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Introduction

Online Publics in Muslim Southeast Asia: In Between Religious Politics and Popular Pious Practices

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Abstract

This article introduces the special issue ‘Online Publics in Muslim Southeast Asia: In Between Religious Politics and Popular Pious Practices’ by discussing prominent approaches in the study of media and the public sphere in light of the specific history of digital media’s rise in Muslim Southeast Asia. It focuses on earlier and current expressions of mobile and Islamic modernity as well as on changing moralities and forms of Islamic authority. Referencing the other contributions to this special issue, it particularly emphasizes the (discursive and visual) contestations and social dramas that take place in the region’s media spaces providing for a variety of Islamic forms, practices, and socialities that can best be grasped, the authors argue, by considering politics, the pious, and the popular not as separate, but as mutually constitutive domains.

Keywords

Islam – morality – politics – public sphere – socialities – Southeast Asia

Despite predictions to the contrary, in many parts of the world, over the past few decades an upsurge, if not wholesome return of, expressions of religiosity in public has occurred. More often than not, such public manifestations are facilitated by the convenient access to old and new media technologies,

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the affordances they provide nowadays, and especially the way in which internet(-related) technologies have boosted the many new (inter)faces of public religion (De Vries 2001; Meyer & Moors 2006). Southeast Asia, a region in which all so-called world religions have been present for many centuries (in many different guises and in close interrelations with local forms of religion), has been no exception to this, and as a region it may prove fertile ground for observers of the fate of faith in the digital era. In particular, many adherents of their faith tend to be part of an ever-expanding middle class in this region, which after almost four decades of economic growth – only briefly interrupted by the Asian financial crisis in 1997/1998 – has not only found a newborn assertiveness, but easily seems to have married neoliberal consumption patterns with ‘Asian’ and other ‘spiritual values’ (Pinches 1999, Hefner 2010). Unprecedented economic growth and fast-paced migration to its metropolises has transformed Southeast Asia from the ‘underdeveloped backwaters’ it was in the early 1960s – when most countries there only just had gained their independence – to an upstream and test market, in which today typically electronic gadgets and new social media platforms imported from both the East and the West are first being tested by a young urban and well-to-do segment of the population.

Contrary to what many old-school theorists of modernization would have predicted only a few decades ago, the economic well-being of these Southeast Asian middle classes, their patterns of conspicuous consumption, and their never-quenchable thirst for new fashions have nowhere stood in the way of exploring novel lifestyles by simultaneously emphasizing one’s religion (see e.g. Hasan 2009, 2017; Heryanto 2014; Schmidt 2017; Shamsul 1999). Compared to their peers in much of the global North, a large part of Southeast Asia’s young middle class arguably has opted to live ‘the modern life’ religiously and often in ways more orthodox than their parents or grandparents would have done only one or two generations before them. Again, it may come as no surprise that the role of new and, especially, social media has often been a particular strategic means in the (re)styling and solidifying of such middle-class public piety. Yet even such simple observations can only begin to unravel the sheer diversity of possibilities, the rapidly altering practices to which mostly young believers have turned in previous years, regularly leaving one platform or device for the next and no longer worrying about the costs or availability of such technologies but, instead, mostly focusing on the ability of such technology to fulfil their needs and desires for self-expression (Madianou & Miller 2013). Just observing that all religion nowadays is (digitally) mediated does little to capture the sheer variety in attitudes and beliefs of those nominally practicing such a religion, nor does it explain the often-divergent attitudes towards

technology and resultant moral discourses even among those sharing the same faith (Eisenlohr 2017). By illustration, the contributors to this special issue have chosen to focus on the use of digital communication technologies by adherents of Islam, the majority religion in most of insular Southeast Asia, looking at how Muslims of all sorts, ages, and branches, and often in the name of Islam, have been adopting, appropriating, and adjusting (to) digital technologies, with different results. If there is one thing we wish to highlight in this issue, it is the conclusion that it is rewarding to move away from a mere distinction between how the secular and the devout are both currently and historically mediated in the public sphere and to focus instead on how the digital has enabled often contrasting practices in the public expression of Islam.

Not surprisingly, many of the studies on public Islam in the late 1990s (e.g. Eickelman & Anderson 1999) depart from a public sphere framework, famously developed by Jürgen Habermas (1991) in the early 1950s and translated into English only in the 1980s. The early original publication date may explain why Habermas seemed to have missed out on the ubiquitous presence of religion in later modern public life (but for comments on what he calls ‘political theology’, see Habermas 2011). Numerous studies (e.g. Asad 1986; Casanova 2011; Eisenstadt 2000; Taylor 2004) have observed the limitations of Habermas’ notion of a public or ‘third sphere’, next to economy and the political system in particular, in locations outside the West or in overt religious contexts, such as in Southeast Asia. Salvatore (2007) in particular emphasizes the need for more complex genealogies in studying the public sphere, interrogating Habermas’ ideas and noticing their shortcomings that pertain to the lack of attention to class- and gender-based counter publics, their ignorance of national and historical differences, the little developed possibility of transnational public spheres, and especially the normative characterization of the public sphere as a singularly modern and hence Western concept. The very notion of a ‘desecularizing’ or ‘post-secular society’, developed to address some of these shortcomings, has in turn been similarly rejected, if only because in much of the global South and in parts of the West, religion has never been much out of public sight (think here of the US Bible belt and the subsequent rise of televangelists, so well described by Harding [2000] or the International Pentecostal movement as described in Kapferer et al. [2010]).

