

Internationalizing Internet Studies

Beyond Anglophone Paradigms

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Mosaics of Local–Global Discourses

Merlyna Lim

INTRODUCTION

In the aftermath of the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, the effect of globalization on Islam has not only become a hot topic, but also more of a reality. Other world events following that day, such as the United States' war on terror and the Israel–Hezbollah conflict have awakened a consciousness among Muslims all over the world to unite and stand up for themselves. The concept of *Ummah*—a universal community of those who profess the Islamic faith, a community that transcends race, ethnicity, nationality, and class—has become more important in the minds of many Muslims.¹

The proliferation of new information and communication technologies, such as satellite television and the Internet, is also promoting a greater Ummah consciousness, a heightened sense of belonging to a global community of believers. Global networks can potentially become vehicles that transform local concerns into global causes and vice versa. The recent development of Internet applications, such as blogs and other social exchange and networking software, has enabled more people to engage in global conversations. Blogs, in particular, can potentially be a venue for global dialogue and the formation of a global community.

Through a comparative study of the Indonesian and Iranian blogospheres, this chapter shows that these platforms and the messages they promote do not, however, result in a single global metanarrative² or the advocacy for a single course of action. The local contextualization of globally circulating discourses results in a diverse mosaic of interpretations, positions, and identifications of sources of discontent.

From this perspective, blogging and the blogosphere can be seen as being self-organized into nodes, networks, and streams that, while they overlap, cannot readily be molded into a hegemonic voice or viewpoint. The importance of this finding to the study of new media, particularly the blogosphere, is that while certain moments, such as the *Jyllands-Posten* Muhammad cartoons controversy,³ are volatile and spread throughout the globe through electronic information technologies, they can neither be said to embolden resistance uniformly everywhere nor be imagined as

fostering a “contest of civilizations.” Yet, the technologies of the Internet and the advent of the blogosphere offer a decisively innovative set of interconnected pathways toward a public sphere that reaches far below and rises high above the territorial level of the nation-state. In this sense, it creates key conditions for civil society and allows collective voices to move from the local to the global and back again, no matter how disparate these voices might be.

Before moving to look in detail at the cases of the Iranian and Indonesian blogospheres, the following section will provide some background on how blogging emerged as one of most popular social activities currently undertaken in cyberspace, and how blogging and politics have become increasingly interrelated.

BLOGGING AND POLITICS

Wikipedia defines a *weblog* (usually shortened to *blog*) as “a web-based publication consisting primarily of periodic articles (normally in reverse chronological order).”⁴ Blogs allow for the instant, chronological, and frequently updated communication of information, such as personal thoughts, news, and events. Blogs not only create an online journal that remains archived online, they are also indexed and searchable by search engines. With millions now online, blogs offer a new way for communicating and discovering social metadata and provide advantages over other web-based information sites, such as conventional websites, e-mails, forums, and mailing lists.

In the domain of politics, the rise of blogging has provoked discourse on incommensurable issues. However, until early 2004, blogs were not yet perceived as playing any significant political role. Compared to other players in domestic politics and mainstream or mass media, bloggers and their blogs did not appear to be either powerful or visible, as underscored by statistics showing that even the most popular blogs received only a tiny proportion of the web traffic that the major media outlets attracted. The 2003 Pew Internet Survey reported that only 4 percent of Americans reported going to blogs for information and opinions.⁵ With this in mind, the *New York Times* quipped, “Never have so many people written so much to be read by so few.”⁶

But that perception changed with the rapid and progressive deployment of the Internet during the 2004 United States Presidential campaign. Even with only 9 percent of Internet users reporting that they frequently or sometimes read political blogs during the election campaign, blogs started to be seen as of potential significance to politics. Several candidates and political parties set up blogs during the campaign. Among the more notable was Howard Dean’s *Blog for America*, which was exemplary in showing how a blog could be used for building social networks of political support. By

September 2003, Dean's campaign had raised \$7.4 million via the Internet, out of a total of \$14.8 million, with a remarkably modest average donation of under \$100.

Dean's blogging phenomenon and a rapid rise in the popularity and proliferation of blogs marked 2004 as an important year in the history of the blogosphere. By the end of that year, the term *blog* had been chosen as the top word of 2004 by Merriam-Webster, a US dictionary publisher.⁷ And in subsequent years, blogging has become much more popular. The 2006 Pew Internet survey⁸ reports that 8 percent of Internet users, or about 12 million American adults, keep a blog, while 39 percent of Internet users, or about 57 million American adults, read blogs, and the numbers have shown a significant increase since the fall of 2005. The popularity of blogging is also increasing in other countries, including Iran and Indonesia.

While the biggest portion of the blogosphere is devoted to personal stories/journals, political blogs do exist and some of them are among the most popular. Dubbed a catalyst for change and the people's media, some argue that blogs could be an empowering tool for society, especially in countries where strict media censorship and surveillance is conducted. Dan Gillmor, a veteran journalist, hails the rise of blogs as the beginning of a citizen journalism era, where the marginalized can at last play a greater role in making rather than merely consuming news.⁹ Some observers strongly believe that if politicians would all start blogging, public debate would be dramatically revitalized.

