Young Turks and new media: the construction of identity in an age of Islamophobia

Abstract
The place of Islam in a multicultural society is high on the agenda of every western nation at the moment. In the wake of a series of local and global events, Australia’s Muslims have found themselves in the glare of media scrutiny over what it means to be Australian and a Muslim. Increasingly that media discourse contributes to a rising tide of anti-Islamic feeling, also known as Islamophobia, in the community. Diasporic communities across the globe are using new technology to overcome some of the structural difficulties inherent in being cast as ‘outsiders’, even of the country in which they were born. This paper examines the use of communications and media technologies to establish, assert and define social groups and notions of social identity, using a research project with Melbourne’s Turkish community as a case study. The qualitative research, which forms part of a broader study of the Turkish community in Melbourne, focuses on the experiences of a small cohort of young people of both first and second generation Turkish background, who are completing their education in the Australian university system. The very rapid recent spread of new information and communication technologies has had important repercussions for the way these young people communicate and maintain their interpersonal relationships, as well as the way they organise and communicate with wider networks of acquaintances, peers and communities of interest.
**Young Turks and new media: the construction of identity in an age of Islamophobia**

**Introduction**

When the Prime Minister, as he did recently, issues a call for Muslims in Australia to learn English and integrate (Muhammad, 2006; Grattan, 2006), it reinforces in the minds of Muslims and non-Muslims alike that the socially constructed category now known as Muslim-Australians, for all the heterogeneity that that encompasses, are a united body, and moreover, a body that is essentially unAustralian. The place of Muslims within western societies has become a hot topic in the wake of recent national and international events, but the construction of an Islamic identity is much more problematic than current media reporting would have us believe. The enormous diversity and complexity found amongst followers of Islam in Australia belies attempts to homogenise or essentialise Muslims as a single entity. This is particularly so for Muslims of non-Arabic descent, given that much of the current Australian rhetoric applies mainly to the (pre-dominantly Sydney based, Arabic speaking) Lebanese Muslim community. Even within a single nationally defined minority group such as the Turkish community there is a degree of diversity in ethnicity (Turkish, Kurdish, Armenian) and religious identity (Christian, Sunni, Alevi). Although minority groups in the homeland such as Armenians in Turkey, are more likely to migrate for political reasons, the bulk of Turkish migration to Australia has been of the Sunni Turkish majority, migrating for economic rather than political reasons.
For the younger generation of Turks in Melbourne, establishing their own individual and personal senses of self is happening at the same time as having a stereotypical Muslim identity foisted on them through public discourse. This prominence being accorded to religion may not coincide with individual’s own developing social and cultural identities. As part of an ongoing project with the under-researched Turkish community in Australia, recent investigations with Turkish young people in Melbourne have given them a chance to articulate their own sense of identity and their place in Australia’s multicultural society. In particular, attention was paid in the research to the media and communications strategies Turkish Australian young people use to create networks and communities and to build and sustain their personal sense of identity and belonging. This paper presents some preliminary findings from the research in an attempt to unravel some of the complexities involved in constructing an identity in the face of broad popular hostility and in an age of instant communications. The findings suggest that for these globally connected youth, personal networks and cultural ties override commitment to religion as a unifying feature of their sense of self.

The past forty years have seen a fundamental change in the perceptions of ethnic difference within the Australian community, and in particular the rise of faith based identifications and divisions. Although freedom of religious belief has been enshrined in Australia’s Commonwealth Constitution since federation, in practice State based laws regarding Sunday Observance were in place for much of the last century, reinforcing the dominant Christian cultural norm (Jupp, 2002: 26). It has also been apparent over the last five years that a combination of a growing and increasingly visible Muslim community within Australia and the world events which have had an impact on Australian citizens, have contributed to both an ‘ethnicisation’ of the diverse followers of Islam in Australia (Bloul, 2003: 10) and a
hardening of attitudes towards that group. This is seen not only in the activities of individuals and right wing groups involved in assaults against Muslim women wearing hijab (Poynting and Noble, 2004; HREOC, 2004; Lewis and de Masi, 2007: 68), attacks on mosques and Islamic bookstores and the riot and affray at Cronulla beach, but in media reporting, most notably talkback radio and even federal government pronouncements considering the banning of some religious clothing seen to be Islamic and therefore unAustralian, calls for better integration and a debate about enforcing adherence to Australian values (whatever they might be).

