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RELIGION AND SPACES OF TECHNOLOGY:
CONSTRUCTING AND CONTESTING
NATION, TRANSNATION AND PLACE

By

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ABSTRACT

In this paper, I focus on one particular technological development that has come to influence religious practice in significant ways – religious broadcasting. While computer-mediated communications now garner growing research attention, I have chosen to remember the influence of the older technology of broadcasting, for its continued influence on myriad lives. In bringing this focus to bear on another major phenomenon, that of transnationalism, I have come to understand how religious broadcasting does not contribute in a straightforward, linear fashion to perpetuating transnational identities and communities, but instead is implicated in the assertion of the national in the face of transnational influences, while simultaneously enabling and challenging the transnational. I am aided in this understanding through an examination of a specific analysis of religious broadcasting in multireligious, yet secular Singapore, and its impacts on a significant Muslim minority which is nevertheless recognized as deserving of special privileges.

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RELIGION, TECHNOLOGY AND THE TRANSNATIONAL

The explosion of literatures on globalization and transnationalism has focused attention on a variety of global, transnational flows: of people, ideas, images, commodities, capital and so forth (see Appadurai, 1990). The role of technology is only sometimes acknowledged as critical to facilitating these global flows and insufficiently studied. Technological developments, including travel technology, and old and new media, have enhanced trade, migration, conquest, colonialism, missionary work, and more, all of which have facilitated access to information and the flow of ideologies. Within the context of religious practice, technology has facilitated the movement of religious individuals and groups over space and across boundaries, a phenomenon that dates back a long way, with Catholic missionaries and Buddhist monks already travelling across the globe centuries ago when travel technologies were less advanced than those today. This has prompted Rudolph (1997:1) to argue that “religious communities are among the oldest of the transnationals”.

In recent times, technology has opened up new spaces of religious practice – or “techno-religious spaces” (Kong, 2001), evident in an enlarged range of cross-border religious phenomena. These new spaces of religious practice range from that which is basic by 21st century measures, such as radio and television broadcasts to more recent revolutionary Internet-based communication. The former has facilitated televangelism, as well as documentaries about religious tenets and practices, “chat” shows in which religious gurus offer advice on how to lead religious lives, live telecasts of prayers/services/sermons and so forth, all of which can and do reach across boundaries in transnational ways. In the United States, for example, Hoover (1988:12) argued a decade and a half ago that

religious broadcasting [had] moved, over the past decade, from the margins of social and religious life to center stage. Once a feature of late-night and small-market Bible Belt radio, religion is now available on television in every region of the United States and, increasingly, the world” (see also Schultze, 1991, and Hadden 1993 for a contrary view).

Cassette and video tapes, and more recently, compact discs, video compact discs and digital videos, have also facilitated the distribution of sermons, prayers, religious

music, and programmes about a host of religious activities all over the world (Babb and Wadley, 1995).

Computer-mediated communication (CMC) has revolutionised communication in the last few years. Through them, too, religious lives have been mediated. Such CMC may take various forms: one-to-one asynchronous communication e.g. email; many-to-many asynchronous communication e.g. Usenet, bulletin boards or mailing lists; synchronous communication on a one-to-one, one-to-few and one-to-many basis e.g. Internet Relay Chat and chat rooms; and synchronous communication where the receiver seeks out information from a provider e.g. websites, gopher and FTP (see Kitchin, 1998:12-13, for elaboration of these forms). In religion, there are now bulletin boards, mailing lists and chat rooms for discussions of religious matters, and personal and institutional websites which communicate religious orientations and intentions. Religious software programmes are also available: Muslims, for example, have electronic Arabic tutorials, an Islamic law database, and an interactive Islamic game Journey to Mecca (see Zaleski, 1997, for details of resources available via CMC for various religions). They can be accessed from all over the world as long as there is access to computers.

In academic research, there is now much interest in the internet and how it is transforming social roles and relations. Research on the specific influence of the internet on religious life and beliefs is still on the ascendance, and deserves more attention. A great deal more research has been conducted on religious broadcasting, reflecting its longer history. Despite the existence of a significant literature, I nevertheless choose to focus on religious broadcasting in this paper, in part because there remains more work to be done that does not focus on the Christian West as has tended to be, and partly because radio and television still remain more accessible to a large segment of the world's population. It is important that the power of existing technologies does not become backgrounded in academic analyses with the excitement of new media.¹ This will detract from an understanding of the persistent

¹ This is not to downplay the importance of new media in religious life. A recent report highlights the fact that 64% of wired Americans have used the Internet for spiritual or religious purposes (<http://www.pewinternet.org/reports/toc.asp?Report=119>).

influence of “traditional” media. Thus, in this paper, I choose to focus my analysis on religious broadcasting, using the experience of a minority group (Muslims) in multireligious yet secular Singapore as a specific case for analysis. My objectives are twofold. First, I examine the ways in which *policies* relating to technology (broadcasting) and religion intersect. Second, I study the quotidian *experience* of religion when mediated by technology, as expressed by Muslim adherents themselves. In particular, I focus on the ways in which the nation, transnation, and place are constructed and contested in the process, and argue that religious broadcasting policy and practice can simultaneously construct and contest nation, transnation and place. In other words, the notion that “techno-religious spaces” (in the form of religious broadcasts) have transborder reach and therefore quite inexorably contribute to transnational outcomes is challenged. Instead, a complex simultaneity of nation, transnation and place is evident.