However, as previously hinted, even in the United States, the blogosphere suffers from the unequal distribution of readers across an array of blogs. While there are over one million bloggers in the United States posting approximately 275,000 new items daily, the average blogger has almost no political influence, as measured by traffic or hyperlinks. The distribution of links and traffic is heavily skewed, with only a handful of bloggers getting most readers.¹⁰ Presumably, the blogospheres in other countries would be found to suffer even more from the same problem. If the blogosphere is to be seen as an exemplary public sphere where everybody's voice can be heard, then this tendency shows that not to be the case. Yet, this could also be seen as a selection process weeding out the "bad" from the "desirable," although a limited observation shows that the top bloggers are not necessarily better than the rest.

Another constraint is that most blogs are not maintained professionally. Most bloggers are part-time, and blogging is almost exclusively a voluntarily venture. This means that, unlike professional journalists, bloggers mostly do not have the capacity to do any research or investigation prior to publishing their opinions. The credibility of blog entries, in this regard, is lower than articles in mainstream media. This does not mean that postings in the blogosphere are not as critical as those in the mainstream media, if not more so. Being a voluntary activity, blogging also can be seen as a positive force for regular people to voice their opinions without having to go through the exhaustive filtering of traditional journalism that often

excludes some critical, unconventional, or controversial voices from the professional media sphere.

Also, there is no central organization to the blogosphere. No consensus exists among the bloggers/readers with regard to many key issues. This contributes to the pessimistic view that the blogosphere strengthens the Tower of Babel tendency¹¹ in cyberspace, where voices tend to be so idiosyncratic as to be meaningless to casual readers. Through a more positive lens, however, this could also mean that the blogosphere can potentially encourage more genuine individual voices to emerge and real dialogues to be created.

With these dynamics of the blogosphere in mind, this chapter investigates the cases of Indonesian and Iranian bloggers in relation to selected global political issues related to Islam in an effort to show how the general features of the blogosphere do not always have the same outcomes, even in societies with similar religious orientations. Instead, the convivial¹² nature of the Internet that is unreservedly amplified in the blogosphere, and the local contextualization of information, knowledge, and ideas, together resist the emergence of a single storyline put forth by any single powerful player. However, in this milieu of free-flowing ideas, at any one moment, a limited number of popular or preferred storylines is likely to appear, as manifested by increased numbers of hits or visits to certain blogs. Yet these, too, vary from setting to setting, as the Indonesian and Iranian cases reveal.

The cases of Indonesia and Iran were chosen not merely because both societies are predominantly Muslim and both offer rich examples and illustrate how Muslim society and Internet technology are mutually interacting. Both are examples of different political systems, Indonesia being the world's most populous Muslim country, but with a secular democratic government, and Iran being an undemocratic Islamic state. The cases also offer formidable challenges to some variants of Western modernization theory—the assumption of a declining role for religion—by showcasing how religion can couple with technology to force society to move in the direction of modernization. In both countries, religious sentiment and leadership, and not the secular intelligentsia, have lent coherence and force to the modernization and development project, particularly through information and communication technology.

THE INTERNET AND BLOGOSPHERES IN INDONESIA AND IRAN

To fully understand the dynamics of the Muslim blogospheres in Iran and Indonesia, one has to understand the sociopolitical histories of Internet development in both countries. This section will narrate the brief histories of the Iranian and Indonesian Internets to provide a backdrop to understanding the development, uses, and impacts of blogs in both countries.

INDONESIA

Although the Internet arrived in Indonesia in the early 1980s, when the first connection from the University of Indonesia was made to the service provider UUNet, because of a lack of basic infrastructure, no permanent Internet link was established until 1994. With the arrival of private commercial Internet service providers (ISPs), the Internet attained a public presence by 1995, followed by a boom in ISPs at the end of 1997. The mushrooming of ISPs, however, did not lead to the Internet being widely used, since most Indonesians could not afford to pay the subscription fees in combination with the telephone-line rental necessary to connect.

It was not household connections but *warnet*, or Internet cafés, a grassroots form of commercial Internet connection that developed without government intervention, which played a significant role in popularizing Internet use among society at large. From 1996 onward, warnet became the main access points for more than 50 percent of Indonesian Internet users. For most users, the warnet facilitate not only online social relationships, but also function as places for extending online relationships into offline settings. With the expansion of warnet, telecenters, and campus/school-based access points, Indonesia has experienced a dramatic growth in Internet usage, from only 20,000 users in 1995 to 16 million users in 2005. Yet, more than a decade since the Internet first entered the nation, it is still only available to less than 1 percent of the total population. It is the price of Internet access, in addition to a lack of basic infrastructure, rather than political concerns, that are the primary barriers to the widespread usage of fast Internet connections.

Historically, the Internet in Indonesia has always been entangled with politics, and its development has very much run in tandem with discourses of democratization. During the Suharto era, Internet development in Indonesia provided a much more democratic media environment when compared to other media spheres, such as television, radio, and print. In addition, political experiences of the 1990s show how the substantially unregulated Internet contributed to the political reforms that led to the downfall of Order Baru.¹³

The Indonesian Internet operates in a reasonably free sociopolitical environment, under a relatively new government that is still trying to recover from the sociopolitical damage resulting from a long period under an undemocratic and authoritarian system. No censorship, surveillance, or control over self-expression either on- or offline have been formally applied in Indonesia since the overthrow of Suharto's New Order government, which lasted from 1965 to 1998. The people of Indonesia can now freely access all forms of media, and media are also free from outright censorship by the government. The blogosphere thus emerged in an unregulated Internet environment in Indonesia.

