

PROCESSES AND METHODS USED IN ISLAMIC INTERNET IDENTITY¹

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Introduction

The phenomenon of weblogs by Muslims in Singapore, the publication of information and news for the consumption of Muslim audiences in Indonesia, the online calls for *reformasi* amongst Muslims in Malaysia and the proliferation of website forums run by Muslims in Australia illustrate the change in the construction of imagined Muslim communities and in the output of news received by Muslim audiences.

This paper looks at internet usage by Muslim students in Australia, Indonesia, Malaysia and Singapore. The exploration of Islamic identity and community among these Muslim students varies because of the specific religious and media environments evident in each country, including:

- ∞ the nature of the state
- ∞ the politico-legal position of Islam and its adherents
- ∞ the political economy of the Internet, and
- ∞ the nature of Islam as a national social movement.

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On the one hand, these factors reflect national cultures that frame the boundaries of meanings available in identity formation, negotiation and transformation. On the other hand the Internet allows a transnational flow of perspectives and interpretations that facilitates the articulation of a wider Islamic identity (or range of identities) that goes over and beyond the nation-state.

The contention of my research is that the internet plays a key role in facilitating the construction of a shared sense of Muslim identity within nation states, and across some of the borders of these nation-states. Moreover, the relation of the State to Islam as a social reality, and the State's relation to the Internet as a communication environment, interact to produce a highly politicized context for the exploration and constitution of Islamic community, for young Muslims in this region.

This contention emerged after taking into account the questions about Islam that have increased since the September 11 attacks in the United States of America, as well as the significant amount of news coverage devoted to people and incidents related to Islam.

National overviews

Each of the four countries or societies studied had a unique set of circumstances with regards to the size of its Muslim population, the levels of freedom in which its media operated, and the information technology and infrastructure available to its citizens.

Australia is the home of a slowly consolidating Muslim culture that is the result of a nascent Islamic community comprised of both émigré Muslims and converts. Its members engage in the practice of their faith online to build networks, form and maintain relationships, and spread and consume news and views in an alternative Islamo-public sphere. Australia can be said to operate under a libertarian media environment under which freedom of speech is seen as a vital feature of a functioning democracy, and the media according to this system is seen as a marketplace of ideas in which anything can be published or broadcast for supply to media consumers (Sani 2005). With first world infrastructure and information technologies available to this Islamic population, the internet is also used to support the working, educational and social aspirations of particularly younger Australian Muslims - a trend that is observable in Australian society as a whole (Madden and Savage 2000).

Indonesia is the country with the largest Muslim population in the world, but its modern history is one of overwhelmingly pluralistic national identity encompassing multiple faith histories.

Throughout its modern history political and social upheaval combined to alter its media policies and the environment its media (including the internet) operated in. The collapse of the New Order regime which dominated the Indonesian political landscape for thirty years resulted in a slew of new publications and broadcasting outlets, while surviving older ones were able to enjoy a new environment of media freedom (Eng 1998). Internet and email played a role in Indonesia's media revolution, proving to be a turning point for the different ethnic and religious groups who became the users of the new medium. The freer post-Suharto media environment also saw the explosion of political tabloids, some of which had an Islamic orientation and explored the relationships between "reformasi" (the reform movement) and Islam (Tornquist 2000). Internet practice in Indonesia is marked by its use as a form of alternative media through its contribution to Indonesia's public sphere, but there are gender and economic dimensions with its use given that the country was the hardest hit by the Asian financial crisis of 1997-98 and took the longest to recover. While the cost of home internet access is prohibitive to most Indonesian families public internet kiosks or warnet, universities, and workplaces provide access to users who are predominantly members of the young urbanised population. The digital divide and lack of infrastructure prevents rural Muslim and poorer Indonesians from being able to access the internet (Hill and Sen 2002). Indonesia's Islam is pluralistic, and the theological interpretations of various groups establish online presences.

Like Indonesia, Malaysia has a majority Muslim population and minorities of other faith groups. But Malaysia is economically more advanced, with policymakers explicit in declaring entry to the first world as one of the country's development goals (Mahathir 1999; Barlow 1997). Malaysian internet usage reflects an online manifestation of the country's diverse racial composition, and the promotion and support of the internet from government levels for a computer-literate society. Malaysia's population appears to have embraced the government's push for technology-driven development, with large numbers of Malaysians taking up internet access of whom the overwhelming majority are young people below the age of 30 (Hashim and Yusof 1999). However, Malaysian media operates in a restricted environment, and the use of the internet by political activists and opposition parties signal it as a source of alternative media (Gan 2002). Blogs and websites are actively used as a source of independent, non-government-sanctioned news about opposition party policies and critical of the ruling party (Holmes and Grieco 2001). At the same time, young Malaysians use the internet for business and social purposes (for example specific social network sites). The Malaysian government therefore finds itself juggling two different but critically important goals: the need for technology-led economic development and the importance of a vibrant, flourishing and free Malaysian internet environment.