We are not interested here in replicating this by now long-standing debate, but something that does linger in most of the present contributions and that may follow from Salvatore’s observations is the question of whether one can speak of a transnational public sphere at work in much of the Southeast Asian region and, if so, whether such a transnational sphere is currently religiously inspired. In view of the ubiquitous presence of world religions in Southeast

Asian public life and an ever-emerging industry of ‘faith factoring’, referring to the ways traditional faith practices are adapted to and help reflect novel Asian lifestyles addressing its market as adherents of a single religion, what are we to make of the nation-state’s persisting institutions? What is the future of the national blogospheres on which people increasingly seem to rely? What about regional alliances? Are Muslims (and, for that matter, Southeast Asian adherents of other world religions) increasingly accommodated by the new socioeconomic framework that ASEAN (Association of Southeast Asian Nations) seems to posit or has Islam come to replace most of these sentiments by providing a new sense of belonging, even before other attachments have a chance to emerge, thus prioritizing the global Islamic community of believers (*ummah*), over national and regional interests? Should we speak of an Islamic blogosphere in which, for example, Muslim peers from Malaysia, Indonesia, Singapore, the Philippines, and Thailand share and circulate their ideas, or are these communities still much bound by the daily language they speak, tweet, or post in? Some of these questions may seem far-fetched; we, like the contributors here, do not believe in the easy demise of the nation-state. Let us not forget that many of its close competitors, including religious affiliation, have been around for ages.

The case studies in this theme issue allow for culture specific trajectories that may illustrate the struggle over national and regional public spheres and the ways in which moral values continue to be debated in and after the adoption of digital technology in the practice of Islam. And whereas much of the use of digital media by Southeast Asians may be defined as self-consciously modern, such usage is not necessarily new (see Meyer & Moors 2006) and should be put in a more historic perspective to explain the directions in which they are currently changing.

A Short History of Digital Media (Debates) in Muslim Southeast Asia

New media has more history than the term often leads one to expect, as many still hold on to an almost chronocentric belief that our era is solely one of invention and innovation in media technology (Edgerton 2007; Standage 1998). Rather than providing an extensive overview of how internet-based technologies have developed in this region over the past two decades, we familiarize readers with some of the sociomaterial practices associated with such technologies; the newness of new media lies not so much in the technologies as in how they open discussion of what is new in the sociomaterial practices they

seem to accommodate and in how we are to study them (Gershon 2017). We are similarly interested here in how the introduction of new media has triggered hopes and hoaxes and debates on the societal values that are at stake, triggering questions such as what, after the introduction of a newer technology, can be considered public or private. De Vries (2001), in this respect, points out the irony of religion's public voice being reclaimed by media that operate in the privacy of one's home, while the very processes deemed to trigger individualization and privatization simultaneously seem to help shape inclusive communities. Without media coverage, religion could not even be propagated in the first place (Meyer & Moors 2006). However, this observation can only be the starting point for exploring questions such as what digital media do to religious authority after they are introduced, which styles of communication are preferred and by whom, and what the publics and counter-publics are (Calhoun 2005; Warner 2002) that such communication styles attract as the Muslim discursive field is fragmented (Schulz 2006). In this regard, we highlight how digital media provide believers with new ways in which to live and style their lives religiously – for example, by 'googling a *kiai*' (Islamic scholar) (Hosen 2008), as well as the moral discourses that digital media have often helped trigger (for the interesting case of Aceh, see Feener 2013).

The history of the internet and related platforms, devices, and technologies in Southeast Asia is still poorly documented (but see Barker J 2005, 2008; Lim 2003, 2006; Sen & Hill 2005). More has been published on Indonesia than on its neighbours Singapore or Malaysia. And whereas most studies of Singaporean use of digital technology still tend to focus on top-down politics, the city-state's hope to become the world's first smart nation, and censorship and surveillance, little is still written on how internet technology is embedded in ordinary Singaporean users' daily lives (but see e.g. Abidin 2016). In Malaysia, most internet research so far has focused mostly on the uneven spread of digital infrastructure (Evers & Gerke 2012) and its overassertive use by the ruling United Malays National Organisation (UMNO) and its National Coalition, and their use of so-called cybertroopers to monitor and intimidate opponents online (Hopkins 2014). John Postill's book (2011) is one of the few exceptions here, providing a fine-grained ethnography of suburban life in Subang Jaya and depicting how connecting to and through a wide range of new media and mobile technologies matters in the everyday lives and politics of its techno-savvy middle-class residents.

From its onset, nation building in developing countries in Southeast Asia, such as Indonesia, Malaysia, or the Philippines, has been obsessed with iconic information and communication technologies. This preoccupation includes apprehension over postal services and radio communication during

the struggle for independence (Mrázek 2002) and the launching of a home-grown Indonesian satellite system in 1976, the first one in the global South, as a way of creating a modern-day variant of Benedict Anderson's national audience (Barker J 2005). Since the mid-1990s, when the internet era first began in Southeast Asia, the apprehension of information and communication technology (ICT) infrastructure, knowledge hubs, and innovative e-governance applications have become a hallmark of nationalist modernity throughout the region, especially with Singapore's efforts to rebrand itself as the 'first smart nation'. Meanwhile, in neighbouring Malaysia, the abode of a new digital era was marked by a new national masterplan to leapfrog the nation into the digital era, complete with intelligent cities and a multimedia supercorridor; moreover, such plans soon also catered to the majority Muslim portion of the population. In 2003, the 57 member countries of the Organization of the Islamic Conference (OIC) held their biennial congress in Kuala Lumpur to promote a combination of spirituality and technology as medicine to aid the newly developing post-colonial countries. This Kuala Lumpur declaration of 2003, better known as Vision 1441, is an obvious answer to more secular visions and masterplans, such as Malaysia's own Vision 2020, which tend to focus on strengthening the knowledge-based economy (K-economy).

But other 'prehistories' of the Southeast Asian internet are less top-down in approach and often cater to different audiences. Sen and Hill (2005) describe experiments with Inter-University Networks, which in Indonesia took place from the 1980s onwards and later gave way to more commercially driven projects. They also describe how Indonesian students sent abroad by the government were among the first to experiment, with student activists soon using the new digital technologies to circumvent New Order censorship. The US-hosted bulletin board Apakabar Net was one of the first platforms to share information on human rights atrocities and political events in the country (Basuki 1998). Internet communications similarly facilitated transnational discourses about women's equality and raising women's awareness shaped both student and Muslim organizations. Along with various women's rights advocacy organizations, these groups would become the 'backbone of the 1990s democracy movement' (Rinaldo 2008). In the political and social unrest that followed Suharto's resignation in May 1998 and the subsequent end of his New Order regime, interest groups (some more radical than others) resorted to digital technology to gather support for their causes, many of them religiously inspired. Not surprisingly, many studies on Islam and the internet in Southeast Asia have since been driven by debates on civil society, social activism, and the need to counter radicalism and online religious fanaticism (Lim 2003, 2006; Nugroho 2011).

