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IDENTITY IN TRANSITION. CONNECTING ONLINE AND OFFLINE INTERNET PRACTICES OF MOROCCAN-DUTCH MUSLIM YOUTH

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ABSTRACT

In the last 5 years the Internet has become the principal platform for the dissemination and mediation of the ideology of Islamic movements, ranging from purist (non-violent) to politically engaged movements to Jihadi networks. Certainly in intelligence and security circles the Internet is considered the single most important venue for the radicalization of Muslim youth. On the other hand the Internet is seen as a means for people to transcend ethnic and religious divisions that are pervasive in other spheres of life. In this paper I will argue that both premises seem to result from a lack of understanding of the relationship between online and offline realities and still more from the difficulty of ascertaining the extent to which websites influence wider audiences and users. In order to understand the reception of Internet messages the local context and the way global narratives are appropriated in the local context, should be taken into account. My argument will be based on my empirical study of the practices of Muslim youth with regard to the Internet; I will explore how they act simultaneously as performers and observers in these virtual spaces.

KEY WORDS

Internet, Muslim Youth, Identity, Radicalization, Liminality

INTRODUCTION[ii]

In the Netherlands the practices of Muslim youth in cyberspace gained significant attention after film director and writer Theo van Gogh was murdered on 2 November 2004. The perpetrator Mohammed Bouyeri killed him because, according to him, Theo van Gogh had insulted the prophet Muhammad in his writings and in the movie Submission I he made with politician Ayaan Hirsi Ali. It was soon discovered that Bouyeri and his friends (also known as the Hofstadnetwork) had been very active on the Internet disseminating their own texts on several discussion forum, MSN groups ('the true Muslims') and chatrooms (Lion of Tawhid on Paltalk). The Dutch General Intelligence and Security Service (AIVD) mentioned in a report that a few of the members of the Hofstadnetwork were influenced by radical texts on the Internet and that they copy-paste their own Islam. According to the AIVD the freedom people have to create their own Islam on the Internet, gives way to radicalisation (AIVD 2006: 27 and 42). The Dutch coordinator for counterterrorism (NCTb 2006: 33 and 45) has more or less argued in the same way and also Meijer (2006) in her research on Islamic schools warns for the potential dangers of the Internet that brings young people in contact with 'radical Quran texts'.[iii]

At the same time other researchers have argued that new media expand the public domain and create new platforms on which people can express their interpretation of Islam. Eickelman and Anderson (2003: 16) state the new relations emerge between Muslims all over the world and that modern media create potential for new identities. Mandeville (2001: 170) writes that Internet enables Muslims to construct their own Islam and a new kind of imagined community. Although not necessarily contradictive, I will show in this paper that the first approach is too negative while the second is too optimistic. This is mainly caused by their lack of analysis about the relationship between offline and online and the possibilities and restrictions individual users meet on the Internet. In particular the radicalization thesis is flawed when it comes down to analyze the relationship between offline and online and especially with regard to the user of the Internet. The basic assumption seems to be that on the one hand the individual user on the Internet is completely free to construct his or her own Islam

(which leaves the possibility that the Internet has its own structures of inequality and exclusion and inclusion unaccounted for) while on the other hand the Internet seems so powerful that it must lead to radicalization (thereby seeing the Internet user as a passive and powerless observer). In this paper I argue that in order to fully understand the online and offline identity politics of Muslim youth we must view the online practices in a more dynamic way. The paper is based on a 6-year anthropological fieldwork study carried out in a Moroccan-Dutch mosque and in the mosque's homework assistance program in Gouda, a small town of 70,000 people, in the western part of Holland. The research into the websites started in 2004 as a part of the author's anthropological research into the meaning of religion for Moroccan-Dutch youth.[iv] I focus on the process of the consumption and production of Islamic knowledge and how Muslim youth acquire their sense of what Islam is.[v] In this process going online is not a medial state or a static presence but a state of transition wherein online and offline stand into a dialogical relationship with each other, wherein the offline world is asserted by users who act as performers and observers and wherein online experiences becoming meaningful against the background of offline experiences

Moroccan-Dutch Muslim youth in the Netherlands

Many of the discussions in the Netherlands focus on Muslim youth and in particular Muslim youth of Moroccan descent. Given the fact that in the age category ten to nineteen they represent twenty per cent of the Moroccan migrant population and in the category twenty to thirty again twenty per cent, it is clear that youth constitute an important part of the Moroccan community in the Netherlands (Van den Maagdenberg. 2004: 13-14) Most studies pay little attention to the way people are religious and to the question as to how they construct their religious identity. In my Ph.D research I tried to fill that gap and I will summarize the most important points here (De Koning 2008a, 2008b). The way young people construct their religious identity can best be described as a quest for a true or pure Islam. This is a particular way of interpreting and organizing the available cultural repertoires of beliefs, practices and experiences that are seen as Islamic by themselves or others, in which the idea of "one's true self" is combined with the idea of an authentic core of Islam

that is neither ‘Moroccan’ nor ‘Dutch’.[vi] The ideas of purity and truth are constantly negotiated with non-Muslims in different contexts. With regard to the Dutch population Moroccan-Dutch youth increasingly are confronted by the native Dutch tendency to categorize them as Muslims. During the last decade both the native Dutch, as well as Moroccan-Dutch youth, interpret perceived differences between them in religious terms. The search for a Muslim identity means, in relation to native Dutch people, an attempt to transcend the perceived dichotomy between ‘Moroccan’ and ‘Dutch’, while at the same time trying to maintain a certain distance towards Dutch society.

According to Moroccan-Dutch youth the native Dutch usually categorize them negatively; Islam is portrayed as suspicious, related to terrorism, intolerance, and the oppression of women. In particular ‘9-11’ and the murder of Van Gogh by Mohammed Bouyeri in November 2004 serve as the exemplary events in the public debate that are used to explain what is wrong with Islam, or, conversely, what is wrong with the host countries of Muslim migrants. In the Netherlands, Muslims and non-Muslims recognize that since ‘9-11’ criticizing Islam and Muslims is no longer taboo and in some cases it is almost customary to do this in the strongest way possible: the critique of Islam has sometimes been expressed in the harshest and the bluntest terms.