Religious broadcasting

The literature on religious broadcasting is a large one, covering a range of issues: for example, how media depicts religion (Hoover, 2001; Stout and Buddenbaum, 2003); how media influences religious practice (Hays et al. 1998); how religion uses media, for example for evangelical work (Schement and Stephenson, 1996; Hoover, 2001; Stout, 2001); and how religion influences media use and reception of media content (Buddenbaum and Stout, 1996). Particularly of interest to this paper are two sets of literatures: the first deals with the transnational effects of religious broadcasting, and the second examines the recursive relationship between religion and media.

Wood’s (1992:215-21) work reminds us especially of the political transnational effects of religious broadcasting when he highlights how U.S. religious broadcasting agencies may have taken on the role of secular radio stations in seeking to influence the political views and ideological persuasions of audiences beyond the U.S. through international broadcast. At the same time, he argues, religious broadcasting may operate as an “overt ... instrument for the projection of a culture” (Wood, 1992:220), thus becoming a vehicle for cultural imperialism, in addition to its role in purveying political ideas and beliefs. The literature of which Wood’s research forms a part

reminds us of the importance of examining transnational impact of religious broadcasting, and I will return to this issue in relation to Muslim broadcasting in a later section of the paper.

Another set of literature that is relevant to my analysis is that which examines the recursive relationship between religion and media, and which gives agency to the audience and producer alike. This acknowledgement will be familiar to many in media and communications studies, but bears repeating here, as it forms a major philosophical basis for my subsequent analysis:

... the influence of religion on media or the influence of media on religion is best seen as something that is not direct or linear. Instead, we need to understand it as recursive, cyclical, and constructed. People don't simply 'consume' media; they experience media images, symbols, and messages as part of an ongoing flow of experience in their daily lives. Specific programs and images have less prominence than we often think. They are consumed within the larger frameworks of motivation and meaning-making ... Media are more of a resource than an influence. As a resource, they both *represent* religious meaning and, at the same time, *constitute* religious meaning for certain viewers at certain points in time (Hoover, 2001:58-59).

As will be apparent later, my analysis resonates with Hoover's acknowledgement of the dual re-presentational *and* constitutive role of broadcasting in religious life. Thus, I examine the ways in which religious broadcasting *re-presents* religious meaning for Singapore's Muslim population, reinforcing specific wisdoms about Islam, such as its key pan-Islamic teachings. Beyond that, I analyse the ways in which religious broadcasting is implicated in an active process of meaning-making on the part of the Muslim population. Far from being "reliably produced and predictably consumed" (Hess, 2001:289), religious broadcasts in fact "provide space for the creation of, negotiation with, and even resistance to meaning-making - including religious meaning making" (Hess, 2001:289). It is in this sense that religious meaning is *constituted* via techno-religious spaces. In the present context, these religious meanings are constituted in relation to other meaning systems, entangled with the making of nation, transnation and place.

Transnationalism and religion

Aside from the literature on religion and technology (and religious broadcasting in particular), another literature relevant for present purposes is that focused on religious globalization and transnationalism, examining the cultural, social and political manifestations of global and transnational processes. “Transnationalism” refers to many things. Vertovec (1999) refers to transnationalism as social morphology, type of consciousness, mode of cultural production, avenue of capital, site of political engagement, and reconstruction of place or locality. Common to all of these is the recognition of transnationalism as the existence of multiple ties and interactions linking people or institutions across national borders. The ways in which religious and transnational phenomena intersect have been examined in the following ways.

Scholars studying cultural globalization more generally have pointed to cultural homogenization as a consequence, with homogenised commodity consumption resulting in a “McWorld” where we eat the same food, listen to the same music, watch the same movies, and so on (Winchester, Kong and Dunn, 2003, Chapter 3). In the context of religion, cultural homogenization is translated as a homogenization of religious practice, or *religious globalization*. This is evident in a growing convergence and conformity between different religious traditions (such as Christianity and Buddhism) in which particular religious ideals are sought: regular congregational rituals, adoption of a sacred day a week, a centrality of scriptures and texts, an engagement with secular issues such as human rights, refugees, the environment, and so forth. These trends lend themselves to the development of a “global religious civil society” (Nagata, 1999).

Moving from the cultural to the more specifically social, the literature further examines the emergence of transnational religious communities. Proponents of the idea of “transnations” suggest that, with globalization, nation-states have been “reconstituted” in such a way that transnational people assert local loyalties but share in global values and lifestyles (Marden, 1997:37). In religious terms, globalization has urged the emergence of *religious transnationalism*, rooted in the transnational religious community, best imagined as a religious community

constructed across national boundaries. Some argue that the Islamic “*ummah*” provides a classic example (Abdullah al-Ahsan, 1992). More targeted studies of the transnational religious community have focused on the ways in which globalization and increasing migration has led to the growing presence of both highly skilled visible minorities and equally visible “underbelly” illegal or low skilled ones in host countries, and how religious ties with their home countries and new relationships with religious organisations in their host countries for these migrants lead to the creation of cross-border religious communities. The transnational nature of these migrants’ religious lives, and the continued relations between home and host-country institutions which modify religious ideologies, practices and expectations in both societies as a consequence have been termed “local-level religious transnationalism” (see Levitt, 1998) and deserve much more research attention. While important, this however does not constitute the substance of this paper.

