Fatwa in the Age of Google: Redefining Islamic Legal Interpretation

Tousif Reja[a]

[a] Darul Huda Islamic University, Kerala – India

Keywords: Fatwa, Digital Islam, Usul al-Fiqh, Ijtihad, Religious Authority, Online Fatwas, Islamic Jurisprudence

Article Information			
Received	4th Mar 2026	Accepted	1st Jun 2026
Published	30th Jun 2026		

Abstract

The digital revolution has fundamentally altered how Muslims seek religious guidance. Where once a layperson approached a qualified mufti through formal channels, today questions are typed into search engines, forwarded in WhatsApp groups, or asked of chatbots. This article examines this shift through several case studies. First, it contrasts the classical fatwa process (chartered by ijtihād, sanad, and scholarly authority) with the ad-hoc digital "fatwa" environment. Then it analyzes concrete examples: conflicting rulings found via internet search, viral WhatsApp "fatwas" lacking verification, popular YouTube preachers posing as authorities, and AI-driven responses (both a Saudi "Manara" robot and unregulated chatbots). Each case is assessed with uṣūl al-fiqh concepts (ijtihād, taqlīd, tarjīḥ, istiftāʾ, sanad, maqāṣid), exposing methodological gaps and legal-ethical risks. Finally, it reviews institutional responses (e.g. official fatwa portals, regulatory actions like India's blocking of a fatwa website) and offers recommendations. In sum, while digital platforms have democratized access to Islamic knowledge, they have also fragmented authority and diluted scholarly rigor – a real-world tension that needs urgent address.

Introduction

In Islamic tradition, a fatwā is a non-binding legal opinion issued by a qualified jurist (mufti) in response to a specific question (istiftāʾ). Classical fatwās rely on deep expertise in the Qurʾān, Ḥadīth, and uṣūl al-fiqh; they are the product of careful ijtihād (independent reasoning) and often carry a sanad (chain of transmission or institutional authority). Lay Muslims were expected to exercise taqlīd (adherence) to such scholars, not to derive rulings on their own.

The advent of the internet, smartphones, and AI has disrupted this system. Now a believer might search Google for a quick answer, join an Islamic WhatsApp group, follow YouTube "sheikhs," or even consult an AI chatbot. Digital platforms can produce answers instantly, but without the traditional safeguards of credentialed scholarship. Importantly, unlike scholarly fatwās, online "advice" often lacks transparent methodology, verifiable sources, or accountability. This transformation of the fatwa process raises acute issues of validity, authority, and social impact.

This "Real Story" article adopts a case-based approach. It first outlines classical fatwa criteria vs. modern digital features (Table 1). It then examines four case studies – internet search conflicts, WhatsApp forwarded "rulings," YouTube influencers, and AI/chatbot answers – each linked to specific uṣūl problems. Finally, it reviews institutional and policy developments and concludes with recommended safeguards.

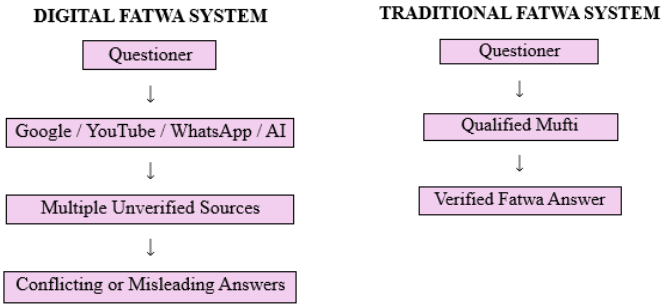

Figure: Changed fatwa-seeking pathway. In the traditional model, queries reach a credentialed mufti who produces a fatwa. In the digital age, questions go through search engines, social media or AI, yielding unvetted answers (often without human scholarly vetting).