Singapore is perhaps the most “wired” country out of the four studied; economically stable and advanced, its information technology infrastructure is used by its citizens and supported by its government (Kalathil 2003). Its citizens enjoy high rates of education, home ownership and employment, in addition to an affluent standard of living. However, Singapore’s media environment is tightly controlled and offers little space for genuine debate, allowing the internet to fulfill the role of maintenance of a public sphere (George 2003). The internet gave Singaporean underground activism an outlet for the publication of views considered too subversive for the mainstream newspapers and broadcasters. The Singaporean government has attempted to control the publishing opportunities the internet offered (Wang 1999), for example through including the internet in regulatory mechanisms for traditional media. Although Muslims in Singapore comprise the biggest minority (and a politically strategic one) at 16 per cent of the country's population, socioeconomically Singapore's Muslim minority are lacking in representation at the professional level. This disparity has implications for the future of the Malay Muslim community in Singapore, often described as becoming an underclass (Lai 2003).

Data Sources and Methodology

With internet usage dominated predominantly by young people in all four countries studied, the material used as the basis for the research also reflected a youth bias. An online survey involving respondents from Australia and southeast Asia was used as the source of data for this research. The respondents were Muslim tertiary students recruited through campus Muslim student organizations.

Earlier it was proposed that four parameters constrain and direct internet use by young Muslims (the nature of the state, the position of Islam and Muslims, the political economy of the Internet, and the nature of Islam as a national social movement). The research methods adopted seek to test out whether these parameters are determinant in the way suggested, and how variations country by country affect the way in which the Internet is used.

Surveys administered online have much appeal to social science researchers. Sourcing respondents via email postings and requesting responses through an internet survey results in faster turnaround time; permits easier facilitation of international respondents; allows instantaneous recording of data; negates the chance of respondents being affected by interviewer bias; and offers the ease of self-

administration of the survey. Online surveys are appealing because of “the power of self-administration and interactivity on the one hand, and the advantages of speed and massive reductions in cost over interviewer-administered surveys on the other.” (Couper et al 2007). Granello and Wheaton (2004) cite a faster response time, lower cost, and ease of data entry as some of the advantages of engaging survey respondents online. However, an online survey's main limitation is that the method contains inherent difficulties in obtaining a representative sample. In addition, the possibility of low response rates comprise a second limitation with this research methodology. The online survey is therefore a double-edged sword: it was selected given its advantages and its relation to the topic of Muslim internet users, but with acknowledgment of its limitations.

It must be acknowledged that the survey respondents represented a very specific sub-community of Muslims in Australia and the three southeast Asian countries that were the focus of the research. Because survey respondents were drawn from Muslim student populations, such a method would rule out trying to extrapolate any meaning from the survey results to the Australian or southeast Asian Muslim community as a whole. Rather than being representative, the research used a sample that demonstrated the characteristic of volunteer sampling: instead of seeking a random group representative of the Muslim populace in Australia and southeast Asia as a whole, the research aimed to target a specific group of Muslims: those at university using the internet. Miller (in Babbie 2001) notes that some groups are ideally suited to internet survey. For example, visitors to specific websites or the members of certain email lists could be targeted according to how relevant the survey's questions are to that group. The research also used the characteristics of quota sampling in that the group of Muslims the research sought for the completion of the survey (ie. internet users) could also be described as a quota sample, gleaned from a variety of sources. Responses were solicited via postings submitted to a Muslim student association (MSA) mailing list; these postings were made to MSAs in the four countries concerned. Similarly non-student community mailing lists requesting responses from Muslim students provided further input. Following these two initial steps, a clear pattern emerged from the data. The greater part of respondents described their location as being from Australia or Singapore, with a much smaller proportion of respondents coming from Malaysia or Indonesia. Unfortunately, the number of respondents from Malaysia and Indonesia remained low.

The online survey was divided into five sections. It began with basic demographic questions asking such things as the respondent's age, location and gender; followed by an exploration of where and

how the survey respondent used the internet, including information requested about access, the frequency with which the respondent uses the internet and whether internet usage is conducted as a primary or secondary activity. Questions were then asked specifically about the use of email and webpages and questions relating to the content and purpose of the web presence of the respondent (if he or she has one). The survey then asked why the respondent used the internet. For each reason selected, the respondent was then asked to gauge how often he or she used the internet for that particular purpose. The reasons listed were related to Islamic practice online: seeking clarification on matters of Islamic law, finding information related to the Muslim community or finding news from an Islamic perspective. Finally, the survey asked the respondent how he or she felt overall about the internet and its potential for the Muslim community.

