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## **An audience focussed approach to examining religious extremism online.**

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### **Abstract**

Interest in the phenomenon of religion and the Internet extends to the use of the Internet by radical or extremist religious groups. Recent events in international terrorism have led government agencies and the academic community to conclude that the Internet plays a role in the radicalisation of individuals towards extremist violence. The literature on the extremism and radicalisation reflects an acknowledgement, although developing understanding, of the role of the Internet in the process of individual radicalisation towards extremist ideologies. Much of the examination of this phenomenon is conducted through content analysis examining how extremist groups incorporate the use of new media into their recruitment and communication strategies. Motivated by the question of what compels individuals to engage with extremist content on the Internet, this article proposes a different approach to examining the phenomenon of extremism on the Internet: one that mirrors the shift in media research from textual analysis to a focus on the audience and the context of media use. The first half of this article examines how the Internet and social media practices represent a discursive relocation of the Islamic tradition of discussing religious disputes. The second half explores the contemporary context of Muslim audiences and their media needs and relates this to the phenomenon of Internet radicalisation.

### **The two-step flow model and the Internet**

Katz and Lazarsfeld's (1955) two-step flow model of mass media and personal influence has spawned several studies aimed at identifying opinion leaders, their characteristics and their influence (Weimann et al, 2007). More recently, Katz and Lazarsfeld's model has continued to generate significant debate among media theorists about the relevance of the model to the modern context of communication characterised by new technologies, social networking and changing media consumption habits. Bennet and Manheim (2006) for example argue that 'social and technological changes directly challenge the underlying assumptions of the two step flow hypothesis because they have isolated increasing numbers (though surely not all) of today's citizens from the very groups that traditionally provided vital cues for interpreting information' (pp. 214-215). According to Bennet and Manheim the social reality of new media audiences is characterised by evolving media formats, individual media use habits and shifting media information formats that target messages directly to individuals. In such a reality, the two-step model becomes less relevant as communication habits have become highly individualised and regulated around self-expression and lifestyle.

In this paper, the author argues that Katz and Lazarsfeld's conception of opinion leaders is not less relevant in the contemporary media landscape as Bennet and Manheim (2006) suggest. Rather, the Internet serves as a marketplace of opinions in which opinion givers vie for the status of leader by adopting communication behaviours that confer authority. As new technologies have become integrated into the mediated practices of audiences, Katz and Lazarsfeld's original conception of the opinion leader has (necessarily) taken on new meaning. In the contemporary media context 'opinion leaders' may be bloggers, forum administrators or social media users who establish their social authority and influence audiences through interactive platforms. In particular the two-step model bears significance for studying how Internet audiences constructed on the basis of a shared religious identity (Islam) exercise their agency in using the Internet to formulate their understandings of Islamic religious teachings and construct their social identity.

### **Religious authority, the media and Islam**

The dissemination of religious teachings and the projection and discussion of religious disputes among mass audiences is not new in Islam. Some two hundred years ago the Ulema (Muslim scholars and religious leaders) developed and printed expositions aimed at the Muslim masses. With no formal legislative role in Islamic society, the Ulema's power was exercised through their ability to influence public opinion. Hence the media have traditionally played an important role in mobilising audiences for or against policies according to the agenda set by the Ulema. While the Ulema represent a body of Muslim clergy, their religious authority is by no means uncontested. Zeghal's (1999) analysis of the transforming political, social and religious landscape in Egypt (1952-1994) asserts that an increasingly competitive religious sphere challenged the legitimacy of the al-Azhar (Egypt's primary religious institution) Ulema in Egypt in the 1970's. The fragmentation and decentralisation of religious authority in Islam has also been noted by Eickelman and Piscatori (1996) who argue that 'the Ulema no longer have, if they ever did, a monopoly on sacred authority. Rather, Sufi Shaykhs, engineers, professors of education, medical doctors, army and militia leaders, and others compete to speak for Islam' (p. 131). Nowhere is this more evident than on the Internet where religious websites and Muslim discussion forums attract diverse opinions on religious, political and secular matters.