Traditional Usūl al-Fiqh Foundations

Historically, issuing a fatwā was a serious responsibility with well-defined uṣūl rules. A mufti was expected to be a learned, mature Muslim with sound character, well-versed in Qurʾānic exegesis, Prophetic traditions, Arabic linguistics, and precedents of the madhāhib (legal schools). The fatwa process involved ijtihād – comparing scriptural texts, analogies (qiyās), ijmāʿ (consensus), and maqāṣid al-sharīʿah (higher objectives) – with full awareness of context. Importantly, each fatwa was anchored by the scholar's own knowledge chain and accountability to the community.

Key usūl concepts here include istifṭāʾ (asking scholars) and taqlīd (following scholars). Laypeople lacking expert training were enjoined to seek answers from legitimate muftīs rather than form opinions ad hoc. This preserved consistency and avoided the chaos of self-appointed interpreters. (See Table 1 for a concise contrast of traditional vs. digital features.)

Table 1. Traditional Fatwa Criteria vs. Digital "Fatwa" Features

Criterion	Traditional Fatwa	Digital Fatwa
Issuer	Qualified Mufti (scholar)	Anyone (content creator, algorithm)
Authority Basis	Scholarly credential, chain of learning	Algorithmic popularity, virality
Methodology	Rigorous *ijtihād*, *uṣūl*-based	Search/AI output without formal method
Sources Cited	Qurʾān, Ḥadīth, classical texts	Unverified web content, quotes out of context
Verification	Peer review, *tarjīḥ* (weighing opinions)	None (answers often conflicting)
Context & Nuance	Deep contextual analysis	Often ignored
Accountability	Mufti responsible to community	Anonymous or hidden behind screen
Time & Access	Slower, limited access	Instant, wide access

The contrast is stark. Under classical uṣūl, the fatwa pathway is linear and expert-driven. By contrast, the digital pathway scatters authority and bypasses traditional filters.

Case Study 1: Instant Search Conflicts (Tarjīḥ in the Era of Google)

Scenario: A young Muslim asks Google a sensitive religious question (e.g. "Is music haram?"). The search returns multiple fatwa sites and forums, often with diametrically opposed answers. One site (IslamWeb) might argue music is largely forbidden, while another (IslamQA) permits certain forms. The seeker is confused: which ruling to follow?

This reflects the new reality of analytical plurality without guidance. Online "fatwa banks" crowd the net, but search algorithms present them indiscriminately. As a result, unschooled users engage in de facto ijtihād – selecting rulings by trial-and-error or personal preference. They may latch onto the most reassuring answer, without tarjīḥ (scholarly weighing) of evidence. This violates a core usūl principle: only those qualified to judge can ijtihad; laypersons should, rather, perform taqlīd.

Rois and Yazdani (2026) dub this the clash of the "sanad" (chain) versus the "algorithm" logic. They note that online, "authority is more often determined by one's ability to present oneself effectively online, to build a following, and to sustain high engagement" rather than by traditional credentials. In other words, a flashy website can masquerade as a fatwa center. The platform redistributes epistemic authority. Awaliah et al. (2025) likewise report the "deconcentration of religious authorities through digital algorithms that form virtual fatwas".

When students of religion see such conflicting answers, they face an ijtihād dilemma with no guiding scholar. This undermines taqlīd and disempowers proper tarjīḥ. If two answers say opposite things, classical usūl would demand returning to the sources (Qurʾān/Hadīth) or a senior scholar's synthesis. But Google gives no tool for such weighing. The outcome is "epistemic dilution": popularity, not authenticity, drives visibility. Controversial or sensationalist fatwas go viral even if they lack depth.

Thus, the instant search case highlights the collision of ijtihād and tarjīḥ with algorithmic chaos. It raises ethical concerns under maqāṣid al-sharīʿah: the objective of preserving certainty is thwarted when guidance is scattered. A legal-governance implication is that jurists and institutions may need to curate official online fatwa portals or certification, to restore trust and clarity.

Case Study 2: WhatsApp Forwards – "Fatwas" Without Sanad

Scenario: A WhatsApp group message circulates claiming to quote a "Shaykh" forbidding a certain normal practice (e.g. using a certain everyday product). The message, unsigned and unverified, is forwarded dozens of times. Some recipients accept it as religious edict; others ignore it. Similar viral messages about ḥadīth or "Muslim history" often proliferate without source.

