Islamic Communities and Media Activism in Australia

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Abstract Aljazeera is well known as an Arab television and media network that has its headquarters in Qatar. For the U.S. Aljazeera is a 'terrorist network'. For Islamic communities it is now seen, ironically, as 'U.S. controlled'. Islamic audiences in Australia use Aljazeera and CNN media but those audiences also use emerging community media in Arab countries as an antidote to both Western and Arab press. This paper reports on the results of an ARC study into Islamic community reactions to Australian media coverage of terrorism. Islamic citizens in Australia are proactive in using P2P media such as blogging and in actively seeking sources of information that give alternative views on both Australian and Arab media.

Aljazeera has amassed a reputation in the West as an Arab television and media network. For the United States Aljazeera has been denounced as a 'terrorist network'. Ironically, some members of Muslim communities in Australian now see al Jazeera as a US controlled institution and are turning to alternative forms of Arab media. Islamic audiences use al Jazeera and CNN media but those audiences also use emerging community media in Arab countries as an antidote to both Western and Arab press. This paper provides an overview of Islamic community use of traditional media and new media to actively seek sources of information that provide alternative views as well as communicative spaces for democratic dialogue.

Media Activism

Media activism sounds like something you would not want your kids to be involved in - the phrase hints at questioning authority and rocking the boat. But as Mueller and Page (2004) point out, media activism is about becoming an informed citizen and this has always been at the heart of democracy. Abusive control of information is possible in a modern democracy and a modern dictatorship. Community media, radical media and marginalised media are all attempts to provide communicative spaces for democratic dialogue and diversification of sources of opinion. Habermas (1984) made is axiomatic that people act in ways that distort communication but essentially humans want to know the truth. He operationalised the idea of the public sphere as institutionally guaranteed spaces that guarantee freedom of speech without force or coercion. In what follows, however, the authors will show that these spaces do not have to be guaranteed for people to want to create them. A public broadcasting service is a 'public sphere' in Habermas's sense, but the *activity* of pursuing a public sphere is also a profound part of any theory of human communication.

As will become clear, the activity of pursuing a public sphere, as Habermas knew, is surrounded with difficulties. Australian Islamic communities are in a double bind. They know that public opinion is against them and distrust Western media that has, for the most part, perpetuated a historically inherited stereotype of Muslims as violent terrorists. At the same time they distrust key Arab media that they think are Western or Israeli

influenced. The most extreme media then become acceptable as an alternative.

Al Jazeera

The first time most Australians heard about al Jazeera was on October 7 2001 when U.S, British and Australian forces, as part of the so-called 'coalition of the willing' initiated the 'war on terror' with an assault on Afghanistan. The timing of al Jazeera's broadcast of a videotaped statement by the alleged mastermind of September 11, Osama Bin Laden, praising the attacks on the World Trade Centre and the Pentagon, brought condemnation from the White House. The US Secretary of State, Colin Powell, attacked al-Jazeera for broadcasting "vitriolic, irresponsible kinds of statements" (Moran 2005). Al Jazeera quickly became likened to former Communist mouthpiece Pravda and Hitler's National Zeitung.

The CIA expressed concern that Bin Laden might be using the videotaped statements to transmit coded messages. This culminated in the revelation that the Bush administration had in fact planned to bomb al Jazeera (Maguire & Lines 2005). In 2001 the US bombed the Al Jazeera Kabul office and in 2003 the Baghdad office was attacked by a US missile. Both attacks were claimed to be accidental. Then on 22 November 2005, British tabloid *The Daily Mirror* claimed access to a 'top secret' memo that revealed a plot by President Bush to bomb al Jazeera headquarters in Doha and which shed doubt on the US claim that the attack on the Kabul office was a military error. Prime Minister Tony Blair quickly dismissed the claim as a "conspiracy theory" (2005).

The history of al Jazeera can be traced to the demise of the BBC's Arabic service in 1996. The BBC partnership with a Saudi Arabian company was shut down amid attempts by Saudi Arabia to censor a documentary on executions. The void created by the BBC was quickly filled by al Jazeera, a satellite channel funded by the Emir of Qatar and other Arab moderates who believed in the need for uncensored news for the Middle East. For many al Jazeera would fulfil the promise of uncensored news devoid of and unencumbered by conspiracy theories and anti-Israeli sentiment that characterises much of the state-controlled networks in the Middle East. Despite this, there are those who take a more critical view of al Jazeera's mission to air stories about the corruption of governments in Egypt, Saudi Arabia, Syria and many other parts of the Middle East embodied succinctly in its motto "We get bot sides of the story." Critics of al Jazeera claim a salient absence of stories that expose corruption in Qatar and that, despite its purported status as an independent news network, al Jazeera is subject to the same kind of state-controls and censorships as many other Middle Eastern networks.

