

Religious Authority in the Digital Age: A Critical Review of the Theme of Authority in Heidi A. Campbell's Digital Religion and Its Implications for Contemporary Hadith Studies

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Abstract

*This article presents a critical review of the theme of religious authority as elaborated by Pauline Hope Cheong in Chapter Five of Heidi A. Campbell's edited volume *Digital Religion: Understanding Religious Practice in New Media Worlds* (Routledge, 2013). Employing a qualitative library-research approach with thematic content analysis, this study reconstructs Cheong's three analytical logics—disjuncture and displacement, continuity and complementarity, and dialectics and paradox—and projects their relevance to contemporary Hadith studies. The findings indicate that, first, Cheong's tripartite framework is a robust meta-theoretical instrument for mapping the dynamics of religious authority in digital culture. Second, the displacement logic resonates with the phenomenon of unauthorized fatwa circulation and the “democratization” of hadith citation in cyberspace, which threatens the epistemic monopoly of the ulama. Third, the continuity logic finds parallels in the strategic adaptation of hadith scholars and pesantren-based institutions in producing digital content for verifying narrations (takhrīj). Fourth, the dialectical logic offers a more nuanced perspective for reading the paradox of digital authority within Hadith Studies, namely that an audience's digital literacy can simultaneously erode and reinforce the authority of muḥaddith. This article concludes that integrating Cheong's framework with the classical epistemology of ‘ulūm al-ḥadīth—particularly the principles of isnād, ‘adālah, and ḍabt—is urgently needed to formulate a methodology for evaluating the authority of hadith narrations on digital platforms.*

Keywords: Imam Malik, al-Muwatta', hadith, Islamic jurisprudence, ahl al-Madinah

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1. Introduction

The religious landscape of the twenty-first century has undergone an unprecedented structural transformation as a result of the penetration of information and communication technology. From the spaces of cathedrals, mosques, and temples, religious practice has now expanded into the algorithmic domain of social media, mobile applications, and even virtual worlds such as Second Life and the metaverse. In her monumental edited volume, *Digital Religion: Understanding Religious Practice in New Media Worlds* (2013), Heidi A. Campbell systematically maps this phenomenon and offers a comprehensive conceptual framework for the study of digital religion (Campbell, 2013, pp. 1–22). Praised by Charles Ess as a “watershed publication” in the field, this book has become a principal reference for scholars grappling with the intersection of religion and new media.

Among the six major themes addressed by Campbell—ritual, identity, community, authority, authenticity, and religion—the theme of authority, authored by Pauline Hope Cheong (Chapter 5), occupies a particularly strategic position. This theme touches not only on theological and sociological questions but also resonates directly with the discipline of Hadith Studies, whose epistemological core is authority: the authority of the Prophet Muḥammad as the source of the sayings (hadith), the authority of narrators within the chain of transmission (isnād), and the authority of the ulama in interpreting and filtering narrations. Cheong observes that systematic research on online religious authority remains relatively scarce compared to research on online community and identity, even though authority constitutes a foundational aspect of every form of religious practice (Cheong, 2013, p. 72).

The question of authority in relation to communication technology is, in fact, not a new issue. Carolyn Marvin has shown how the emergence of electric lighting in the nineteenth century sparked debates about the nature of authority and shifts in communicative behavior between elites and the masses (Marvin, 1988, pp. 4–8). Joshua Meyrowitz, in his influential work *No Sense of Place*, argues that “authority is weakened when information systems are merged” (Meyrowitz, 1985, p. 63)—that is, a leader's authority declines when a medium allows different people to access information that was previously hierarchically controlled. This argument finds its sharpest resonance in the internet era, when every potential user becomes a producer, distributor, and critic of religious discourse.