This exemplifies how false or misattributed fatwa-like content can spread. In the worst cases, such misinformation has deadly consequences. For example, in 2018 a WhatsApp rumor in India alleged child abductors were roaming, leading villagers to lynch a migrant worker. Although not a classic fatwā, this case shows the harm of unsourced claims on religious themes. If such a message resembled a fatwa (e.g. framing it as "prophetic advice"), the receiver has no means to verify its sanad.

From an usūl perspective, these forwarded messages lack any of the required conditions for a legitimate fatwa: there is no known mufti, no evidence quoted, and no account of shurūṭ al-ihtijāb (conditions to grant a fatwa). Recipients cannot perform tarjīḥ because the source is hidden. Essentially, everyone becomes an amīya (layperson) issuing or accepting rulings. This violates the principle that taqlīd should be of a qualified scholar, not of a viral text.

Moreover, such messages flout maṣlaḥa (public interest). The WhatsApp lynching cases reveal how rumors exploit communal anxieties. The maqāṣid of safeguarding life and security (ḥifẓ al-nafs) was grossly undermined. As Reuters reported, "false messages about child abductors on … WhatsApp have helped to trigger mass beatings of more than a dozen people in India – at least three of whom have died". Although these were political rumors, similar dynamics apply to fake "religious" warnings (e.g. fabricated hadiths forbidding normal behavior).

In legal context, this suggests that states may intervene under public-order or anti-misinformation laws when religious misinformation endangers lives. Already, as discussed below, India's authorities moved to block a fatwa website over harmful content. On the community side, there is a pressing need for digital literacy:

Muslims should be educated that "it is not permissible for [an ordinary] Muslim to trust a fatwa generated by artificial intelligence or forwarded without verification", and by extension, any viral message.

Case Study 3: YouTube Preachers and Algorithmic Authority

Scenario: A well-dressed speaker on YouTube or TikTok has millions of followers and regularly posts 10-minute videos answering religious questions. Viewers treat him as an "ustādh" or scholar. In reality, his credentials may be weak (self-study, local certification, or none), but his answers on fiqh issues (e.g. inheritance, prayer rules, or relationships) are widely consumed.

This case highlights how social media creates algorithmic charisma. As Rois & Yazdani (2026) note, "a person with thousands of followers on YouTube or TikTok can easily be perceived as an 'ustaz' or 'Islamic influencer,' even without formal scholarly background". The authority of such online preachers is conferred by views and likes, not by sanad or scholarly vetting. Visually polished presentation and emotive delivery often matter more than textual rigor.

The result is that audiences may import an unvetted fiqh worldview. This shift from "textual-based authority to performative-based authority" undermines classical usūl (Huda, 2024). In proper fatwa-giving, a scholar's reasoning chain can be scrutinized; on video, viewers get sound bites. The algorithm further skews things: content that is click-worthy tends to be simplistic or sensational. In fact, Surau Journal finds that algorithms "determine which religious discourses become mainstream and which are marginalized." . A preacher adept at catchy slogans may eclipse a seasoned jurist speaking nuance.

From a fiqh viewpoint, this threatens taḥqīq al-akhbār (verifying reports) and waḍʿ al-hujaj (placing proof); non-scholars are not trained to cross-check hadiths or weigh evidence. New influencers often gloss over differences between schools, offering one-size-fits-all answers. The public cannot perform necessary tarjīḥ among multiple viewpoints.

Ethically, this digital schism risks ilm al-maqāṣid (understanding objectives) being lost. If an influencer's ruling causes harm or conflict (e.g. by encouraging intolerance or misinterpreting duty), there is no straightforward accountability. Jurisprudence traditionally binds the mufti's conscience to sharia goals; an online micro-celebrity may prioritize audience retention over objective truth.