Cheong, Huang and Poon (2011) examined how the Internet has both intensified and delegitimised traditional structures of religious authority. Their study explored how the Internet has impacted on epistemic religious authority of the Christian priesthood. The authors note that 'Religious epistemic authority depends on a system of communication relations that confers on clergy a special role and status in knowledge acquisition of the divine which in turn authorises them to issue judgements, persuasions, and commands' (p. 940). Religious authority is legitimised through normative regulation, asymmetrical communication relations that ensure minimum submission, professionalised communication skills (preaching and counselling) and community trust (p. 940). Weimann et al (2007) describe a similar set of characteristics attributed to opinion leaders: considered expertise by the social network; strategically positioned within the social network; manifestation of specific communication behaviour (p. 176).

In the Islamic tradition where the Ulema can comprise any person ranging from locally nominated village imams to religious scholars formally educated in various strands of Islamic studies, religious authority is not centrally located in the priesthood. In this sense, religious authority is conferred upon opinion leaders considered to be knowledgeable about religious matters, have status within their social networks and elicit community trust through their communication behaviours. The suggestion here that religious authority in Islam is conferred upon opinion leaders and influentials has significant implications. It implies that epistemic authority in Islam is highly dependent on the perception and acceptance of authority by the social network as opposed to 'communication relations embedded in an institutional order' (Cheong, Huan & Poon, 2011, p. 944). Weimann (2011) makes this point in relation to the issuing of jihadist fatwas (religious edicts) on the Internet: 'The authors of jihadist fatwas come from diverse backgrounds. Some are scholars, some are religious authoritative figures, and others are political leaders of radical movements who are not seen in the wider Islamic world as having authority to provide fatwas, but are accepted as authorities by their followers' (p. 768). Several authors have observed that the Internet has challenged traditional structures of religious authority (Hjarvard, 2008; Soukup, 2004; Lawrence, 2002; Wheeler, 2002; Anderson, 1997; Zaleski, 1997; Meyrowitz, 1985) by creating a competitive market where individuals can access religious texts, assemble their own religious guides and accept the religious authority of online experts. As such, we should consider not only loci of religious authority but also acknowledge the hegemonic power of Muslim publics to set the agenda by asking questions and preferring one religious authority over another. In exercising their agency, Muslim media audiences drive a competitive market for religious ideas and have created a global religious public sphere on the Internet.

### **Googling the Sheikh**

Among Muslims in Australia, the term 'Sheikh Google' has become a popular slogan to describe the trend for Muslims in diasporic communities to seek religious guidance on the Internet. The use of the term belies a complex set of issues relating to Muslim identity in secular states like Australia (see for example Aly, 2007) but also reflects the ubiquity of the Internet in all matters of everyday life; religion included. The phenomenon of Sheikh Google extends beyond using a search engine to find answers to questions about Islamic law, interpretations of hadith or fatawas (edicts and rulings). More broadly, Sheikh Google refers to a range of online religious practices that include social networking sites; Muslim question and answer sites; community forums and blogs and video sites. On Monotheism.com, an interactive multi-faith website, one user demonstrates the expanse of the Sheikh Google phenomenon in a post titled 'Researching the Q'uran: Ask Sheikh Google':

'In addition to my off-line resources, I use various online resources when I am studying the Qur'an. Some of them are:

<http://www.quraninstitute.org/> for ready to refer translation.

<http://www.islamicity.com/ps/> for phonetic searches.

<http://islamawakened.org/WhatQuranSays/default.htm> for Qur'an concordance.

<http://www.free-minds.org/> and <http://www.quranicteachings.co.uk/> for topical discussions.

<http://www.harunyahya.com/> because it is a cool site :)

and <http://www.quran.org.uk/index.html> for miscellaneous Qur'anic information.

However, when I am really stumped, I go to Sheikh Google, and start typing words that I think should find me relevant verse(s). Since I am a pretty good googlephile, 9 times out of 10, I find relevant verse(s) to help my research. Hope you find the above useful in your study of the Qur'an.'