For researchers in the discipline of Hadith Studies, the urgency of examining Cheong's theme of authority is twofold. First, it presents a theoretical challenge: how does the classical concept of religious authority within the muḥaddiṭīn tradition—built upon the pillars of isnād, ‘adālah (integrity), and ḍabt (precision of memorization)—confront the non-hierarchical and instantaneous logic of the digital? Second, it presents a methodological opportunity: how can Cheong's framework enrich hadith scholarship in addressing the phenomena of digital fatwas, hadith microblogging, and the virality of weak (ḍa‘īf) or fabricated (mawḍū‘) narrations on social media?

Building on this background, this article seeks to answer three central questions: (1) How does Cheong conceptualize religious authority in relation to new media? (2) What analytical logics does Cheong develop to read the dynamics of authority within digital culture? (3) What are the conceptual and methodological implications of Cheong's thought for contemporary Hadith Studies? The primary aim of this article is to present a critical reconstruction of Cheong's thought and to project its relevance for developing the epistemology of Hadith Studies in the digital age.

2. Method

This study employs a qualitative approach using the library research method, focused on thematic content analysis of primary academic texts (Krippendorff, 2018, pp. 24–30). The primary source analyzed is Chapter 5, “Authority,” written by Pauline Hope Cheong in Heidi A. Campbell's edited volume *Digital Religion: Understanding Religious Practice in New Media Worlds* (Routledge, 2013), pages 72–87. Secondary sources include the journal articles, monographs, and book chapters referenced by Cheong, as well as relevant classical and contemporary Hadith Studies literature.

The analysis proceeds through three stages: first, conceptual decoding to identify Cheong's key concepts and argumentative logic; second, contextualization to situate Cheong's argument within the broader discursive map of digital religion studies; and third, projection, namely projecting the implications of Cheong's thought for Hadith Studies. This approach enables an analysis that is not merely descriptive but also productive and constructive..

3. Results and Discussion

Conceptualizing Religious Authority in the Landscape of Digital Religion Studies

Cheong begins her discussion with a sharp methodological awareness: authority is a concept that is difficult to define and study precisely because of its richness and diversity. Although terms such as clergy and priest are commonly used in the West to denote religious authority, the terminological variants are extremely broad: pastor, vicar, monk, imam, guru, rabbi, and so forth (Cheong, 2013, pp. 72–73). Cheong acknowledges that, at the time of her writing, no comprehensive theory of online religious authority yet existed—a theoretical gap that in fact opens space for the development of new conceptual frameworks.

Cheong then draws on Max Weber's classical typology, which divides the sources of authority's legitimation into three: sacred tradition, appointment to a superior office, and the perception of charisma inspired by divine or supernatural power (Weber, 1947, pp. 328–330). Building on Weber's typology and Heidi Campbell's exploratory study comparing Christianity, Judaism, and Islam, Cheong adopts four layers of religious authority: hierarchy (the role of, or perception toward, a recognized leader), structure (community, patterns of practice, or formal organization), ideology (shared beliefs, ideas, or identity), and text (recognized teachings or official religious scripture) (Campbell, 2007, pp. 1043–1062).

In addition to this typological conceptualization, Cheong also adopts Bruce Lincoln's relational approach, which views authority as emergent—an effect of a perceived or institutionalized asymmetry between speaker and audience. Lincoln defines authority as that which enables a given speaker to command not only the attention but also the belief, respect, and trust of an audience, or—with an important reservation—to cause the audience to act as if this were so (Lincoln, 1994, p. 4).

According to Cheong, Lincoln's definition is particularly apt for the electronic era, since it treats authority as performative and discursive, dynamically constructed through the medium. In other words, religious authority can be seen as an order and quality of communication that, in the digital age, is media-derived and dynamically constructed. For the present authors, Lincoln's relational framework has an epistemological parallel in the muḥaddith tradition, which likewise views authority as something continually negotiated and evaluated through the mechanism of *al-jarḥ wa al-ta'dīl*—the assessment of narrators' reliability and weakness.

