

Online Islamic identity and community in Australia and three neighbouring countries

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

CERTIFICATE OF AUTHORSHIP/ORIGINALITY

PERSONAL STATEMENT

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS II

TABLE OF CONTENTS III

LIST OF TABLES V

LIST OF FIGURES VI

ABSTRACT VII

SECTION ONE: INTRODUCTION 8

Muslim Populations and Media Environments 9

Australia 9

Indonesia 16

Malaysia 21

Singapore 31

Rationale for Research Topic 39

Curiosity about Islam 40

Changing global politics 41

Research Objectives 42

Conclusion 43

SECTION TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW 45

The Internet, Communication Technologies and Society 46

The Clash of Civilisations 52

Muslim Communities' Adaptation of the Internet 57

E-Revolution in the Ummah 57

Challenging misconceptions about Islam online 61

Diaspora Muslim Identity and Community on the Internet 62

Conclusion 66

SECTION THREE: RESULTS 68

Data Sources and Methodology 69

An online survey analysed quantitatively 69

Information from web forums and mailing lists 71

Interviews conducted with Muslim women on reactions to email forwards following September 11 attacks 71

Limitations 72

Results: Online Survey 72

Design of interview questions 73

The Digital Divide: Response Rates 73

The Importance of the Internet in the Lives of Young Muslims 77

Targeting Muslim Users: Email and Home Pages 80

Engaging Islamic Practice Online 81

Forming and Informing the Electronic Ummah 85

Finding Alternative News on Islam and Muslims Online 88

Muslim Assessment of the Internet: Positive or Negative? 89

Conclusion 90

Results: Textual Analysis of Web Forums and Mailing Lists 91

Background 91

The Australian Muslim's Hyde Park 93

The Australian Muslim's CNN 95
The Australian Muslim's Town Crier 96
The Australian Muslim's Telegraph 97
The Australian Muslim's Family 97
The Australian Muslim's Coffee Shop 98
Case Study I: the Internet and Finding a Halal Spouse 98
Case Study II: The Politics of Online Disagreement Among Australian Muslims 101
Conclusion 108

Results: Reactions of Muslim women to email content following the September 11 attacks 108

Email and community 110
Post 9-11 Email Forwards 112
Conclusion 117

Results Summary 117

SECTION FOUR: DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION 119

Tensions between the State and Muslims 122

Tensions among Muslims 126

Tensions between Muslims and non-Muslims 128

Conclusion 132

BIBLIOGRAPHY 140

LIST OF TABLES

Respondent location	52
Frequency of internet use	54
Respondents who used the internet daily	54
Source of internet access	55
Singapore: source of internet access	55
Australia: source of internet access	55
Indonesia: source of internet access	56
Malaysia: source of internet access	56
Internet as primary/secondary activity	56
Email provider	57
Using the internet to find information on hadith	58
Australian respondents who used the internet to find information on hadith	59
Seeking clarifications on Shariah on the internet	59
Comparison: using the internet for information on Shariah, Quran and Hadith	60
Frequency: seeking clarification on Shariah on the internet	60
Using the internet to find information on the Muslim community	61
Types of community	61
Using the internet to interact with other Muslims	62
Using the internet to defend Islam	62
Finding news from an Islamic perspective	63
General perspective on the internet	64
Beliefs on whether the internet can be beneficial to Muslims	64

LIST OF FIGURES

Taliban singles online.....81

ABSTRACT

In Australia, Islam is a controversial religion practiced by a small but growing band of converts alongside migrant Muslim communities from the Middle East, Africa, Europe and Asia. By contrast, in Indonesia it is the professed faith of the majority of the population yet holds no place in state laws or the constitution of the Republic. In Singapore Islam is practiced within tightly monitored state-imposed boundaries by a Muslim population that comprises the Island's second biggest ethnic/cultural group. Nearby Malaysia though secular in policymaking and socio-political foundations, incorporates Islamic aspects into its governing practices and national identity. Since the early days of its existence, the internet has been the site of alternatives and challenges to the dominant popular discourse that permeates the content and values of earlier media forms such as television and print. Does the internet act to the benefit, or to the detriment, of Muslims in representing themselves and their way of life? If the internet can be used for the benefit of Muslims, in what ways can it do this?

The thesis explores how Muslim identity is constructed and mediated online in Australia, Indonesia, Malaysia and Singapore. It provides key parameters that emerge from the overview of the countries studied, and uses these as the basis for the research topic. It then examines five key hypotheses (that national government policies on internet "freedom" will set up a first order structure of constraint that will either facilitate or inhibit free expression and exploration of identity; that government 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 - eg political rights, questions of moral or ethical guidance, and personal relationships; that the political strength of Islam within a society will be demonstrated by the diversity of opinions and outlets available to members of the ummah; that the social class and economic position of users will affect their access to and use of the Internet, reflecting the specific characteristics of the digital divide in each society; and that the use of the internet will 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).

SECTION ONE: INTRODUCTION

- Muslim Populations and Media Environments
 - Australia
 - Indonesia
 - Malaysia
 - Singapore
 - Rationale for Research Topic
 - Curiosity about Islam
 - Changing global politics
 - Research Objectives
 - Conclusion
-

The question of how young Muslims in four countries (Australia, Indonesia, Malaysia and Singapore) construct their Islamic identity on the internet is the key topic explored in this thesis. Religious identity is complex: it is spoken of in conjunction with national or ethnic identity, and aspects of it incorporate (or are often mistaken for) for cultural identity. A Muslim sees him- or her- self in a multiplicity of ways beyond merely a person who takes on an Islamic identity and is referred to as a Muslim. Above the fundamental definition of a Muslim being a person who professes or adheres to the Islamic faith, the word “Muslim” itself means different things to different people and in different contexts. In Malaysia and Singapore, adherence to Islam is inextricably linked to Malay ethnicity (Ismail 2006). In Indonesia, there is a demarcation between “modernist” Muslims who object to mysticism in worship and are concentrated in the metropolitan areas, and “traditionalist” Muslims for whom mysticism is part and parcel of religious practice and are largely members of rural populations (Fox 2004; Anggraeni 1998). In Australia, a Muslim might use terms such as nominal, practicing, secular, non-practising or pious to describe the “type” of Muslim a person is (Dunn 2004). Islamic identity can therefore be viewed as a constructed identity - it is an amalgam of cultural and ethnic association and theological and ideological positioning.

Terms such as modernist, traditional, nominal and practicing are indicative of the multiplicity seen in the discourse on public and political Islam. This vibrant diversity is true of the four countries that lie within the scope of this thesis. For example, in Indonesia the two largest Muslim organisations - the urban-centred Muhammadiyah symbolising “modernist” Islam, and the Nadhlatul Ulama with its expansive rural support base and representative of “traditionalist” Islam, both with estimated memberships totalling more than 35 million - spearhead the push to modernise Indonesian Islam while at the same time trying to protect their credibility as Muslim scholars.

Indonesian liberals are engaged in a battle for the hearts and minds of Muslims as well as an epoch-making attempt to extract the prophetic truths from the Holy Koran in a manner that shows the inherent compatibility of modern-day concerns with sacral texts.

(Raslan 2002: np)

This battle is not restricted to Indonesia. Linguistically, culturally and anthropologically, Indonesia shares many similarities with its neighbour Malaysia. Because in Indonesia and Malaysia the notions of pluralism, tolerance of minorities, and support for social welfare and gender issues are framed as an integral part of Islam (Wanandi 2002; Raslan 2002; Desker 2002), these two Muslim majority countries are cited as exemplary models of modern Islamic nations, to the extent that

...the small Islamic monarchy of Brunei and the significant Muslim minority populations in Thailand, the Philippines and Singapore are influenced by trends and developments affecting Muslims in Malaysia and Indonesia.

(Desker 2002)

Economically, Malaysia is thriving with a robust and growing domestic market (Raslan 2002; Desker 2002), while Indonesia suffered greatly during the Asian financial crisis of the 1997-1998 and is entering a fragile but stabilising phase (Deuster 2002). In contrast, Muslims constitute a minority in the other two societies that fell within the scope of this research. In economically developed Singapore Muslims number 350,000 out of a total population of 2.3 million, a minority of 14.9 per cent (Gerrard & Cunningham 1997). Muslims are also a minority in Australia, where they constitute around 1 per cent of the population of 20 million people (Haque 2001).

This section begins by exploring how Muslim identity is constructed and mediated online in Australia, Indonesia, Malaysia and Singapore, in order to facilitate discussion in later chapters about how Islam is negotiated online and offline. This section also provides key parameters that emerge from the overview of the countries studied, and uses these parameters as the basis for the research topic presenting the research's contention and rationale, and outlining the objectives in conducting the research.

Muslim Populations and Media Environments

Australia

Despite the fact that Muslims constitute a minority in Australia, the presence of the religion in the country is not as "foreign" or as new as is traditionally thought. Australia has had contact with Islam as early as the eighteenth century of the Christian era when Muslim fisherman from the Indonesian island of Makassar came to trade with the indigenous Australians (Matthews 1997; Saeed 2002). In terms of settling in Australia and bringing the religion with them, between two and four thousand Pashtun Muslim cameleers from Afghanistan and the Punjab region of pre-partition India arrived in the late nineteenth and first decade of the twentieth centuries, "when the use of the camel as a means of

transportation was at its peak” (Matthews 1997), to provide outback transport. While many of the cameleers returned home, others stayed in Australia working as farm hands, hawkers or setting up their own farms. The practice of Islam amongst this community of early Australian Muslims diminished and eventually disappeared (Cleland 2002). The years following World War II saw migration to Australia of Muslims from places including Lebanon, Turkey, Bosnia, Pakistan and Indonesia (Saeed 2002). In addition to migrants, Australian born Muslims and converts have added to the Muslim presence “down under”. According to 2001 census data, more than one third of the 300,000 Muslims in Australia were locally born. The same census figures indicate that Muslim communities in Australia represent some seventy national backgrounds and comprise one and a half per cent of the total Australian population.

Although often spoken of as a homogenous group, the Muslim community in Australia is disparate and consists of several sub-communities, with more than sixty countries of birthplace and speaking fifty five languages (Dunn 2004). Just as internationally, Islam encompasses different cultures and parts of the world, Australian Muslims are multicultural and ethnically diverse: “the global diversity of Islam is reflected in Australia” (Keely 2006). On the surface, Muslims in Australia are divided by national affiliation, as well as cultural/linguistic groupings - for example, Australian Muslims identifying themselves as Malay may come from Malaysia, or Singapore. They may interact or work together with Australian Muslims identifying themselves as Indonesian in origin, because of the shared linguistic and cultural heritage of Malay and Indonesian Muslim societies. For instance, the 2003 Melbourne concert of Malaysian religious vocal group “Raihan” was organised by an Indonesian student body with the help of other community groups including the Malay Association of Victoria). Identity for a Muslim in Australia, as a member of a community where two thirds of the members are overseas born, does not stop at “Muslim Australian” and instead takes into account other definitive layers: racial, ethnic and country of (parents’ or own) origin in a process of what Abdel-Fattah (in Schwarz 2005) defines as hyphenated identity.

In addition to the first level of division amongst Muslim Australians (ie division by cultural or national differences), Muslim communities in Australia are also divided amongst theological fault lines that may seem at times either blurred or pedantic, to an outsider. The concept of bid’ah or innovation illustrates some of the varying viewpoints: there are Muslim Australians who believe the method of ritual prayer and dzikr (remembrance of Allah through reciting specified phrases of praise) should correspond to the way shown by Prophet Muhammad and not encompass, for example, group recitations which were not conducted during Muhammad’s time; there are also Muslim Australians who believe that group gatherings are an innovation but one which they classify as a positive bid’ah. It can be said that the extent to which an Australian Muslim negotiates the practice of Islam varies considerably among Muslim communities. McMichael (2002: 180) observed the critical role played by physical manifestations of faith as an anchor in the lives of newly arrived Muslim migrants from Somalia:

the expression of Islam was immediately apparent through material practices: women attend mosques, buy their meat at halal butchers, wear veils, and fast and feast during Ramadan; children are sent to Islamic weekend schools to learn the Qur'an; and sheikhs are called upon to recite the Qur'anic texts for good fortune and during times of crisis.

In other Muslim communities in Australia, notably those from southeast Asia, veiling, the purchase of halal meat, and mosque attendance all varies and is not the overriding norm.

The fundamentals of Islam are agreed to by Muslims in principle if not always in practice - belief in one God and Muhammad as the Messenger of God, sholat (ritual prayer) five times a day, sawm (fasting) in the month of Ramadhan, zakat or giving to the poor, and performing the Hajj or pilgrimage to Makkah if a Muslim is financially and physically able. However, beyond these fundamental beliefs the semantic details of life as a Muslim in 21st century Australia are discussed at length by Muslims in the course of their daily lives. Members of Australian Muslim communities engage in rigorous, sometimes passionate, debate amongst themselves, and with non-Muslims, about virtually everything to do with practice and belief in Islam. Popular topics of discussion are methods of interaction with non-Muslims; matters pertaining to the individual and collective rights and responsibilities of Muslim men, women and children; their roles as Muslim Australians; how these roles, rights and responsibilities are navigated by Muslims within a non-Muslim society. Although Muslim organisations in Australia were initially constructed on the basis of shared culture or ethnicity (Dunn 2004) today parity of opinion about Muslim roles, rights and responsibilities together with factors such as shared occupations, campuses or demographics can also constitute the basis of formation of Muslim organisations. For example, there are Australian Muslim societies with Lebanese, Bangladeshi, Fijian Indian or Indonesian orientations (some of which have quite specific - and in a few cases, such as the Lebanese Muslim Association, exclusionary - membership requirements). There are also Muslim bodies representing students, followers of particular religious teachers, and those that deal with specific professional or service areas such as the Islamic Women's Welfare Council in Victoria, or the Islamic health and community welfare-focused Mission of Hope, which aims to cater to the culturally-sensitive needs of the Muslim community in Sydney.

Organisations and societies such as these are indicative of how the various elements of Australian Muslim society functioned as representative bodies, and did so prior to the onset of the internet, but in vastly different and less effective ways. Muslim associations or groups operated within geographical constraints; and made use of the advantage of personal contacts and networking. For instance Muslim bodies such as the Federation of Australian Muslim Students and Youth (FAMSY) have state chapters under a national umbrella body while the Young Muslims of Australia (YMA), although Melbourne-based, have a corresponding body in Sydney with which joint activities are conducted. In the case of FAMSY, the organisation's history goes back to 1964 with what was originally the Muslim Students'

Association of Queensland (MSAQ), based at Queensland University. MSAQ was instrumental in pushing for Muslim students at each Australian university to set up a Muslim Students' Association, making this suggestion at a national conference which was attended by Muslim students from other states. By 1968 Muslim students at five other universities in Australia had set up MSAs. Together with MSAQ, the six original MSAs joined together to establish what would later be known as FAMSU. The seeds sown by MSAQ in 1964 took four years to bear fruition. Without the benefit of such ties established over a long period of time, the expansion and strengthening of Islamic community across state and national boundaries was an arduous process involving non-digital means of communication such as newsletters, snail mail and face-to-face contact.

In essence the internet has allowed Muslim student and community organizations in Australia to overcome distance and connect with each other across the different cities and states and strengthen religious ties by electronic means - online forums, email lists and websites. For example, the users of Australian Muslim websites and email lists are the target audience for events publicised primarily through the internet, including protests against the war in Iraq and a barbecue jointly organised by the MSAs of Sydney's five universities. At the latter, female and male attendees had separate areas in the spirit of conforming to Islamic principles on mixing of the sexes. Following the barbecue a (female) user posted a congratulatory message to the organisers, on the IslamicSydney/Muslimvillage forum (where she probably knew they would read it). Another (male) poster responded:

You were there? Man, I knew about the segregation (of the sexes) and all, but we should have worn name badges...Next time yell out your names or something!

(MuslimVillage 2003: np)

On the one hand these two users "knew" each other in the sense that they had been interacting in the online forum. Yet away from their computers and in the real world, they were complete strangers - despite being at the same event, on the same day, at the same time and place, even (in all probability) carrying out the midday prayer in the same congregation. Of course, there was the opposite scenario to this - there were others there who did indeed know each other both on- and off-line; as revealed by their subsequent postings to the forum. Both sets of circumstances - engaging with the people a user knows personally, as well as engaging with people who happen to hang around the same website as the user does - raise the question of social interaction and community. Because after all, this is what sites such as IslamicSydney/Muslimvillage are doing - the site administrators weren't just building an internet presence, but in the process they had inadvertently built a community.

The onset of the internet therefore marked a new chapter in the history of inter-Muslim and Muslim/non-Muslim relationship and community building in Australia and beyond. What the internet allowed Muslims in Australia to do was to foster, over a short period of time, ties with Muslims in

other states, and in many cases with fellow Muslims in other countries. For example, the sheikh that a Muslim Australian turned to for advice on religious matters did not necessarily have to be the sheikh attached to the local mosque - rather, it could be a well-known religious figure overseas. An Islamic scholar from Trinidad, Imran Hosein, had several students in Sydney Australia who turned to him for advice, as is evident from certain postings to the former Islamic Sydney online forums (MuslimVillage 2004). Such interaction was made possible through the adaptation of the internet as a technology which knew no geographical limits and respected no political boundaries. The various communities within Muslim Australia drifted online, and people who did not originally know of or belong to Islamic organisations or collectives were able to gain access to them through their webpages or by subscribing to their mailing lists. It is not difficult to envisage how the internet could be useful to individuals in the following situations: a newly arrived female student from a Muslim country looking for shared accommodation with other young Muslim women close to her campus; a Muslim man moving from Adelaide to Sydney to take up a job offer and wanting to know the location of the nearest mosque to his new workplace so he could perform Friday prayers; or a recent convert to Islam seeking support and social networking. In each of these circumstances, the information sought could be a mere mouse click away. For example, putting the words “mosque” and “melbourne” into a search engine will result in a list of web pages, the second of which is a page that is part of the Australian Federation of Islamic Councils’ website. This page shows a list of Mosques in Victoria including names, addresses, phone numbers and pictures. It appears that internet usage by Muslims in Australia reflects the adoption of the medium as a means for constructing communities and setting up relationships, or fast-tracking the process of building ties amongst Muslims (and with non-Muslims) scattered throughout the country.

The use of the internet has made possible for Muslim Australians an active Islamic public sphere where discussion takes place about contentious issues of faith and practice, as well as Muslim Australian viewpoints can be found on current affairs and news involving Muslims in Australia and overseas. That such a public sphere exists may come as a surprise, given dissent in religious thought is not the norm in Muslim societies. This is a commonly held misconception - even amongst Muslims themselves - that differing viewpoints have no place in Islam. In fact, Islamic teachings espouse requirements of adab (etiquette) which Muslims are encouraged to pay heed to, when expressing viewpoints at odds with each other. As a visiting American Islamic scholar told a Sydney audience of young Muslims,

the point becomes how do we manage our differences? How do we differ in such a way that while our ideas may differ and be separate, our hearts are united and we recognise each other as brothers and sisters involved in one mission?

(Jackson 2000: 11)

It is true that the most commonly held and agreed upon beliefs and customs of orthodox Islam are rarely disputed over by Muslims - for example, no Muslim would argue about the authenticity of the

Hadith (sayings of Muhammad) that urge Muslims to be obedient to their parents and particularly their mothers. However, there is scope for debate in context-specific situations - for example, a young Muslim who is having difficulties with his parents might well discuss his predicament with other young Muslims giving details of the situation: if a mother or a father behaves in a certain manner, what is the appropriate way to respond given Islam's regard for filial piety? The Islamic concept of shura (the requirement that those in positions of leadership or authority engage in consultation with others in the community) lends credence to the general view held by many Muslims that having an opinion about religious matters is not only permissible but desirable. This is provided, of course, that such opinion is a) sited within the framework espoused by the Quran and the Hadith and does not contradict what is found in these two sources of Islamic teachings; and b) expressed within the bounds of adab or Islamic etiquette. Given that Muslims (are encouraged to) have opinions on the practice or execution of their faith, and that a public sphere exists amongst Muslims, the internet seems to have acted as a strengthening agent, enhancing the nascent Islamic public sphere in Australia.

The public sphere function of the internet situates the technology within a media framework. The discussion taking place on the internet involving Islamic issues is complementary to, and a reflection of, traditional media with mainstream and alternative sites of discourse existing side by side. It must be acknowledged that prior to the widespread use of the internet, a small scale Islamic public sphere already existed in Australia. By the 1990s Muslim organisations in Australia had taken baby steps to providing their communities with Islamic media. Salaam, the magazine of FAMSU, was established in 1995 and continues to be issued by the organisation on a bi-monthly basis. Australian Islamic organisations such as the Muslim Women's Association also made inroads in public affairs and media management, establishing contacts with media by through furnishing of opinion pieces in metropolitan newspapers, writing letters to the editors of papers, issuing news releases and providing spokespeople to talk to print and broadcast media outlets. Due to reasons such as prohibitive setup costs and inadequate human and other resources, Islamic media however was still in its infancy by the time the information superhighway arrived. The internet made it easier for Muslims in Australia to establish, maintain, and distribute Islamic oriented media, and niche audiences. It aided in the setting up of new outlets from which Muslim Australian voices could be heard.

The extensive use of the internet in the establishment of a burgeoning Islamic public sphere in Australia was made possible in part because of the country's media freedom. Using the Four Theories of the Press outlined by Siebert (1956) it could be said that Australia operated under a form of Libertarian Theory. Under this theory 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). There is an extensive religious internet presence in Australia, indicating the high level of freedom of opinion given to internet service providers and religious organisations or bodies. This environment can then be used by religious organisations such as Muslim groups in Australia, in the creation of spaces devoted to

discourse related to their particular faiths. An example of the use of the internet in the formulation of an Islamic public sphere in Australia involves the Islamic Council of Victoria (ICV) and its racial vilification case against the Catch the Fire Ministries. Prior to the ruling by the Victorian Civil and Administrative Tribunal (VCAT) that Islam and Muslims had been vilified by the evangelical ministry at an inter-faith gathering, the key parties involved in the case had made use of the internet's various permutations to garner support for their cause and disseminate their side of the story. The ICV posted its response to the ruling in a press release on its website, which was also emailed to its Melbourne-based Muslim email lists (Islamic Council of Victoria 2004); the ICV also wrote to NSW-based contacts who posted information about the case in online forums:

...we write to you to make sure that you are informed about the Islamic Council of Victoria's (ICV) complaint and Legal action against Catch the Fire Ministries...The outcome of the case is in the hands of Allah, but we are doing our best to ensure that innocent Muslims are not demonized...We request that you inform Muslims in your networks that they can help.
(MuslimVillage 2004: np)

On the side of the Catch the Fire Ministries their submission to VCAT was placed on their website (Catch the Fire Ministries 2004). This case, which was seen as a key test of Victoria's youthful anti-vilification legislation, illustrates the role of the internet in the formation of a religious community's specific public sphere through the use of email and websites in battles for opinion and attempts to garner support in the context of faith-based communities.

Reflecting the youth-biased demographics of Muslim Australia, internet usage in Australia is skewed towards a younger age group. Young Muslims in Australia use the internet for a variety of work, social and educational purposes. Predominant among these young Muslim internet users in Australia are university students, who mobilise and form links amongst themselves by way of websites and email lists. Most Muslim Student Associations (MSA) have their own websites and mailing lists used to describe the association's news and events, in addition to websites such as that of the Sydney Muslim Youth which has a females section advertising "a guide to shops all over Sydney supplying Islamic clothes for women" (United Muslims of Australia 2004) and Reflections, an online magazine aimed at Muslim and non-Muslim youth between the ages of 12 and 18 produced by a group of young Muslim females. Students and young people within Australia's Muslim communities are comfortable and competent at using the internet - they are given email accounts through work or university or at home, they communicate with friends or colleagues online, and they meet other Muslims through forums and mailing lists. Older Muslims may not have the access to the technology, or the skills needed to do these things. This indicates an index of exclusion in internet usage that focuses on the lack of participation by older Muslims in Australia - a trend that is observable in Australian society as a whole (Madden and Savage 2000).

In Australia, a home-grown Muslim Australian culture is consolidating, comprising of a multicultural minority negotiating their Islamic and national identities offline and through the internet, which is used to build communities and relationships, to construct and maintain an alternative public sphere, and to support the working, educational and social aspirations of young Australian Muslims.

Indonesia

As the country with the largest population of Muslims in the world, Indonesia's association with Islam seems self-apparent. Yet Indonesia was not always a country with a Muslim majority population. The history of Islam in Indonesia began with the arrival of traders from India and the Middle East from the end of the 13th century. These traders set up local communities and made networks with local leaders. The process of conversion was sped up considerably when the rulers of the great Hindu and Buddhist polities of the time turned to Islam and their followers did likewise, among them the Sriwijaya and Majapahit empires whose "cosmopolitan trading connections...would favor the introduction of Islam" (Lapidus 2002: 383). No Muslim army ever set foot in Indonesia, but over time Islamic identity came to be associated with the resistance of the Dutch occupation spanning three hundred and fifty years and leading up to World War II. Islam played a central role in the defining of Indonesian nationalist sentiment and resistance against the non-Muslim colonisers. When the massacres of Communists and their (alleged or actual) sympathizers took place in the 1960s following an aborted coup in which six generals were tortured and murdered, Islamic identity was also invoked as the antithesis to the perceived godlessness of the Communist threat in the 1960s (Newland 2006). Traditionally Islam was practiced in Indonesia on a private level with outward manifestations of the religion limited to religious holidays - for example, the belief of some Indonesian Muslims that the wearing of the women's headscarf is only obligatory for ritual prayers (Brenner 1996). Although the post-independence architects of the republic endorsed the principles of a secular nation-state, it was made clear in the national ideology Pancasila (from a Sanskrit word meaning "five principles") that to be God-less was not an option: the first foundation of Pancasila was belief in God. Indonesians therefore must place their religion on their identity cards: even though the majority of Muslims are nominal in their day to day practice of Islam, officially they see themselves (and are counted as) Indonesian Muslims. Even though the overwhelming majority of Indonesians elect to put "Islam" next to "religion" on their identification papers, "many chain-smoking, beer-drinking 'ID card Muslims' are less than fanatical about their faith" (The Economist 1991: 31)

The role that Islam played in the Indonesian political landscape has always been a contentious one (Hefner 2000), a topic debated - and disagreed on - by Indonesian Muslims and non-Muslims alike. Where the practice of faith was previously a private matter, in the last decades of the twentieth century symbols showing public adherence to Islam became more commonplace as Indonesian Muslims looked towards their religion for comfort and guidance in the face of the country's sprawling economic

and political woes. From 1970s onward a visible Islamic resurgence took place in Indonesia (Brenner 1996; Howell 2001; Suryadinata 1997) reflecting similar trends that began at the same time in Malaysia (Camroux 1996) and were visible among Singapore's Muslim minority (Desker 2002).

Thousands of new mosques sprouted all over the country. Girls on university campuses took to wearing the headscarf. The once lackadaisical began to pray five times a day and donate alms to Islamic charities. The hajj pilgrimage became a status symbol.

(Dhume 2005: 52)

While modernist urban Muslims supported the New Order regime of Suharto, support for him had waned by the late 1990s (Cohen 1998), when the rupiah was in freefall and the economy was struggling after being hit hard by the Asian financial crisis of 1997-8. Under Suharto's New Order regime political Islam was largely portrayed as one of the threats to Indonesian nationalism (Desker 2002); the other was Communism (Lapidus 2002). Suharto had always ruled Indonesia with an iron fist. This extended to measures designed to keep Indonesian politics free of Islamic influences such as channelling all Muslim-oriented groups into an officially sanctioned party whose leaders were monitored and the announcement of Shariah courts for marital disputes. It also encompassed keeping a tight rein on Indonesia's media. Suharto had not foreseen the power of the internet which he had dismissed as mere technology (Winters 2002). It was the internet that would play an important role in disseminating information to political activists during Suharto's final years in power, information the state-monitored media would not have circulated (Gazali 2002; Menayang et al 2002).

In the archipelago's major metropolitan cities such as Jakarta, Bandung and Yogyakarta, the warnet or internet kiosk has become ubiquitous as the most common and cheapest way to access the internet. Despite Indonesia's low rate of subscriptions to private commercial internet service providers, the internet has caused a visible impact in Indonesian life. The internet in Indonesia is used as a form of alternative media - a type of usage which is embraced by many groups within Indonesia, including (but not limited to) Muslim organisations. Because of the fluctuating political environment in which country's mainstream media operates, underground voices have always played a much-needed minor role in public discourse. Even prior to the onset of the internet, alternative media in Indonesia flourished in the form of very locally produced zines not subject to political whims, advertiser's sensibilities or circulation figures, and therefore able to address issues ignored by the mainstream media (Crosby 2002). 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). The internet's entry into Indonesia assisted in such proliferation of news, viewpoints and opinions. Despite poverty and a lack of infrastructure (which will be touched on later in this chapter) the use of the internet in Indonesia has expanded rapidly since its introduction in 1995. internet use in Indonesia experiences constant growth (Hill and Sen 2000), and although not all of Indonesia's educational institutions have internet access,

indicators of the internet's increasing adoption in the country can be seen in the rising number of users, which is said to double every year (Purbo 2003). The spread of the internet has resulted in interesting developments related to its acceptance as a form of alternative media in Indonesia. The different "types" of Islamic practice in Indonesia - traditionalist, modernist, urban, and youth Muslim organisations - made their way onto the internet. Examples include the very active mailing list of the "Jaringan Islam Liberal"; or the website of the urban-based Muhammadiyah offering services such as consultation for religious matters. The nascent internet industry in Indonesia therefore functions as a form of fringe media, where Islamic and other groups who don't see their information needs being catered to can very easily find and form their own sites of discourse.

The internet in Indonesia also functions as a public sphere in a role that complements that played by television, newspapers and other media (similar to the Australian scenario): a site of battle for hearts and minds. Towards the end of the Suharto presidency, when media outlets were still required to toe the line when reporting on politics, the introduction of the internet gave Indonesians hope in that topics could be talked about and covered through this new medium, out of reach of the draconian grasp of the Ministry of Information.

The internet allowed Indonesians to discuss taboo subjects, such as corruption in the military and the business empires of Suharto's children, and to link up with other dissidents. It introduced new dissident groups to a national audience. Political figures hiding from security forces spoke up on the internet, as did journalists whose magazines had been closed by the government.

(Eng 1998: 20)

For example, after Tempo two other newsmagazines, Editor and Detik, were banned by the Ministry, internet websites for both these publications were quickly established. One year after the internet was introduced in Indonesia and just after the three newsmagazines were banned, supporters wrote to the Indonesia-L listserv condemning the ban:

We will not certainly forget the time Tempo revealed the mass killing in Jakarta's Tanjung Priok, the mysterious murder of [labor activist] Marsinha, the arrest and imprisonment of Nuku Soleiman and the students who dared to criticise the president...people are angry, they do not want to live under the dominance of a regime which does everything without any shame to keep its hold on its own tyrannical power.

(Nashidik in Parekh 1996: np)

It was just months after the bans that Tempo Interaktif came online, and Detik followed not long after. Following an injection of funds from a foreign investor, Detik then transformed itself within a few years to a portal offering not only news but entertainment, mobile phone ringtones, email

services and gossip columns. The cases of these previously print-only publications are a stark illustration of how rapidly the media environment moves out of the clutches of an authoritarian grasp when the internet, a decentralised and global media form that is tailor-made for the re-construction of a public sphere, is introduced.

Despite a freer media environment in the post-Suharto era, many ordinary Indonesians who do not have the means or the accessibility required to express viewpoints and opinions through the older media - for instance, writing letters to the editor or engaging in television panel discussions - are able to add to public discourse through postings on Indonesian language forums and mailing lists. In their analysis of the role played by the internet in the Maluku conflict, Hill and Sen describe the explosion of sites related to the sectarian violence in the Spice Islands, adding that these sites were often created and maintained by people not actually living in Maluku:

Hundreds of sites centrally concerned with Islam or Christianity began to include information—online media articles, individuals' postings—referring to the religious conflict in Maluku and taking up the cudgels for their fellow believers.

(Hill and Sen 2002: 176)

Within a specifically Islamic context, internet users in Indonesia have played an important role in the building and portraying of varying - and, it could be said, competing - visions of what constitutes an Islamic cyber-ummah (community). These multiple imaginings of community are not necessarily negative in their impact: for all of the fears that adoption of the internet for Islamic discourse will cause the disintegration of Islamic brotherhood, the truth is that the effects of the internet on Muslim communities also depends on what the user is doing offline to enhance his or her understanding of Islam.

For Islamic leaders in pluralistic communities such as Indonesia, perhaps the challenge is not so much to produce a coherent synthesis of Islam and democracy, or pluralism and piety, as it is to find ways to make competing notions of political and religious community coexist

(Brumberg 2001: 385)

In this manner, the internet is a crucial part of Indonesia's burgeoning free public sphere, the seeds of which were sown with the fall of Suharto and the subsequent dismantling of the Ministry of Information by Gus Dur.

Internet usage by Muslims in Indonesia reveals a gender dimension, with the predominant usage of the warnet (public internet kiosks) by young urban males. There is also an economic dimension with the majority of users accessing the internet from work and from warnet type places, unlike comparable scenarios in neighbouring countries whereby the growth of internet use is predominantly a function of

the rise in residential subscriptions with commercial internet service providers. The lagging pace of internet development in Indonesia have caused a few instances of what Hill and Sen (2002) call “indexes of exclusion” - such as the digital divide between those who can afford internet access in Indonesia and those who can’t, or the disparity in telecommunications infrastructure between the larger urban centres and the outlying islands. The one that will be elaborated on in this section of the chapter is the third index of exclusion - the fact that more males than females have access to, and the ability to use, the internet in Indonesia. The gender imbalance is particularly striking given that there two of the main sources of internet access are access from work, and access from warnet or public internet kiosks (Indonesia Internet Business Community 2002). In 2002, the number of warnet in Indonesia was estimated to be more than one thousand, located in Jakarta and other urban centres such as Yogyakarta (Himmelsbach 2002). The warnet concept means that more Indonesians are able to access the internet even if they could not afford a computer, a phone line, or the prohibitive connection charges. According to the Association of Indonesian internet Service Providers, the warnet are the primary source of internet access for two-thirds of Indonesian internet users (Purbo 2003), while an industry report of warnet estimated that these internet kiosks were used by 64 per cent of Indonesian internet users (Utoyo and Sulaiman 2003). Nearly two-thirds of the clients of the warnet are male (Indonesia Internet Business Community 2002). Therefore, in addition to the usage of the internet as a form of alternative media, as well as a public sphere and site for contrasting discourses, it can be said that a third characteristic of internet usage in Indonesia involves a gender dimension, through the proliferation of warnet and their predominantly male users; while a fourth and final characteristic of internet usage in Indonesia involves a question of economics. A low computer ownership rate and high telecommunications costs have prevented the majority of Indonesians from accessing the internet from home. The economic dimension of internet usage in Indonesia can be seen in the two greatest sources of revenue for internet business: the growing warnet industry and corporate users.

By and large, the different visions of Islam as practiced by Indonesian Muslims are portrayed in various forms on the internet. Off-line, there has been little evidence to suggest that different religious groups engage in the type of grass-roots contact that Indonesian-specific web forums and email lists enable. Traditionally, religious authorities in Indonesia have worked within the framework of a consultative partnership with political authorities (Laffan 2003). Religious groups that arise out of internet usage, however, are free of the historical norms that require them to follow any sort of official regulations. Reflecting the freer media environment that existed post-Suharto, the internet presence of so many different “flavours” of Islam poses interesting dilemmas for policy-makers. For example, should there be any attempts to “authorise” one particular brand of Indonesian Islam over another? What role should the Indonesian government’s official institutions, such as the Ministry of Religion and the Ministry of Information, play in monitoring relationships between the different Islamic groups online, and between Islamic and non-Muslim groups? How can Indonesian authorities respond to the use of the web by groups promoting terror and disunity in this multireligious

archipelago without compromising their commitment to post-New Order media freedom? In the era of the internet, one of the challenges for those in positions of religious and political authority in Indonesia lies in being able to use the internet's potential to enhance their relationship- and network-building capacity.

In a country that has embraced an overwhelmingly pluralistic national identity encompassing multiple faith histories over the course of its existence, political upheaval and social tensions towards the end of the 20th century combined to have a drastic impact on the newspaper, television and radio industries in Indonesia. After the rapid collapse of the New Order regime, new publications flourished and old ones were able to perform a role closer to that of the "fourth estate" idealised in visions of participatory democracy. Amidst this background of profound change, the internet's introduction in Indonesia in 1995 proved a turning point for the country's media and for the various cultural and religious groups who constituted the users of the new medium, including the different Muslim organisations in the country. Internet practice in Indonesia is marked by its use as a form of alternative media, its contribution to Indonesia's public sphere, and the gender and economic aspects of its use with public internet kiosks (warnet) and workplaces being the main sources of access, and young males comprising the majority of users, particularly at the warnet. There is an urgent need to decrease the digital divide and overcome the lack of infrastructure that is preventing rural Muslim and other Indonesians from being able to access the internet, while within the Islamic interpretations of various groups establishing online presences there is also a strong imperative for societies to understand the cultural and political aspects of adopting the internet.

Malaysia

The conjoined monoliths of four hundred and fifty metres of glass and steel that make up the Petronas Twin Towers in central Kuala Lumpur stand as a gleaming monument to Malaysian endeavour. Half of the Twin Towers' eighty-eight storeys house the national petroleum company Petronas and the other half an ultra modern shopping mall, a tourist viewing deck, and several office suites within a large complex called the Kuala Lumpur City Centre (KLCC). The KLCC also includes a concert hall for the Malaysian Philharmonic Orchestra, a luxury hotel, a park, and more office towers. The KLCC and the Twin Towers in particular are a symbol of Malaysia's vision of itself and represent both the journey to where it stands today and the road it wishes to embark on in the future. Modern, multicultural and Muslim-majority Malaysia is well on its way to becoming a high-tech Southeast Asian tourist and business haven, and the internet is playing a significantly important role in its project to achieve modernisation. The adaptation of the internet, however, by the country's political, religious and media communities has not been without teething problems. The challenge faced by Malaysia lies in grasping the economic and cultural potential of the internet while understanding and acknowledging its capacity to build communities of shared interests and challenge established political thought. The

adoption of the internet in Malaysia took place amidst a growing movement of change across several Southeast Asian countries. While not as tumultuous as the overthrow of President Suharto in neighbouring Indonesia, nor as muted as Singapore's restricted nurturing of its public sphere, a steady increase took place of Malaysian voices urging social and political change from the ruling party, the United Malays National Organisation or UMNO. These voices reached a crescendo with the dismissal, imprisonment and charging of former Deputy Prime Minister Anwar Ibrahim. The Anwar Ibrahim case, the online experiences of opposition parties Keadilan (the Justice Party) and Parti Se-Islam Malaysia (PAS), and the establishment of the web-only newspaper *malaysiakini*, collectively illustrate the critical part played by the internet as Malaysia recovered from the 1997 financial crisis, and as its growing middle class demanded reformasi.