Conversely, non-Muslims are just as much part of the process of identity construction by Moroccan-Dutch youth as part of the Muslim community. Parents frame the behavior of their children in terms of *halal* (permissible) and *haram* (forbidden), they tell stories about the life of the prophet Muhammad, who serves as a role model, and they teach the children how to pray. For the parents, Morocco remains important as a continued frame of reference for their presence in Dutch society and also for their religious beliefs and practices. This is not the case for second generation Moroccan-Dutch youth. Partly this is a normal process during which the new generation tries to adapt an existing religious tradition to the challenges of modernity. Because of the inevitable changes that come with this re-interpretation, many older people often experience these developments with regret and nostalgia. Sometimes this may lead to conflicts over the question of who interprets Islam the right way and who represents ‘the truth’.

In order for young people to structure the available repertoires of knowledge they have to gather knowledge about Islam. The Internet has become one of the most important tools that young people use when looking for authoritative sources and persons. Although most of them tend to look for information on 'Moroccan' sites, the sites of the Salafi movements[vii] in the Netherlands stand out for their user-friendliness and huge amount of texts and answers to the specific questions the younger generations have. In almost all discussions, therefore, texts from these sites are used to answer questions of other people or convince them of the validity of their own opinions. At the same time however these Salafi movements have become the main culprit in the counter radicalizations policies that came about after '9-11' and in particular after the murder of Van Gogh on 2 November 2004. They are linked to intolerance against 'infidels' and inciting hatred against politicians and other opinion leaders (De Koning 2008c). In combination with their dominance on the Internet, this has triggered debates about the radicalization of Muslim youth by copy pasting their own Islam on the Internet.

THE INTERNET AS A LIMINOID SPACE

Liminal and the liminoid

Wilson and Peterson (2002) make clear that in many studies concerning new media lack an nuanced and sophisticated understanding of cultural practices and processes leading to a focus on dichotomy between resistance and accommodation, production and reception, online and offline and so on. Individuals and groups are continuously redefining, renegotiating and reproducing multiple identities within particular political, cultural and economical contexts. Several studies have tried to transcend the online-offline dichotomy such as Awan (2007) and Wheeler's (2001) of Kuwaiti women using the Internet for political action or Corrells (1995) study of an online lesbian café that shows how offline social roles and existing ideologies are played in online communication (Wilson and Peterson 2001: 456).

In order to 'draw cyberspace back into offline processes and practices' Wilson and Peterson (2001: 455) propose to use Appadurai's concept of 'mediascapes' to

account for the fluidness and irregularities of new media, the trajectories and modalities of media technology, its dissemination and the images that are produced by these media (cf. Appadurai: 1990: 9). Others such as Wakeford (2003) see the Internet (or, in particular, cyber cafés) as an example of 'scapes of computing'. Although these ideas might certainly be very useful, here I would like to explore a much older idea in anthropology that has particular relevance for understanding the Internet and the practices of Internet users.

Based upon observations in Internet cafes and mosques where young people have access to the Internet and observations in chatrooms, two things immediately stand out. First of all many people seem to be completely unaware of the physical place they are in. Sometimes they talk out loud as a reaction to something they see on the screen, many of them are so concentrated on what happens on the screen that it is difficult to talk to them. Second, mainly based upon observations in chatrooms, people are often not completely aware of the time they are active on the Internet. Many visitors in chat rooms suddenly discover (when someone else makes a remark about the time for example) that are already spending hours in that chat room and that they should have gone to sleep since they have to get to work or school very early.

During the time of my research I met Samira a very shy and modest girl. After a while I found out that she was active on one of the largest Moroccan-Dutch communities on the Internet: Marokko.nl. On this forum her performance was everything but shy and modest. She insulted almost everyone she was discussing with, using harsh and foul language and did not shy away from publishing personal details of journalists who contacted her for an interview about her online practices. According to her it was just a way to get rid of her daily frustrations and anger, something she found difficult in every day offline life. This reminds us to anthropologist Victor Turners (Turner 1969: 167) ideas about liminality: "if liminality is regarded as a time and place of withdrawal from normal modes of social action, it can be seen as potentially a period of scrutinization of the central values or axioms of the culture in which it occurs" Samiras status "becomes ambiguous, neither here nor there, betwixt and between all fixed points of classification" (Turner 1969: 232), and therefore she escapes everyday controls in which her behavior could have lead to serious negative consequences.

Turner has used the concept of liminality to describe and analyze the position of subjects during ritual performances of the Ndembu tribe. According to him, the young people experience during the rituals of transition that they are “a community or comity of comrades and not a structure of hierarchically arrayed positions” (Turner 1967: 100). In this liminal phase in a transition ritual the individual is separated from his/her previous position in society by symbolic acts. After the separation the individual is reincorporated and takes up a new position in society (Turner 1969: 95) The experience of equality, betwixt and between where structures (as in statuses, hierarchy) do not apply, were conceptualized later on as communitas (Turner 1969). Turner (1969: 129) perceived society as being involved in a dialectic process between communitas and structure in a cyclic way: “Maximization of communitas provokes maximization of structure, which in turn produces revolutionary strivings for renewed communitas”. According to Turner communitas and liminality were qualitatively different in industrialized societies compared to the Ndembu tribe. He therefore introduced the term liminoid signifying the quasi-liminal character of cultural performances such as theatre plays and leisure activities. Deflem (1991: 18) describes that liminoid performances originate outside the boundaries of the economic, political and structural process, they are voluntary, they are the product of individual or specific group efforts and can be generated continuously. The expressions of the liminoid often challenge the wider social structure by critiquing or offer alternatives for transforming the dominant social order. Lövheim (2005) has shown that, with regard to the Internet, websites and online interactions are distinct from conditions and standards that structure offline lives of people in terms of time, space, rules and positions in social interaction. Internet allows people to experiment with social identities because of the ambiguity of online conditions and standards.