Expressing the Mobile and Islamic Modern: Early and Current Practices

Indonesia and Malaysia are large Muslim majority countries (in fact, Indonesia is the largest in the world) and substantial Muslim populations live in adjacent Brunei, Singapore, the Philippines, Thailand, and other Southeast Asian countries. Yet not all use of digital media technology by Southeast Asian Muslims is equally religiously inspired, pious, and devout in character. However, in this section we focus on some of the more conspicuous and overt uses of digital technology in the name of Islam so far and on how such uses have been changing over the past two decades, without meaning to downplay the often mundane, even banal ways that the internet and associated technologies have also been used by Southeast Asian Muslims (see Schielke 2010; Schielke & Debevec 2012).

Considering Ilana Gershon's (2011: 997) observation that 'the internet is now taken to be a collection of interfaces for gathering information and conversing with other people' and that 'web-based communication can be as integrated into daily life as a phone call or reading a book', we emphasise that online publics in Muslim Southeast Asia have also become parts of Muslims' everyday lives. In this regard, it is important to note with Heather Horst (2012: 62) that, long before the internet, 'new media technologies altered the infrastructure and rhythms of everyday life'. This is especially true for interfaces that enable real-time interaction, whereas other internet applications give more room to harmonize online with offline activities. Moreover, for pious adherents of a religion, daily life is often temporally structured by religious orthopraxy, which can be reinforced or altered by new media technologies. Similarly, regular online communication of members of prayer groups with their Islamic leader and among themselves is becoming an inherent part of everyday religiosity (Slama 2017a).

The use of digital technology for overt religious purposes may be as old as the introduction of those technologies, and by now we have already witnessed various 'generations' and resultant differentiations of such 'digital Islam' according to the various affordances such technologies may offer its religiously inspired designers or users. At the same time, we remain cautious about using such a 'generational approach' too prominently, in addition to scrutinizing its origins and application as a mere marketing tool (from digital native to today's Generation Z; see Thomas 2011). In fact, many of these practices, some newer than others, tend to coexist. Moreover, such generational labelling is often the result, or at least a symptom of, larger moral panics and first used by people other than the designated users.

Religious use of internet technology was surely boosted by the widespread adoption of mobile technology in the late 1990s. Barendregt (2011) describes the Southeast Asian cell phone craze of the time and the associated and much-aspired-to mobile lifestyle that became so popular in the years after the Asian crisis in 1997. In the absence of proper landline connections, and often of decent electronic infrastructure, cell phones brought the dream of a 'digital revolution' into reach for millions of Southeast Asians. However, there was a clear differentiation between larger cosmopolitan hubs, such as Jakarta or Kuala Lumpur, where the latest mobile gadgets such as the then-fashionable Nokia or Blackberry could be purchased by the happy few, and the digital hinterlands, where the digital participation of the multitudes was often limited to second-hand, black market, and cannibalized mobile phones. Appealing to the unquenchable thirst for the new by an emergent and often very orthodox middle class in Southeast Asia, overtly Muslim digital gadgetry soon appeared, including Islamic iPods and a wide range of Muslim phones. The latter came with *kiblah*, a prayer compass, and full-text Qu'ran recitation and Islamic ringtones, with names such as My Iman, for a Malaysian-produced cell phone (Barendregt 2009; see also Campbell 2010: 130). Barendregt notes that such Islamic hardware and software are also subject to both the rules of religion and rapidly changing (commercial) tastes, and as a result their use often varies over time (religious holidays, fasting for the month of Ramadan, Friday prayers, etc.) and according to the kind of Islam that one generally follows (Salafism, 'liberal' Islam, a more traditionalist or syncretic approach, etc.). Again, it may be more productive here to look at differences within Islam, not simple rhetoric or mere marketing speech, rather focussing on believers' real-life use of such technologies, especially addressing the question of what, according to them, is won or lost by using such technologies.

Elsewhere, Barendregt (2009) proposes to look at such investment by Muslims in mobile and digital technology more generally in two separate though heavily interrelated scenarios, Islamizing modernity versus modernizing Islam, with modernity as a catchphrase for all sorts of things but mostly standing for the aspiration to make oneself modern by association with ideas, values, and, especially, technologies that are considered as such. New media are prominent tools in emphasizing this notion of modernity, their use often being so fetishist that we can almost label it as an expression of 'extra-modernity', as Göle (2002: 184) asserted: 'modernity's manifestations are overemphasized, as are the performances of belonging to modernity'. The Islamizing modernity scenario then relates to exploiting digital technology's outwardly (hyper)modern appearance, which is best manifested in the design of new media technologies according to existing preferences, yet also injecting them

with a conspicuously 'Islamic feel'. The second scenario, as Barendregt suggested at the time, is potentially more revolutionary in character, focusing on how Islamic practices may benefit from such technological advances and, thus, in certain ways modernize Islam itself. In this case, it is more about how new technology tends to recast social relations than about the innovative qualities of the new technology (Miller & Horst 2012; Pfaffenberger 1992). The ways new media in a Muslim Southeast Asian context since the early 2000s have started to change contacts between youngsters of the opposite sex are illustrative. It appears that Salafist-oriented Muslim girls, largely restricted in their daily conversations with the opposite sex, are among the most fervent practitioners of texting, as it allows them to engage more freely with male friends, opening new spaces for contact and self-expression (Barendregt 2011). If one thing stands out in the use of digital technology by a young well-to-do Muslim generation so far, it is the ways in which digital technologies have helped facilitate newly styled gender performances (Slama 2010). This recasting of gender among young Southeast Asian Muslims has been given new impetus by the rise of social network sites since 2002.