While academics have contended that the mediation of religion on the Internet represents a change in the nature of religious authority, the Sheikh Google phenomenon is also in part indicative of the changing nature of mass media which, through the Internet, has transformed from traditional forms that were hierarchical, exclusive and dissociated, to new forms that are individualised, informal and interactive. While Bennet and Manheim (2006) argue that this transformation brings the relevance of the two step model of communication into question, it may also be argued that the Internet offers a new platform for opinion leaders to construct asymmetrical

communication practices with social networks: a competitive market place of religious ideas where anyone can claim religious knowledge and authority, issue religious rulings and give advice. The polemic nature of Islam and the Islamic tradition of ijma (consensus) whereby different opinions about a matter of Islamic jurisprudence are discussed until a common position is reached, present particular issues in relation to the Sheikh Google phenomenon. Yahya Birt (2008) proffers the following analysis of Sheikh Google:

‘The nightmare scenario is that Sheikh Google will lead the unified madhhab of the virtual umma in which a billion-plus, atomized Muslims project their subjective musings, screaming inanities into the ether in a dialogue of the deaf. Sheikh Google’s umma would be protean, individualised, samizdat, postmodern, unregulated and without any agreed standards in interpretive technique. All differences would become mere subjectivity, reducing everything to the will for recognition manifested as the narcissism of small differences.’

Birt’s prediction of the future of Sheikh Google may seem bleak but it reflects much of the criticisms levelled at the phenomenon by those claiming that it promotes an amateurish approach to religious study:

‘One aspect that has plagued so many of the websites online providing knowledge on Islam is polemics; even when article(s) are written by a single author, there are straw-man attacks on other valid Islamic perspectives. . . usually one side is trying to ‘win’ the argument by trying their best to discredit the views of others. It is thus an exclusivist approach. This exclusivist approach ultimately leads to narrow-mindedness and an inability to appreciate or even listen to the views of others. This is further compounded by the fact that arguments are sometimes presented on the basis of ‘piety,’ thus one view is presented as ‘more pious’ than the other’ (Haq 2011).

The Sheikh Google phenomenon has decentralised religious hegemony from the traditional Ulema to the individual. This is because different websites will often tender conflicting information. One website may for example deem something to be permissible while another will state that it is not only prohibited but is actually a major sin. An example is voting in Western democracies. While some more extremist edicts have ruled that it is a major sin for Muslims living in Western countries to vote, others advise that it is permissible. The individual is then left to choose which interpretation he or she accepts and which he or she rejects, often without seeking further advice or clarification. The practice of targih in Islam refers to the process of determining which interpretation or opinion is preferential. It is usually the activity of scholars who are highly trained in the science of interpretation. To an extent all Muslims engage in some form of targih, albeit informally, to resolve conflicts of opinion. However, the criteria used by lay Muslims are based not on the science of interpretation but on the persuasiveness of the argument and the perceived religious authority, knowledge and piety of the person proffering the opinion. Sheikh Google empowers the layperson to self-select interpretations, edicts and rulings based on their own preferences, contexts, world views and readings.

### **Extremist content on the Internet**

Much attention in the literature in diverse fields including terrorism studies, security studies and media studies has focussed attention on Islamic extremist content on the Internet. This rather recent interest in the presence of extremist groups on the Internet is to a large extent spawned by recent global events and an urge to understand the role that the Internet plays in radicalising certain individuals towards violent extremism.

*39 Ways to serve and Participate in Jihad* is a publication by a UK based group called At-Tibyan Publications (<http://www.tibyan.co.cc/>). At-Tibyan’s homepage begins by establishing the group as learned scholars of Islam

‘Your brothers who are with At-Tibyān Publications are Tullāb Al-‘Ilm (students of Islāmīc knowledge), who have studied with various scholars around the world’. The groups ‘about us’ profile incorporates discursive elements that demonstrate the group’s piety and communicate to the pious. For example, the page ends with the following salutation: ‘May Allāh accept the effort of everyone in this Da’wah, and make it purely and sincerely for His Face, and forgive any shortcomings and mistakes of our brothers. And salutations and peace be upon our Prophet, and his family, and his Companions. And all praise belongs to Allāh Alone’ (<http://www.tibyan.co.cc/2009/08/about-us.html>)

*39 Ways to Serve and Participate in Jihad* exhorts its readers to participate in ‘Electronic Jihad’ stating that ‘The Internet is a blessed field which contains much benefit... a chance to defend the mujahidin and spread their ideas to the people.’ The publication provides specific instructions for readers to use discussion boards to promote jihad and defend violent extremism by: ‘Inciting to jihad and mentioning its virtues; Defending the mujahidin and protecting their honor; Awakening the idea of jihad in the minds of the masses; Putting out

research and knowledge based articles related to jihad; Going after those who oppose jihad from among the modernists and apostates, and exposing their faults' (At-Tibyan n.d)