The Logic of Disjuncture and Displacement: The Erosion of Traditional Authority

The first logic mapped by Cheong is disjuncture and displacement—the dominant view that characterized the early wave of internet studies. This logic presupposes that the relationship between religious authority and new media is marked by rupture, disconnection, or displacement/replacement. The internet is regarded as a distinctive third space conducive to spiritual interaction, in which new flows of religious information and knowledge exert a corrosive effect on the influence and jurisdiction of traditional religious authority (Cheong, 2013, p. 75).

Stephen O'Leary, one of the pioneers of cyber-religion studies, reports that online religious communities frequently operate without a central leader or institution (O'Leary, 1996, pp. 781–808). Paul A. Soukup notes a shift away from the church as “a locus of theology,” as seekers of religious information now assemble their own religious guidance under the authority of web pages that appear “completely self-contained” and “free of external certification and gatekeeping” (Soukup, 2003, as cited in Cheong, 2013, p. 75).

This logic of displacement finds its sharpest articulation in the Islamic context. Cheong cites Anderson, who describes the emergence of “new communities of discourse” reflecting

creolization: commentators weave religious discourse together in idioms previously allocated to separate speech communities (Anderson, 1999, p. 56). What emerges with the internet, Anderson argues, is a “sphere of intermediate people, new interpreters” who construct an alternative public sphere containing different voices and different authorities.

Turner's thesis expands on Anderson's. According to Turner, global information technology and its accompanying culture “undermine traditional forms of religious authority because they expand conventional modes of communication, open up new opportunities for debate, and create alternative visions of the global community” (Turner, 2007). Turner specifically highlights that, in the era of global media, it is not difficult for a Muslim to cite a few hadith or issue a fatwa, since the capacity to claim religious authority has been democratized. In the context of Hadith Studies, this thesis is deeply unsettling, since the transmission of hadith within the Sunni tradition requires *ʿadālah* and *ḍabṭ* that have been historically and socially tested (al-Khaṭīb al-Baghdādī, n.d., pp. 76–80).

A consequence of the displacement logic is the emergence of new authority figures: webmasters, forum moderators, YouTube ustaz, daʿwah influencers, and so on. Researching online Christian news communities, Herring notes that forum members generally accept moderators as a “governing authority” and spiritual adviser (Herring, n.d.). Similarly, the authority of Buddhist leaders has been displaced by non-monastic figures such as webmasters, who are positioned as “religious specialists or virtuosi,” replacing monks as disseminators of knowledge.

The Logic of Continuity and Complementarity: Adaptation and Reinforcement of Authority

The second logic Cheong offers is continuity and complementarity, which challenges the thesis of authority erosion. This logic presupposes that the relationship between religious authority and new media is marked by connection, continuity, and negotiation. Rather than threatening traditional authority, the internet is instead adapted and leveraged by religious leaders to reweave their legitimacy.

Empirical evidence for this logic is fairly robust. Barzilai-Nahon and Barzilai show how the ultra-Orthodox Jewish elite in Israel controls online information through the censorship and supervision of websites, which provide them with a platform to disseminate teachings and present counter-narratives against political criticism (Barzilai-Nahon & Barzilai, 2005, pp. 25–40). The use of the internet beyond professional and economic purposes is prohibited through the proclamations of their spiritual leaders. Heidi Campbell similarly documents how the Catholic Church has shaped the internet in accordance with its formal hierarchy, through the use of automated email responses issued in the Pope's name and the removal of interactive features—such as ranking functions and comment modes—on the Vatican's YouTube channel, in order to preserve the Vatican's image and control over new media (Campbell, 2012, pp. 81–96).

Kluver and Cheong's study of religious leaders in Singapore likewise substantiates the logic of complementarity. They find that Buddhist, Christian, Muslim, Taoist, and Hindu leaders in this highly connected environment generally frame the internet as a positive development and adopt it as part of their mission and community growth strategy. These leaders emphasize the internet's tool-like capability to lend an impression of neutrality to the medium, so that it can be “reclaimed” for their religious practice (Kluver & Cheong, 2007, pp. 1137–1138).