While some Indonesian bloggers started their first blogs as early as 2001, blogging only became popular in 2004, mostly due to the progressive

campaigns of some early bloggers, such as Enda Nasution,¹⁴ known as the father of Indonesian blogging, Priyadi,¹⁵ and A. Fatih Syuhud,¹⁶ as well as the availability of (currently) free blogging platforms, such as blogger, livejournal, blogdrive, wordpress, multiply, and Friendster's blog. The number of Indonesian bloggers is not well documented, as shown by estimates ranging from 100,000 to 1,000,000. While the list of the top 100 Indonesian bloggers is dominated by male Internet users, a significant percentage of female bloggers can also be observed in the Indonesian blogosphere. Most female bloggers are not into blogs dedicated specifically to politics, but they do intersperse politics into their stories and conversations about everyday life experience.

Based on my observations, Indonesian bloggers seem to need to be networked in communities. Big clusters of networked blogs are commonly found in the Indonesian blogosphere. Among the biggest blogging communities is that of Muslim bloggers,¹⁷ where the community leaders (moderators) actively endorse some community (Islamic) values and encourage the members to address issues related to Islam and the Muslim world.

Iran

The origins of the Iranian Internet date back to 1987, with the establishment of the first dial-up connection from the Institute for Studies in Theoretical Physics and Mathematics through the co-operative U.S. university network BITNET network and Iran's membership in the European Academic Research Network. The link later developed into a national network with five hundred assigned Internet Protocol addresses. The first primary users of the connection were academics and research institutions.

The internal data network, though, was only established in 1993 by the Telecommunication Company of Iran (TCI), which planned to build a nationwide packet-switched network based on the X.25 protocol, IranPac. In 1995, however, the government took over IranPac, clamped down on private information services, and advanced the development of its own data communication network. Over subsequent years, Iran witnessed a very rapid growth in its Internet network, as the Internet quickly became embedded in the sociopolitics of Iranian society. In the May 1997 elections, two leading presidential candidates, President Khatami¹⁸ and the conservative candidate, Ali Akbar Nategh Nouri,¹⁹ both used websites to get their message across, and the election results were announced online on the Iranian government's website.²⁰ The Iranian Internet continued to experience a remarkable growth, increasing from about one million users in 2001 to approximately five million users in 2005. With more than 1,500 cybercafés (in Tehran alone), around 5,000 Internet hosts (in 2003), and 650 ISPs, the number is expected to reach 25 million in 2009.²¹

Unlike other media, which are subject to harsh Iranian government censorship, initially the Internet was relatively free. This resulted in the Internet

becoming one of the most important information resources in Iran. Polls show that people rely more on the Internet than any other media as a source of information, and beginning in 2000, more Iranians began to use the technology to circumvent the state's control over conventional media sources; this was marked by a burst of growth in online content in the Farsi and English languages. The state responded by applying a sophisticated state-mandated filtering system. The OpenNet Initiative's testing shows that more than 30 percent of websites are blocked by this filter. The Iranian government has effectively blocked access to:

pornographic online sites, most anonymizer tools (which allow users to surf the Internet without detection), a large number of sites with gay and lesbian content, some politically sensitive sites, women's rights sites, and certain targeted blogs, among other types of sites.²²

While there is no specific regulation regarding Internet content, the government does enforce strict controls on Internet materials under the country's Press Law.²³ For example, individuals who subscribe to ISPs must promise, in writing, not to access "non-Islamic" sites. However, the state apparently does not monitor the content of pages that users access. Yet, in some cities, judges have announced that they do intend to monitor usage in cybercafés while on the lookout for prohibited activities, which includes viewing non-Islamic material. Even in the face of such threats, Iranians still perceive the Internet as a relatively freer sphere for expressing opinions in comparison with other media spheres.

Thus, unlike the case in Indonesia, blogging in Iran operates under particular circumstances, as the Iranian government tends to discourage self-expression. A heavily censored, state-controlled mainstream media have created an environment for the Iranian blog to be potentially more important than blogs in the United States, Western Europe, and other more democratic countries, such as Indonesia, since blogs in general tend to be relatively unregulated compared to other forms of expression in Iranian society.

In April 2005, the BBC reported that Massih Ali-Nejad, an Iranian investigative journalist, had been barred by the conservative-controlled parliament of Iran after she exposed parliament members' huge pay and bonuses.²⁴ Ali-Nejad turned to blogging and continues to write about Iranian Members of Parliament in her blog. Mohammad Ali Abtahi, a former chief of staff of President Khatami, a vice president of legal and parliamentary affairs, and one of Khatami's advisors, also turned to blogging to voice his political opinions and views. He said that blogs "let me be myself . . . regardless of my official and governmental status." These two very different examples represent but a fraction of the Iranian blogosphere, which is perhaps among the most exciting in any language or cultural context.

In a country that has a population of about seventy million, almost three-quarters of which are under the age of thirty, apart from journalists like

Ali-Nejad and politicians like Ali Abtahi, many students have also turned to blogging. Among the most prominent student bloggers is a Toronto-based Iranian, Hossein Derakhshan, aka, Hoder. He has actively promoted blogging in Iran by explaining the steps necessary to start a blog and encouraging Iranians to use the available platforms to create their own blogs.²⁵

As of October 2005, there were estimated to be about 700,000 Iranian blogs out of an estimated total of 100 million worldwide, of which about 40,000–110,000 are active and mostly written in the Persian language, the official language of Iran. Among the active blogs, many are available in both Persian and English versions. Through their bilingual blogs, users share their lives and perceptions with the world. Hossein Derakhshan argues that the Iranian blogosphere is a window to look into another culture, a café where Iranians can meet to discuss matters in ways not possible in the offline world due to geography, politics, or language, and thus blogs form a bridge for people or groups from different communities to interact and communicate.

