.e. the colour should not fade into the background but rather stand out in sharp contrast.

It is important for the site to be consistent as far as formatting is concerned. Users can become confused when the look of the site changes from page to page; it may seem as though they've stumbled across an older version of the site or in fact left the site altogether.

One approach to web design, which has been considerably abused, is the use of frames. Frames make it possible to divide a page into different sections and then load different pages up in each section. Often, this is used so that the navigation bar is always visible to the user. Frames however, come with certain limitations. Firstly, not everyone can view

frames. People using older browsers will have trouble accessing the site unless it has a non-frames version of the site as well. They are also hard to bookmark and can cause problems if a user tries to save a page. In addition to this, frames are often used clumsily causing clutter on the page.

While original content is the most important aspect of a site, design and look also play a major role. If a site is badly designed, difficult to navigate and ugly to look at, users will be discouraged from returning.

Most Internet users come online for a specific reason and are often impatient when trying to find the information they are looking for. For this reason, websites need to be easily navigable and updated regularly for an outdated website is of little use.

Content is the main aspect of any website. It is important to know exactly what the aim of the website is as well as to be aware of the target audience. Thereafter, one has to decide what to write about and exactly how much detail and diversity is needed. Too much detail and the user may become bored; too much diversity and the user may become lost. When it comes to writing for the Internet it is important to stick to the point while supplying the user with additional links in the event that more information is needed. One should keep in mind that the internet is not just print media on a monitor, it is a completely different media form with its own norms, its own trends and its own *writing style*.

< www.islam.co.za > was the first site I visited and it displayed extremely poor site design. The background, a single image tiled over and over again, is too busy and the text is difficult to pick out.

Moreover, the site has absolutely no original content. Instead, it is a disorganized list of links, many of which do not work. Attached to these links are large images identifying them as 'foreign' or 'new' and yet the webmaster does not tell us when the site was last updated and as such a link marked 'new' may be long outdated. The links themselves are

not very descriptive and in most cases, one has to click on a link in order to find out where it leads. Many of the sites to which there are links are of questionable authenticity.

Furthermore we have no indication as to who owns the site, who runs it and who designs it. The site therefore loses credibility.

< <http://www.afosa.org> > is the official website of the Ahlul Bait Foundation of South Africa. The exact purpose of the site is unknown. It boasts links, chat and activities yet delivers nothing. In fact, the only page in good working order is the 'About Us' page, which provides an in-depth history of the organisation but tells us nothing of their aims, goals or achievements. Instead of linking to other pages when speaking about different ideas, this single page runs on and on. I got bored after 10 lines. I browsed the entire site without learning anything about Shi'ism.

The graphics on the site are of extremely low quality and the colour scheme is harsh on the eyes. In addition to this, the site makes unnecessary use of frames that merely serve to make it look more unprofessional and cluttered.

The question here is why would one upload an incomplete site and make the URL known? It is obviously still under construction and should by all rights have remained offline until such time as all links were working and all bugs removed.

Muslim Views < <http://www.muslimviews.org> > is an online version of a printed newspaper and thus shares the problems of being an on-screen version of a newspaper. The original articles possibly need to be rewritten in an "Internet style." It is important for the writers to realize that writing for the Internet is different from writing for print media as a website works in different ways. The text needs to be more condensed and should start with one main idea and give more information further on. There should be links to further information incorporated into the article as well as accompanying links to related articles.

While the Muslim Views has a more classic look to its website, it is a bit slow in loading up and has a number of dead links. The flashing 'rent this space' signs are also a major distraction. On the plus side, the site does have daily updates even though it does not supply external links for those seeking more information. It has some original content but does not reference well.

Al-Qalam < <http://786.co.za/al-qalam> > is a well-known print media newspaper in the Muslim community and has been in distribution for years. The website is a much more recent affair. It does well in comparison to the first two sites I looked at and is to be commended on its original content.

The design is clean i.e. it is easy on the eyes and does not look too cluttered. The designers were not taken in by the flashiness of frames that don't work. However, it is disappointing to find that the site design is not consistent as it changes slightly on certain pages.

The main page has a list of headlines and links to longer versions of the articles. This is basically in line with the conventions of online newspapers, however, the headlines are still too long and, like the Muslim Views site, Al-Qalam is not an entity on its own. The site is merely an electronic reproduction of the newspaper.

The navigation on the site could be better and I think Al-Qalam could make good use of tables as, at the moment, one has to keep returning to the home page in order to find the table of contents. A table would give the page the same sort of look as frames without the complications. It would essentially allow the page to be split into sections, with a table of contents in one section, and an article in the next.

Al-Qalam boasts a discussion board and this shows initiative. Discussion boards go a long way to facilitate communication and build online communities. Unfortunately, South African Internet users in general do not actively participate in discussion boards as

readily as their American or British counterparts and Al-Qalam's discussion board has therefore had little use.

The site also allows one to subscribe to Al-Qalam over the Internet. Probably the most interesting feature of Al-Qalam online is its archives. The archives go back years and contain complete copies of previous editions of Al-Qalam available for viewing over the Internet.

Most importantly, the site tells us exactly when last it was updated, gives us the paper's complete contact details and also tells us more about the journalists behind the article. All of this lends credence to the site as a whole.

While the idea behind the Media Review Network < <http://www.mediareviewnet.com> > is a good one, the site lacks credibility as most of the articles are written by the staff-writers about whom there is little information. While there is an incredible amount of original content, they are not properly referenced and frequently authors names are left out.

This site also uses frames when it does not need them. Aside from cluttering the screen, the frames on this site require the viewer to scroll from left to right in order to read all the text. The same effect could have been achieved merely by using a table.

Navigation is a problem as, in order to find a list of articles, the user has to either hit the back button or return to the index page and start navigating all over again. Another very irritating aspect of the site is the designers need to place large images stating the obvious 'click here' next to each link.

On the subject of site design, it is even more important for this site, as a collection of articles, essays and other publications to have a standard design. Each article should be formatted in the same way and yet they are not. I came across one article that was pages long and all of it underlined.

The website of the Gift of the Givers Foundation < <http://www.giftofthegivers.co.za> > is probably the best site that I viewed; though it too has its shortcomings.

It takes a moment to load up due to the size of some of the pages, but except for the additional scrollbar resulting from the frames used, the site is clean and well designed. It is easy to navigate and easy on the eye. It is interesting, informative and supplies the user with all the requisite information. However, there are certain pages that are unrelated to the charity and simply do not need to be there. The site falls prey to not understanding the language of the Internet and sometimes gives too much information.

None of the sites viewed was up to scratch even though some of them had good content. Content is important but it is not enough. Bad site design is rife on the Internet and even some professionals are prone to making the most obvious errors. Aspirant web designers need to realize that raw enthusiasm is not enough to justify putting a substandard website up, for once it is there, the site is open to anyone, anywhere in the world. It is important to make good first impressions on those who seek to know more about Islam and South African Muslim communities and bad Internet sites unfortunately do not do this.

For me, the best Islamic site on the Internet is < <http://www.islam.com> > It is certainly worth visiting. It is wonderful to see Islam.com tackling everything from Current Affairs and Politics to Education and child rearing. The discussion boards are extremely active and the site is beautifully designed - not merely for looks but for its in-depth and original content. One gets the feeling that there really is a community spirit about the site. This is the kind of website we in South Africa should aspire to, something which takes time and hard work.