Weimann (2011) contends that online communication platforms have become a staple for terrorist organisations who 'are taking advantage of the fruits of globalization and modern technology—especially the most advanced communication technologies—to communicate, seduce, plan, and coordinate their deadly campaigns' (pp. 768-9). Weimann's study of radical online fatwas or 'cyber-fatwas' demonstrates how extremists establish and use religious authority on the Internet to justify and legitimize violent action through the issuing of violent edicts. He states 'Many of these online fatwas provide moral and religious justification for the use of terrorism and relate to terrorist issues including the definition and identification of the battle scene in which attacks are to be executed; the identity of the legitimate victims, the proper means of actions, and the legitimacy of suicide attacks' (p. 769). The body of work by Bunt (2000, 2003, 2009) on how the Internet has influenced Muslim societies and perceptions of Islam attests to the far-reaching impacts of online extremism on the Muslim religious landscape. According to Bunt (2009) 'cyber Islamic environments have exposed Muslims to radical and new influences outside of traditional spheres of knowledge and authority, causing long-standing paradigmatic shifts at a grassroots level within societies.'

A qualification often made in the literature and that deserves reiteration is that not all religious content on the Internet is extremist or radical in nature. So too, not all radical or extremist websites are campaigns of violent jihad. Some websites use propaganda to validate the violent causes in religious, political and ideological terms. These websites promote conspiracy theories but do not openly endorse the use of violence. Other websites are social networking platforms that offer access to an audience of like minded individual and groups through secure forums. Regardless of where extremist websites sit on the spectrum of sympathy for the terrorist cause to the open call for armed conflict, all present a worldview that is embedded in a construction of oppositional forces of good versus evil; honour versus dishonour and Islam versus the West. The audience is compelled to take a side: to be either with us or against us. Being with us offers potential recruits to the terrorist cause incentives of honour through martyrdom.

Websites that glorify terrorists as martyrs adhere to a strict discursive format designed to influence the audience by constructing the martyr as pious, religiously knowledgeable, and strategic to the social network: all qualities associated with religious influence and opinion leadership. Biographical narratives of suicide bombers describe them as 'martyrs': a devout believer who is motivated to action by his faith, absolute submission to Allah and an intense desire to fulfil the greatest demonstration of piety possible: that of self sacrifice. His destiny is not determined by a strategy of selection, recruitment or radicalisation but he is 'destined' by Allah to join the ranks of other 'martyrs'. He (or she) makes contact, of his own accord, with a social network of likeminded 'heroes' and expresses an intense desire to die 'for the sake of Allah'. Once the target is identified, the plan is executed by the brave hero and, invariably, results in the successful annihilation or injury of vast numbers. Reference is almost always made to a suppression campaign in the Western media 'The number of casualties for the enemy was estimated in the hundreds but alas, this was suppressed in the media, one of the enemy's best tools' (Abu Ismail al- Muhajir n.d.)

### **Revisiting the audience**

While scholarly pursuits in the area of Internet extremism and radicalization focus on the content of jihadist websites and ask questions such as 'who are the extremists?'; 'what is their message?'; and 'how do they use the Internet?' little attention has been paid to the audience as active agents in the process of message transfer, influence and indoctrination. Should we also be asking questions about the receivers of extremist messages, their media habits and the social contexts in which they form and exercise their media consumption? Media theory that approaches the question of audience motivation and action from a uses and gratification perspective offers insights into how and why violent extremist content on the might appeal to audiences in particular contexts.

### **Uses and Gratifications and the Internet**

The study of uses and gratifications in media studies developed over decades of research to identify several categories of user needs broadly based on the fundamental informational and entertainment functions of the media. Contemporary approaches to uses and gratifications delineate the following four needs (Katz et al., 1973; Mc Quail, 1983):

- Information needs describe the cognitive needs and desire for understanding which are served by the surveillance function of the media;
- Personal identity needs relates to strengthening personal confidence and credibility and value reinforcement;

- Social integration and social interaction needs relates to personal relationships and the need to affiliate and maintain contact with a social group; and
- Entertainment needs describe the desire for escapism and stress release.

The typology of needs assumes, for example, that information seeking is driven by a desire for knowledge and understanding. However, the concept of searching the Internet has confounded this to some degree because people can search for information that specifically reinforces their own ideas and worldviews: a personal identity need. The four needs proposed by the uses and gratifications model are therefore not discreet or autonomous and the same set of content or material can potentially gratify an assortment of needs.