In July 2006, Iran's President Ahmadinejad launched his own blog.²⁶ Well-designed and written in four languages, the blog attracts many visitors, not only from Iran, but also from other places in the world. The President's decision to start a blog lends official sanction to the importance of the blogosphere in Iran's political realm.

GLOBAL ISSUES IN THE INDONESIAN AND IRANIAN BLOGOSPHERES: NARRATIVES OF CONSPIRACY/VICTIMIZATION

As countries whose populations are predominantly Muslim, both Indonesia and Iran share some similar political narratives, yet with different iterations. One of the grandest narratives shared is related to Jewish conspiracies and the existence of Israel as a nation-state, which is closely connected to the narrative of a global Western–Israel (or Zionists–Crusaders, US–Israel, or Christians–Jews) conspiracy against Islam that is more widespread around the globe.

Historically, this narrative has been associated with two important lines of reasoning. First, radical fundamentalists in both Indonesia and Iran believe that none of the many aspects of modernization, including secularization and rationalization, the shift from traditional values to more liberal ones, and the global economy and its culture of individualism and hedonism, can be seen as independent processes, but rather should be viewed as interlocking aspects of a plot against Islam. This behind-the-scenes conspiracy with the purpose of destroying Islam is identified with Jews and Zionism, and anybody who is considered to be “helping” this conspiracy—no matter from what religion or background—can be called a Zionist.²⁷

Second, the conspiracy theories and the tendency to scapegoat Jews originally came from the Middle East, especially Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, and

Egypt,²⁸ whose hatred of Israel is directly related to the Palestine case. In addition, the belief in a Jewish conspiracy to destroy Islam and to dictate to the whole world is not only a reaction to Israel's existence, but is also exacerbated by the dissemination of anti-Semitism from the West, including Russia, to Arabic countries. The source that is frequently referred to is *Al-Maka id Al-Yahudiyah*, or *The Protocol of the Elders of Zion*,²⁹ which is seen as proof of this conspiracy. In the 1950s, an Arabic version was published. This piece of writing was translated and adapted into Indonesian in the 1980s.³⁰

For today's Muslim world, though, these past stories do not matter that much. More contemporary events, such as the lengthy Israeli–Palestinian conflict (which is perceived as a religious war rather than a territorial one), the “victimization” of Muslims all over the world (Bosnia, Kashmir, Chechnya, and Iraq are prominent cases), and moreover, the aggressive “War on Terrorism” by the United States and other governments, now have more significant meaning. They are seen as underlying the global narrative of conspiracy against Islam.

Previous studies on cyberradical fundamentalism in Indonesia show that many Muslims have become sensitized to issues affecting Muslims worldwide via the Internet and have developed a collective sense of identity and resistance through it. Yet, there is no evidence that any of these users have gone straight to a Palestinian or Iraqi training camp from an Internet café.³¹ *Jihad*, in the form of physical war, is neither simply a blind and bloody-minded scramble for temporal power nor solely a door through which to pass into the hereafter. Rather, it is a form of political action in which the pursuit of immortality is inextricably linked to a profoundly this-worldly endeavor—the founding or recreation of a just community on earth.³²

Other studies confirm that the majority of Muslims are moderate and are not prone to joining radical *jihadi* groups.³³ Most Muslims cannot be categorized as being capable of “killing for politics or religion.” Yet, similar studies have found that the belief that the West and Israel (Zionists–Crusaders or Jews–Christians) are conspiring against Islam is prevalent even among moderate Muslims worldwide, including those in Indonesia and Iran. In the last five years, after the September 11th attacks and the launch of George W. Bush's War on Terrorism, the “Zionist–Crusader/Jewish–Christian/Israel–US conspiracy against Islam” has become an extremely popular topic, and narratives on this theme fly around the blogospheres, and elsewhere in cyberspace, print media, and daily conversations in Indonesia and Iran.

At the same time, from within the body of Islam itself, much effort has been devoted by reformist believers to a struggle against the growth of radical fundamentalism and anti-Americanism in the post-September 11th context. Reformists, too, use the media, including the Internet, to spread their message of tolerance and peace, as Islam does profess itself as a religion of peace. The voices of these moderate and tolerant Muslims, however,

are subdued by the fact that US foreign policy is lacking in sensitivity and nuance to its effects on the ground in the Muslim world. For example, in Indonesia and Iran, just like in any other part of the Muslim world, US policies toward Palestine and Israel are not seen as mutually supportive. The policy of the United States toward Israel is interpreted essentially as an anti-Muslim policy. In this manner, the discontent that US policies create in a place like Jerusalem, and places like the West Bank and Gaza, becomes indistinguishable from the policies of Israel. The Afghanistan invasion, and especially the Iraq invasion, has only strengthened this perception. The persistence of this conspiracy theory in today's deeply polarized world of politics has created a situation where Muslims who access global information through selected sites cannot help but frame world events—especially those related to Islam/Muslims—within this framework of conspiracy, which has now become a metanarrative underlying many Muslim believers' interpretations, perceptions, and analyses of current events.