The increasing popularity of social network sites coincided with other novel forms of sharing, most notably among them one-click hosting sites such as RapidShare, Beeshare, or local Indonesian equivalents with names as Toko Rapid (Quick Shop), where virtually anything rendered in digital code can be obtained, providing young Southeast Asian Muslims with an arsenal of easily downloadable religious texts, recitations, religious music, and other forms of Muslim entertainment that helped style the pious self. These sharing mechanisms also more openly confronted Muslim youth and their often-concerned parents with the perils of the information society, including piracy, political subversion, and, in particular, pornography. Pornography was often (symbolically) used as a battle cry for a more decent internet with both nongovernmental organizations and government bodies calling for a 'Healthy Internet' that requires education for both young and old and often also the shuttering of sites with dubious content. It has also raised the call among some Muslim software designers to come up with alternatives to global packages and proprietary software, such as the Tunisian-made Sably, a free, open-source operating system 'designed by and for Muslims' to enable parental control but whose popularity in the Southeast Asian market was nonetheless short-lived.

The anonymity and other functionality offered by communication software such as mIRC and Bluetooth enabled BEDD (Humphreys & Barker 2007) was now extended and amplified by new powerful and freely accessible software platforms, such as Friendster, MySpace, and, later, Facebook, which is still the number-one social media platform in much of Southeast Asia, with Indonesia

ranked among the world's 'largest Facebook nations'. The huge popularity of these platforms among Southeast Asian youngsters is explained by mostly its facilitation of intimate yet relatively anonymous ways of sharing affection, especially the good personal (read 'romantic') conversations it helped develop in a society that is often heavily restrictive in public communication between the sexes. For example, Martin Slama (2010) describes the Indonesian practice of *curhat* (from *curahan hati* [pouring out one's heart]), explaining how female adolescents often tend to get different things out of such communication from their male peers. Whereas in earlier years, internet mailing lists, such as *wanita-muslimah* (beginning in 2000) and *ruang Muslimah* (beginning in 2007; both now long-since defunct), had offered new public spaces for female Muslims to reflect on both religious and female interests, including health, sexual reproduction, and women's rights, Facebook and, later, Twitter and Instagram replaced these new arenas for female self-expression. In their aftermath, they also introduced new religious spokeswomen, who often lacked conventional credentials but acquired digital literacy, which enabled them to reach out to their own religious following.

As Meyer and Moors (2006) rightfully suggest, new media formats tend to shake up religious conventions and power structures, introducing new orthodoxies to new (counter) publics but also presenting us with new often charismatic spokespeople and a newly blossoming (yet often controversial) 'faith literacy' (Rosowsky 2015). This is by no means unique to either the Southeast Asian context or the world of Islam. In the past few years, many publications have dealt with the adoption of new media technologies by (international) televangelists, most prominently in Southeast Asia probably being the Filipino Brother Mike Velarde, for whom the medium has become the spiritual message (Wiegele 2006). In the past two decades, Muslim Southeast Asia has also seen the coming and going of many a 'poster priest' who combines sheer charisma, the wisdom of self-help psychology, global business strategies, and Sufism, all facilitated by the clever use of digital media technologies. Both Hoesterey (2016) and Watson (2005) have described the digital stardom of Indonesia's AA Gymnastiar, like Velarde a self-styled and 'God-made' man, drawing upon separate forms of literacy while building his national religious media emporium, known as MQ (Management of the Heart). AA Gym was one of the first to launch a religiously inspired SMS (Validated Added) service in 2002, when he initiated his Al Quran Seluler, which does not seem to have taken off commercially, despite being innovative. In other cases, resorting to the internet has enabled the unlikely rise and popularity of Chinese Southeast Asian Muslim preachers in their use of cyber *da'wa* (proselytization) (Weng 2015). In all these instances, the use of media technology by a new generation

of Islamic net celebrities builds on previous practices and the popularity of national (Indonesian) media preachers, such as Hamka or Zainuddin MZ, who in their time made use of other new technologies, such as radio, audio cassettes, and television. Internet-based technology leads to yet larger publics, although in most cases the fame of these new social media preachers is surprisingly still restricted to national blogospheres only, despite the theoretically wide reach of languages, such as Indonesian or Malay.

Malaysian and Singaporean society therefore have their own share of new Islamic celebrities, although not many have been as prominent and politically influential as AA Gym has been in the Indonesian context. Barendregt and Hudson (2016) describe such a case of new-found Islamic celebrity in Malaysia, which also underscores the changing forms of authority and publics in the digital era. Prime-time reality shows such as *Imam muda* (Young Imam) or, for that matter, an all-female equivalent such as *Ustazah pilihan* (Elected Female Teacher), shown on the Islamic-influenced national channel Astro Oasis, not only illustrate the emergence of the ordinary Malay in talent competitions but also construct a social identity at the intersection of traditional Islam and Malay modernity as well as of modern Islam and Malaysian traditions. Aspiring imams practice Islam by delivering sermons, spiritually advising juvenile delinquents involved in some of the nation's notorious motorcycle gangs, as well as overseeing animal slaughter in accordance with Islamic laws. Battling for the favour of mostly young Malaysian women or those looking for the perfect son-in-law, these young preachers turn to Facebook, Twitter, and other social media platforms to win the popular vote. Interestingly, in this case reality TV and social media, once considered alien and threatening to religious values, are now well-adapted and domesticated and able to play a significant role in reinforcing the normative culture familiar to most Malaysian Muslims (Barendregt & Hudson 2016).

A final note on the coming and going of ever newer Islamic interfaces pertains to the question of technology's future potential to spread the name and fame of Islam, especially its possible limitations: the issue of how much popular culture and money Islam in practice is able to withstand. There is some concern over the outright hedonism engaged in by Muslim youngsters as they use digital media in their lives and popular memes are seen as commenting on the pitfalls of, for example, selfies and social media's self-indulgence (see Jones 2010). Yet, overall, strikingly little concern is expressed over the wedding of Islam and capitalism in the digital age. Young female Muslim entrepreneurs in particular have now fully embraced social media platforms, such as Instagram and Pinterest, to appropriate them for their own commercial aims, to which the contribution by Eva Nisa in this special issue also

attests (see also Nisa 2013). Young women turn to such platforms to express their religious sentiments, often for an all-female audience, opening up new spaces for thinking about and discussing their religion openly. Yet, in its aftermath, they brand, advertise, and sell their own self-made Muslim fashion to those willing to buy into their proselytizing message and the need to accompany this religious stance with everyday halal-style goodies. A group of self-professed fashion vloggers, commonly referred to as the Hijabers Community, made national and international headlines for having turned all things halal into a successful and visually spectacular enterprise (Beta 2014; Luvaas 2013; Schmidt 2017).