The Muslim population has been undergoing a process of ethnicisation insofar as it slowly evolves into a ‘Muslim minority’, sharply distinguished from the rest of the population (the ‘us’ versus ‘them’ phenomenon) with its own ‘voice’. Islamophobia in the mainstream arises in response this increasing ethnicisation in a circular process. The more Islamophobia rises, the more Muslims are united in attempts to organise against it and hence the stronger becomes the idea of a ‘Muslim-Australian’ entity. Islamophobia then increases as a mainstream backlash against an increasingly visible ‘other’, as was seen in the events at Cronulla beach in 2005. This vicious circle has sped up the process of Islamic ethnicisation (Bloul, 2003: 10-13) and the creation of the ‘Muslim Australian’ identity category amongst mainstream Australia. Yet this is a process which is actively resisted by the young Turks interviewed for this project, who explicitly distanced themselves from those ‘other Muslims’ such as the Arabic speaking community.

Communities or Networks?

Critical thinking about what actually constitutes a community has revealed some fuzziness in the sociological and political understanding of ‘community’ (Mowbray, 2005; Bryson and
Mowbray, 1981). Yet the popular understanding and usage of the term reveals an easy familiarity with and comfortableness in using the word to describe a range of social groups, not necessarily geographically co-located. A school community, a religious community, a community which shares language, ethnicity, sexuality, profession or other interests may be widely dispersed in physical terms, but may meet face to face sufficiently often to constitute a genuine community in the old fashioned sense of the term, without the use of electronically mediated communication. Members of such social groups may well be comfortable describing them as ‘communities’. The extension of communities into the virtual realm makes such communities even easier to establish, support and maintain through cheap and fast communication, conducted at a time, place and pace (synchronous or asynchronous) which suits the members.

Yet an argument can be made for the kinds of social relationships that are being played out in cyberspace as constituting, not communities, but networks. Thus they are not dense, interconnected, strong ties between bounded groups of individuals, but rather looser, ego-centred personal networks of loose, weak ties, each constituting an individual’s personal network, unique and unmappable to any one else’s network. Wellman’s research has shown that such networked individualism has three main characteristics:

- Relationships are not geographically determined, but can equally easily be local and long distance
- Personal networks are sparsely knit but include densely knit sub groups
- Relationships are more easily formed and abandoned.

These circumstances have been developing since the demise of the pastoral village society with the rise of the industrial revolution. However, these can be supplemented by two additional things which are enhanced by electronic communication:
• Many relationships are with people from different social backgrounds
• Some online social ties are strong, but most are weak. (Boase and Wellman, 2006:12)

In sum, networked individualism is: dispersed; sparsely knit; transitory; socially diverse; and weak. These are the hallmarks of modern relationships (Boase and Wellman, 2006: 16). This may be particularly so for diasporic communities, where individuals are tied by kinship, language, religion and interest to widely separated geographical communities and nations. The weak ties which exist when relationships are maintained amongst a dispersed group of friends and acquaintances are supported by the rise of electronic means of communication, in which communication may be more easily initiated and terminated. At the same time, electronic communication can strengthen the strong ties which exist amongst close friends and relatives when it becomes just another way of communicating with those who are far away, but dear to our hearts. The rise of increasingly cheap, fast communication such as long distance telephony, online chat, VOIP, webcams and email can increase the frequency of keeping in touch with distant kin and friends, helping to maintain and enhance long distance relationships.

**Transnationalism and Identity**

While individuals have long held multiple, nested identities, articulated as required according to context, the overarching collective identity in the west since the Treaty of Westphalia has been at the level of the nation state. Yet as Anderson’s work has shown, there is nothing natural or innate about the nation state (Anderson, 1999). Rather it is an ‘imagined community’, produced in the minds of members by shared experiences and reinforced by political propaganda and media pronouncements. The concept of a unitary national identity has been an important way for nations as imagined communities to keep members locked in
and non-members locked out. In the global context of the twenty first century, the rise of transnationalism makes this idea of identity increasingly problematic. National identity has been threatened both by supranational and transnational collectives and at the same time, by fragmenting sub national identities (Glavanis, 1999: 12-3). At an individual level, identity can be experienced in much richer ways than those offered solely by the nation state. No longer necessarily nested or hierarchical, identities may now be overlapping, hybrid and even competing.