Focusing on two recent issues related to the Muslim world, the following discussion provides some snapshots of how two blogospheres, in two different Muslim countries, on different continents, and with different political systems, but that do share some similar concerns have responded. The cases under investigation are the *Jyllands-Posten* Muhammad cartoons controversy and the letter sent by President Ahmadinejad of the Iranian Republic to President Bush of the United States.

THE JYLLANDS-POSTEN MUHAMMAD CARTOONS CONTROVERSY

The Muhammad cartoons controversy began after the Danish newspaper, *Jyllands-Posten*, published twelve editorial cartoons, most of which depicted the Islamic prophet Muhammad, on September 30, 2005.³⁴ The controversy spilled out onto the blogosphere on February 8, 2006, when the "Freedom for Egyptians" blog³⁵ published scans reportedly showing six of the cartoons, including the "turban bomb" image that had been reprinted in the October 17, 2005 issue of *El Faqr*, an Egyptian newspaper. On the same day, the "Egyptian Sandmonkey" blog³⁶ followed this by publishing a different version of the scanned pages from *El Faqr*.

Following these Egyptian bloggers, Muslim bloggers all over the world reacted to the controversy by posting various entries. On this issue, the Iranian blogosphere displayed both more polarized, as well as more nuanced opinions, when compared with the Indonesian reaction. In the Indonesian blogosphere, a large number of bloggers accused *Jyllands-Posten* of blasphemy and an abuse of freedom of expression. Among this group, some condemning *Jyllands-Posten* believed this blasphemous act to be proof of the hatred of the West for Islam and linked it to the global conspiracy metanarrative. They suggested that Muslims in Indonesia and all over the world

should boycott Danish products. From February 2006 onward, banners proclaiming “Boycott Danish products” were pervasive in the Indonesian blogosphere.

In the Iranian blogosphere, however, such sentiments were not so pervasive. Although Ahmadinejad, the president of Iran, ordered a ban on Danish products (the Indonesian president did not do the same), Iranian bloggers were not keen on boycotting Danish products and did not think that such action was necessary. Regarding this issue, an Iranian commented in his blog:

So much about these Danish cartoons these days that finally got here in Iran. Members of the government oriented Malissia groups together with some hard-line clerics attacked the Danish embassy. Ahmadinejad ordered the ban of Danish goods although I have not seen a significant reaction from the body of people. The fact that Iran did all these after most of the other Muslim countries is kind of odd! Seems that Iran suddenly woke up and sensed a competition from others around the world and feared that Iran might have called not Muslim [sic] enough by others! But I am sure Danish pastry that is very popular in every and each pastry shop in Tehran, will be there although some stupids suggested it's [sic] name to be changed!³⁷

There was a small group of Indonesian bloggers who tried to be more critical about this issue. While they also thought that the Danish cartoons were proof of the abuse of freedom of expression, they did not necessarily link this to any conspiracy. They also deemed that the extreme actions taken by some Muslims, who turned to protest and violent acts, were not rightful and went against the core of Islamic teaching. Some Iranians shared similar opinions with this Indonesian group.

Unsurprisingly, there was no known Indonesian blogger who defended the *Jyllands-Posten* nor had the courage to display the cartoons. According to the discussion carried on via the comment boxes of some blogs, many of those who condemned the Danish cartoonists never actually saw the cartoons.

Two Indonesian bloggers who declared themselves to be moderate-liberal Muslims articulated that they did not publish the cartoons in their blogs based on the belief that it is forbidden to depict Muhammad in the form of cartoons. Their hesitance was more rooted in the feeling that they would have been threatened had they done so. One blogger commented:

There are *preman berjubah*,³⁸ moral police, everywhere, including in cyberspace. I do not want to jeopardize myself just by voicing my opinion about this cartoon or about anything related to Islam generally in my blog. Not worth it.

One thing that was not paralleled in the Indonesian blogosphere is that, in the Iranian blogosphere, there were some bloggers who fully supported the

Danish cartoonists. As Muslims (and Iranians), they stood firm in defending the freedom of expression. This does not mean that there were no Indonesian bloggers who shared similar opinions with these Iranian “freedom of expression” defenders. There might have been some, but they did not support this position in their blogs. As hinted at in the comment of the moderate Muslim cited above, self-censorship could have been among the reasons for their silence. Meanwhile, something cultural lies behind “not saying anything” in the Indonesian context.³⁹ The absence of a reaction can actually be interpreted as a sign of disagreement. Thus, in this context, the fact that there were many Indonesian bloggers who did not say anything about the issue does not automatically exclude them from the discourse. Many of them might have actually been expressing their disagreement with the majority opinion through expressing no reaction.

One important aspect that should be brought into consideration is the fact that most Indonesian Muslims belong to the Sunni tradition, while Iranians are mostly Shia/Shiite. The Shia tradition does recognize the graphical representation of the Prophet Muhammad—something not recognized in the Sunni tradition. Thus, it might have been easier for the Iranian Shites to tolerate the cartoons when compared to the Indonesian Sunnis.

AHMADINEJAD: A HERO OR A FAILURE?

In May 2006, Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad sent President George Bush an eighteen-page letter discussing religious values, history, and international relations.⁴⁰ In it, Ahmadinejad criticized the US invasion of Iraq and urged Bush to return to religious principles. This long, well-written letter was quickly circulated in the blogosphere and translated into English, as well as various other languages, including Indonesian.