Tourism Malaysia's print and television advertisements in countries such as Singapore, Indonesia and Australia emphasise the tagline, "Malaysia...truly Asia". The advertisements show a *mélange* of cultural vistas - Indian dancers, Chinese food, Malay musicians and colourful costumes worn by the *orang asli* or indigenous people of Sarawak on the island of Borneo. As in Singapore, images of multiracial harmony are integral to the Malaysian image of self. Accordingly, and not surprisingly, the cultural dimension of internet usage in Malaysia reflects the fact that country has a population that comprises of various races (Don 2003). Malays consist of just over fifty per cent of the people of Malaysia; the Chinese (at nearly 27 percent of the population) and Indians (at nearly 8 percent of the population) comprise the most sizeable minorities; and the remainder consists of indigenous, Eurasian and other races (Lee 2003). To an extent, the practice of defining ethnicity at a bureaucratic or official level was one introduced by the British (Nah 2003; Korff 2001). The categorisation of racial sets in Malaysia was largely a by-product of colonial practice. Different sub-groups existed within the main groupings used by British colonialists to lump residents of the Malay peninsula. For example, within the Chinese population there were linguistic and racial divisions among the Teochew, Cantonese or Hokkien Chinese. Similarly within the overriding grouping of "Malays" there were Malays of Buginese, Kelantan, or Minangkabau origins. In other words, the broad categories of "Malay", "Chinese" or "Indian" contained people who did not necessarily identify themselves with the ethnic label ascribed to them. Nevertheless, in the case of the Malays, "what different Malay groups had in common was their orientation towards Islam" (Korff 2001, 274). As Brennan (2001: 302) describes, "for a Malay, cultural identity is inextricably bound up with being a Muslim, for almost all Malays are Muslim ". Being of Malay origin was equal to professing the Muslim faith. Islam is the only religion to which the Malay majority subscribes and the religion of a substantial portion of the Indian minority; it is also a defining factor in the construction of Malay identity (Joseph 2000; Lintner 2006). Conversely, Muslims in Malaysia of Indian or Chinese background find themselves overlooked by the official paradigms of ethnicity. Indian Muslims are "trapped in between the two dominant identity markers of Malaysian society: ethnicity and Islam" (Stark 2006: 383). Although Indians constitute one of the two main minorities in Malaysia, the category of "Indian" referred to many sub-communities such as Sikhs, Bengalis, and Tamils. This resulted in problems for Malaysian officials in terms of categorization and

administration of the Indian Muslim community, which constitutes around 18 per cent of the Malaysian Indian population is Muslim (Nagata 1974). As Hirschman (1987: 564) explains, “the classification of Indian Muslims and those of Ceylonese origin (Sri Lankans) has clearly been varied and inconsistent over the years”. Not fitting in the racial grouping of “Malay Muslim” (although most speak Malay), Indian and Chinese Muslims can be said to possess a fluctuating social identity, inhabiting two worlds by virtue of their ethnicity and their faith.

Similar to the situation in neighbouring Indonesia, recent years have witnessed a resurgence of Islam in the politics of southeast Asian countries - a process to which Malaysia was not immune. By the turn of the 20th century Malaysian political Islam was observed as being pluralistic and pro-democratic (Weiss 2004; Desker 2002). The increasing importance of Islam in the Malaysian public and political eye reflects the critical role it plays in the lives of Malays, for whom Islam represents stability, solidarity, moral direction and an alternative to secular modernity. In the post 9-11 world, many Malays in Malaysia are cognizant of the fact that there is an increased focus on Islam in the world media. This in turn may have resulted in a heightened sense of awareness about being Muslim, and for some Malays in Malaysia to identify him- or her- self as Muslim first and Malaysian second (Martinez 2006). But constitutionally, the factors that make someone “Malay” are belief in Islam, the customary use of Bahasa Melayu, and practice and devotion to adat or Malay custom (Nagata 1974). So while self identification takes place through religious before national parameters, the concept of being Malay is more complicated than a matter of faith: “Malayness” is both an ethnic marker and a social construct.

Although Muslim Malays numerically make up the majority of Malaysians, economically the country is dominated by the ethnic Chinese. Former prime minister Mahathir Mohammad was scathing in his criticisms of his fellow Malays, arguing that “the main impediments to Malay progress” were “their mind-set, more specifically their ‘inadequate attitudes to money, property and time’” (Uimonen 2003, 300). The New Economic Policy (NEP), adapted in 1971, attempted to “redress imbalances in the educational and economic position of the Malays” (Stoever 1985, 86). The NEP can be seen in the wider context of encouraging a new Malay business class and culture. It was introduced in Malaysia along with the establishment of the Council of Trust for the People (Majelis Amanah Rakyat or MARA) - a body which encouraged ownership and investment in business by the bumiputra or native Malays. The NEP also coincided with the idea of the Melayu bahru or New Malay which is an interesting conflagration of identity, encompassing as it does a modern, successful business vision in harmony with “Malay-ness” and Islamic principles (Korff 2001). The New Malay is “an attempt at social engineering, the objective of which is to create a modern Malay middle class” (Uimonen 2003, 300). It was the response of the government to the perception that the progress of the Malay people had fallen short of the ambitions of Mahathir.

The cultural dimension of internet usage in Malaysia is also indicative of a society which embraces technological development. Malaysia sees information as an integral aspect of the path to modernity.

Mahathir's imposing vision for the development of both his people and his country were thus articulated in the Malaysia Boleh ("Malaysia Can") campaign, along with Vision 2020, the ambitious economic blue-print with the goal of turning Malaysia into a fully developed country by the year 2020 (Mahathir 1999; Barlow 1997). The New Malay thus plays an important role that "complements his [Mahathir's] social engineering efforts by creating a 'middle-class subject' representing a 'spiritual fit between Malaysian "can-doism"...and Islamic modernity'" (Uimonen 2003, 300).

Critics of the NEP argued that such a brazen affirmative action policy would not work. However, by 1990, Malaysia's economy did reflect more accurately the diversity of the country's societal composition. Most of the targets set by the NEP to increase the proportion of Malay-owned investment and the number of Malays in professional and managerial roles had been fulfilled (Chin 2000; Barlow 1997). In addition the rise of the middle classes, across all races in Malaysia, could be seen in the country's seemingly unending push towards modernity: for example, in increased consumer demand for products and services and an accompanying rise in shopping venues. Against this backdrop of Malaysia's journey towards the goals of Vision 2020, the introduction of the internet in Malaysia took place with the opening in 1990 of the country's first internet service provider JARING.

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). Statistics from the Malaysian Communications and Multimedia Commission on age demographics of Malaysian internet users reflect this youth bias: 70 percent of the country's internet users are below 40 years of age, while nearly half (40 percent) are below the age of 25 (White 2006). The youth market is seen as the test bed for many IT-related markets - for example, young people are the pioneers in the take-up of developments in mobile communications technology (Wong and Hiew 2005). Uffa, Syazwin, and Kent exemplify the Malaysian cyber-citizen- young, either studying or working, born after the launch of the New Economic Program in 1971, and incorporating the internet into their daily lives. Given the Malaysian government's endorsement and support of technology, the promotion of IT-savvy citizenry, and the country's developed multi-media and communications infrastructure, it is not surprising that the social and business lives of young people, who comprise one fifth of the population of Malaysia (Rahmin and Pawanteh 2003) revolve around their various uses of the internet.

From her profile on Friendster.com, it can be seen that 20 year old student Uffa hails from Pahang. She wears a headscarf and lists her hobbies as shopping, eating, sleeping and traveling. Uffa's favourite television shows are Smallville, Roswell, and the Thai drama series "The Princess". Her favourite movies include "Pirates of the Caribbean" and the Indonesian teen romance "Eiffel I'm in Love". Nineteen year old Syazwin is one of Uffa's friends. Syazwin is single, likes chatting on the internet and camping, and also comes from Pahang. She likes reading the Chronicles of Narnia and manga comics. Over on the Malaysian social networking site Ahmoi.com, users can find Kent - a young

financial dealer living in Selangor. Kent is a non-smoker, and works long hours. He's put a profile on Ahmoi hoping to increase his social network. The profiles of Uffa, Syazwin and Kent demonstrate the "techno-tribe" phenomenon that exemplifies Malaysian internet usage. Since 1990, the use of the internet in Malaysia has echoed the racial/cultural plurality of the off-line population, as well as the change in attitudes alluded to by Malaysian leaders such as Mahathir, who through his policies encouraged Malaysians to adopt the lifestyle of "the future that he has termed 'technotribalism', important elements of which include creativity, imagination and freedom" (Uimonen 2003, 302). Social networking sites, government internet sites and those challenging the government - such as web presences set up by supporters of former deputy prime minister Anwar Ibrahim, and the sites of human rights groups such as Aliran - are reflective of this "technotribalism" with detailed and well-maintained portals of information reaching out to readers with similar inclinations. The users of such internet websites can be read as members of techno-tribes: cyber-communities whose reason for being relates to the grouping of individuals with a commonality in shared interests instead of the geographical, cultural or linguistic ties that bind offline communities.

Frequent observations have been made of the links between state-initiated or supported ideologies of conflict, identity or modernity and the support such ideologies receive in the national media (Dittmar 2004; Carragee 2003; Erjavec 2003; Burney 2002). In the search for Malaysia's modernity-related identity, the hegemonic discourse of traditional media plays an active part. The official vision of Malaysia is promoted and supported by the content found in mainstream newspapers and broadcasters (a situation that is similar to most countries). For instance, in a New Straits Times article entitled "Shop! Shop! Shop!" Malaysia's image as a high-tech, developed and modern consumer haven is demonstrated through subheadings focusing on the appeal of "shopping morning, noon and night for Arab tourists who have arrived here in droves – and it's not just the prices they find attractive" (Koh 2005, n/p). The Malaysian sense of self is further emphasised in paragraphs that discuss how the country has become an Asian shopping hub for Arabs and well-heeled Indonesian women, due to the quality of products and competitive prices. In Malaysia, it is clear that given a situation where the established center of power plays an important gatekeeping role, the output of mainstream newspapers and broadcasters is closely linked to processes of identity construction and nation building. The utilisation of the media for the purposes of giving credence to government established programs and principles can also be found elsewhere, for example in neighbouring Singapore (Bokhorst-Heng 2002) so that the "blending of mediascapes and ideoscapes is by no means unique to Malaysia" (Uimonen 2003, 305).

The website malaysiakini ("Malaysia Now") illustrates how the internet has been used by independent journalists, opposition parties, and political activists as an alternative to the information found in the major media organisations such as the New Straits Times. Against this backdrop, the most well-known example in foreign circles is the malaysiakini publication. The opinion of its founder is that "[in Malaysia] we have a plethora of publications...but we don't have a free press (Gan 2002, 65). As a

cyber-news organisation that published material that was questioning of the government, malaysiakini was subject to raids (in 2003) in which its computers were seized, and its journalists were denied entry to Malaysian ministers' press conferences. The raids were condemned by people within Malaysia as well as external observers, as being antithetical in spirit to the commitment by the government not to censor the internet. malaysiakini continues to function today despite having reinvented itself from a free Malaysian news and information portal, to one operating on a paid access basis. The malaysiakini story is a key example of the internet's role in assisting in the development of the Malaysian public sphere, and in providing new paradigms of critical perspective with which to engage with the legislative bodies tasked with engineering the development of Malaysian modernity. Given that the publication was not available off line (as are a number of Malaysian newspapers), malaysiakini's success indicates the crucial part played by the internet in today's Malaysia. The founders of malaysiakini gambled on the existence of an audience sited within and outside of Malaysia that was eager to consume its critical perspective on domestic issues. Indeed, "...e-journalism has been much celebrated in Malaysia, particularly by those who craved alternative perspectives and adventurous encounters with ideas in their news consumption. (Wilson Hamzah and Khattab 2003, 527).

There are several possible reasons for malaysiakini's popularity in some circles. Its editor attributes the publication's success to an increase in "political conscience" amongst Malaysians (Gan 2002, 66), traditional media's more conservative reporting, and the Malaysian authorities' commitment to avoid internet censorship: "to promote the Multimedia Super Corridor, Malaysia's own Silicon Valley, the government has pledged not to censor the internet. To its credit, the government has kept very much to its promise" (Gan 2002, 66). There are fundamental differences in the way the internet mediates meaning (Uimonen 2003, 310), for example in creating a public sphere in which users can dissect and join in debates about current issues of interest. This online environment brings down the constraints that frame and limit off-line discourse - especially when those limitations apply to a high-context cultural setting. Malaysia is a high-context culture, so it could be assumed that on-line contributors to public discourse are a welcome intrusion. It is also possible to discern elements of Mahathir's social engineering in malaysiakini's success, placing it within a general context of widespread acceptance of the internet by today's New Malays. In addition to malaysiakini, the mainstream newspapers (which Steven Gan's internet news site tried to differentiate itself from) have set up shop in cyberspace with internet versions of their print editions "in order to establish their corporate presence in wired journalism as well as to attract a young generation of enthusiastic information technology-skilled Malaysians" (Wilson Hamzah and Khattab 2003, 527). They join malaysiakini and other Malaysian information sources online, such as human rights-oriented non-government organisations Aliran and Suaram. Together these publications utilise the web's unique "management of meaning" to develop urbane, mature, and information rich web sites for the consumption of the growing, technologically literate Malaysian middle class.

With its Islamic majority and collectivist societal customs, Malaysia had traditionally railed against the onslaught of globalised (which usually referred to American or Western) influences on the country's young people. In a situation reflective of its neighbour Singapore (whose government and society had tried to support the maintenance of Confucian values and endorsed filial piety on behalf of the youth), Malaysia's government condemned the influx of foreign culture as a threat to Asian values, with former Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamad deriding young Japanese as "blondes" because of what he perceived to be their worship of Western lifestyles (Asian Market Research News 2002). However, in the absence of any widespread support (in both Singapore and Malaysia) for local or indigenous musicians, artists, movies and television shows, foreign cultural products and their conspicuous consumption were seen as desired and necessary trappings of modern life. Because the development of Malaysian youth culture was not encouraged, the adoption of Western youth culture took its place (Asia Pacific Management News 2002). Like their counterparts in many second- and third- world countries, Malaysian youth are not immune to the attractiveness of the lifestyle of Western capitalism. Global consumerism has become imbibed in Malaysian youth culture (Noor 1996) - a consumerism mediated by the provision of transnational satellite broadcasting services that bring the likes of MTV into the homes of Malaysian youth, third and fourth generation mobile services, and broadband internet availability.

As citizens of a country with a stable, growing economy and widespread internet use, young Malaysians turn to the internet as source of information and as a networking tool. They can make or maintain links through web presence - this could incorporate instant messaging services like gmail chat or MSN messenger, putting up detailed profiles on global social networking sites like Friendster and Myspace, or specifically Malaysian ones. A cursory glance at the profiles on Ahmoi (one of Malaysia's biggest social networking sites) reveal that it is a popular place for Chinese Malaysians to gather and meet new friends. FriendX, another oft-visited Malaysian site, uses profiles similar to Friendster or Myspace, but also resembles the Korean super-site Cy in its use of "rooms" which users can decorate with items. Whereas Cy uses purchaseable "acorns" as "currency" which can be used to buy goods for the user's cyber-room, FriendX uses a points system. Users can engage in activities to earn free points, or they can buy the points. In addition to a profile that can be linked to friends' profiles, sites like FriendX, Ahmoi and Friendster also offer blogs and photo uploading, reducing the need to put digital photos on one site, the blog on another, and the friend network on a third.

Cognisant of the fact that young people are increasingly turning to sites like MySpace to consolidate their online presence, and aware that information accessible by young people can be used to decide purchasing decisions, government and commercial organisations in Malaysia have decided to reach out to the increasingly important youth market on their turf. Recognising the power of the youth market, organisations make use of the hyper-mediated lifestyles of Malaysia's young people to present information, given that "it's a cinch reaching the under-25s: they are media junkies" (Shaw 2004, 10). For example, Consumer product manufacturer Procter and Gamble together with two Malaysian

partners launched an official Friendster profile of its Head & Shoulders shampoo brand, citing the demographics of the social networking site which is said to receive 800,000 hits monthly from Malaysia, and whose members are described as overwhelmingly in the 16-24 year old age group (Hargrave-Silk 2005). The profile is called H'n'S and takes on the character of a young, single female whose hometown is Kuala Lumpur. Under "Hobbies", the profile lists "fighting the 5 signs of dandruff to give you the confidence of flake free, soft, smooth & itch-free hair" (Procter and Gamble 2005). As an official, product profile, the Head and Shoulders Friendster profile has "friends" and "fans". At the time of writing more than 24,000 people had linked to the profile as a fan. But major companies aren't the only ones seeking brand loyalty or awareness through social networking sites. Away from one-to-one marketing of P&G, a Malaysian business woman runs a highly successful and extremely detailed website called Graduan, for fresh graduates seeking work. It focuses specifically on domestic and returning Malaysian international students who are about to enter the job market. Run by a private company, it takes into account the local business context, such what to do when employers ask about expected salary, or whether a graduate is able to apply for an admin job when his or her degree is in Islamic studies. The print version of Graduan is distributed to universities where Malaysian students can be found both domestically and overseas.

The development of a wired nation was one of the cornerstones of Malaysia's modernity project, in which the goal of Vision2020 is to make the country a fully developed and first world nation within a set timeframe. The internet is in some way a critical means for Malaysia to leapfrog into first world-dom. What happens once that goal is achieved is open to conjecture. If the government's internet-related goals are reached, where to after that for Malaysian modernity, especially as the internet has opened up access by external parties to Malaysia's domestic political and commercial realms?

The new electronic space created by the internet's widespread adoption has collectively resulted in a more active Malaysian public sphere and access to this sphere by those outside of Malaysia. Meanwhile dedicated initiatives have been implemented by the government to attract internet-related development. These initiatives, started while Dr Mahathir was at the helm, will be continued by his successor Abdullah Ahmad Badawi, who has a degree in Islamic studies and comes from a family of Islamic scholars - credentials which boosted his standing in the eyes of many devout Malaysian Muslims. Yet Mr Abdullah has so far managed to retain both his focus on religious duty and identity, and an emphasis on Malaysia's status as one of the most developed Muslim-majority countries. The challenge for Mr Abdullah, and for Malaysia, will be to maintain the impetus of the first few years in which the internet made a dramatic impact in the country's culture while successfully managing, without turning back on its promise to keep the internet censorship-free, the political challenges posed by the internet. These challenges include internet usage by alternative media such as malaysiakini and opposition parties such as the Parti Islam Se-Malaysia or PAS (an Islamic party that controls the northern state of Kelantan). Like other Asian countries such as China and Singapore, Malaysia recognises that the internet needs to be incorporated into the daily life of its citizens in

order for the country to avoid being left behind in the information era. But unlike these other countries, Malaysia has made an explicit commitment to avoid censorship of the internet (Abbott 2001). This has resulted in a challenge for the government because while the wholesale embracing of the internet is crucial for the success of the Malaysian economy, it has opened up avenues for effective political resistance. The Malaysian government supported the use of the internet amongst the business and growing middle classes, as part of a wider quest for economic progress. But it also saw the internet as a traditional media form subject to the regulations used with newspapers and broadcasters - encouraging a culture of acceptance of technological developments, but restricting it "within the parameters of established means of cultural management" (Uimonen 2003: 307). Thus the benefits of adaptation of the internet came with a catch - the "proliferation of Malaysian websites dedicated to political challenge and social reform" (Holmes and Grieco 2001, 61).

The roots of this dilemma could be traced to an economic and a political crisis: the Asian financial meltdown of 1997, and the arrest of former Deputy Prime Minister Anwar Ibrahim in 1998. As the region's economies recovered from the 1997 crisis the call for political change spread amongst southeast Asian countries including Malaysia and Indonesia where, with their cultural and linguistic similarities, the translation of the word reform (which was the same in both countries) became a catch-cry for a newer and more open future: *reformasi*. Demands for *reformasi* amongst the Malay middle classes could be seen as a reaction to the 1997 crisis (Uimonen 2003; Subramaniam 2001) and mirrored the events taking place in neighbouring Indonesia: the call for change came from the "educated, (sub)urban students and professionals who took to the streets with unprecedented fervour" (Uimonen 2003, 304).

The political crisis that engulfed Malaysia in 1998 resulted from the dismissal and arrest of former Deputy Prime Minister Anwar Ibrahim. Supporters of Anwar turned en masse to the internet. The Anwar case was the trigger that "sparked off on-line activism in Malaysia. Within months of his dismissal on 2 September 1998, dozens of *reformasi* web sites emerged" (Uimonen 2003, 307). However, the role of the internet was not merely to act as a catalyst in this instance, for the activism of the pro-Anwar *reformasi* sites extended beyond cyberspace. The Anwar Ibrahim case and its championing through websites strengthened the networks of Malaysian *reformasi* activists (Abbott 2001) and in many ways, the fallout from these websites extended offline. The readership of alternative news sites and pro-*reformasi* or pro-Anwar sites was largely underestimated, given that it was not limited to those who read the contents of these sites online. Thanks to printing, photocopying, faxing and snail mail (Abbott 2001), the information contained in pro-*reformasi* websites made its way to a readership outside of the 700,000- 800,000 estimated internet subscribers in Malaysia in 1998. Before the phenomenon of blogging made it possible for the players in newsworthy incidents to broadcast their thoughts to the world, Anwar Ibrahim's ideas and views during his incarceration were expressed via the internet as visitors and supporters transcribed and then uploaded them: "mass access to his contemporaneous writings from prison was immediately

enabled online” (Holmes and Grieco 2001, 66). Knowledge of the Anwar Ibrahim case, as well as his status today as a respected figurehead in Muslim circles not just in Malaysia but elsewhere, can be attributed to the wealth of information and opinion that his supporters published online.

The use of the internet to disseminate opinions and news in favour of the reformasi groups affected public opinion and the results of elections. The Keadilan or Justice Party, which lent strong support to Anwar Ibrahim’s case and counted his wife Dr Wan Azizah Wan Ismail as one of its founders and main spokespeople, gained a number of seats in parliament which the party attributed to online campaigning efforts: the view of its media coordinator was that Keadilan “would never have reached the same success if it were not for the internet, a medium that allowed to reach an estimated 25 per cent of the voting population” (Uimonen 2003, 309). The opposition Party Islam SeMalaysia or PAS has also used the internet as an effective means of communication (Abbott 2000).

In response to the growing readership and popularity of the pro-reformasi movement online (and offline), the government reacted by using the mainstream media to counter the criticisms spelled out in internet publications. The accuracy of the online reformasi news sources was brought up as an issue, with users being warned that given the ease of publishing on the internet, dis-information could easily pass off as accurate reporting. Anyone could simply set up a website and post information that was difficult to verify as fact. The response of reformasi sites was to provide, online, detailed information relating to political sources that supported their version of events, such as international news agencies. The Malaysian administration quickly learnt that limiting the fallout from internet-based challenges to governments is difficult. This is partly because of the inherent nature of the medium (a decentralised technology that can publish content from overseas servers does not lend itself to domestic surveillance very well). The resolution of the issues surrounding internet adaptation and the ramifications for a new era of Malaysian political and media freedom remain a work in progress.

The current Prime Minister of Malaysia is someone known for both his economically forward outlook and his strong Islamic credentials. It was thought that the introduction of the internet in Malaysia (set against a tumultuous wave of political reform in the region) could assist in Malaysia’s economic development without causing political instability. The internet did turn out to be a critical factor in Malaysia’s development - but in ways no one could have predicted. Anwar Ibrahim’s case galvanized reformasi groups online, while opposition parties such as Keadilan and PAS turned to the internet in search of an audience - the same reason that alternative news sites such as *malaysiakini* and human rights groups such as Aliran established online presences. As Malaysia recovered from the 1997 financial crisis, it became possible to mark three characteristics of the adoption of the internet in Malaysia. Cultural dimensions were discernible, through the online manifestation of Malaysia’s diverse ethnic composition and the promotion and support from official levels for a computer-literate Malaysian society that would embrace the wired world. It was also possible to see the development of

an alternative component to the country's existing public sphere, with the internet being actively used as a source of independent, non-government-sanctioned news. At the same time, young Malaysians in particular avidly use the internet to trade, shop, do business and make new friends, resulting in the rise of specific social network sites. Just like Prime Minister Badawi has to maintain a balancing act (in his devotion to traditional religious duty alongside his commitment to modernization) his Cabinet and government will also juggle 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

The increased adaptation of the Muslim woman's headscarf (called "tudung" in Malay) and the intense public focus on the 2002 case of four schoolgirls who wore the tudung to their state schools (in defiance of a ban on the headscarf) can be read as reflecting a similar "revival" of displays of Islamic belief to the ones that took place in Indonesia and Malaysia. But the Singapore government did not adequately comprehend the resurgence of political and social Islam in neighbouring Malaysia and Indonesia. The Muslim minority in Singapore is portrayed as "disobedient, not loyal and uncompromising in safeguarding the values of their religion" (Law 2003: 110). This perception is reinforced through, for example, publicly focusing on the perceptions of Malay Muslims about Saddam Hussein's invasion of Kuwait that precipitated the first Gulf War, which the government declared were different to the perceptions of other Singaporeans, or banning Malay Muslim soldiers from higher positions in the armed forces (Motalib 2005). The ethnic composition of Singapore with its Chinese majority and two major minorities (Malay Muslims and Indians) has remained constant since the 19th century (Motalib 2005). 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). Recognising this the Singapore government has tried to address the gap with the creation of a Malay-Muslim professional body, (Mendaki.) The disadvantaged position of the Malay Muslims is underscored by the hurtling of Singapore's economy into the 21st century - a move predicated on the increased adaptation of the internet.

The use of the internet in Singapore as an economically developed Asian country reflects the high amount of support from official levels for the adaptation of the internet, and widespread adaptation by government, business, community and private sectors to the new medium. In addition, the internet formed a public sphere in which subversive or banned voices (including Muslim voices) made their way into the consciousness of Singaporeans, outside of sanctioned channels such as the Straits Times. In this public sphere a wide range of interests could be found. The political atmosphere in which the

internet was adopted and used was notable in that there were attempts by authorities to control the public sphere the new medium offered, such as by inclusion of the internet in regulatory mechanisms for traditional media.

Internet usage by Muslims in Singapore therefore takes place against a backdrop of technological adaptation. Any notion of a Singaporean digital divide was undermined by the cross-sectional nature of internet usage in the city-state. The economic and utilitarian benefits of the internet were grasped by the academic, government and business sectors. Tertiary institutions in Singapore were among the first in Asia to use the internet in education delivery. For example, in 2000 institutions such as Nanyang Technological University had adopted the online delivery software Blackboard in areas such as pre-service teacher training (Lim 2001). The internet was also used to introduce online units and implement off-campus courses, such as those offered by overseas universities through local providers. Students enrolled in these courses could communicate directly with their instructors in Australia or the United Kingdom, and submit assignments through internet websites to which access was gained after enrolment. Meanwhile, the government quickly realised the potential of the internet in terms of convenience for its staff, and for citizens. An e-government portal was set up which Singaporeans and foreigners working or studying in the country could use to conduct their dealings with various ministries. At this portal, called “E-Citizen”, residents of Singapore could do everything from register for an SMS alert reminding them of passport renewals, to informing the defence authorities of absence from national service duties, to apply for membership of the government “singles” agencies (Ministry of Information Communications and the Arts, 2004). “Just about any action requiring interaction with the government can be performed online, and the list is constantly expanding” (Kalathil 2003: 45). From this e-government portal Muslims residing in Singapore could find out the requirements for the registration of an Islamic marriage (such as the attendance of the wali or bride’s guardian), look up information pertaining to pre- and post- marriage guidance courses offered from an Islamic perspective (including a course specifically for young people in recognition of the fact that some Muslims in Singapore marry below the age of 20) and download the relevant application forms for registering polygamous marriages. In addition to the academic and government sectors, private businesses and community bodies in Singapore quickly established websites. One such organisation was the Dar-ul-Arqam or Singapore Muslim Converts’ Association which set up a detailed site listing the services it offered, such as witnessing of conversions to the Muslim faith or courses in Quran recitation.

The use of the internet by Muslims in Singapore takes place in an environment that is supportive of new technology, with the government stating explicitly that it has a long-term commitment to using the internet in the provision of services (Wong 2003).

By using the internet to enhance government responsiveness and quality of life, Singapore's ruling party has turned the internet into an asset that increases citizens' satisfaction with their government.

(Kalathil 2003: 45)

This commitment manifested itself in policies such as the National Computerisation Plan announced in 1980, the National IT Plan and IT2000 Masterplan (both announced in 1986), and the Singapore ONE network plan for national integration of internet services announced in 1997 (Mattar 2003). Under the latest blueprint called Infocomm 21 a specific agency of the government - the Infocomm Development Agency - manages public internet telecommunications with the aim of helping Singapore achieve global market competitiveness (Takao 2004). By 2001 more than ninety percent of Singapore government services were available online (Ke & Wei 2004). The country's success in delivering public services over the internet could be attributed to a high level of synchronization amongst the different government departments and a coordinated approach to online service delivery.

Initially, the government viewed the internet as a form of media, so the regulation of cyberspace was viewed as falling under the jurisdiction of media authorities. The tasks of internet content monitoring and service provision licensing were therefore allocated to a new regulatory body formed in early 2003 called the Media Development Authority or MDA. The MDA was a result of a merger of previous media regulatory bodies (the Singapore Broadcasting Authority, the Films and Publications Department, and the Singapore Film Commission), and was a direct "response to the convergence of different media that requires a consistent approach in developing and managing the different forms of media" (Media Development Authority 2003: np). The MDA's brief was therefore to provide harmonised approaches to the regulation of new as well as older media. Although the site claims that the MDA "does not stop religious and political bodies from putting up web sites" (in George 2003: 262) these organisations are nevertheless asked to register their internet presence in the interests of peaceful coexistence between Singapore's different ethnic and religious groups. One positive change is that the MDA has reduced its "list of discouraged material" to just two main areas: "sexual content and material harmful to racial and religious harmony" (George 2003: 262-263). Thus the guidelines covering internet content in Singapore are very similar to those relevant for older media operating in the country, such as print and television.

The widespread and rapid adaptation of the internet by the Muslim minority and non-Muslim majority in Singapore was a reflection of both the country's high per-capita income and teledensity (which meant that the potential customers for internet connection and subscription constituted a ready market), and the cultural aspects of technological adaptation present in Singapore society (with a widespread belief that scientific advancement was not something to be feared, but instead embraced if the city-state were to prosper in the coming years). This belief, coupled with Singapore's "reasonably small, well-informed, and well-wired public" (Ke & Wei 2004: 95), enabled potential users

to become actual users with ease. It meant that going online in Singapore could mean something as easy as adding an extra service to the telephone bill. Aside from the readily available and affordable infrastructure, there was a cultural and political motivation. The city-state had long been touted as a regional economic powerhouse due to the belief (held by both Singaporeans and others) that its greatest or only resource was its people (Cordeiro & Al-Hawamdeh 2001; Birch 1992). Its people, therefore, had to be adequately equipped to deal with the challenges of

Being a small island and without any natural resource, Singapore depends on its human potential and investment in National Information Infrastructure (NII) in order to find its place in the competitive global world economies.

(Cordeiro & Al-Hawamdeh 2001: np)

The Singapore government's vision in the area of information technology centred on turning the country into an "intelligent island" - this phrase comes from an earlier internet related policy, and the precursor to Infocomm 21. The 1992 strategy IT2000 - A Vision of an Intelligent Island set the goal of connecting the entire residential, corporate, educational and government sectors to broadband networking by 2002 (Warschauer 2001). On a practical level, every home and office in Singapore can already access broadband (Butterworth 2000) and while some have not, the country has one of the highest rates of connectivity in the world (Kluver 2004). In addition to outlining its internet development-related goals, the Singapore government also tries to actively promote a culture of embracing technological advancement through focusing on the skills necessary to ensure that Singaporeans would not be left behind in the information age. A policy of lifelong learning was promoted to ensure continual employability of Singapore's labour force (Low-Ee 2001), supplemented by the country's increased affluence and accompanying rise in consumption of leisure and cultural goods taking place against the backdrop of the government's vigorous IT push (Mattar 2003).

In addition to the widespread adaptation of the internet and related telecommunications technologies by government, business, community and private sectors, a second characteristic of internet use in Singapore centres on its role as an alternative to the public sphere. The situation of the cyber-public sphere for Muslim internet users in Singapore was between that of Australia and Indonesia. In Indonesia, the internet reflected the wide array of opinions, including Islamic-oriented viewpoints, which could already be found in the traditional media. Thus internet usage by Muslims in Indonesia constituted an alternative for Muslims whose information needs were already being catered to in Islamic television shows and print media, but who wanted to build their own in cyberspace or perhaps interact with others who had done so. On the other hand in Australia the internet was used by Muslims to complement an existing and relatively free media-scape that was not conducive to discussing news and views from an Islamic perspective. The internet in Australia provided a means for Muslims to construct Islamic community-specific discourse that did not have as prohibitive a cost as, say, setting

up a newspaper or television station. The situation in Singapore was dissimilar to both the Indonesian and Australian scenarios.

The Singapore government realised early on that policing cyberspace was not a simple matter. It would not be as straightforward as, say, revoking the licenses of any foreign language magazine which interfered in domestic politics. Because of the internet's decentralisation, it became apparent that viewpoints that would have been banned or prohibited from being aired or published in Singapore's older media could utilize the decentralised and interactive properties of the internet, finding audiences outside of sanctioned channels such as the readership of the Straits Times. A range of interests sprung up on the internet - providing support, information and cyber-networks for the media-disenfranchised of the Lion City. Some of the web presences that would not be found in the offline media in Singapore included those of the homosexual community, sites of political dissent, and cyber communities with a religious bent. Queer, bisexual, lesbian and transgendered (QBLT) people in Singapore, for example, used the internet to build networks and provide information for visitors to the country about QBLT-friendly shops and clubs. At the website "People Like Us" for example, set up by Singaporean QBLT activists, responses are posted to government actions or statements, such as the report by Singapore's Censorship Review Committee recommending more flexibility for adults in the viewing of homosexual content in the media.

If we want to be a vibrant and inquiring society, people must be free to see for themselves, to think and judge for themselves. We believe that some practical provision must be made for no censorship at all, for those who consciously choose it.

(People Like Us 2003: np).

In addition to alternative Singaporean sexuality on the net, a number of sites devoted to alternative political news and views were also set up, such as TalkingCock and the website of the Think Centre. In these sites, the bugaboos of the conservative ruling-party linked media were dissected and spoken of. The boundaries of the tightly contained political scene in Singapore were pushed and expanded by activists and opposition figures. "Using websites and electronic mailing lists," argues George (2003: 248) "they have been publishing information and opinion that is absent or underplayed in the mainstream media, thus challenging government domination of the public sphere." The Think Centre, a political society and NGO, uses its site to "cultivate awareness, appreciation and understanding of civil, socio-economic and political perspectives, realities and alternatives" (Think Centre Society 2001: np). For example, letters that have been rejected for publication by Singapore's newspapers are placed onto the website, along with articles from foreign newswires (such as items from international news agencies on the fact that the country has one of the highest rates of capital punishment in the world).

In addition to internet use by gay Singapore and political opposition figures, the cyber-public sphere in Singapore was diversified by the presence of religious interests. Muslim groups within Singapore used the internet to raise awareness of Muslim-related issues in a way that could not have happened with the older media, whose operators were ever-mindful of being hit with the material-harmful-to-racial-harmony slurs. One example in particular is pertinent to this discussion: the case of the now defunct Malay Muslim web site known as Fateha.com. The controversy and discussion concerning the web site took place both online (because the site's presence was deemed inflammatory by Singapore's media authorities) and offline (its owner was subject to threats of being charged under defamation laws). Fateha.com published articles and information about issues affecting the Malay Muslim minority in Singapore, such as the disparity between laws concerning school uniform regulations. Sikh boys attending secular schools were allowed to wear turbans with their school uniforms, but Muslim girls were not allowed to wear hijab with school uniforms unless they were students at madressas or religious schools, which were seen as less efficient than the secular schools in preparing students for success in employment. The no-headscarf rule in effect forced the Muslim girls who wanted to wear the hijab to forego a secular education. In an interview with a Muslim magazine in 2002, owner Zulfikar Mohamad Shariff explained in part why the website had garnered so much attention:

the government keeps saying that they want the citizens to question their policies...That is what they usually say. But in practical terms they want only government sanctioned dissent.
(Shariff in Mahmood 2001:np)

Fateha.com was both feared and derided by the Singapore government: it was seen as subversive and a danger to the nation's racial harmony. Such was the coercion that Shariff moved to Australia, where he worked for an Islamic financial provider and was able to send his children to a large Muslim school, writing that

...the PAP government used legal criminal charges and intimidation techniques to weaken the effectiveness of the website. In doing, it has pushed Fateha members to operate anonymously and to base themselves overseas.
(Shariff 2004: 362)

Shariff directly attributed the experience of conducting Malay-Muslim discourse on Fateha.com to the development of the internet in Singapore, adding that its success came from "its ability to provide alternative community news in a cost effective manner and staffed only with volunteers" (Shariff 2004: 362). He foreshadowed that the website's future was uncertain, and indeed, it stopped operating by 2004. Its former owner indicated a desire to return to Singapore (Raymond 2004), having forecast that it remained to be seen "how far the PAP government will go to ensure its monopolistic control over voicing Malay/Muslim community concerns in Singapore" (Shariff 2004: 362).

