Silent Until Asked to Speak

Al-Jāḥiẓ (d. 869), the Written Word and Trust in Generative AI

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A description of a prompted model?

صامت ما أسكتّه، وبليغ ما استنطقته.

“Silent as long as you silence it, eloquent when you ask it to speak.”

ومن لك بمسامر لا يبتديك في حال شغلك، ويدعوك في أوقات نشاطك، ولا يحوجك إلى التجمّل له والتذمّم منه

“Where else will you find a night companion who does not start talking while you are busy, calls on you when you are eager, and never obliges you to put on airs for him or apologise to him?”



Silent until asked



Eloquent when asked



Never interrupts you



No pretence, no apology

Not a prompted model, but al-Jāḥiẓ (d. 869) on the book

Kitāb al-Ḥayawān, amid a heated debate over the move from oral to written learning

Outline

01

A revolution in knowledge

AI changes the reality (*wāqiʿ*) in which we learn, not only single cases

02

The book's benefits

Al-Jāḥiẓ's case for the written word

03

The book's harms

The concerns of its critics

04

The resolution

The book adopted, orality kept as a safeguard

05

Today

Lessons for generative AI

The thread: a ninth-century defence of the book, read as a mirror for generative AI

A revolution, not a single case

Two lenses from the Islamic ethical tradition

A new case (*wāqiʿa, nāzila*)
One question, one ruling: is this use of AI permissible?

The reality (*wāqiʿ*)
The world in which cases arise: how we learn, judge and trust

Generative AI changes the *wāqiʿ*, not only the cases.

The industrial periodisation

1	**Steam and mechanisation**	c. 1760–1840
2	**Electricity and mass production**	Late 19th century
3	**Electronics, computers, the internet**	From the 1960s
4	**Cyber-physical systems and AI**	21st century

Yardstick: what humans can do when allied with machines: power, production, speed

Four revolutions in knowledge

Yardstick: what each shift does to knowledge: authority, transmission, trust and the ethics of learning.

1

Orality to writing

samāʿ, imlāʾ, ijāza; the *ṣaḥafī*

9th century

2

Manuscript to print

The first Ottoman Arabic-script press (1727)

18th–19th centuries

3

Print to digital

Digital libraries; Arabic OCR

Late 20th century on

4

Digital to generative AI

Low-resource Arabic; frequency over authority

Now

Today: the first transformation, read through al-Jāḥiẓ, as a mirror for the fourth.

Baghdad: paper, books and a critic

- Paper reaches Baghdad in the late 8th century; books, copyists and booksellers multiply.
- Al-Jāḥiẓ (d. 869) rented booksellers' shops to read through the night.
- His *Book of Animals* opens by answering a critic of books as such.

حتّى تجاوزت ذلك إلى أن عبت وضع الكتب ... فعبت الكتاب؛ ونعم الذخروالعقدة هو، ونعم الجليس والعدّة

"You went on to fault the making of books as such … Yet what an excellent treasure it is, what an excellent companion and resource!"

Al-Jāḥiẓ to his critic

The debate weighed benefits against harms. First, the case for the book.

Benefits I: memory and reach

Al-Jāḥiẓ's case for the book

1 Knowledge exceeds memory

Without books "most knowledge would perish".

Even the index of one's own books would exhaust a scholar.

→ **Generative AI:** memory, book, index, search, synthesis.

2 Bridging absence

Speech serves "the nearest needs", the book "the most distant".

It carries knowledge across places and generations.

→ **Generative AI:** access across distance and language.

3 The book does not forget

A reciter forgets a word and puts in its place "a word of the same metre";

"the book does not forget and does not exchange one word for another".

→ **Generative AI:** a model may supply a word "of the same metre".

Benefits II: access and economy

Al-Jāḥiẓ's case for the book

1 Compressing time

"In a month what you would not learn from the mouths of men in an age."

→ **Generative AI:** instant synthesis; AI tutors.

2 No gatekeepers

No "standing at the door" of the paid teacher.

A democratising claim, with an elitist edge.

→ **Generative AI:** access without gatekeepers, the same double edge.

3 One book, many peoples

"A garden carried in a sleeve";

"a speaker who speaks for the dead and translates for the living".

→ **Generative AI:** multilingual generation; the garden is now a phone.

Benefits III: the ideal companion

Al-Jāḥiẓ's case for the book

1 On demand

"Silent as long as you silence it, eloquent when you ask it to speak."