Online structures and hierarchies

The lack of parental control with regard to youth, the possibilities to combine different repertoires of knowledge, means that the Internet as a liminoid space has a huge potential for people to engage with and re-enact their daily lives and their (religious) experiences and beliefs. The technical characteristics, the lack of supervision, anonymity, the greater knowledge of youth about Internet (compared to their parents)

seem to make Internet the ideal place for youth creating a religion that is fully detached from culture. Internet then contributes to the ideal of having a community (or as Turner would have it: communitas) based solely on religion and where it does not matter who people are (Dawson 2004: 80-81).

There are however important qualifications to be made with regard to Turner's ideas of the liminal and the liminoid and therefore also with regard to the Internet as a liminoid space wherein communitas is generated. Most of these criticisms pertain to the relationship between the liminal and the social structures outside the liminal and therefore in terms of the Internet, the relationship between online and offline. Deflem (1991: 18-19) shows that Turner has been criticized for overestimating the potential of the liminal and the liminoid to challenge the social structures and neglecting the ways in which the social structures respond to these challenges (with regard to the Internet, think for example of the ways states try to reduce the privacy of people by forcing Internet providers to release personal information of the their clients or by forcing website providers to close racist, extremist sites). Deflem refers to Gluckman who effectively argues that Turner did not take the dialogical nature of structure and the liminal far enough by treating them as completely separate and different and by arguing that communitas is significant only "within an established structure which is asserted again afterwards, and which indeed is asserted during the liminal period itself by inversion" (Gluckman and Gluckman 1977: 242 in Deflem 1991: 19). Another important point of critique that Deflem mentions is Goffmans (Goffman 1961: in Deflem 1991: 19) assertion that some marginal phenomena of the liminoid and liminal are not at all contesting the social structure and do not lead to communitas but instead bring about mechanisms by which the whole personality of the individual stripped off (for example in prison or in gaming) or should be seen as outlets for the social order.

Looking at how young people use the Internet as one of the major resources for to look for authoritative sources and persons makes clear how this criticism also pertains to the Internet. A quick search at sites such as Google.com or Askjeeves.com with the word 'Islam', provides us with a huge amount of websites ranging from discussion sites, to sites of scholars, to personal blogs of Muslims and so on. This means on one the hand that the Internet offers a range of possibilities for people to shape their identities; on the other hand, the overwhelming amount of sites

may also overpower them. People therefore have to discern ‘good’ knowledge from ‘bad’ knowledge or in the words of some of the young Muslims in my research to discern ‘truth’ from ‘falseness’ (cf. McMillan and Morrison 2006: 91). One of the ways we can analyze this process is looking at changes in religious knowledge and religious authorities as a result of the Internet. In my research there are various examples of this. Take for example the discussion on one of the MSN-communities about using the pill for birth control. One man asked if it was halal (permissible) in Islam for his wife to take the pill. Other participants contributed answering his question by using statements from several scholars derived from Islam-qa, Al-Islaam.com but also by using information from their GP and their own personal experiences with the pill. Mandaville (2006) shows that this pluralization of authorititative texts and people leads to the pluralization of coexisting discourses that authorize or normatively orient social behavior. Important is who gave the answers and what evidence from which sources did he or she used. Texts from pietist Salafis have little authority among some of the youths who use texts from ‘political salafis or ‘jihadi’ salafists. Others however are not very interested in these quarrels and use texts from different groups.

The reception of the texts and messages seems to be a largely individual process. Most people read them online, download and print them but don’t discuss it with others. A few others however discuss texts from different scholars with each others in chatrooms and on online discussion groups (and sometimes also in offline networks). This can lead to heated debates when people who follow different scholars clash with each others and accusing each other of being a *kafir* (infidel), committing *shirk* (idolatry) occurs frequently albeit that most of the participants try to refrain from that. These clashes may lead to people breaking away from the established online community and create a new community for themselves and others. New media therefore not only signal a new type of distribution and consumption of religious knowledge but also a new form of cognitive power and leadership with it’s own structures and identity politics (Allievi 2003: 314; Bach 2004). This means that these new structures and identity politics do not by definition lead to ‘communitas’ but rather to a fragmentation into several communities.

These new structures are also visible in the websites themselves. These structures do not only pertain to power relations between different online groups, but also to the

characteristics of the Internet. White (2006a) shows how the technological, visual aspects and contents of websites instruct people how to follow particular rules, how to define themselves and how people can engage these sites. The rules and standards of Internet discipline the users. In particular forums avatars of jihadi warriors are forbidden while in others they seem to be the rule. In other forums the possibility of people exchanging private messages is severely restricted (certainly in case of exchanges between men and women). In some of the registration forms people have to fill in their gender but also their religion and in many cases atheist/secular worldviews but also Hindu and Buddhist are not possible choices. Often people can use several avatars but these avatars themselves often reproduce stereotypical images of Muslims, Muslim women, skin colour, bodily aspects of men and women (cf. White 2006b: 346).