Al Jazeera has met with resistance from both the US and Arab regimes. Kuwaiti officials protested against its pro-Iraqi stance, Saudi Arabian officials protested against anti-Islamic programming and Yasser Arafat frequently protested against its interviews with militant Islamist Palestinian groups. In 2004, the Iraqi interim government announced a one-month closure of al Jazeera's Baghdad office amid claims by Iraqi officials that the station was advocating violence "inciting hatred and problems and racial tensions." (Aljazeera vows to defy Iraq ban, 2004). The ban followed accusations from US Defence Secretary, Donald Rumsfeld that al Jazeera was inciting hatred of the US in the Middle East. American condemnation of al Jazeera as a terrorist

network suddenly shifted in 2005 when Washington granted interviews to al Jazeera with Powell and Rice, interviews that they had long denied, and with rumours that the US would even consider buying time on al Jazeera to broadcast political messages. In another twist rumours have emerged that al Jazeera has an agreement to supply CNN with all video messages from known terrorist cells prior to broadcasting them on its network. The irony of the newfound friendship between the US and al Jazeera has not been lost on viewers of al Jazeera.

Islam goes online

Television stations like al Jazeera have captured large international audiences. Arab and Islamic media, however, have become extremely diverse, with the internet providing voice for both traditional and non-traditional views. Islam came on-line through what Anderson (2003) calls "technological adepts" who have the 4 skills to bring interests they have as Muslims to the new medium. This includes students who go abroad to study, émigré professionals, political exiles and labor migrants. These adepts put up texts of the Qur'an and electronic discussion forums on Islam and related subjects that engaged Muslims. What emerged was an arena of contest, challenges to authority and responses - or as Anderson (1999) says - "the real diversity of the Muslim world and Muslim opinion."

An example of a middle-ground Islamic portal is the4 islamonline.net site produced in Qatar with content created in Cairo. Islamonline.net includes religious lessons and sermons but also instructional material for children and services which provide interaction directly with sheikhs or with databases of fatwa, other advice, religious lessons, sermons, hajj guides, health information, entertainment, personal testimonials and interviews with public figures. The site draws an audience interested in lifestyles that they cannot find at home.

Islamic portals, therefore, tend not to be tied to existing institutions, even though traditional Islamic web sites still exist. On the Internet people can find4 alternative sheikhs who speak to their situation and provide an Islamic expression not available at their neighborhood mosque or from local sheikhs. "Their religion does not become private, but4 transferred to another public and style of interaction" (1999).

Australian Muslims

How do diasporic Australian Muslims engage with Australian and Arab media? Like their Arab counterparts are they also highly selective in their choices of sources?

The authors in research on an Australian Research Council (ARC) project *Australian responses to the images and discourses of terrorism and the other: establishing a metric of fear to assist communities* interviewed Islamic communities in Western Australia in order to gain an insight into perceptions of media and their representations. One of the authors, a Muslim, allowed entry into both male and female groups of varying age groups. The focus groups with Muslim communities included Muslim men and women born in Australia, Palestine, Jordan, Indonesia, Malaysia, South Africa, England, Pakistan, Afghanistan, Iraq and Egypt reflecting the Muslim population in Western Australia. The following accounts provide a context for understanding Muslim constructions of Arab and Western popular media.

Interviews revealed that many Muslims harbour suspicions about the popular perception of al Jazeera as the single source of unbiased news in the Middle East. As one participant commented:

"But you look at Al Jazeera they talk in the same tongue as the Western media [but] in our language."

While the US has focussed on al Jazeera and its influence in Middle Eastern media, little attention had been given to the Lebanese television station al Manar run by Hezbollah and accessible to much of the Middle East via satellite. Al Manar, which literally translates as "the beacon" in Arabic began broadcasting via satellite in 2000. Much like al Jazeera, al Manar broadcasts images of Iraqi suffering under the hands of the coalition. Unlike al Jazeera these images are formatted into video clips accompanied by music and lyrics such as "we do not fear America". Despite political pressure including a decision by the US to list al Manar as a terrorist organisation in December 2004, just one week after a French ban on the station because its programming had "a militant perspective with anti-Semitic connotations", al Manar continues to broadcast videos depicting the US as the "mother of terrorism". In one particularly graphic video, the Statue of Liberty rises from the depths of the sea, wielding a knife in place of the torch and dripping in blood, her face altered to resemble a skull. As she rises out of the sea accompanied by music resembling a funeral march the following words in Arabic are emblazoned across the screen:

On the dead bodies of millions of native Americans
And through the enslavement of tens of millions Africans
The US rose
It pried into the affairs of most countries in the world

After an extensive list of countries impacted by US foreign policy including China, Japan Congo, Vietnam, Peru, Laos, Libya and Guetamala, the video comes to a gruelling halt with the words "America owes blood to all of humanity". Another video juxtaposes images of Bush with Hitler with the caption "History repeats itself". One website run by the Coalition Against Media Terrorism refers to al Manar as "the beacon of hatred" and applauds the decisions by the French and US governments to ban the station. Al Manar defended itself against the bans stating on its website that they are attempts "to terrorise and silence thoughts that are not in line with the US and Israeli policies." The station continues on its mission "to carry the message of defending our peoples' rights, holy places and just causes … within internationally agreed professional laws and standards."

While al Manar has been accused of flogging Iraqi propaganda by broadcasting graphic images of civilian casualties and has incurred bans from France and the US on the premise that it incites hatred and terrorism, it is arguable that the videos al Manar broadcasts are no more provocative than some of the reports in liberal media outlets. The Socialist Alliance Statement on the 9/11 attacks for example condemns "the hypocrisy and arrogance of the US political leadership and its allies in Australia" citing the impact of US foreign policy on countries including Iraq, East Timor, the Balkans, Palestine, the Congo, Central America and Afghanistan. The particular brand of propaganda employed by al Manar has resulted in its gaining popularity among diasporic Muslim communities who no longer trust al Jazeera as a viable source of objective news.

"And then you look again at something like al Manar who talks of their own tongue. They do not use the other media's ideas. They have been attacked by the Australians, been attacked by the Israelis, and they have their own opinion."

The growing distrust of al Jazeera and the rising popularity of al Manar among Muslims in Australia is closely related to the perception that al Jazeera has been priveliged over other media sources because of a close affiliation with the US. This is particularly reflected in perceptions of the Iraq war coverage where some indicated that the ability of al Jazeera journalists to infiltrate areas where journalists from al Manar did not have access. In interviews with Muslim women in Perth, the participants stated that al Jazeera was losing the trust of Muslims because of a perceived affiliation with the US. The following excerpt from interviews with Muslim women demonstrates this:

"Group: But lots of people don't believe in media even for example Al Jazeera. Some people don't believe in Jazeera and they think that it's led by America even, yes ... the tongue of them.

Moderator: Of America?

> *G: Yes … because Manar is the one who most people believe in*
> *M: So al Jazeera has access to more places than Manar has?*
> *G: Yes ... and some people believe that if al Jazeera has this access then al Jazeera can't be against the US.*
> *M: There must be some reason behind it?*
> *G: Yes, some people talk about the reason and they think that al Jazeera is owned by an Israel company and Israel has a hand, the upper hand over America. Who rules America? The Israelis. So this mystery - how can the al Jazeera media people get to these places and get this information without being touched or without being scratched while others can't? Because they are protected and they have their own access that others don't have.*
> *G: This at the end means that lots of people can't believe or trust media.*
> *G: No trust anymore."*

Disengagement with Western media is widespread among members of diasporic Muslim communities who increasingly feel that the media institutions are motivated by an agenda that includes profit and the perpetuation of a negative stereotype of Muslims both in Australia and around the globe, particularly in relation to Middle Eastern affairs. The media coverage of the September 11 attacks and media reports following the attacks were singled out by Western Australian Muslims for being biased and for perpetuating fear among the broader community of Muslims in Australia. As one participant commented:

"The media has directed the Westerners that it is the Muslims who are behind it [9/11] and unfortunately the people start looking at you like 'oh, you're the guilty one'. The law says you are innocent until proven guilty and it has changed that rule by saying you are guilty until proven innocent. So basically we were victimised and anything that happens around the world now, any attack, any thing, and the fingers are pointed at us no matter what."

Mainstream media were particularly criticised for the absence of any plural and objective analysis of the September 11 attacks and for decontextualising the attacks, presenting them without precedent or cause:

"If you look at the IRA when they were interviewed there was a cause, if you were looking at the bombings of all the abortion clinics there is a cause. I

haven't seen any mainstream media go back and say what is the genesis or what is the reason for these attacks? Therefore we get a very technical report on the attack but none has dug deep to say this is the reason.   I mean if you start taking some of the actions of some of the groups against the developed nations of the world you get a reason. Some of them, at least ,we know what they're trying to achieve."