In response, some scholars advise caution: popular figures are not substitutes for scholarly taʿlīm. Institutions may need to engage these platforms to promote qualified voices. Indeed, one positive movement is the "digital training" of ulema mentioned by Awaliah et al. (2025).

Case Study 4: AI and Chatbot Fatwas – The Limits of Machine Ijtihād

Scenario: Tourists in Mecca pose questions to the "Manāra" Robot during Ramadan 2025. The device provides instant answers in multiple languages using its programmed database. Meanwhile, casual users worldwide ask AI chatbots (like ChatGPT) about halal/haram issues, getting quick responses generated from scraped internet data.

This highlights two diverging AI-related trends. On one hand, official religious authorities are experimenting with AI: Saudi Arabia's Presidency for the Two Holy Mosques introduced the Manāra (Beacon) Robot to answer pilgrims' queries from a vetted database. According to Gulf News, "the machine was specially designed … to serve as a smart reference for answering Sharia-related questions through an integrated, governed database". The Manāra Robot can even video-call a live cleric if needed. This model preserves scholarly oversight: answers come from a controlled fatwa archive.

On the other hand, uncontrolled AI is being questioned. IslamQA (the Saudi permanent committee's fatwa site) explicitly ruled on July 27, 2025: "It is not permissible for [an ordinary] Muslim to trust a fatwa generated by artificial intelligence… [he] should ask trustworthy scholars". The committee notes that AI "does not

understand religion or real-life issues" and its output may mix reliable and unreliable sources. This echoes traditional rules: a machine has no ʿilm al-ʿāmm (mastery of knowledge) or moral accountability to issue a fatwa.

Practically, AI-generated answers exhibit known flaws. For instance, AI may ignore ʿurf (local custom) and kulli (individual circumstances), giving rigid or inappropriate rulings. Scholarly nuances (e.g. conditional allowances) can be lost. If a layperson treats a chatbot's word as final, they commit a grave error of unauthorized ijtihād. Moreover, malicious actors could train chatbots on extremist or sectarian content, embedding biases.

Legally, unchecked AI fatwas could violate rights or laws. For example, an AI wrongly permitting something illegal under national law might entangle religious practice with illicit acts. Countries like Egypt have already banned using AI for Qur'ān interpretation to maintain scholarly control.

In summary, AI in fatwa-making should be seen as a tool under strict governance, not as independent mujtahid. The Saudi robot case suggests one model: a hybrid system where technology aids but scholars supervise answers. The IslamQA pronouncement reinforces that only qualified humans can issue fatwās in trust.

Institutional Responses and Ethical Implications

Faced with these disruptions, both religious bodies and governments are taking steps. On the religious side, traditional institutions are expanding online. Egypt's Dar al-Iftā and Malaysia's fatwa councils have robust websites and apps, aiming to provide authoritative guidance to digital publics. India's Darul Uloom Deoband, as a case, operated a bilingual online fatwa portal receiving thousands of queries, becoming one of the world's largest fatwa sites.

However, such openness has provoked controversy. In January 2022 India's National Commission for Protection of Child Rights demanded Uttar Pradesh block Darul Uloom Deoband's website, citing "unlawful and misleading" fatwas on adoption and women's education. The Commission warned that "the impact of such misinformation can be enormous on children.". This incident shows a government response motivated by child welfare and legal norms clashing with certain fatwas.

Likewise, states worldwide grapple with misinformation on messaging apps. WhatsApp instituted forwarding limits after multiple mob lynchings in India. Social media platforms now label forwarded messages or partner with fact-checkers. But religious content poses special challenges. Platforms could prioritize having credentials for "verified" scholars or AI moderation of blatantly false hadith.

The ethical imperative remains clear: maqāṣid al-sharīʿah – preserving life, intellect, religion, lineage, and property – are threatened when people take religion into their own hands online. Illegitimate digital fatwās can erode ḥifẓ al-dīn (protection of religion) by sowing confusion or extremism. Scholars thus have a duty (amāna) to guide the community wisely. They may need to engage technology proactively: for example, partnering with tech firms to flag suspicious religious content (analogous to how fact-checkers operate on political news).