USERS AS PERFORMERS AND OBSERVERS

Reconstituting and translating identity

We can see the Internet as a liminoid space with new forms of distributing knowledge, hierarchies, structures and identity politics. What does this mean for the users? Valentine and Holloway (2002) show how the Internet enables teens to re-configure their social relationships and identities in online spaces. These relationships and identities are usually situated upon, and representations of, their offline identities and activities. In this process offline relationships and inequalities are reproduced. In order to understand such processes we have to ask then what happens when a person goes online and enters the cyberspace of Islamic sites, blogs, and chat rooms and so on. From a physical person this man or woman is transformed into a person that is both digital (the online identity) and physical (the spectator). When online, people are no more then digital codes without any meaning. People therefore have to find ways to make their presence on the Internet meaningful. We can see this on the Internet in different ways. For example people choosing their own avatars (signs) on fora, chatrooms and in particular in Second Life where the avatars are not merely abstract signs or faces but complete digital bodies. While Islamic dress in offline realities is seen as statement (Moors 2004) for example

emphasizing personal choice (Bartels 2005), a girl using an avatar of a girl like figure with a headscarf can also be seen as a visual statement. Other ways of doing this is choosing particular names as nicknames such as ‘Umm Osama’, ‘Islamlove’ and ‘Talib al Ilm’. Creating your own websites, blogs and chatrooms is also a way of making your presence known and meaningful, the same as spreading your own texts and movies. Choosing your own nickname and making your presence known is very important also when people are engaging with others online. Consider for example Amina’s account of her chat activities:

I always introduce myself as Moroccan. Look, I usually chat on a Moroccan channel, so I expect everyone there to be Moroccan. First thing you hear then is, are you Berber or Arabic? When you are Berber and the other one is Arabic, they often leave you because they want to talk with an Arab person.

Amina like many other boys and girls in my research look for people of whom they expect of having the same backgrounds and (therefore) the same interests. Given the fact that Internet is mostly a textual medium, people like Amina often use stereotypical images and texts in order to present themselves and to assess other users. This is done to make identification with others faster and easier (cf. Dawson 2004: 77-78; De Koning 2008b).

Given the disciplinary aspects of the Internet as a liminoid space I mentioned in the former paragraph, the process of translating and reconstituting ones identities has to be accomplished according to the conventions of the medium (cf. Waskul 2005: 54-57). As stated on some sites it is not allowed to use jihadi avatars while on other sites it seems to be the rule. The deliberative and disciplinary aspects of these sites are in fact mutually constitutive. The disciplinary aspects make it possible for users to perform their acts of reconstructing the self and society. Being active on a Jihadi site or instead on a website that spreads messages against jihad is a performative act in itself. Also publicly declaring you do not want to receive messages from ‘brothers’ or ‘sisters’ is a way of expressing ones faith. In their performances users at the same contribute to these rules and standards as for example happens in the chatrooms where people who do not want to finish their debates while the Quran is being played are called to order by the other participants.

Observing and performing

During the process of translating and reconstituting ones identity, the Internet user is both observer and performer. Let us take a look at one of the messages that were spread by one of the members of the Hofstadnetwork:[viii]

Dear brothers and sisters in Islam, I would like to remind you again to the importance of your contribution ('in the fight between light and dark/good and evil' MdK). At this moment the Internet is one of the few means to our disposal. We should make use of it as good as we can, and reach out to as many brothers and sisters as possible. You could for example forward this message to other brothers and sisters. May Allah reward you with Al-Firdous (paradise, MdK).

This was part of a message about, according to the writer, the deplorable state the Muslim ummah is in because of the lack of faith among Muslims. Muslims should be mobilized to fight against disbelief. The message can be regarded as a means to incite people to protest and even violence, but for the writer it was also a means to make his presence on the Internet meaningful, to recreate and relive his rebirth as a Muslim (since in the years before he did 'not really practice the faith'). It is clear that the writer is not just a passive observer, but should be seen as an Internet activist.

The user as both observer and performer also pertains to people who only read online texts or only engage in a minor way with others online. Interesting is that one of the messages of Mohammed Bouyeri ('To catch a wolf') on a small forum such as Islam.startkabel.nl. is the most popular topic with 91 reactions and 2256 viewings but before 2 November 2004 (the day on which Bouyeri killed Van Gogh) there were only 20 reactions; the rest was posted after 5 November. Huks (2005) account of a photo exhibition about 9/11 in which he refers to Nietzsche and Barthes is very useful to comprehend what is happening when people view films, photos or in this case Bouyeri's texts. According to Barthes the medium and the image collide and the result of this collision can only be experienced in a secondary act of reflection. What has happened on the Internet forum is that the observers on the Internet project meaning onto the text even before reading it. The text has gained new meanings because of the murder on Van Gogh which is shown by the fact that the visitors after

5 November did not post reactions about the text but about the murder on Van Gogh and/or about the fact that it was written by Bouyeri. Viewing the text also means that the viewer is consuming the textual experience among other things based upon his knowledge of the writer's identity.

Here we also see that the process of translating and reconstituting the self online takes place against developments offline. Offline events, in this case the murder of Van Gogh, influence the way people consume texts online. Another example of this is the case of Samira mentioned above. In her discussions on the Internet she focused on the 'macho behaviour' of Moroccan-Dutch boys and the 'racist attitude' of Dutch people towards Muslim youth. Her strong feelings were brought about by the debates in the Netherlands about 'lover boys' (young men who seduce young women and girls and force them into prostitution), crime rate among Moroccan-Dutch boys and Islam. Her online practice therefore shows how her offline experiences are expressed online and that her online practices should be understood against the background of her daily offline experiences. Rather than seeing the Internet as completely separate from the offline world we should see the Internet as a liminoid space that stands into a dialogical relationship with the offline world wherein the offline world is asserted and wherein online experiences becoming meaningful against the background of offline experiences (that can be influenced by prior online experiences). Being online is therefore not a medial state but given the dialogical character of the online and offline we should see the presence in cyberspace as a transition, as Turnbull (1990: 77-78) makes clear. While online the self and is continuously re-negotiated between online and offline realities and experiences and the online performer creates his or her own online existence and is regulated by the standards of the medium. The nature of this transition is different for each person since people play different roles online and there differences in, for example, authoritative status.