Findings

From the responses of Muslim students in Australia, Indonesia, Malaysia and Singapore to an online survey it appears that:

Policies on internet freedom do not appear to affect the level of free expression and explorations of religious identity online. For example Malaysia and Singapore have a more conservative approach to internet freedom than Indonesia and Australia, yet the Muslim students in all four countries who responded to the online survey say they use the internet to thrash out various viewpoints regarding Islamic teachings and practice; and to defend Islam through online discussions. This is supported by the content analysis, in which was found that Australian Muslims used the internet as a source of alternative viewpoints among the members of their communities, discussing issues related to Islamic faith and practice online.

The level of religious freedom given to Muslims and in particular the public expression of symbolic aspects of Islamic identity do affect the reasons for internet usage. The results of the online survey responses suggested that the internet represents a source of practical information for Muslim students living in non-established minority groups, and that their use of the internet was more practical than that of Muslims living in countries where Islam was the faith of the majority of the population (where practical information such as prayer times or the location of mosques) could be found offline. The results of the online survey also suggested that Muslim students in all four countries actively build networks using the internet, and this activity is more pronounced in countries where Muslims are a minority. The idea of the global

Muslim community being maintained through email and websites was invoked in comments by Muslim students about an email forward sent in the aftermath of the 9-11 attacks, depicting a “Taliban dating agency”. The students agreed the email was insulting to Muslim women in general (not just those of Afghan descent) and mocked Islam. They envisioned email as a way of building links between Muslim women beyond national borders.

Islam's political strength within each country studied is not clearly demonstrated by the diversity of opinions and outlets available to members of the 'ummah' or Muslim community. The online survey results appear to suggest that irrespective of whether Muslims constitute a majority or minority in the country concerned, the internet is used as a means to discuss alternative sources of news related to the Muslim world. This is complemented by the content analysis, in which it is argued that postings to Australian online sites or email lists such as the MuslimVillage forum and the Islam-info and Australian Muslim Media mailing lists or listservs demonstrates how the Australian Muslim community online uses the internet to disseminate opinions about the news distributed by mainstream traditional media outlets. This practice provides the Australian Muslim minority population with a form of rebuttal against the ways in which the mainstream media portrays Islam and Muslims, which are seen as hostile and marginalizing.

Social class and economic position of users affects their internet access and use. The availability or affordability of internet services in the four countries studied reflecting the specific characteristics of the digital divide in each society. The online survey responses alluded to differences existing in the detail of internet usage (for example, in whether the source of internet access was from home or work, and in the frequency of accessing the internet).

Discussion

The internet plays the role of an alternative source of media for Muslims, irrespective of the size of the Muslim community. The size of the Muslim community in proportion to the general population does not matter. Muslim students and other members of the community will turn to the internet as an alternative news source, where any one of two factors are present:

- ∞ whether or not the existing media environment is tightly controlled, as in the case of Singapore and Malaysia

∞ whether or not the Muslim population constitutes a minority, as in the case of Australia.

While Muslims constitute the majority of the population in Malaysia, they will turn to the internet to find news if the non-internet sources media environment is heavily restricted. Thus, the web forums and email lists serve to fulfill the media needs of Muslims where the output of newspapers, radio stations and television networks are diluted politically though tightly controlled. When Muslims are a minority, the internet acts as a form of alternative news where the opinions can be shared on Islamic community-specific discourse that is not situated within the coverage of non-internet media output, and where news that is relevant to the Muslim diaspora community can be accessed and disseminated.

The size of the Muslim community and the strength of Islam in the given society impacts in some way on whether the internet is used for practical purposes. National policies on communications infrastructure play a part in determining the amount of time and purposes to which internet use is put. Where a community of Muslims is a minority (as in the case of Australia) the internet is a practical source of information such as halal restaurant locations or Friday prayer times – information that in countries where Muslims are a majority can be found through personal networks and non-internet media.

