7 'Muslim punk' music online: piety and protest in the digital age[1]

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The presence of young diasporic Muslim musicians in new media is already significant, but also continually rising. The explosion of MySpace and Facebook pages for diasporic Muslim bands is a case in point. It is tempting to stop at this moment, basking in this concrete new media presence. However, presence does not always beget position. And in this case, young Muslim males continue to be othered, exoticized, otherwise marginalized online and offline. The online presence of 'Taqwacores', a transnational diasporic punk music scene, serves as a space where these marginal essentialisms are contested. In the face of post-9/11 and 7/7 Islamophobia, Taqwacores' cyberspaces have been viewed as 'safe' outlets for progressive activist Muslims to discuss and organize. Though the Internet's role in growing Muslim musical youth subcultures is important, it is critical not to let this overshadow the role of these virtual spaces as cocoons where young Muslim males (especially marginalized ones) can creatively and freely express themselves. This chapter explores the continuing circulation of pejorative essentialisms of diasporic Muslim males (especially as 'terrorist'/demonic 'other') and underlines the possibility of cyberspaces to function as meaningful and progressive Muslim social worlds which challenge these essentialisms both online and offline (a case in point for the anti-Islamophobic leanings of the Taqwacores).

Almost a decade after 9/11 and some years after 77, Islamophobia in the UK, US and other Western states sadly continues to flourish. Fuelled by the ongoing Anglo-American 'War on Terror', Muslims, especially young Muslim males, continue to be othered/marginalized at best and demonized/violently attacked at worst. Furthermore, the diverse cultures and cultural products of diasporic and non-diasporic Islamic cultures are reductively conflated with stereotypical invocations of an imagined, homogenous ultra-Orthodox Islam. This chapter examines the case of one subcultural scene in which young diasporic South Asian Muslim males are resisting these essentialisms through music which they term 'Muslim punk'. This scene, known as the 'Taqwacores', began its life in suburban Boston, USA, but its most critical 'spaces' are mediated by the Internet. This chapter explores the online presence of the Taqwacores on social networking/social media sites – especially Facebook and Twitter – to understand how new digitally mediated collective Muslim youth identities combine piety and protest in deterritorialized spaces within the Internet.

Post-9/11 and 7/7, Islamophobia has been on the rise in the West (Ashencaen Crabtree et al. 2008; Dunn et al. 2007; Malik 2006; Popoviciu and Mac an Ghaill 2004). Muslim men have been specifically demonized as being terrorist/extremist (Virdee et al. 2006; Dwyer et al. 2008) or uncontrollably sexually aggressive (Hubbard 2005). In Britain, this has also resulted in institutional racism, including a sharp increase in the number of house arrests of Muslim men (Brittain 2009). In the US, violent and sometimes lethal attacks against Muslim men have risen sharply (Curiel 2008). The positioning of Muslims as a dangerous/unwanted 'other' has become pervasive, embedded within dominant Western media, political and religious discourses. Notably, Pope Benedict XVI in a speech at the University of Regensburg in 2006 framed Islam as a violent religion in stark opposition to the enlightenment of Western religious traditions.[2] This construction of Islam as an essential dichotomous other has real consequences for young Muslims (Malik 2006). Media portrayals, as Poole and Richardson (2006) observe, continue to demonize Muslim males. In April 2009, the popular American TV show 'Lie to Me' ran an episode in which a Washington, DC based mosque was accused of being home to an Al-Qaeda splinter cell. In the episode, all young Muslim males were sharply essentialized as terrorist/fanatical extremists. This Islamophobic gaze in America continues to retain staying power. As Curiel (2008: xii–xiii) observes, a Gallup poll in 2006 revealed that almost a third of those polled felt American Muslims were sympathetic to Al-Qaeda and a 2007 *Newsweek* poll showed that 41 per cent of those surveyed believe that 'Muslim culture glorifies suicide'. The post-9/11 gaze grew to such a level that Mahmood (2002) felt compelled to write an anti-essentialist book entitled *Islam Beyond Terrorists and Terrorism*.