THE RECEPTION OF ONLINE ISLAM

Distance and proximity

Having explained how the Internet can be seen as a liminoid space wherein individual users acts as observers and performers, we can now move to an account of the process of reception of online Islam by individual users. The relationship between religion and media has only recently become a topic of research (Hoover & Lundby 1997). The increasing mass mediatisation of the public sphere, the increasing public character of religion and the proliferation of electronic media and the crisis of the nation-state make a more profound understanding of religion being mediated by the Internet necessary (Meyer & Moors 2006: 2-3). In this paragraph I will analyze the process of consuming Islam online by focusing on four aspects that are important for the constant re-negotiating between online and offline realities: distance, the creation of an imaginary ummah, agenda- and frame-setting and going virtual as part of every day religious experience.

The way young people deal with religious texts and authoritative texts points to an interesting aspect of cyberspace: distance. On the one hand people seek out religious authorities ranging from Yusuf Qaradawi (a renowned orthodox mufti) to Amr Khaled (preaching a conservative 'light' version of Islam) and Abdullah Faisal (a radical jihadi preacher), who are far away. On the other hand themes that seem important far away such as the war in Iraq and the Palestinian case come closer into people's every day life. Mandeville (2007: 107-108) calls this process spatial pluralization: changes with regard to how far away and in what kinds of spaces one seeks authority and authorization. These changes do not only expand the range of authoritative texts and voices but they also mean that the local authoritative discourse is influenced by or constructed in relation to themes, texts, persons and debates at a considerable distance. An example of this in my research is when a few young Muslims contacted a mufti in Jemen, via a Dutch salafi website that had his mobile number on the site, to ask him for advice about the rulings of an imam in their home city The Hague and later on confronted this imam during his Friday sermon with this piece of advice. The issue on which these young Muslims sought advice was the criticism of this imam of the speeches and interviews of Hirsi Ali.[ix] In this

case a Dutch local issue is made global by the actions of these youngsters (first online and then by mobile phone) and in return debates in the transnational salafi movements, of which both the boys, the Jemeni mufti and the imam in the Hague are part of, influence this local issue. This also shows again that the relationship between online and offline is mutually constitutive (Valentine and Holloway 2002: 307).

Bunt (2000) makes clear how different the practice of Muslim youth looking for authoritative persons and texts is, compared to the practice of their. Most of the parents here would go to a local imam they know with their questions. They know what kind of education the imam had and usually have a reasonable indication of the viewpoints of the imam who also knows them. On the Internet this is usually not the case. Asking questions to a scholar of Islam far away gives people the advantage that there is no control by that scholar of how people interpret and practice his rulings. It allows them, to a certain extent, to create their own Islam also because religious knowledge is no longer the monopoly of certain specialized individuals. By storing certain texts on the Internet, people can use these texts by spreading them and copy-paste them into new texts.

The influence of far away conflicts among Moroccan-Dutch Muslim youth, and of the religious authorities in the Middle East, broadens the perspective of these young people in ways that are sometimes seen as detrimental to the process of their integration into Dutch societies. The feeling that Muslims do not acknowledge the Dutch nation-state as their moral community but instead look for strong moral benchmarks in a globalized Islam, triggers to a certain extent the same distrust as in the case of foreign imams whose influence is also seen as hindering integration and at odds with a possible emergence of a ‘Dutch’ Islam (Boender 2007, Vink 2007). For most of the Moroccan-Dutch Muslim youth, however, such a perspective does not fully take into account the ways in which they construct their Muslim identities. On the one hand young people are seeking strong moral benchmarks but, on the other hand, are looking for a way to manage their loyalties towards Dutch society, their parents, their peers and so on, all of which inevitably leads to compromises. Their search for a ‘true’ Islam that is neither ‘Dutch’ nor ‘Moroccan’ does not mean a break with Dutch society or with the Moroccan (first generation) migrants but represents a merging of the idea of the authentic self with the idea of a pure Islam as revealed by Allah (Roy 2004: 23, Jacobsen 2005: 160). It reflects a transformation in society that

enhances self-fulfilment, individual choice and assertiveness (Van den Brink 2002, Pels 2003). Combining the idea of one's true self with the search for the true Islam forces people to study Islam themselves and to ask the question 'what Islam really says' (De Koning 2008b). While combining the search for a 'true' self with the search for a 'true' Islam in their identity politics, they have to negotiate with others and account for their choices. This means that also the ideas they receive from the Internet are re-negotiated with others.

Online and offline should therefore not be equated. There are 'filters' between authorities and 'lay' people. Notwithstanding the enormous presence of modern media, it is still impossible to reach everyone. This enormous presence also makes it impossible for recipients to acquire all of the information that is spread. With regard to this, in my research it is clear that Muslim youth use religious authority to discard or approve certain messages before they even read them as a means to establish some order in the huge pile of information they receive. Also recipients of the same message can interpret this in distinct ways. Publics therefore can use religious authority and media for their own ends and purposes.

Re-creating the ummah

There is one area in which the Internet seems to be very successful in creating new ties between people: international politics. The situation in Iraq, Afghanistan, Chechnya, Palestinian areas is brought into the daily lives of people by stories of martyrs, films, photos and so on. The idea of a unified and worldwide Muslim community, Ummah, is very strong partly because of the Internet and other mass media. Images of destruction in Iraq, Afghanistan and the Palestinian area's that are spread easily and very fast and on a large scale, are combined with antagonistic feelings about being Muslim in Dutch society. This contributes to the idea that Islam is under threat.

