Muslims in Europe are using digital counterpublics to challenge mainstream discourses

Two young German Muslims are using online platforms to engage with the public on their own terms. The website muslime.tv and blog Ein Fremdwoerterbuch both illustrate the main features of counterpublics: documenting feelings of exclusion and misrepresentations by the mainstream public, circulation of alternative identity images, and criticism of mainstream public discourses. These spaces are increasingly needed, Asmaa Soliman finds, with every new incident or discourse that puts Muslims' place in Europe into question.

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Awesome in the kitchen too. Not
#TraditionallySubmissive

Forgot to be oppressed

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In the midst of on-going atrocities undertaken in the name of Islam and public discourses questioning the place of Muslims in Europe, European Muslims often feel the need to challenge the mainstream discourse and negative associations made with their community. As a result, they express themselves differently in the public sphere. While some are less concerned about 'countering', others engage in "counterpublics" that aim to offer an alternative public sphere to the mainstream.

There are various examples of Muslim counterpublics across Europe, which are often facilitated through new media platforms. Recent examples from the UK include the Twitter hashtags #YouAintNoMuslimBruv and #TraditionallySubmissive. The first hashtag developed in reaction to the terrorist stabbing at Leytonstone tube station in 2015. Its aim was to disconnect Muslims from terrorism and to counter the association of Muslims with violence. Initially the phrase was used by a bystander who witnessed the attack shouting 'You ain't no Muslim bruv'. His statement was quickly picked up by the British Muslim community and ended up trending on Twitter.

The second hashtag developed in protest against David Cameron's statement in January 2016 about Muslim women being "traditonally submissive". A British Muslim woman initiated the #TraditionallySubmissive hashtag to counter his claim. This quickly took off on Twitter with Muslim women from all over the world participating in it. Their aim was to challenge Cameron's statement by tweeting about their success, professions, hobbies and achievements.

This online public engagement is happening in other places in Europe too. In Germany, where my research has focused, two young German Muslims are using new media to engage with the public by forming their own public sphere. Two platforms – muslime.tv founded by Nuri Senay and the blog Ein Fremdwoerterbuch started by Kuebra Guemuesay – illustrate well the main features of counterpublics. These include the perception of an exclusive mainstream public, the circulation of self-definitions and counter discourses, as well as criticism of mainstream discourses and representations.

Perception of an exclusive mainstream public

Both Senay and Guemuesay express feelings of frustration with regard to Germany's mainstream public and its representation of Muslims. According to them, mainstream public is often exclusionary and restrictive. It does not offer free spaces of expression for Muslims, often misrepresenting them or associating them with negative characteristics, such as violence, oppression and backwardness. In contrast to the dominant public, these young German Muslims see their own publics as free spaces where they can express themselves in the way they want. The ability to "speak in one's own voice" within a counterpublic seems to play a major role here.
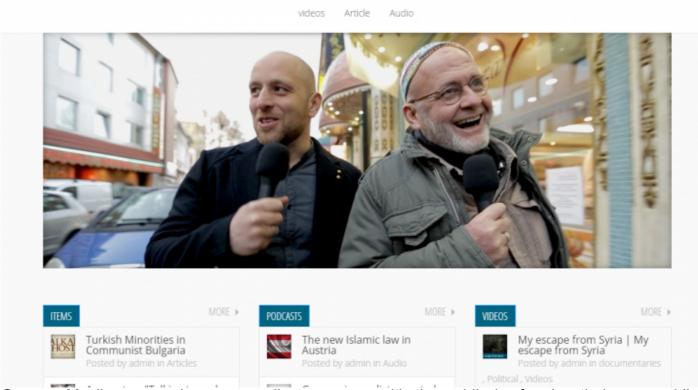
Guemuesay elaborates on the blog's free space as follows:

> "Obviously you are your own editor-in-chief when you have your own blog, no one censors you except for yourself, no one edits you except for yourself so you are basically your own boss, you decide what you want to do, you decide the context you are in, so it is basically all in your hands."

This perception of a free space that empowers individuals to be their own authors, to decide which themes are addressed and how and to represent themselves in the way they want is crucial in the context of counterpublics.

Guemuesay compares the freedom she enjoys in her blog to the constraints of Germany's mainstream public and mainstream media, particularly in the context of Muslims. She argues that she never really experienced complete freedom of expression when she was invited onto mainstream TV shows. In her view, Muslims are always under various forms of pressure when they appear on these shows and, as a result, these experiences are challenging and strained.