It "obeys you by night as by day".

→ **Generative AI:** the always-available assistant.

2 Neither flatters nor extracts

"The companion who does not flatter you";

it does not "extract what you have by cajolery".

→ **Generative AI:** sycophancy; harvesting data and attention.

3 Discreet and loyal

It "keeps a secret better than its owner".

It "does not turn against you".

→ **Generative AI:** logged prompts; a tool its provider can withdraw.

Concerns I: the written word

The opposing voices

1 Learning without a teacher

"Do not take knowledge from a *ṣaḥafī*": one who learnt only from written sheets.

Without a teacher, misreadings went uncorrected.

→ **Today:** fluent text, no one to correct it.

2 Writing down hadith

"Do not write from me anything but the Qurʾān"; other reports permit writing.

Fears: rivalling scripture, neglecting memory.

→ **Today:** what should not be delegated?

3 Knowledge you can lose

Robbers seized al-Ghazālī's notes: "How can you claim to know it, when we have taken it?"

He spent three years memorising them.

→ **Today:** offloading: whose knowledge is it?

Concerns II: the teacher and the trust

Knowledge as a trust (*amāna*), not only as content

1 Knowledge is religion

"This knowledge is religion, so look to whom you take your religion from."

Integrity and piety matter, not only the text.

→ **Today:** who stands behind the answer?

2 Formation, not only information

In the teacher's company the student acquired *adab* and was formed (*tarbiya*).

A whole genre set out these ethics.

→ **Today:** can a tool form character?

3 The speaking teacher

Learning "from the mouths of men" surpasses learning "from written sheets, even when the words are the same".

The teacher speaks; the book is inanimate.

→ **Today:** it speaks back: teacher, or simulation?

The book won: a knowledge industry

Al-Jāḥiẓ's side won; the industry was built at home

1

Paper

Made locally from the late 8th century

2

Booksellers

"More than a hundred" shops in one Baghdad quarter

3

Libraries

Court, mosque and private collections

4

Bibliographies

Catalogues of thousands of titles

The question became how to keep the benefits and contain the harms.

Safeguards: orality kept alive

Hybrid modes: the written text, verified through the living voice

Samāʿ
hearing the text from the teacher

Qirāʾa* or *ʿarḍ
reading it back for correction

Imlāʾ
dictation sessions

Muqābala
collating a copy against its master

Ijāza
a licence to transmit, recorded in the manuscript

قرأت كتاب الرسالة المصرية على الشافعي نيّفا وثلاثين مرّة، فما من مرّة إلّا كان يصحّحه

"I read the *Risāla* to al-Shāfiʿī thirty-odd times, and each time he corrected it."

His student, 9th century

Al-Jāḥiẓ's own caveats. "They placed the tongue before the pen." "Books do not revive the dead … but where nature is receptive, books sharpen it."

Today: who makes the “paper”?

The historical context has changed

1 Then: at the centre

- Abbasid society made its own medium, and the ethics that governed it.

2 Now: the stack is elsewhere

- Models, chips and computing power sit in the US, China and Europe.
- The Muslim world is largely a user, not a maker.

3 Data and grounding

- Arabic: 0.67% of web-crawl documents; English: 42.6%.
- Grounding helps, but does not supply method or authority.

Source: Common Crawl, 2026.

Book and generative AI as media

Measured against al-Jāḥiẓ's book

Kept

- Silent until asked; available by night and day
- Compression: a literature in minutes
- Reach across languages and generations
- Access without the teacher's door

At risk

- Fixity: a plausible word "of the same metre"
- Non-flattery: sycophancy
- Discretion: prompts logged and reused
- Loyalty: rented, updated, withdrawn
- A named author and chain of transmission

New

- It speaks back, like a teacher, without a teacher's accountability
- It composes rather than stores
- It can initiate (agents)
- It belongs to a provider with a business model

What the book revolution teaches

1. A revolution in knowledge is moral as well as technical: it was argued in terms of benefits, harms and trust.

2. The answer was neither rejection nor surrender: the book was adopted, and orality kept as a safeguard.

3. The safeguards concerned persons, not only texts: who transmits, with what integrity, under whose licence.

Beyond benchmarks

- What kind of revolution are we in, and who is shaping it?
- Which of our practices will be our *samāʿ* and *ijāza*?
- How do we keep the human teacher, and the learner's formation, at the centre?