For many users the discourse of a global Muslim ummah enables them to understand themselves and the world around them as part of a larger struggle between good and evil, between Islam and the West and gives them a framework to engage in debates about local and global politics. Important I think in understanding the relationship

between media, geopolitics, contemporary religion and religious authority is the use of visual messages. Much of what people know and say is visually coded information and how people give meaning to these images is part of their identity (Hoover 2001: 158-159, White 2004: 206). Video sites such as Youtube and IslamTube will most likely mean that also on the Internet visual messages will become more and more important. It makes clear why so many of the debates about for example preacher Amr Khaled pertains to the way he dresses and for example the many video testaments of martyrs provided an example for one of the members of the Hofstadnetwork (Samir Azzouz) in making his own videotestament. Certainly in the case of so called Jihadi websites it is in particular these kinds of written and videotaped messages that are feared by the larger public and security services. Although in the case of the Hofstadnetwork there is a link with radicalization, in most cases the identification with the global Ummah (and injustice) and Jihad is not only a political incentive but also a spiritual one in the sense that fighting the violent Jihad is the highest form of following God's will (and therefore the true Islam). Spreading Jihadi messages or engaging in discussions can be seen as an an act of spreading the call, *da'wa*, but also as an ongoing process of asserting one's own place in the world as a person who tries to be a devout Muslim. Many of the Moroccan-Dutch Muslim youth go through several phases of increased attention on Islam after periods of neglecting their faith. The Internet can contribute to that, but these online activities can also be a result of their 'waking up' as Muslims, as I have shown elsewhere (De Koning 2008d). Their online activities are a way to recall and relive their 'rebirth' as a Muslim (cf. Coleman. 2003). For most of them it just gives a feeling of empowerment and moral virtue and it is not necessary an incentive for action (Werbner 2004: 455). Being active on these sites or on other forums discussing about global politics and jihad gave them a sense of being involved in the well being of Muslims worldwide or even as a cybermujahideen (a virtual fighter of the jihad).

Alternative media, agenda-setting and frame-setting

In his research on Jihadi websites Awan (2007: 400) states that there is ample evidence for Internet radicalization in the existing cases of terrorism and that it is difficult to assess to what degree these sites influence wider audiences albeit that in

the case of recruitment Internet does seem to play an important role. In my research many young people visited so called radical or Jihadi sites but for a number of reasons. One of the most important reasons was that they saw these sites as an alternative to 'Western' and/or 'Dutch' media they deemed as not objective and in favour of the US. In other cases young people wanted to know more about the violent Jihad. This corresponds with the findings of Awan (2007: 396-397) who gives several functions of Jihadi websites one of them being sites for expression of their political activism (without resorting to violence) and an outlet for people to express their frustration and anger. Important is this regard is also that, based upon my observations in chatrooms and interviews, that sites which pay attention to the position of the global ummah (within a Jihadi framework or another) contribute to agenda setting. Agenda setting refers to the idea that mass media have a strong influence on the importance people attribute to particular issues (e.g., the conflict between the Israelis and the Palestinians) (McCombs & Shaw, 1972). This is related to the opinion of many of the people in my research group that Islamic websites form an alternative to Western news sources. With regard to this the influence of the websites pertains to the topics people deem important and on which they establish and express their own opinions. An important example in my research was the case of Muhammad Al-Durra. In 2000 the images of this young Palestinian boy in Netzarim in the Gaza Strip being killed went all over the world but were particularly apparent on several Islamic websites and the debates about it were very emotional. Pictures and parts of the film where one can see how he is protected by his father before being killed, were spread rapidly via websites and email groups. During the 2005/2006 Ethnobarometer[x] research on the relationship between Muslims and non-Muslims this event was used as an example by Moroccan-Dutch Muslims to explain to non-Muslims their identification with the Palestinians. The non-Muslim participants however did not seem to remember the issue at all. Media therefore can decide upon the topics people think about and the way they think about it. Being active on the Internet liminoid people therefore can generate some sense of connectedness with other Muslims, freely outside other (offline) social structures. The fact however that Moroccan-Dutch youth express their relation with Palestinians in terms of 'Muslim brothers' and 'Our land, Muslim land' means that there is more then just agenda setting (De Koning 2008b). What matters on these sites is not only what kind of issues are displayed and discussed, but also how. This can be seen as a particular

kind of agenda setting, but is more often (and more adequate) conceptualized as a different kind of theory: framing (Scheufele 1999, Scheufele and Tewksbury 2007). According to Goffman (1974) individuals have difficulties to understand the world fully and are struggling to give meaning to their lives and the social realities around them. In order to process new information in an efficient and effective manner Goffman (1974) makes clear that individuals apply interpretive schemas 'primary frameworks' to categorize information and give meaning to it. Framing does not dictate how people exactly think about a certain topic but it does influence the salience and relevance attributed to it (Scheufele 1999). By referring to Israel and the Palestinian areas as 'our land' Moroccan-Dutch youth attach a particular 'Islamic' repertoire to it that articulates 'injustice' and some of them see the struggles of the Palestinians as a part of a larger war against Islam by infidels.

Internet as a liminoid space transcends the boundaries and social structures of offline daily lives. This almost by definition means that it also challenges the offline social structures for example because people can obtain different kind of knowledge by looking at alternative news sites. In particular, gruesome pictures and videos of victims of the Israëli soldiers or of the US occupation of Iraq (often not shown in Dutch news programs) play an important role in that. Another important aspect is the dominance on the Dutch part of the Muslim cyberspace of salafist websites (De Koning and Bartels 2006, De Koning 2008a). The salafist groups do not only challenge some of the values that are highly valued in Dutch society (such as toleration of homosexuality, the importance of democracy and freedom of speech) but also the traditional existing umbrella organizations of Muslims (De Koning 2008c). It is in particular the salafi groups who are very successful in creating new ties among Muslims based upon the idea of the global ummah. These Salafi groups (in particular those supporting the global jihad) try to frame the suffering of people in Chechnya, the Palestinian areas, Iraq and Afghanistan or particular incidents such as the Cartoon affair and the film Submission I (of Ayaan Hirsi Ali and Theo van Gogh) as part of the war against Islam. In this way the try to create what Bayat (2005: : 904) has called 'imagined solidarities': forged spontaneously among different actors who come to a consensus by imagining, subjectively constructing, common interests and shared values between themselves.