Muslims interviewed also questioned political control of the media and indicated that opposition and distrust of certain media institutions including al Jazeera is closely linked to perceptions and understandings of the political affiliations of those institutions. Interestingly, this analysis was not extended to al Manar that has strong political affiliations to Hezbollah and has, since its inception, been presented as the voice of the militant organisation. The station is well known for its pro-Palestinian agenda and Shiite agenda. Muslims interviewed verbalised this:

"But also we have to ask the question, how much information does the media actually have access to? Because maybe they, the government, is keeping information away from the media, so the media is just reporting what they think or what they have to. The media is very much against Muslims and Muslims also have to ask the question what is the media? It is non- Muslim, so of course they're going to take it from that perspective so we can't actually expect the media to take it from our perspective because they're not Muslims they don't have empathy with us because they don't understand us."

The lack of critical analysis of al Manar in comparison to al Jazeera can, at least in part, be attributed to the fact that al Manar supports many of the opinions of Muslims in Australia with regard to the multitude of theories surrounding September 11, its causes and its perpetrators. The interviews with members of Muslim communities revealed a popular perception that September 11 is part of a bigger US agenda to control the Middle East. Some of the theories verbalised during the interviews included a belief that the CIA was responsible for the attacks on the Twin Towers and the Pentagon. Almost all the Muslims interviewed questioned the capacity of al-Qaida to perpetrate terrorist attacks on the scale of September11. Not surprisingly, Muslims engaged with alternative media sources that supported their own conspiracy theories and beliefs that September 11 was not perpetrated by Muslims. In this context, it is easy to see why al Manar's popularity among Muslims in Australia has flourished. One respondent stated that it was not surprising that Muslims, in particular Arabs, would question the media reports on September 11:

"Well I would think about it this way. We have been raised always carrying the conspiracy theory as Middle Easterners because we always think people are conspiring against us, so the first impression you will get is 'wait a minute I think it's a conspiracy against us'"

Obstinate audiences

Only a few brief accounts from a West Australian Muslim community have been presented here, but they demonstrate a common theme that emerged among the participants - they have become what Bauer calls "obstinate audiences". The history of indoctrination shows that the more control a central authority tries to apply to communication, the more likely it is that the community will seek alternative media. When Bauer conducted a study of Soviet refugees in the 1950s, he found that Soviet methods of indoctrination were singularly unsuccessful. Bauer knew that virtually every Soviet citizen was regularly exposed to meetings at which were conveyed some news, the

party line on various issues, general political agitation and indoctrination. The Soviet refugees were asked 'From what sources did you draw most of your information about what was happening?' Only 19 per cent specified the meetings, compared with 87 per cent citing newspapers, 50 per cent radio, and 50 per cent word of mouth. "Gradually the obvious dawned on us", said Bauer, "our respondents were telling us where they learned what *they* wanted to know, not where they learned what the regime wanted them to know" (1971, 338-339). The higher Bauer went up the social ladder of the Soviet refugees, the more likely those groups were to rely on word of mouth to better understand the official media. "Viewed from the vantage point of the regime's intention, the widespread dependence upon word of mouth was a failure in communication. From the point of view of the citizen and what he wanted, his own behaviour made eminent sense" (1971, 339). Bauer called this phenomenon the 'obstinate audience' because people, bottom line, want to know what is really going on.

Al Manar is most acceptable for Muslim audiences precisely because it is condemned by militant Westerners in sites like www.stopmediaterorrism.org. Community media in Western cultures, as Howley (2005) points out, enhance the democratic potential of electronic communication. They also encourage the expression of different social, political, and cultural beliefs and practices. Monopoly control of media can distort the capacity of community media just as authoritarian control of media can distort the capacity for democratic communication. Empirically though it does appear that regardless of culture there is a desire for *democracy* in communication and a desire for *channels* that enable that communication. "Word of mouth" in the case of Bauer's obstinate audience was used to try to work out the truth. New media today allow the passing of messages out of conventional channels and blur boundaries not only between genre of expression but also between social spaces. Islamic communities in Western democratic countries and in non-Western Islamic countries have acted as 'obstinate audiences', using media for democratisation of communication and diversification of content - public spheres.