Yet the first halal entrepreneurs on the Southeast Asian Islamic internet, to the extent that such a thing exists, have experienced downfall and decline with the waning popularity of AA Gym after marrying his second wife (and the loss of his mostly female audience, which previously had not associated their 'modern-minded' preacher with the practice of polygamy) and then the arrest of the Indonesian designer and fashion blogger Anniesa Hasibuan, due to suspicion that she had swindled money from customers who had registered for an *umrah* pilgrimage to Mecca, while spending their money to support her own luxurious and consumerist lifestyle. In the near future, these and other scandals, which quickly go viral, are likely to raise anew questions about the limits of Islamic consumerism, creating a halal lifestyle, and the role of digital technology in these practices. In the next section, we address further concerns over Muslim Southeast Asians using digital technology as well as introduce the contributions to this special issue on online publics in more detail.

Online Publics Contested: Politics, Piety, and Changing Moralities

Eminent observers of Islam in Southeast Asia have diagnosed 'the end of innocence' (Feillard & Madinier 2011; see also Feillard 2010) and a 'conservative turn' (van Bruinessen 2013) with regard to religious life in the region (see also Hefner 2012). Their analyses are based on developments in the late 1990s and the 2000s that made it increasingly difficult to uphold the hitherto-dominant image of a 'tolerant', 'moderate', and 'peaceful' Southeast Asian Islam (for an illuminating genealogy of this image, see Mandal 2011). Phenomena such as radical Islamic figures, Islamist political projects, and terrorist attacks could no longer be ignored or downplayed as simply not representing 'the silent majority' or as exceptional 'tragic events' in an otherwise stable region. Among not only Western scholars but also many Southeast Asian Muslims, discontent has emerged over the evolution of Southeast Asian Islam over the past two decades or so.

Interestingly, 'the end of innocence' coincided with the beginning of the rise of digital online spaces that, as shown above, were quickly appropriated by Southeast Asian Muslims for often outspoken religious purposes. Mirroring responses to the digital in other parts of the world, these first encounters were characterized by optimism and utopian projects of an 'Islamic Techno Nationalism' and an 'Islamic Information Society' (Barendregt 2009, 2012). Yet a closer look reveals that even in the early years of the internet in Southeast Asia, digital spaces became the sites of bitter religious clashes. Christian-Muslim antagonisms in the Moluccans once fed by online hate speech, flaming, and the dissemination of false news soon resulted in nothing short of an online civil war (Bräuchler 2013), unfortunately not the last of its kind. All the more so today, Southeast Asian online publics are far from innocent when it comes to the expression of inter- and intrareligious friction. Recently, especially in Indonesia, the different Islamic players in the country have become more strategically organized with regard to their online activities, resulting in the contemporary situation of a permanent contestation between different Islamic organizations and currents. Every day, users upload posts, tweets, memes, and pictures to Indonesia's virtual realms, asserting their position, ridiculing their opponent's ideology, or forthrightly condemning the thoughts and practices of others.

Leonie Schmidt's contribution to this special issue, which analyzes the online strategies employed by members of Indonesia's biggest Islamic organization, Nahdlatul Ulama (NU), certainly should be seen in this context. In line with its view of itself as 'traditionalist' and 'moderate', NU has until recently refrained from being particularly active on social media – in stark contrast to its opponents, ranging from the Indonesian version of the Muslim Brotherhood (Partai Keadilan Sejahtera [Prosperous Justice Party]) to *salafi* and jihadist groups that came to dominate Indonesian Islamic online realms as part of the wider Islamic media landscape (for the 'private' uses of social media by jihadist groups, see the illuminating study by Nuraniyah [2017]). Although the younger generation of NU may share the disgust for the online activities of such 'radical' groups with older NU figures, they do not agree with the digital passivity that is represented by the latter (although there are also exceptional older figures that who regularly go online). Instead, through their concerted efforts examined in detail by Schmidt, they seek to (re)gain suzerainty in Indonesia's Islamic (online) spheres. By spreading a creative mix of textual and visual material, they aim to (re)establish NU online in a way that reflects NU's offline significance as Indonesia's biggest and most influential Islamic organization in the country; and they do this in a similarly confrontational yet more humorous way compared to, for example, the youth wing

of the Malaysian Islamic Party (Parti Islam Se-Malaysia [PAS]) (Mueller 2014: 120-125).

Members or followers of Islamic organizations representing Islam's most prominent ideological currents, however, do not only shape Islamic online publics in Southeast Asia. Social media allow Muslims who have not received a comprehensive theological education to develop an online presence according to their own needs and interests, shaping and sharing their own forms of faith literacy (Slama 2017b). As Eva Nisa shows in her article of this special issue, Instagram is a platform where Muslims can not only explore their religiosity but also address a wider audience that enables them to develop their Islamic online businesses (e.g. selling Islamic clothes) and, in some cases, even to attain the status of an Islamic social media celebrity. Clearly, the online expressions of these young Islamic role models have not only self-serving purposes, because their display of an Islamic moral order is always also directed at others, e.g. at 'friends' on Instagram, Facebook, and so forth, resulting in new ways to convey and practice Islam. The relevance of these new Islamic online expressions should be seen as part of broader developments in Southeast Asia, where 'private moralities' based on Islam, as Suzanne Brenner (2011) points out for Indonesia, increasingly became a public issue as well as an issue in the public and semi-public spheres of social media. Facebook, for example, has not only become 'the medium for expressing the private and intimate' (Miller 2011: 174), as Daniel Miller (*ibid.*, 175) has observed in Trinidad. He proposes regarding Facebook 'as an aggregate of private spheres ... consist[ing] of all people one knows privately, but in one place and open to each other'. To paraphrase Miller, it has also become an aggregate of public spheres, where thousands of 'friends' can meet or accounts completely lack privacy settings.