The state's attitudes to religious freedom and expression of Islamic identity and Muslim viewpoints, collectively affect the formation of Islamic identity and community online. This can be seen in the use of the internet by opposition groups in Malaysia, and Malay Muslim dissidents in Singapore. The internet is a way to forge networks between Muslims in the process of creating communities of shared thoughts and belief. The use of the internet to form networks among Muslims is particularly prevalent in minority Islamic populations such as Australia's Muslim community, but the practice also exists among Muslims who are a majority (such as in Indonesia and Malaysia). The internet is therefore used by Muslim students to find out about, and connect with, other Muslims in their country or region, building an Islamic cyber-community, irrespective of the size of the Muslim population in relation to the population as a whole. The differences in practice amongst Muslims are manifest online, where certain websites or email lists will contain cyber-congregations of Muslims who are followers of a particular theological or political inclination.

Conclusion

This paper argued that the internet plays a key role in facilitating the construction of a shared sense of Muslim identity within nation states, and across some of the borders of these nation-states (again reflective of Islam's border-less ethos). The argument that the research proposed is that observable variances in internet use by Muslim communities can be attributed to factors such as differences in systems of governance, the position of Islam and the size of the Muslim population, economic development (leading to digital divide and access issues), and the structure and freedom of media industries in the nation-state. Through the method of a quantitative online survey, the research hypothesized that government policies on internet freedom will either facilitate or inhibit free expression and exploration of identity. It also hypothesized that policies on religious freedom and in particular the public expression of symbolic aspects of Islamic identity will contribute to the priority accorded different internet content questions, for example political rights, questions of moral or ethical guidance, and personal relationships (to some extent paralleling a common hierarchy of economic, political and social rights). The paper argued that the political strength of Islam within a society would play a part in internet expression, and would be demonstrated by the diversity of opinions and outlets available to members of the *ummah*. It hypothesized that social class and economic position of users would affect their access to and use of the Internet, reflecting the specific characteristics of the digital divide in each society. Finally the thesis hypothesized that the use of the internet would have an effect on gender relations among adherents to Islam in the four nation-states studied, with particular reference to changing conceptions of Muslim women's roles and responsibilities in the areas of relationship building and participation in public discourse.

The story of Muslims and their practice of Islam on the internet is one that is still being written. Today in the post September 11 era, the Islamic faith and its adherents are constantly in the spotlight. Although it can be argued that the mainstream media is slowly improving in terms of the objectivity and accuracy in its coverage of Islam, there are still profound misconceptions about Muslims and their faith within the mainstream media that remain unaddressed. Against this backdrop of (mis)information, the use of email and the World Wide Web may well eclipse that of newspapers, radio and television in terms of fulfilling the information requirements of the Muslim audience. The role played by the internet in the daily life of Muslims cannot be underestimated. In contrast to the unidirectional nature of newspapers, the linearity of radio and the irresponsiveness of television, the internet with its decentralization and low entry points to publishing represents a new world of potential. Newspapers and television have high costs to entry for those wishing to make

use of these mediums to create communities and audiences. Radio has a comparatively lower entry barrier (for instance, through community radio) but licenses and broadcasting time are restricted. On the other hand, for Muslims who have access to the internet the possibilities are endless. A web presence or mailing list can be set up at little or no cost (other than the initial outlay for the computer and internet access). The internet plays the role of information provider to Muslims in Australia and overseas. The multiplicity of information available online has allowed Muslims to engage in constructive discourse within the bounds of adab or Islamic etiquette about theological issues – for example aqidah (belief) and fiqh (jurisprudence) – as well news and current events. The internet is a vital source of information on practical day-to-day matters to which Muslims must attend as believers in Islam, for instance in finding out mosque locations in unfamiliar cities or looking for halal places to eat. The internet also contains a plethora of additional resources from which Muslims can seek information relating to the Qur'an and hadith, although there may be skepticism about the use of the internet as an information source on Shariah.

Young Muslims, caught between modernity and tradition, use the internet as a Muslim counselor and adviser. On the other hand, Muslim internet users surveyed in all four countries used the medium to find out about Islamic communities within and external to their countries of origin. The usage of the internet to seek alternative news and viewpoints is indicative of a paradigm shift amongst Muslims from absorbing news that has been collected and reported by non-Muslim sources, to the selection and channeling of specific and desired information from both Muslim and non-Muslim publications that may be geographically dispersed from the user's physical location. The use of the internet by Muslims cannot be categorized as purely political, purely religious, or purely social. Muslims use the internet for all three purposes – as a support mechanism for political campaigning; as a discussion and information source for religious knowledge seeking, utilization and dissemination; and as a complement to offline socializing and textual interaction amongst Muslims and with non-Muslims. The internet may well prove to be the means by which Muslims can assimilate Islam's grand narrative and holistic life principles with the precepts of a modern lifestyle, at all times maintaining and developing the integrity of Muslim identity.

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