Public spheres, heterotopia and imagined communities

It might sound odd to say that al Manar is part of a 'space' that allows or creates democratic communication and a public sphere. But, as we saw in the case of internet media, it is the activity of searching for the truth that matters, even if the source appears to be partisan. Jurgen Habermas used the term 'communication' to refer to 'interaction', but he also made the concept of 'intention' primary in the idea of a public sphere. Intentions for him are the basis of interaction. Illocutionary aims of speech acts are achieved when *all* participants 'harmonize their individual plans of action with one another and thus pursue their illocutionary aims *without reservation'* (1984, 294). Communicative competence in Habermas's analysis is not simply the production of grammatical sentences, but the dimension within which we test the validity of what we are saying, that is, test intentions. He presented what he considered to be the ideal and minimum conditions of human existence. These entail tacit deference to the truth of one's conduct. This implicit commitment to the truth and correctness of conduct in turn implies accountability and a willingness to offer reasons in justification of one's commitment if challenged. Habermas's work is essentially about moral conduct. Human communication that does not allow freedom and participation

is systematically distorted. 'A speaker can pursue perlocutionary aims only when he deceives his [*sic*] partner concerning the fact that he is acting strategically - when, for example, he gives the command to attack in order to get his troops to rush into a trap' (Habermas, 1984, 294). Habermas's ideas about the ideal speech situation, while abstract, led to his notion of a *public sphere* as an institutionally guaranteed area of free speech in society.

Not all public spheres need to be institutionally guaranteed in a legislative or a political sense. Each society has existential spaces that may be outside normal governance. These 'existential spaces' have properties conducive to communication and creativity and communitas (the sense of community) but which are problematic in relation to other structured spaces of social organization. Anderson in his concept of 'imagined communities' took the idea of the public sphere further, linking it to mediated communication and shared spaces (1999). Anthropologist Turner called these spaces 'liminal' (Turner, 1984). Post-modern thinkers such as Foucault called them *heterotopia* and Deleuze and Guattari *territorialized*, where differences could be played out that were not allowed in normal social routines. An expanded idea of the public sphere therefore serves as a useful starting point for understanding the motivation for Islamic communities - or any community - in seeking democratic communication or the truth. People, not surprisingly, do not like being lied to, are careful about which channels they trust or use, and need structured subjective spaces to debate.

The authors chose to show how Islamic communities actively develop solutions to perceived constraints on their media use. Access to mainstream media in Western societies by Islamic communities has become more difficult as public opposition to those communities has increased. According to a poll published in the *Sydney Morning Herald* in April 2004, 68 percent of Australians believed that Australia was at threat of an imminent terrorist attack (Michaelsen). Dunn & Mahtani (2001) in a major survey in Australia immediately after the 9/11 attacks found that more than any other cultural or ethnic group, Muslims and people from the Middle East were thought to be unable to fit into Australia. Two-thirds of those surveyed believed that humanity could be sorted into natural categories of race, with the majority feeling that Australia was weakened by people with different ethnic origins. Fifty-four per cent of those surveyed, mainly women, said they would be concerned if a relative of theirs married a Muslim. The majority of the Muslim population, not surprisingly, has gone into a 'siege mentality' Hanna (2003). This Australian experience has been duplicated in the United States and the United Kingdom (2003).

Muslim diaspora engagement with marginalised media such as al Manar is symptomatic of their own feelings of isolation and marginalisation in the West. Feelings of vulnerability have cultivated a siege mentality among Muslims in Australia. The Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission Report on the Ismaa consultations with Muslim and Arab Australians asserts that a majority of Muslims and Arabs have experienced incidents of racism and discrimination since September 11. The report also reveals that Muslims largely attribute the increase in racially and religiously motivated vilification and discrimination directly to the influence of the media. Interestingly, Hezbollah is a Shiite organisation and uses al Manar as a conduit for propagating Shiite propaganda. There has long been a chasm between the majority Sunni and minority Shiite Muslims. The majority of Muslims in

Australia are Sunni and all those interviewed as part of this study are Sunni Muslims. Their comments suggest that, despite religious ideology differences, Sunni Muslims are taking, in terms of Hall's (1980) encoding decoding model of communication, a 'preferred' reading of al Manar media texts, and an 'oppositional' reading of al-Jazeera and Western media texts.

It would appear then that the Sunni/ Shiite divide in Islam does not come into play in media choice. Rather, the *activity* of consulting marginalised media texts like al Manar creates a 'public sphere' that while not necessarily guaranteeing the truth provides a transfer from what is perceived as biased media. Islamic communities do exactly what Habermas said we do when we perceive communication as distorted, we try to test the validity of what we are saying. We test intentions.

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