Finally, research on religious transnationalism has focused on political and ideological issues. The reach of transnational religious groups set against the mediations of local forces has drawn research attention, as has the question of how pan-religious identities and communities conflict with local and national affiliations. Haynes (2001), for example, argues that globalization facilitates the growth of transnational networks of religious actors which feed off each other’s ideas, aid each other with funds, and form bodies whose main priority is to improve the well-being of their transnational religious community. The focus, as in other works, is very much on organized transnational religious activism. Haynes examines whether the activities of transnational religious actors undermine state sovereignty, and concludes from his case studies that while they help to undermine the hegemony of authoritarian governments, this is not equivalent to a more general threat to state sovereignty. Rudolph and Piscatori’s (1997) oft-cited *Transnational Religion and Fading States* similarly focuses on the question of state sovereignty and whether it is diminished by religious movements that operate across state boundaries. They argue that future conflicts are less likely to result from a “clash of civilizations”, but to originate at micro levels. Conflicts are as likely to arise between states sharing a religion as between those divided by it and more likely to arise within rather than across state boundaries. Rather than seeing transnational religion purely as acting

against states, the essays in Rudolph and Piscatori (1997) discuss the dual potential of religious movements as sources of peace and security as well as of violent conflict.

To sum up, the various literatures suggest that there is scholarly interest in a range of questions pertaining to religious broadcasting and cross-border religious phenomena, including issues of 'nation' and 'transnation' in the face of enhanced global flows of people, images and ideas. Much of the literature has focused on the Christian West, and the limited literature on religious broadcasting and religious transnationalism as it pertains to non-Christians (in particular, Muslims) beyond the west suggests that further scrutiny is in order to refine conceptualizations and expand theoretical ideas about these religious phenomena. There is, however, no "ascent" to theory without "descent" to case, to which I turn below. To enable the study, research entailed two parts. First, a thorough examination of state policies pertaining to religious broadcasting in Singapore, and a specific analysis of how these policies are translated into actual empirical occurrences of religious broadcasting (or lack thereof), coupled by an interpretation of the ideological intents motivating policy and practice. Second, an analysis of how Muslims in Singapore respond to these policies and practices, and how they accept or challenge the ideological underpinnings of religious broadcasting policy, reflecting their constructions of religion and its place in state and nation. In this regard, interviews were conducted with 45 Singaporean male and female Muslims in a range of age groups between 2000 and 2002. These interviewees were drawn from a variety of contexts: from randomly selected secular schools, universities and *madrasahs* (Islamic schools), and mosques, workplaces, and public spaces.² I turn now to religious broadcasting and Muslims in Singapore.

ENABLING THE HEGEMONIC NATION

One of the lessons drawn from observing the three-way relationship between 'nation', religion and technology in Singapore is that the hegemonic 'nation', as constructed by the state and its apparatus, is enabled via, *inter alia*, policies and discourses about religion and technology. I begin by focusing on the nature of this state-vaunted 'nation': a 'multireligious' and 'multicultural' society within a secular

² This study was part of a larger research project on the use of secular spaces for religious purposes, and this entailed interviews at schools, museums, and public housing estates.

framework. I will then examine how this construct of the 'nation' is enabled and maintained.

The secular, yet multireligious nation seems a contradiction, but may be understood as follows. Singapore is secular to the extent that no one religion is identified as the official state religion. Further, a key tenet of the state's secular policy is the view that religion and politics must be kept strictly separate. Religious groups should not venture into politics and political parties should not use religious sentiments to gather popular support. If members of religious groups are to participate in the democratic political process, they must do so as individuals or as members of political parties and not as leaders of religious groups. The Maintenance of Religious Harmony Act, passed in November 1990, is designed to define behaviour that is acceptable, and allows the relevant minister to issue prohibition orders should any individual cause feelings of enmity or hatred between different religious groups; should a person carry out political activities for promoting a political cause or the cause of any political party under the guise of religion or propagating religious activity; should a person carry out subversive activities under the guise of propagation of religion; and should a person instigate and provoke feelings of disloyalty or hatred against the President or the government.

Even while the secular framework is clearly established, Singapore society is also multireligious in that it is characterised by a high degree of religious heterogeneity, with the population comprising Buddhists (42.5 %), Taoists (8.5%), Christians (14.6%), Muslims (14.9%), and Hindus (4.0%). In addition, 0.7% of the population adhere to other religions, and 14.8% have no religion (*Census 2000 Advanced Data Release*). Freedom of worship is also constitutionally enshrined, providing the framework for multiple religions to exist. Specifically, every person has the right to profess and practise his or her religion and to propagate it. Every religious group has the right to manage its own religious affairs, to establish and maintain institutions for religious or charitable purposes, and to acquire and own property and to hold and administer it in accordance with law. Every religious group also has the right to establish and maintain institutions for the education of children and to provide instruction in its own religion, but there must be no discrimination on the grounds of religion only, in any law relating to such institutions or in the administration of any such law.

At the same time, the state is also committed to the principle of multiculturalism.³ This is enshrined in the Constitution in two ways. First, a general clause protects the fundamental rights of the individual and citizen and prohibits discrimination by race, language, or religion (Article 12). Second, the Presidential Council for Minority Rights established under Article 69 has the general function of considering and reporting on matters, referred by parliament or the government, affecting persons of any racial or religious community in Singapore.

The secular position, coupled with the specific stance of multiculturalism and multireligiosity together constitute a specified Singapore 'nation' as envisaged by the state. The singular deviation from this carefully cultivated hegemonic 'nation' is the special position accorded the Malays, and, relatedly, the Muslims in Singapore.⁴ Article 152 of the Constitution focuses on minorities and, in particular, on Malays. It spells out clearly that the government must care for the interests of the racial and religious minorities in Singapore; particularly, it must "recognise the special position of the Malays, who are the indigenous people of Singapore, and accordingly it shall be the responsibility of the Government to protect, safeguard, support, foster and promote their political, educational, religious, economic, social and cultural interests and the Malay language" (Constitution, 1985: 73). This consideration for the Malays is a legacy of the politics of the 1950s. Specifically, in the negotiations for the coalition government of 1959, one of the agreed conditions was that the Malays, as the indigenous population, should have special rights, which would be enshrined in the Constitution. It could also be an acknowledgement of geopolitical realities; that is, of Singapore's position in Southeast Asia, a predominantly Malay world. Recognition that the Malays are the indigenous population and according them a special position

³ Various versions of this concept have been discussed by sociologists. For example, Benjamin (1976:115) discussed the concept of 'multiracialism' in the context of Singapore as the "ideology that accords equal status to the cultures and ethnic identities of the various 'races' that are regarded as comprising the population of a plural society". Siddique (1989:565) discussed the "4Ms": multiracialism, multilingualism, multiculturalism, and multireligiosity. To her, multireligiosity "acknowledges a societal situation in which a number of religions are practised, but none is officially recognized as paramount". It is distinguished by a "religious populism supportive of moral order".