Anderson’s work on the construction of identity through ‘imagined communities’ (Anderson, 1999) shows how the nation state has become ‘the most universally legitimate value in the political life of our time’ (1999: 3), even though there is nothing ‘natural’ about such a construction, based as it is on tireless effort and propaganda, particularly in national media. Both radio and television broadcasting have traditionally been one of the most important ways in which nationally based audiences have come to imagine themselves as belonging to a particular national community (Morley and Robins, 1995: 11). Yet as unique community identities are blurred by the forces of globalised business, population movements and communications, national identities, based in language, religion, cultural practice and descent are being deterritorialised through globally available media sources and the de-linking of physical space and communicative possibility.

The popularity of emerging communities of interest online point to the potential of new information and communication technologies to override the importance of place of residence in the generation of a sense of community (Green, et al., 2004: 805-6). It may be seen, then, that the intersections of media, migration, technology and globalisation are producing a situation where the imagined national community becomes just one among many such
imagined communities (Tufte, 2001: 35).

Detailed, ethnographic studies of what minority groups actually do online and how they use new technologies show that this apparent erasure of place from (cyber)space is not as simple as it might at first appear. Many studies have suggested that access to online communities of interest based in or concerning the homeland reinforces the users’ sense of belonging to or interest in a territorially defined homeland (Tyner and Kuhlke, 2000; Ranganathan, 2002; Georgiou, 2005; Hiller and Franz, 2004). In these studies, migrants who have left their place of birth used the internet in a variety of ways to maintain connections with family and friends, to establish new connections with fellow migrants in the new place of residence and to stay connected to news and events ‘back home’. The geographical place in which the migrant was born retains a strong emotional pull which influences the subsequent use of technology to mitigate the effects of long distance relocation. Paradoxically Saunders research with ethnic Russians living in the newly nationalising states of the former Soviet Union found the opposite response. Instead of using new technologies to reinforce a sense of nationalism with the homeland, and establishing community with co-nationals in Russia, these internet using Russians, stranded on the wrong side of new political borders look outward to a global environment accessible to them on the world wide web. Instead of backward looking nostalgia for a sense of belonging in another place, these generally young, technologically savvy internet users are utilising global connectedness to access opportunities for education, employment and travel worldwide (Saunders, 2006).

Clearly, careful account must be taken of contextual factors which impact on the choices that individuals make regarding the opportunities available to them through the use of new technologies. The historical forces which cause groups of people to find themselves living as
minorities in multicultural societies, the attractions of the homeland compared with the opportunities available elsewhere, ease of access to information and communication and the entry and exit rights that exist within various cultural and ethnic groups all play a part in influencing the development and maintenance of nationalist identity in diasporic communities.

The research project

In 1967 Australia and Turkey signed a migration agreement which led to the arrival of Turks in Australia in significant numbers. Prior to this there were less than 3000 people of Turkish origin in Australia (1966 Census data), but over the next thirty five years the population of people of Turkish descent (Turkish migrants and their children and grandchildren) rose to almost 100,000. More than half of these settled in Victoria, mostly in the north western suburbs of Melbourne: Broadmeadows, Glenroy, Brunswick and Coburg (Fontaine and Kaymakci, 1996: 3). Many of the first arrivals came with the notion that their stay in Australia would be temporary and purely for work and economic advancement. There was little incentive therefore for the first arrivals to learn English or to acclimatise themselves to Australian culture and way of life. The community therefore remained comparatively insular and isolated from mainstream Australia. It has taken some time for the legacy of this mindset to be overcome (Fontaine and Kaymakci, 1996: 4).

Most of the first generation of Turkish migrants arrived as unskilled labourers, and initially their employment rates were high. As manufacturing declined over the last quarter of the twentieth century, however employment prospects diminished. Unemployment rates for Turkish and Lebanese Muslim youths were particularly high in the recession of the early 80s, and Turkish and other Muslim groups are still lagging behind the rest of Australia on
indicators of employment, education and income (Betts and Healey, 2006; Keceli and Cahill, 1998). While the second generation of Turks have better educational outcomes than their parents, their performance on average is still significantly worse than that of their Australian peers (Keceli and Cahill, 1998: 210).