The official distaste for and condemnation of Fateha.com illustrates the challenges faced by Singapore in its adaptation of the internet. Within the political atmosphere in which the medium operated the internet was viewed as a means to keep Singapore's people wired and capable of taking on the challenges of an information-based economy. But for all the emphasis in government policy on the internet as a weapon which Singapore could use to maintain its competitiveness in a global economy, essentially the internet was viewed as cultural apparatus. Within Singapore's political atmosphere, therefore, there existed a delicate contradiction in the manner in which the internet was conceived. Although the internet was utilitarian for Singapore government, business and community groups, in a purely regulatory sense it (as a new media form) came under the jurisdiction of the Singapore Media Authority, and so the environment in which it existed was one of subtle authoritarianism. The political atmosphere in Singapore had always involved attempts to control the flow of information accessible to the media consuming public - in a sense, to set the limits of the public sphere and slowly expand these boundaries as the government saw fit. Previous attempts to control the public sphere manifested themselves in examples such as the withdrawing of licenses to foreign and local news publications that promoted overt criticism of the government, or the use of legal measures to punish recalcitrant media outlets for publishing material considered as being outside the specified regulations of the relevant authorities. The internet was subject to similar scrutiny, as the case of Fateha.com shows.

The internet in Singapore was thus included in regulatory mechanisms for traditional media, and in a media environment such as Singapore's that meant that the political atmosphere in which the internet operated was restrictive and heavily guarded in disregard of its interactive and decentralised nature, and in contrast to the almost anarchic level of freedom it was accorded elsewhere. For the first few years after the introduction of the internet, Singapore's restrictive political atmosphere envisioned the internet in two differing, competing incarnations (internet-as-media for regulation of content, and internet-as-technology for an information based economy).

There is no doubt that the Singapore government - in charge of a resource-poor country and mindful of the need to keep its population equipped to deal with political challenges- is serious in its attempts to encourage an environment that is conducive to widespread internet usage. Along with Malaysia, Singapore is a clear case of explicit and direct government involvement in internet policy in order to achieve specified internet-related economic goals such as getting at least half of Singapore businesses to use some form of e-Commerce by 2003, as detailed in the e-Commerce Master Plan 2000; and aiming to transform Singapore into an "intelligent island" by ensuring that all residential households had the ability to be connected to broadband internet by the first decade of the 21st century, from the IT2000 plan released in 1993 - a plan which has largely been fulfilled (Brown et al 2004; Lee 2003). Other instances of the interventionist approach of the government include advancing the use of electronic service delivery in response to citizens' dealings with the government as detailed in the e-Government Action Plan revealed in 2000, and adopting the latest technologies to develop artistic

cultural products and make Singapore the “Renaissance City” of the east, from the Creative Industries Development Strategy of 2002.

Singapore has become renowned for its numerous aggressive policies made in support of a well-developed internet sector. This makes the Asian city-state significant due not only to its position as a highly developed information economy, but also as “a country with an interventionist state casting a long shadow over the telecommunications and internet industries” (Guillen and Suarez 2001: 356). The vigorous and active involvement of the Singapore government in the internet sector involves two related major goals. On the business side, such involvement is “designed to both stimulate the use of e-Commerce and to drive levels of economic activity, economic growth and/or economic development” (Corbitt and Thanasankit 2002: 44). Conversely, on the user side, government support of the internet is also aimed at creating consumer-based initiatives and building Singapore citizens’ computer literacy and acceptance of developments in information technology, in line with the greater aim of ensuring Singapore’s most valuable resource (its people) are not left behind in terms of competitiveness in the new economy.

At the same time, however, the country faces the reality that the internet is a unique medium that cannot be governed according to pre-cyberspace laws. There is a strong imperative for Singapore to have the internet be considered as separate area of policy, rather than lumped into the broad category of a media form subject to the same types of regulation and monitoring as radio and television. Older forms of media were (and are) subject to strict control mechanisms to which the internet cannot be applied. The traditional way is

about the establishment of a ‘central control’, one which allows the authorities to micro-manage and keep an eye out for potential dangers...Online politics, therefore, is about the extension of tried and tested ‘off-line’ rules to the online world.

(Lee 2003: 77)

These “off-line” rules, however, such as withdrawing permission to broadcast or publish, are difficult to apply to the internet. This is made more evident by the growth in the percentage of the internet-using population.

What the political leaders in Singapore, China, and other countries in a similar situation may not have anticipated was that the difficulties in taming the Net have grown in parallel with its size...

(Wang 1999: 284)

Of course, seeing the internet as another media form means evaluating its risks and benefits within the same paradigm as the older media - allowing the government to resort to an old argument that

increased freedom in the media could destabilize the country. The media's role in stirring the violence that led to the late 1960s fatal race riots is often cited as a major factor in Singaporean acceptance of some government censorship and control over the media. The emphasis on this argument, thirty years after the riots, appears to have worked: surveys show that the concern for political and social stability that is expressed by the government, should the media be allowed greater freedom, is shared by the majority of Singaporeans. Accordingly, censorship is not something that the population sees as negative or a threat to a thriving democracy, in the same way someone from Australia or the United States might. Instead it is supported, particularly in instances of "materials for the young, news leading to racial conflict and racially offensive public expression" (Wang 1999: 282).

The Singapore of today is a very different place to the Singapore of the late 1960s. Its citizens enjoy high rates of education, home ownership and employment, in addition to an affluent standard of living. The internet has contributed to Singapore's public sphere by allowing a small portion of underground activism an outlet for the publication of views considered too subversive for Singapore's mainstream tastes. Politically, the government responded by trying to control the publishing opportunities the new medium offered, in ways such as including the internet in regulatory mechanisms for traditional media. In order to encourage conducive widespread internet usage; and the imperative for the internet to be considered separately to traditional media, the Singapore government will be giving serious thought to the treatment of the internet given its decentralization, interactivity and global reach.

Rationale for Research Topic

The intersection of Islam and the internet has given rise to a global e-ummah - a phrase referencing the "global village" (McLuhan and Fiore 1967) used (not exclusively) by McLuhan to describe a future where the main barriers to human communication - the callousness of time and distance - could be altered. The word ummah refers to followers of the Prophet Muhammad. It has often been suggested that today's internet is the manifestation of McLuhan's predictions (Rao et al 1998): it enabled people to talk within international arenas, businesses to reach markets across geographical boundaries, and movements to expand above national or local frameworks. Perhaps most importantly, it enabled entire societies to begin the process of redefining themselves through new modes of communication - thus fulfilling McLuhan's assertion that society was evolving from the orderly, timely and methodical linear projection of culture by books and newspapers of the print media era, to a world where the impact of fragmented and instantaneous output of electronic media could be received, literally, at the click of a button; and consolidating the concept Anderson's concept of imagined communities where a "nation" is imagined by the users of media forms because of the impossibility of experiencing it in real time and space. The internet has altered the conceptualisation of the listener, reader or viewer from an audience as a receptacle of information produced by a small number of producers, to

individuals who are active in the selection and usage of the media sites which they visit, the forums to which they are members, or the email email lists to which they subscribe. The composition of online Muslim presence in the form of publications and forums represents a very different type of imagined community and reflects Islam's border-less ethos: no longer defined by geographic locale, the audience is instead a niche market whose members are drawn together by shared interests, beliefs and outlooks. The Vietnam era of war reporting saw every major Western news outlet, with its national or regional audience; install a correspondent only to find that the news filed out of the country was relatively uniform. In contrast the internet era has fewer correspondents in actual numbers, but an audience that is fragmented by common ground, ready to select and utilise the wider array and medium of "voices" coming from the conflict zone.

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 are indicative of the change in the construction of imagined communities and in the output of news received by audiences. In the introductory review of the national situation in Australia, Indonesia, Malaysia and Singapore, four key parameters emerge - 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. The contention of this thesis 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 identity for young Muslims in this region. 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. 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.

Curiosity about Islam

Questions about Islam have become commonplace post September 11, because Muslims are under unprecedented levels of scrutiny. In many places both on- and off- line, Islam and its followers have been the subject of curiosity and examination, such as in the case of the niqabi described above. They have also been the subjects of verbal and physical attacks. An American convert to Islam - Muslims refer to them as reverts - described one such confrontation when he went to the aid of a hijabi being

abused on the streets of in New York. Having recently “reverted”, his European bloodline belied his new found faith.

‘What do you care? You are not one of them?’ I grabbed him and told him that I was Muslim. This turned into a physical confrontation, at which I was called a terrorist.

(Haidon 2002: np)

Such attacks are exacerbated by the ubiquitous linking of Muslims with terrorist acts in public discourse. While people of the Muslim faith (like people of Catholic, Jewish, Hindu and no faiths) have conducted horrific acts of brutality in the name of their cause, the correlation of Muslims as terrorists has become omnipresent in mainstream media after September 11 and the Bali bombings. “The t-word. I hate it,” a young Australian Muslim told the Bulletin (Bagnall 2002: np). As the site of alternatives and challenges to the dominant popular discourse that permeates the content and values of earlier media forms such as television and print, the internet raises significant questions for Muslims about whether it acts to the benefit, or to the detriment, of Islam in the way it allows Muslims to represent themselves and their way of life; and (if the internet can be used for the benefit of Muslims) in what ways can it do so.

Changing global politics

Recent political and military developments in Australia, the region, and the rest of the world allowed the research to be conducted during the first five years after September 11: a time of tremendous upheaval and turmoil on a global scale. For Australians, the sinking of the Tampa; the apprehension and conviction of several young men of Lebanese Muslim descent in Sydney for their role in a series of vicious gang rapes illustrate the flash points arising between Muslims and non-Muslims. In Indonesia, the period was marked by inter-religious conflict in Maluku and Sulawesi and bombings in Bali and Jakarta. During this time, Malaysia experienced increasing calls for political reform, a change in leadership as Mahathir Mohamad handed power to Abdullah Badawi, and the Anwar Ibrahim case which made headlines around the world. In Singapore newsworthy topics from a Muslim perspective during this period included the indefinite detention of suspects under internal security laws and controversy over the banning of the Muslim headscarf by girls in public schools. Globally, US president George W Bush, following the advice of his uber hawkish advisers and defying the opinion of the vast majority of the world’s population, launched a unilateral, exceedingly unpopular, and completely unprovoked attack against a sovereign Middle Eastern state. It would be no cliché to say history was constantly being made and remade in the years devoted to this project, and it was against this backdrop that the research tried to look at the way Muslims in Australia, Indonesia, Malaysia and Singapore used the internet as a means of social network building, self-representation, and the construction of Islamic identity and image.

Research Objectives

Because of historical circumstance Islam is a hot topic; while the internet provides an ever changing subject of analysis and discussion. More often than not a lot of useful information came into inboxes daily, as a result of the many email lists that are available for both Muslims and non-Muslims to join. Signing up to these lists enabled users to link up with the Muslim community in Australia, as well as Muslims in Indonesia, Malaysia, Singapore and beyond. As this material comprises an unwieldy and enormous amount of statistics, action alerts, fatwas, open letters, articles, communiqués and press releases, it then becomes necessary to collate and use that information. In order to test how the four parameters identified above contribute to the process of identity formation and negotiation, and how these parameters appear in the lives of everyday young Muslims, specific operational issues are addressed as outlined in the following aims of the research.

To document the role played by the internet in the daily life of Muslims.

It was evident that Muslims already used the internet - in the proliferation of Islam oriented websites; the existence of Islamic mailing lists (devoted to everything from gatherings for Muslim youth, to networking by Muslim professionals, to monitoring media coverage of Islam, to finding a spouse); and in memberships to Muslim discussion boards and forums. But for what specific purposes were Muslims turning to the internet? Were Muslims using it to find news from an Islamic perspective, or information on their local community? Popular Islamic sites including Islamicity.org have databases of the Qur'an and hadith (saying of the Prophet Muhammad) searchable by topic. Were Muslims indeed turning to the net for matters of Islamic law, looking up a certain hadith or Qur'anic verse online, rather than physically attending a lecture at the mosque and asking the shaykh (scholar) or reading about it from a hard copy of the Qur'an or Sahih Bukhari? The answers to these questions might be found in answers to a survey.

To assess what differences, if any, existed in how Muslims in four countries used the internet.

In Australia, Islam is a controversial religion practiced by a small but growing band of converts alongside migrant Muslim communities from the Middle East, Africa, Europe and Asia. By contrast, in Indonesia it is the professed faith of the majority of the population yet holds no place in state laws or the constitution of the Republic. In Singapore Islam is practiced within tightly monitored state-imposed boundaries by a Muslim population that comprises the Island's second biggest ethnic/cultural group. And nearby Malaysia, though secular in policymaking and socio-political foundations, incorporates Islamic aspects into its governing practices and national identity. In addition to the differences under which Islam exists there are also both political and economic differences in the four countries that are the subject of the study. Economically, Australia and Singapore are more advanced than Indonesia, with Malaysia somewhere in between. Politically, Singapore and Malaysia are

restricted in the freedom allowed in public discourse, while Australia enjoys comparatively unregulated discussion and Indonesia's media is one of the most libertarian in Asia. As a result of these differences, the research sought to see if there were differences in internet usage across the countries where respondents were asked to complete the survey. The differences could be pinpointed by analysis of questions according to country.

To measure the impact the internet had had on the representation of Muslims

A key question that this research poses is how the internet has aided in representation of Muslims. Thus the last specific aim relates to what impact the internet has had in changing perceptions of Islam and its followers through the actions of Muslims themselves.

To evaluate the political and social nuances of internet usage by Muslims on a local, national and regional scale

One of the many unsubstantiated rumours that flew across cyberspace after September 11 was that Usama bin Laden used cryptic messages embedded in the internet to communicate with al-Qaeda members. While retrospectively this may be a sign of paranoia, it is certainly true that there are political undertones in many of the activities that Muslims conduct using the internet. In particular one of the aims of the research was to see how networks formed, how links between Muslims occurred, and how campaigns were conducted via the internet. Furthermore the research would observe if possible how these networks and campaigns spilled into the offline world. Within Australia examples included the work of Australian Muslim Media Rights, an invite-only email group in monitoring instances of anti-Islamic bias in traditional media; the cyber and real-world alliance of the Victorian Peace Network, set up to oppose war in Iraq and affiliated with groups such as trade unions, churches, student groups, and the Islamic Council of Victoria; and the efforts of Rural Australians for Refugees, Australians Against Racism, and other bodies in forging cyber-links with Muslim organisations to highlight the lot of asylum seekers. Outside of Australia an applicable example is the Muslim run website called Fateha.com campaigned for Muslim girls in Singapore public schools to be allowed to wear the hijab (called tudung in that part of the world); its leader was the subject of a vicious smear campaign by the Singapore government and linked to terrorist organisations. In short, the research aimed to dissect how Muslims use the internet as a medium for political action, a method of social mobilization, or a channel for community building; and assess instances of these processes and methods having been initiated by cyber-maneuvering and subsequently complemented by offline events.

Conclusion

Muslim identity is complex - it is constructed and mediated in different ways in Australia, Indonesia, Malaysia and Singapore. The practice of Islam is negotiated online and offline in methods indicative

reflecting the political situation of the country concerned, and the prevailing culture in which existing media operate. The research topic of how Islam is negotiated online in the four countries studied was chosen bearing in mind the increased curiosity about Islam in the post September 11 world, and the changing global and national political landscape that had impacts on the depiction and portrayal of Muslim communities in southeast Asia and Australia. Against this backdrop, in conducting the research it was hoped that the role played by the internet in the daily lives of Muslims could be documented, and any differences uncovered in how the Muslim communities in the four countries studied used the internet. It was also hoped that the research could evaluate the impact the internet had had on the representations of Muslims, and the political and social nuances of internet usage by Muslims on a local, national and regional scale. To do this the research will draw on three main sources of data including the results of an online survey whose respondents comprised Muslim students in Australia and southeast Asia, analysis of two Australian Muslim email-lists or email lists and a popular Sydney-based online forum, and discussion by Muslim women of email forwards received after September 11.

SECTION TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW

- The Internet, Communication Technologies and Society
 - The Clash of Civilisations
 - Muslim Communities' Adaptation of the Internet
 - E-Revolution in the Ummah
 - Challenging misconceptions about Islam online
 - Diaspora Muslim Identity and Community on the Internet
 - Conclusion
-

In the sixteenth century Islam's religious scholars (the ulama) successfully banned the printing press from the Muslim empire for two hundred years, and "Arabs have been trying to close the gap ever since" (Dickey 2001). The ulama's reaction to the discovery of paper in the eighth century after the Christian era was to embrace it and understand how the invention of paper could be used to enhance the status and development of members of the far-flung Muslim empire - in short, as one means with which to fulfil the Qur'anic command to "Read" (Qur'an 96:1) and Muhammad's urging to his followers to "seek knowledge even as far as China" (Akhavi 2003; Daly 2004; Mehran 1991). Sardar (1993) recounts how the word that occurs the most number of times in the Qur'an (after Allah or God, and Rabb or Lord) is ilm which can roughly be described as "knowledge". This idea encompassed not just knowledge, but the accumulation, preservation and dissemination of knowledge in the name of God (Hilgendorf 2003) and ilm formed the basis of Islamic civilization (Sardar 1993, Hilgendorf 2003). While Europe was in the Dark Ages the Islamic empire championed the cause of learning. Muslim doctors laid the basis for the foundations of modern medicine, Muslim scholars invented the first universities and preserved the learning of the ancient Greeks and Romans (Al-Attas 1977; Yahya 2002), Muslim researchers invented the scientific method (Rashid 2000; Saliba 1994) and made pioneering discoveries in astronomy, physics, mathematics and philosophy (Saliba 1994; Akhavi 2003; Hilgendorf 2003). It seemed strange in the utmost then that subsequent Islamic leaders would prove so reactionary to the introduction of the printing press, unlike their European counterparts. There were two possible reasons: firstly, the ulama were concerned that widespread duplication of Islamic holy texts (which would have been made possible by the introduction of printing equipment) would leave religious teachings open to misinterpretation by unqualified readers - a valid concern due to the "irrational and exploitative behaviour that was being justified on the basis of Qur'an and hadith" (Sardar 1993: 52). Secondly the ulama feared that having an educated Muslim public would undermine their authority (Iqbal 2000). The effect of the ban on Islamic society was devastating - indirectly, it prevented the formation of a corresponding "reading public" alluded to by Anderson that arose in Europe as a result of the spread of print capitalism. In literature that looks at Islam and Muslim usage of the internet, the internet is thus described as a chance for Muslim societies to regain lost ground by using the medium as the tool for an Islamic digital reformation. If the reaction of some leaders in the Muslim world to the internet is similar to the reaction of the 16th century ulama to the printing press, then this would "easily condemn the Arab world to the dark side of the digital divide" (Dickey 2001).

At a time when many countries with majority Muslim populations languish in poverty and conflict, it is popular to speak of the need to “reform” Islam. The word “reform” is distasteful, contentious and viewed with suspicion in the Muslim world; after all, the Islamic religion is thought to have been revealed for all time, and outright alterations to Islamic teachings are unacceptable to the majority of Muslims. Thus any blueprint for “internet-based reform” or a “digital reformation” would not be a reform of Islam per se. Neither would it be a reform of the teachings of Islam which are based on the Qur’an and hadith. The reformation being spoken of would therefore take place in the way Muslims practice their religion, not the religion itself. However, the way Muslims practice their religion is not uniform - evidenced by the emergence of various “sects” or groups throughout the Islamic world (to name but a few: the Tablighi, the Wahabis of Saudi Arabia, or the Kharijites). In an oft-quoted hadith Muhammad says that his ummah would one day be split into seventy different groups, of which only one would interpret his traditions and the teachings of the Qur’an correctly. The theological differences that underpin the practice of Islam become especially poignant when observed in smaller Muslim populations - the Muslim diaspora in Western countries or the minority Muslim communities of countries such as India and Singapore. As Smith (2002) asks, “What does it mean to be Muslim in a society in which one’s co-religionists represent many different countries and cultures and yet make up only a small proportion of the total society?” Although referring to the American context, this question is equally valid for the Muslim community in Australia, the UK or any country where an influx of migrants from Muslim-majority societies has resulted in a variety of interpretations of Islam.

The argument that has been proposed so far is that observable variance 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. This literature review begins by looking at the paradigms used to assess the impact of the internet on communication and community. It then looks at the research that has been done from a cultural studies angle that discusses a supposed incompatibility between Islam and the West. From these two perspectives the literature review then looks at how the theme of internet usage by Muslim communities has been addressed, and suggests a new way of researching this topic.

The Internet, Communication Technologies and Society

The rapid development of the internet across the mostly developed parts of the world resulted in an introspective look at what had been written about other media technologies that, in a similar vein to the internet, could be said to have changed communication processes. The cultural theory perspective contextualises the internet within paradigms present before the widespread use of the medium. Laying the groundwork for what would eventually be referred to in academic studies of the internet,

community and communication was Habermas' ideas of the public sphere and Anderson's notions of imagined community". The advent of the internet and its effects on human communication were remarkable: from the mid 1990s onward and within a timeframe of about ten years the English language saw the explosion of internet-related terms: weblogs, netiquette, similies, FAQs, MIRC, webcam, A/S/L and other cyber-communication phrases became a part of internet users' parlance. Digital signatures were invented in recognition of the increased business correspondence being conducted through email. The number of web pages proliferated exponentially. The internet fundamentally and profoundly altered the way human communication in some parts of the world took place, and studies elaborated on this new e-world and the pioneers who came to populate it. Work on internet-induced changes to human communication was written by Rheingold who documented the early years of cyber-community formation, Negroponte who focused on the ramifications of increased digitisation (atoms turning into bits), and Poster who reflected on the changes to identity and group construction online.

Habermas placed public discourse within values popular during the Enlightenment period in the 18th century during which time, scholars believed humankind consisted of autonomous beings that could shape nature and existence by virtue of their superior values of reason and logic (Gaynor 1996). Habermas stipulated that such discourse could exist in a public sphere where true democracy was conducted, provided certain conditions were met (such as freedom of expression and speech, and the lack of external coercion on participants). Rheingold (1994: 403) explains, "Habermas formalised what people in free societies mean when we (sic) say 'The public wouldn't stand for that' or 'it depends on public opinion'". Subsequent critiques of Habermas' ideas about the public sphere noted the lack of involvement by women and others disenfranchised in society.

The formation of such a "public" (ie. the collection of individuals motivated by the Enlightenment's insistence on the values of logic and reason) could be traced in part due to the rise of the print media alluded to by Benedict Anderson, who argued that the matrimony of print-capitalism (the term he used to denote the book publishing industries which expanded rapidly during the sixteenth century) and vested socio-, cultural and/or political interests (such as the Protestant and Catholic Churches) together gave rise to a new literate public (Anderson 1991). The changes that took place in European society in the years following the introduction of the moveable type printing press in the sixteenth century were (according to Anderson) the result of the mass and commercialised adoption of a new media technology. This provides a relevant framework from which to read the relationship between the internet and Islam because it exemplified how religious as well as political changes in society could arise from the implementation of a new communication technology. Anderson described how the hegemonic power of the Roman Catholic Church occurred because the Vatican "always had better internal lines of communication than its challengers" (Anderson 1991: 39) but its stranglehold on the interpretation and teachings of the Bible would eventually be shattered following the introduction of the first mass readership known to European society (thanks to the availability of printed matter). Led

by Martin Luther, a “colossal religious propaganda war” (Anderson 1991: 40) resulted between Protestantism and Catholicism in which the former gained an advantage by production of cheap popular material for the consumption of the masses. Critically the publication-blitz offensive of the Protestants did not make use of Latin, the language of the Catholic Church which most of the traders and women of the time could not understand. The impact of the Reformation, according to Anderson, lay in the vernacularising and standardization of European print-languages to the extent that the multitude of pre-print era dialects became reduced. As readers of identical printed material could “imagine” that they were part of the same community despite being separated by distance, the foundations of national consciousness were constructed.

The convergence of capitalism and print technology on the fatal diversity of human language created the possibility of a new form of imagined community which in its basic morphology set the stage for the modern nation.

(Anderson 1991: 46)

The role of the print media in imagining nation provides parallels to the adoption of the internet by Muslims except that where print set the stage for the emergence of the nation-state, the “nation” that Muslim internet users envisage is not defined by geographical boundaries and is instead supranational in character, in line with Islamic teachings that emphasise religious ties over nationalistic ones. This is a basic fundamental precept of the Islamic world - that all who subscribe to the faith are adopted as “brothers and sisters” of one polity.

In online communication veteran Howard Rheingold’s account of how a prolific, articulate and well-known member of his virtual community committed suicide, he describes how the man - a one-time cocaine addict - was so busy chatting online to his fellow netizens that he failed to note an amount of the drug that had been placed near his computer screen. “At two bucks an hour,” observes Rheingold (1993), “obsessive computer conferencing is cheaper than every other addiction except tobacco.” The prevailing theme in Rheingold’s description of the Well, one of the early virtual communities (of which he was a pioneer), is that computer communication - whether through forums and bulletin boards, email lists or chat - affects people in very real, not cyber, terms. “Words on a screen hurt people,” he reflects after depicting community member’s suicide. Rheingold (1993) noted that even though “nobody mistakes virtual life for real life...it has an emotional reality to many of us”. In their creation of societies of people with like-minded interests and passions, one of his fellow Well-ites draws a parallel with Benedict Anderson:

‘Virtual communities require an act of imagination to use,’ points out Marc Smith, extending Anderson’s line of thinking to cyberspace, ‘and what must be imagined is the idea of the community itself.’

(Rheingold 1993)

Therefore, virtual communities are defined by Rheingold as similar to offline communities (in that they are the sites of rituals, the places where relationships are formed and broken, and governed by behavioural norms) but with two important differences: there is (initially) no face-to-face contact and the members of these communities are not bound by time or distance. Rheingold describes these virtual communities as analogous to Habermas' public sphere - decentralised and self-governing places where conversations could take place, of the type heard in bars, cafes or community centres. He looks at the possibilities of virtual communities in re-shaping social structures, citing Japan and France as significant examples (both societies being more conservative and opposed to change, as compared to the United States). The effects of new technology on society are explored using these examples, as well as Rheingold's own experiences with the San Francisco based Well. From these experiences Rheingold elaborates on how the usage of the internet extends our understanding of the effects of communication technology. The medium becomes more than a means of relaying information and a reflection of societal composition itself. Describing a visit to Japan, he found that the country's leaders

...like American technology managers, find themselves forced to look beyond their piece of technological turf or the perimeter of their profit centers, to consider the larger system, the infrastructure--the social changes as well as the hardware and software involved in creating a national or international highway of the mind.
(Rheingold 1993)

In other words, in the internet lies the potential for societal and social change, not merely technological change. When he got to know the members of COARA, one of the Well's equivalents in Japan, Rheingold noted that the structure of the community "...seemed to me more diverse in several ways than traditional Japanese social groups" (Rheingold 1993). Rheingold found that the construction of this cyber community did not reflect normative Japanese social spheres: the composition of the internet community, unlike traditional Japanese communities, cut across divisions of class, gender and age. In a similar vein, the internet could undermine the traditional strict confines of gender relations as practiced by Muslims. Rheingold (1993) observes that "the new medium poses a potentially formidable threat to gender relations - one of the mainstays of Japan's core social structure". In addition, the internet was an alternative method of projecting individual and group identities. Because of the constructed nature of identity inherent in the medium, the internet was the perfect means with which to dispel inaccurate notions of one's racial, social or religious group.

The citizens I met in Oita were eager to use CMC to bypass the mass media and communicate directly with their counterparts--the housewives and professionals in Santa Monica and elsewhere--to show that there is more to Japan than the picture painted by the American media. (Rheingold 1993)

But in addition to the potential qualities of computer mediated communication Rheingold also elaborated on the dangers of virtual communities, which he envisions as two-fold: they can fall victim to commercialisation, or they run the risk of breaking up into small groups with shared prejudices, instead of reinvigorating political discourse. In this Rheingold echoes Jon Anderson's view that the internet may simply be a new space for discussing old topics (Anderson 1991). He warns that the internet's opening up of avenues for increased participation in public discourse may be tempered by "fragmentation, hierarchization, rigidifying social boundaries, and single-niche colonies of people who share intolerances could become prevalent in the future" (Rheingold 1993). It is a view pertinent for online Muslim communities if they are to avoid resembling the talkback radio stations that preach to the converted - and if they are to succeed in reaching out to society at large, as is commanded by the Qur'an and hadith.

In *Being Digital* Nicholas Negroponte establishes a paradigm of atoms (analogue) versus bits (digital) and asks, "Is the publisher of a book in the information delivery business (bits) or in the manufacturing business (atoms)?" For Muslims, the answer is both. The atoms are symbolic. In a sense, the planks on which modern Islam is based - the Qur'an and hadith - have always been in "bit" form - that is, stored in the memories of the first Muslims of Muhammad's generation. The Qur'an is in hard copy because Muhammad's successor Abu Bakr realised that those who had memorised it would, eventually, pass away. Knowing that no human was immortal, and fearing that subsequent generations of Muslims would not have access to the Qur'an in its pure form, Abu Bakr began the process of collecting parts of the holy Book from human databases - the companions of the Prophet who had committed verses and sequences to memory. Living during the period of time that he did, bits were not an option for Abu Bakr - but atoms were. It was through Abu Bakr's actions that the world has the Qur'an in hard copy - atom format - and ironically, new technology enables Muslims to convert it to bits again, this time into memory banks that won't "die". Hence entire Qur'ans and collections of hadith exist on CD ROM and on searchable databases on the world wide web. The ummah of the 21st century, having witnessed the digitisation of the verses of the Holy Book might see in the process a reflection of the verse, "surely We have revealed the Reminder and We will most surely be its guardian" (Quran 15:9).

Negroponte (1995) relates how he was once asked to sign in his laptop at a circuit manufacturer's corporate headquarters. He tells the receptionist it was worth between one and two million even as she estimates the Powerbook to be valued at around two thousand dollars. The anecdote underscores Negroponte's assertion that while atoms may be worth a certain amount, some bits are "priceless". He believes the framework of globalisation and free trade is anachronistic, written as it is outside of the digital information framework: the assessment of economies and the writing of balance sheets is done "with atoms in mind. GATT is about atoms". This view bears relevance to the Muslim world, and not just in an e-commerce sense. The products deemed priceless in the Islamic sense are the pillars on which the Muslim civilisation is built - the spreading and dissemination of knowledge for the sake of

God. In a de-atomised, digital world, such dak'wah (propagation) can take place without regard for the boundaries of the nation-state, and almost instantaneously. As Negroponte points out,

The information superhighway is about the global movement of weightless bits at the speed of light. As one industry after another looks at itself in the mirror and asks about its future in a digital world, that future is driven almost 100 percent by the ability of that company's product or services to be rendered in digital form.

The “products” of Islam - the Qur'an, and the hadith or sayings of the Prophet Muhammad =- are therefore digitised in order to remain relevant to the Muslims of the future. The onset of globalisation and the introduction of the internet have resulted in the “almost instantaneous communication patterns between Muslim thinkers that took a lifetime to accomplish before the introduction of the printing press” (Stowasser 2001). Although Muslims believe the Qur'an will be protected for all time (bits or no bits) the message is clear about the role of humanity in the process: if Muslims don't wish to be left behind by the digital revolution, they need to convert (and have in fact begun to convert) their “products” into bit format, and forget about atoms.

In contrast to Negroponte who focused on the actual process and effects of digitization on communication, Poster was concerned with how the space created by a new technology such as the internet helped or hindered the development of democracy and democratic institutions. When discussing the effects of the internet on communication Poster (1995) argues that the medium is a social space and not a concrete technology vis-à-vis the television or the telephone “so that its effects are more like those of Germany than those of hammers”. Just as the effect of a predefined national space on the people within it is to impart some of the cultural, social and other characteristics of the space, so Poster argues that the internet needs to be understood not merely as a technology but as a social construct. He therefore cautions against unperturbed use of preexisting frameworks from which to analyse how the internet relates to democracy. Poster is suspicious of using the Habermasian model as a means to gauge the internet's political potential. “If there is a public sphere on the internet,” asks Poster, “who populates it and how?” He argues that Habermas's notion of consensus reached through validity of argument and discussion is denied when taking place online because electronically mediated discourse has introduced new forms of democracy rendering face-to-face talk that was a feature of the Habermasian public sphere. Poster's view that consensus reached through debate is a process that does not take place on the internet is an accurate one, when computer mediated communication alone is being evaluated along the lines of the public sphere. However, Poster's reasoning does not hold true when the internet is used as a complement to off-line discourse. New forms of electronic communication are more open to fulfilling the conditions stipulated by Habermas where they are used as an adjunct to off-line communication. Conditions of validity are easier to fulfill in cases where the internet is used to balance the information and actions provided by older media. Poster points to this, saying that “many areas of the internet extend pre-existing identities

and institutions”. In reference to Ernesto Laclau’s rejection of class struggle as society’s primary faultline, and Laclau’s call for a democracy of “antagonistic pluralism”, Poster draws parallels between the internet and postmodernity’s dismantling of barriers:

One may characterize postmodern or postMarxist democracy in Laclau's terms as one that opens new positions of speech...While the internet is often accused of elitism (a mere thirty million users), there does exist a growing and vibrant grass-roots participation in it organized in part by local public libraries.

Within postmodernity itself, identity is therefore constructed as a function of which individuals or groups one socialises with and the way one communicates within and without that social sphere, rather than identity being defined through its ties to theory. This according to Poster is one of the unique characteristics of communicating online: the very constructed nature of identity on the internet.

If one is to be masculine, one must choose to be so. Further, one must enact one's gender choice in language and in language alone, without any marks and gestures of the body, without clothing or intonations of voice.

At the same time, Poster notes that the internet refutes traditional hierarchies, tending “to discourage the endowment of individuals with inflated status”. This is reminiscent of an observation by Jon Anderson (1997) that official voices on the internet compete with those that do not have endorsement from organizations considered legitimate in the non-cyber world: an observation discussed at length below.

The Clash of Civilisations

The key Islamic principle that all believers are part of one ummah (community) could account for the vast similarities in basic Islamic values and patterns of living (such as the way one conducts prayers or the amount of poor-due that is obligatory upon believers) despite the fact that Muslim-majority countries stretch geographically from eastern Europe to northern Africa, the middle east, the Asian sub-continent, and the fringes of southeast Asia. Traditionally these countries have been thought of as a homogenous bloc, a loose coalition of “them and us” in the classic Orientalist sense. Or, as it was most crudely put by George W Bush after September 11 - “either you are with us or against us”. Seemingly on the fringes of the discussion but ever present as a milieu to the discourse (and particularly so after the events of September 11 2001) was Huntington’s “Clash Of Civilisations” premise that Islam and the West were incompatible, and the refuting of which by Said and others.

Huntington (1993: 25) contended in *Foreign Affairs* that a civilisational clash would occur over differences in opinion over topics such as

...the relations between God and man, the individual and the group, the citizen and the state, parents and children, husband and wife.

Civilisations, as defined by Huntington, comprised of “the highest cultural grouping of people and broadest level of cultural identity people have” (1996: 43). The cultural grouping known as modern Western civilisation, for Huntington, was defined by the things that he sees as being absent from Islamic society: the separation between Church and state, the rights and responsibilities of citizens vis-à-vis their governments, and human rights and gender issues. It’s because of these supposed differences, argues Lewis, that fundamentalist movements are galvanised:

...it is Western capitalism and democracy that provide an authentic and attractive alternative to traditional ways of thought and life. Fundamentalist leaders are not mistaken in seeing in Western civilization the greatest challenge to the way of life that they wish to retain or restore for their people...

The *Clash of Civilisations and Remaking of World Order*, Huntington’s book written three years after the article *Clash of Civilisations* expounds on what divides and not unites humanity. Even before Bush having enunciated that “you’re either with us or against us” in the so-called war on terror, Huntington had argued that “the question ‘which side are you on?’ has been replaced by the much more fundamental one, ‘who are you?’” (1996: 34). In both the book and the journal article, Huntington’s thesis (1993, 1996) implies that the civilisational clash would result in more political or military antagonism between nation-states that belong to different civilisations (and that conversely, nation-states that belong to the same civilisation would be less likely to be involved in conflict). Increased contact between people in a globalised era and the rise of regional trading blocs have resulted in conditions conducive to civilisational clash and a challenge to Western hegemony by two “contender” civilisations, which are defined by Huntington as those of China and Islam. Cultural identity, based on religious affiliation, is “the central factor shaping a country’s associations and antagonisms” (1996: 125). Cultural factors therefore become the defining base upon which conflict takes place, instead of ideological factors that preceded the end of the Cold War (competing ideologies of communism versus capitalism). Cultural factors, however, for Huntington, actually mean religious ones, because religion is a civilisation’s “central defining characteristic” (1996: 47). It is based on this premise that Huntington contends that clashes between civilisations are usually conflicts of different religious followers. Curiously, Huntington views the chasm between these religion-based civilisations as something that is being reinforced and not negated by the forces of modernisation, which he sees as strengthening non-Western culture and power - a process he describes as “the world is becoming more modern and less Western” (Huntington in Barber 1997: 66). In other words, Huntington rejects the

theories of the collapse of cultural differences in the wake of the advancement of Western (or American) culture at the same time as he advocates or supports the notion of civilisational blocs in the Chinese and the Muslim worlds whose people are bound in common by a fervent hatred of the West.

In his critique of the clash of civilisations argument, Barber (1997) expresses explicit concerns with Huntington's definition of culture, tied as it is to defining civilisation by way of religion. Barber points out that in some cases, for example Confucianism or Islam, religion could be said to influence a civilisation's cultural mores, but "it hardly defines African or Western civilisation, which are multicultural and multireligious as well" (1997: 67). Barber contends that there is another, more critical area where Huntington has fundamentally missed the mark: in his work's failure to recognise changes to the role of cultural and information export in post Cold War politics. By focusing on an imaginary and obdurate adversary of Muslim civilisation, Huntington is "unable to think in the absence of enemies" (Barber 1997: 67) with the result that his analysis simply replaces the big bad Communists with the big bad Islamists. In addition, this view ignores the power of cultural exportation: in the globalised era, it is important to acknowledge that culture constitutes a product to be provided in accordance with the dictates of supply and demand, instead of a building-block that represents a segment of societal identity. Barber's view (1997: 66) is that American global interaction is defined less and less on the battlefield and more and more in the marketplace.

