

# Modern media technology and Islamic student activism in Indonesia

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# MODERN MEDIA TECHNOLOGY AND ISLAMIC STUDENT ACTIVISM IN INDONESIA

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Keywords: Islamic movements · Student activism · Media and religion · Indonesia

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In my dissertation project I seek to contribute to the growing body of anthropological and sociological research highlighting the constitutive role of modern media technologies in religious practice by rethinking the polarity between deliberative and normative approaches to the impact of modern media technologies. In this article I intend to approach this issue by looking at the production and launch process of a book entitled *Dynamics of Islamic Student Movements* (Nef Saluz 2009), that I edited during my year of fieldwork in Yogyakarta, Indonesia.

During the academic year 2008-09, I worked intensively with student activists of the renowned Gadjah Mada University, representing different strands of Islam<sup>1</sup>. I attended seminars and workshops they organised around different topics, participated in education training sessions for members of different Islamic organisations and collected a large number of media releases in the form of pamphlets, posters, magazines, stickers and books published by the activists themselves and also in the form of reference and course books used by different organisations.

I aim to approach the constitutive role of modern media technologies on Islamic activism not in terms of a polarity between what are assumed to be two contradictory processes, the deliberative and the disciplinary, but by viewing the two processes as interwoven, as first suggested by Charles Hirschkind (2006, 2001a).

Studies that focus on the deliberative aspect tend to emphasise the possibilities for argument and dialogue and the broader access to information this represents. This is seen to result in a democratisation of religious authority. It is argued that religious believers with access to a vast amount of information question and revise their religious practice. Prominent examples of scholars emphasizing the deliberative aspect of modern media technology in the Middle East are Eickelman (1992), Eickelman and Anderson (1997) and some of the contributors to the volume edited by Norton (1995). For examples of authors that identify a democratisation of religious authority in the Indonesian context see, for example, the study of Hosen (2008) on the role of the Internet.

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<sup>1</sup> This was my second stay at the Gadjah Mada University. In 2005-06 I had the chance to work together with different Islamic student activists while conducting fieldwork for my Master's thesis on Islamic pop culture. I would like to take this opportunity to express my deep gratitude to all the people, especially Najib Kailani, Afidatul Lathifah and Sita Hidayah, I worked with in Yogyakarta during the stints of fieldwork I did between 2005 and 2009. Without them sharing their insights and observations with me and without their allowing me to participate in some of their activities, I would not have been able to write either my dissertation or this article.

Scholars emphasising the disciplinary functions of religious media, on the other hand, stress the ideological aspect over the dialogic one. In terms of this view, media technologies enable an extension of an authoritative religious discourse. In this case, the resultant public represents less a sphere of discussion than a site of subjection to authority. This is seen as part of a project aimed at promoting and securing a uniform model of moral behaviour. Examples of studies that put the ideological or disciplinary aspect of modern media technology forward in the context of Islamism are provided by the work of Roy (1996), Sivan (1990) and, for the Indonesian context, Lim (2005) or Bräuchler (2003).

My argument is that every Islamic organisation that I have worked with perceives the public arena within which it is active as a deliberative space of argumentation and contestation between different individuals and, *at the same time*, as a normative space for spreading their own visions of Islamic virtues. The public space constituted by the media practices of Islamic activists of any strand of Islam cannot, therefore, be identified as simply either a place for argumentation and discussion *or* indoctrination (Hirschkind 2001a, 2006). All activists adopt public deliberation as one of their modalities, trying to convince others of their visions and ideas through argument. The struggle to promote their own vision starts at a point of difference rather than at one of commonality.

When trying to convince others by argument, the activists see themselves as following the example of the Prophet. In the Quran the necessity of discussion when differences occur is stressed as, for example, in sura 16,125: «Call towards the path of your Lord with sound planning and good advice, and debate with them in the best possible way; indeed your Lord well knows him who has strayed from His path, and He well knows the guided»<sup>2</sup>.

Modern media technology opens up new ways of discussing and debating in public space. Not only the Internet but also cheaper means of telecommunication and, as argued in this paper, the cheaper production and distribution of print media have opened up new ways for student activists to carry on the struggle of the Prophet Muhammad in order to strengthen the Islamic community (*ummat*). The creative usage of new public arenas, as created through new communication opportunities, thus

leads to the opinion that «Indonesia has arguably become the world's most vibrant centre for contemporary Islamic thought» (Feener 2007: 225). In a world where politics, media and religion are mutually constitutive, rather than distinct phenomena, it is important to understand the formation and practices of different Islamic communities and how this articulation or mediation takes place, giving shape to various expressions of Islam in Indonesia<sup>3</sup>.