⁴ 99.6% of Singapore's Malay population (aged 15 years and over) is Muslim (Singapore Census of Population 2000, Advance Data Release No.2 - Religion).

could help to avert any suspicions on the part of Singapore's neighbours that it is trying to be a "Third China" (Chua, 1983:38), after mainland China and Taiwan, with any accompanying hint of Chinese domination. In brief therefore, the hegemonic version of the 'nation' as constructed via state policy and practice is one that is secular, yet multireligious and multicultural, while privileging the Malay/Muslim population in specific areas.

In what follows, I will highlight how specific policies pertaining to religion and broadcasting reinforce the state-vaunted 'nation'. While it is fashionable and reasonable to argue that 'techno-religious spaces' (Kong, 2001) contribute to the (re)production of transnational religious identities, it is important to remember that they can also simultaneously reinforce the 'nation' rather than defy it. In the specific case at hand, the state-vaunted version of the 'nation' outlined above is enabled and reinforced via a range of statutory regulations and censorship guidelines, which simultaneously define and circumscribe the place of religion in the public sphere. The following discussions, which use radio and television broadcasting as examples, indicate how the enabling of the hegemonic 'nation' occurs.

Radio and television are so much a part of contemporary quotidian lives that it is easy to forget how they formed part of a technological revolution not so long ago. Yet, it is precisely their everyday taken-for-grantedness that deserves particular scrutiny, for the influence that they can potentially exert on the community. In Singapore, radio and television reach almost all homes, providing entertainment, information and education. Because of their potential impact, broadcasting services are licensable,⁵ and subject to statutory regulation and scrutiny by the Media Development Authority (MDA), which draws up and enforces a code of practice for broadcasting services, and constitutes advisory, censorship review and appeals committees to guide programming. From the broadest statutes to the detailed codes of conduct, and from the standing advisory committees to the ad hoc review

⁵ These licensable broadcasting services are: free-to-air nationwide television and radio services; free-to-air localised television and radio services; free-to-air international television and radio services; subscription nationwide television and radio services; subscription localised television and radio services; subscription international television and radio services; special interest television and radio services; audiotext services; videotext services; teletext services; video-on-demand services; broadcast data services; and computer on-line services (Broadcasting Act, Chapter 28).

committees,⁶ the issue of religion (and race) is subject to scrutiny and regulation, collectively designed to maintain the carefully tended secular yet multireligious 'nation'.

The contradictions of this secular yet multireligious 'nation' are evident in the handling of 'broadcasting spaces'. Although multireligiosity is interpreted constitutionally as the freedom to propagate one's religion, radio and television programming codes stipulate that programming must not "persuade or influence viewers towards a specific religious end" (see, for example, http://www.mda.gov.sg/medium/radio/r_progguide.html). At the same time, while religion is not explicitly prohibited, there are clear out-of-bound markers. The common thread in programming and advertising codes emphasises the need for broadcasters to "exercise due caution when featuring the views, beliefs, practices or activities of racial and religious groups", reminding broadcasters that "matters pertaining to race and religion are sensitive and capable of evoking strong passions and emotions" (http://www.mda.gov.sg/medium/radio/r_progguide.html). Programmes that denigrate, are likely to offend the sensitivities of any racial or religious group, are intended to incite or which have the potential to incite racial and/or religious intolerance or misunderstanding, should not be broadcast. References to race and religion are to be presented "accurately and in a dignified manner". Further, programmes that "feature the views or beliefs of any religion must be acceptable to the target audience". Racial and religious stereotyping are to be avoided. Failure to observe these codes will subject broadcasters to fines.

Through circumscribing the discursive field, programming codes such as the above define (by exclusion) particular constructions of the Singapore 'nation'. For example, the idea of multireligiosity as the freedom of all religious groups to propagate its religion in all medium and contexts is here excluded. Instead, programming codes contribute to the construction of the 'nation' by prescribing possibilities. Specifically, they stipulate that programmes must uphold racial and

⁶ The relevant policies and guidelines are encapsulated in the Broadcasting Act (Chapter 28), the Radio Programme and Advertising Code, and the TV Programme, Advertising and Sponsorship Code, and shaped or effected by the various advisory and appeals bodies for radio and TV programmes, and the Censorship Review Committee.

religious harmony; observe societal and moral standards; and promote positive family values (http://www.mda.gov.sg/medium/tv/t_progguides.html). These prescriptions dovetail with other state instruments that have been devised to manufacture the Singapore 'nation', such as the "Shared Values" project of the 1990s, in which the guiding principles for the ongoing governance of the country were articulated as nation before community and society before self; family as the basic unit of society; regard and community support for the individual; consensus instead of contention; and racial and religious harmony. Specific regulations pertaining to religion in broadcasting spaces thus reinforce other hegemonic projects of the state in maintaining the 'nation'.

