

Media Use and Community among Turkish Australians

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Abstract: The last two years have seen an increase in the level of public debate around Islam and what it means to be a Muslim. In Australia nearly all of this commentary has been negative in its portrayal of Islam as a religion of extremists, fundamentalists, terrorists, queue jumpers and gang rapists. At the same time, new technologies have opened up the possibilities for strengthening communities of interest online and creating virtual spaces where minority groups can flourish without fear of persecution. Such virtual communities can contribute a sense of identity and belonging to diasporic communities, as well as reinforcing the very existence of such fragmented social groups. What is perhaps unclear thus far, however, is the role that such communities ('virtual', 'imagined' or 'transnational') play in shaping identity and a sense of belonging alongside existing locally based geographic communities. This paper takes a theoretical look at some of the issues involved in attempting to understand the variety of modern communities in a multicultural society.

The last two years have seen an increase in the level of public debate around Islam and what it means to be a Muslim. In Australia, as elsewhere in the west nearly all of this commentary has been negative in its portrayal of Islam as a religion of extremists, fundamentalists, terrorists, queue jumpers and gang rapists (Kampmark, 2003).

Furthermore, media reports are presenting Muslims as fundamentally "un-Australian", denying their Australian identity in a way which has been less apparent with other migrant groups (Turner, 2003). Islamic organizations are being viewed with increasing suspicion both by governments and the community, while projects such as "dob in a terrorist" fuel the fear, uncertainty, ignorance and prejudice about "the other" in the wider community. Turkish Australians have certainly been presented by mainstream media (when they appear at all), as a strange, incomprehensible, different group, who have been less successful than other ethnicities in assimilating into the Australian way of

life. Thoughtful and nuanced understandings of Islam in Australia are in danger of being swamped by populist rhetoric which lumps all Muslims together as an undifferentiated but essentially 'evil' other (Muscati, 2003).

How this is to be reconciled with a multicultural, democratic society is quite unclear. There is a fundamental opposition inherent in a liberal, tolerant, diverse polity which must include and invest in all its members whether they concur with its ideology or not. In return for the rights of access to the benefits of belonging to the nation all members share in the responsibilities that belonging entails. In a context of ever-easier global movements of people, goods and information, national citizenship remains the fundamental unit of political activity (Goodhart, 2004). Yet official citizenship does not automatically confer a real sense of membership in a polity in which official language, religion, culture, history and political process may be alien and even in opposition to those held by individual citizens (Hage, 1998).

Sociological research has long been interested in such negotiations of social positioning of minority groups both in relation to the country of origin as well as to the host country, but recent rapid changes in patterns of communication and media consumption complicates the picture. Recent years have also seen an explosion in the new forms of electronic communication technologies which are opening up the possibilities for instant networking amongst geographically dispersed people, allowing the strengthening of communities of interest and creating virtual spaces where minority groups can flourish without fear of persecution (see for example Sokefeld, 2002). The very rapid recent

spread of accessible means of communication, including the internet and mobile telephones has had important repercussions for the way people communicate and maintain their interpersonal relationships, as well as the way they organise and communicate with wider networks of acquaintances, peers and communities of interest. Interestingly, interdisciplinary studies into diasporic media use, cultural diversity and group identity have only recently begun to appear (Cunningham and Sinclair, 2000, Brouwer, 2004). Given the current preoccupation with the place of Islam in a liberal, democratic, pluralist society, alongside the contemporary explosion in use of electronic media, it seems surprising that not more is being done to explore the connections between access to information and communication technology and notions of group identity and membership.

A lack of in depth research in this area, especially in Australia, is hindering efforts to understand the emergence of “transnational communities” (Wolbert, 2001). Revealing the patterning of social relationships is important for understanding the social, political and economic positioning of non-mainstream groups in a heterogeneous society. Instant or near instant access to news reports from countries of origin, whether via the internet or satellite broadcasts, along with a proliferation of non-English language websites, chat sites and instant messaging increase the possibilities for maintaining intra-ethnic group affiliations. Such virtual communities can contribute a sense of identity and belonging to diasporic communities, as well as reinforcing the very existence of such fragmented social groups through the dissemination of information and the creation of online spaces

where community members can communicate and interact (Appadurai, 1996; Cunningham and Sinclair, 2000; Lysloff, 2003).