Furthermore, Cheong, Huang, and Poon develop the concept of strategic arbitration—the role of religious scholars as knowledge mediators who actively facilitate the co-creation of information while retaining discretionary power to determine informational and interpersonal outcomes. This practice encompasses the monitoring of online communication, the selective restriction of email responses, and the justification of authority's validity by referring to scripture while emphasizing their own interpretations through branding activities and online ministries (Cheong, Huang, & Poon, 2011, pp. 938–958).

In the Islamic context, the logic of continuity is evident in Scholz and colleagues' research on Muslim podcasts. They argue that Muslim groups can disseminate doctrine and reinforce power structures by extending group leaders' presence through podcasting

technology: The authority necessary to legitimize this specific interpretation of Islamic belief and practice is generated by a set of acoustic and visual features signaling 'Islamic' authenticity to the listener and by the bias of steady references to the high educational level (in terms of a traditional Islamic education) of the podcasts' key speakers. (Scholz et al., 2008, p. 508)

As analyzed by Scholz and colleagues, this quotation shows that Islamic authority resides not only in doctrinal content but also in acoustic and visual markers that signal "Islamic authenticity" to listeners. In contemporary Hadith Studies, a similar phenomenon appears in the practice of online ngaji (religious study sessions) conducted by traditionally certified ulama, in which visual markers—such as the use of classical Arabic, kitab kuning (traditional Islamic texts), black peci (caps), and mosque settings—function as non-doctrinal markers of authority.

The Logic of Dialectics and Paradox: Tensions of Authority in Digital Mediation

Cheong's most original contribution to the study of digital authority is her proposal of a third logic: dialectics and paradox. This logic proceeds from the recognition that the internet facilitates both the weakening and the strengthening of religious authority at once—offering the possibility of conflict alongside understanding and accommodation. Cheong draws a dialectical perspective from Eastern philosophy (yin and yang), which sees two seemingly opposing forces as nonetheless interdependent and mutually complementary (Cheong, 2013, pp. 82–83).

This dialectical logic is most evident in Eileen Barker's observation that the internet can simultaneously undermine "the strong vertical authority structure" and provide "an alternative source of information to be disseminated by the movement's leaders" (Barker, 2005, p. 80). Cheong, Huang, and Poon probe this paradox further with a compelling thesis: A paradox of epistemic authority is that it may be more effective when followers possess some level of knowledge that enables them to evaluate the legitimacy of clergy's knowledge. (Cheong et al., 2011, p. 1163)

This thesis, as Cheong and colleagues affirm, explains why followers who possess competitive knowledge resources can in fact strengthen—rather than weaken—the authority of leaders who are able to operate in a mode of mediation (rather than dictation). Lomborg and Ess observe a similar paradox in Facebook friendships: such relationships relationally benefit leaders who wish to build closeness with their congregation, but also constitute a "delicate balancing act," since presenting a pastor as an "ordinary person" or "one of us" risks undermining the professional respect crucial to pastoral work (Lomborg & Ess, 2012, p. 185).

The logic of dialectics and paradox provides a far richer framework for reading the dynamics of religious authority in the digital world than the two preceding logics. Religious leaders struggle with, negotiate, and build tensions related to the process of digital mediation as they attempt to reconstruct religious authority.