In 2005, the Danish newspaper *Jyllands-Posten* controversially published comics depicting the prophet Mohammed, including clear references to Islam as a religion of terrorists (Brun 2008). The publication of these led to widespread protests by Muslims around the world. Hoskins and O'Loughlin (2007: 154–7) argue that these media depictions of Islam collectively constitute a 'mythology', in which Islam and terror become conflated. Writing in the wake of the urban disturbances in the northern British cities of Oldham, Burnley and Bradford in 2001, Louise Archer (2001: 81) argues that 'Muslim young men are increasingly being defined as militant and aggressive, intrinsically fundamentalist, ultimate Others' (cited in Dwyer et al. 2008: 117). Following Foucault's (Foucault and Sheridan 1972) theory of discursive relationality, Western Islamophobia has become constituted as a system of discursive statements, relationally networked and maintained through complex hegemonic structures of power.

In this discursive system which continues to propagate 'demonizing mythologies' (Gómez-Peña and Peña 2005), Taqwacores, a transnational diasporic Muslim punk subculture, has served as one avenue for young Muslim men to challenge dominant Islamophobic discourses and forge new identities which go beyond modes of binaristic thinking. Taqwacores' cyber-spaces have

been viewed as 'safe' outlets for progressive South Asian Muslims to discuss and organize. Though the Internet's role in growing South Asian musical subcultures is important, it is critical not to let this overshadow the role of these virtual spaces as cocoons where South Asian youths (especially marginalized Muslim youths) may feel they can creatively and freely express themselves.

In this research, respondents were interviewed through online methods, face-to-face ethnographic interviews and participant observation. A sample of interview participants was collected from Facebook and MySpace groups on Taqwacores, whose membership is published publicly on the Internet. The largest of these groups is 'Taqwacore' on Facebook, which has 462 members (at the time of writing) and of which I became a member. Respondents were also recruited through Twitter as well as through gatekeepers in the field. Thirty-seven face-to-face interviews were conducted in eight metropolitan US cities. In terms of the digital ethnographic component of this research, the interactions of members within Facebook/MySpace groups such as Taqwacore (text discussion, uploading of video/audio, etc.) have been observed. Both in offline and online interview work, respondents' viewpoints on participation in Taqwacores through online spaces have been elicited. Respondents were asked to reflect on issues of identity, social marginalization, religious marginalization and ethnicity. Though membership of Taqwacores can be seen online, i.e. publicly, it remains a sensitive and marginalized subcultural scene.

My research into the Taqwacores project has also involved maintaining a Twitter account through which I regularly send out tweets regarding my research – whether it is material I am reading, videos I am watching, research questions I am grappling with, or hypotheses I am investigating. Through Twitter, I also 'follow' individuals involved in the Taqwacores scene and read their tweets regularly. I maintain a project website which includes photographic images related to the project, visualizations and an archive of my tweets.[3] Through this process, I quickly realized that youths involved in Taqwacores are using this viral, instant and ubiquitous medium to bring a wide array of individuals both into Taqwacores as well as to keep interested individuals informed of the scene. The scene's use of Twitter also enables Taqwacores to reach out to groups of individuals who may not feel comfortable attending concerts or events taking place in the scene (or who may face socio-religious barriers). For example, there are many more women Twittering about Taqwacores than you would see at most of their concerts. This use of Twitter highlights specific examples of how Taqwacores is challenging pejorative normative stereotypes of young Muslim Americans.

This chapter is especially interested in how particular music websites, discussion forums and social networking websites are facilitating the growth of the Taqwacores scene. By way of background, I will briefly introduce the punk scene and the Muslim diaspora before examining the Taqwacores scene.