While the Uses and Gratification approach alludes to the psychological dispositions, sociological factors and context in which media use occurs, it does not, in itself, offer more than a preliminary analysis of how the social situation may be involved in the emergence and development of media needs. In applying uses and gratifications to an analysis of the role of the Internet in influencing audiences to violent extremism, it is necessary to position Internet use (or indeed any use of any media) within a broader context that takes into account the social realities that create needs in the first place and that drive media consumption on the Internet. In a previous study for example, the author found that members of Muslim communities in Australia were increasingly turning to the Internet for information driven by a growing distrust and dissatisfaction with popular media reports that were perceived to be negatively biased against Muslims. In the uses and gratifications model this would be described as an information need, but this specific need, the need to seek out and find alternative reports that did not present negative stereotypes of Muslims, arose out of social situation in which the Muslim participants found themselves the subject of intense media scrutiny.

One of the reasons put forward to explain the Sheikh Google phenomenon is that young, second generation Muslims living in non-Muslim majority countries and who often have a rudimentary knowledge of Islam, encounter issues that are particular to their context. They turn to the Internet to search for answers to questions such as ‘am I allowed to swim in the sea?’ and ‘what do you do if you want a job in a supermarket, but Islam forbids you to sell alcohol?’ (Van Tol, 2010). The Internet offers them answers to assist them in negotiating their Islamic identity in a secular context. Their need is driven by the desire for information on the one hand but also by their personal identity needs which arise out of the specific context of being Muslim in a non-Muslim environment. Considering that media consumption is context specific and that media needs emerge differently in different contexts, it is useful to try to identify some of the factors that characterize the contemporary context of Muslims that may drive their media needs.

It is possible to identify five factors that describe the contemporary socio-political context that drive Muslim media needs. The first four relate to Romano’s (2002) analysis of the factors that affected the adoption of modern communication technologies among Kurdish nationalist movements. The fifth factor is derived from Wilhlemsen’s (2005) analysis of the Islamisation of the Chechan Separatist movements:

- Transnationalism and the emergence of a Muslim diaspora;
- The development of a shared identity of victimhood among Muslims around the globe that is validated by the concept of the ‘ummah’ - a brotherhood that transcends boundaries of nationhood, ethnicity or race;
- A widely held perception among Muslims that the Western media is untrustworthy and subsequent disengagement with the Western media; and
- Access to new media.
- The presence or perceived presence of a personal and communal crisis framed in terms of an ideological battle for the survival of Islam and expressed in terms of a battle between Islam and the West.

### **Transnationalism**

The evolution of Muslim diasporas in Western countries like Australia has created a need for social networking and interactions with other Muslims living in similar conditions. Access to social networks through Web 2.0 applications on the Internet fulfills this need and opens new spaces of communication. The information function of the Internet also provides first generation migrant Muslims around the globe with access to a variety of news reports and personal accounts (through blogs for example) through which they can maintain their cultural identity and ties with their homeland. Forums such as Aussiemuslims.net and Muslim Village offer Australian Muslims a discursive space in which they can participate in discussions about Islam, the media, entertainment, current affairs, family life, politics and almost every other aspect of their lives. Discussions on these forums range from the banal and everyday such as appropriate day care facilities and marriage to more serious questions about whether suicide bombers go to heaven and whether the use of weapons of mass destruction by terrorists

violates Islamic law. The forums are particularly popular among younger Muslims who have embraced social networking and use the Internet as a social function.

### **Shared identity**

In the decade or so since the terrorist attacks in New York in 2001 and the 'war on terror', the popular media construction of Muslims as the 'common enemy' became the framework for understanding the experiences of Muslims in diasporic communities in the US, UK, Europe and Australia. The victim identity is embedded in a widespread perception that Muslims are the targets of negative media, negative public opinion and negative political rhetoric and is part of a broader framework in which Australian Muslims who see themselves as part of a global community of believers identify with a notion that Muslims around the globe are under attack, and that they are the victims of a larger conspiracy aimed at undermining Islamic identity and eradicating Islam as a world religion (Aly, 2007).

The Internet offers an infinite resource for Muslims to validate their shared identity of victim through content that reinforces perceptions of Muslim suffering and promotes the use of violence not just as a justified response to this suffering but as the duty of all pious Muslims.