## MEDIATING VIEWS ON ISLAM

The book I edited contains nine self-portraits of Islamic student organisations active at the renowned Gadjah Mada University. A wide spectrum of currently important Islamic streams of thought is covered. A feeling of discontent with the fieldwork situation led to the idea to publish this book. I felt that some of the activists were sceptical about a Western, non-Muslim female wanting to know more about their organisations and daily activities. They were willing to give interviews but the information they provided often did not exceed the information found on their homepage. Because of this I was looking for a way to collaborate that would be beneficial and interesting for both sides, allowing for deeper discussions and exchanges.

When I approached the presidents of the different Islamic student organisations with the suggestion to submit a book proposal, they were interested in the idea of contributing a chapter to the volume. They felt that such a book, uniting different Islamic organisations and giving an overview, was not yet to be found on the market. More important still for them, however, was the opportunity to inform others about their organisations' own visions and missions. In eight out of nine cases, I approached the presidents (seven male and one female) with the proposal in order to show respect for the organisational hierarchy; the decision of who would actually write the chapter, however, was left to the organisation. In all cases, the presidents themselves wrote the contributions, five of them being assisted by a co-author.

It was six months from the moment of the first discussions with different activists before the book was available in bookstores. The small publishing house Resist Book was interested in the project from the start, as they found that the proposed title fitted their book series on social move-

<sup>2</sup> Translation by Ahmed Reza Khan.

<sup>3</sup> I would especially like to thank my colleague Carlo Caduff from the Institute of Anthropology, University of Zurich for his thoughtful and inspiring comments. I am also grateful to both Prof. Dr. Shalini Randeria, University of Zurich, and Prof. Dr. Heinzpeter Znoj, University of Bern, for the suggestion to write this article, and for their helpful feedback on an earlier draft.

ments. Furthermore, this publisher was trusted by the different organisations as it was not affiliated with any one particular strand of Islam. During this half year, I worked intensively with the fourteen authors and co-authors, all activists of Islamic student organisations. The activists signed a contract agreeing to write a short chapter outline, followed by a first draft and the final version. This process allowed for discussion and provided room for suggestions about what to include in the text. For me, this was a balancing act between, on the one hand, allowing personal emphasis and style of representation and, on the other hand, trying to point out topics that might be of interest to potential readers. Most of the contributions in fact cover the history of the organisations, their visions for Indonesia and the larger Muslim society, as well as the role of students as agents of change and their everyday activities on and off campus. Besides the text, at least two photos and the logo of every organisation along with a caption were included.

Working together with mostly male activists was at times challenging, but always insightful. In one case I discussed the issues while sitting behind a curtain (*hijab*) dividing the room into male and female parts. Over time I learned which activists did not wish to shake hands with women, which ones had or would like to have had a girlfriend, and which did not look one directly in the eyes when talking.

Despite all the differences between the organisations, there was at least one common vision that they shared, namely that of promoting an understanding of Islam as «blessing to all» (*Rahmatan lil 'Alamin*). They all sought to bring Islamic values (*nilai-nilai keIslaman*) back into everyday life. The worship of God is, in this view, not restricted to praying between finishing classes and playing football. It is rather about carrying out all aspects of everyday life – regular worship, such as praying, being one important part of this – in accordance with Islam. How Islamic values, and which Islamic values, should inform everyday conduct and make Islam become a blessing to all was probably the central issue of debate and a question through which the organisations defined their own specific identities. It could mean promoting human rights and engaging in the struggle to achieve gender equality, arguing that they followed the transformative spirit of the Prophet to reform society. For other activists, though, bringing Islamic values back to everyday life could mean objecting to gender equality and human rights as non-Islamic concepts and Western imports. In

both cases, the sacred texts, the Quran and the Sunna<sup>4</sup> were the starting point for grounding one's arguments. Ideology and critical deliberation were present in both cases and did not stand in opposition to one another, each mutually requiring the other.

## THE ENTANGLEMENT OF DISCIPLINE AND DISCUSSION

The interest in the book-launch event exceeded the expectations of the organisers. With more than 150 students present, mostly students of the Gadjah Mada University and members or sympathisers of one of the organisations, the room was so full that some students could not get in. Representatives from eight different organisations shared the stage with a moderator and myself. It was the first time, I was told, that the activists from these different organisations had come together in one room to discuss Islamic issues. The moderator, Eko Prasetyo, director of the publishing house and himself a writer and well-known activist, managed – with his ability to make jokes about all speakers – to, for the most part, maintain a cordial atmosphere in the crowded room. Given the tensions and disagreements between the groups represented, this was no easy task.