As Miller (2011: 180) observed, Facebook provides 'a crucial medium of visibility and public witnessing' that can include 'witnessing the moral order of the self', that is, how one should behave. It is precisely this aspect that makes studying religiosities in connection with social networking sites crucial, especially among Southeast Asian Muslims who express the moral order of the self by referring to and practicing Islam in new ways online. Moreover, given the recent surge of 'remoralization' and 'managerialist values that are associated with business or corporate elites' not only within Pentecostal movements around the globe (Kapferer et al. 2010: 4) but also in Indonesian Islam (Hoesterey 2016; Rudnyckj 2010), the extent to which these 'private moralities' based on Islam are informed by such neoliberal discourses as well as how they are challenged by the neoliberal order (as is the case with the Islamic e-commerce analyzed by Nisa in this special issue and in her earlier article about *salafi* women [Nisa 2013]) cannot be ignored.

At the same time, the central position of visual materials in these online realms points to genealogies that go beyond current intersections between Islam and the economy. At a time when the production and circulation of images in Southeast Asia is at an unprecedented scale, users' religiosities cannot be separated from their self-representations as modern citizens. Karen Strassler's (2010) seminal study about the social history of photography in Indonesia – which can also be read as a 'prehistory' of the current digital/online photography boom rapidly transforming the region's visual cultures – rests upon the argument that amateurs' pictures reflect the dominant ways in which the colony and later the independent state were envisioned. This line of thought can also be applied to the online (self-)representations of Indonesian Muslims and to their visions of a pious Indonesia. Moreover, whereas in Christian Pentecostal circles 'Internet technology helps to reach all the unconverted in the world, fuelling dreams of a wholly Christian planet' (Oosterbaan 2011: 70), the dreams by Indonesian Muslims, which might simultaneously have local, national, and global components, find their visual expression on social media today. As Strassler (2010: 73-122) shows, in the post-colonial eras of both Sukarno and Suharto, amateur photography expressed particular modern desires and belongings by displaying (inter)national landscapes, architecture, and technologies. Similarly, digital photography as it appears on Facebook is also characterized by images related to contemporary desires to be both Muslim and modern. And this holds true even for photographs of human beings that are rejected and hence substituted by graphic representations of Muslims (as we can see in Nisa's paper).

The Language of Sociability, Emerging Socialities, and Religious Hierarchies

New Islamic practices are added to already existing ones through online mediations. Some of these, such as forms of collective prayers on social media, portray how, to borrow a phrase from Matthew Engelke (2010: 376), 'media technologies [are] used to close the distance between the human and the divine (or the divine's representatives)'. Moreover, the emphasis on practice and the everyday in the religious uses of social media has consequences for our conceptualization of religion, as Heidi Campbell argues when she explains that users 'often reshape new forms of media in practical or ideological ways in their efforts to incorporate them into the life of their community and beliefs' (Campbell 2010: 187), resulting in forms of 'religion that [are] constituted in new ways through digital media and cultures' (Campbell 2013: 3).

In Muslim Southeast Asia, social media platforms have become major sites where Muslims deliver insight into their Islamic practices and discourses reflecting their views on how to lead a proper Muslim life. On their social media accounts, appearing pious – by doing such things as posting Qur’anic verses and short references to Allah or the Prophet Muhammad in status updates and uploading bloglike entries with religious content and pictures of Islamic practice (especially pilgrimages) – represents a major ‘cultural genre of content’ (Miller 2011: 212) that is characteristic of these online activities, in contrast to ‘appearing “sexy” and “funny”’ in Trinidad for example (ibid.). In light of these Islamic online expressions as possible new cultural genres one should take into account Miller’s (2012: 148) hypothesis ‘that SNS [social networking sites] are so quickly accepted in places ... such as Indonesia and Turkey because their main impact is to redress some of the isolating and individualizing impacts of other new technologies and allow people to return to certain kinds of intense and interwoven forms of social relationship that they otherwise feared were being lost’. In other words, speaking about Islam and social media in Southeast Asia always also means addressing socio-technical formations and people’s responses to their transformative potential.

In these Islamic online realms, what is at stake is not only a sense of community and new forms of sociality but the social hierarchies that are part of relationships per se. The rise of social media in Southeast Asia coincided with broader developments in society. As Nancy Smith-Hefner (2007, 2009) has argued for Indonesia, gender hierarchies came under pressure from more egalitarian ideologies of being modern that were embraced in middle-class circles, particularly by young educated women advocating more informal speech styles and more emotionally open relationships. The informal version of Indonesian that is in wide use today, *bahasa gaul* (language of sociability), originated in Jakarta as slang among young people. As Smith-Hefner (2007: 197) points out, it ‘emerged at more or less exactly the same time that a new Islamic resurgence has led many, especially urban, Indonesians to a more religious orientation and pious lifestyle’. It is thus noteworthy that, not only in Indonesia but in other parts of Muslim Southeast Asia, more egalitarian idioms and models for relationships are not necessarily seen as being in opposition to Islam (see also Jones 2004, 2012). The language of sociability has quickly entered early online spaces, such as chat rooms, where the young users could experiment with romance and share their concerns openly and where women could more easily claim power within relationships (Slama 2010; on the colloquial language in SMS conversations and issues of class and consumerism, see Baulch [2017]).

These issues concerned with language use, emotionality, Islam, and gender relations remain important in the context of the new social media. At the same

time, as Nisa's article indicates, questions of social hierarchy and Islamic authority can go beyond language, when young Instagram users state that they prefer 'cute' and 'motivating' visual Islamic posts over proper sermons because they 'do not like to be preached to'. Discussions about literacy and the positioning of digital natives and Generations X, Y, and Z versus an older generation have thus also penetrated the Southeast Asian *ummah*. As such accounts also suggest, proselytization (*da'wa*) is currently reconceptualized in Southeast Asian online publics to the point that older oral forms of spreading the word of Islam become disassociated from the newer visually elaborate calls for Islamic piety; each mode sometimes has its own preferred audiences and hence runs the risk of further fragmenting Islamic publics. From the perspective of pious Southeast Asian Muslims, this is certainly not a question of whether one should be open to proselytization but one of how proselytization is mediated and mediatized and how particular socioreligious hierarchies are reinforced or subverted in these processes.