Implications for Hadith Studies: The Authority of Transmission and the Challenge of Digital Verification

Having mapped Cheong's three logics, this section seeks to project their conceptual and methodological implications for contemporary Hadith Studies. Three main issues will be discussed: (a) the democratization of hadith citation and the challenge to ulama monopoly; (b) the digitalization of takhrīj and the strategic adaptation of hadith scholars; and (c) the paradox of congregational digital literacy and muḥaddith authority.

a. The Democratization of Hadith Citation and the Challenge to Ulama Monopoly

Turner's thesis that, in the era of global media, "anybody can assume the role of an [imam]"—including in citing hadith and issuing fatwas—finds abundant empirical evidence in Indonesia's digital world. The circulation of calligraphic images labeled "hadith" on WhatsApp, Instagram, and Facebook—often without isnād, without takhrīj, and not infrequently derived from weak (ḍaʿīf) or even fabricated (mawḍūʿ) narrations—constitutes concrete evidence of Cheong's logic of displacement within the domain of Hadith Studies (Bunt, 2009, pp. 132–157).

Gary Bunt, in *iMuslims*, meticulously documents how various unconventional actors—from Salafi-Jihadi influencers to popular e-muftis—have seized authoritative space previously controlled by institutions such as al-Azhar, Dār al-ʿIlfā, or the Indonesian Ulama Council (MUI) (Bunt, 2009, pp. 13–34). The Islam-Online crisis analyzed by Mona Abdel-Fadil—in which the site Islam-Online.net fractured owing to an ideological battle between wasaṭiyyah and Salafi factions—is a striking illustration of how digital authority can be hijacked and seized (Abdel-Fadil, 2011).

From the perspective of Hadith Studies, this phenomenon is deeply problematic, as it violates the fundamental principles of *ʿadālah* and *ḍabṭ* that are prerequisites for the acceptance of a narration. Al-Khaṭīb al-Baghdādī, in *al-Kifāyah fī ʿIlm al-Riwāyah*, established a rigorous epistemic framework for evaluating transmission—a framework that is almost impossible to apply conventionally to an anonymous forwarder in a family WhatsApp group or the owner of a TikTok account “preaching” hadith.

b. The Digitalization of Takhrīj and the Strategic Adaptation of Hadith Scholars

Cheong's logic of continuity and complementarity resonates with the strategic adaptation of contemporary hadith scholars to digital technology. The emergence of vast hadith databases such as al-Maktabah al-Shāmilah, Mawsuʿat al-Ḥadīth al-Sharīf, and Jawāmiʿ al-Kalim has transformed the practice of takhrīj from days of manual labor into instant searches taking mere seconds (Herlambang, 2019, pp. 25–48).

In the Indonesian context, institutions such as Nahdlatul Ulama's Lembaga Bahtsul Masail and various modern pesantren have produced digital content verifying hadith through YouTube, Instagram, and TikTok. Hadith scholars and academics—as seen in the work of the academic communities at UIN Sunan Kalijaga, UIN Sunan Gunung Djati, and UIN Maulana Malik Ibrahim Malang—have developed authoritative websites and social media channels for disseminating takhrīj and hadith analysis (Darmalaksana, 2020, pp. 1–14). This practice reflects what Cheong terms the shift of religious leaders from “commanders and sages” to “guides and mediators of knowledge” through strategic arbitration (Cheong et al., 2011, pp. 945–948).

Interestingly, this adaptation does not replace face-to-face majelis taʿlīm (study circles) but rather complements them. Hadith kiai continue to teach texts such as *Bulūgh al-Marām*, *Riyāḍ al-Ṣāliḥīn*, or *Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī* at their pesantren while also publishing recordings on YouTube. This hybrid pattern aligns with Cheong, Huang, and Poon's thesis regarding Buddhist clergy's behavior in reallocating online resources and messaging into pastor-congregation relationships by emphasizing the benefits of Dharma classes and real-life mentoring (Cheong et al., 2011).

c. The Paradox of Congregational Digital Literacy and Muḥaddith Authority

The most productive aspect of Cheong's framework for Hadith Studies is the logic of dialectics and paradox. Cheong, Huang, and Poon's thesis that “epistemic authority may be more effective when followers possess some level of knowledge” (Cheong et al., 2011, p. 1163) carries considerable explanatory power for understanding a new phenomenon in Indonesia: the proliferation of online communities such as “Pecinta Hadis Indonesia” (“Lovers of Hadith Indonesia”), “Sahabat Hadis” (“Friends of Hadith”), and digital *Bulūgh al-Marām* study forums.