In educational institutions, digital literacy must be stressed. Muslims should be taught the uṣūl of seeking knowledge: e.g. verifying chains, consulting established references, and respecting scholarly hierarchies. This might become part of madrasah curricula or community classes.

Conclusion and Recommendations

The "digital fatwa" phenomenon is a double-edged sword. On one side, it democratizes access: a devout person worldwide can (in theory) get religious guidance instantly in their own language. On the other, it dilutes the very epistemic foundations of Islamic law. The case studies above show that the speed and scale

of online information have outpaced the gatekeeping functions of traditional scholarship, leading to epistemic fragmentation and potential harm.

To address these challenges, several steps are advisable:

Scholars and Ulema: Engage on digital platforms proactively. Establish official channels (websites, apps, YouTube channels) where Q&A follows proper ijtihād processes. Clearly display credentials and sources. Use social media for istiṣlaḥ (public interest) campaigns about misinformation. Consider issuing joint statements (fatāwā jamāʿiyya) on hot topics to unify guidance and help tarjīḥ.

Religious Institutions: Create or enhance vetted e-fatwa portals. For example, expand Dar al-Iftā-style services and promote them widely. Train new muftīs in digital communication so answers remain accessible yet accurate. Encourage muṭālaʿah (review) policies so fatwās are updated as needed. Consider collaborating on an "Islamic digital ethics" charter for researchers and developers.

Tech Platforms: Social media and search engines should work with Muslim scholars. Possible measures: algorithms could weigh certified Islamic sources more heavily for religious queries (analogous to medical query policies on Google). WhatsApp/Facebook might label forwarded religious messages as potentially unverified, steering users to official advice sites. AI developers should seek scholarly input to avoid built-in biases (the proposed AI Fatwa Council by Jarrar (2025) is one model for oversight).

Community and Education: Grassroots awareness is key. Educational programs must stress Islāmiyyat and modern media literacy together: e.g. how to check hadith authenticity, question suspicious messages, and know when to consult a real scholar. Families and mosques can spread the message that "doing taqlīd of an unknown internet preacher is not permitted", just as IslamQA advises against trusting AI.

In essence, the core solution is not tech suppression but education and accountable use. If Muslims can adapt the time-honored usūl principles to the new environment, preserving chains of knowledge within digital means, many risks can be mitigated. Otherwise, the fragmented new fatwa landscape will continue to undermine both faith and social order.

Table 2. Cited Cases: Sources and Problems

Case (short)	Source	Key Problem
Internet search conflicts (music fatwa)	Fatwa websites (IslamWeb, IslamQA)	Contradictory rulings online; seeker cannot perform *tarjīḥ*
WhatsApp forwarded rumors (lynchings)	News report (Reuters, 2018)	Viral misinformation; no sanad, causing violence (maqāṣid breach)
YouTube/social-media preachers	Academic analysis (Rois & Yazdani, 2026)	Algorithmic authority with no credentials; epistemic dilution
AI "fatwa" robot (Manāra)	GulfNews (2025)	Official AI with oversight; contrasts with unregulated AI
AI Chatbot fatwas	IslamQA (Saudi fatwa, 2025)	AI not qualified; fatwas from chatbots are illegitimate
Darul Uloom online fatwas (India)	Times of India (2022)	State block of site due to "misleading" rulings (legal conflict)

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Article Information and Declarations

Declarations

Authors' Contribution:

- All Authors Conceptualization, and intellectual revisions, Data collection, interpretation, and drafting of manuscript
- The author agrees to take responsibility for every facet of the work, making sure that any concerns about its integrity or veracity are thoroughly examined and addressed

Conflict of Interest: NIL

Funding Sources: NIL

Correspondence:

Tousif Reja

tousifpsnl@gmail.com

How to Cite:

Fatwa in the Age of Google: Redefining Islamic Legal Interpretation. (2026). Wah Academia Journal of Global Religions, 2(2), 74-80. https://doi.org/10.63954/rrzv9029