The outcome of circumscribing the discursive space is an absence of free-to-air religious broadcasts on local television, and very limited free-to-air religious radio broadcasts. In particular, the only religious television broadcasts are from Malaysia, on RTM1, 2 and 3, and none on local Singapore channels. As for radio, there are two main programmes on the local channel Radio Warna at 6 a.m. and 6 p.m. daily. The former (*Firman Dan Sabda* or The Words of God and the Prophet) caters to Muslims who engage in their morning prayers, and airs sermons on what it is to be a good Muslim and how Islam is relevant to life in modern times. The latter is a prelude to the evening prayer, and comprises similar sermons. The channel also plays the *azan* (the call to prayer five times a day).

The general absence of religious broadcasts may be interpreted as the work of a secular ideology, and its near-absence across all religions reflective of a stance of multiculturalism and multireligiosity, interpreted as equality of treatment, and in this case, construed specifically to mean equal absence (as opposed to equal space for and celebration of all religions). At the same time, the exception in the form of limited Radio Warna programmes and the broadcast of the *azan* on radio must be understood within the context of the special position of the Malays, and, relatedly, of the Muslims in Singapore, where the religious interests of the Malay population are safeguarded constitutionally. At the same time, Radio Warna's religious role in facilitating the *azan* may in fact be read as a means of maintaining a specific construction of multireligiosity, one in which religious practices of one group do not inconvenience other groups, despite close co-existence. It entails the maintenance of

a religious practice in a minimally intrusive manner for the multireligious population, and represents a solution designed to avoid conflict in a multireligious society. In particular, the traditional call to prayer in rural settings and small Muslim communities used to be done on a loudspeaker, outward from a mosque to attract adherents to prayer time. In Singapore, population growth and urbanisation has meant that the new urban social setup has caused such sound production to sometimes be regarded as intrusive by those not involved in that religion or those particular events (Lee, 1999). State regulations were therefore introduced to deal with this, specifically, regulations on “noise pollution”, including turning the loudspeakers inwards towards the mosque rather than outwards. This, however, caused unhappiness among the Muslim community who viewed the regulations as attempts to restrict the freedom of worship among Muslims. State strategies to deal with this included flagging its “multicultural” stance, that all communities were affected by the noise regulations, including Chinese operas, funeral processions, church bells, music during weddings, record shops and places of entertainment. Even state-endorsed and state-encouraged nation-building activities were not spared, it declared, such as the recitation of pledges in schools. To ensure that the Muslim community had the means by which to still issue the *azan* in an effective manner, it was agreed that prayer calls would be made via radio. Thus, Radio Warna gained the role of issuing the *azan*. In short, technology in the form of a broadcast service was called into play to enable (and modify) a particular religious practice, thus maintaining a hegemonic version of the ‘nation’ as essentially secular and uniquely ‘multireligious’.

The hegemonic vision behind the general absence of religious broadcasting in Singapore and Radio Warna’s limited role prompts varied reactions amongst the Muslim population. One view may be summarised as acceptance of the hegemonic position: common broadcasting spaces should remain free of religion and thus maintain neutrality, reflecting the secularity of the state. In fact, it goes further, arguing that special treatment of the Malays/Muslims should not be accorded. Thus, for example, Aini, a 28-year-old Muslim clerical officer, reflects the partial success of the state’s hegemony when she says:

We are a multireligious society so we cannot have all kinds of religious programmes on radio or TV. If not, there may be conflicts as a result. Also, we are not a Muslim country, so we should not expect Muslim broadcasts if the other religions do not have it.

The example is particularly interesting, for Aini's oxymoronic opening statement reveals the ideological contradictions in state constructions of the Singapore 'nation', and the success at hegemonic influence, despite the inconsistent logic. First, analytically, the general absence of religious broadcasting in Singapore reflects the desire to keep Singapore a secular state rather than a multireligious one, for one might argue that broadcast space would be given to all religions in a multireligious nation. Yet, ideologically, the state also propounds this multireligious status for the 'nation', and it is that which Aini attributes as the reason for the absence of religion in radio and television broadcasts. At the same time, the general notion of multireligiosity as equality of treatment for all religions is clearly accepted, to the extent that special treatment of the Malays/Muslims is deemed unnecessary, even by a Malay Muslim.

Not all Muslim interviewees, however, agree that equal absence amounts to multireligious practice. Indeed, a further slippage between hegemonic intentions and alternative ideological positions is evident in the desire to see "more religion on television" (Kamariah, 40-year-old). This view is expressed by various Muslim interviewees who verbalized their disapprobation that the Malay TV channel Suria focused too much "on the younger generation" and not sufficiently on the spiritual aspects of life. Twenty-two year old undergraduate Sa'adah, herself a member of that generation, described the channel as "very MTV like", and suggested that it did not have much credibility for some in the Malay-Muslim population as a consequence. Comparisons were drawn with Malaysian channels which have frequent and regular religious programmes, a practice heralded as desired, and viewed as contributing to a "more spiritually enriched nation" (Ahmed, a 25-year-old graduate). Indeed, Ahmed was at pains to point out that his desire to have "more religion on television" was not confined to Muslim programmes only, and argued that he would have liked to learn about other religions through "infotainment programmes, if only they were available". This, he reasoned, would allow better understanding of different religions to develop. Alternative

constructions of multireligious practice are thus evident among the Muslims I interviewed, evidence of multivocality as against a preferred seamlessness and solidarity of state ideology.

