The ability to use new media has been significant for many young Muslims, as many who feel isolated have come to find solace in these virtual communities. The creation of community through media and the subversion of stereotypes through popular culture, have all allowed for this new generation of Muslim youth to develop their own identity. Through a series of three programs, UC Berkeley’s “Islam Today: New Media & Youth Culture in the Middle East, South Asia and Southeast Asia,” will address these issues, as well as the clash between traditional and modern forms of religious practice and ideals that is continually being played out in these different mediums.

“Politics and New Media in the Muslim World,” the first program in this series, brought together five young practitioners, researchers and scholars to discuss the transformations that have occurred following the rapid expansion in the use of technology and new media to talk about political issues and political change in the Muslim world. Speakers included: Mohamed Abdel Dayem from the Committee to Protect Journalists; Nik Nazmi Nik Ahmad, a member of Malaysia’s opposition party KeAdilan Rakyat and a recently elected member of Selangor’s State Assembly; Muhamad Ali, Assistant Professor of Religious Studies at UC Riverside whose research looks at contemporary Islam in Indonesia; Huma Yusuf, a freelance journalist in Pakistan with a special interest in new media and political activism; and Haroon Mughal, a popular U.S.-based blogger who writes about issues concerning South Asia and Muslim Americans (avari.typepad.com). The forum was moderated by Wajahat Ali, Associate Editor of altmuslim.com.

The forum highlighted the similarities and differences between the three world regions in intriguing ways — bringing forward many points where more discussion would be fruitful, and also exposing the audience to look more broadly at contemporary politics in the Muslim world. It also turned out to be a great opportunity for networking among the speakers and the audience. Before and after the forum, three of the five forum speakers participated in other events in the Bay Area: Haroon Mughal led the Friday prayer for the Muslim Students Association on the UC Berkeley campus; Huma Yusuf gave a talk on Pakistan’s relations with the U.S. at UC Berkeley’s Graduate School of Journalism; and Nik Nazmi Nik Ahmad gave a talk at the Asia Pacific Research Center at Stanford University and met for three separate off-the-record dinners with Malaysian students and professionals in Berkeley, Santa Clara and San Jose.

The forum co-sponsors were the Asia Society Northern California, Islamic Networks Group, the Arab Cultural and Community Center and Meedan.net.

SUMMARY

• The forum’s discussion mostly focused on new media and how it is used to ‘resist’ governments.
• Governments use new media for their own ends as well, but people still tend to turn to the Internet for new and exciting information — since the status quo is less interesting to read about, it seems likely that new media will tend to remain more a tool for those who are less aligned with government interests than otherwise.
• As Internet connectivity mushrooms in the region, the popularity of online news sources, including blogs and more formal sites, will rival traditional news and print media.
• Use of the new media outlets is especially relevant with sensitive topics such as sexual harassment, torture, HIV/AIDS, religion and politics.
• Governments may also try to crack down, and they do crack down, but the mobility of the web seems to mean that new ways of getting information out continually emerge.

“Islam Today: New Media & Youth Culture in the Middle East, South Asia and Southeast Asia” is being organized by UC Berkeley’s Centers for Middle Eastern Studies, South Asia Studies, and Southeast Asia Studies, with funding support from the Social Science Research Council, for 2009-2010. This new collaborative program explores how Muslim youth around the world are using new media, politics and popular culture to explore their identities, find “virtual” communities, promote new agendas and confront stereotypes. Three events have been planned: a forum on new media, Islam and politics; a forum on Muslim youth and social networking; and a festival on youth, Islam and the arts.

This is a report of the first event. Further information and webcast at: http://islamtoday.berkeley.edu
Huma Yusuf discussed the rise in the use of new media in Pakistan. She argued that new media emerged in Pakistan between 2007-2008 when then President Pervez Musharraf declared a state of emergency in Pakistan. With the shutting down of television stations and independent print news and channels, blogging provided a platform to the opposition. Furthermore, Pakistan experienced an explosion of cell phone usage with texts and SMS reporting becoming increasingly popular. For example, Yusuf described how Pakistani citizens were able to capture Benazir Bhutto’s assassination through the use of cell phones. One blogger was able to connect cell phone images and make the case that Bhutto was in fact shot before the blast occurred. Yusuf described this as an example of the convergence of citizen journalism and political activism.

Mohamed Abdel Dayem explained that in the Middle East and North Africa blogging has become a serious medium for social and political commentary as well as a target of government suppression. Though large numbers of blogs do not meet this journalistic standard, CPI and other analysts estimate that hundreds, if not thousands, of blogs in the region critically examine issues of public interest. These issues are that traditional media, shackled by government ownership or strict, longstanding newspaper regulations, often cannot cover. Dayem gave the example of an Egyptian blogger, Wael Abbas, who began blogging in 2005. With a focus on domestic issues, Abbas attracted a loyal but modest readership in his first year of blogging. But when he posted a video of police torture in 2006, he set off an astonishing outcry and altered the nature of blogging in the region. Egyptians had long heard anecdotes of torture in custody, but the video provided evidence. This and other equally damning videos posted by Abbas and others ultimately led to the conviction of several police officers.