What is perhaps unclear thus far, however, is the role that such communities (“virtual”, “imagined” or “transnational”) play in shaping identity and a sense of belonging alongside existing locally based geographic communities. What does it mean to be living in Australia if most of your television, radio, newspaper and world wide web content comes not from the mainstream of Australian society, but from a global network of geographically dispersed individuals and organizations (Cunningham *et al*, 2001)? Notions of identity must include both self-identification by group members as well as attribution of identities to others by outsiders.

The formation of groups, enclaves and networks is still something of an uncomfortable topic for public debate, despite current rhetoric around community building and social cohesion. This is in part due to a tension arising from understandings of group function and the need to balance the benefits to insiders of group belonging against the exclusion of outsiders which that necessarily entails. Recent elaborations of the notion of social capital have emphasised the importance of balancing strongly bonded groups with more broadly inclusive, less strongly bonded communities (Hopkins, 2002).

The role of language and literacy is crucial here in understandings of cultural and national belonging and full civic participation. The recent explosion in accessibility of foreign language cable and satellite television in Australia as well as the ease of access to

international websites and overseas produced digital media such as videotapes, CDs and music files means that there is suddenly a much richer source of foreign media content available here. And while the Turkish community in Australia is comparatively small (particularly in comparison with European countries such as Germany, and Holland), it is already active in producing local content for national and international consumption through radio, television and the world wide web (Sokefeld, 2002).

Yet the relationship of Australian Turks to new media appears to be, at the least, somewhat ambivalent. A recent study of a major community networking initiative in Melbourne has shown some surprising results (Hopkins, *et al*, 2003; Meredyth, *et al*, 2002; Meredyth, *et al*, 2004; Ewing, *et al*, 2003). The e-ACE project at Atherton Gardens high rise public housing estate in inner city Melbourne provided residents of that estate with free computers in their homes, along with software, cabling, an intranet with multilingual content (including Turkish language material), email, training in the use of these technologies and low cost access to the world wide web. Whilst the take up rate for the computers across the whole estate was rather high (over 75% of households had completed training and received a computer within two years of the project's commencement), very few of the Turkish residents had elected to participate. When questioned about the lack of interest in the project, a common response was that families were fearful of allowing internet access in the home where women and especially children could access culturally inappropriate material and especially pornography. Recent research in the Netherlands has shown that access to online communication

forums has indeed allowed some Muslim women to transcend “the traditional segregation of the sexes in Islam” (Brouwer, 2004: 52).

This raises interesting questions about adaptation to change and the rise of intergenerational conflict amongst diasporic populations. Australian born children of Turkish families on the estate are now reaching young adulthood and entering tertiary education, where access to new technologies is not just possible, but essential. What is not yet known is how the increasing availability of new technologies is creating or exacerbating intergenerational conflict as well as other kinds of challenges to cultural norms, and how this might impact on the maintenance of ethnically based community groups. There is enormous scope, for example, for more research into the importance of communication technologies role in maintaining or even increasing language and religious ties amongst second generation migrants in Australia (see for example Brouwer, 2004; Schmidt, 2004; Sokefeld, 2002 for overseas case studies).

One way to consider these kinds of complexities is to see Turkish Australians as members of an “imagined community” (Anderson, 1991). Understanding such complexity involves a thorough analysis of the role that connectedness through social networks plays in establishing feelings of security or risk in a new environment. Maintaining personal and cultural links with established networks can allay some of the anxieties which emerge when migration occurs, yet some fluidity in the evolution of networks over time can be predicted.

The recent colonisation of internet spaces by diasporic communities has the potential to re-establish social networks which have been disrupted and dispersed by geopolitical events (Sokefeld, 2002). This is particularly relevant to the global Turkish population, who have links not just with the nation-state of Turkey, but also with ethnic identifications, such as the Kurdish people, or with religious groups such as the Alevites. These historically persecuted minorities have established web presences which may be as strong as, if not stronger than, their geographical existence as a community. Identity with such groups may consist as much in the exchange of electronic information and communication as with face to face interactions. In such a global environment, the fact of physical residence in an Australian community may be of far less importance to an individual than has perhaps been previously understood.