The complexity of nation-building projects is an empirical phenomenon experienced in multiple ways throughout (especially) the postcolonial world. Singapore is not alone in this regard. Where 'nation'-building efforts are troubled by issues of religious pluralism and mired further by potential state-religion tensions, the situation calls for skilful ideological work and multiple reinforcing policies. Using the examples of radio and television broadcasting in Singapore, it is apparent how policies and regulatory frameworks pertaining to religion and technology are harnessed to construct, maintain and enable state-vaunted versions of the 'nation', and work in tandem with other state ideological instruments, such as the Shared Values project. Muslims in Singapore are not monolithic in their engagement with ideology and practice, and simultaneously reflect and refract the hegemony of the state. While some appear to accept even the contradictory constructions of 'multireligious nation', others question the contradiction, particularly prompted by the ability to make comparisons across national boundaries. With appropriate technological wherewithal and suitable regulatory broadcasting frameworks, Muslims in Singapore can access radio and TV broadcasts from Malaysia, including religious programmes, and this opens up possibilities for alternative constructions of the 'nation', informed by ideology and praxis elsewhere. To that extent, hegemonic versions of secular state and multireligious society are sometimes challenged.

ENABLING OR CHALLENGING TRANSNATIONAL RELIGIOUS IDENTITY AND COMMUNITY?

If the hegemonic 'nation' is periodically challenged, what alternative constructions fill the breach? The literature on technology and community earlier draws attention to the emergence of disembedded social systems and the rise of communities that are not bound by space. Within the context of religion, this translates into the development of transnational religious identities and communities that defy national boundaries, facilitated by technology. Such a community is an "imagined" one in which the "image of their communion" (Anderson, 1983:15)

across boundaries is rooted in religious communion, not primordial ethnic ties, which others like Anthony Smith (1987) premised their theses on. I will explore in this section how religious broadcasting contributes to the construction of a transnational religious community, but also to its fracturing. In particular, I will examine how both religious content/message and religious experience may be produced and consumed in ways that both enable and challenge transnational religious identity and community.

As apparent in the previous section, the regulation of religious content and discourse via broadcast is state-based. To that extent, the control is local, as is the specific encounter with a religious message, discussion, or act purveyed via these spaces of technology. Such an encounter could take the form of watching TV in one's living room, or listening to the radio in one's bedroom. The local and located event, however, evokes experiences that are simultaneously global and local. In this section, I will focus on how this global-local nexus is apparent in the simultaneity in which community and identity are experienced.

Broadcasts are global and local simultaneously. Those programmes that purvey the teachings of Islam are viewed as global in nature. For example, Sutinah (30-year-old nurse) highlighted how "most of the topics discussed are relevant and cut across national boundaries", a view echoed by 25-year-old undergraduate Mohammed, who identifies the key recurring themes to be "the purpose of creation", and "the unity of Muslim brotherhood" which are "relevant to everyone [i.e. all Muslims]". Sahlan (60, retiree) elaborates that the commonalities lie in "principles from the Quran and Hadis", and these "do not vary across artificial political boundaries". Abu Bakar (33, teacher) cites a specific example:

For example, the concept of prohibition of interest. We are living in a secular economy. Interest is part and parcel of the economy. We live within the economic system which we cannot break. But in religious terms, interest is *haram* [that is, prohibited]. And this concept is applied whichever country we are talking about. In these various ways, the global, transnational message of Islam is emphasised, and the specific production location of broadcasts is not important.

Yet, many of these programmes are simultaneously local in that they also address some specifically local issues. In all the examples cited, Muslim interviewees in

Singapore pointed to the injection of political commentaries in Malaysian religious programmes. As Mohammed highlighted, “they are mainly pro-Anwar”⁷ commentaries. At the same time, discussions are focused on particular social problems in broadcast production locations. Thus, in 2000 and 2001 when the bulk of the empirical work for this study was conducted, interviewees pointed to the discussion on Malaysian channels of a particular social phenomenon in Malaysia – “the *bohshiah* girls”.⁸ As Rosnita (30, clerical officer) pointed out, “this is more an issue in Malaysia than in Singapore. It’s not quite our problem. Our problem is different. But it’s interesting to hear.” What these examples illustrate is that religious teachings and beliefs are used to frame commentaries on local social and political issues, and/or aspects of these local social and political issues are used to underscore religious positions.

Whether we focus on the global or local nature of the broadcast messages, the effect is an ongoing construction and contestation of multiple Islamic identities. In the first instance, the constructed Islamic identity is a global one in that listeners and viewers are reminded of shared beliefs and a common identity. In the second instance, the Islamic identity is a local one, tied up with specific social and political experiences in particular contexts. It underscores the view that religion is relevant to and requires understanding specifically within the context in which it is lived and practised. In other words, there should be no *a priori* category called “Islam” or “Muslim”, but all “Islams” and “Muslims” are to be understood within the specificity of social, economic and political conditions. This reflects Williams’ (1977:80-1) argument that analytic categories (such as class and religion) should be a matter for historical and place-specific analysis rather than the substantive categories that they often assume in social science analysis. Muslims may share beliefs and values in a transnational way, but their experience of Islam is also mediated through the particularities of place and the specificities of history. Being “Muslim” is not a constant heuristic despite common transnational beliefs and value systems. Thus, religious programmes made in Malaysia (and broadcast in Singapore) are also embedded in the

⁷ Anwar Ibrahim was Deputy Prime Minister of Malaysia until 1998 when he was charged on five counts of corruption and “unnatural sex”.

⁸ “*Bohshiah* girls” is a term used in late 1990s Malaysia to refer to female youths and their wanton lifestyles.

specific Malaysian context of production, speaking to the social challenges of that society. To that extent, technology both enables and limits the development of pan-Islamic, transnational identities. It enables through the reinforcement of shared teachings, but limits by insistently reminding that religious value is specific to interpretation and practice within particular societies. In effect, technology contributes to the fracturing of pan-Islamic identity and community even as it simultaneously aids in its construction. Despite the promise and potential of transnational reach, technology in the form of religious broadcasts is circumscribed in effect, first, through the regulatory constraints that states impose on access and content, and second, through the local specificities that shape production.