Muslim diaspora in the US

It is estimated that there are approximately 2.35 million Muslims in the US (Ewing 2008: 3). Some scholars of the Muslim American diaspora have felt a need to break down this population by ethnic origin, mosque affiliation, etc. For example, Mohammad-Arif (2002: 34) begins by describing the population as follows: 24.4 per cent are of 'South Asian' descent, 42 per cent are 'African-Americans' and 12.4 per cent are 'Arabs', ending her book with pages of tables listing approximate populations by city, numbers of mosques, mosques by religious sect, etc. Mohammad-Arif's statistics, and those like hers, seem useful only to those who seek to understand Muslims in the US as terrorist/dangerous 'others'. Furthermore, they elide the diversity within limited meta-categories. For example, 'South Asian' Muslims include individuals who identify with Pakistan, India and Bangladesh, and belong to a variety of Muslim sects including, but not limited to, Sunnis, Shiites, Sufis, Wahhabis and Salafis. Not all of these groupings are mutually exclusive either. As Suárez-Orozco (2008) argues, post-9/11 Americans negatively associate all Muslims, regardless of divergence in class, language, country of origin or religious practice. Furthermore, she adds that existent misunderstandings, misperceptions and misrepresentations of Muslims have made them 'targets of reflexive hatred' in America (ibid.: xiv).

Ultimately, there is a significant population of Muslims in the US, which large-scale census data suggests is around 0.5 per cent (Ewing 2008: 3) and President Obama in his historic speech at Cairo University put at seven million (Fisk 2009). Unlike the marginal socioeconomic position of Muslim populations in Western Europe, the median family income among American Muslims is $60,000 – a figure comfortably above the national median (Barrett 2007: 9).[4] Or, as Peter Skerr (cited in Muedini 2009: 39–40) sees it, Muslims who are considered to be 'guestworkers' in Europe have remained 'working-class' while American Muslims are generally considered 'well-educated profession[al] and business people, far more affluent than their coreligionists in Europe'. Though some Muslim groups in America have and do face significant economic marginalization (e.g. Muslim taxi drivers in New York City (Mathew 2005), it is the racialization and demonization that haunts young diasporic Muslim men the most. As Malik (2004: 179) argues, the US remains at best 'indifferent' and at worst 'totally hostile' to the realities of diasporic Muslim American lives, a view echoed to some extent by Abdo (2006: 7). Additionally, certain groups of diasporic Muslim youths, especially those who deviate from dominant sectarian/community norms, have neither been embraced by Muslim diasporic cultures nor 'American' ones – leading to their position as 'strangers' (Simmel 1971) caught in between. As Kibria (2008: 246) notes in her study of new Bangladeshi–American Islamic youth movements, some diasporic Muslim American youths have 'limited exposure to the homeland' and are 'unable to relate meaningfully to the ethnic culture of their parents'. Simultaneously, they 'feel distant from and unaccepted by the dominant society' (Kibria 2008: 246).

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Diasporic Muslim American men face unique issues in terms of gender and identity. There exists a reasonable corpus of literature on British Muslim masculinities (Archer 2001; Dwyer et al. 2008; Alexander 2004; Din and Cullingford 2006; Hopkins 2004; Hopkins 2006; Hopkins 2007). However, as Enloe (2006: vii) highlights, 'there has been a stunning lack of curiosity about [Muslim] masculinities' in the United States. Rather, the very diverse Muslim masculinities that exist in the diaspora have not only been collapsed, but naturalized as violent and subsumed by discourses of terrorism, patriarchal backward cultures and religious fanaticism. Though an interesting subject of study in itself, the production of these discourses is beyond the remit of this chapter (for more discussion on this, see Hunt and Rygiel 2006). But the impact of these discourses cannot be overstressed. For example, Shahjehan, a member of the band The Kominas, was bluntly asked by a fellow student at his university (who was mixed race – half white and half Indian), 'Would you say that most of the problems in the world have to do with or are caused by Muslims?'[5] Peek (2003) similarly found that young Muslim male college students in New York challenged the authenticity of video footage showing crowds celebrating 9/11. Nonetheless, these media images (e.g. cheering crowds of Muslims with machine guns) are powerfully embedded into the American psyche, as exemplified by the question posed to Shahjehan. As Smith (2008: iii) observes, 'Young, Muslim, male' constitutes a 'package of attributes' which has become pejoratively imprinted into (geo/socio) politics. Or, as one of Muedini's (2009: 51) young Muslim American respondents poignantly puts it, media outlets portray Muslim men as 'animals'.