However, in light of these current ways of being digitally pious in Southeast Asia (see also Slama 2017b), the articles of this special issue go beyond studies that first saw the internet as a place where the traditional authority of Islamic scholars is undermined. As Jon W. Anderson (1999: 53) asserts, based on his study of Islamic websites, the internet became 'an arena for alternative expressions of Islam both to popular and to traditional elite views' (see also Barker, E. 2005; and Cheong 2013). What we can observe in today's Muslim Southeast Asia is a novel constellation of interfaces, that is, an online/offline mix of relationships facilitated by new media, which provides opportunities for both the (re)assertion of authority and its questioning. Exploring this aspect further, we follow Daromir Rudnyckyj (2009: 92), who is inspired by Eikelman's and Anderson's volume (1999), in asking 'what specifically is new about "new media in the Islamic world"?' He (2009: 109) answers this question by pointing to the contemporary phenomenon of 'modifying the form through which religious practice and knowledge is conveyed'. Today, social media are indeed employed to introduce new forms of conveying Islam, using various platforms and the digital tools that they provide so that, for example, Facebook status updates can be perceived as proselytization, which does not necessarily undermine but simply does not correspond to pre-digital forms of Islamic authority.

When focusing on novel ways of expressing Islam online, we think that it is important to keep in mind pre-digital ways of asserting one's authority and the broader offline context, as Julian Millie (2016: 121) reminds us, not to develop an understanding of 'public communication between subjects who are independent of hierarchies and structures'. Millie (*ibid.*) argues, instead, for viewing

media and 'its public-forming properties' as embedded in 'the real undertakings of social and political life'. In a similar vein, Charles Hirschkind et al. (2017: S11) identify 'new media dreams' and 'a desire for an object that will overcome all differences, tensions, and contradictions'. In these imaginaries, this desire can be fulfilled through connectivity as it is embodied by new media, 'though in this technological dreamworld of contact and connection, the hierarchies and inequalities of the social world remain largely unchanged' (ibid.). Online publics are thus far from neutral meeting grounds and, as the examples from Muslim Southeast Asia in this special issue attest, hardly function as spaces for overcoming 'differences, tensions, and contradictions'; rather, they offer people a space where they can accentuate such differences, echoing but not necessarily replicating offline structures and hierarchies.

In Muslim Southeast Asia, this results in a plurality of forms for conveying Islam and asserting and questioning Islamic authority. In this regard, we stress that the digital environment of social formations in which these processes are embedded can be equally diverse. John Postill (2011: xi) views the extensive use of particular concepts in internet studies critically, such as 'community' and 'network', which he calls the 'community network/trap'. He cautions against (ibid.) 'reducing the plurality and flux of social formations that one invariably finds in urban and suburban areas (e.g. peer groups, cohorts, associations, gangs, clans, sects, mosques, factions, families, action committees, mailing lists, online forums, Twitter trends) to a crude community vs. network scheme'. The increasing multiplicity and complexity in how people associate and socialize today have also been observed by Nicholas Long and Henrietta Moore (2012: 40), who assert that 'an anthropological theory of human sociality ... would need to be able to account for the tremendous variety of forms that can be assumed by the sociality of humans ... a variety that appears to be ever-bourgeoning as new innovations in science and technology allow human beings to extend their imaginative and practical reach'. Social media offer an environment in which many of these innovations take place and in which people, to adopt an argument of Tom Boellstorff (2012: 52), 'move within virtual contexts but also across the gap between the virtual and the actual'. Moreover, Boellstorff argues that 'it is through the general gap between them [the virtual and the actual] that the emerging socialities so in need of anthropological investigation are taking form'. Thus, instead of relying on well-established concepts, these scholars suggest exploring contemporary social formations by paying heed to the social dynamics that take place in contemporary online/offline realms.

Muslim Southeast Asia is not an exception in this respect: emerging socialities (such as various Islamic study sessions and prayer groups) inform, to a different extent and on different levels, online publics that are, in turn, part of

the region's public at large. Although some of these socialities cannot be automatically associated with particular Islamic movements and currents, one is well advised not to see them as disconnected from how publics are constituted in Muslim Southeast Asia today. The concept of 'scalable sociality' recently introduced by Miller et al. (2016: 3) is helpful in this regard, as it directs our attention to the extent to which people's social media practices are actually 'private' or 'public' and to the size of the group in which these activities are embedded. Instead of thinking in terms of a dichotomy between the private and the public, social media platforms allow us to express ourselves with different degrees of intimacy and openness to groups of people of different sizes (starting with online communication between only two people). As the articles in this special issue attest, Southeast Asian Islamic publics also operate on different scales, that is, young Instagram activists and tweeting representatives of various Islamist organizations generate different audiences. Sometimes, these online publics can expand in scale considerably, especially when certain online expressions 'go viral', and can intersect with electronic and print media, forming what John Postill and Leonard Epafras in this special issue call a 'hybrid media space'.

Islamic Media Spaces as Arenas and Echo Chambers

Postill and Epafras not only show how religion – in particular, Islam – can be illuminated by introducing this perspective of a hybrid media space but also discuss theoretical concepts that allow us to analyze the increasingly dynamic processes that continue to shape that space. Referring to examples in Indonesia, they develop particular concepts further (see also Postill 2015), such as Pierre Bourdieu's notion of the 'field' or analytical tools introduced by the Manchester school in anthropology such as 'social dramas' and 'arenas', bringing them into dialogue with contemporary approaches in media studies. Indonesia's public sphere thus becomes a space in which social dramas are staged in arenas, online and offline, that are themselves expressions of Indonesia's religious field, and the country's field of Islam in particular. However, according to Postill and Epafras, these fields are realms for not only long-standing practices but also contested actions. In the latter case, unlike Bourdieu's conception of relatively stable fields, they are not institutionalized but, rather, situational and depend on particular events. Following Patricia Spyer (2017: S36), one could add that these events can also generate 'an accidental public', that is, a public that is 'ad hoc and contingent; built on immediacy, intensity, indeterminacy, and excess'. In Spyer's case of the post-Suharto violence in the Moluccas, this ad hoc public

is initiated by jihadi vCDS, but this idea can easily be adopted for other cases tied to current uses of social media.