What, after all, is the Pentagon compared to Disneyworld?...Who in the 1950s could have imagined that a medium of pop culture such as MTV could make inroads in societies closed to diplomacy?

Because of Huntington's dismissal of cultural influences such as MTV, he is what Barber terms "conceptually adrift when he tries to evaluate the relative power of our new epoch's clashing civilisations" (1997: 67). Barber endorses the idea that paradigm shifts have occurred in our conceptualization of power - instead of power being seen solely as "hard" (measured in terms such as GNP and military might), it now encompasses "soft" power (evaluated on the grounds of cultural exports and the ability to control news and information). Clash, argues Barber, shelves the perception

that power itself has been transformed over the last half century from hard to soft, from military and industrial to technological and informational...in its new "soft" forms...power belongs to the cultures and civilisations that dominate the production of information and entertainment...

(1997: 67-68)

In this regard, Barber contends that Huntington is wrong when he compares the power of the two "contender" civilisations of China and Islam to the West, and supports the idea that Western civilisation is in mortal danger. Barber also notes that, interestingly, Huntington dismisses culture as a

powerful force in international affairs while at the same time viewing it as a powerful internal force that corrodes Western (in this particular case, American) values. For example, having promoted the view (Huntington 1996: 256, 263) that most Muslims view their culture as superior to that of the West and that their culture glorifies military values (“Islam’s borders are bloody, and so are its innards”) , Huntington argues that while Europe’s most pressing menace is Muslim in flavour, Hispanics play the same role for the US. Commenting on the map in *Clash* indicating that in sixteen years, there will be a 50/50 white/non-white racial mix for the population of the United States, Barber (1997: 69) observes

the map conveys the distinct impression that American civilisation is right only when it’s white, that neither black Americans who have been here longer than most European immigrants nor the continent’s only genuinely native population really belong to America...they apparently dilute America’s civilisational essence in ways that render the country vulnerable to outside enemies...

Barber concludes that Huntington’s call for the protection of Western/American values is, in reality, a call to support “white Christian Europeanism” (1997: 69) instead of the principles of liberalism that underpin the freedoms granted to or enjoyed by US citizens. Huntington’s apparent fear of China and Islam and his imagining of a massive global conflict in which the West defends its values against an onslaught by these two civilisations has resulted in his “predictive social science...[having] deteriorated into what can only be called paranoia” (Barber 1997: 68).

The implication behind Huntington’s ideas (that civilisational clashes would result in more political or military antagonism between nation-states that belong to different civilisations instead of nation-states that belong to the same civilisation) is the focus of a critique by Henderson and Tucker (2001) which measured the empirical incidence of inter- and intra- civilisational conflict between 1816 and 1992 (ie before, during and after the Cold War). Henderson and Tucker (2001) cited a 1960 study by Richardson, conducted before Huntington’s *Clash* article or book, in which it was found that factors such as the same religious denomination or a common language did not have a diminishing effect on the number of times nation-states went to war. Richardson (in Henderson and Tucker 2001) also found that Christianity, more so than Islam, was subject to intra-civilisational conflict, undermining Huntington’s “Islam’s Bloody Borders” notion. Henderson and Tucker’s findings indicated that “civilisational difference is not significantly associated with an increased likelihood of interstate war” (2001: 334). While Barber (1997) questioned Huntington on the grounds of ignoring the cultural dimensions of power, Henderson and Tucker’s main criticism is that Huntington’s work overlooks the role of nationalism, whose interests “often work at odds with civilisational ones” (2001: 333).

Sullivan’s post-September 11 evaluation of *Clash of Civilisations* credits Huntington with restating the role played by civilisation in global affairs but observes that this role, while having had earlier support

from authors such as Spengler and Toynbee, “largely had been discredited by behaviouralism” (Sullivan 2002: 169). Sullivan condemns Huntington for reasserting the false stereotype of Islam in the West that views it as having been a faith spread by the sword (2001: 170). However Sullivan also notes that Huntington’s views had appeared to change, citing a 2001 speech given by him in the United Arab Emirates in which he urged the United States to forego ideas of enforcing American lifestyle on values on other peoples, stop frequent foreign military interventionism, and distance itself from Israel. Sullivan observes that incidents such as September 11 have

obscured the moderate, culturally conservative, and deeply religious movement that marks the best of the contemporary Islamic revival...[which] may have much to teach the radically secular West
(2001: 173)

He pushes for more inter-religious dialogue as a means of avoiding “Huntington’s nightmare hypothesis of 1993” (2001: 176) and points out the seemingly semantic detail that the original 1993 article had a question mark after its title - indicating, according to Sullivan. Huntington’s “uncertainty” about the matter that may have been underlined by the events of September 11 2001 when Huntington’s work was being invoked by various sections of the media as a prediction having come to pass. In that environment, Sullivan noted that “precisely when the world may teeter on the edge of a war of civilisations” Huntington “repudiated his original hypothesis and emerged as an apostle of conciliation and critic of US foreign policy” (2001: 170).

It is becoming increasingly problematic to pit the Islamic and Western civilisations against another a la Huntington (1993). As pointed out by Said (1993) and others (Boehle 2002; Sullivan 2002; Henderson and Tucker 2001), to assert that Islam and the West are two mutually exclusive units that are on a collision course with each other ignores cogent indicators of 21st century life. Today’s reality is that the West is dependent on many Islamic based nations for the supply of resources such as gas and oil, Western expatriates reside in Muslim-majority countries, and significant numbers of Muslims form diasporic communities based in Western countries (Sullivan 2002). Despite this, the perspective of Muslims is often missing in the messages produced by older media. Thus because many in the Muslim world distrust the output of Western cultural production industries which they view as being inherently anti-Islamic, they prefer to have their information needs fulfilled by narratives that speak to Muslims.

Muslim Communities' Adaptation of the Internet

The followers of twenty first century Islam embraced internet technology (understanding its networking capabilities and making use of its decentralised nature) - in contrast to how Muslim society had struggled with the question of the printing press five hundred years earlier. A speaker at a networking conference in Budapest, Hungary, in 1995, told his audience “all technology is a religious phenomenon” (Wilson 1995). In terms of the Muslim world, the internet is a religious phenomenon. While Western philosophy conceptualised the internet within frameworks such as that of the public sphere, or of a medium that could realise some of the ideals espoused by Lyotard when he spoke of alternative voices to challenge the “metanarrative”, the parallel theme running in Islamic-specific analyses on the role of the internet was to view the technology as a lost opportunity regained. The establishment of religion on the internet is a reality: in the US alone, more net surfers claim to use the medium for religious purposes than for finding dates, or stock market information (Kelsey 2001). Other studies have also mentioned the presence of religion, both mainstream and cult, online (Cirillo 2003/2004; Hadden and Cowan 2000; Dawson and Hennebry 1999; Ho, Baber and Khondker 2002). It can be said therefore that both in nation-states that have a Muslim majority population, and in those where Muslims constitute a minority, the internet has been appropriated by Muslims for the purposes of practicing and propagating Islam. Studies dealing specifically with the Islamic reading of the internet see the medium as the possible means by which languishing Muslim civilisations could set in motion a digital reformation, involving the appropriation and dissemination of information about the Islamic world. Some research has looked at how the internet can alter the perception of Muslims among non-Muslim audiences. In addition, research has been conducted into how Muslims who form minority or diaspora populations in Western countries use the internet in the process of political and media engagement and community formation.

E-Revolution in the Ummah

One of the key proponents of the idea of the internet as a means by which the Islamic world could see a media based reformation was Anderson (1997). He describes the internet as an arena where

any number of counterparts from other Middle East and Muslim countries have used their skills to create, join, and debate in this new space where otherwise aborted or suppressed projects of nation-building, cultural exposition and religious outreach find outlets not available at home.

Noting the lack of in-depth analysis of the internet phenomenon, Anderson sets up a binary opposition of supporters and detractors of the information superhighway. The first part of this binary model

comprises of what Anderson termed the “Cyberspace and internet enthusiasts” who envisioned “a new paradigm of knowledge, information and work replacing those of the industrial revolution with an information age/society/ economy” (1997). Anderson makes reference to the linear history of the post-industrialised world that took humanity from the “modern” society where many people are employed by the services industry, to an “information” society where the main form of work involved information processing - a status attained by countries like Japan and towards which Australia appears to be headed. At the opposite end of the model are people who are “...tied to older information regimes of print,” who see in the onset of the information society parallels with “the earlier effect of industrialization on the craft trades”. Just as the industrial revolution had wiped out the dominance of craft trades (eg blacksmiths, carpentry), these “cyber-detractors” see the onset of the internet as signaling the end of certain white-collar trades - such as accounting or banking, which utilize and process information in tasks which are increasingly dominated by computers. In framing this viewpoint, Anderson outlines how standards of publication are (for better or worse) lowered when it comes to cyber-content, and how traditional media structures and roles - which include the editor as the “barometer of quality” and reporters or journalists who are semi-professional, degree-educated or accredited - dissolve in the online world where any individual can be an editor, reporter, or producer. “Official” or “sanctioned” media exists on the internet via formal online versions of big off-line media such as the BBC and CNN, but they share bandwidth with web logs created by adolescent girls. This is why the internet has changed the way human beings process and consume information, and it’s the crux of Anderson’s essay: that whether there exists or not endorsed, official output (the “legitimate” output of society’s institutions) audiences can find on the internet electronic fanzines, personal web pages, community forums, and not-for-profit online newsletters. Within Western society, the Islamic presence on the internet, argues Anderson (1997), served to take existing, offline discussions or debates on-line, for example about the roles of women, or the latest world events affecting Islam and Muslims. Anderson refers to this as the process of discussing old topics in a new setting. Secondly, online Islam publicises the plight of expatriate/diaspora Muslim communities in the West to their home cultures. Finally, the Islamic internet presence offers alternatives to the mainstream non-Muslim discourse - “cultural profiles, political news and commentary and religious witness”. Anderson (1997) also refers to how historically, the internet was the means by which the scientific/research community linked to laypeople with shared interests so that the medium “grew not only technologically but also socially to encompass interests that could be fitted to its values and frames” of which the most significant were values and frames of religious or political discussion making up a significant proportion of the Muslim presence on the internet. Internet communication thus begins with the migration of existing discussions offline (stage one), but also permits demarginalisation of voices from the fringe (stage two). As Anderson describes, internet communication “enables messages heretofore expressed in much more limited settings...to find more public outlets and thus to change the balance of who and what is published”. The third and subsequent stage is that of convergence of the Muslim cyber-community who end up looking to “new sources of authority and legitimacy such as those of applied science and higher education...” Anderson

explains that this convergence is the result of the meeting of three forms of Muslim society - which he outlines as the Islam of the ulamas (with its legalist bent), the Islam of the masses (which an emphasis on social and community issues) and the version he calls “middle brow Islam” (academic, tinged with an “official” air). What comes onto the internet, he argues, is the third form - “a more middle-brow Islam associated with a more middling population: its versions range from fundamentalist to liberal”. He alludes to the imagined communities of Benedict Anderson in describing the internet, like print media before it, as “preeminently a realm of publication” and whose effects on society are analogous to those of printing in that notions of imagined community were conceptualised among European diaspora populations. Referring to the process of the Muslim population moving online as creolisation, Anderson noted how this process had defining characteristics including mixed discourses (ranging from established media sources such as newspapers to the dissemination of personal web sites), a tendency to network amongst members, varying levels of intellectual techniques, and participation that was predominantly engaged in by the Middle Eastern/Muslim diasporic communities in the West. He observes that in response to the proliferation of non-official Islamic websites, email lists and forums, “increasingly ‘official’ voices find their way not just to challenge...alternative voices; they also join the new forms for propagating, defending and witnessing the faith” (1997).

The usage of the internet as the informational weapon of choice for dissenting groups in conservative countries is the theme running through Teitelbaum’s (2002) analysis of government and opposition presence on the internet in Saudi Arabia. The onset of the cyber era posed many challenges for the Islamic kingdom, which were best summed up as the need to balance the cultural and political advantages, informational needs and business requirements that were presented by the introduction of the internet with the conservative nature of Saudi Arabian society. Teitelbaum (2002) outlines the efforts by the House of Saud to block access by citizens to undesirable websites in the interests of protecting its citizens (but no doubt also to control the information that Saudi Arabian net surfers are able to gain access to) and concludes that while blocking, together with the phenomenon of self-censorship, have worked in some respect total control by the government is not possible. He begins with an historical overview of net usage in Saudi Arabia and Crown Prince Abdullah’s decision to introduce the new medium - a decision which, Teitelbaum notes (2002: 224) was not without controversy:

A debate in the press followed. Saudis were understandably cautious about the introduction of the internet. For those opposed, it was a bald-faced attempt at Westernization.

Teitelbaum explains how the opposition in Saudi Arabia had used the internet effectively since 1994, with groups such as the Movement for Islamic Reform in Arabia (or MIRA) setting up web presences and maintaining email contact with other dissidents. In the case of MIRA, its web site was set up by a UK-based Saudi surgeon living in exile, and contains political statements, news coverage, and analysis. Teitelbaum suggests that the website’s tone is “anti-government, challenging the Saudi pretension to

speak in the name of an authentic Islam” (Teitelbaum 2002: 226). Three levels of filtering are discussed: self-censorship at the first level, at the second level compliance by internet service providers who are threatened with losing their operating licenses if they provide access to restricted sites, and at the third level the fact that ISPs must go through a central (government-controlled) proxy server. Interestingly, the MIRA website apparently contained technical hints on how to access the pages “while avoiding Saudi censorship of the internet” (Teitelbaum 2002: 226). Teitelbaum does mention, however, that attempts to completely restrict internet access by any authority are unlikely to succeed. “The challenge of using the internet for Islam and modernization, while trying to limit its cultural impact will continue for many years to come” (Teitelbaum 2002: 38).

In their exploration of an internet-based Islamic reformation, Mazrui and Mazrui (2001) discuss the Islamizing of computer-mediated communication as part of a wider quest to “Islamize scientific (and other forms) of knowledge for the greater project of Islamizing modernity itself”. Arguing that the Christian Reformation was a return to the biblical roots of Christianity, Mazrui and Mazrui (2001) explore the idea of the internet doing for Muslims what the first industrial revolution did for Christian Europe: provide a means with which the populace could challenge dogmatic rulers and find out more about their own beliefs in order to return to a pure version of the faith - in this case, the Islam practised by Muhammad that had as its foundations peace, respect for fellow human beings and - most importantly - the lifelong search for *ilm* or knowledge. The internet is key to the idea that technology indirectly affects culture, by affecting the way we communicate. The internet has altered the way Muslims communicate with each other and with non-Muslims - and as a consequence, it can change the cultures and ways of Muslims. One outcome of this may be to re-acquaint Muslims with some of Islam's original aims such as the fostering of cross-border brother- and sister- hood. Such a development would rely on the internet's ability to destroy the walls of geographic differences.

national sovereignty...will shrink in the wake of the internet and cyberspace. The printed word played a major role in the construction of nationhood and in reinforcing national consciousness. Computer communication, on the other hand, is contributing to the breakdown of nationhood.

(Mazrui and Mazrui 2001)

Another area in which the internet could help the Islamic community rediscover pure Islam is in the religion's original aims of enhancing the status of women. Because the internet emphasises the de-physical (ie. through permitting interaction to take place without two people being physically present in the same spatial area) it could play a practical role in altering entrenched mindsets in certain patriarchal Islamic societies regarding the role of female believers. Although Islam gave women the right to work and seek income, because of cultural practices some societies do not permit this on the basis that women ought to be protected and secluded . Such an argument would carry no weight when it comes to e-commerce, argue Mazrui and Mazrui (2001). What they refer to as “the computerised

hijab” allows an avenue for women to be involved in both income generation and social and political involvement on local and global scales, among those Muslims who believe it is preferable for women not to work (although this belief is hotly disputed). In contrast with Huntington’s binary dichotomy of Islam and the West (made popular in the wake of September 11), Mazrui and Mazrui (2001) are of the opinion that a revived Islamic civilisation is more, not less, open to engaging with other cultures.

...Islamic renewal will not only galvanize the Muslim ummah from within but also, by rekindling the spirit of ijtihad, it will reopen the doors of constructive engagement with other civilizations...

Such comments are particularly resonant because of the ever-present fear and distrust of the Western world amongst many Muslims (particularly after George W Bush’s brutal “regime change” in Iraq) and because many Muslim-majority countries are ruled by despotic, authoritarian governments. Citing historical precedents such as the way the early Islamic civilisation had protected minorities, how Jewish scholars rose to prominence under Muslim Spain, and how Christians had attained ministerial offices during the reign of several Ottoman Empire sultans, Mazrui and Mazrui (2001) say that the Muslim world is at its most tolerant precisely when Islam is politically influential and not demonised or threatened: “a self-confident and self-assured Islam is a better partner for peace than a threatened Islam”.

Challenging misconceptions about Islam online

While acknowledging the internet’s potential to bridge the gap of misunderstanding about Islam, Horvath (1998) warns against accepting the myth of that the internet represents “a global community which is one and indivisible”. Instead, he argues that “existing prejudices against the religion (evident in older media) may simply move online” - as an example, he cites the decision in 1996 to block access by American computers to what was then Iran’s sole internet connection in support of the Iran and Libya sanctions act. This enraged expatriate Iranians who were prevented from communicating with relatives, and “only after a wave of net protest and repeated phone calls was the connection then re-established.” Horvath also articulates the fear felt by Muslims with regard to the new medium - that instead of capitalising on the talents and knowledge of the Islamic world, it will corrupt the minds of Muslim youth.

Their main concern is with the news that daily spews forth from western media sources which tarnish both the image of Muslims and their religion. They complain that on the internet it’s hard to find fair and decent news coverage coming from western media sources about Islam and Muslims, or events affecting Muslims and Muslim countries.
(Horvath 1998)

Since then, current mainstream media coverage of Islam has been careful to enunciate the differences between Islam's teachings and the practices of some of its followers.

Martin and Phelan (2002) researched a comparative content analysis of two types of texts. The first consisted of transcripts from five US based TV networks (CNN, ABC, CBS, NBC and FOX) totaling 4.18 million words; the second were the contents of CNN Online's message board from 10:06 am on September 11 to 00:00 on September 17th, a total of 2.39 million words. Martin and Phelan (2002) analysed the two types of texts in the sample lexiconically using Wordsmith software. Noun phrases studied involved two-word groups ("Islamic" was the first word, used as an adjective). The study found that there was commonality across both TV media and the message board, with ten phrases in the top 15 amounts of both texts. They included Islamic fundamentalist(s), Islamic jihad, Islamic world, Islamic militant(s) and Islamic extremist(s). Similarly across the content of both the online discussion boards and the TV news transcripts, they noted frequent use of the phrase "Islamic world" - a signification of the other that is rejected by theorists like Edward Said (2001). Recurrent occurrence of this expression in both the online and television texts sampled led the authors to suggest that the academic influence of Said's thesis on orientalism has not spread to popular discourse. Interestingly, despite all the post September 11 invoking of Huntington's Clash of Civilisations paradigm, there was a distinct lack of mention (only two in total from both texts) of the phrase "Islamic civilisation". There were, however some differences in the two samples. Notable, there was a higher incidence of Islamic noun phrases on the messageboard (1582 compared to the network transcripts' 468). This figure is unusual because the messageboard was significantly smaller (in amount of words) by about fifty per cent. "Islamic terrorist" was used the most in the message board (174 mentions); in television transcripts, it occurs only 14 times. The posters were suggested by the authors to be in acceptance of the association of Islam with terrorist acts. There was also a higher incidence in the television transcripts of "neutral" noun phrases like Islamic community, Islamic faith, Islamic society or Islamic center. Some referred to attacks on venues ("Islamic center") while others spoke of heads of the local "Islamic society". Martin and Phelan (2002) conclude that, with very specific currency, the ideology surrounding media coverage of Islam still exudes a bemusing and contradictory message, because of the official response from government which reflects the same contradictions in urging the avoidance of "stark polarities between 'us' and (the Islamic) 'them', while nevertheless firmly and paradoxically characterizing the conflict as one in which 'you are either with us or against us'."

Diaspora Muslim Identity and Community on the Internet

The emergence of a cyber, Islamic public sphere is the focus of an edited collection of papers by Eickelman and Anderson (1999) who note in an opening section how new media forms are accessible to Muslim laypeople and intellectuals. These media forms are assisting in the construction of new Islamic

identities, new Islamic public discourse and new Islamic audiences in a process the editors term “reintellectualisation”. The scope of such “reintellectualisation” is in “presenting Islamic doctrine and discourse in accessible, vernacular terms, even if this contributes to basic reconfigurations of doctrine and practice” (Eickelman and Anderson 1999: 12). Within this edited anthology, the mixing of traditional and modern scholarly styles of discussing Islamic teaching or principles is covered in a chapter by Eickelman, in which he attributes such intellectualization of public discourse to the increase in higher education and net access amongst Muslims. Such discussion often takes place outside the boundaries of the “legitimate” or official viewpoints (for examples, those of traditionally trained ulamas or scholars). In creating hitherto unknown spaces in which Islamic discourse can be conducted by Muslims audiences and Islamic communities can be built in which geographically disparate members can connect, new media, argue Eickelman and Anderson, are the means by which barriers of distance can be eroded and social and religious landscapes altered within the Muslim world.

Eickelman and Anderson’s collection covered the Middle East, various Muslim majority countries, and the diaspora Muslim community of the United States. In a similarly multinational fashion, Bunt (2000) provides an overview of sites from around the world that represent “Cyber Islamic Environments” in the hope that these sites “offer some insight into contemporary manifestations of Islam within and outside computer-mediated environments” (2000: 15). These Islamic sites online run the gamut of traditional and mainstream to those on the fringes of acceptable Muslim society, such as Queer Jihad. As Bunt states in the beginning, the aim of his work was not to make value judgements concerning the accuracy or usefulness of Muslim oriented information on the Web, but rather to describe the landscape of Islamic cyberspace. Accordingly, Bunt organises his observations around themes, for example one chapter deals with Quran and Hadith online, another on the range of Islamic schools (Sunni, Shi’a and Sufi) represented on the net, while another chapter looks at sites dealing with political Islam. Bunt also goes into detail about the disparity between verification standards on the internet and in the real world, pointing out how the anonymity of internet publishing is at variance with the traditionally meticulous recording of, for example, the backgrounds of ulama who were qualified to pronounce scholarly judgements or interpretations of Hadith. Bunt engages with the pressing (for Muslims) issue of authority and Islamic practices online, and explores one of the most interesting and vibrant uses to which young Muslims today put the net: what the author of this thesis terms the “shaykh google” phenomenon of referring their Islam related questions to dedicated websites where users can post questions (and receive answers from Sheikhs) about Islamic practice and belief. He provides insights into the usage of cyber environments by Muslims including the internet as a provider of alternative viewpoints to the off-line traditional sources of religious knowledge within Islam, the practical usage of the internet in acts of worship (for instance studying the Quran through downloading recorded recitations), and the use of the internet to build spaces for political discourse.

The use of bulletin boards or online forums by Muslims as sites for building Islamic-centred discourse is one of the ways in which discourse concerning the politics of the ummah can be constructed. Mandaville (2001), in his analysis of how Muslims experience Islam as a lived experience, has a special focus on how Muslims integrate the classical Islamic writings (Qur'an and Hadith) into their lives through a framework of two powerful forces of the globalised era: media and migration. He explores how migration has resulted in members of Muslim communities in Europe identifying with both Islamic and Western civilizations. Through the media, Mandaville analyses the vibrant discourse that exists within Islamic communities, delineating the diametric, constructed opposition of the politics of Islam-vs-the-West and instead focusing more towards a second type of politics: "that of Islam and its own internal others" which, Mandaville posits, "is becoming increasingly important in the present translocal climate" (2001a: 81). He asserts that new media will play an important role for young Muslims in the West in searching for spaces and language to formulate a version of Islam suited to their time and location. Mandaville views the Middle East and Islam as a form of travelling culture in which migration and diaspora communities contribute to the process of the Middle East being reconceptualised and re-articulated in places far removed from the geographic Middle East, through the use of communications technologies. He focuses on the up to 40 per cent of Muslims who live as minorities in non-Muslim countries. Within such communities Mandaville argues that "Islamic meanings shift, change and transmutate" (2001b: 173). This type of political re-imagining of Islam, according to Mandaville's analysis, manifests itself in cultural products being made by and for Muslims such as websites, Muslim-oriented print media, and CD ROMs which (as is suitable in a globalised and postmodern world) are available beyond the immediate locality of production. Through the new media, Mandaville finds, young(er) Muslims find ways in which they are able to discuss competing interpretations of Islam, or even challenge authorities on Islamic grounds.

The use of the internet by young diaspora Muslims is also the focus of the study conducted by Schmidt (2004) that looks at formation of Islamic identity on the basis of visibility, individual choice, transnationalism and social ethics, among young well-educated Muslims of immigrant background between 15 and 30 years of age, either born or raised in Western countries. Schmidt argues that transnational identity formations are taking place among young Muslims in Denmark, Sweden and the US - formations that are continuously effected by aspects of the local and the contextual, and in particular by the conditions and legislation of the host nation-state. From interviews with young Muslims in the three countries chosen as part of his study, Schmidt discovers that proof of Islamic knowledge is seen as a key component of claiming Muslim religious identity in a Western context, and that for these youthful diaspora Muslim populations, knowledge is gained "through reading of books, and equally through downloads from the Internet and membership of Internet based discussion groups" (Schmidt 2004: 36). The Internet-based discussion groups usually geographically determined and focus on Muslim residents of a particular city or state. The young Muslims in the study viewed it a necessary part of their belief structure to question religious teachings, drawing on the experiences of Prophet Muhammad and his companions who would ask about different verses of the Quran. Although

the Muslims spoken to saw Islam in its normative form as not open to change, they also viewed “the constant nature of the divine message” as one that did “not contradict adaptability, development or discussion” (Schmidt 2004: 37). The young Muslims Schmidt spoke to, therefore, believed in adapting the core message of Islam to current modern circumstances without digressing from its normative form, arguing that matters such as human rights and gender equality, taking care of the environment, and democracy had always been contained in Islamic teachings seeing “no contradiction between the religious ideals of the Islam that they advocate and the non-Muslim societies they live in” (Schmidt 2004: 38).

For Hirji (2006) issues of citizenship, community, political engagement are recurring themes within the online construction and maintenance of a loosely knit community opposed to the Iraq war. Hirji’s content analysis of a web site (the Montreal Muslim News) used by diaspora Muslims in a Western country (Canada) reveals that the media of Muslim minorities has the ability to link its members outside of a given geographic location to events taking place in other parts of the world with which the diaspora community feels a connection. The Montreal Muslim News website was chosen because it was a site that provided its own content as well as taking news from other sites, allowing “discussion and debate about a variety of issues, including questions of belonging and identity” (Hirji 2006: 127). The war in Iraq provided a focus point for the content creators and audience members of the website who could provide their views and analysis of news regarding fellow Muslims in another part of the world through the website’s mailing list and action alerts. Hirji sees the implication of the presence of opinions on the website from the Muslim community in Montreal about events happening in Iraq as suggestive of the need among diaspora communities for mediated political activity on a trans-national scale. This need did not necessarily entail a negative framing of public discourse on Muslim web sites and email lists - instead, it simply translates into a wider array of views from the Muslim community about events involving people situated geographically outside of Canada who were nonetheless imagined as being an extension of the Canadian Muslim community. Instead of seeing the opposition to the Iraq war from the Muslim community as disenchantment with the Canadian society, Hirji argues that the negativity about the war on the Montreal Muslim News site - the action alerts, the protests, and the opinions posted - reflected “signs of committed civic engagement that are rooted equally in nationalism, faith, and an awareness of global issues” (Hirji 2006: 138).

Like Hirji’s research on the use of a particular internet medium by the members of a Muslim minority in Canada, content analysis of an Islamic web presence is explored in a study by Brouwer (2004), which looks at a mailing list associated with the first Dutch Muslim website where intense debates take place over issues associated with being Muslim in a Western, secular country. Brouwer looks at the issues mailing list members discuss and how their views are presented in an attempt to find out whether “the participants only talk about ‘old topics in new settings’—as Mandaville and Anderson wondered—or do new topics come up as a result of the new medium?” (Brouwer 2004: 49). Covering the 1998 - 2001 timeframe, Brouwer notes that both the membership and the activity on the list

fluctuates, and that many email postings to the listserv were practical in nature (for example, information about halal food, meetings and events, addresses of mosques). The listserv contents were indicative of what was happening in the Dutch Muslim community at the time - for example, during Ramadan many of the postings were about fasting. The variation in listserv activity was especially marked when Dutch media covered issues to do with the Muslim community. Local news items about Islam would prompt a flurry of activity as mailing list members responded to those items and articulated their views on Islamic-related coverage in the newspapers or television programs. Brouwer feels that Benedict Anderson's imagined communities can be invoked to describe the relationship between the members of the listserv studied given that they did not know each other in an offline, face to face sense. The sense of community stemmed from "common interests or experiences. Sharing the same religion and living as a Muslim in a Western society strengthens such a feeling" (Brouwer 2004: 53). The three main themes discussed on the mailing list were the position of women in Islam, the stereotypical way Islam is presented in Western society, and the aftermath of the 9/11 attacks in America which the list participants viewed as demonstrating anti-Islam attitudes in the West. These topics, Brouwer argues, lend credence to the view that the internet is not merely a place where old topics are discussed in new settings - "most of the topics they discuss are new" (Brouwer 2004: 53).

Conclusion

Despite the negative connotations of the word "fundamentalism", it's useful in understanding why there are so many different interpretations of what constitutes Islam. In a fundamental sense - as even a nominal Muslim will be able to explain - the major principles of Islam remain the same: the declaration of faith, five daily prayers, fasting during the month of Ramadan, giving a proportion of your income to charity, and pilgrimage to Makkah if one is financially and physically able. However, there are differences in theological standpoints and interpretations of Islam which are reflected in the viewpoints of Muslim communities throughout the world. The internet is one way in which these differences can be discussed and drawn out, and it is also one way in which common ground between Muslims can be discovered. This conclusion can be drawn from a look at the two interconnected fields of research that lead to a study of the Islamic presence online: how the internet had changed the way human beings communicated and formed communities, and how the Islamic world and the Western world are framed with regards to common ground and differences. Modern-day Muslims have been quick to grasp the potential of the internet in bringing closer (both spiritually and geographically) the far-flung corners of Islamic society, and in increasing the engagement of Muslims within political and social contexts. This is reflected in research that focuses at the use of the internet (primarily through web sites and email lists) by specific Muslim diaspora or minority communities within Western countries such as the United Kingdom, the United States, Denmark and the Netherlands. Most of the studies have involved content analysis of listserv postings and website content, or interviews with

young Muslim representatives of these minority communities living in secular non-Muslim countries. Yet in the literature regarding Islam online, there has not yet emerged a cross-border comparison of internet usage among Muslims in nation-states in which a range of political systems are used, differences can be found in the proportion of the Islamic population and the space accorded to Muslim-related issues, socioeconomic disparities can be discerned, and variances exist with regards to media industries and policies. A study of this kind will further reveal the nuances of internet usage among both Muslims living in countries where the majority of the population are followers of Islam, and Muslim minority communities living in secular Western or non-Western countries, and attempt to uncover if differences in social, economic and political situations faced by Muslims moderates and adjusts their internet use.

SECTION THREE: RESULTS

- Data Sources and Methodology
 - An online survey analysed quantitatively
 - Information from web forums and mailing lists
 - Interviews conducted with Muslim women on reactions to email forwards following September 11 attacks
 - Limitations
 - Results: Online Survey
 - Design of interview questions
 - The Digital Divide: Response Rates
 - The Importance of the Internet in the Lives of Young Muslims
 - Targetting Muslim Users: Email and Home Pages
 - Engaging Islamic Practice Online
 - Forming and Informing the Electronic Ummah
 - Finding Alternative News on Islam and Muslims Online
 - Muslim Assessment of the Internet: Positive or Negative?
 - Conclusion
 - Results: Textual Analysis of Web Forums and Mailing Lists
 - Background
 - The Australian Muslim's Hyde Park
 - The Australian Muslim's CNN
 - The Australian Muslim's Town Crier
 - The Australian Muslim's Telegraph
 - The Australian Muslim's Family
 - The Australian Muslim's Coffee Shop
 - Case Study I: the Internet and Finding a Halal Spouse
 - Case Study II: The Politics of Online Disagreement Among Australian Muslims
 - Conclusion
 - Results: Reactions of Muslim women to email content following the September 11 attacks
 - Email and community
 - Post 9-11 Email Forwards
 - Conclusion
 - Results Summary
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This section outlines the procedures for information gathering including what sources of data were drawn upon and what types of sampling were used. The section also presents the results of the research in three sources of data (the online survey responses which were subject to quantitative analysis, information from web forums and mailing lists that formed the basis of textual analysis, and interviews conducted with Muslim women on their reactions to an email that was forwarded following September 11 which were also the subject of a textual analysis). The survey results from Australian respondents and the information from Australian web forums and mailing lists reflected the use of the internet as a media alternative for Australian Muslims and a means with which to build the ummah online. In contrast, survey results from Indonesian respondents were indicative of a youth bias, the use of the internet as alternative media, and digital access issues faced by Indonesians including indexes of gender and urban/rural exclusion. Malaysian survey responses also indicated a youth bias, and implicit in these responses were reflections of techno-tribalism and social engineering in the invoking of the New Malay. Meanwhile, the survey responses from Singapore reflected the political culture in which the net is used with its high levels of connectivity, and low levels of media freedom. In each case the data was reflective of the themes identified with the practice of Islam online in Australia, Indonesia, Malaysia and Singapore.

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. There were three sources of data for the research - namely an online survey analysed quantitatively involving respondents from Australia and southeast Asia, information from Australian Muslim web forums and mailing lists, and interviews conducted with Muslim women on their reactions to the email forwards following the September 11 attacks.

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. It is important here to avoid a circularity in which propositions are not about relationships but essentially are true by definition.

It is therefore hypothesised that:

- a) the national government policies on internet “freedom” will set up a first order structure of constraint that will either facilitate or inhibit free expression and exploration of identity;
- b) government 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 - eg political rights, questions of moral or ethical guidance, and personal relationships (to some extent paralleling a common hierarchy of economic, political and social rights).;
- c) the political strength of Islam within a society will be demonstrated by the diversity of opinions and outlets available to members of the ummah;
- d) the social class and economic position of users will affect their access to and use of the Internet, reflecting the specific characteristics of the digital divide in each society.
- e) the use of the internet will 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.

An online survey analysed quantitatively

Surveys administered online have much appeal to social science researchers (Berry 2005). 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.

This source of data would involve gathering responses from Muslim students using the internet in Australia, on the basis of the benefits perceived as coming from an online survey. These included the ability to obtain a large sample of student respondents scattered across four countries and the provision of anonymity to survey respondents, which was an important ethical concern, while at the same time preventing multiple responses by recording respondent’s IP addresses. The online survey also allowed flexibility in the design of questions, which was envisaged as means of helping to perform analyses of the data; and offer a level of objective reliability gleaned from the self-administering nature of the survey, which would rule out observational bias were a person to conduct the survey face-to-face.

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.

There are several disadvantages of engaging respondents online - but a crucial one is the question of whether or not the respondents who were convinced by the postings to do the survey are representative (which they are clearly not, at least not of the Muslim communities in these countries as a whole). Of course, because of the relative newness of the medium, it remains to be seen whether online surveys will gain the acceptance of social science research as a whole in the manner that interviewer-assisted surveys or focus groups have.

Information from web forums and mailing lists

The collection of postings and contributions made to the MuslimVillage web forum and two mailing lists formed the participant observation study conducted by the author as a “lurker” between September 2002 and January 2003. The two mailing lists were Islam-Info and Australian Muslim Media Rights of which the author was a member. The two lists shared similarities and differences. Both targeted Australian Muslims and covered issues of importance to Muslims in Australia (such as upcoming talks and lectures, media coverage of Islam in Australia, and articles from Islamic and non-Islamic sources from around the world). Nearly all the members of the Australian Muslim Media Rights group were members of the Islam-Info mailing list. However they differed in some aspects. The Islam-Info mailing list had unrestricted membership while the Australian Muslim Media Rights list was invite-only. Islam-Info’s mailing list was moderated, but Australian Muslim Media Rights was not. Australian Muslim Media Rights is now defunct, having been superseded by the list operated by the Forum on Australian Islamic Relations or FAIR organization. MuslimVillage has an open entry policy, although the forum is moderated.

Interviews conducted with Muslim women on reactions to email forwards following September 11 attacks

Given the gender dimension of internet usage in some of the communities studied these interviews tried to ascertain the role that the email and the internet played in the lives of these women at such a decisive time. It was the aim that these interviews supplemented the data collected as a result of the survey, by providing qualitative explorations of the types of activities of Muslim women that the survey tries to pinpoint - using the internet to find news about other Muslim women, interacting with them through email lists and forums, or going online to check a hadith or verse of the Qur’an.

Limitations

There are three main limitations to this account of internet usage by Muslims in Australia and three southeast Asian nations: linguistic, chronological and geographical limitations. The websites used as the basis for the content analysis are largely in English. This would pose a serious limitation for the researcher who wants to examine the use of the internet by diaspora Muslims who do not engage online in English. There are other sources used by Muslims in Australia, Singapore, Indonesia and Malaysia in non-English languages. Websites such as Aussiemuslims, while based in Australia, have Arabic language sections whose content was excluded from the content analysis. This limitation means that the research looks at specific (English) language communities of Muslims online, geographically dispersed but sharing the use of one language for their internet related activities. It does not look at the non-English usage of these Muslims online. The websites or email lists studied as part of the content analysis did not include those that were related to Islam and Muslim communities but were in Bahasa Indonesia or Bahasa Melayu. Further studies on the topic of Islamic internet use could focus on non-English sections of diaspora Muslim websites in Australia, or mailing lists or web forums in the indigenous languages of Malaysia, Singapore or Indonesia.

The topic of the research is one that is constantly changing. Inherent fluidity exists in the study of web forums and email lists because the membership and structure of these forums and lists change over time. The case of Muslim Village illustrates this, with a change in name, changes in membership and amendments to posting regulations throughout the lifespan of this thesis. A key limitation of the research is therefore that it is restricted to the particular time frame in which it is set. Because of this it is difficult to support long-term the contentions that are made about the topic, given the topic's fluidity and subjectivity.