In these communities, digitally literate congregants frequently come to hadith study sessions with questions that previously arose only from senior students: about the status of a chain of transmission, discrepancies among narrations, or textual contradictions. Rather than eroding the authority of hadith scholars, this phenomenon—if responded to appropriately—actually strengthens their authority as strategic arbitrators capable of sorting, explaining, and situating narrations within context. This is what the present authors term the paradox of digital muḥaddith authority: the greater the congregation's access to hadith texts, the greater their need for scholars capable of contextualizing and interpreting those texts.

However, this paradox also carries risks, as Lomborg and Ess caution. The presence of hadith scholars on social media as an “ordinary person”—posting family photos, commenting on football, or sharing daily vlog content—can strengthen emotional connection with the congregation, but simultaneously risks eroding hayba (dignified authority), which is an integral part of ‘adālah within the muḥaddiṭīn tradition. Al-Khaṭīb al-Baghdādī, in al-Jāmi‘ li-Akhlāq al-Rāwī, positions hayba and the etiquette of transmission as integral to the ethics of narration (al-Khaṭīb al-Baghdādī, 1983, 1:212–225).

The methodological implication for Hadith Studies is the need to develop a framework for evaluating digital authority that integrates: first, the classical criteria of isnād, ‘adālah, and ḍabt for content evaluation; second, Cheong’s framework of hierarchy, structure, ideology, and text for evaluating the authority of digital mediators; and third, dialectical principles for reading the tension between access to information and the need for authoritative interpretation (Cheong, 2013, pp. 83–84; cf. Ess, 2020, pp. 88–112).

4. Conclusions and Suggestions

This critical review of the theme of authority, as elaborated by Pauline Hope Cheong in Heidi A. Campbell’s *Digital Religion*, yields four principal conclusions. First, Cheong’s tripartite framework—disjuncture and displacement, continuity and complementarity, and dialectics and paradox—constitutes a robust meta-theoretical instrument for mapping the dynamics of religious authority within digital culture. The strength of this framework lies in its capacity to accommodate seemingly contradictory perspectives within a single, coherent discursive map.

Second, the logic of displacement resonates strongly with the phenomenon of unauthorized fatwas circulating and the democratization of hadith citation in cyberspace, which threatens the epistemic monopoly of hadith scholars. Turner’s thesis that “anybody can assume the role of an [imam]” has been empirically substantiated in the viral spread of ḍa‘īf and mawḍū‘ hadith on social media.

Third, the logic of continuity and complementarity resonates with the strategic adaptation of hadith scholars and pesantren institutions in producing digital content that verifies transmission. This practice, which Cheong, Huang, and Poon term strategic arbitration, shows that digital media does not merely undermine traditional authority but can also become a new stage for its reconstruction.

Fourth, the logic of dialectics and paradox offers the most nuanced perspective for reading the paradox of digital authority in Hadith Studies: audience digital literacy can simultaneously erode and reinforce muḥaddith authority. A hadith-literate audience is not a threat but rather a dialogical partner that strengthens the mediating function of religious scholars.

The original contribution of this article lies in its proposal to integrate Cheong’s framework with the classical epistemology of ‘ulūm al-ḥadīth—particularly the principles of isnād, ‘adālah, and ḍabt—as a strategic step toward formulating a methodology for evaluating the authority of hadith transmission on digital platforms. Further research is recommended to develop empirical instruments for mapping digital hadith authority in Indonesia, through case studies of da‘wah influencers, digital pesantren channels, and the official websites of fatwa institutions (Campbell, 2013, pp. 1–22; see also Hoover, 2013, pp. 266–268).

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