As part of a larger, ARC funded project with the Turkish community in Melbourne, I recently began conducting research with Turkish young people in Melbourne regarding the Turkish diaspora and the use of new media. Because Muslim communities are not hierarchical and no one can speak for everyone else (Donohoue Clyne, 2001: 8), my research project used group interviews as a meaningful way of generating insights into the complex issues of community membership, identity and social networks. The interview groups included both male and female participants, all of whom were studying undergraduate or postgraduate degrees at university. Participants were recruited through the Turkish Students Associations which exist on each campus in Melbourne. The groups included a mix of Turkish born and Australian born respondents, as well as some who identified as Kurdish ethnicity and Alevi religion besides the Sunni Turkish majority. All were fluent in both Turkish and English and while some had a third language (either Kurdish or an Asian language learnt at an Australian school), only one had made any study of Arabic. As Küçükcan also found during his research with young Turks in London, despite fluency in both languages, young people preferred to speak in English, especially when the discussion turned to complex questions about religion and identity (1999: 126).

Discussion in the interviews covered topics such as generational differences, religious and cultural identity, patterns of associationalism within the Turkish community, links to family overseas, media use and making a place in Australian society. Much other research has noted
the importance of differences between the generations within immigrant communities as a cause of friction or of social and community breakdown. What is interesting coming out of this current research, is that there is comparatively little difference between the way second generation young people (that is young people born in Australia to parents who migrated from Turkey) and young people born in Turkey who have arrived here as teenagers, compared with their parental generation. First and second generation Turkish-Australians have more in common with each other in terms of their sense of identity, belonging and place in the world, as well as their use and consumption of media and communications technologies and sense of connection with the Turkish community here, than they do with their elders of the parental generation. Other Australian and overseas research confirms this trend towards the establishment of a global youth media culture which cuts across ethnic and national affiliations (eg: Ang et al., 2006: 41; Tufte, 2001: 46).

A striking example of the global connectedness of Turkish youth with peers in Australia, Turkey and Germany is through their use of fixed and mobile telephony, email, online chat and webcams. All the respondents in these focus groups reported that the internet was their first resource both for gathering news and current affairs information and for communicating with friends and family. Online chatting through sites such as MSN and text messaging are their preferred means of keeping in touch with peers both locally and internationally. In many cases the communication is with cousins, through ‘chatting and phones and texting’, illustrating that generational change in media use is occurring in Turkey as well as in Australia. Young people also function as intermediaries for their parents, showing them how to chat online, checking the email for their parents and setting up webcams and the like. The rapid recent fall in the cost of international telephony has also had an impact on communications patterns between the migrant community and homeland, with far more
frequent international telephone calls being made (see also Vertovec, 2004).

The recent introduction of satellite television services into Australia from Turkey has also had an effect on the media consumption habits of Australian Turks, and again a generational pattern is apparent in the change. The following comments are reflections on the older generation:

with the satellite dish, our community has completely stopped watching English TV.
They’ve stopped improving their English now.
Its nice, it relieves their homesickness that they may have for the general community, but its terrible in terms of integration

While for the younger generation:
My sister refuses to get it. She says my brother in law is just gonna be watching that and she’s gonna be switched off from the Australian news.

Research across several European countries suggests the impact of the introduction of satellite television has been both more marked and more contested there than is the case in Australia. Since the introduction of Turkish satellite TV, Turks in Europe have been both rapidly adopting the technology and heavy consumers of the product (Milikowski, 2000: 125). The mainstream German and to a lesser extent Dutch response to this is that it leads to greater ethnicisation of Turks, or a stronger degree of ethnic identification and a lower degree of integration by reinforcing the cultural difference between Turks and other Europeans (Milikowski, 2000: 444; Aksoy and Robins, 2000: 344; Ogan, 2001: 75). Thus the rise of transnational satellite television broadcasting has aroused anxieties in host communities about ghettoisation and the creation of cultural enclaves. Yet mostly what Turks are doing with
Turkish media is not passively being influenced by Turkish state nationalism, but ‘working through the complexities of Turkish culture and identity now.’ (Aksoy and Robins, 2000: 345).