A third limitation concerns the geographic area chosen, which are Australia and three neighbouring southeast Asian countries. While the diversity of political structures and the variations in the strength and practice of Islam within these four societies was evident and permitted a discussion on how such differences would mediate the usage of the internet by Muslims in those countries, the selection of countries means that comparisons are limited to the societies chosen. Follow-up studies examining the use of the internet by Muslims could look at Islamic diaspora communities online and compare, for example, Australian Muslim internet use with the corresponding British or American Muslim context.; or focus on a more in-depth comparison of two southeast Asian countries with similar media environments such as Malaysia and Singapore.

Results: Online Survey

Design of interview questions

One of the goals of the research was to find out motivation and procedure in internet usage by a defined group (Muslim students from Australia and southeast Asia). Which Muslim sites did they choose to frequent and why? What mechanisms did these sites employ, if any, for user feedback? Are there any non-Islamic sites, which they visited? Were Muslims seen to respond to the content of these non-Islamic sites? For example if erroneous information about Islam was posted on a public forum what percentage of Muslims said they try to rectify such a situation?

The online survey was a structured exploration of these questions developed to test the parameters identified as having the potential to impact on the use of the internet by Muslim students in Australia and south east Asia - the political system governing the society with which respondents identified, the percentage of Muslims in the population and how Islam is situated within each studied polity, the development of the internet in society and the freedom afforded to users, and the nature of Islam as a national social movement. The questions therefore looked at the stated reasons for internet usage and whether the responses reflected state policymaking on internet expression; the more pressing reasons for which respondents turned to the internet usage and whether hierarchy of purpose could be discernible; whether the size and percentage of Muslims in a society affected the reasons for internet use; and how infrastructure and social class modified internet usage and the purposes to which the internet was put in the daily negotiation of Islamic tasks.

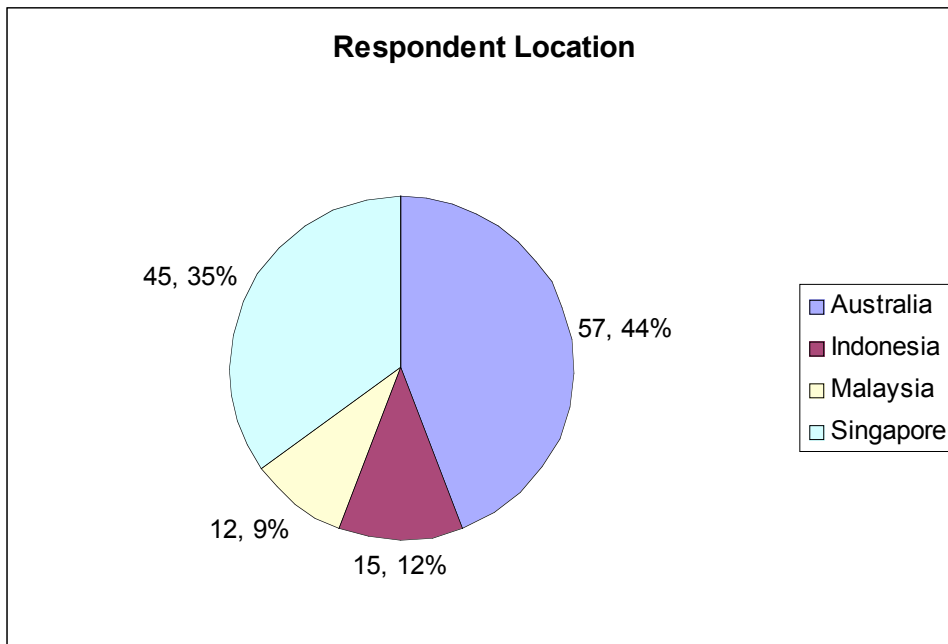
The online survey was divided into five sections. It began with basic demographic questions asking such things as the respondent's age, location and gender; followed by an exploration of where and how the survey respondent used the internet, including information requested about access, the frequency 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.

The Digital Divide: Response Rates

When evaluating usage of new technologies issues of access invariably come to the forefront, in a phenomenon known as the digital divide (Hersberger 2003; Graham 2002; Norris 2001; James 2001).

One of the key assumptions of the research was that differences existed in internet access across the four countries where data was collected and that these differences could be categorised as variations in those countries' internet or telecommunications infrastructure and levels of socio-economic development (as in the case of Indonesia compared to Malaysia) and differences in political structures between the countries concerned, and hence in the levels of freedom afforded to internet users and content providers (as in the case of Australia compared to Singapore). Figures indicating the location of respondents appear to underline the first assumption, both in the total number of people who answered the survey and the speed at which they reacted to my call for respondents. The rationale was that if there were differences in the availability and affordability of internet access amongst the four countries, those that were more technologically developed and economically stable would result in higher response rates. This was true in the case of Australia and Singapore, which provided (respectively) the largest and second-largest response rates. However, the second assumption was tenuous: out of the four countries surveyed, those with a free media environment (Australia, Indonesia) should have had resulted in comparable response rates, which proved to be untrue in the case of Indonesia. Given that Indonesia has a freer media environment than Singapore or Malaysia, it was anticipated that more respondents would complete the survey. The smaller number of respondents from Indonesia can be attributed to its underdeveloped telecommunications infrastructure.

Internet infrastructure and access issues were therefore used as the framework for reading the disparity in the number of responses between the four countries. The majority of survey respondents (57, or around 44 per cent) came from Australia. Forty five respondents (nearly 35 per cent of total respondents) came from Singapore. The remainders of respondents were split between Indonesia and Malaysia. Fifteen respondents came from Indonesia constituting 12 per cent of total respondents. There were 12 respondents from Malaysia, making up just nine per cent of the total respondents. The higher response rate from Australia and Singapore could be attributed to the higher level of internet access and penetration, and the effectiveness of the methods used to source for respondents.



In terms of disparities in access among the four countries that were the scope of this research, there was a clear dividing line between the “connected” and the “disconnected” economies. The most connected countries were the two that provided the majority of respondents - Australia and Singapore. By “connected” it is inferred that out of these four countries, Australia and Singapore had the most number of households able to access the internet. The 1997 World Economic Forum in Davos, Switzerland, heard that in a list of forty nine of the world’s largest economies, Australia ranked sixth in terms of the number of internet hosts - that is, Web, ftp, mail or other kinds of servers connected to the internet - after Finland, Iceland, the US, Norway and Sweden while Singapore was number thirteen. By contrast, Malaysia and Indonesia were ranked thirty four and forty six respectively (Macdonald and Knobel 1997). A year later, the regular internet usage rate of Singapore’s population would hover at 5-10 per cent “rivalling the United States and ahead of Australia” (Rodan 1998). Although Malaysian per capita income has experienced relatively high growth since the 1980s (Buckingham and Hughes 2001), internet development was restricted for a time, due to the internet market lagging behind Malaysia’s telecommunications sector in competitiveness (Asian Technology Information Program 1997). Nevertheless, the low response rate from Malaysia was surprising given that the internet community in Malaysia, like that in neighboring Singapore, has grown steadily since the medium was introduced in the 1990s. The amount of internet subscribers in Malaysia increased four-fold in just two years from 1996 to 1998 (Wilson Hamzah & Khattab 2003: 527).

Out of the four countries surveyed the one that has the most pressing issues with regard to internet development is Indonesia, whose economy was one of the most devastated in Asia when the monetary crisis of 1997-8 hit (Deuster 2002) and where a computer is classified as a luxury item and taxed accordingly (Suardi and Redfearn 2002). Compared to neighbouring Asian countries, the growth of the internet industry in Indonesia has been considerably slower (Hill & Sen 2002; Suardi and Redfearn 2002). The most common form of internet access in Indonesia is through public warnet dotted

throughout Jakarta and the major provincial cities. Warnet (an abbreviated form of warung internet or literally “internet kiosk”) are “...similar [to], but less sophisticated than internet cafes. Warnets are geared to provide cheap internet access to everyone - at hourly fees of around Rp5,000” (Suardi and Redfearn 2002: 31). The number of these public access commercial internet kiosks is growing in a scene reminiscent of the earlier boom in wartel or telephone/facsimile kiosks, and the warnet provide an important form of access to students and others in Indonesia who can’t surf the internet at home or work.

The warnet seem to be much more a phenomenon of the larger provincial centres like Yogyakarta or Bandung where there is sufficient technological and educational capacity to create a market of the internet but not the level of wealth required for widespread personal ownership of computers or private access to phone-lines.
(Hill & Sen 2000: 123).

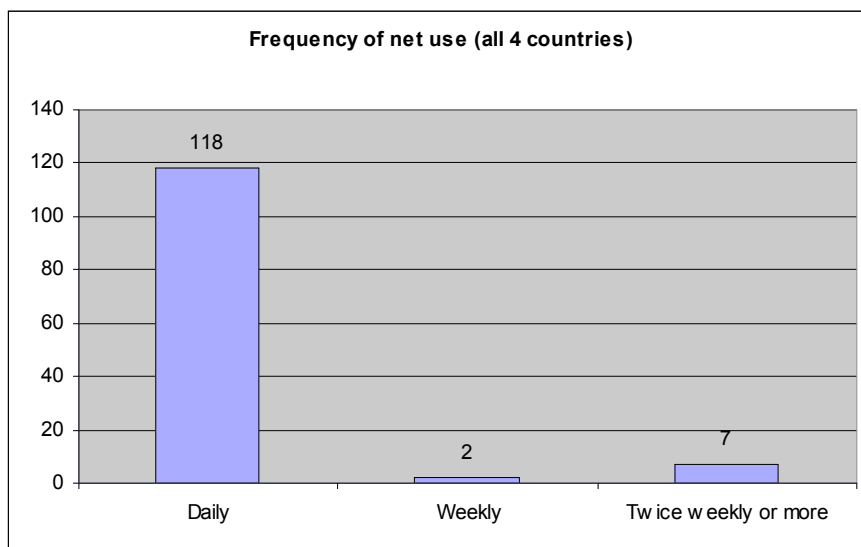
Thus the warnet are only available in major cities - a trend that pinpoints one index of exclusion (centralization) and is also observable in Malaysia, where most users of the internet live and work in urban areas or are linked with colleges or universities (Wilson Hamzah & Khattab 2003). Another index of exclusion in Indonesia is cost. Even the cheap hourly rates “cannot promise widespread access in a country where the official minimum daily wage is 5,000 rupiah in the capital and lower in many regional towns” (Hill & Sen 2002: 170).

In addition to access issues, the low response rate from Malaysia and Indonesia, compared to Singapore and Australia, could also be attributed to the effectiveness of the methods used to source for respondents. There were more avenues available to let potential survey respondents know of the project in the two countries that had the biggest response rate. For instance, there were several university Muslim Students Associations in both Australia and Singapore that responded positively to requests for disseminating information about the project through their respective mailing lists. By contrast, in Malaysia and Indonesia (despite also having tech-savvy Muslim student organizations) online forums were a more accessible means of requesting respondents, and thus depended on the visitors to those boards as opposed to a higher number of internet users getting information about the project directly in their email inboxes. While it is true most of the Indonesian clients of internet kiosks are young and male (Hill & Sen 2000), and while the majority of Malaysian internet users are affiliated to their universities or colleges (Wilson Hamzah & Khattab 2003), the youth demographic is one that is prevalent across internet users in general. Given that many of the respondents heard of the survey through their university mailing lists, the overwhelming majority (nearly 83 per cent) of the respondents were in the 18 to 35 age bracket. But the fact that university Muslim student mailing lists were targeted is not the only reason that this demographic was over-represented with the number of respondents overwhelmingly dominated by young people. Most of the users of the internet are either young and studying, or young and working. Negroponte (1995) suggests an easy solution for adults

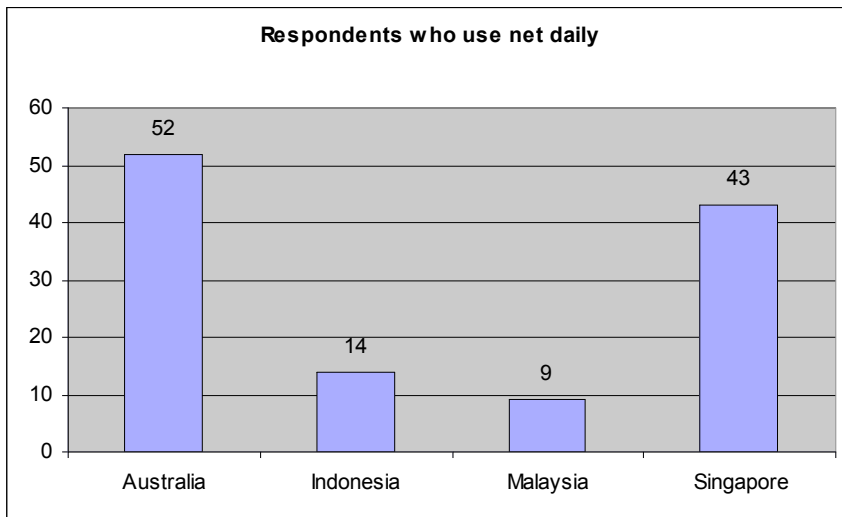
facing difficulties in adopting new technologies: get a child. Merchant (2001: 296) says of young people, “To some extent they are the innovators, the forces of change in the new communication landscape”.

The Importance of the Internet in the Lives of Young Muslims

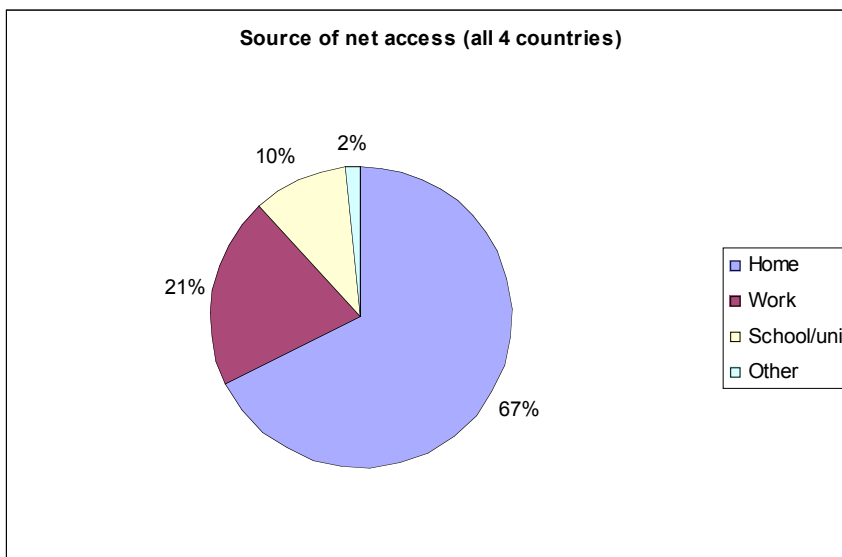
Ninety three per cent of Muslim students who took part in this survey (118 respondents) indicated that the internet was something which they used on a daily basis.



Divided by nation, Malaysia had the least number of respondents stating that they used the internet daily (75 per cent) compared to Singapore (95 per cent), Indonesia (93 per cent) and Australia (just over 91 per cent). Seven respondents said they used the internet twice a week or more. Out of the entire sample only two respondents - one each from Indonesia and Australia - stated that the internet was something they used weekly. No respondent from any country used the internet less than weekly. This is in line with the notion of the internet being an integral part of the lives of young people who incorporate its use into their daily lives within educational, social and business spheres. Rahmin and Pawanteh (2003) go so far as to say the social and business lives of young Malaysians are constructed around their various uses of the internet.

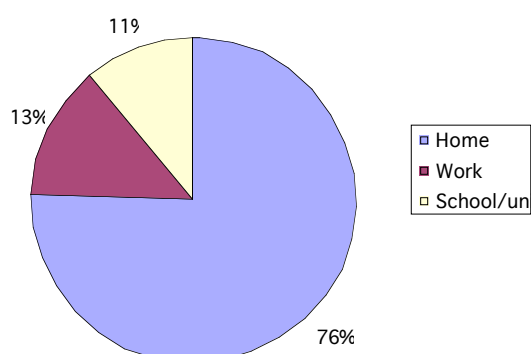


The overall response rate of Muslim students who use the internet from home as their main source of access was nearly seventy per cent, or 87 students in total.



But within each country there were variations reflecting the varying themes of each country around which Islamic identity is built, Islamic networks are formed and Islamic beliefs put into practice

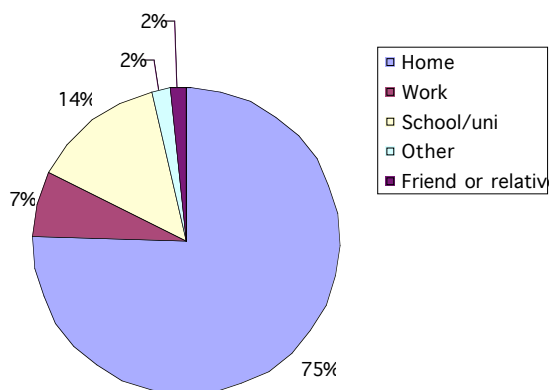
Singapore: source of net access



online. There were similarities between the responses of Muslim student internet users from Australia and Singapore who completed the survey. Seventy five percent of the Singapore respondents (or 34 people) and just over seventy five per cent of Australian respondents (or 87 people) stated that their main source of internet access was from home, with

most of the remaining respondents selecting school or work as their main source of internet access.

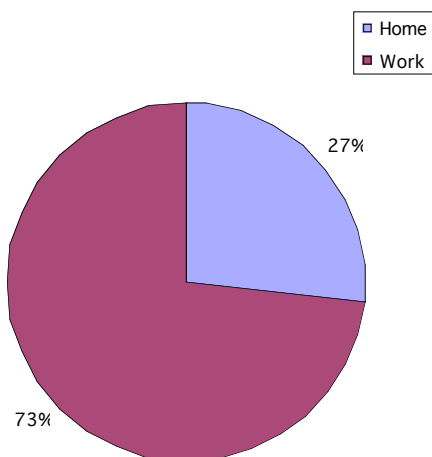
Australia: source of net access



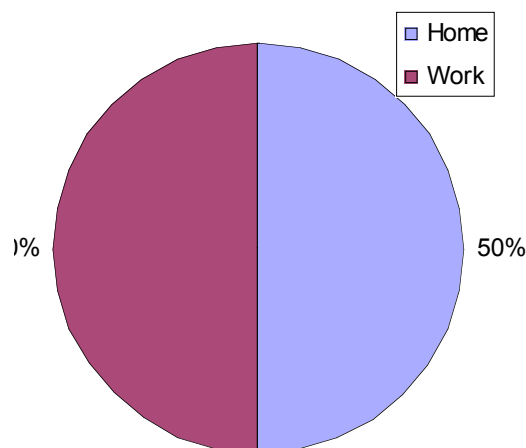
However, figures from Indonesian and Malaysian respondents are in stark contrast to this. The Indonesian responses demonstrated nearly the opposite scenario, with eleven of the fifteen people surveyed from Indonesia NOT getting their internet access from home, but from work. It was initially expected that at least some Indonesian respondents would state that most of their internet access comes from the ubiquitous warnet whose presence grew steadily in the archipelago's urban centres from 1998-2000 (Hill and Sen 2002).

But this was a premature premise - it had been conservatively estimated that completing the survey online would take about twenty minutes, and this was mentioned in email and online forum postings about the survey. Given that an hour of access at a warnet costs five to ten thousand rupiah or one to two Australian dollars, in a country where the average per capita income is less than six hundred US dollars a year it would have not been feasible to stay online for twenty minutes at a warnet doing a survey. In Malaysia the situation was that half of the respondents said their main source of internet access was from home, and the other half said their main source of internet access was from university or their workplace, reflecting the internet-savvy, educated and professional product of New Malay social engineering policies.

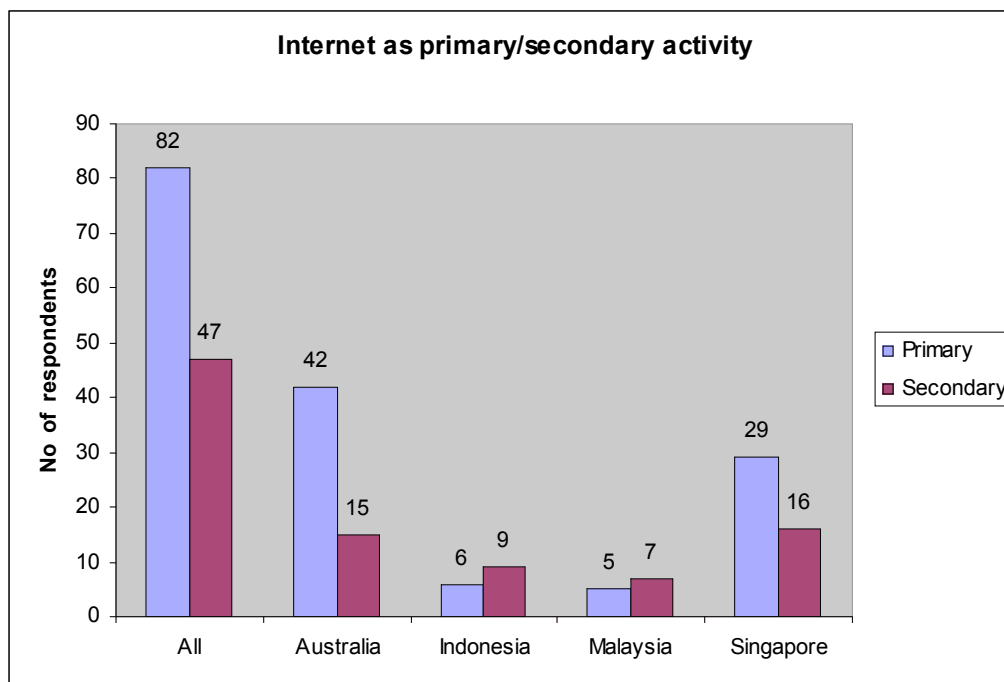
Indonesia: source of net access



Malaysia: source of internet access



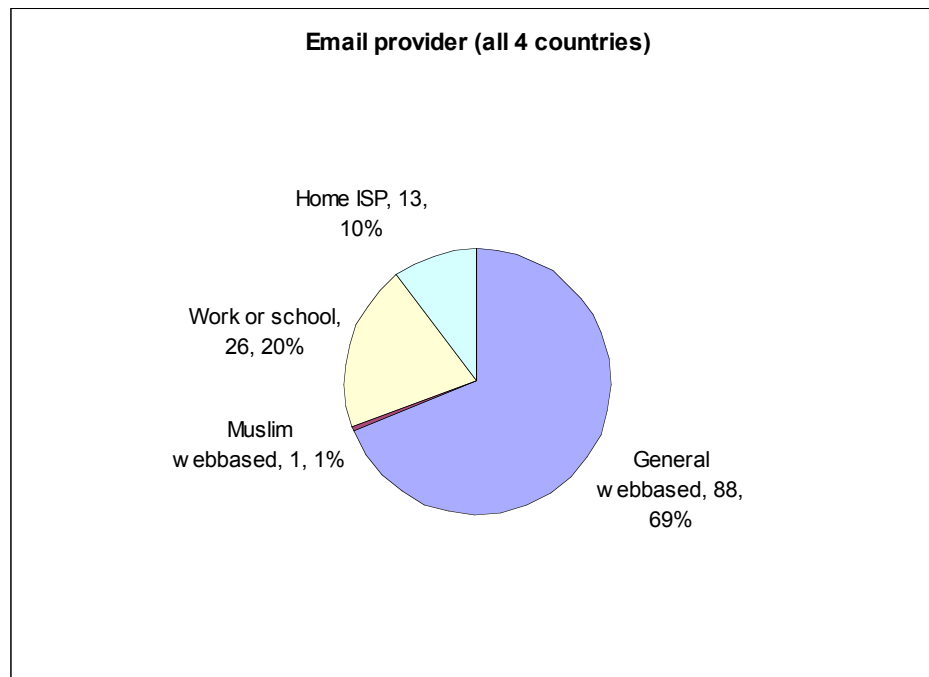
Because more respondents from Malaysia and Indonesia described their main source of internet access as coming from campus or the office, higher figures from these countries indicated that more of the respondents described their internet usage as a secondary activity. This was in contrast to Australia, where nearly three quarters of the respondents (42 respondents or 73.7 per cent) said using the internet was a primary activity for them. In Singapore more than sixty per cent of respondents (29 people) said likewise, with the remaining 16 respondents saying they used the internet mainly as a secondary activity.



Targetting Muslim Users: Email and Home Pages

It does not appear that the provision of specific Muslim-audience webmail services (such as those provided by the now defunct Islam Online portal) has made an impact on Muslim communities - at least in this part of the world. Out of all the correspondents only one (from Australia) selected "Muslim web-based email" as the main email provider. The most popular option was general web-based email (sixty eight per cent of all respondents, or 88 people); followed by work- or school- based email (twenty per cent of all respondents, or 26 people) and email provided by a home internet service provider (ten per cent of all respondents, or 13 people). In line with the lower rate of residential internet penetration in Indonesia, more than half the Indonesian respondents said their main email account was provided by work or university, with the remainder of Indonesian respondents split between using a general web based email provider and their home based internet service provider email. It could be that among the internet-using Muslim students of Australia, Indonesia, Malaysia and Singapore, the identity or faith orientation of the internet provider is not so much an

issue compared to the content and function of the internet presence (for example which mailing lists or online forums are used by the student).



Most of the respondents (90 people, or nearly seventy per cent) did not have a webpage. Out of the 39 respondents who did, twenty per cent or 26 people said they were hosted by a free general web-based service (such as Geocities or Blogger). One respondent selected a Muslim web-based service for web-hosting, while the remainder was split

between web-hosting provided by work or school, and paid commercial web-hosting. Individual webpages were most prominent among the Muslim student respondents from the two countries where the internet has been an important source of alternative and dissenting viewpoints, and where it has been a key catalyst for political reform - Malaysia (33 per cent) and Indonesia (46 per cent) had the most number of respondents with a webpage, compared to Singapore (22 per cent) and Australia (just over 19 per cent). In a result that reflects the demographic asked to do the survey (students) and emphasises the youth bias of internet usage, more than half of the thirty nine survey respondents who had webpages said the purpose of having their own webpage was school or university related.

Engaging Islamic Practice Online

As a religion that promotes its teachings as a complete way of life, the practice of Islam by Muslim students in the four countries studied would not be limited to off-line incarnations. For example, because of Islam's strict teachings about gender segregation, online fatwa or ask-a-sheikh type web sites contain questions emailed by Muslims about the etiquette of interacting with members of the opposite sex online. Given the research objective was to document the role played by the internet in the daily life of Muslims the survey dealt with the purposes for which the Muslim student respondents turned to the internet. Conceptualising Islamic religious practice involves an awareness that followers of Islam adhere to certain beliefs and practices. There are five pillars - the declaration of faith, praying five times a day, fasting during the month of Ramadan, donating a percentage of your income to charity, and performing a pilgrimage to Makkah in Saudi Arabia if physical and financial resources

permit. Surrounding these physical indications is a blueprint for day to day life: what foods to avoid, how to dress, marriage and birth rituals, how to treat parents and the elderly, how to treat spouses, the rights and responsibilities of children and so on. Of course the extent to which Muslims adhere to this blueprint varies, as is evident from the various terms used by Muslims and non-Muslims to categorise “types” of Muslims found in public discourse on Islam in Australia and southeast Asia: terms such as modernist, traditional, nominal and practicing.

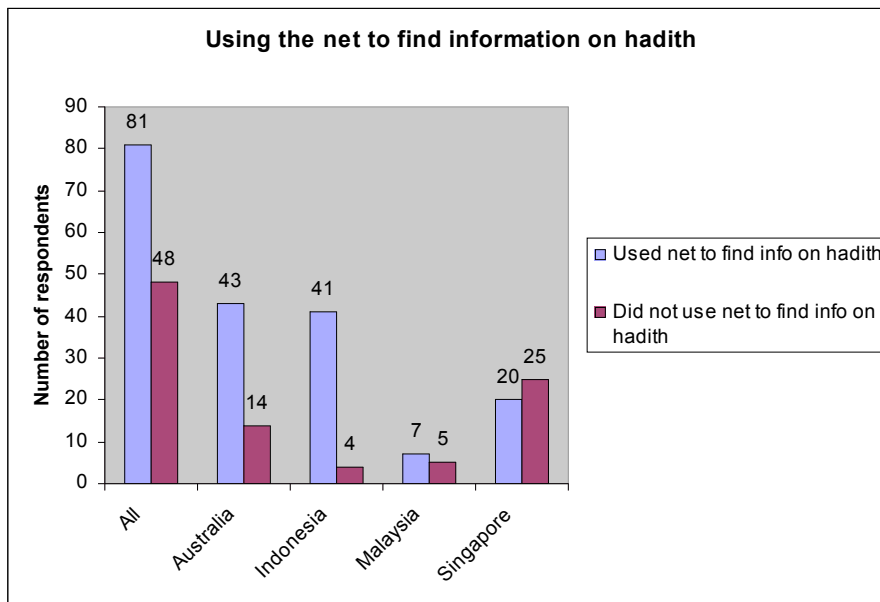
In this context one of the objectives of the research was to uncover how the five pillars of Islam are dealt with online. Judging by Islamic portals, Islamically-oriented internet activities mirror the activities that are conducted by Muslims offline (or are an extension of these activities). On these portals, for instance, it is possible to use your credit card for zakat (alms-giving, the third pillar of Islam); download software that can loop specific verses of the Qur’an to aid the user in memorizing these verses; and find practical resources, such as how-to-pray guides, for newly converted Muslims. On the internet a Muslim can book all-inclusive packages for hajj (the pilgrimage, the fifth pillar); communicate with other Muslims via chat or message boards; send an e-card during Eid-ul-Adha (the feast of Sacrifice commemorating Abraham’s offer to sacrifice his son); order Islamic books, videos, DVDs, CDs, and software; as well as clocks that can be programmed to recite the call to prayer at set times, non-alcoholic perfume, and framed prints of Arabic calligraphy; and read articles on how to make the most of Ramadan, the fasting month. The FAQ section of one website gives some advice to potential customers who want to book a pilgrimage package:

Men & women don't shake hands. Women for the most part wear Hijab except in downtown Jeddah and some other places. Never criticize food in front of the host, even in a restaurant. Don't get surprised to see men and women totally separated in local city buses. Bargaining is in the blood of Saudi merchants. Don't be shy to get the best deal for yourself.
(Islamicity 2004: np)

These portals act as a stepping stone to other Islamic resources online. They are the foyer or lobby from which the Muslim net-surfer can click and point his or her way to Islamic-related information, or to other Muslims.

The research looked at whether the user turned to the internet for information on hadith, the sayings and traditions of Muhammad. Information is one of the most important uses to which the internet has been put by Muslims who believe gaining information is a form of self-education. The internet allows Muslim users to filter the information so that only those that are relevant to his or her identity as a 21st century Muslim makes its way into the user’s (and the computer’s) memory. The issue of knowledge is thus a pertinent example of the way the internet has been integrated into the lives of Muslims. Various hadith or sayings of Muhammad declare that seeking knowledge is compulsory for all Muslims. Accordingly, more respondents in the survey answered yes (81 respondents), than no (48

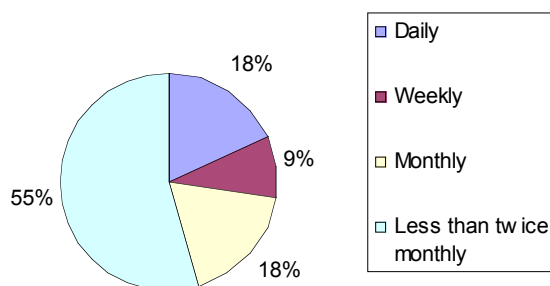
respondents) when asked whether they turned to the internet for information on hadith. The biggest “no” response to this question came from Singapore where fifty five per cent of Singapore respondents said they did not use the internet to find information on hadith, compared with forty one per cent of the Muslim respondents from Malaysia and twenty six percent of respondents from Indonesia.



Most Indonesian respondents who said they used the internet to find information on hadith said they did this less than twice monthly, while more than 36 per cent of the Australian respondents who answered yes to this question said they did it either monthly, or twice weekly or more. Australian Muslim students more frequent use of the internet to find information on hadith than Indonesian

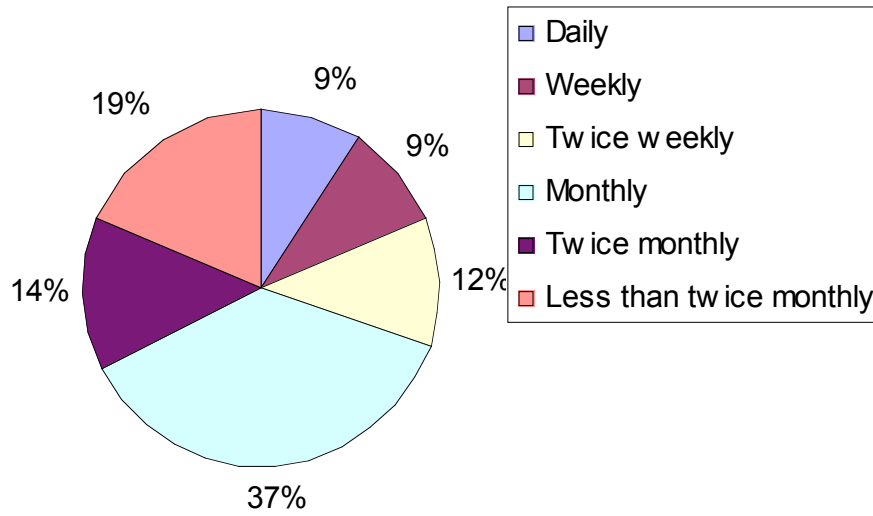
Muslims could be attributed to a function of information availability. The response to this question appears to underline the disparity in the size of the Muslim population in the two countries (the Muslim minority in Australia, as apposed to an overwhelming majority in Indonesia). Muslims living in a country where the majority of the population is Muslim will have more alternatives to seeking, offline, information about hadith than Muslims living as minorities in non-Muslim countries. For example, Muslim students in Indonesia will find it easier than Muslims in Australia to come across books on

Indonesian respondents who used the net to find info on hadith

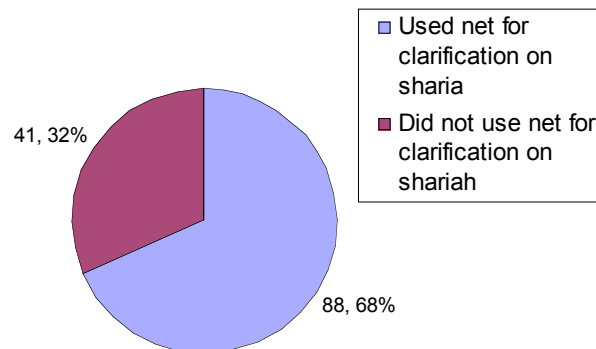


hadith, magazines about Islam, and people who educate others about Islamic teachings in their day to day lives. But for Muslim students in Australia, the internet makes it easier to find information about hadith, taking this particular knowledge-based aspect of Islamic practice online.

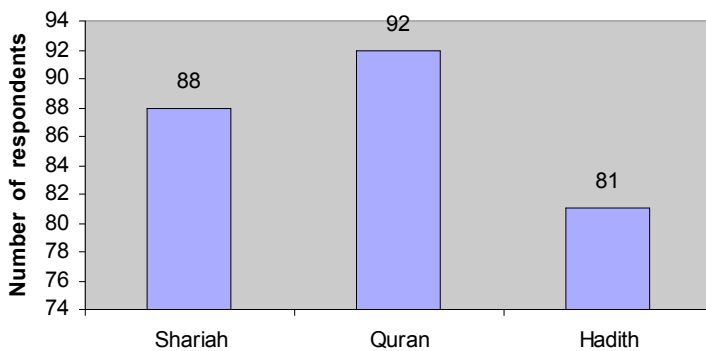
Australian respondents who used the net to find info on hadith



Seeking clarification about Shariah on the net



Comparison: using the net for info on Shariah, Quran and Hadith



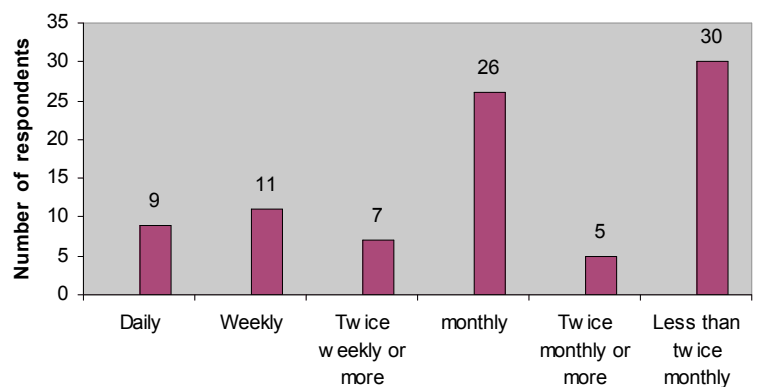
While nearly seventy percent of respondents stated that they used the internet for clarification on shariah or Islamic law, they did not frequently turn to the internet for this particular purpose. Of those respondents who did go online for clarification on Shariah, forty eight percent did so either twice a month, or less. A greater number of Muslim students across all four countries (92 respondents) say they use the internet to find information relating to Islam's holy book the

Quran - comparable to the 81 people who said they used the internet to find information on hadith.

The higher numbers of Muslim students who say they seek information about hadith and the Quran online is significant because issues negotiated by modern-day Muslims (such as whether smoking is makruh - permissible but disliked, or haram - outright banned) are hotly contested by Muslims who cite certain hadith or verses from the Quran in support of one view or another. In this

light the number of Muslim students in this survey who turn to the internet (with all its attendant image problems as an unreliable information source) is surprising given the various interpretations that exist offline among Muslims about the authenticity of information on the Quran and its meaning. The internet in its global reach and output, and its decentralisation, is providing alternate views on Islamic tenets - and perhaps Muslim students are looking to it for just that purpose.