Indonesian Muslim bloggers cheerfully welcomed this letter as a gem that had emerged from the Islamic world. Ahmadinejad, a name that was formerly unknown to most Indonesians, has suddenly become an icon of the rise of Islam against the West. Many Indonesian bloggers now perceive Ahmadinejad as an ideal president, and romanticize his being a future leader of the Muslim world, the global Ummah. Many Indonesians, especially female bloggers, have become emotionally attached to the speeches of Ahmadinejad. In their blogs, many Indonesian Muslims state that Ahmadinejad is speaking for them, and his speech is described as “inspiring,” “touching,” and “making me cry.”

When Ahmadinejad made a visit to Indonesia, he was enthusiastically and passionately welcomed as a new hero by Indonesians, especially young Muslims. His visit was covered in a large number of blogs. Glowing personal stories about Ahmadinejad—his choice of living a simple (poor) lifestyle, his piety, and his courage—were conspicuous in many of these postings. As reflected in some blogs, the Indonesians’ romantic view of Ahmadinejad’s

leadership may be related to the frustration among Indonesian Muslims with multiple ongoing crises in their country. Faced with an unstable socio-political–economic situation and many unresolved problems marking the transition from authoritarian to democratic governance, many Indonesians have turned to religion as a magic wand for transforming the country.

Ironically, the Iranians themselves mostly do not share the same opinion about their president. While there are some bloggers who support Ahmadinejad, most of the top Iranian bloggers do not think that he is a good, let alone ideal, president. Some perceive Ahmadinejad through his controversial policies, especially those dealing with foreign affairs, as having failed to place Iran in a better position in the world of international politics. Others suggest that he would be better off using his energy and brainpower to fix domestic socioeconomic problems, rather than attempting to gain international attention by making controversial statements.

Concerning Ahmadinejad, one Iranian blogger, who calls himself Mr. Behi griped:

I am going mad for everything he does [sic], from his one post blog, to the denial of holocaust, to his suggestion for debate with Bush, to his claims about being protected by hidden forces and the lies that he gives people about the rate of inflation, freedom of speech and rights of people. He is a little ignored individual that loves to be seen no matter positive or negative, he does not care.⁴¹

For most of the Iranian bloggers surveyed, who know much better than Indonesians how it is to live under the governance of Ahmadinejad, their president is little more than a failure. Iranian bloggers do recognize the growing popularity of their president in the world, although they suggest that Ahmadinejad's popularity is not due to his own qualities, but is more related to his enemy's, US President Bush, incompetence. They also opine that Ahmadinejad tries to shift the attention of his own people and that of the world from his own failures by pointing out of the damage that the Bush administration has done in the international arena. With this in mind, one Iranian blogger states:

Imagine, without Bush Ahmadinejad would be forced to account for growing unemployment in Iran, for significant economic decline, stricter social controls, greater repression for free speech and thought and press. In other words, if there wasn't so much hatred for Bush and his own totalitarianism, there would be more pressure on Ahmadinejad to account for his own abuses.⁴²

In contrast, no Indonesian blogger was observed to care about what Iranian bloggers themselves thought about their president. There are no known references made by Indonesian bloggers to any Iranian blogs concerning Ahmadinejad.

The snapshots presented here show how both Indonesian and Iranian bloggers take up certain global issues that tap into their interests and their Islamic identity. However, the examples also show that there are distinct differences between the two. Certainly, the majority of both Indonesian and Iranian blogs are mostly personal. They address communal and public issues, including those on a global scale, but in a personal mode. Still, the examples display how there is more common feeling among individual opinions in the Indonesian blogosphere when compared with the Iranian one. Indonesian bloggers seem to consider more overtly “what others think of him/herself” when expressing opinions. In attempts to voice personal opinions, Indonesian bloggers also show a tendency to filter out some aspects that would be uncomfortable for their friends, networks, community, and country if spoken about. In this manner, a hidden social self-censoring of the blogosphere can be said to take place in Indonesia.

Iranian bloggers, on the other hand, are observed to not be so uniformly concerned about this kind of issue. As the blogosphere is one of few spaces where Iranians can freely express their personal opinions, Iranian bloggers take this opportunity to voice their opinions in full. Richer and more colorful voices thus emerge out of the Iranian blogosphere.

CONCLUSION

The cases of the Indonesian and Iranian blogospheres clearly show how blogs function as a means for organizing and assimilating experience, as well as voicing opinions. While global issues and ideas of global community, such as Ummah, do resonate beyond nation-states, community boundaries still remain. Even for those who are writing/reading in the same language (English), there does not appear to be any cross-cultural communication between Iranians and Indonesians. Yet, while there is no significant dialogue or cross-cultural communication, contrary to polarization theory,⁴³ there is no example of deep polarization in either the Indonesian or Iranian blogospheres. What do exist are the many timbered voices not previously found in traditional media.

The blogosphere exists in the nexus of state–civil social relations that are contextualized by local histories and still affected by the power of the nation-state in a global era. Thus, although practice might still depart from the ideal, in the case of Indonesia, a secular, democratic form of governance has been wrested from an authoritarian regime. In this context, the discourse on Islam in the world does not present itself as a contest between civil society and the state. As such, it might seem to be less diverse because it tends to cater more to social than political pressures concerning what can and cannot be said in the blogosphere.

In contrast, Iranians live under a conservative religious government that is itself entangled in global Islam and, at the same time, engaged in a contest

with many elements of civil society over basic rights of voice and expression in the public sphere. The fact that the Iranian blogosphere mixes critiques of the world at large with the government there is thus not surprising.