“Community” is, of course, a slippery term (Bryson and Mowbray, 1981). Recent theorists have used the concept of social capital as a model for understanding social relationships, and the term social capital is now common in government policy and public discourse as well as academic debate. The social capital literature draws heavily on Robert Putnam’s work which has encouraged an emphasis on social cohesion. This emphasis on cohesion, rather than Bourdieu and Coleman’s earlier models of individual advantage, has led to a focus on ‘networks, norms and trust’, co-operation and mutual benefit (Putnam, 1993). Social capital has been measured through various indicators: participation in geographically co-located communities, neighbourhood connectedness, contact with family and friends, feelings of trust and safety, tolerance of diversity (Productivity Commission, 2003). Critics of this mode, however, have pointed out the

arbitrariness of prevailing assumptions about what constitutes positive relationships within neighbourhoods, or appropriate levels of civic trust and activity (Cox and Caldwell, 2000).

Until recently, debates on social capital were disconnected from discussions of new media use and diasporic communities. This is now changing. Woolcock's (1998) more sophisticated social capital matrix was developed for face to face exchanges, but it can be adapted to describe the social exchanges and forms of communication associated with electronic networks (Hopkins, 2002; Hopkins *et al*, 2003). Recent digital divide initiatives have begun tackling not just inequities in computer and internet access, but exclusion from participation in electronic networks and online communities (Loader and Keeble, 2004). The Wired High Rise project in inner Melbourne has spent the past three years researching the effects of belonging to a networked community on social capital in a culturally diverse, low income population, which includes residents of Vietnamese, Chinese, Macedonian and Turkish background. This project has been using a series of specially developed social capital matrices to trace patterns of communication and participation within different levels of formal and informal groups. Access to new forms of communication technologies has helped to strengthen pre-existing groups such as families and friendships which exist across geographically dispersed locations. It has also helped to establish new social networks and communication channels both amongst residents and between residents and the wider world.

This work opens up new possibilities for understanding social networks which might then usefully be applied to the Turkish community. The social capital matrix could be adapted to describe patterns of social exchange online as well as offline. This would involve tracing associations, identifications and allegiances through observations of face to face communications between Turkish speaking Australians, in meetings, formal and informal social gatherings and public spaces. It would also involve tracing equivalent (and sometimes divergent) patterns of exchange taking place online, in email communication, intranet discussions, through web pages, by online notices and in chat groups. A matrix of social capital indicators could be developed based on ethnographic observation. The difficulty lies, not in choosing the indicators of social capital, or in measuring differences in different cohorts of the study population, but in identifying the boundaries of the communities and tracing the networks of inclusion and exclusion between people who live in close proximity to each other but who use electronic communication in complex and multi-stranded ways.

There is a strong need to combine the insights of citizenship studies and sociology of community with the study of new media technologies and diasporic media use. Whereas previous Governments have pursued policies of “multiculturalism” and “assimilation” for migrant groups in the past, the rhetoric today is more cautious, including on the one hand a thread about exclusion of outsiders and a fear of infiltration by the unknown, and on the other hand a push towards integration of minorities into the white mainstream culture and creating a stronger society through community building. Critical assessment and understanding of the complexity which arises when societies are made up of numerous

ethnic, religious and national groups is essential if we are to avoid creating future problems of ghettoisation, racially motivated crime, religious intolerance and fear of strangers.

The future of Australia's multiethnic, multilingual, multifaith society remains unclear. This paper has offered some approaches towards the investigation of the place occupied by Australians of Turkish descent within this rich mix, the role that they play as bearers of Islam, the rights to which they are entitled as Australian residents and citizens, and the responsibilities that that residency entails in civic and political participation. In particular, it has tried to highlight the importance of understanding the Turkish community's complex adoption and utilisation of modern communication and information technologies as they establish, negotiate and maintain cultural boundaries in an increasingly hostile environment. The importance of such a study lies in coming to understand modern, liberal, secular Turks, and their place both within and beyond their geographical and virtual communities.

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