Punk Muslims?

Punk music has been traditionally associated with 'scruffy' working-class anti-establishment white British youth (Hebdige 1979). Given the music's trajectory in racist skinhead movements (Hebdige 1979: 54–59), its appropriation by ethnic minority groups highlights the complexities of punk's rerouting. A strong example of punk music as activist music for marginalized ethnic minorities can be found in the Puerto Rican punk music scene in New York. As Mateus (2004: 263) argues, 'New-Nuyorican' punk bands such as Rican-struction have 'resignified and reconfigured' punk rock's anarchist and anti-establishment aesthetic (Moore 2007) to express progressive *Boricua* (i.e. Puerto Rican) socio-political aims.

Furthermore, punk is not restricted to production in the West as Baulch (2007) demonstrates. Indeed it first appeared in the 1990s in countries with large Muslim populations such as Indonesia. In Bali, for example, performances by metal and punk musicians have served as a form of resistance to dichotomous essentialisms of 'Indonesianness' and 'Balineseness'. Similarly, an activist punk scene in Bandung, Malaysia has, according to Pickles (2007), facilitated new progressive activist identities and ethnicities. In a different

vein, a Basque nationalist youth identity movement, as Kasmir (2002) notes, has emerged and been maintained through a punk music scene in Basque bars. In a radio interview, Michael Knight, author of the Taqwacore novel, was asked how punk and Islam could possibly be compatible (Prescott 2009). Knight responded succinctly that the Prophet Mohammed resisted unjust power in his time and that Muslim punk strives to replicate this vein of hegemonic resistance. As will be discussed later, many individuals involved with the Taqwacores scene have echoed this sentiment. Ultimately, punk is a musical form and, like any music, can be (and has been) reinscribed with a wildly divergent set of socio-political agendas (from eco-punks to racist punk skinheads).

Though an assertion of hegemonic resistance is forwarded, punk scenes have historically been male-dominated and it should be noted that the Muslim punk scene is no exception. Women have been conspicuously involved in global punk scenes – dyeing their Mohawk-shaped hair and wearing leather bodices, fishnet stockings and pointed stilettos (Hebdige 1979: 107–8). However, despite this visibility, their participation has been as a minority (Leblanc 1999). The punk scenes in Britain and the United States in the 1970s and 1980s played host to a variety of new masculinities: 'teddy boys', 'skinheads', and ones fusing bondage and sexual fetish subcultures. However, these masculinities, unlike those of the Muslim punk scene, are not born from religious engagement. Most relevant to Taqwacores are the masculinities associated with Straight Edge (sXe), a movement of vegan/vegetarian, teetotal and monogamous/sexually abstinent punks (Wood 2006). The scene started in the early 1980s in the UK and US and peaked in the late 1990s as vegetarianism and thrift store shopping gave way to millennial hyper-consumerism. Haenfler (2006) argues that the nearly two decades of sXe developed masculinities which both answered Messner's (1997) 'crisis' of masculinity and challenged punk's traditional association with aggression, emotional distance and drugs/drinking.

The masculinities of Taqwacores parallel those of sXe in that they are similarly derived from the subculture as a site for promoting perceived 'healthy masculinities' (Haenfler 2006: 121) which integrate some feminist and social activist values. This distinguishes them from the much larger historical punk scenes which were more broadly based with anti-establishment or anarchist aims. Taqwacores also stands distinct from predecessor Muslim punk scenes in Indonesia and Malaysia. Though the Balinese scene was also male-dominated (Baulch 2007: 8–9), it, unlike Taqwacores, retained negative views towards women participating in punk. Interestingly, as Baulch (ibid.: 9) highlights, if a band began to accumulate a female fan base, they were accused of selling out and becoming too commercial. Retaining a hard masculinity was viewed as critically important by the musicians in the Balinese scene. Ironically, this hard masculinity was ultimately a sanitized middle-class corporate-mediated one with some punks going to eat at McDonalds at a local mall (Baulch 2007: 24). Though women are few in numbers in Taqwacores, the scene claims one all-women Muslim punk band, 'The Secret Trial Five', and

Taqwacore bands have noticed the high turnout of women at their events in New York City.