After the book discussion was over, I was invited by a local radio station to discuss the book, together with a chapter contributor. The audience was asked to contribute by sending SMS text messages and emails with questions. Most of these had to do with the differences between organisations and how they might eventually work together to strengthen the Islamic community.

After the book discussion some activists criticised the virtual absence of female voices. In fact, all the representatives on the podium, except me, were male. For the purposes of the discussion male members represented the two female authors. The female author and Hizbut Tahrir activist Riskha was not allowed to represent her organisation in front of a male audience. Laras, the other female author, felt more comfortable giving priority to a senior male member. I addressed this fact during my introductory speech, explaining how I had approached the presidents of the respective organisations about this issue. The fact that I was both non-Muslim and an outsider was seen by most as the reason for me being able to work with organisations representing different strands of Islam.

<sup>4</sup> The Sunna describes the practices (sayings and deeds) of the Prophet and His companions.

I wish to emphasise, however, that the fact that Riskha was only allowed to write about her organisation, Hizbut Tahrir, but not to represent it in front of a male audience, should not be viewed in terms of a polarity between the deliberative and disciplinary functions of media. Deliberation was not negated just because she was not present on stage. In this example, deliberation and discipline were thoroughly interdependent. In this discursive arena, public deliberation such as, in this case, not speaking in front of a male public resulted in the embodied sensibilities and modes of expression understood to facilitate the development and practice of Islamic virtues; in her view, this presented Islamic ethical comportment. Even though she refused to speak in front of a male audience, she nevertheless participated in the sphere of dialogic engagement and articulated her view of Islamic ethical norms and how they should be embodied in everyday life and practice. By asking me to explain to the audience her reason for ceding her chair in the discussion round to a male colleague she was not stressing the ideological over the dialogic aspect to promote and secure a model of uniform moral behaviour. Argumentation, even though not on stage, was inseparably entangled with discipline and ideology.

It was Riskha's idea to hold a discussion especially for female activists and we ended up organising this event together. Besides the book, the question of why the voices of female activists were heard less often in public, even though the number of female activists slightly exceeded the number of male activists, was discussed. Approximately thirty women belonging to various different Islamic groups attended. One activist was wearing a black chador showing only her eyes while others were unveiled, wearing jeans and T-shirts. All of these women agreed that they had the same intellectual capacity as men but that their voices were underrepresented. A variety of problems that women activists faced were addressed, such as the lack of self-esteem, the lack of physical mobility and restrictions on staying out until late. It was pointed out by some activists, however, that new media technologies such as cheaper book and magazine production as well as online media, blogs and Facebook were opening up new possibilities for participation that should be increasingly used by female activists.

## CONCLUSION

The production of «Islamic media» has become common in Indonesia, this ranging from films to music, novels, web pages and magazines, to mention just a few. These media are, however, not simply a form of pious enter-

tainment: Their production as well as their consumption forms part of a technique for the cultivation of Islamic virtues and, therefore, for the creation of the modes of public sociability that these virtues uphold. Writing a chapter in the book that I edited, participating in the discussion about it as a speaker or a member of the audience and speaking on the radio or commenting on issues in one's personal blog can all be part of being a good Muslim, of following the example of the Prophet to spread the message of Islam.

I will argue in my dissertation that these emergent practices cannot be understood simply as a modernizing turn towards an increasingly individualized form of rational piety; nor can they be seen as tool to strengthen the national culture. Instead, these media need to be analysed in terms of a particular articulation of personal and political virtues within contemporary Islamic discourse which is transnational in character.

The central idea of strengthening the Islamic community cuts across the distinctions between state and society and public and private that are central to the Habermasian notion of the public sphere (Habermas 1962). My argument is, in line with scholars such as Hirschkind (2006, 2001a, 2001b), Hirschkind and Larkin (2008), Street (1993) or Warner (1990, 2002), that media technologies, as employed by Islamic activists, have created conditions for a kind of «publicness» grounded in certain classical Islamic concepts but reformulated in response to a variety of contemporary exigencies. Deliberative and disciplinary moments are inextricably interwoven and interdependent within this arena. The public sphere is thus a place for learning, dialogue and dispute, all practices necessary for the moral guidance of the collective Islamic community.

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