Experiencing Islam

For Moroccan-Dutch youth being active on the Internet, gathering information, discussing about Islam is a way of being and becoming Muslim in itself. Given the above mentioned reconstituting of identities, this kind of experience is understandable. The fact that the self and society has to be redefined by the Internet user means that people have to reflect about themselves and their identities. Consuming texts, video messages and photos is therefore to be understood as new way of actively engaging with Islam. Two aspects that are not mentioned yet are of particular importance in the shaping of religious subjects: all kinds of stories, pictures that show the greatness of Islam and the benevolence of God, and reading and listening to the Quran on the Internet.

One aspect of experiencing Islam, that stands out in my research is the appearance of what I call Islamic legends (cf. Burger 2006). These legends are usually stories but they can also be PowerPoint presentations, films, photos and combinations of these. There are stories for example of girls who get trapped in the hands of 'lover boys' and become rescued by a pious Muslim man, stories about non-Muslims who suddenly experience the presence of God because a Muslims recites the Quran after which the non-Muslims breaks out in tears and subsequently becomes Muslim. It is difficult to assess whether these stories are true or not, but they usually are connected to every day realities of people (such as the 'lover boys') and the are experienced as true and told to others as if one was present at the events and/or familiar with the people in the stories (Meder 2003, Burger 2006). The kind of legend that was viewed and downloaded often were photos with Islamic miracles such as the name of God in the clouds, a tree in Australia bending as if it was praying into the direction of Mecca, and so on. These stories, pictures can be understood as sensational forms. According to Meyer (2006: 9) sensational forms are "[…]relatively fixed, authorized modes of invoking, and organizing access to the transcendental, thereby creating and sustaining links between religious practitioners in the context of particular religious organizations. Sensational forms are transmitted and shared, they involve religious practitioners in particular practices of worship and play a central role in forming religious subjects."

The Islamic legend is a complex of images and/or texts by which ideas about the benevolence and power of God are mediated. In some of the emails containing these messages one can read: ‘Makes you think or does it not?’ In the discussions I had with young Muslims they refer to their ideas about God, the kind of God he is and what his characteristics are. The legends evoke therefore the relationship with the transcendental. The idea of God is manifested in concrete pictures and stories and the experience of God’s presence and benevolence expresses itself by emotions such as awe and astonishment. The astonishment of youth is for example shown by the fact that they find it hard to make their idea of the transcendent concrete. The images evoke this astonishment and speechlessness, but at the same time challenge people to find an interpretation. Many of them refer back to the image in order to explain the greatness of God by saying: see? Where God is for them eternal, omnipresent and powerful and therefore hard to grasp for believers, these sensational forms open up the idea of God so as to give meaning to that idea without loosing the idea that God is in fact above human imagination (cf. Meyer 2006: 10-11).

The second aspect of experiencing Islam that is important can also be seen as sensational form: the Quran online. The Quran can be read on numerous websites and many of them also offer the possibility of listening to Quran recitals. This does not replace the more traditional forms of reciting and memorizing the Quran and both the new and old forms contribute to produce a disciplined personality and creates communal ties with others (Turner 2007). Muslim youth listen to recorded recitals for relaxation and to improve their moral and ethical discipline. Hirschkind (2001, 2006) has shown how the consumption of cassette tapes with Quran recitals strengthens the willpower among believers and stimulates their capacity to resist everyday temptations and follow the path of God. This capacity is mainly trained by repeatedly listening to the tapes. When listening to the tapes young people already have formed their opinions and thoughts about Islam and listening to it means that their existing repertoire of beliefs is questioned. Listening to the tapes is therefore a kind of dialogue between them and God. Understanding the recitals is important but not necessary. Most of the Moroccan-Dutch Muslim youth do not speak and/or understand the Arab language but still respond to Quran recitals. An example of this is when a group in a youth centre was drinking alcohol and smoking cigarettes and joints. When one of them put a cassette tape on with a Quran recital, all of them put

away the drinks and the cigarettes. This shows that Muslim youth who have only a minor religious orientation respond to it. The same can be said for Quran recitals on the Internet. Muslim youth use the recitals on the Internet to listen to them while surfing, for downloading on iPods or mobile phones. This is done for pleasure and relaxation for example before an important event in schools but also when they are very angry or frustrated. In chat rooms Quran recitals are often used to end a heated debate in which emotions run very high. In most chat rooms it is not allowed to speak or write texts during when the Quran recital is on. Although most of the time the debate does not immediately end, in most cases the atmosphere does become friendlier during and after the recital.

The pictures, videos and the Quran recitals contribute to an auditory, visual and textual construction of cyberspace. In his research on cassette tapes Hirschkind (2006: 125) calls this construction a sensory environment the subject has to engage and from which he draws his attitude and experiences. The practices of Muslim youth with regard to online Quran recitals and the Islam legends show that also in the case of the Internet this environment nurtures and stimulates the affection of individuals for a particular kind of moral orientation and activates particular religious repertoires (Hirschkind 2006: 124-125).

CONCLUSION

In this paper I focus on process of the consumption and production of Islamic knowledge and how Muslim youth acquire their sense of what Islam is by using the Internet. Going online is to be seen as a transition in which in individual users act as performers who are re-defining and reconstituting their identities constantly renegotiating between online and offline realities and experience in order to make their presence in the virtual world meaningful according to the procedures and standards of the medium. In order to make his presence online possible, known and meaningful the person has to engage with and subject himself to a sensory environment with its own visual, textual, auditory and technological structures. In this process of engaging and subjecting oneself, the Internet user is both performer and

observer. As an observer he sees texts, photos and films, but in order to understand them he projects online and offline experiences onto the Internet content and similarly consumes the new virtual experience.

The online experiences cannot be equated with people's experiences in their offline daily lives but they do have consequences for every day offline life. The pluralization of Islamic knowledge is one of the most important transformative developments that occur within the liminoid space. New themes emerge, people seek out religious authorities that are at a distance and at the same time distant themes are incorporated into the daily lives of people. Within this process people tend to look for like minded people which may lead to a new sense of communitas but at the same time also leads to new processes of inclusion and exclusion. People can use the liminoid space as a space for experimenting outside the other offline structures but are confronted with new structures and hierarchies in the liminoid space with which they have to engage and that provide the framework within they can express their online presence.