While the older generation are hooked on subscriptions to Turkish TV, and read Turkish newspapers, even though they are some days out of date by the time they arrive, the younger generation unanimously state that their first resource for getting information is the internet. Young people might skim through the newspaper after their fathers have read it and none reads Turkish language magazines whether from Australia or Turkey. There was a also a high level of scepticism displayed, bordering on disgust, with the depiction of Turks and Turkey in the Australian media. The following statement is an answer to the question regarding the depiction of Turkey in Australian mainstream media:

I don’t think they present the Turkish community well at all. Every opportunity they’re actually bad mouthing Turkish people, even if its good [news].

Or its making fun of….Abdullah Gul [Turkish foreign Minister], and he fell off a horse or something, that’s what they showed and they were making fun of him. Like that’s ridiculous, like they were looking for something to make fun of, something Turkish. That’s how I feel.

Despite the media and political rhetoric regarding the Australian Muslim community, for the Turkish young people that I spoke to, their Turkish identity was much stronger than their Muslim identity. In fact, although some (but not all) of the young people identified their religion as being Islam, they were at pains to separate the Turkish community from other Islamic communities and to identify with cultural practice rather than religious tradition. The
following is a discussion between four young women:

I’ve never had any problem with religion.

We don’t wear a headscarf so people wouldn’t even know.

Turkey is a bit different to the Arab communities. We’re not, the majority of them aren’t actually practicing Muslims…

They’ll say they are but, I mean, very few people would follow the five pillars of the religion, like they might do some, like they might fast, but they won’t pray five times a day.

Like even if women have their heads covered they don’t go to the mosque. Or to a hoca for help. They will still go to their general practitioner or a psychologist.

I’m sure there are the people that do go, but generally we’re non practicing.

I have no idea. My parents are religious, but I, I don’t know.

Like I say, ‘I’m a Muslim’, but I don’t practice.

Because I had a very anti-religious, well not anti-religious but religious-less upbringing, I don’t know what religious values are. I just think that everything we do is cultural, rather than religious.

As with the findings of Robins and Aksoy’s (2001) research in London, the retention and preservation of cultural traditions was far more important for these young people than their religious or national identity. They identified the values that they were brought up with as being Turkish values much more than being Muslim values. Recent research in London also found that less than 5% of Turkish respondents chose religion as their only identity marker, and 68% did not choose a religious identity at all. Even being Muslim was seen by some as a cultural rather than religious identity. There was also little sense of belonging to a wider Muslim community. Even people who pray and fast do not necessarily identify themselves as
being religious (Enneli, Modood and Bradley, 2005: 40-1). Similar research by Küçükcan, found that, amongst adolescent Turkish respondents in London, although the overwhelming majority believed in god, 48% could not identify any of the five pillars of Islam, and only 28% could identify all 5. Only 20% had read any or all of the Qur’an in translation, 45% had never read it and 28% had tried but given up because they couldn’t understand it (1999: 153). Thus the perception of a global community of Muslims, united by their belief system and a shared communication in the Arabic language and through Arabic language media (Balnaves and Aly, 2006) is seriously undermined.

Most of the respondents in Melbourne said that their social groups were not from within the Turkish or Muslim communities in Australia, and that the Turkish friends they do have are the children of their parents friends, rather than being the young people’s friends in their own right. However they also valued their parents involvement with the Turkish community, and the sense of their parents Turkish friends standing in for the extended family which was largely left behind in Turkey, or who had migrated elsewhere, such as to Germany.

When questioned about who they might marry later on, however, the answers were revealing:

It would be nice to marry someone who has the same values as you. Who was brought up with the same language. Ultimately I would like my kids to speak Turkish and have Turkish names, and they probably will even if I didn’t marry a Turk, but I would love for my culture to be carried on. It’s a nice culture.

Yeah, and its so much easier. The in-laws would get along, your parents would get along with your partner. Everything.
Again the parallel with Robins and Aksoy’s (2001) research with Turks in London is clear. Maintaining one’s sense of Turkishness is not just about a sense of belonging to a particular ethnic, national or religious group, but is concerned with ensuring harmony within one’s own personal community and the transmission of social values and norms to the next generation.