As in production, in the consumption of religious broadcasts, the global and transnational, pan-Islamic message is similarly challenged. Evidence suggests that fractures emerge between those Muslims who seek an intellectual engagement with their religion and those at ease with a more affective sense of identity and community. Religious broadcasts, reaching as they do quite different audiences simultaneously are subject to varied consumptive challenges. On the one hand, some Muslim interviewees take the view that the religious broadcasts tended to be superficial and to construct Islamic identity and community based on a “lowest-common-denominator understanding” of the religion (Syed Mohd, 25). For those (usually the younger and the more highly educated) who seek to intellectualise the religion, and to engage more analytically with their religion, the effect of the broadcasts is to encourage them to believe that an undesirably simplistic and largely emotional Islamic identity and community is being actively promulgated via religious broadcast. They point to the construction of Islam as “the great religion” and “the superior Muslim community” as evidence of this approach:

The broadcasts are emotionally charged. I think they try to get you to feel that Islam is the greatest. It's everything. It's the solution to man's [sic] problems. They get you to feel, you talk about ideals, there is nothing critical said at all. There's nothing wrong except that what you are presenting is very superficial, you see. Just make people feel good by being a Muslim but other than that, when you ask them, so what are the apparatus of governing the people that you have or when you introduce them to western ideas, they say this is disbelief. It's very bad (Syed Mohd, 25).

One explanation of this is offered by 23-year-old undergraduate Shawaliza, who believes that it is because “the religious orthodox themselves ... don’t read a lot” and because their own education is “based on the Madina or the Al-Azhar system that tends towards the rhetorical while rejecting anything that comes from other than Muslims [as] *kafir*, deviant”. A more extreme criticism suggests that such a constructed identity and community is intended by the religious orthodoxy as a deliberate strategy to keep adherents unquestioning and reliant:

I would say that there’s some politics involved ... sometimes you would rather the people remain where they are and be dependent on you for knowledge so that you won’t lose grip of them. This is what I see the religious orthodox in Southeast Asia to be like. They would prefer their followers to be in that position, you see, and let them be dependent on the leaders for knowledge. When the student becomes cleverer than the teacher then ... the teacher is not the leader anymore ... (Syed Mohd, 25).

Thus, rather than unproblematically enabling and reinforcing a transnational identity and community, religious broadcasts may in fact be the vehicle which causes pan-Islamism to be challenged and fractured. This analysis brings us in line with the literature that recognizes the agency of audiences, refuting the accord of absolute power to the mass media. Indeed, as some interviewees pointed out, power most commonly lies with the individual, at least as conferred by the remote control device. This most literal and fundamental power is expressed by 23-year-old Salwati who talks about a tendency to switch channels when something religious comes on, thus denying any even the opportunity for meaning producers to reach out to their audiences. Borhan (25, undergraduate) elaborates on the individual’s power of control, not only in terms of challenging the construction of a transnational Islamism or the hegemony of ‘nation’, but ever more fundamentally:

The reality is, the technological tool that we have allows us to change channels. So sometimes I would just change channels. Because ... I don’t know, it’s just already my kind of ... part of my system already. Whenever there’s an *azan* on the Malaysian TV and all that, I would kind of like change the channel. I don’t know why. ... It’s not dislike or disrespect or whatever. It’s because you have the means to shut out things. It’s like, I don’t feel like being part of a larger community of Islam, brothers or sisters with that *azan*. Unless you are in the mosque where you cannot shut things out, ah then there is a greater tendency to be part of the oneness there in the mosque. In the space of the mosque. But with tv, you can shut it out.

In short, the enabling function of technology – bringing religion to the living room – is matched by a disabling function – the ease with which it can be switched off. The intended construction of either ‘nation’ or ‘transnation’ through the intersection of religious and technological practice is thus more fundamentally subverted.

While the consumption of religious broadcasts may entail the challenge of the global, transnational, pan-Islamic *message*, thus potentially reinforcing the more local interpretation of Islam as mediated by state hegemony, it may also enable transnational religious *experience* when audiences do tune in. This is evident in at least three ways. I illustrate through the example of the radio broadcast of the *azan* and televised broadcast of the *haj*.

First, the use of the radio for the *azan* has added a new dimension to religious space that is predicated on the auditory. The call to prayer through radio transmission creates a shared acoustic space among Muslims (Lee, 1999) that cuts across national boundaries, and is limited only by the reach of the radio broadcast. Those who respond to the *azan* then create their own place of prayer, whether at home or at the workplace or school. The absence of formal shared physical space for worship defies notions of sacred place as a collectively shared physical space but calls attention to the sharing of a different kind of space – acoustic space – enabling a shared transnational religious experience. However, it must be noted that, even while the call to prayer reaches out to a transnational community of listeners, it also simultaneously privatizes and individualizes. As Lee (1999) argues, the community-wide tradition is replaced by a decentralised, individualised personal, private act of worship. This is made possible through the miniaturization of sound, as ear pieces and portable radios pervade (Chow, 1993). Yet, at the same time, listening to the call to pray on the radio “reunites each member of the Islamic community and creates an abstract communal Islamic space without the encroachment of non-Islamic social spaces” (Lee, 1999:94). This simultaneous individualizing and privatizing, on the one hand, and communing and membership, on the other, represent the quintessential experience of the modern urban condition, and parallel the simultaneous “localizing”, “nationalizing” and “transnationalizing” effects of technology on religious experience and understanding.