These observations return the discussion to the main theme of this chapter: the very technology of the Internet, which defies central management and control, and also defies global metanarratives. To be sure, such metanarratives do emerge and do have their moments of currency, but as this discussion has shown, the mix of the distant global and the intimately lived local in the context of the Internet-based blogosphere soon allows for nuances, differences, and even counterhegemonic voices. Whether this should be celebrated or not is yet another matter about which many voices can speak.

The cases discussed here also show that while cyberspace can promote a greater *Ummah* consciousness, it does not remove its users from their localities. The territorial-based localities retain their relevance. The cases presented also show that Islam is not monolithic. Just as it is uniquely and culturally practiced in Indonesia, Iran, and other places, Islam is personalized, contextualized, and territorialized in the blogosphere, too.

The blogosphere is indeed one of those spheres where global or postnational identity, such as Islamic identity, and ideas of community, such as a global electronic *Ummah*, can be molded and formed. However, postnational identity is not a matter of disavowing national difference, but rather of “constituting a discursive device which represent difference as . . . identity.”⁴⁴ In the case of religious identity, identity can also recognize the national nature of communities while, at the same time, projecting them beyond the nation. In this regard, the common generalization about religious identity being in opposition to the nation state is misleading. Rather, in a network society, postnational types of identity are fluid and can take different forms according to social–political–historical contexts, moving from being nationalist, to challenging nationalism, or to a mixture of both. More specifically, at the current juncture in history when the nation-state is still a basic unit of territorial power and popular identity, seizing the nation-state and placing it under the aegis of postnational identity can be viewed as a practical approach toward ideologically, as well as politically, assembling the building blocks for global communities having that identity.

As the Internet becomes more internationalized and globalized, the technology does not homogenize the social and political experiences of those who inhabit cyberspace as if they were in one big “global village” with a singular dominant language and imagination. Global networks do indeed enable individuals to communicate beyond the boundaries of their locales—neighborhoods, hamlets, cities, counties, states, and nation-states—to join a global community and partake in global discourses. But their global social experiences always co-exist, connected, overlapping with, and extended to and from their local experiences. Cyberspace is another zone in which real world events are apprehended in a manner that is connected to the corporality of its

users. This also implies that the existence and power relations of nation-states and other entities persist in cyberspace; yet, cyberspace offers more flexible boundaries for social identities to be amalgamated.

NOTES

1. For more on the concept of *Ummah*, see Wikipedia, "Ummah," <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ummah> (accessed May 20, 2007).
2. A *metanarrative* is a big story, a story of mythic proportions that claims to account for, explain, and subordinate all lesser, smaller, and local narratives. See Jean-Francois Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge* (Manchester, UK: Manchester University Press, 1984); Michel Foucault, *The Archeology of Knowledge and the Discourse on Language* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1972), associates the concept of metanarrative with legitimacy, as it can be used as a tool for social and political mobilization against perceived antagonistic, hegemonic forces while it also seeks to create its own hegemony.
3. For a summary of this controversy, see Wikipedia, "Jyllands-Posten Muhammad Cartoons Controversy," http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Jyllands-Posten_Muhammad_cartoons_controversy (accessed May 18, 2007).
4. See Wikipedia, "Blogs," <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Blog> (accessed May 20, 2007).
5. Pew Internet Project, "Blogs Gain a Small Foothold," <http://www.pewinternet.org/reports/reports.asp?Report=87&Section=ReportLevel2&Field=Level2ID&ID=662>
6. Katie Hafner, "For Some, the Blogging Never Stops," *New York Times*, May 27, 2004 <http://www.nytimes.com>
7. BBC News, "'Blog' Picked as Word of the Year," <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/technology/4059291.stm> (December 1, 2004).
8. Amanda Lenhart and Susannah Fox, *Bloggers: A Picture of the Internet's New Storytellers*, Report (Washington, DC: Pew Internet and American Life Project, 2006; also available at http://www.pewinternet.org/PPF/r/186/report_display.asp).
9. Dan Gillmor, *We the Media* (Cambridge, MA: O'Reilly, 2004).
10. Matthew Hindmann, Kostas Tsiotsiouliklis, and Judy Johnson, "Googlearchy: How a Few Heavily-linked Sites Dominate Politics Online" (paper presented at the annual meeting of the American Political Science Association, Philadelphia, PA, August 2003).
11. Cass Sunstein, *Republic.com* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2001); Anthony Wilhelm, *Democracy in the Digital Age: Challenges to Political Life in Cyberspace* (London: Routledge, 2000).
12. Characterized by convergence, low cost, broad availability, and resistance to control, the Internet is a "convivial medium" that affords a greater scope for freedom, autonomy, creativity, and collaboration than previous media. The first use of the term *conviviality* to describe the sociotechnical landscape of the Internet is found in Merlyna Lim, "The Internet, Social Network and Reform in Indonesia," in *Contesting Media Power: Alternative Media in A Networked World*, ed. Nick Couldry and James Curran (Lanham, MD: Rowan & Littlefield, 2003), 274.
13. Merlyna Lim, "Cyber-Civic Space in Indonesia: From Panopticon to Pandemonium?," *International Development Planning Review* 4, no. 24 (2002): 383–400; Krishna Sen and David Hill, *The Internet and Democracy in Indonesia* (London: Routledge, 2005).