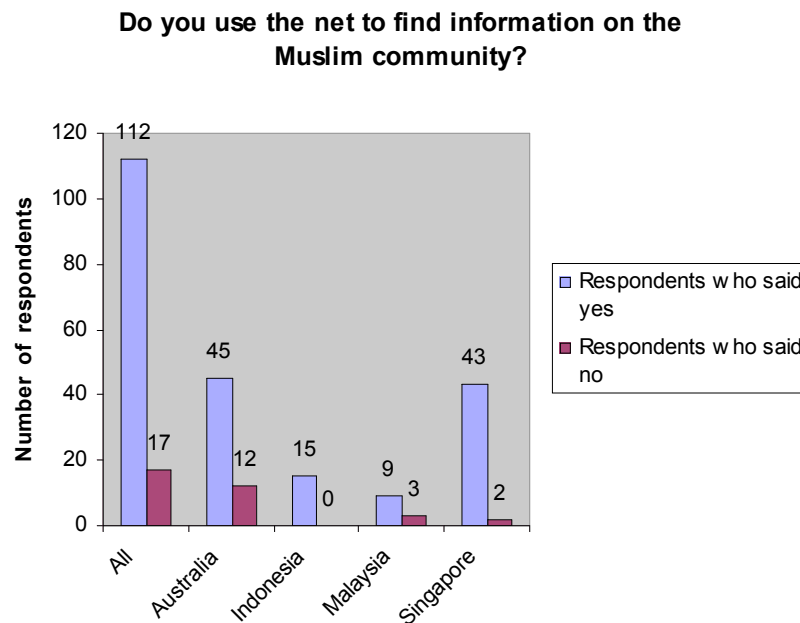
Frequency: seeking clarification about Shariah on the net (all 4 countries)



Forming and Informing the Electronic Ummah

The internet's role as a "builder" of societies is borne out by the results of the survey on using the internet to find information on the Muslim community. Not all the Muslim students who completed the survey claimed to use the internet to find information on their local or national communities. Often, the community about which information was sought extended to the regional and global Muslim communities, illustrating how "the internet is used primarily to transcend location, either evading detection at home, mobilizing support overseas, or both" (George 2003: 248).

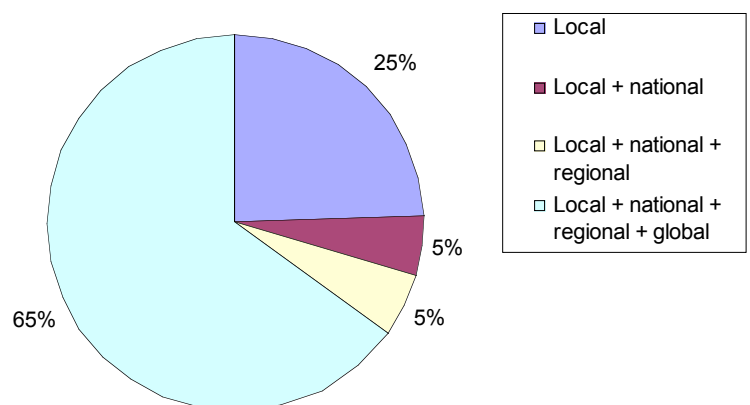
Nearly eighty seven per cent of Muslim students answered yes to the question “Do you use the internet to find information on the Muslim community?” In Indonesia, all Muslim students who completed the survey said they used the internet for this purpose. Australian Muslim students said they sought information from the internet about local, national, regional and global Muslim communities, reflecting the theme of community building through the internet - a theme illustrated further in the research by the analysis of postings to online forums and email lists.



Amongst Indonesian respondents more than half sought information from the internet about the global Muslim community - when seeking information about the Muslim community, it is clear in this case that “community” is not defined geographically. A website or forum may have a physical location in mind such as MuslimVillage in Sydney or Ambonnet, a site about the sectarian violence in Ambon (capital of Indonesia’s Maluku province).

However the internet users who congregate at that particular junction of cyberspace may have little or no physical connection to geographic location that is the focus of the website or forum. In the case of Ambonnet, it was “...not a forum for current residents of Ambon to talk amongst themselves; it was people outside Maluku speaking about them, on behalf of them, taking up in cyberspace...the physical

Types of communities respondents sought info about on the net (all 4 countries)

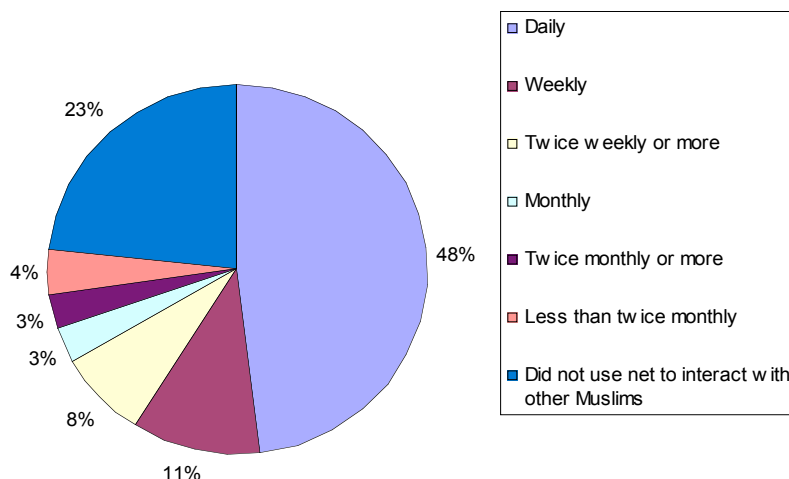


battles being fought on the soil of Ambon” (Hill & Sen 2002: 182). The overreaching emphasis of “community” can also be seen in the surfing habits of diaspora Muslims, who turn to the internet to seek out news about Muslim communities in their countries of origin: for example, Malaysian readers of the New Straits Times who reside outside of Malaysia “anticipate enjoyment of a continuous sense

of themselves as part of an extended global community, a dispersed nation. E-journalism on the internet integrates diasporic consciousness” (Wilson Hamzah & Khattab 2003: 532).

The use of the internet to build community extends to social interaction with Muslims and non-Muslims online. Nearly half of the Muslim students who answered the survey (62 respondents, or 48 per cent) stated that they used the internet to interact with other Muslims on a daily basis. Chat rooms, message boards and messenger services were popular places in which survey respondents claimed to interact with other Muslims.

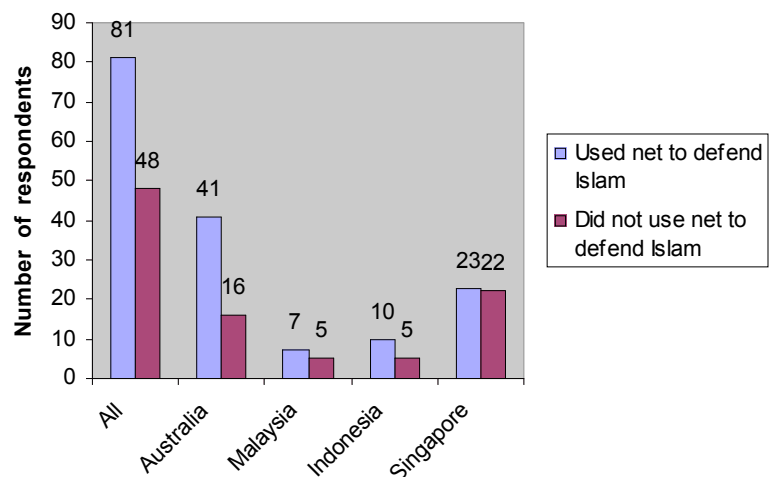
Using the net to interact with other Muslims



Australia had the highest percentage of respondents saying that they used the internet to defend Islam on a daily basis (21 respondents or 37 per cent of all respondents). Although half just over half of the Malaysian respondents stated they used the internet to defend Islam, none did on a

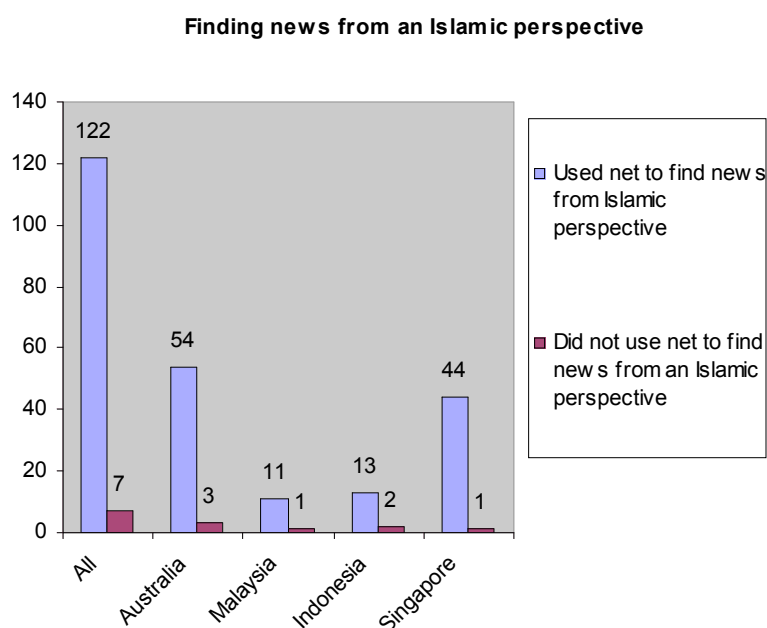
daily basis. Being Muslim in a country where Muslims constitute the minority, it is possible that there exist more cases of misunderstandings about Islam in the media in Australia, and the internet may be seen as a way of rectifying these misconceptions.

Using the net to defend Islam



Finding Alternative News on Islam and Muslims Online

Not only does the Internet help Muslim students build communities extending beyond geographic borders, the research implies that Muslim students make use of the internet as an alternative media source. Only four people or 3 per cent of all respondents said they did NOT use the internet to find news from an Islamic perspective. Of the Australian respondents who said yes to this question, more than half (52 per cent, or 30 people) used the internet daily to find news from an Islamic perspective. This is similar to the results from Singaporean respondents - 55 per cent of whom stated that they used the internet to find news from an Islamic perspective, on a daily basis.



In tightly controlled media environments such as Singapore's, the availability of uncensored news from overseas sources and perspectives makes the internet an attractive option. Regarding both Singapore and Malaysia, George (2003: 247-248) argues that

freedom of the press is no greater now than when the two societies were subjects of the British crown half a century ago. Within this restrictive environment, an assortment of media activists has found welcome space in the internet.

Governments who are not keen on relinquishing control of the information environment find it "extremely difficult, if not impossible, to impose restrictions on sufficiently determined and technologically literate individuals" (Rodan 1998). This is because the original structure of the internet made it possible for multiple methods of access to the same information. As As Ho Baber & Khondker (2002: 298) explain, "Ultimately...the blocking of some sites by local ISPs is largely symbolic as these can, indeed, be circumvented by dedicated computer experts".

Singapore's neighbour Malaysia also has an offline media environment that is tightly controlled. Here, eighty per cent of Muslim students said they used the internet either daily or weekly, to find news from an Islamic perspective. Such a figure is in accordance with views that the popularity of internet news sites amongst Malaysian internet users is due to the staid nature of the sanctioned media: e-journalism is

...celebrated in Malaysia, particularly by those who craved alternative perspectives and adventurous encounters with ideas in their news consumption. Traditional mainstream media seem to drive them to the mouse.

(Wilson Hamzah & Khattab 2003: 527)

In Indonesia the media enjoy much greater freedom than Singapore or Malaysia. Irrespective of this, the internet is still seen as an alternative media source by the Indonesian Muslim students who completed the survey. One example of an Indonesian web presence where alternative and Islamic-oriented news can be found is the Islam Liberal website and moderated listserv (which is operated through Yahoogroups). While the website posts articles in English and Bahasa Indonesia by members of Islam Liberal, the yahoogroups listserv allows members to

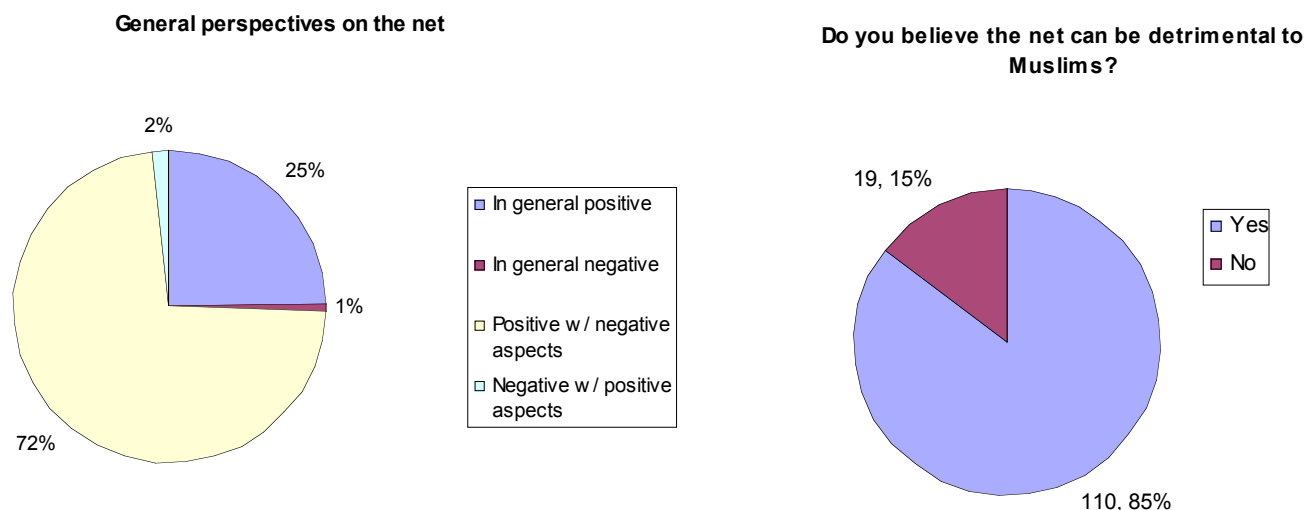
debate issues, respond to questions and views, cite the Koran to support their arguments and even provoke debates with their critics. Their website highlights issues on their agenda such as secularisation, emancipation, power relations, pluralism, gender, democratisation, tolerance and human rights.

(Desker 2002)

Muslim Assessment of the Internet: Positive or Negative?

At the end of the survey respondents were asked to agree with one of four statements:

- in general, the internet is a positive development for Muslims
- in general, the internet is a negative development for Muslims
- in general, the internet is positive for Muslims but it has negative aspects
- in general, the internet is negative for Muslims but it has positive aspects



The majority of respondents (94 respondents or 72 per cent) agreed with the third statement - that the internet is positive for Muslims but has negative aspects. One respondent viewed the internet as a negative development for Muslims and two respondents chose statement (d) - that the internet is negative for Muslims but has positive aspects. Despite the generally positive attitude towards the internet displayed by the Muslim students in the survey, eighty five per cent (or 110 people) answered “yes” to the final question “Do you believe that the internet can be detrimental to Muslims?” - underlining the cautious acceptance of the medium by Muslims aware of its potential to help the cause of Islam but wary of the dangers it might pose to Islam’s followers and their practice of their faith.

Conclusion

An online survey was selected as one part of the methodology due to the benefits of a fast response time, the ability to engage respondents in four different countries, and the exclusion of interviewer bias from the data collected. The results of the survey give an indication of the purposes to which Muslims put the internet - purposes that reflect the themes of practicing Islam online in the four countries studied.

- It was hypothesized that each country's policies on internet freedom would affect the level of free expression and explorations of religious identity online. However, despite the fact that Malaysia and Singapore have a more conservative approach to internet freedom than Indonesia and Australia, the Muslim students in all four countries studied say they use the internet to thrash out various viewpoints regarding Islamic teachings and practice.
- It was also thought that each society's manifestation of religious freedom and in particular the public expression of symbolic aspects of Islamic identity would affect the reasons for internet

usage. Certainly, the survey responses suggest that the internet represents a source of practical information for Muslims living in non-established minority groups.

- It was thought that Islam's political strength within each country studied would be demonstrated by the diversity of opinions and outlets available to members of the ummah. However 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 according to the students who responded to the survey.
- It was also hypothesized that social class and economic position of users will affect their internet access and use, reflecting the specific characteristics of the digital divide in each society. The 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).

Results: Textual Analysis of Web Forums and Mailing Lists

Background

The results of the online survey completed by Muslim students in Australia and three southeast Asian countries emphasise the use of the internet as a tool for community building. In the Australian context with its small Muslim minority and the attention it has drawn in public discourse, the online construction of Islamic community is further underlined by the contents of Australian Muslim web forums and mailing lists or email lists. The intense attention given to the minority population of Australian Muslims during the time the research was conducted was attributed to a number of factors gaining media coverage. The period marking September 2002 to January 2003 demonstrated an array of concerns faced by the Muslim community in Australia. In September 2002 the most pressing of these was the impending build-up to an imminent attack by a United States led coalition on Iraq. The one year anniversary of September 11 led to worries about vilification against Muslims throughout the world. In Sydney, a franchisee of the fast food giant McDonalds opened a halal outlet in the suburb of Punchbowl. Talkback radio whipped up such public prejudice against Muslims that swimming lessons for a Muslim school at a public pool had to be cancelled for fears of attacks. Barely one year after September 11, a nightclub in Bali was bombed in October 2002. The victims were mainly Australian and a hitherto unknown southeast Asian Islamic organization blamed as the culprit. Mosques were firebombed and the homes of clerics became the target of vandalism. A Muslim IT worker in Sydney hit the headlines when together with the Australian Industrial Relations Commission he reached an agreement with his employer on allowing him to pray at work. In what was the clearest indication at official levels that the loyalty of Muslims to Australia was questioned, ASIO began raiding the homes of several Australians of Indonesian background as well as Indonesians resident in Australia. Australian

Prime Minister John Howard foreshadowed the possibility of using pre-emptive strikes against suspected terrorists in other nations. Relations between Australia and Indonesia were strained and several Asian countries called Australia arrogant. Ramadan began in November 2003 with the clouds of war forming rapidly around the Pentagon. Riots in Nigeria sent the Miss World pageant to London after a local paper, espousing the beauty of the participants, speculated that Prophet Muhammad may have picked a wife from amongst the contenders. In January 2003, a routine traffic check in Sydney became a national incident when the spiritual head of Australia's Muslim community got caught up in a row with the police. A weapons inspector combing Iraq for concealed weapons of mass destruction told the American media that his team had found "zilch". Australians became increasingly vocal in their opposition to war in Iraq. These global, regional and national developments provided the backdrop against which members of email lists or email lists in Australia, such as the Islam-Info and Australian Muslim Media Rights mailing lists, discussed the events that had an impact on their lives as Muslims in Australia. The events in the news often became the points of discussion between members online, and/or spurred political or social action by members off-line. The research looking at the contents of the mailing lists and online forums is based on observations of how members used the space afforded to conduct Muslim-specific discourse running parallel to and complementing the more easily accessible mainstream media and television coverage of issues dealing with Islam.

Given that Islam is a newsworthy topic, and given that the internet (at least in some countries) is shaping up as a viable contender to television insofar as the provision of latest information is concerned, the role played by electronic communications in the lives of diaspora and native Muslims in wired-up countries (like Australia) cannot be underestimated. An overview is provided of the main functions served by website forums and email lists (referred to throughout the paper as email lists) managed by Australian Muslims. These include providing a general alternative to the dominant viewpoints found in mainstream news sources; acting as a means of actively refuting or rebutting the official media line; providing practical information for the Muslim community; and dissemination of articles from overseas that are of relevance to the community in Australia. In addition Australian Muslim email lists and website forums are also a means of establishing networks and contacts (amongst Muslims in Australia and overseas; and between Muslim and non-Muslim Australians). They also provide a platform for the discussion of community affairs. Subsequently, the last two listserv or web forum functions are illustrated by looking at specific case studies. In the case of establishing inter-Muslim contact, the chapter discusses the use of a Sydney forum to publicise an offline matrimonial service. And to illustrate how the internet can act as a means of community discussion the chapter explores the responses (made via email and forum postings) by Muslims to the decision by the country's peak Islamic body, AFIC, to invite the Australian prime minister to its annual congress, as well as comments debating the teachings of a little-known Sufi movement known as the Murabitun.

The Australian Muslim's Hyde Park

The potential of new media technologies such as the internet in the provision of alternatives to the dominant discourse has often been elaborated on in theory, and demonstrated in real life. One of the most profound illustrations of this is the Salam Pax blogging episode. Salam Pax was the nom de plume of a blogger - an internet user who claimed to be adding to his online journal, or web log, from the city of Baghdad prior to, during and after the American invasion and occupation, in often painstaking and haunting detail:

...the moment I walked out of the hotel doors I would be back in Baghdad: no electricity, lines at gas stations, prices as burning hot as the weather and a life that looks as if it will never return to normal... Have you seen how a fish flips on its sides when it's out of water? This is how it feels in Baghdad these days.

(Pax in McCarthy 2003)

With thousands of Web surfers reading his blog, Pax became a Net celebrity. In the days before the imminent invasion, '...20,000 people were regularly reading Salam's words and his writing became the most linked-to diary on the internet' (McCarthy 2003). The phenomenon of weblogs is indicative of a change in the construction of imagined communities and in the output of news received by audiences. The internet has altered the conceptualisation of the listener, reader or viewer from audience members as receptacles of information produced by a small number of producers, to individuals active in the selection and usage of the media sites which they visit, the forums to which they are members, or the email email lists to which they subscribe. The composition of the audience represents a very different type of imagined community: just as many of the Muslim students who completed the online survey sought information about their co-religionists globally, the audience is no longer defined by geographic locale and instead functions as a niche market whose members are drawn together by shared interests, beliefs and outlooks. In the internet era, audience is fragmented by common ground, ready to select and utilise the wider array and medium of voices coming from sites of discourse and conflict.

Just like net-users worldwide became hooked on the voice of Salam Pax and his primordial accounts of Baghdad life (as a complement to the coverage offered by major television networks and newspapers), one of the most important functions of the internet for Australian Muslims is to provide an alternative to the news they would normally see or hear. This is particularly significant given that coverage of Arabs, Muslims or Islam adheres to ritualistic tendencies - conventions of traditional reporting that were identified by Said:

It is only a slight overstatement to say that Muslims and Arabs are essentially covered, discussed and apprehended either as oil suppliers or potential terrorists. Very little of the

detail, the human density, the passion of Arab-Muslim life has entered the awareness of even those people whose profession it is to report the Islamic world.

(Said 1995: p28)

Said's comments were written pre-September 11, pre-Bali, and within a general (global) context. But they are indicative of the press treatment that, specifically, Australian Muslims were often the recipients of - so much so that the ABC program MediaWatch devoted its entire September 11th first-year anniversary special to the scare mongering by domestic media of Muslims and Islam (Australian Broadcasting Corporation 2002).

Following the November 2002 bombings in Bali of nightclubs known to be frequented by Western tourists, the Australian Security and Intelligence Organisation conducted raids on the homes of Muslims they suspected of being linked to terrorist organisations - often wrongly, as it turned out - the home of one subject "was one of a number raided by ASIO officers and the Australian Federal Police on October 30. No one has been charged as a result of those raids" (Goodsir 2003). In the battle for the shaping of audience perspective, most of Australia's mainstream media reported on the tactics used by the country's security personnel within a framework that placed ASIO and the AFP's actions as beyond the boundaries of what constituted acceptable Australian behaviour. In other words, the major media outlets, such as Fairfax and News Limited, reported the raids in a manner that questioned the necessity of the level of violence, drowning out the presence of some minority voices who resorted to the politics of the pedantic in opining that stories about the ASIO raids were 'a beat-up...For one thing, it was only in Perth that balaclavas were worn and doors forced open' (Devine 2002). In Western Australia, the listserv 'WA Muslim News' urged members to take action through the proper channels, appending these comments to a forward of an ABC news item about ASIO raiding a home in Sydney: 'Please make complaints of ASIO HEAVY-HANDEDNESS to the Commonwealth Ombudsman' (WA Muslim News listserv, 2002). As the raids had occurred in Perth, Melbourne, and Sydney, a message posted to a New South Wales listserv described an eyewitness account and warned readers to prepare for the worst:

Last night I witnessed such a raid in my apartment building in Lakemba. The same tactics employed in those raids conducted in response to Sept. 11 were repeated here again. Guns raised, sledge hammer, bullet-proof vest, etc...So just be aware of this because if they come to your house, they won't knock!

(Islam-info listserv, October 2002)

Australian Muslims thus used email and the World Wide Web to disseminate views and information on the output provided by the mainstream media

The Australian Muslim's CNN

In addition to using internet email lists and web forums as a way of garnering or publishing dissenting viewpoints, Australian Muslims also actively turned used email and forum memberships as a means of challenging the hegemonic output of, and broadening the scope of discourse from, the national print or broadcast media. For example, in the lead up to the US bombardment of Iraq, Australian Muslim community email lists contained all sorts of information that could be used to rebut the arguments being put forward by the White House (and, of course, the Australian government) to support “regime change” in Iraq. These included a forward entitled “Eight Washington Lies About Iraq”, which was sent to the Federation of Australian Muslim Students and Youth mailing list in October 2002, along with these remarks appended to the top by the sender:

...almost every commentator, ‘expert’ or guest belonging to the Jewish faith appearing on talk shows vehemently supports Bombing of Iraq and the TV hosts rarely challenge them and one wonders why. Jews such as Noam Chomsky, Israeli Shamir et al, never appear as talk show hosts and one also wonders why.

When the Australian-based magazine Nida’ul Islam and its publishers were accused of having links with the Jemaah Islamiyah, News Ltd’s national daily The Australian approached the Islamic Youth Group whose representatives published the magazine. The normally reticent group agreed to grant an interview via email, in the hopes that they could clear their group’s name. The decision to use email for the interview with The Australian was a stroke of genius, for it would allow Nid’aul Islam, after the story was published, to forward the entire interview to the Islam-info mailing list and other email lists so that other Muslims who were subscribed to the email lists could compare the interview and the way the questions and answers were unfairly used in the publication:

The story titled, ‘Muslim Youth deny Bashir link’, was out this morning in the the local news section [of the Australian newspaper]...It confirmed our suspicion Islam and Muslims would not get a fair hearing in mainstream media, only when it would suit their selfish agenda.

(Islam-info mailing list, October 2002)

A similar illustration of the way email lists could be used to actively refute the view put forward by the mainstream media could be seen in the way the director of the Australian Muslim Public Affairs Committee forwarded a press release to the Muslimmediawatch listserv in October 2002, about the media’s reliance on supposed terrorism expert Rohan Gunaratna.

I’m forwarding this old AMPAC release out in the hope that it will be of use to people in combatting his lies. I have a lot more information, including a detailed analysis of his recent book on al-Qaeda and examples of some of the factual errors he has made in it that belie his

ineptitude as a writer and his lack of knowledge of the subject matter. For example his claims about the 20 hijackers who went to there [sic] deaths. (There were only 19).
(Muslimmediawatch, October 2002)

The result of this use of the listserv to refute the dominant or more readily accessible voice in public discourse is that more people are aware of the alternatives. The example cited above (of an old press release given a new audience through the listserv) is an example of a message that also managed to make it to a mainstream readership, for presumably the type of message was also conducive to being spread to the major news outlets. Although some segments of the popular media continue to use Gunaratna as a so-called expert on terrorism today others have taken notice of his dubious claims to being one - some time after this contribution was made to the listserv a major metropolitan daily in Melbourne picked up the story (Hughes 2003).

The Australian Muslim's Town Crier

In addition to providing alternatives to the dominant discourse, and providing a means for the rebutting of views put forward in the mainstream media, a very practical use exists for the website forums or email lists. They act as a means by which seemingly mundane but crucial information for community members can be disseminated. In nations unlike Australia where Muslims comprise the majority of the population, practical information is readily available away from the internet's forums and email lists. For instance in Indonesia television networks will take into account the annual fasting month of Ramadan and amend their programming so that prime time shows (often to do with Islamic teachings) are aired after sunset's breaking of the fast. In countries where Muslims are the minority, of course, the demand for such shows is simply not there. The internet in the form of email lists and web forums can step in to fill the gap by providing practical information online for Australian Muslims. Given that this type of information is purely practical there is not much need to elaborate, except to give some illustrations, including the forwarding of advice from the Australian Federal Police on what to do in the event of a hate crime. The message with the subject header "Information for Community Members" was forwarded to three email lists including the Islam-info mailing list, by a member who received the information in a reply to a query he'd made to the Federal Police. It reminded users that NSW police were the first point of contact in an emergency, and that the AFP could be contacted if a person either wanted to report terrorist behaviour; or was receiving hate mail or harassing phone calls. Other instances of the way Australian Muslims used website forums or email lists in gaining practical information they needed as Muslims included answers provided by fellow listserv or forum members to questions about halal food locations, or where to do Friday prayers in the Sydney CBD. For example the following excerpt from a post entitled "Advice from a Muslim pharmacist" gave viewers some hints on coping with Ramadan from a medical perspective (iftar refers to the meal taken after

the sun sets when breaking the fast, while sahur is the last meal taken at the break of dawn before fasting):

...there is no need to consume excess food at iftaar or sahur. Overeating contradicts the principle aim of fasting. The body is able to adapt to ensure that when we are eating less than normal, stored body fat is used more effectively. It is therefore not necessary to eat more than you normally would.

(MuslimVillage 2002)

Other examples of the practical usage of Muslim website forums or email lists include advertising upcoming Muslim events such as talks by visiting ulama (scholars), or calling for requests by interested parties for holding stalls at annual end-of-Ramadan festivals.

The Australian Muslim's Telegraph

A fourth purpose to which email forums and email lists are put includes the dissemination of articles from overseas newspapers that have relevance to Australian Muslims. Some of the lists are unmoderated and thus a member's posting will immediately be sent to the other members. Other lists require a posting to gain the approval of the list-owner or moderator before it is sent to the other members. Also, there is a surprising level of heterogeneity in the composition of membership for each general community mailing list (in terms of ethnic background, education level, age and religious adherence). Given this diversity there is a tendency for members to have differing internet surfing habits. When a member comes across an article that she or he thinks is relevant or interesting to fellow listserv members, it is forwarded to the list. For instance, a piece forwarded to the Muslimnetmelbourne list came from the Tribune newspaper in Portland, Oregon. It concerned a Jewish lawyer from New York, Stanley Cohen, who defended, without fee, Muslims charged with terrorism offences. On top the user who forwarded the story commented, 'and where are the MUSLIM lawyers while this Jewish gentleman is zealously defending Muslims free of charge while risking his own imprisonment and ostracism?' (Muslimnetmelbourne October 2002).

The Australian Muslim's Family

The notion of brotherhood constitutes an important aspect of Islamic aqidah or belief. It encompasses the links that exist between one person of Muslim faith and another, in accordance with what Muhammad told his followers at his last sermon, 'Learn that every Muslim is a brother to every Muslim and that the Muslims constitute one brotherhood'¹. Website forums such as MuslimVillage and email

¹ The full text of Muhammad's last sermon, delivered in 632 CE, is easily accessible online. Try <http://www.quraan.com/ProphetsLastSermon/Default.asp>.

email lists act in part as a means of establishing ties between Australian Muslims and other Muslims separated by time and distance. These ties or contacts include those made between Muslims in Australia, for example in the usage of the internet to find a spouse in an Islamically permissible manner (this will be explored in a subsequent case study). In line with notions of community not being restricted in a geographical sense among Muslims, these ties include those between Muslims in Australia and those overseas, as an email from a Hunan University Muslim professor to the WA Muslim News and other mailing lists illustrates: ‘in Changsha I have contact with people of various Muslim ethnic communities. The Uyghur is the biggest. I would like to contact Muslimin in Australia with relatives in China, or an interest in the life these Muslim brothers and sisters face here’ (Islam-info and WA Muslim News email lists, September 2002). Finally these ties provide a platform for establishing a different type of network - between Muslims, and non-Muslims in Australia. Emails from high school students doing projects about Islam have often been forwarded to the list and replies given either to the list and CC’d to the person making the enquiry, or addressed to the student personally. This constitutes a form of dawah or propagation of Islam - a form of Islamic practice that has also migrated online, as in the case

The Australian Muslim’s Coffee Shop

As with many email groups, Australian Muslim email lists function as arenas for discussion by members - sometimes quite heated, other times civil. For instance, a query on the legitimacy of claims by fast food outlets in serving halal food prompted this posting: ‘Our cousins of the Jewish faith don’t patronize stores that are not supervised by their Kosher authority. Why do we spend our money in stores that do not have Halal certification?’ (Islamic-info, February 2003) Another list member responded, ‘In regards to supporting McDonalds and KFC, I would be inclined to give them a miss. There are plenty of places to eat nice food, and you will support Muslim brothers’ (ibid). Although passionate, the series of postings discussing this particular topic remained civil. Sometimes, as the debacle of the Prime minister being invited to dinner by the Australian Federation of Islamic Councils and the case of the Murabitun movement (these three cases will be elaborated on in the final part of this chapter), the discussion became quite heated. In the instances where insults were thrown, a third party would usually try to calm things down and remind list members of Islamic adab (etiquette) which urges restraint in the expression of differing views and opinions.

Case Study I: the Internet and Finding a Halal Spouse

Those who check their web-based email often may have seen three, or four, beautiful men or women competing for the viewer’s attention, armed with big smiles and expressions that are invitations letting the viewer know of their availability. A suggestive piece of text included within the

advertisement asks viewers which one you'd go out with, or entices viewers into making contact. The internet is increasingly seen as a viable alternative to the singles bar or club (Donn and Sherman 2002; Hardey 2002). While internet dating used to have a stigma attached to it - and in some circles, still does - it has become increasingly acceptable: a quarter of teenage boys from the United States in one study admitted to asking out girls while using instant messaging services (Pew Internet 2001) while some online dating websites claim tens of thousands of active members (Kirn 2000: 73).

In Western societies, the general expectation is still for young people to marry and create families (Donn and Sherman 2002). In Islamic societies, as in Western ones, marriage occupies an esteemed position, and is viewed as a stepping stone in a very important journey - the establishing of families, which are the fundamental building blocks of society (Wiktorowicz and Farouki 2000). However, in Islamic societies the concept of dating - whether online or not - is anathema. It could be said that Islam is a way of life that forbids unchecked rampant lust yet untethers itself from the restraints of celibacy. Marriage is therefore the moderate option for Muslims: a process that "halalifies" sexual relations (Wiktorowicz and Farouki 2000; Abdul-Rauf 1993). It represents an act of ibadah or worship because by choosing to marry, a Muslim demonstrates his or her submission to Allah. Muhammad told his followers, 'Whoever of you has the means to support a wife should get married, for this is the best means of keeping the looks cast down and guarding chastity' (Sahawneh 1994).

The process is relatively straightforward for a young brother or sister living in a predominantly Muslim land. Customs and rituals are established, mosques and officials at close hand, and networks of parents, families and friends smooth the way for the finding of prospective suitors (Dhami and Sheikh 2000). For a second or third generation diaspora Muslim migrant, it is more problematic. In the Australian context, a mere 1.5 per cent of the population is Muslim (Australian Bureau of Statistics 2001). This reduces the options somewhat for someone looking for a life partner. Furthermore, the Islamic communities are fractured along nationalistic affiliation and like non-Muslims, Muslims sometimes prefer that their offspring marry from within the same cultural grouping (Dhami and Sheikh 2000; Aslam 1993). In response to the problem of single young Muslims seeking partners, community groups undertook various initiatives including establishing spaces where Muslim youth could meet in an Islamically acceptable environment, such as the mosque, camp or youth group; driving home (through talks, lectures and religious classes) the importance of getting married as a way of averting sin; and providing community-run match-making services offline.

Nevertheless, just as the internet has provided dating services for non-Muslims, it has also come to the rescue of lovelorn Muslims. The Islamic matchmaking services have migrated online, sometimes in great detail. One site, Zawaj.com (the word zawaj is one of many meaning "marriage" in Arabic) provides not only classifieds for those advertising for a marriage partner (and these ads themselves can be quite specific in the type and number of requirements); but extensive articles on the role of marriage in Islam; treatises on the way a husband and wife ought to behave towards each other

according to the way of Muhammad; and advice columns where users can submit emails outlining their marriage-related predicaments. Testimonials are also published from those who have found the site useful:

I met and married my husband through your matrimonial services. We started corresponding in May 2001, and were married in July 2001...We would not have met if it wasn't for your service. It is truly a good way to meet a prospective mate. May Allah reward you for all your efforts.
(Zawaj.com 2003)

In addition to marriage-specific websites, advertisements and sections of general Islamic sites also point the user to matrimonial services. The IslamicSydney website was set up prior to the 2000 Olympics, to cater to Muslim visitors to the Harbour City. The website also featured a moderated forum (now called the Muslimvillage) where Muslims and non-Muslims discussed current, religious and community affairs. In one of the discussion threads, a user outlined the details of a matrimonial service operated by an offline association supporting new and recently converted Muslims ("reverts"). Explaining that he 'had sisters waiting', the user asked 'Australian men (prefer Reverts)...looking for muslim wives' to 'please email with your details. Please no tyre kickers!' (MuslimVillage.com 2003). When a female user jokingly asked him to find her a husband, his reply - 'I will add your name to the ever growing list' - revealed the increasing number of unmarried Muslims, and by default the need for a service such as his group was offering.

Subsequent additions to the initial posting revealed an undercurrent of resentment that Australian (presumably Anglo-Australian) new Muslims were specifically requested. 'Why are sisters after Aussie reverts?' queried one non-convert. 'What about us born Muslim brothers?' Another asked, 'Why are reverting Aus males being targeted?' (MuslimVillage.com 2003). The expression of this resentment was jocular and not deep-seated or antagonistic in nature. One Muslim male even suggested that the non-reverts (ie the men who had been Muslim since birth) could 'counter-attack by going after revert sisters yourself! (err...keep it halal though)'. A "revert sister" opined that the service was requesting new Muslims 'probably because they have no family members to look for prospective spouses for them, same as convert sisters'. This was confirmed by the user representing the service, who said that it was open to anyone although initially he 'was just wanting to help out all those lonely Australian reverts...If you want to recieve a form, send me your postal address to ####@###.com. The service is free'. An amused non-Muslim visitor to the site commented, 'You guys are so funny! So its as easy as that ha? Crazy Ozzys' (ibid).