The al-Jāḥiẓ test: for discussion

The book's virtue	Al-Jāḥiẓ on the book	Generative AI?
Fixity	Does not exchange one word for another	Fills gaps with a word "of the same metre"
Non-flattery	Does not flatter you	Adapts to what the user wants to hear
Non-extraction	Does not extract what you have by cajolery	Data and attention harvesting
Discretion	Keeps a secret better than its owner	Prompts logged, reused, exposed
Non-intrusion	Does not start talking while you are busy	Notifications; agents that initiate
Loyalty	Does not turn against you	Rented, updated, withdrawn by its provider

1. Would our models pass his test, and should our benchmarks measure it?
2. How can a system be responsive without becoming sycophantic?
3. What would *samāʿ* and *ijāza* look like for AI-mediated religious knowledge?

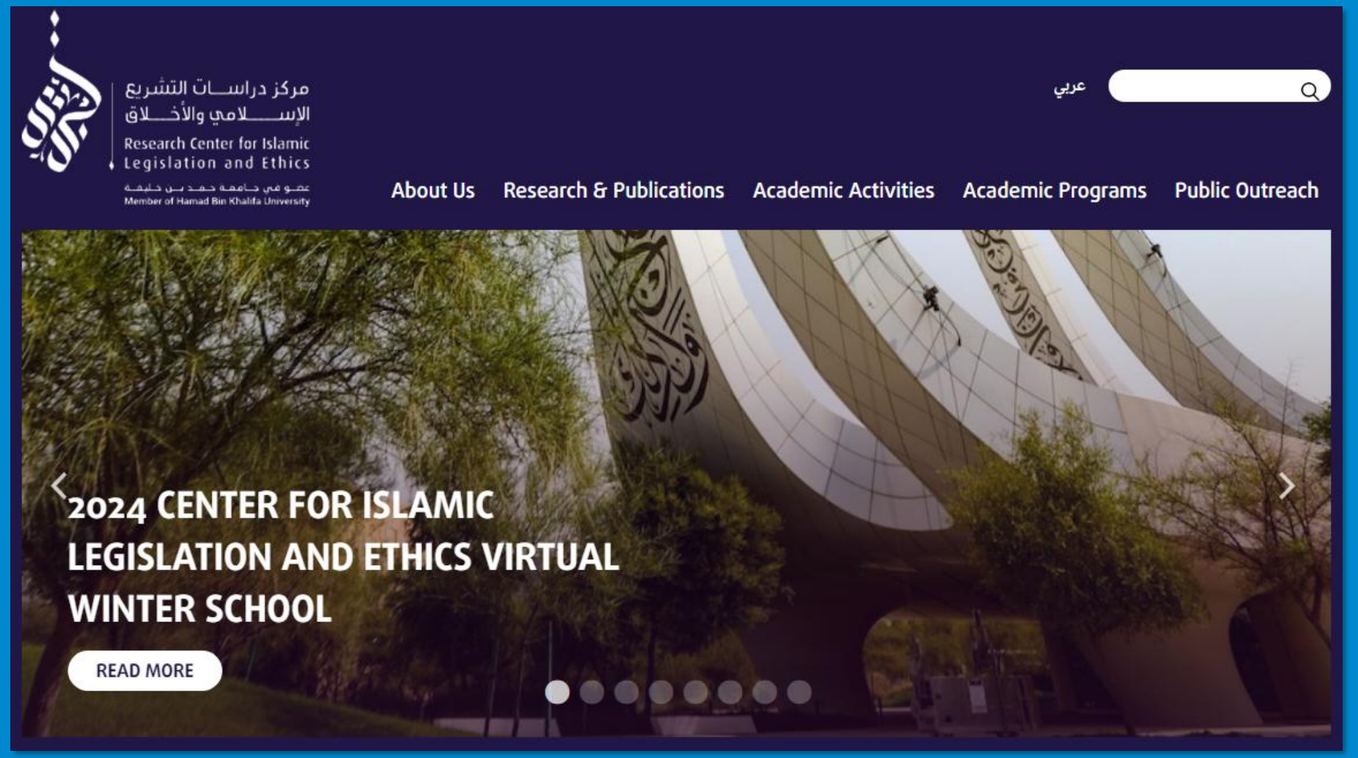
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