Abdel Dayem also discussed the press laws and overarching regulations that blogging is policed by in the Middle East. He explained that virtually all regional countries rely on three basic types of laws to restrict online expression: longstanding press and penal code provisions, emergency laws, and emerging Web-specific laws and decrees. In Iran, which Abbas mentioned, the use of blogging was particularly important in the March 2008 elections, which brought significant change to the country. He also pointed out that for the first time in many years—and which Nik Nazmi said was in no small part due to the ability of Malaysians to turn to online sources for their information. New media outlets help counteract Malaysia’s dominant Barisan National political alliance from being too easily able to place stories in print or elsewhere that discredit the opposition or that stir up ethnic divisions. The government under then PM Mahathir had initially pressed to develop a multi-media corridor and Internet-savvy society, with a Bill of Guarantees provided to international companies such as Microsoft to promote market penetration, it is now limited in how it can crack down or go against the growing reliance of many Malaysians on alternative and independent online news sources, including in 2009, Wael Abbas, a prominent Egyptian blogger, was arrested on charges of “abusing” and “publishing false news.”

Nik Nazmi Nik Ahmad discussed how new media was playing a crucial role in Malaysian politics. This role had emerged because of the tight control placed by the government over old media, such as print, radio and TV. The new media role was particularly important in the March 2008 elections, which brought significant gains to Barisan National’s main opposition party led by Anwar Ibrahim. He was elected to the legislature in Selangor state in 2008, as a member of the Pakistani Parliament, and as the youngest candidate to contest a seat in those elections. He currently serves also as Political Adviser to the Chief Minister of Selangor, and is a member of the Executive Committee of his party’s youth wing. He studied law at King’s College, University of London.

Huma Yusuf is the Features Editor of Dawn.com, the website of Pakistan’s leading English-language daily. She reports on media trends, terrorism, and human rights for Dawn, The Christian Science Monitor as well as other news organizations. She is a graduate of M.I.T’s Comparative Media Studies program, where she worked as a researcher for the Center for Future Civic Media. Her recent writings examine the interplay of new media and democracy in Pakistan as well as the importance of community radio stations in combating terrorism.

Mohamed Abdel Dayem is the Program Coordinator for the Middle East and North Africa for the Committee to Protect Journalists (CPJ) in New York. Before joining CPJ in 2008, Mohamed Abdel Dayem worked for the Save Darfur Coalition; for the National Endowment for Democracy, where he managed the Endowment’s Iraq portfolio; and for Human Rights Watch, where he conducted research and media outreach on countries throughout the Middle East and North Africa. He currently serves as an Instructor of Advanced International Studies at the Johns Hopkins University.

Haron Moghul discussed his work with the Islamic Center and how the use of Internet has allowed their message to spread. Their use of new media involves reciting their religious sermons and making them available on outlets such as iTunes, YouTube, or through their website. These sermons are often about “taboo” topics; topics, such as sex, that Muslim youth and others find difficult or awkward to discuss in public forums or with their families. These sermons reach 30,000 listeners per month in about 125 countries and have received feedback from places as far as Iran, and as close as students from New York University. Indeed the recorded sermons have helped establish communication and conversation between Muslims and across geographical and “virtual” boundaries. Moghul argued that just because someone is using new media, this does not mean that they are liberal or secular. As the phenomenon of new media continues to advance, so will the ability to connect people of all faiths and creeds.

Haron Moghul is the author of an influential and popular blog focused on issues concerning South Asia, the Middle East, Islam and Muslim Americans. He is the author of *The Order of Light*. He has written for *The Washington Post*, *The Los Angeles Times*, *The New York Times* and the *International Herald Tribune*. He has contributed articles to *The Nation* and *The New Republic*, and has served as Research Fellow at the *Atlantic Council*. His writings have appeared in *The Chicago Tribune*, *The San Francisco Chronicle*, and *The Christian Science Monitor*. He is also the author of the novel *The Interchange*.
“Online repression in the Middle East combines old-school tactics such as detention and harassment with newer techniques such as online blocking and monitoring. It has also moved assertively to extend—and even expand—longstanding legal restrictions on print and broadcast journalism to online media.”

“Heightening political instability has wracked Pakistan since November 2007. In an effort to boost public accountability, organise protests, and disseminate accurate information, young Pakistanis are employing new media tools – blogs, YouTube videos, social networking sites, SMS2Blog – thereby spurring a new culture of political activism and civic engagement.”

“Through its on-line lectures and sermons, the Islamic Center at NYU has become part of a web of global discourse. My presentation discusses the implications of that development for authority in Islam.”