### **Disengagement with the Western popular media**

Australian Muslims are increasingly turning to the Internet for information about Middle Eastern affairs including the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, the state of Palestine and the recent revolutions across the Arab world as an alternative to the information presented in the Australian popular media. The impetus for using the Internet for informational purposes is inherent to the social role of Muslims in Australia through which they reject popular media reports and search for alternative information sources on the Internet that more closely align with their perceptions of the conflicts. Underlying this trend is a commonly held belief among Muslims that Western media are defiantly anti-Muslim (Aly, 2010).

Where the Internet is a medium that gratifies the information needs of Muslims, content that opposes the dominant themes of terrorism in the popular media and focuses on the themes of Muslim suffering, Western conspiracies, and martyrdom can cultivate a sense of injustice and motivate individuals to search for other forms of content that vindicate them and restore a sense of power and control and is, potentially, violent in its nature.

### **Crisis**

According to Wilhelmsen's (2005) analysis of the Chechan movement, communities in perceived crisis will seek some form of ontological security: '...the strengthening of religious faith during a war is effected by a well-known mechanism: when in trouble, people turn to God.' While God may not necessarily be found on the World Wide Web, the post 9/11 environment has seen an increase in religiosity among Muslim youth both in the Middle East and in the West that underscores a need to identify with a social group as religion becomes a mechanism for coping with perceived crisis. Young Muslims today are more likely to identify as 'Aussie Muslims' whereas their parents' generation identified as Egyptian, Lebanese or Arabic (Aly, 2007). The social interaction and personal identity function of the Internet serves religious identity needs and allows users to participate in religious discussion through P2P and P2C applications. Web 2.0 applications that integrate information with social networking offer opportunities for Muslims to both consume and participate in the communicative process.

An example is Working Muslim, a Facebook page founded in 2010 in London. Its creators describe themselves as a 'team of successful working professionals who have experience of working for multinational companies, for high profile government organisations and a variety of other employees. We are here to support and champion working Muslim women with all the issues that they face' (Working Muslim, n.d.). The page, aimed at working Muslim women, has attracted 23,818 Facebook friends. The page advertises online seminars and publications by its creators for 'professional Muslimahs' (their terminology used to refer to working Muslim women) and invite 'friends' to comment on issues such as managing emotions and feelings and how to deal with workplace functions that serve alcohol. The approach combines elements of life coaching, career development, motivational communication and Islamic observance. The page attracts a homogenous group of Facebook users—young, veiled Muslim women who find themselves confronting issues related to maintaining their

### **Islamic identity in a secular workplace.**

By examining the context in which media needs arise and are generated among Muslim communities and relating this to the gratifications that extremist websites provide, it is possible to gain an understanding of how such websites attract and influence audiences. The Internet, through its various media functions, acts as a facilitator of needs both in terms of content (news, information, propaganda, images) and attributes (real time,

interactive, consumptive, productive, participatory). The social situation of Muslims generates media needs that are gratified by the content and functions of the Internet which in turn is generated by the aims of extremist groups to identify, inform, influence and indoctrinate potential audiences. The role of the Internet in what is often referred to as 'online radicalisation' lies in its ability to present alternative realities and truths that invite people to be part of a social network where the boundaries of belonging are set by violent extremists.

## Conclusion

The developing study of religious extremism has attracted a range of contributions from disciplines as diverse as psychology, security, terrorism studies and media. For the most part, studies that explore religious extremism (specifically Islamic extremism) on the Internet tend to focus on media producers, the content they produce and the Internet functions that they use. Scant attention has been paid to the audience in the communicative process despite a long tradition of audience focused research in media studies. This paper essentially argues for an audience-focused approach to the study of online extremism that recognises that audiences are active agents who select and process messages in contextualised settings. The two-step communication model provides a framework for understanding how extremists gain influence in a virtual marketplace of religious ideas where conflicting interpretations of Islamic doctrine compete and where claims to religious authority and piety help to establish opinion leaders. The Uses and Gratifications approach provides further insight into how the Internet serves the media needs of Muslim communities who are becoming increasingly reliant on the Internet in negotiating their identities. The argument presented in this paper is not intended to be exhaustive; rather it provides a conceptual starting point for further scholarly pursuits that can illuminate the complex relationship between media, religion and the audience.

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