14. Enda Nasution's Weblog, <http://enda.goblogmedia.com>
15. Priyadi's Place, <http://www.priyadi.net>
16. <http://afsyuhud.blogspot.com>
17. Komunitas Blogger Muslim, <http://komunitas.muslimblog.net/>
18. Khatami.com, <http://www.khatami.com>
19. <http://www.netiran.com>
- 20.
21. See CIA, "The World Factbook—Iran," <https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/ir.html> (accessed May 11, 2008); and Telecommunication Company of Iran, "TCI at a Glance," <http://www.tci.ir/eng.asp?sm=0&page=18&code=1>
22. OpenNet Initiative, "Internet Filtering in Iran in 2004–2005: A Country Study," <http://www.opennetinitiative.net/studies/iran/>
23. Islamic Republic of Iran, *Press Law*, Article 2, translation available at <http://www.netiran.com/?fn=law14>
24. Sadeq Saba, "Iran Bans Parliamentary Reporter," BBC News, http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/middle_east/4414895.stm (April 6, 2005).
25. Editor: Myself. Hossein Derakhshan's Weblog, <http://www.hoder.com/weblog/>
26. Mahmoud Ahmadinejad—The Official Blog, <http://www.ahmadinejad.ir/>
27. Martin van Bruinessen, "Yahudi sebagai simbol dalam wacana Islam Indonesia masa kini" [The Jew as a Symbol in Contemporary Muslim Discourse in Indonesia], in *Spiritualitas baru: Agama dan Aspirasi Rakyat* (Seri Dian II Tahun I, Yogyakarta, Indonesia: Dian/Interfidei, 1993), 253–268.
28. Bruinessen, "Yahudi sebagai simbol."
29. Norman Cohn, *Warrant for Genocide: The Myth of the Jewish World-Conspiracy and the Protocols of the Elders of Zion* (Chicago, CA: Scholars Press, 1981).
30. Among these books are: Darouza, *Mengungkap tentang Yahudi: Watak, Jejak, Pijak dari Kasus-Kasus Lama Bani Israel* (Surabaya: Pustaka Progresif, 1982); Madjid Kailany, *Bahaya Zionisme terhadap Dunia Islam* (Solo: Pustaka Mantiq, 1984); Hizbul Haq, *Skenario Rahasia untuk Menguasai Dunia* (Bandung: Hizbul Haq Press, 1989); Pustakakarya, *Ayat-Ayat Setan Yahudi. Dokumen Rabasia Yahudi Menaklukkan Dunia dan Menghancurkan Agama* (Jakarta: PT, 1990); The Indonesian editors and publishers of these adaptations or translations believed (and shared the belief) that this book consists of secret plans of a Jewish organization to rule and dominate the world through capitalism, communism, democratization, authoritarianism, revolution, and economic liberation all rolled into one (see Bruinessen, "Yahudi sebagai simbol."). Indonesian editors and publishers do not realize that this book is not a historical document at all, but was a fabrication written by several anti-Jewish Russians.
31. Merlyna Lim, *Islamic Radicalism and Anti Americanism in Indonesia: The Role of the Internet* (Washington, DC: East-West Center, 2005).
32. Hannah Arendt, *Crises of the Republic* (New York: Harcourt Brace & Co, 1972).
33. Bruinessen, "Yahudi sebagai simbol."
34. The newspaper asserted that the publication of these cartoons was meant to contribute to public discourse about criticism of Islam and self-censorship. In response, Danish Muslim organizations held public protests and spread the publications worldwide. On October 17, 2005, the Egyptian newspaper, *El Faq*, was the first non-Scandinavian media to publish the cartoons. It published six of the images, along with an article strongly denouncing them. No known protests from either Egyptian religious authorities or the

Egyptian government emerged due to this publication. However, in early 2006, as examples of the cartoons were reprinted in newspapers in more than fifty other countries, the controversy grew and eventually led to protests, as well as rioting, particularly in the Muslim world.

35. Freedom for Egyptians, <http://freedomforegyptians.blogspot.com>
36. <http://egyptiansandmonkey.com>
37. http://mrbehi.blogs.com/i/2006/02/the_danish_pas.html
38. *Preman berjubah* (in Indonesian), literally translates as “mobs wearing robes.” This term refers to several radical fundamentalist groups who use an Islamic face to fight against what they interpret as acts of the infidels (*khufur/kafir*) or morally wrong. These groups include Front Pembela Islam (Islamic Defender Front), Majelis Mujahidin Indonesia (Indonesian *Mujahedeen* Council), and some other lesser-known and smaller groups. In executing their projects, they usually wear robes and turbans.
39. In Indonesian custom, which is heavily influenced by Javanese culture, one can show his/her disagreement by saying nothing, as opposed to showing support (saying “yes”). Giving no reaction can actually signify disagreement or opposition.
40. CNN World, “Ahmadinejad’s letter to Bush,” <http://edition.cnn.com/interactive/world/0605/transcript.lemonde.letter/>
41. Adventures of Mr. Behi, http://mrbehi.blogs.com/i/2006/08/ahmadijacket_lo.html
42. Rami Yelda, “Money exchange in Hamadan,” <http://www.iranian.com/Shorts/2006/sept2006.html> (September 30, 2006).
43. Sunnstein, *Republic.com*.
44. Stuart Hall, “The Question of Cultural Identity,” in *Modernity and Its Futures*, ed. Stuart Hall, David Held, and Tony McGrew (Cambridge, UK: Polity, 1992), 292–297.