From here, the joking made way for a discussion that was a bit more serious, as it touched on a pressing issue for many Australian Muslims - the divisions that existed in the community along ethnic or racial lines. A female user explained, 'Most of the Muslim sisters I know (mostly malaysian/ singaporean/ indonesian) are married to converts of anglo saxon background' (MuslimVillage.com

2003). In contrast, she said, ‘the sisters I know who are of arabic/lebanese/turkish tell me they prefer men of their own nationality. And they tell me the men of their heritage prefer women on the same background...unless they are *white* convert women...’ (ibid). Another female user, a born Muslim, blamed the preference for a same-background partner on ‘what their parents impose on them...females raised in multicultural Australia I reckon can generally see passed the cultural/nationality differences and opt for a Muslim (regardless of culture)...’(ibid). Acknowledging this division the user representing the service explained that one of its aims was to ‘cross all ethnic backgrounds and bring the various Muslim ethnic communities together by cross cultural matches, ie. Muslims of African, Asian, Arab, Anglo backgrounds have the chance to look elsewhere for a match, rather than being confined to searching within their own community’ (MuslimVillage.com 2003). Whereas Anglo-Australian Muslim males were being targeted, he revealed that ‘dark-skinned African females seem to be in demand...At the same time if you prefer someone from your own ethnicity, that also can be arranged, insya Allah’ (ibid). So it was - in the words of a forum member - as easy as that. For those Australian Muslims both born and converted who opted for a service such as this, at least there was no chance of not “keeping it halal”.

Case Study II: The Politics of Online Disagreement Among Australian Muslims

On the 11 April 2003 metropolitan dailies reported that Australian Muslims in Sydney had decided to call off a planned protest (Karvelas 2003). The subject of the Muslims’ anger was the Australian Federation of Islamic Councils or AFIC, the umbrella body representing the various Muslim community organisations. To the disappointment and disbelief of many, AFIC had invited Prime Minister John Howard to its annual congress and dinner. Why did inviting the Prime minister invoke such strong opposition? The following post to the MuslimVillage forum could best sum up the position of many in the Muslim community. It listed the reasons behind the vehement lack of support for AFIC’s decision.

John Howard...has been the author of an incredible amount of discrimination towards Muslim refugees, dishonesty about Muslims in need and now outright war against a Muslim trading partner...it is shameful...to see people claiming to represent our community crawling to the Prime minister for a few dollars, instead of sending strong and severe messages to him that his decisions are not only unpopular but wrong.

(MuslimVillage.com 2003)

That Howard’s motives in accepting the invitation were looked upon with suspicion by Muslims was clearly illustrated by several other posts. The invite had been issued just on the eve of Australian involvement in impending US plans to invade and take control of a Muslim country. Perfect timing. AFIC was seen by Muslims as ‘...politically gullible’ in their refusal to acknowledge that the prime minister would ‘not exploit this “invitation” for his own political ends’. The writer of this post also

pointed to the fact that AFIC had apparently frequently invited the Prime minister to their annual congress but were turned down: 'every year he has been unable to attend - until now. I can just see the headlines - "Howard: War is Not With Islam"' (ibid).

The cynicism was entrenched - the writer of another post appeared to echo the sentiments of fellow Muslims when she or he sarcastically suggested that 'Mr Howard will praise AFIC and other "peace-loving Moderate Muslims" just to get votes' (ibid). As if to underscore the depth of feeling, a poll on the MuslimVillage website resulted in 87 per cent of respondents voting "No" to the question of whether AFIC should have invited the Prime minister. AFIC appeared apathetic about the outrage, saying that "although AFIC understood the sentiments of Muslims angry about Mr Howard's views on the war, the overwhelming majority of Muslims believed it was important to engage with him" and dismissing the poll on MuslimVillage as unrepresentative (Karvelas and Shanahan 2003).

There was a minority view, held by those who reasoned that having Howard attend the congress was a positive thing in terms of the accessibility afforded on the occasion to the nation's leader. Seeking to make the best out of the situation, one poster urged AFIC to ask the Prime minister 'why he has detained the same people... whom he wants to liberate. And why a 'small portion' of australians abuse muslim women on the streets...ask why david hicks is not back in aus' (MuslimVillage 2003). Argued another poster, 'those who oppose John Howard's visit as 'guest of honour' may see the downside. But, when have you had the chance to talk to the man who, whether you like it or not, makes decisions which directly affect you?' (ibid). However, there was a problem with the view that meeting the Prime minister would present an opportunity to the representatives of the Muslim community for discussing pertinent issues - and that problem concerned the representatives themselves. The underlying theme in the debate was the legitimacy of AFIC as the peak umbrella body of Muslim organisations in Australia.

I would like to know from where do these national organisations and state organisations draw their legitimacy given that the muslims themselves have absolutely no say in the election of people to these leadership positions nor the manner in which these organisations are run?
(MuslimVillage.com 2003)

The question mark that hung over AFIC's claims to represent the Muslim community debunked any notion that being able to discuss terrorism, or the Iraq situation, with the Prime minister outweighed the potential for the invitation to be used to political gain. The posters seemed to agree that it would be advantageous to address issues facing Australian Muslims with the Prime minister, but 'it would have been far better to raise any concerns or to put forward the "Muslim" perspective in a formal delegation in private. Not to invite (John Howard) to a Public Dinner by a body that supposedly represents all Australian Muslims...' (ibid).

AFIC staunchly refused to consider withdrawing the invitation despite the fact that it was evident many Muslims were deeply upset at the lack of consultation with the community prior to the decision to invite Howard, as well as the seemingly indifferent attitude to the community's concerns. As one poster described, 'it seems clear from the outrage that when that decision was made, the Muslim community was not consulted nor was any consideration given to the obvious fact that many people wouldn't like it' (MuslimVillage 2003). Pointing to non-Australian Muslims, another post referred to Howard being one of a small number of leaders who endorsed US action in Iraq.

Do you think our brethren in Afghanistan, Chechnya, Kashmir, Iraq, Bosnia etc would sit down with Bush or Blair to a nice dinner, and eat with them, share a meal, share a hand shake, discuss current world events!

(ibid)

By this time the framework of the discussion had quickly expanded further than just whether the invitation should have been made to Howard, and even beyond the issue of the legitimacy of AFIC's leadership. The issue had been picked up by the mainstream media and had extended beyond Australian shores. A prominent Muslim scholar based in Trinidad, Imran Hosein, advised AFIC that inviting the Australian leader was a mistake². This was resented by some in the community as a foreign scholar telling Australian Muslims what to do. But, as one poster argued, the question was not whether Imran Hosein had stepped out of line, but

whether or not AFIC should invite the PM (who in my opinion has fresh Muslim blood on his hands) to a "dinner" where he will be the Guest of Honour of the Australian Muslim community...'

(ibid)

Still other users on the forum questioned the notion that the nationality of AFIC's critics was relevant: 'may Allah be pleased with Imran Hosein and all that strive to open the Ummah's eyes and hearts. Yes, he is not an Australian and he does not reside here. That is a blessing, because you need to step outside to see what is inside' (ibid). In the section on marriage services discussed above, it was pointed out that one of the issues faced by Australian Muslims was the disunified nature of the community, fractured along ethnic or racial lines. Perhaps the only positive outcome of the AFIC and John Howard saga was the way it illustrated another concern faced by the community, which it could then work to overcome - the adequacy and relevance of the leaders who spoke on its behalf.

The activities of the little known and mysterious Sufi order called the Murabitun did not gain much attention in Australia, outside of the coterie of devoted followers who subscribed to its core teachings. In fact, one member's estimate of the amount of time the Murabitun had existed as a group in Australia was a mere twenty-five years (MuslimVillage 2004). That is, until a man who claimed the identity of a key member of the movement began joining the cyber discourse of Sydney based Muslims. Who are the Murabitun? This Sufi group were reported in Western mainstream media as a curioso, a extreme Islamic minority whose extremism was defined not by militant interpretation of Islamic teachings but by the marketplace: the Murabitun were "possibly the only religious sect in history whose defining article of faith is a financial theory" (Dibbell 2002: 3) and, euphemistically, a group that were "strongly opposed to capitalism" (McCallum 2003). In Scotland the Murabitun were at the center of scandalized news reports implicating their ties with far right groups and covering their

2 The statement by Imran Hosein can be found at <http://forums.muslimvillage.net/viewtopic.php?t=983>

closure of a local mosque (Silk 1995). According to one Scottish publication the Murabitun minted its own silver and gold coins in order to avoid the Western banknotes and system it viewed as not permissible for Muslims, and as an organization had been in existence for just over thirty years:

since 1971, [the group] specialise in recruiting white Europeans, especially in Britain. Many are from well-off backgrounds. Ex-members...said Murabitun deliberately did not try to recruit in immigrant Indian, Pakistani or Arab communities around Britain because mainstream Muslims would oppose it. "The reason they've gone to the north of Scotland is because there's almost no Muslims there who might challenge what they do - a lot of which I would say is anti- Islamic," said one ex-disciple.

(Campbell 1995)

The abolishment of the banking system, which Murabitun acolytes view as haram because of its basis on *riba* or interest is indeed one of the Sufi group's core ideologies. Headed by Shaykh Abd al-Qadir al-Murabit, an ex actor who used to be known by the name Ian Dallas, the Murabitun have been condemned by Muslims and non-Muslims alike for their supposed links to far right and anti-Semitic groups, and by Muslims who allege that the Murabitun commit the most un-brotherly act of viewing other Muslims as having strayed from the Straight Path (ie. the path of Allah).

In early 2004 a contributor to the former IslamicSydney forums (known by then as the MuslimVillage forums) identified himself as Umar Vadillo, a senior figure in the Murabitun movement and author of *The Esoteric Deviation in Islam*. To say that this publication created controversy amongst Muslims would be an understatement. Detractors alleged that the book labeled some non-Murabitun Muslims who follow other schools of thought, or some Sufi Muslims who followed other *tariqas* (brotherhoods) as having deviated from the true teachings of Islam. Many Muslims were also upset at the book's apparent implication (and its resonance with Murabitun views on capitalism and the banking system) that the only form of *zakat* or charity that was acceptable was that paid in gold, as paper money was deemed haram. The speed and interactivity with which discussions about the book, as well as accusations and counter-accusations about the parties involved, escalated could only have taken place in an online environment. In forums such as MuslimVillage, *Esoteric Deviation* sparked intense deliberations, as it did in many other forums and email lists. In the al Zawiya listserv, the following reaction was typical of the responses generated:

A quick read of this very thick black covered book, seems to tell the reader that there are many modern and contemporary personalities (muslims and converts) are being sort of labelled as "free-masonic" or have "tendencies or inclinations" to that effect. And at the end of the book, the writer's *tariqa* & their sheikh seem to be put on the "high pedestal".

(al-Zawiya 2004)

The impression of non-Muslims about the book's divisive contents was on the mind of another poster to the listserv who said that reading *Esoteric Deviation* would give the impression that "the Shaykh is actually having a rant against ALL muslims, as it appears to go against all the famous names that they may hear" (al-Zawiya 2004). On the forums of the IslamicSydney website, now renamed MuslimVillage, refutations of the book's contents were posted. In reference to the book's statement that its authors did not respect the New Testament, one poster wrote

Allah save us from pseudo-reformers that confuse...reverence with submission and belief. First, the Shari`ah makes it incumbent upon every Muslim to know the names of the heavenly Books and believe in them and the Prophets they were revealed to; second, adab requires every Muslim to revere the same books for all time even in translation and even in their present form...

(MuslimVillage 2004)

The forum member who claimed to be *Esoteric Deviation*'s author Umar Vadillo began posting refutations of the refutations of the book, on MuslimVillage. The identity claimed by this member may have been genuine, as several other members attempted to confirm it. Irrespective of whether she or he really was Umar Vadillo, or not the user claimed to be the author of the book and therefore behaved as could be expected: she or he then rallied in support of it against against the critics, of whom there were many. One example of criticism came from a forum member who explained that "from my exchange with Umar in the other thread what I have come to conclude is that I do not believe his theories are sound from an economic perspective" (IslamicSydney 2004). A third forum member questioned the methodology of the author of *Esoteric Deviation*:

I too can write up a 1000 page book on my personal opinions and grievances with and against certain orgs in australia [sic] for example...I can then go to my shaykh and ask him to approve it, but guaranteed he'd probably turn around and slap me with the ton of pages upside the head before he put his name on it in approval because despite the truths it may contain in it, it will cause more harm than good.

(MuslimVillage 2004)

The discussion on the IslamicSydney/MuslimVillage forums also reflected on the way the book had divided the Muslim audience on - it seemed - uneven lines, with few endorsing the viewpoints contained and many condemning them. One forum member who defended the book did so on the grounds that

Some have claimed to have read a "bit" of that book and when I asked how much exactly was that bit, the answer was, "around 10 pages". Some others have gone directly to the index and

then looked up their shaykh's name and then, read only that part of the book where it spoke of their shaykh. I don't think it is fair like that.

(MuslimVillage 2004)

The discourse surrounding Muslim criticisms leveled at Esoteric Deviation beyond simply the book itself and to the religious order that had spawned it. One thread by the poster who said that he was Umar Vadillo was begun with the aim of talking about Heidegger, whose work (according to Murabitun philosophy) was important for Muslims to study. The responses to this ranged from the supportive (“I can’t really stress the importance of reading Heidegger”) to the questioningly hostile:

Why dont you use the Murabitun-oft-quoted words for non-Muslims ‘kafir, kuffaar’ for your Heidegger. Why say ‘He was not a Muslim’? Is it because you want your Murabitun-Philosopher-Guide Heidegger to sound a bit more palatable for Muslims?

(MuslimVillage 2004)

Some members tried to deflect the increasing enmity that was growing apparent between the MuslimVillage members, for example one post relied on wit to convey the disapproval of the antagonism that was fermenting on the Murabitun issue: “hey come on, take it easy. Don't let a thread about ‘The End of Philosophy’ (or The End of Heidegger) turn into ‘The End of Brotherhood’” (MuslimVillage 2004). There even sprang up a poll in the forums which asked users what they thought of Murabitun postings. In one of the postings attached to this poll the member who started the poll expressed his reservations about what he called the “Murabitun bombardment”:

Everyone knows that I also am no fan of salafi/wahabi da'wa but this has never stopped me and my salafi/wahabi friends from seeing each other the exact same way, unlike the seeds of dissent felt between myself and other murabitun friends. Their threads have done nothing but to create controversy between muslims,

(MuslimVillage 2004)

One quite senior and veteran member of the IslamicSydney forums pointed out that the minority of members who were standing up for Esoteric Deviation’s contents were doing so on dubious grounds: “some matters Sidi [name deleted] has defended, I must say are indefensible according to Shari’ah” (IslamicSydney 2004), he said. Sidi is a respectful title of North African Muslim origin, used when addressing a Muslim adult male. Or, as a respondent to the post in defence of the book, about its critics having only read ten pages, replied,

reading a specific 10 pages which speak out enormities against other fellow muslims still qualifies the 10 pages as being controversial and the 963 in totality doesnt defend the 10 if the 10 are incorrect...

The general view, however, that came out of the postings on the al-Zawiya listserv and the MuslimVillage forums, was that if Vadillo in his book did criticise the practices of non-Murabitun Sufi and non-Sufi Muslims, such a practice could not be condoned. Putting down other Muslims who did not adhere to the specific way of thinking espoused by a particular sheikh was not on, irrespective of how many pages in the book were devoted to it. “Whosoever calls another Muslim a kafir (unbeliever), the statement is true for at least one of the two” is a famous hadith or tradition of Muhammad. The jury is out on the motivations or the legitimacy of the Murabitun, but by the very nature of the discussion taking place within cyberspace demonstrates that the internet has profoundly altered the level and speed of interactive discourse on Islamic texts.

Conclusion

The (often unintentional) lack of informed knowledge among non-Muslims about Islam is why Muslims turn to their own media and information sources, that don’t depict them in the terrorist-misogynistic-reactionary frame of mind. In the Australian context it is possible to find various email lists or email lists fulfilling different functions for the Muslim community. They are a source of alternative viewpoints. They provide counterattack against the mainstream media. They are a resource for practical information for Australian Muslims. They provide access to news from overseas that an Australian Muslim would be hard pressed to find on Channel Nine or in the Herald Sun. In addition, email lists allow Muslims to establish inter- and intra- community contacts both domestically and with overseas Muslims; and they are sites of discourse on matters important to the community. The last two functions can be seen in the way Muslims have turned to the internet for matrimonial services and the heated discussions that took place in cyber gatherings of Muslims following the release of a controversial book by a little known Sufi sect, and an unpopular decision by the peak Islamic organisation in the country. The story of Australian Muslims and their practice of Islam on the internet is one that is still being written. In the contemporary world, the Islamic faith is constantly in the spotlight. Although the mainstream media is slowly improving in the fairness of 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.

Results: Reactions of Muslim women to email content following the September 11 attacks

The award for most curious Afghan web presence might be that of the Taliban. The internet represented the ultimate symbol of the modernity of technology but the Taliban to outsiders

symbolised a virulently anti-modern ideology. Their emergence after civil war beset the country was a reaction to the problems that the Taliban saw as resulting from modernity. During the oppressive years of communism Afghanistan's industrial progress was restricted to the major cities. The rural areas remained largely based on agricultural subsistence farming. After the Afghans defeated the Soviets and fought amongst themselves, the rise to power of the Taliban could be read as "the revenge of the traditional village against the modern city, which symbolised the 'immoral' and atheistic Western culture" (Chroust 1999: 104). Traditional villages, however, are not places where you would expect to find information superhighways. Hence, everything the Taliban was taken to represent - the conservatism, the triumph of the old ways - seemed in direct contrast to all that the internet did. The Taliban took steps to remove Western influence from Afghanistan by banning the methods and means with which that influence made its way there: the televisions, the cameras. Yet, despite banning the internet, it was a useful tool for them in their attempts at combating the power of Western cultural hegemony. This makes the "fact that most of the Afghan population have no electric light and even are illiterate, let alone have access to the world wide web, is not such a paradox as it first seems" (Chroust 2000: 109). The Taliban initiated a process via the internet of building links with external Islamic communities - reaching interested external parties and disseminating their ideology for training new supporters. Indeed much of the updating of Taliban sites was said to have taken place overseas, with supporters of the group contributing knowledge and labour from outside of Afghanistan. Chroust (2000: 110-111) referred to this as an inversion of the global economic order: instead of globalisation-era American companies outsourcing cheap workers in poorer nations like India, the traditionalist Taliban were outsourcing labor from the West. The case of the Taliban illustrated that even poor or illiterate Muslim societies can access the net, joining the global electronic ummah.

Notions of community are brought into play in discussions by Muslim women of an email forward that was distributed among Muslims and non-Muslims after September 11. Within western critical theory the internet was contextualised within paradigms that were present before the widespread use of the medium including Anderson's idea of "imagined communities" and McLuhan's global village. In addition to the World Wide Web, for many internet users the most ubiquitous and widely used manifestation of the internet is email. From a Muslim woman's viewpoint the internet could be the means by which the patriarchal overtones of many Muslim-majority countries could be dismantled by setting in motion a digital reformation, involving the appropriation and dissemination of information relevant to Muslim women. But this is not to infer that the two contexts are mutually exclusive, and this can be seen from the responses of Muslim women to the content of an email forwarded among Muslims following the September 11 attacks in New York. A brief discussion is presented of the usage of email and its cultural implications for the building of community, followed by the presentation of results of the discussion of the Taliban dating agency email that was in frequent circulation in the days after September 11 2001, and the responses of seven Muslim women from Australia and southeast Asia to this email.

Email and community

Email has all but replaced the telephone in many countries as a personal and work related method of communication. The leveling effect of the internet was often invoked in discussions about the changes that the new medium made in the way human beings interacted with each other. The internet (specifically the world wide web and email) was the new form of communication, and in the process of changing communication, the internet helped build communities (as discussed in the results of the research, in particular the online survey and the contents of the Australian web forums and mailing lists or email lists). Communication therefore “dominated the internet, by asynchronous email and discussion lists and by synchronous instant messaging and chat groups. All were supposedly connected to all, without boundaries of time and space” (Wellman 2004: 124). Running concurrently with the adaptation of the internet was the progress of nation-states along the spectrum of technological development, moving from services-based economies to information based economies. In the process online communication became increasingly valued by individuals, governments and organisations as a way to efficiently respond to global or local affairs. Internet usage shows no signs of slowing down: statistics show that approximately 1.1 billion e-mails are sent out daily in the U.S. and 88 million people are connected to the internet through their place of employment (HR focus 2003). From 1993 to 1996 alone the number of internet hosts grew from 1.3 million to 9.5 million (Gray 1996). As time passes it is likely that internet usage will continue to expand amongst members of each subsequent generation worldwide (Negroponte 1995).

Muslim communities operate on a global level, communicating across national barriers and in different parts of the world. In past decade, technology has affected the way people communicate, which has in turn brought impetus for changes in culture and society (DeFillippi 2002). Although online communication has helped to foster an information and knowledge based culture, it could hinder communication if it is poorly planned, developed and implemented (Kraut Susan & Susan 1989; Martinsons & Chong 1999). Cultural issues therefore have implications for the adaptation of email - a very Western form of communication - by those who come from traditional or conservative Muslim societies such as Afghanistan. Some features of email (such as the instantaneous nature of the communication, and its global reach) had the potential to cause problems in more traditional cultures. But these same defining attributes of email also “make it a useful tool for creating a sense of community and exchanging ideas” according to Rudick and O’Flahavan (2001) who suggest that email is the perfect way of giving praise, soliciting input and - most importantly - building a community.

As illustrated previously in the discussion on Australian Muslim email lists, email groups are a pertinent illustration of how email can be used in the construction of an online community. There are many parallels and contrasts that exist between online and offline communities. Rheingold (1994) has

described how the internet causes differences in users' perception of geographical or real-world distance. This altering of the spatial relationship enables new forms of community to exist that did not, as was the case previously, have to have inhabitants residing in the same geographic location. The concept of an e-community existed on the idea that a group of people who share the same values and interests associate and identify with one another as a group - for example, users of the Islam-Info mailing list identify themselves as Sydney-based Muslim Australians. Rheingold's exploration of the virtual community contains parallels with Anderson (1991) who had looked at the role of the newspaper in the formation of the nation-state. His findings - that communities are built around groups of people who "imagine" certain beliefs, traits and values and understand that there are others who do likewise, and to whom they are tied by virtue of reading the same material - can be applied to the internet and email email lists, the material disseminated through these means, and how audiences (or members of the list) react to the material.

Because communities that had existed before the onset of email and the internet needed to be in a specific geographic locality, the ties that bound in these social groupings had to be strong. In small towns, lifelong relationships based on work and family structures ensured the survival of the community. Social cohesion is probably not as important to internet communities as it seems necessary to real world ones. Instead what constitutes a successful community online includes factors such as the size of the community (which doesn't necessarily have to be large, but it has to constitute a reasonable number in terms of the activities engaged in by members) and the activities conducted by members within the construct of the e-space they have carved out for themselves (in other words, how much of an ownership stake do the members have within the community? Do members contribute actively to the community's activities?). What is required for a community to be a success depends on whether the community is one founded in the real world or one that exists virtually.

Because of its low entry costs internet and email as forms of communication offer the potential for hundreds of voices previously unspoken for in mainstream media to be heard. Many of these voices come from groups who have suffered ill treatment at the hands of older media, such as women and ethnic or religious minorities. Said (1997) outlined how in older media like television and newspapers, Muslims and Muslim women have been the subject of negative coverage by Western news organisations. Can email therefore build bridges with marginalised groups and offer an improvement in the media coverage of ethnic minorities? Nakamura (2000) in her work on Asian identity on the internet, points out that when communicating online, there is the distinct impossibility of leaving behind all real world pretenses to physical self - our online representation, no matter how "anonymous", will have to require some form of signifier that is a holdover from the offline world. Given that existing stereotypes migrate to email communication (for instance, through perceived ethnic or religious affiliation attached to a person's name and email address), it is pertinent to ask whether it is possible to overcome such stereotyping and use the recognition of difference as a positive force in the building of communities.

Post 9-11 Email Forwards

Email can be thought of as the most public of private discourse. For example, an email sent by an exiled Afghan living in America, to his friends spread throughout the world (Seligman 2001) telling his unintended global audience of his view that any US military campaign against Afghanistan would be a fallacy.

...why don't the Afghans rise up and overthrow the Taliban? The answer is, they're starved, exhausted, hurt, incapacitated, suffering...There are millions of widows. And the Taliban has been burying these widows alive in mass graves...These are a few of the reasons why the Afghan people have not overthrown the Taliban.

(Ansary 2001)

As the case of Tamim Ansary shows, the ease with which information can be reproduced means there is no guarantee that what a user writes in a quick memo to your friends or colleagues (something highly individual or personal) will remain a confidential interaction, thus blurring the line between public information and private communication. This characteristic of email use is reflective of the notion of computer-mediated-communication being the domain of open and unrestricted debate by all parties regardless of race, gender or class - the embodiment of a democratic marketplace of ideas.

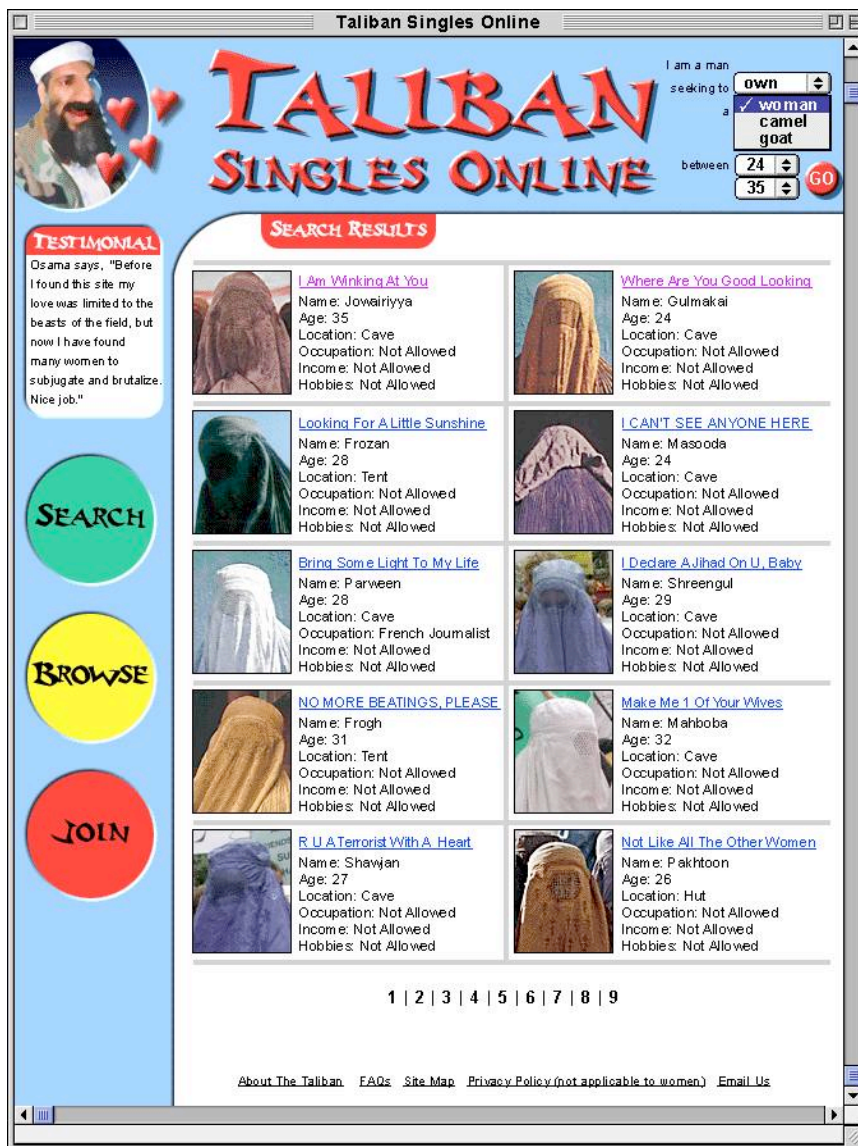
Of course, the idea of a democratic marketplace of ideas is not new - Habermas referred to it as the public sphere and outlined the conditions of free speech that needed to be met for such a marketplace of ideas to exist. Against the milieu of critiques of Habermas which pointed to the lack of voices from the margins (such as female narratives), and the rise of a literate public which was alluded to by Anderson as the consequence of the expansion of print-capitalism, it is possible to recall McLuhan who took the analogy of a print-media-propelled public a step further. Following the rise of the "public" which was the consequence of the expansion of the print industries, we saw the emergence of a subsequent term to describe large audience-based groupings - the "mass", the public's successor, which came about due to the rise of the broadcast media in the 20th century. But if, as McLuhan states, the print media can be associated with the "public", and broadcast media with "the mass", what relevant social identity can be used to describe us in the age of the internet?

If the Web and other forms of internet communication represent nascent forms of something yet to be fully defined, will they usher in a third form of humanity? What comes after the mass?

(Moulthrop 2000: 268).

The mass, and before it the public, were illustrative of Carey's transmission view of communication (Carey 1985) that has dominated Western discussion on the media/audience relationship. In this view, the sender and receiver are two separate entities, and the information flow was viewed as one-way. But the internet turns that theory on its head, for email and the World Wide Web (to name just two forms of the Net) mean the sender and the receiver can be one and the same. The internet has the potential to level the playing field, by challenging the hegemony inherent in more traditional media forms such as print and television, and allowing the disenfranchised a medium through which to speak. On the net, there are not hundreds but thousands of different "publics", all consisting of members who shared common fundamental values within, but not necessarily across the various spheres. Construction of identity on the internet is disparate, and incongruent, separated along fault lines of race, religion, gender, sexuality and class. So as Moulthrop asked, what comes after the mass? Whatever it is, it would be wise not to assume that there will be a singular "third form" of receivers-who-are-also-senders, but instead, third forms consisting not of one social identity but several identities, and exemplifying not "humanity" but "humanities". The heterogeneous nature of the audience and the hypertextuality of content in email and the World Wide Web illustrate how, as the penultimate postmodern media form, the internet provides the perfect foil to what Lyotard called "metanarratives" - the linear, dominant Western paradigm through which culture and discourse are portrayed.

Of all the voices missing from older media's mainstream political and cultural discourse, one of the most conspicuous must be that of Muslims in general, and Muslim women in particular, who bear a double burden - the brunt of anti-Islamic feeling external to their communities, and the brunt of misguided, sexist cultural practices posing as religious aphorisms within their communities. Historically, the relationship between Islam and the West has been uneasy at best, and violent at worst. This is despite Western society with its individualist focus having an emphasis on equality and freedom of association, speech and religious practices, and despite the Islamic teachings of respect and tolerance that must be accorded for followers of other religions provided they do not oppress or act against Muslims. The Islam/Western dichotomy has been played out on the battlefield (the Crusades, the Middle East wars), in economic terms (for example, sanctions) and in the public relations arena (through print, electronic and digital media). The Western portrayal of the Muslim world as a whole can be said to have been tainted with subtle and not-so-subtle prejudice and hatred which (not surprisingly) worsened following the September 11 attacks. The Western portrayal of the Islamic world is seen by Muslims and others as ethnocentric, particularly with issues that are hotly contested among Muslims such as the role of women in Islamic society. The prevailing viewpoint among Muslims is that members of Western society do not, and can not hope to, understand why (for example) the Qur'an and traditions of the Prophet Muhammad appear to treat women differently.



The email discussed here was among those distributed after the September 11 attacks in New York and other parts of the US. In intention and content, the emails varied greatly. They ran the gamut from those intending to be humorous, to those that were attempts at humour, to those of such a serious nature that they were humourless. The responses to this particular email come from seven young Muslim women studying and working in South East Asia and Australia. These young women came from different national backgrounds (Afghan, Malay-Muslim and Indonesian) but they shared a few things in common: apart from being young (all under 25) female and Muslim, they all spoke English as a first language and all lived in cultures or communities that could be described as Islamic but where the Muslim population was a minority (Singapore and Australia). The responses of the young women who revealed their views regarding one post September 11th email that was circulated right after the attacks illustrated starkly the cultural faultlines that are affected when online communication takes place between people of differing cultures.

The email contained an image in an attachment which depicted the photos of various veiled Afghan women in a "Taliban dating agency". The names attributed to the women were typically "Arabic" or

“Islamic” in nature. Perhaps it was supposed to be funny. Insensitive jokes were not the only thing that abounded in cyberspace following September 11. The poignant thoughts of musician-turned-Muslim Yusuf Islam made the rounds not long after the attacks. Although starkly different in tone and intention to the “Taliban dating agency” email, the forwarded article by Islam shared one similarity in that it mentioned the intersection of names and religions. Islam (2001) recalled how

...sadly, the latest horror to hit the US looks to have been caused by people of Middle Eastern origin, bearing Muslim names...This fuels more hatred for a religion and a people who have nothing to do with these events.

But where Yusuf Islam was able to distinguish between the alleged perpetrators of the WTC attacks and what he termed “a people who have nothing to do with these events”; the general feeling amongst the women who discussed the email about the Taliban dating agency was that this email forward was tasteless. This was based on their comments that this email could not differentiate between the perpetrators of terrorist attacks and the victims and instead ignored the fact that the women of Afghanistan were the victims of a particularly chilling and repugnant set of circumstances. One young woman commented on the Taliban dating agency email in the following words: “That one was not funny. Just like the Taliban, the Western world was also putting women down.” This user was a future teacher, a university student studying education and of Afghan descent who had moved to Australia as a refugee three years previously. Similarly, a young radio presenter of Malay-Muslim background working in Singapore states that

...it makes a mockery on the women wearing jilbab [the Malay term for veil]...personally i do not find this amusing. In fact I was rather outraged because it is indirectly making a mockery on Islam.

The use of the words “mockery on Islam” highlighted the outrage that was expressed by the young Muslim woman from Singapore. The outrage was not directed at any feeling of disgust for her own rights as an individual; instead the email illicit such as strong reaction because the user found it a mockery of her religion, and by indirectly attacking Afghan women, the email indirectly attacked her community.

The ability of online communication to build community across national barriers again came up in discussions with young Muslim women about the 9-11 emails. As a twenty year old student from Singapore notes,

There are so many Muslim women all over the world and with technology like emails, it will help us to communicate and act as a means to achieve a common goal and a channel for discussion, because we might not be able to meet personally.

The Muslim women “all over the world” who want to get in touch with each other belong (by and large) to Islamic societies, and those who are in non-Muslim societies such as the diaspora Muslim populations of the West will tend towards a Muslim orientation by virtue of their faith. The similarities in values and beliefs amongst these Muslim women will be key to the successful and effective formation of cyber communities. A 20 year old Information Technology student in Australia, of Afghan descent, spoke of how she used email to contact her relatives overseas: “I found that email was the best way to get to them.”

The post-911 emails tastelessly making fun of Afghan women; or publicising the reflections of the man-formerly-known-as-Cat-Stevens about the attacks; can be seen in the context of the internet's potential to nudge Muslims in the direction of their faith's original teachings, including unity between Muslims worldwide and the importance of gaining, preserving and disseminating knowledge. The Taliban dating agency email, despite its crass insensitivity, was valuable if only for Muslim women to remind one another that amongst their fellow Muslim women, there existed victims not just of a patriarchal male-dominated society but also of flagrant misunderstanding from some parts of the West. A Muslim retail sales assistant in Melbourne of Indonesian background says of the Taliban dating service email,

...that was an insult to the women of Afghanistan because they have not chosen to be that way and I am sure that amongst them there are a few at least who are educated.

At the same time, forwards such as the Yusuf Islam article outlined a positive image of Muslim men - as logical and capable of rational thought.

The use of email post September 11 did not merely invoke community ties or the idea of reaching out to fellow Muslim women. Reactions to the post September 11 Taliban dating service email demonstrated the cynicism with which the members of internet-savvy Muslim women viewed the mainstream media, reflecting the use of the internet (in this instance, email) as an alternative media source. In the words of the twenty year old Singaporean Muslim student,

even though we can't really measure the impact of emails on readers i think to a certain extent it reaches a less accessible audience who might be oblivious to this issue.

By implication, the internet is fulfilling the role of a champion of marginalised voices - including the voice of Muslim women. But to whom do these marginalised voices speak? If they merely speak to each other, would that not be a case of preaching to the converted? For example, if Muslim women only forwarded their opinions about the depiction of Islam's treatment of women in the media, about 9-11 or in fact any issue related to Islam, only to other Muslim women who also believed in Islamic values,

what purpose would this serve? Would the output of Muslim women in Islamic society, or in Western countries with their individualist values, then continue to exist on the fringes?

Conclusion

The onset of the internet brought challenges and benefits as online communication became more and more widespread. Email offered many benefits and distinguishing features to users including speed and global reach. Before the prevalent use amongst modernised societies of online communication marginalised groups such as Muslim women rarely got a chance to have their voices heard in the realm of the public sphere. That disparity has been assisted in some respects by the use of the internet and email. Perhaps it is fitting then that email - and on a broader level, general internet usage - by Muslim women can be read within both Western views of the internet (as digital public sphere, as vibrant multi-voiced global village where a single person has a much greater right to publish) and corresponding Islamic ones that see the internet as the Muslim world's Third Wave, an imagined (Islamic) community.

Results Summary

From the responses of Muslim students in Australia, Indonesia, Malaysia and Singapore to an online survey; the postings to the MuslimVillage forum and the Islam-info and Australian Muslim Media mailing lists and discussions by young Muslim women of an email forward sent in the aftermath of the 9-11 attacks, depicting a "Taliban dating agency"; 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 discussions by young Muslim women of an email forward sent in the aftermath of the 9-11 attacks, depicting a “Taliban dating agency”. The women 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. 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 email lists 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).

SECTION FOUR: DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

- Tensions between the State and Muslims
 - Tensions among Muslims
 - Tensions between Muslims and non-Muslims
 - Conclusion
-

This thesis began by providing key parameters emerging from the overview of the countries studied in terms of the size of their Muslim populations, media freedom and economic situations. It used these parameters as the basis for the research topic presenting the research's contention and rationale, and outlining the objectives in conducting the research. These objectives dealt with the role of the internet as the site of alternatives and challenges to the dominant popular discourse that permeates the content and values of earlier media forms such as television and print - whether that dominant popular discourse arose from a restricted media environment such as that of Singapore or Malaysia, or whether it comes from a free but hegemonic media environment such as that of Australia.