Whereas the contributions to this special issue discussed so far focus on practices, including visual expressions, actions, and social dramas as they can be observed on social media, Saskia Schäfer's article emphasizes online discourses and their effects in the public spheres of Muslim Southeast Asia. She traces the (post-)colonial discourses on racial and religious categorizations in Malaysia and Indonesia to reveal how online Islamic orthodoxy is constructed vis-à-vis minority groups, such as Ahmadis and Shi'is. In these processes of categorization, Schäfer outlines a particular role of social media: a kind of echo chamber effect that tends to amplify discriminatory discourses against Ahmadis and Shi'is. She argues that, despite the growing number of social media platforms and outlets, this does not necessarily result in a greater variety of opinions, let alone in open and respectful discussions or a tolerant coexistence of a plurality of discourses. Specifically with regard to minority issues, online discourses can become very narrow and have homogenizing effects. Viewing Facebook groups and other online media as echo chambers, Schäfer relies on Judith Butler's work on repetition as a key concept for understanding the (re-)enforcement of hegemonic discourses. Online fora that echo one and the same discourse do precisely this: they repeat a particular view about certain topics or groups of people. As a consequence, as Schäfer shows, online media often reinforce discourses that construct Ahmadiyya and Shia identities in derogatory ways.

The contributions of Schäfer as well as Postill and Epafra bring us back to the above-mentioned diagnosis of an Islamic 'conservative turn' in countries such as Indonesia and Malaysia. On the one hand, they point to the roots of these conservative discourses in Southeast Asia, urging us to consider colonial and post-colonial hierarchizations; on the other hand, they reveal how these discourses gain new dynamics when they enter a hybrid media space, as described by Postill and Epafra. However, we do not suggest that contemporary online publics in Muslim Southeast Asia simply reflect this broader shift towards conservatism. Rather, we stress that the contributions to this special issue, in particular the articles by Schmidt and Nisa (as well as Postill and Epafra), reveal significant counter-discourses and online activisms and activities that cannot be reduced to a conservative/progressive dichotomy (or similar dichotomies). Creatively presenting established Islamic scholars of Nahdlatul Ulama on various social media platforms or displaying pious images by young online entrepreneurs, for example, cuts across categories that have been used so far to characterize Islamic currents in Southeast Asia. In this regard, the articles in this special issue are indeed located *in between* religious

politics and popular pious practices. Muslim Southeast Asia's online publics represent media spaces that allow a variety of Islamic forms and expressions, which can best be grasped by considering politics, the pious, and the popular, and sometimes by thinking about all three domains at once.

Outlook

As we have noted at the beginning of this introduction to the present issue, we can only begin to unravel the sheer diversity of possibilities, the rapidly altering practices that mostly young Muslims have turned to in recent years. We believe that the articles in the issue provide a good departure point and welcome entry to the rapidly emergent context that is Southeast Asian digital Islam. However, we also see our own shortcomings and things that have received insufficient attention or that we have only just begun to explore. So, allow us to take a few last words to signal some of what we believe will be significant trends in the years to come, both in the world of digital Islam in Southeast Asia (and beyond) and in the ways in which we might analyze such trends.

First, there are a couple of emergent phenomena that we did not fully address in this issue, not because they are not relevant but simply because one cannot be exhaustive in the space allowed. One such trend that we as observers of digital Islam in Southeast Asia had better pay attention to is the increasing cross-fertilization of Islam, heritage, and new digital technologies, such as digital repositories of Islamic classical texts and new ways to data mine them, as well as recent experiments with virtual reality as means of preserving Islamic heritage (Lim 2011), to mention just two examples. As with our other examples, it would be interesting to see how such new trends deal with existing forms of faith literacy and which novel Islamic publics may be accessed and even created by means of such digital Islamic heritage.

Although this theme issue contains two very fine contributions (by Eva Nisa and Leonie Schmidt) on everyday uses of digital technology by young Muslims, we also find that most scholarly work on Islam and the digital still focuses on the political, spectacular, exceptional, or extreme, often at the cost of the more banal and everyday uses by mostly young believers. We would love to see more studies in the upcoming years that focus on Muslim memes (cf. Bellar et al. 2015), blogging by halal foodies, religious e-Xpression (Epafra 2016), or other seemingly trivial uses that similarly make up digital Islam. Important questions arise here: Will digital expressions of Islam soon be a building block for an emergent popular regionalism (cf. Chua 2015) that speaks to Southeast Asians not as a single ethnic or national group, as they

commonly regard themselves, or as the more abstract global *ummah*, or as a young, independent-minded generation that is both Muslim and Southeast Asian and relates to one another as such – an identity facilitated by the use of ever new digital devices?

At the same time, and not always as strictly separated from these popular uses of the internet for Islam's sake as one might think, is the question of what the growing institutionalization of religion does with online publics: how, for example, will the newly and by now fashionable trend of advocating an 'archipelagic Islam' (Islam Nusantara) start shaping online dialogues on Indonesian websites, blogs, or micro media? How, in spite of its often-nationalist sentiment, will such more institutionalized online expressions spill over into, or lead to, responses from the still largely separated blogospheres in neighbouring countries, such as Malaysia or Singapore?

Also, we have just started to scratch at the surface of some of this in our section on the public sphere above. Yet one of the most intriguing questions for the time to come surely will be how international education, the long-established exchange between Southeast Asian universities and those in the Middle East, Pakistan, or Iran, as well as the West, plus the new sorts of digital literacy acquired at campuses, high schools, and even places of learning such as madrassahs, articulate the need for new languages and new platforms. What role will the internet and social media play in this respect? What will they do to further boost the already prominent role of Malay and Indonesian, for example, in the world of Islam? Will Malaysia and Indonesia, which now often compete with both Turkey and Arab countries such as the United Arab Emirates in terms of Islamic fashions, tourism, or high tech, become signposts and role models for an Islam that increasingly looks forward, claiming a role on the world stage and digital futures of its own? These are all relevant questions that beg for further research and surely will determine the fate of faith in the time to come, and that fate is partly sealed in the domain of the digital.

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