Nonetheless, despite rejecting their parents immersion in the Turkish culturally milieu through satellite television subscriptions and other cultural practices, the four young women mentioned above all foresaw a future for themselves within the Turkish community through their choice of marriage partner. For these young Turkish Australians, their religious identity is subordinate to a range of other cultural and national loyalties. Perhaps because of Turkey’s fierce historic commitment to national secularism they had no difficulty in separating their religious beliefs or non-beliefs from their Turkish cultural traditions and in seeing the traditions that they valued as being Turkish rather than Islamic. It was quite clear that these young people, whilst being cultural Muslims, had no interest in or commitment to a larger, supranational or global community of Muslims.

**Conclusion**

It is clear from the results of this research that for these young people, cultural or ethnic identity is much stronger than religious identity. Although they spoke articulately about preserving their heritage and language and the traditions which they would follow when getting married, these were seen to be firmly Turkish traditions, with cultural rather than religious significance.

Traditionally ethnicity is understood in terms of language, culture and race, but Islam transcends these (Glavanis, 1999: 13). Moreover, when the religion was founded it was
explicitly on the basis that what was being created was both a religion and a state making the separation of ‘church’ and state problematic for many in non-Islamic countries. Yet the case of Turkey shows us that it is entirely possible for a Muslim majority country to function as a secular democracy. For non-Muslims in multicultural countries it may be easy to apply an Islamic identity to categorise people who are ‘not-us’, but it is not necessarily a meaningful category for those whom it seeks to describe. It is not yet clear whether the ascription of Islamic identity to the diverse community of believers in Australia has any validity – whether internally or externally ascribed. It seems premature to talk of an Australian Muslim identity (Saeed and Akbazadeh, 2001: 5), yet there are clearly factors both intrinsic and extrinsic to the Muslim community in Australia which are conspiring towards portraying as unified what is truly a diverse and heterogenous minority within Australia’s rich multicultural mix. The rhetoric has leapt ahead of the reality.

At the same time, increasing heterogeneity, hybridity and acculturation in the second and third generations is leading to an erosion of old, monolithic cultural, ethnic, religious and linguistic social categories. Multiple fractured, overlapping and intersecting identities are being developed. New forms of media and communications technologies are making transnational communications easier, cheaper and more frequent than ever before, but it does not follow that diasporic populations making use of these technologies are necessarily forging transnational communities, transnational identities or nationalist identities tied to the country of origin. The next generation is growing up in a globalised media environment, in which transnationalism is a banal and taken for granted everyday experience (Aksoy and Robins, 2003). Texting, chatting online, email and internet surfing are as likely to be with peers who live next door as with peers who live across the globe. Religion is one aspect of identity, but by no means the most important one. Nor is the nation an overriding marker of identity,
whether with Turkey or Australia, nor even the hybrid or hyphenated ‘Turkish-Australian’. Turkishness is embedded in language, culture and customs, not in a passport or a geographic location.

For the young people in this research, being online and constantly connected to their peers in whichever country they reside is simply part of belonging to the current generation, and does not come at the expense of their offline relationships or any other part of their personal identity. Much more than being simply members of the Turkish Australian community, let alone being a ‘Muslim Australian’, individuals are enmeshed in complex ego-centred networks of family, local community, homeland relatives and diasporic networks which span the globe. They are skilled readers and critics of mainstream media, and are comfortable using new media to consolidate their own positions together with, rather than in opposition to, the non-Muslim Australian majority.

Acknowledgement

Thanks are due to all the young people who generously gave their time to participate in this research. The research was undertaken as part of a post-doctoral fellowship funded by the Australian Research Council.

References


Betts, K. and Healy, E., 2006, 'Lebanese Muslims in Australia and Social Disadvantage', *People and Place*, 14, 1, pp. 24-42.


Grattan, M., 2006, 'Muslim Anger at Costello Call to Renounce Terrorism', *The Age*, 4 September 2006


Küçükcan, T., 1999, Politics of Ethnicity, Identity and Religion: Turkish Muslims in Britain, Ashgate, Aldershot.


Ranganathan, M., 2002, 'Nurturing the Nation on the Net: The Case of Tamil Eelam', Nationalism and Ethnic Politics, 8, 2, pp. 51-66.