What is often defined as online radicalization is therefore first and foremost the result of the process of reconstituting the self and society online. The different reasons people have for visiting so-called radical sites, make clear that it is too simple to equate every visitor of these sites as radical. Nevertheless the transformative potential of the Internet is very clear in particular because the so-called radical salafi sites are very successful in forging new bonds and create such sensory environments that make people aware of involved with the fight against 'injustice against Muslims worldwide'. Deeming them as radical as is done by for example the AIVD is therefore not just a neutral line of policy but an attempt to react against the features of online performances and structures that potentially challenge the existing status quo in society.

The framework of the Internet as a liminoid space where users are both observers and performers within the technological, visual and auditory environments that are produced, is useful in analyzing how people acquire their sense of what Islam is without reducing them to passive consumers or powerful individuals who can copy-paste their own Islam without any restrictions. It also provides us with important questions that cannot be fully answered yet on the basis of my research. More

research needs to be done for example about how people mediate their presence online by avatars and how they reproduce stereotypical representations of identities. Other questions pertain to issues such as how people experience the differences and similarities of offline and online daily lives? Given the dominance of the salafi sites on the Internet also important questions have to be asked. Did these movements understand the transformative potential earlier then other movements? What is the relationship between their dominant position and certain technological and content standards on the Internet (such as the clear preference for short texts and increasingly also video and audio material)? Taking these questions seriously will lead us to a better understanding of online experiences within the broader framework of social, economic, political and cultural politics without treating websites and their visitors as inherently dangerous or deviant.

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[ii] I would like to thank Edien Bartels (Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam), Carmen Becker (ISIM), the participants of the 'Radicals' meeting group of the Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam, and the participants of the Colloquium Other Europes of the Institute for the Study of European Transformations (where this paper was presented, London, 1 February 2008) for their critical and stimulating comments on earlier versions of this paper.

[iii] In an interview with Reformatorisch Dagblad 14-09-2006

[iv] The research focused on Moroccan Muslim youth aged between 10 and 20. In the 6 years, about 200 boys and girls were monitored almost every day in the mosque and on the streets and sometimes in their homes and schools. The paper is based upon observation of their internet practices, content and an analysis of the websites they visited. The observation of their internet practices mainly took place in the mosque and sometimes at their schools and homes. During the final year, interviews were held with 20 boys and 20 girls who were monitored on a daily basis for two years. The selection of the websites is based on the choices made by young Muslims in Gouda. At the sites and discussion groups (On MSN and Yahoo) they visited other sites are linked and/or used. They have been analyzed as well. In total, this involved about 80 websites and MSN and Yahoo groups.

[v] I leave out other processes of gathering information, for example for school assignments, figuring out train schedules and so on.

[vi] Based upon Droogers (2003). Repertoires exist at a macro-, meso and micro level and have three important characteristics. People's knowledge of how to behave correctly in a particular context is not always activated, depending upon the relevance in that specific context. The beliefs, practices and experiences that make up a certain repertoire can change by adding, leaving out, and reshaping. The constituting elements of cultural repertoires contain contain inconsistencies and contradictions, given its use in varied contexts (Droogers 2003: 267).

[vii] The Salafi movements constitute a strict and puritanical branch of Islam trying to 'purify' the Islamic creed and its method of application of all forms of historical and cultural influences and other influences that are deemed unislamic. In their attempt to 'purify' Islam they try to follow the example of the Prophet Muhammad and the first generation of Muslims (al-salaf al-salih). The current Salafi movements have their foundation in the 18th century Saudi Wahhabi reform movement (but should not be equated with it). In the 1980s and 1990s several Salafi leaders (in particular those who have mixed Salafi ideologies with the ideology of the Muslim Brotherhood) came to Europe after being prosecuted in for example Syria, Saudi Arabia and Egypt (De Koning 2008b).

[viii] The Hofstad network is the network of jihadi Salafists such as Mohammed Bouyeri (the murderer of film director and writer Theo Van Gogh who made the film Submission I together with Ayaan Hirsi Ali. Before this he was one of the main disseminators of jihad texts on the internet sometimes mixed with his own viewpoints. During the trial he stated he killed Theo van Gogh because, according to him based upon texts from *ulama,* he had to kill the person who insulted the prophet. Samir Azzouz first came into the picture after he tried to reach Chechnya in order to fight with the jihadis against the Russians. Later, in 2004, he was arrested for having plans for an attack at Schiphol Airport; an accusation from which he was acquitted at first but later (recently) convicted to 6 years. In 2006 he was sentenced to eight years imprisonment again for planning a terrorist attack (the so called Piranha-case).

[ix] Hirsi Ali is a member of the VVD, a conservative-liberal party, and one of the most vocal critics of Islam and (radical) Muslims stating that Islam is incompatible with democracy and renowned for her accusation that the prophet Muhammad is a 'paedophile' according to 'contemporary Western standards'. Together with film director Van Gogh, she has made the movie Submission I. Hirsi Ali was threatened numerous times with an attack on her life and lived in hiding several weeks after the murder of Van Gogh. Currently she works in the U.S. for the conservative think tank American Enterprise Institute.

[x] Ethnobarometer is a programme of social scientists providing independent and research-based reports on levels of racism, xenophobia and ethnic conflict in selected countries of Europe and coordinated by the director of Ethnobarometer, Alessandro Silj. The latest Ethnobarometer project, *Europe's Muslim communities – Security and Integration post-11 September*, is operational in six countries: Belgium, France, Germany, Italy, the Netherlands and the UK. The International Institute for the Study of Islam in the Modern World (ISIM) is

responsible for the Dutch part of this Ethnobarometer project, the objective of which was to assess the consequences of the various responses to 11 September and the murder of Van Gogh in November 2004 for both the Muslim communities and European societies at large and, in particular, the relations between Muslim communities and the rest of the population.