Second, the radio broadcast of the *azan* enables the inclusionary transnational gendered participation of women. Lee (1999:95) argues that radio may be the main, if not the only, means for women to maintain their religious identity through the broadcast of the call to prayer. Whereas they are not meant to go to mosque for prayers, radio nevertheless allows them to be a part of the receivers of the call, thus affirming their status and positioning them with men at least in this respect. Lee's argument is persuasive to the extent that women have access to sermons on television and radio, listen to religious talks, and listen to the call to prayer. As Salwati articulated, "Because it is requested of Muslims to be silent and to listen to the *azan* being made, I am participating in a religious practice listening to the *azan* on tv or radio". The spaces of technology are in that sense emancipatory spaces for women in the participation in religious life, and connect them in a transnational manner with other Muslim men and women, locally, nationally and transnationally.

Third, audio-visual re-presentations succeed in recreating sacred experiences for some adherents, including transnational experiences. This happens mainly for adherents who have had first hand prior experience of similar situations that they then view electronically. This is best expressed by Sutinah (30-year-old nurse), who talks about her experience of the *haj* and the re-creation of the sacred experience as she watches a screening of the pilgrimage on television:

Because I have been to Saudi Arabia, to Mecca, so I know the atmosphere there. I can feel the emotions, the overwhelming feeling, and the participation, maybe because I have experienced it. I am able to feel the amazing atmosphere. Yes, so because I have experienced the *umrah* before, and now I watch it on tv, I feel like I am a part of it.

Similarly, Sahlan says:

I feel part of the Muslim brotherhood all over the world. For example, when they broadcast the *haj* or *umrah*, I feel like I'm there because I had been there. I recollect the time I was there, how I felt, what I did, the feelings ...

On the rare occasion, there are those who are simply roused by what they see on television, and share some of the religious experience vicariously.

It does make me feel great being Muslim. You see how the effort of the Prophet has borne fruit now ... just seeing the population inside the masjid in Mecca is itself impressive. Inside the Masjid ... when they show it, that one mosque can fill up to 2 million. I also surprised myself with my reaction. When you watch TV, how can it be 2 million? 2 million in there? The big mosque right? The *Kaabah* in the center. You can fill 2 million people in there. I don't know. I've never been before. But my friend who experienced it says that at every angle, it's around 400 metres. Yes, it's very packed. Sometimes you can't even bow. It's 2 million people (Syed Mohd, 25).

In this regard, van de Burg's (1995:48-49) notion of "living room pilgrims" offers a useful conceptual frame within which to think of this technology-enabled transnational experience. She refers to such "living room pilgrims" as

a heterogeneous group of individuals who, for the time they view televised assassination anniversary news narratives, join together in a common, albeit electronically mediated, pilgrimage journey. And like corporeal pilgrims, living room pilgrims may experience "the *communitas spirit*" as they vicariously travel the pilgrimage route.

While her reference point is televised assassination anniversary news narratives, the concept of a shared technology-mediated experience lends itself to useful analysis in a religious context. Through watching a televised *hajj*, the religious experience of awe, of the overwhelming and out-of-this world becomes a shared experience of the numinous (Otto, 1917) and constitute adherents' participation in "living room rituals".

CONCLUSIONS

In this paper, my aim was to focus on one particular technological development that has come to influence religious practice in significant ways - religious broadcasting. While computer-mediated communications now garner growing research attention, I have chosen to remember the influence of the older technology of broadcasting, for its continued influence on myriad lives. In bringing this focus to bear on another major phenomenon, that of transnationalism, I have come to understand how religious broadcasting does not contribute in a straightforward, linear fashion to perpetuating transnational identities and communities, but instead is implicated in the assertion of the national in the face of transnational influences, while simultaneously enabling and challenging the transnational.

The specific analysis of Singapore has shown how, through particular policy formulations on religion and broadcasting, the state-vaunted 'nation' is (re)produced. This state construction of 'nation' is ridden with contradictions – secular yet multireligious; multireligious as characterised by equal absence rather than equal opportunity; and multireligious as equal treatment yet willing to privilege a minority group. Through religious broadcasting policy and practice, the discursive field is circumscribed and the contradictions supported to enable the maintenance of the hegemonic 'nation'. Yet, this hegemony is not total, and the transnational periodically fills the breach. While writings highlight ways in which social relations have altered with technological change, and scholars like Giddens (1990:21) have argued that modernity and its associated technologies has caused time to become separated from space and space from place, giving rise to ever more “disembedded social systems”, my analysis suggests that these assertions need to be tempered. Social relations and cultural systems have not invariably and unproblematically been lifted out of local contexts of interaction and restructured across “indefinite spans of time-space” (Giddens, 1990:21). Instead, they continue to be rooted in local conditions. In the present discussion, religious broadcasts purvey pan-Islamic messages, but also address social conditions in the context within which they are produced. This underscores the embeddedness of religious understanding, the useful though partial value of the “transnational” in such understanding, the interlocking of the social and political with the religious, and the inappropriateness of treating “religion” as *a priori* category. However, it must be emphasised that the “transnational” is not merely a heuristic in understanding religion in the contemporary world. My analysis of audience experience of religious broadcasting illustrates how “techno-religious spaces” can be emancipatory in constructing shared transnational Islamic experiences, whether through acoustic space or living room rituals.

In brief, technological developments (in this case, religious broadcasting) have influenced the ways in which religious experience and understanding have evolved in contemporary urban society. These “techno-religious spaces” have enabled the national and transnational simultaneously, while creating conditions that at once challenge both.

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