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. 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 the younger Australian Muslims. **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. 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. 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 young males. The digital divide and lack of infrastructure prevents rural Muslim and poorer Indonesians from being able to access the internet. 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. 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. 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. 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. 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. 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. 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, for example through including the internet in regulatory mechanisms for traditional media.

The goal of this research was to explore how Muslim identity is constructed and mediated online in Australia, Indonesia, Malaysia and Singapore, in order to facilitate discussion about how Islam is negotiated on the internet by Muslim students. It proposed that the exploration and construction of online Islamic identity among young Muslims in Australia and three neighboring southeast Asian regions is influenced by key factors such as the political system embedded in the nation-state, the economic infrastructure, and availability of internet access, the state's policies towards communication industries, and the position of Muslims and Islam in each state. The key findings from the research are:

- **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 through 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.

Collectively the use of the internet as an alternative source of media for Muslims, the size of the Muslim community and the strength of Islam in a given country, and the formation of Islamic identity and community online has resulted in tensions being created, exacerbated or maintained between the state and Muslims, among Muslims within a state or within an electronic sphere, and tensions between Muslims and non-Muslims, at the same time as the Muslim community is constructed and re-constructed online.

Tensions between the State and Muslims

Against the backdrop of modern nations, existing tension between Muslim populations and the State arises from developments or incidents that affect humanity on a global scale such as the September 11 2001 attacks. International-scale incidents such as these increase tension across the board between Muslims and the State (Carey 2005; Ryan 2003) but the presence of the internet re-formulates the paradigm in which such tension is situated: the internet opens up avenues of discourse and political engagement, creating new lines of conflict and new battlegrounds. Where the media has historically served to underline global incidents as pointing to the tension that exists between Muslims and the State (Abdo 2007; Almaeena 2007; Humphrey 2007), the internet magnifies and highlights the way in which Muslims and non-Muslims engage with developments in a manner that involves less external mediation than radio, newspapers or television. This can be seen in the use of internet web forums and email lists established by Muslims to discuss local, regional, national, and international developments.

Global developments exist alongside local ones, highlighting potential sources of conflict between Muslims and the State. There are context-specific tensions that exist in each of the four countries studied as a result of local developments. In Australia the key local developments that caused a rise in tension between the Muslim community and the State included the debate on national values and identity, the gang rapes of 2002 in southwestern Sydney, and the case of Guantanamo Bay detainees David Hicks and Mamdouh Habib. The Islamic adaptation of the internet came at a time when the definition and scope of Australian values were the subject of public discourse, in a way that framed Muslim identity as being incompatible and situated outside the scope of Australian values. The government of John Howard emphasised the question of Muslim values and their supposed conflict with the Australian way of life, publicly questioning the allegiance of Australian Muslims to the country. Talkback radio picked up the theme, demanding to know whether the loyalty of Australian Muslims was to their country or to their faith - a question usually not asked of Australians of non-Muslim faiths (with exceptions such as the Irish Catholics - who were suspect both for their opposition to British rule in Ireland, and their allegiance to a foreign power - the Holy See). Following Prime Minister John Howard's statement that some Muslims in Australia were "utterly antagonistic to our kind of society" (Briton 2006: np), the Treasurer Peter Costello told the media, "If you have a strong objection to walking in your socks don't enter the mosque. Before becoming an Australian you will be asked to subscribe to certain values. If you have strong objection to those values don't come to Australia" (Gordon and Topsfield 2006: np). Prime Minister Howard also called on Muslim Australians to learn English, implying that reticence to adopt the national language was a problem that lay only with the Muslim community, belying the fact that more than a third of Muslim Australians were born and raised in Australia (Department of Immigration and Citizenship 2006) and the fact that research showed migrants of Muslim background adopted English with proficiency (Philip 2007). Residents of the country's largest city, Sydney, reeled from the horror of calculated gang rapes of Anglo-Australian

girls in 2001 by a group of Lebanese Australian boys. The majority of law-abiding Lebanese Muslim Australians notwithstanding, sections of the media launched an all out campaign to demonise the Lebanese Muslim community in coverage that invoked notions of collective ethno-religious guilt (whose underpinning concepts may not have been used to explain the crimes had they been committed by members of a non-Muslim Australian community). The perceived gulf between Lebanese Muslim Australians and the rest of Australian society became the catalyst for the creation of a Middle Eastern Crime Unit of the New South Wales police (O'Neill 2006). The return to Australia of Guantanamo Bay detainees David Hicks and Mamdouh Habib further highlighted the suspicion that existed among some members of the Muslim community regarding their place in Australian society, while the arrest of suspected terrorists in Sydney and Melbourne heightened the fear of Muslims among the non-Muslim population.

In Indonesia, tensions between the Muslim majority and non-Muslim minorities have focused on the role of Islam in the country's political arena. Under the governments of Sukarno and Suharto the influence of Islamic parties was controlled, for example through one legal Muslim party. Muslim political engagement took place within a state sanctioned atmosphere with attempts to mobilize Islam as a political force outside the limits set by the state severely punished. During the Suharto years Abu Bakar Bashir, thought to be the spiritual leader of the Jemaah Islamiyah group that was accused of the Bali bombings, was frequently imprisoned as a threat to Indonesia's security. Muslim intellectuals in Indonesia have publicly debated the role of Islam in public life; most agree that religion and politics do not work in the favour of the pluralistic society that Indonesia comprises (McCawley 2005; Hughes 2004). Following the end of Suharto's government, a freer domestic political environment resulted in the formation or revival of minor political parties affiliated to Islam (some of whom had been outlawed under previous administrations), but the influence of these political parties has been curtailed due to the lack of appeal among voters for parties campaigning on Islamic platforms (Bertrand 2003).

Recent legal debates in Malaysia have illustrated the tensions that exist between the Muslim population who constitute a slight majority, and the non-Muslim minority population. Malaysia is technically a secular state although religious affiliation with Islam constitutes a core aspect of the construction of identity among the dominant ethno-cultural Malay group. In recent years, the Islamic revival that struck many parts of southeast Asia also affected Malaysia. Strengthening of Sharia courts and the rise of Islamic banking and financial institutions are testimony to the growing importance placed on Islam in Malaysian life. But the seemingly clear lines drawn with regard to Malay identity - to be Malay is to be a Muslim - have become murkier with recent legal disputes such as one concerning custody matters between a mixed-faith marriage (the husband was Hindu and the wife Muslim, and both agreed that the children would be raised Hindu) that did not work out. Such court disputes, highlighting existing tensions between Muslims and the state, have taken place against a backdrop of legal debate about the roles, jurisdictions, and responsibilities of Malaysia's Shariah court system. It

appears that there will be continued discussion over what part the Shariah court system will play, and if indeed Malaysia wants to retain the system alongside the secular courts. Like Indonesia, Malaysia too engages in rigorous debate about the role of Islam in the state's politics, particularly with a major opposition party (the PAS) being Islamically focused. Although only one Malaysian state is under PAS control, its population is subject to seemingly arbitrary application of Shariah law which is resented and feared by its non-Muslim residents. Several members of PAS have been imprisoned under the country's Internal Security Act. The ruling UMNO has gained some electoral mileage out of popularizing Prime Minister Abdullah Badawi's religious credentials, drawing some support from PAS voters who did not like his predecessor Mahathir because of the latter's perceived secular nature. The electoral spats between UMNO and PAS, the promotion by the Malaysian government of Abdullah Badawi's religious credibility and the arrest of PAS members under the Internal Security Act are further examples of local incidents and developments that have served to demonstrate or give emphasis to the tension between Muslims and the Malaysian state.

Singapore's Muslim population is the largest minority in the city state. The mainly Malay Muslim community has been the focus of much attention post September 11, with its government keen to portray the state as a prosperous and endangered secular island at threat from a hostile Muslim sea. The attention has been on the perceived home grown threat the Muslim minority population poses, with the arrest under Singapore's Internal Security Act in 2002 of fifteen local men accused of being members of an al-Qaeda linked group. The government has sought to portray the arrests as justification of its stand on the US-led "war on terror" (Gomez 2004). Prior to the arrests the tension between Muslims in Singapore and the state was evident in the debate over the tudung (the Malay term for headscarf). Then-prime minister Goh Chok Tong said the ban on the tudung in public schools was in the interests of fairness in allowing all the students in public schools to enjoy the same uniform (except for the male members of Singapore's Sikh minority who were allowed to wear turbans to public school). The government tried to explain this seemingly conflicting stand by saying the Sikh exception was a holdover from British colonial times (Singapore Window 2002). In a similar manner to Australia's circumstances, the Muslim community in Singapore found itself at the receiving end of calls to integrate more fully into national life.

What role does the internet play given the existing tensions between Muslims and the state in Indonesia, Australia, Malaysia and Singapore? With reference to the survey results, differences in the freedom accorded to internet users, variances in the size of the Muslim community relevant to the general population of the state, and the political strength or position held by Islam in the country concerned do not appear to impact on the use of the net to discuss issues affecting Muslims locally and globally. Despite differing state attitudes and policies toward internet freedom across the governments of Australia, Indonesia, Malaysia and Singapore, the students surveyed all say the internet is both a means with which they can make contact with other Muslims in the same city or around the world, and a method of discussing political developments to do with Islam and Muslims.

The idea was invoked by these students of the internet being used to imagine a global Muslim community linked by shared values and a fibre optic cable, irrespective of the fact that Indonesian and Australian internet freedom is more extensive than Singapore's or Malaysia's. Neither does the size of the Muslim community (in relation to the general population) appear to matter. Whether they are part of a diaspora, a minority or a majority, the Muslim students argued that they use the internet to obtain and disseminate news relevant to their observance of Islam and/or their interest in Muslim-related matters that are not covered by "traditional" media outlets. The relative political strength of Islam and Muslims within each country studied was not clearly demonstrated by the diversity of opinions and outlets available to members of the ummah. Irrespective of whether Muslims constitute a majority or minority in the country concerned, the internet is used across the board as a means to discuss alternative sources of news related to the Muslim world according to the students who responded to the survey.

The internet appears to both reinforce and reduce the social and political tensions that already exist between Muslims and the state. In the Indonesian, Malaysian and Singaporean situations the internet appears to intensify the Muslim/state conflict through the use of internet publishing mechanisms to challenge and confront the position of the state. This takes place in Australian Muslim cyberspace, but at the same time Australian internet is a means by which Muslim/state tension can be negated. In Indonesia, despite lower rates of internet connectivity compared to other southeast Asian countries, political discourse about Islam and Muslims exists online through the homepages of Muslim student groups, study circles, and Muslim magazines such as Sabili and Era Muslim. The slower expansion of Islamic (and secular) media into Indonesian cyberspace may be linked to the existing freedom and diversity inherent in the country's other media forms. By contrast the strictly regulated Malaysian media has resulted in exponential growth in the Malaysian blogosphere, with political and religious weblogs such as Raj Petra Kamarudin's Malaysia Today (<http://www.malaysia-today.net/index.shtml>) challenging the status quo. The blogs exist in addition to more well known and established news publications with wider audience reach, such as malaysiakini (<http://www.malaysiakini.com/>) which runs news critical of the government, and which has been the subject of police reports and a raid on its offices (Brewer 2003; Chin 2003). Some Malaysian political bloggers have even been acknowledged by international news publications for their contributions to the domestic political debate (Backman 2007) while the government - aware of the potential of bloggers to undermine and counteract the state-owned media's carefully manufactured portrayal of Malaysian society - recently announced laws aimed at clamping down on bloggers. In Australia the rise of Muslim-based web forums and email as sites of discussion and political tools has presented a double-edged sword for Muslims. On the one hand the ability of young Muslims to engage in the political process serve to emphasise the tension that exists between the Muslim minority population and the non-Muslim Australian majority, by eschewing interaction with non-Muslims in favour of Islamic-oriented information consumption. On the other hand, non-Muslims have used the same forums, websites and email lists to make contact with Australian Muslims with the aim of increasing understanding.

Tensions among Muslims

On a global scale tension exists not just between Muslims and the state or Muslims and non-Muslims - but within the world of Islam itself. Muslims are divided along key fault lines involving theology, politics and interpretations of Islamic law. One of the most prominent areas of conflict is the divide between Sufi or “spiritual” Muslims, and Salafi or Wahhabi Muslims (or non-Sufi Muslims accused of such). Sufi characteristics including being part of a tareeqah (“way or method”) while “ma’rifah” means “knowledge” and “haqq” means “truth”. Sufi Muslims delineate between the method and worship of qualified scholars, and the ordinary acts of worship which applicable to Muslims in general. They claim that the ultimate goal is to arrive at the truth, through the proper knowledge of God obtainable by following the “right” method of worship or remembrance (Arif 2005). Non-Sufis find some of the practices of Sufis unacceptable, especially where the act of worship is not specifically sanctioned by the Hadith (sayings of Muhammad) and the Quran - the two fundamentals on which Islamic law is based. The Sufis counter that non-Sufis are too literal in their interpretation of the Hadith and the Quran. Those who disagree with the spiritual version of Islam practiced by the Sufis are often accused of being Salafis or Wahhabis - in reference to the strict interpretation of the religion practiced in parts of the Middle East. The divide between the Sufis and the Salafis/Wahhabis is found in practically every Muslim country today as well as the Muslim diasporic communities of the West” (Knysh 2007: 507).

Saeed (2007) categorises differences between Muslims today as political, legal and theological. The main political divide that exists in Islam is between the Sunni or orthodox Muslims and the Shia - the difference between the two resulting from the political rift that stemmed from the aftermath of the death of Prophet Muhammad. The Shia believed that Muhammad’s successor should have been a blood relative - his cousin Ali - while Sunnis believed that Abu Bakr, Muhammad’s closest companion, had the right to succeed him by virtue of consensus of the Muslim community. Legal issues or issues of jurisprudence have led to four main schools in Sunni Muslim religious scholarship (Hanafi, Maliki, Shafii and Hanbali) while theological differences involving different emphases on the practice of Islam have led to a divide among the Sufi (“spiritual”) and non-Sufi Muslims. Saeed (2007: 396) also alludes to the classification of Muslims in perceived political outlook:

In the modern period, classification of Muslims into modernists and traditionalists has also been common. More recently, terms such as radicals, militants, extremists and moderates have also been used and their meanings are often unclear
(Saeed 2007: 396)

The notion of the followers of Islam being divided by their attitudes to modernity is particularly prevalent in Indonesia, where some Muslims are called “Santris” and differentiated by their lifestyles

having a more intense Islamic influence. By contrast the “Abangans” are characterized by their practice of a “folk” version of Islam, and are based in the inland areas of Java. The Abangan mix religion with pre-Islamic influences like animism and Hinduism. The Santris are located on the coastal areas of Java and are thought to be more devout in their practice of Islam. Within the Santris there are further loose affiliations: east and central Javanese Santri are traditionalist - more spiritually inclined and influenced by Sufi practices - the Sufi interpretation of Islam was thought to suit the cultural background of rural Javanese, given the influences of Hinduism and Buddhism (the pre-Islamic religions which most Javanese had at one time adhered to). There are also modernist educated urban Javanese Santri Muslims “sought to purify Indonesian Islam from its pre-Islamic influences” (Kadir 2004: 205). These represent two strands of mainstream Islamic thought in Indonesia.

Given these tensions that exist within the world of Islam among its followers, what role does the internet play? It appears that the internet serves to emphasise the differences between different Muslim persuasions. Muslims of certain schools congregate on different internet sites where the specific nature of the communication medium may on the surface appear to encourage and facilitate open discussion between different Muslim groups but in reality highlight the theological, political and legal faultlines between them. For example, two popular Muslim Australian web forums have decidedly different theological inclinations - the Muslim Village forum is skewed towards mainly Sydney based members who are practicing “spiritual” or Sufi inspired Islam although non-Sufis are certainly active members, while the Aussie Muslims forum has more Melbourne based users, is less influenced by Sufi thought and accused of being Salafi in orientation although conversely Sufis are also represented in the membership. Going by the content analysis of Australian Muslim email lists and web forums, the internet appears to facilitate far more robust discussion about the tensions that exist among Australian Muslims than is offered by the offline world. The lack of non-verbal cues and the availability and reach of the medium combine to present to the online Muslim an opportunity to thrash out differing viewpoints on the intricacies of Muslim belief and practice.

The (often unintentional) lack of informed knowledge among non-Muslims about Islam is why Muslims turn to their own media and information sources, that don’t depict them in the terrorist-misogynistic-reactionary frame of mind. In the Australian context it is possible to find various email lists or email lists fulfilling different functions for the Muslim community. They are a source of alternative viewpoints. They provide counterattack against the mainstream media. They are a resource for practical information for Australian Muslims. They provide access to news from overseas that an Australian Muslim would be hard pressed to find on Channel Nine or in the Herald Sun. In addition, email lists allow Muslims to establish inter- and intra- community contacts both domestically and with overseas Muslims; and they are sites of discourse on matters important to the community. The last two functions can be seen in the way Muslims have turned to the internet for matrimonial services and the heated discussions that took place in cyber gatherings of Muslims following the release of a

controversial book by a little known Sufi sect, and an unpopular decision by the peak Islamic organisation in the country.

In the contemporary world, the Islamic faith is constantly in the spotlight. Although the mainstream media is slowly improving in the fairness of 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.

Tensions between Muslims and non-Muslims

The December 2005 racial conflict between Anglo Australians and Lebanese Australians that took place Cronulla Beach, Sydney, illustrated the tensions that existed between Muslims in Australia and non-Muslims (White 2006). Arising from an altercation between Lebanese Muslim visitors to the beach and lifeguards, public discourse focused on the role of short text messages and talkback radio in encouraging the conflict. In media coverage of events at Cronulla beach, notions of national identity were used as a powerful paradigm for reading the riots - the location was referred to on talkback as “our (Anglo Australian) beach”, a place from which it was ok to exclude members of the Lebanese Muslim population. Many saw the riots as a challenge to the politics of the multiculturalism - proof that pluralism, tolerance, cultural diversity, and the politics of inclusion were merely hollow words. The arguments were that the riots indicated a failure of Australia’s multicultural policy and demonstrated that cultural diversity and tolerance were ineffective and discouraged national unity, ignoring the fact that

“multiethnic, multiracial societies are not geared towards unavoidable conflict. For that to happen active choices must be made; one set of options adopted over another; certain things said or not said; positions actively staked out; exclusions and inclusions clearly demarcated”

(Perera 2002: 23)

The tension between Sydney’s Muslim and non-Muslim populations was heightened due to the fact that in the aftermath of Cronulla, Australian Prime Minister John Howard maintained the stand he established shortly after his election in 1996 when he refused to condemn Pauline Hanson for her perceived anti-Asian comments in federal parliament. Howard stubbornly maintained that there was not an element of racism in the riots, even when people involved themselves admitted the racist attitudes present. In addition, he refused to condemn talkback host Alan Jones’ on-air encouragement to “true Australians” to “reclaim our beach”, even when Jones was subsequently found by the country’s broadcasting authorities to have breached racial vilification laws by allowing anti-Arab

comments from his callers on air. Altogether, this exacerbated the already tense atmosphere in Sydney between Muslims and non-Muslims. It is clear that even without the internet, the media played a crucial role in the situation at Cronulla. Pictures of the riot were beamed around the world yet taking the issue in perspective four people had injuries and were taken to hospital. The high rate of unemployment and racism or discrimination faced by Lebanese Muslims did not rate a mention in most media with few exceptions (eg O'Neill 2006), rather the majority of mainstream media outlets demonstrated a lack of comprehension about Islamic religion and culture and chose to sensationalise the matter as an inevitable us-and-them conflict.

While the Australian government officially endorses a policy of multiculturalism it is perceived by many commentators to engage in the practices of divisive politics. The distrust apparent between members of the Muslim and non-Muslim communities was made worse by comments by the country's prime minister and the treasurer in the press that told Australians that if people want to come and to live in Australia, they have to accept Australian values or leave. Unfortunately exactly what constituted Australian values was not defined in public discourse. The Cronulla riots illustrate the fact that the majority of Australians are not aware of what it means to be Muslim. The tensions between Muslims and non-Muslims centre on the fear of Muslims fuelled by the media and government - for example by playing the race card for electoral purposes, linking applicants of asylum with terrorism and desperate people who would throw their children into the sea, linking the Sydney gang rapes to the whole of the Lebanese Muslim community even after the head of NSW Crime Statistics denied such a connection (Collins 2003). What seemed to be apparent from the riots was that the average non-Muslim fears Muslims yet did not know them. In addition to incidents like Cronulla, bombings committed by Muslims have always resulted in increased tension between Muslims and non-Muslims. After the September 11 2001 attacks in the US, the Gulf War in 1991, and the Bali bombings a sharp increase in anti-Muslim attacks took place.

Like Australia, violence between Muslims and non-Muslims takes place in Indonesia - with far more deadly results. The sectarian violence that exists in strife-torn Maluku province results more from a tit-for-tat desire to avenge the latest killing or atrocity committed by the other side rather than an ideological hatred between Muslims and Christians. Before the recent spate of violence Muslim and Christian villagers had lived peacefully side by side by generations. The aggravated conflict between the two has raised the questions about the ability and the commitment of the armed forces of the Indonesian government to contain the religious extremism that threatens to fracture the archipelago, already threatened by various separatist movements. The religious violence between Christians and Moslems in the main Island of Maluku of Indonesia has caused thousands of deaths and nearly half a million people of both faiths to flee for their lives. Some pinpoint the violence between Muslims and Christians as dating back to a fight between a Muslim conductor of a bus and a Christian passenger in January 2002. The fight has forced the population to regroup in villages and neighborhoods and the province is now religiously divided.

The conflict was aggravated by the arrival of 3,000 Muslim militants from other parts of Indonesia who believe they are on an assignment to defend the Maluku Muslims and undertake a crusade against Christians. Although Muslims form about 90 percent of Indonesia's 210 million people, Christians are in the majority in many parts of Maluku. The Indonesian army has been accused of doing little to stop fighting and at times, to take part in it. The Maluku conflict joins a list of prominent terror attacks in causing Christian and other non-Muslim Indonesians to be fearful of the Muslim majority in Indonesia: October 2002 in Bali, August 2003 in the Marriott Hotel in Jakarta, September 2004 in the Australian Embassy, and October 2005 in Bali again. These incidents have shown the presence and the influence of fundamentalists and terrorists in Indonesia, and convinced authorities of the serious domestic and international threat posed by terrorism. Current president Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono has demonstrated a more nuanced comprehension of the threat to Indonesia and the region than his predecessors and has promised that his government will take effective action against domestic extremist movements.

A high profile case that illustrates current debates on freedom of worship in Malaysia focuses on Lina Joy, a woman who was originally born to Malay Muslim and raised as a Muslim, but wanted to convert to Christianity and found various legal obstacles to her wish to live as a Christian. She wanted to drop Islam from her identification papers and be listed as a Christian - something that is impossible to do for Malaysians who are born Muslim. Unfortunately for Lina this meant she could not marry, because Malaysian authorities would not marry her to a non-Muslim. Her case has been marked as a test for religious pluralism in Malaysia, and highlights the matter of freedom of worship in the Muslim-majority country, especially when comes to Malays. Adherents of other faiths can convert to other religions but not Muslims, who are believed to be apostates and punished under Malaysia's Shariah courts if they wish to choose another religion.

In addition to debates on freedom of religion, policies that favor the pribumi or indigenous Malaysians have caused tension between the Muslim and non-Muslim population. In spite of the Muslim majority, Malaya is not an Islamic state. Instead Malaysia is theoretically a Malay-dominated plural society where the liberty to practice religions is offered to all (Shamsul 1998). This conception of indigenous Malay hegemony is a result of the negotiations that resulted in the political formation of the current ruling United Malays National Organisation in the post-colonial period (1957). Non-Malay ethnic groups such as the Chinese and Indians were offered citizenship and other rights such as economic and residency rights as well as the liberty to preserve and practice their religion, culture and language. In return, Malay Muslims retained their sultans, a special political position, their language (as the official language), and its religion. In addition special rights were offered to protect the Malays in the controversial Article 153 of the Malaysian constitution. According to this article, those that profess the religion of Islam speak the Malay language, and conforms to Malay customs and traditions are permitted to enjoy special benefits in three specific areas: services to the community, education, and

business licenses, without damaging the rights of other ethnic groups. Thus it is important to accentuate that Malaya is founded "not in individual rights but what political theoreticians have come to refer to as ethnically differentiated citizenship" (Hefner 2001: 29). The state of religious pluralism in Malaya depends firmly on the interpretation of the importance of Article 153.

The constitution of Malaysia recognizes the special position of Islam as the religion of the state, the special position of the Malay, and their rights as the indigenous (bumiputera) population. The ethnic-based initiative of affirmative action, the New Economic Policy of 1970-1990, was applied after the May 1969 racial riots. The NEP is commonly attributed to Malay resentment of its socioeconomic marginalization in spite of its position as the dominant ethnic group in Malaysia. During the time of the riots, bumiputeras controlled 2.4% of the corporate sector compared to 22.8% for the Chinese community. UMNO as the dominant member of the Barisan National ruling coalition recognised what it saw as the critical need to restore its image as the "protector" of Malay interests and the interests of the bumiputera, alleviate their economic frustration and to recover its political position, weakened after the poor electoral performance of 1969. Although the NEP has generally been acknowledged as succeeding in terms of its affirmative action policies, it has also been criticised for alienating the non-Malay Muslim members of Malaysian society. Chinese resentment towards the NEP is demonstrated by the lack of support among the Malaysian Chinese community for the national system of education, preferring instead to send its children to Chinese secondary and primary schools. There is a perceived Islamization in the predominantly Malay-Muslim state educational providers. Limits on the study of Mandarin and Tamil to outside of normal school hours has also caused resentment among the non-Muslim minority population in Malaysia. With the majority of Chinese children attending Chinese schools, ghettoised systems of education run side by side with national schools becoming Malay enclaves. This has resulted in Malaysia's education system being promoted in public discourse as a nation-building tool, but one that rests on notions of ethnicity (Brown 2007).

In Singapore tension exists between the minority Muslim population and the Chinese non-Muslim majority stemming back from the 1969 racial riots that also affected Malaysia. There exists a perception of Muslims based on stereotypes such as "the lazy Malay". Singapore's Muslim community was governed by laws, which differed in many ways to those governing the rest of the population (for example, excluding Malay Muslims from achieving higher ranks in the armed forces). This has given rise to the coexistence of two societies – one Buddhist, the other Muslim. This situation has led in turn to discrimination against Muslims in their public and private lives. Similar to the Australian situation, calls for moderate Muslims to make their voices heard as a way of proving their national loyalty have also been heard in Singapore, where the Muslim minority has been asked to reclaim the agenda from the 'fundamentalists'. Singapore, as a Chinese (and largely non-Muslim) dominated state in the heart of the world's most populous Muslim region, has not been immune to the effects of September 11, the Bali bombing, and other acts of terrorism that have been construed by the local media as the frightening outcome of religious zeal out of control. The controversy over the tudung

or hijab, further illustrated the seemingly isolated position of the Muslim population in Singapore. The call to be moderation was seen as the solution.

With these tensions between Muslims and non-Muslims the internet served to reinforce religious battle lines through allowing a greater number of people to take part in active discussions online. The nature of online communication is not geared to focus on differences between Muslims and non-Muslims; however internet users gravitate towards others who are perceived to share values, viewpoints and outlooks. In doing so the opportunities for communities of differing orientations are few and far between. With respect to the survey results, the use of the internet to defend Islam was cited by students in all four countries studied. The internet has made it easier to do this with its ability to allow users to communicate across the world, actively seeking out information and responding to it. But ironically, at the same time it has also facilitated the creation of cyber-ghettoes where Muslims feel they can openly engage with each other away from non-Muslims.

Conclusion

The thesis proposed that the internet raises significant questions for Muslims about whether it acts to the benefit, or to the detriment, of Islam in the way it allows Muslims to represent themselves and their way of life. It also asked in what ways the internet could be used for the benefit of Muslims if indeed it could be used for the benefit of Muslims.

The timing of the thesis meant that political and military developments in Australia, the region, and the rest of the world contextualized the research which was conducted during the first five years after September 11. This was a time of tremendous upheaval and turmoil on a global scale in which Muslims and Islam were very much playing an important role in public discourse. The composition of online Muslim presence in the form of publications and forums represents a new type of imagined community, reflecting Islam's idealized border-less vision: instead of national location as a determinant for audience composition, media audiences instead comprise a niche market whose members are drawn together by shared interests, beliefs and outlooks. This is illustrated by 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. These developments are illustrations of the rapid changes in the construction of audiences who are imagined communities, and in the output of news and information received by audiences.

After elaborating on the differences between the national situations in Australia, Indonesia, Malaysia and Singapore, the thesis argued that four key parameters contributed to the process of identity formation and negotiation among young Muslims online. These four parameters focused on 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. The thesis 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).

In order to test how the four parameters identified above, and how they modify, and appear in, the online lives of young Muslims in Australia and three of its southeast Asian neighbours, the thesis attempted to address the following issues as the specific aims of the research.

- To document the role played by the internet in the daily life of Muslims.
- To assess what differences, if any, existed in how Muslims in four countries used the internet.
- To measure the impact the internet had had on the representation of Muslims
- To evaluate the political and social nuances of internet usage by Muslims on a local, national and regional scale

The argument that the thesis proposed is that observable variances in internet use by Muslim communities can be attributed to factors such as the four parameters identified in the preliminary chapters of the thesis: 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.

The thesis provided a literature review that began by looking at the paradigms used to assess the impact of the internet on communication and community. The literature review also looked at the research that had been done from a cultural studies angle that discusses a supposed incompatibility between Islam and the West. From these two perspectives the literature review then explored how the theme of internet usage by Muslim communities has been addressed, and suggested a new way of researching this topic that took into account differences in theological standpoints and interpretations of Islam, which are reflected in the viewpoints of Muslim communities throughout the world. The thesis' literature review argued that the internet is one way in which these differences can be discussed and drawn out, and it is also one way in which common ground between Muslims can be discovered. This conclusion can be drawn from a look at the two interconnected fields of research that lead to a study of the Islamic presence online: how the internet had changed the way human beings communicated and formed communities, and how the Islamic world and the Western world are framed with regards to common ground and differences. The literature review examined research that explored how modern-day Muslims were quick to adapt the internet and understand how it could bring Muslims closer (both spiritually and geographically) and how it could also increase the level of engagement of Muslims within political and social contexts, especially in situations where Muslims comprised a minority.

This approach was reflected in research that focused on the use of the internet (primarily through web sites and email lists) by specific Muslim diaspora or minority communities within Western countries such as the United Kingdom, the United States, Denmark and the Netherlands. Most of the studies have involved content analysis of listserv postings and website content, or interviews with young Muslim representatives of these minority communities living in secular non-Muslim countries. The literature review argued that regarding Islam online, there was not yet a cross-border comparison of internet usage among Muslims in nation-states in which a range of political systems are used; where differences could be observed in the proportion of the Islamic population and the space accorded to Muslim-related issues; where socioeconomic disparities can be discerned; and where variances exist with regards to media industries, freedom and policies. It proposed that this thesis would further reveal the nuances of internet usage among both Muslims living in countries where the majority of the population are followers of Islam, and Muslim minority communities living in secular Western or non-Western countries, and attempt to see if differences in social, economic and political situations faced by Muslims moderates and adjusts their internet use.

Through the method of a quantitative online survey, the thesis discovered that with internet usage dominated predominantly by young people in all four countries studied, the material used as the basis for the research reflected a bias towards young people. There were three sources of data for the thesis - in addition to the online survey analysed quantitatively involving Muslim student respondents from Australia and southeast Asia, the thesis also made use of information from Australian Muslim web forums and mailing lists analysed qualitatively in a content analysis, and interviews conducted with Muslim women on their reactions to the email forwards following the September 11 attacks.

Earlier in the thesis it was proposed that four parameters constrained and directed 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 sought to test whether these parameters are determinant in the way suggested, and how variations country by country affect the way in which the Internet is used.

The thesis hypothesized that government policies on internet freedom will through constraint 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 thesis hypothesized 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.

An online survey was selected as one part of the thesis' methodology due to the benefits of a fast response time, the ability to engage respondents in four different countries, and the exclusion of interviewer bias from the data collected. The results of online the survey gave an indication of the purposes to which Muslims put the internet - purposes that reflect the themes of practicing Islam online in the four countries studied.

In the Australian context the thesis also looked at the various email lists or email lists fulfilling different functions for the Muslim community. In the content analysis that was the second source of data for the thesis, it was found that these email lists and web forums are a source of alternative viewpoints; provide counterattack against the depiction of Islam as found in the Australian mainstream media; provide resources for practical information for Australian Muslims; and provide access to news from overseas that an Australian Muslim could not find in the output of mainstream broadcasters or the major newspapers. In addition, the thesis found that email lists and web forums allowed Muslims to establish inter- and intra- community contacts both domestically and with overseas Muslims; and they act as sites of discourse on matters important to the community. The thesis explored these last two functions by case studies on how Muslims in Australia have turned to the internet for matrimonial services and the heated discussions that took place in cyber gatherings of Muslims following the release of a controversial book by a little known Sufi sect, and an unpopular decision by the peak Islamic organisation in the country.

The thesis' third and last source of data comprised the views of young Muslim women in Australia and southeast Asia, on an email forward that was circulated after the September 11 2001 terrorist attacks. The thesis argued that email offered many benefits and distinguishing features to users including speed and global reach, and that prior to the use of email marginalised groups such as Muslim women rarely got a chance to have their voices heard in the realm of the public sphere. The thesis proposed that this disparity has been reduced in some respects by the internet and email.

Taking these sources of data into consideration a summary follows of the results of the thesis' research.

- Earlier, the thesis had hypothesized that each country's policies on internet freedom would affect the level of free expression and explorations of religious identity online. However, despite the fact that Malaysia and Singapore have a more conservative approach to internet freedom than Indonesia and Australia, the Muslim students in all four countries studied say they use the internet to thrash out various viewpoints regarding Islamic teachings and practice;

and to defend Islam through online discussions. In the content analysis it 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 through web forums and email lists.

- The thesis had also hypothesized that each society's manifestation of religious freedom and in particular the public expression of symbolic aspects of Islamic identity would affect the reasons for internet usage. The results of the online survey responses suggested that the internet represents a source of practical information for Muslims living in non-established minority groups, and that their use of the internet was more utilitarian than that of Muslims living in countries where Islam was practiced by 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 actively build networks using the internet. The idea of the global Muslim community being maintained through email and websites was invoked in discussions by young Muslim women of an email forward sent in the aftermath of the 9-11 attacks, depicting a "Taliban dating agency". The women 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.
- The thesis hypothesized that Islam's political strength within each country studied would be demonstrated by the diversity of opinions and outlets available to members of the ummah. But the survey results suggested 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 according to the students who responded to the survey. From the content analysis, it seems the postings to the MuslimVillage forum and the Islam-info and Australian Muslim Media mailing lists or email lists illustrate the way the Australian Muslim community online uses the internet to disseminate opinions about the news distributed by mainstream traditional media outlets, that provides a form of rebuttal against the ways in which the mainstream media portrays Islam and Muslims.
- The thesis also hypothesized that social class and economic position of users will affect their internet access and use, reflecting the specific characteristics of the digital divide in each society. The 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).

This thesis argued that the exploration and construction of online Islamic identity among young Muslims in Australia and three neighboring southeast Asian regions is influenced by various factors such as the political system employed by the nation-state, the economic infrastructure and availability of internet access, the state's policies towards communication industries, and the position within the state in which Muslims and Islam exist. The thesis looked at whether this contention has been borne

out by the results of the online survey, the analysis of the email lists and web forums, and the interviews with Muslim women about an email forwarded after the September 11 attacks. From these results we can conclude that:

1. The size of the Muslim community does not matter, in terms of whether the internet is used as alternative media for Muslims. The two factors that predict the use of online communication by Muslim students to find alternative Islamic-related news are firstly whether or not the existing media environment is tightly controlled, as in the case of Singapore and Malaysia, and secondly whether or not the Muslim population constitutes a minority, as in the case of Australia.
2. The size of the Muslim community and the strength of Islam in the given society do impact 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.
3. The internet is a means with which Muslim students can 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.
4. 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. In the process the adaptation of the internet has resulted in tensions being created, exacerbated or maintained - tensions between the state and Muslims, tensions among Muslims within a state or within an electronic sphere, and tensions between Muslims and non-Muslims.

The three main limitations to this thesis' account of internet usage by Muslims in Australia and three southeast Asian nations are linguistic, chronological and geographical limitations. The websites used as the basis for the content analysis are largely in English. The topic of the research is one that is constantly changing. And a third limitation concerns the geographic area chosen, which are Australia and three neighbouring southeast Asian countries.

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.

The internet has also been used as a political lobbying tool for Muslims. Email operations urging Muslims in Australia to get in touch with members of Parliament, or keeping Muslims abreast of campaigns and events in which they can take part, are evidence of the political nuances of internet usage by Muslims. Publications advising Muslims of their rights are often distributed through email lists or are put on websites for downloading. As an alternative media form, the internet provides Muslims with viewpoints that are often in opposition with the values presented in off-line, mainstream media. It could be said that there exists on the internet news that comes from an Islamic perspective, and that the internet has made it possible for such news to gain a wider audience through dissemination via email lists and forums on which Muslims and non-Muslims gather. In cases such as coverage of the Arab-Israeli conflict or the US war on Iraq, opinions that reflect the viewpoints of Muslims are circulated through mailing lists and can be found on specific websites. The internet has also had a considerable impact on the representation of Muslims. Through enabling Muslims to publish the viewpoints of Islamic writers, scholars and academics and through establishing links with non-Islamic media, the internet has assisted in the provision of positive public relations for Muslims. Due to differences in media and political environments, as well as differences in economic status and development, Muslims surveyed in Australia, Indonesia, Malaysia and Singapore differ slightly in their usage of the internet.

More Indonesian and Malaysian Muslims who were surveyed stated that usage of the internet was a secondary activity, but more Muslims surveyed in Australia and Singapore said they used the internet as a primary activity. As a religious minority, Australian Muslims who were surveyed stated that the

internet provided services not readily available off-line, such as seeking information on hadith or providing a means for young Muslims to meet potential spouses.

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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