German Muslims are using new media to engage with the public by forming their own public sphere. Muslime.tv founded by Nuri Senay (above) and the blog Ein Fremdwoerterbuch started by Kuebra Guemuesay (below) are two examples

ein fremdwörterbuch

by kübra gümüşay

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deutsch

Hallo, Moin Moin und Salams! Hier schreibt Kübra Gümüşay,
eine passionierte Fremdwoerterbuchautorin mit leichter Lakritzsucht.

Bildcredit: *Tasnim Baghdadi*

Ich bin Journalistin, Bloggerin & Referentin. Als freie Autorin schreibe ich für Die Zeit, Zeit Campus, die Taz und andere Medien. Ich referiere zu den Themen Politik, Islam, Rassismus, Feminismus und Social Media an Universitäten, auf Konferenzen und in Presse, Radio & TV. Warum das alles? Darüber sprach ich 2013 bei meinem TEDx Oxbridge Vortrag: "The Power Of Stories".

Circulation of self-definitions and counter discourses

Senay emphasises that muslime.tv is meant to give an insight into Muslim life in Germany and should mirror the status quo of Muslims without being subject to external pressures. Guemuesay expresses a similar intention. Asked why she started her blog, she describes her motivation as follows: "I wanted to create a space of encounters with people who have never met a Muslim girl before, and to give an insight into a Muslim girl's life in Germany." Both platforms developed due to an urgent feeling that Muslim life should be presented from an insider perspective and that the mainstream image of Muslims must be countered.

A diversity of topics is featured on both platforms. What all themes have in common is that they mainly deal with Muslims in Germany and Islam-related issues. Here, there are two particularly notable aspects. The first deals specifically with Muslim identity and the importance of Islam in the lives of Guemuesay and the Muslims featured on muslime.tv. Matters that concern practicing Muslims, like Islamic prayer, spirituality, charity, Islamic marriage, Islamic pilgrimage and fasting come to the foreground. The second aspect is the relationship of Muslim identity to Germany. A German Muslim lifestyle, which integrates German and Islamic values, is conveyed and, in turn, the perception that Muslims do not belong to Germany is challenged.

Criticism of mainstream discourses and representations

These platforms do not only present alternative stories about Muslims in Germany, they also function as spaces where Muslims can criticise mainstream public discourses regarding Muslims in Germany. An example of this can be found on a video on muslime.tv featuring a young Muslim who responds to Thilo Sarrazin's anti-Muslim statements in a satirical way. He contributes to the discourse by voicing his scepticism about Sarrazin's statements and the generally negative

attitude towards Muslims in Germany. By expressing that negative comments about Muslims are common in Germany and that the equation of Islam and terror shapes the way many Germans think about Muslims, he brings another element to the foreground of public discourse. Rather than talking about Muslims and Islam, he reflects upon the issue of how Germans think about Muslims and Islam. It can be understood as a way of critically confronting German society and its stance towards Muslims.

By criticising mainstream discourses, dominant concepts that are often used in relation to Muslims are challenged. An example is a German Muslim scholar's perspective on the Islamic meaning of Sharia which is featured on muslime.tv. His view offers a different definition to the mainstream meaning that is associated with this word in Germany. He explains that Sharia does not stand for Islamic law as many people think, but for "the ethical-legal overall system of Islam". From an etymological-symbolic perspective, Sharia means the Islamic way of life. He gives the example of Muslims who follow Islamic practices like praying, arguing that they thereby embrace Sharia. One can see that his definition moves away from the populist rhetoric of a radical political body that will enforce its laws on German society.

Both muslime.tv and Ein Fremdwoerterbuch contain significant features of counterpublics as feelings of exclusion and misrepresentations by the mainstream public, circulations of alternative identity images, and criticism of mainstream public discourses can all be observed. Although counterpublics only represent some examples of European Muslims' public engagement, these are nonetheless important ones. The need to challenge mainstream discourses and representations of Muslims in Europe is a sentiment that is often awakened with every new incident or discourse that puts Muslims' place in Europe into question.

About the author

Dr Asmaa Soliman is a teaching fellow & visiting fellow at UCL and a visiting fellow at LSE.

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