Muslim punks online

> Because the Internet is a transnational space where people from all over the world can converge […] it is a space where […] community building can occur in a more efficient manner.
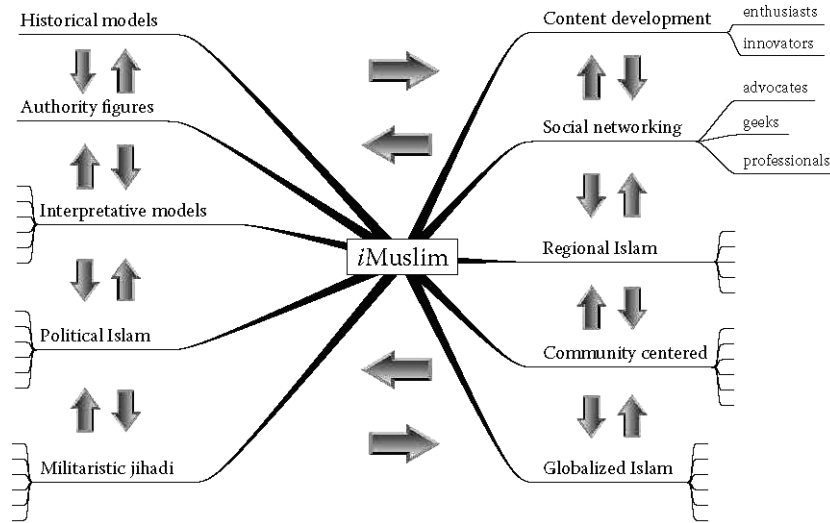
> (Ignacio 2005: 3)

Similarly, Muslim students in the United States have been actively building transnational communities on the Internet. These 'cyberMuslims' (Mohammad-Arif 2002: 209) have taken advantage not only of the transnational reach of the Internet, but of the speed of propagating information. The Internet has specifically facilitated transnational Muslim communities (e.g. surrounding activism or identity construction) through social networking websites, Internet chat rooms and Web-based forums. Maira (2008) found that young South Asian Muslims in America (re)constructed their identities through engagement with Internet-based transnational e-communities. She gives the example of a young diasporic Bangladeshi girl, Jamila, who lives in a city in New England and, through Bangladeshi Internet chat rooms, identifies with like-minded youths in London. In this case, the Internet creates a Muslim space which, though not free of difference or hierarchy, can (but not always) escapes both the confines of geography and offline Islamophobia.

These youth groups are part of a broader engagement of Muslims with online spaces which Bunt (2003) terms 'Cyber Islamic Environments' (CIEs). In these CIEs, online *khutbah*s (sermons) are delivered in real time, religious 'authorities' make pronouncements, and Web pages chronicle the activities of dominant and marginal opposition Muslim groups. Bunt's (2009) newer work updates CIEs to include blogs, social networking sites and other Internet spaces. Bunt (2009: 7) makes the distinction between 'Muslim-only' web spaces, such as MuslimSpace and IslamicTube, and those with 'an Islamic footprint', such as MySpace pages and Facebook groups. Bunt (ibid.: 8) ultimately concludes that:

> Online, new virtual groupings and affinities develop beyond traditional boundaries, drawing upon multiple identities. These challenge and mutate previously conventional understandings of Muslim identity, transposing familiar elements within a digital interface. CIEs provide opportunities for those from nonconventional Muslim backgrounds to promote their own worldviews. These challenges to the status quo have drawn attention from traditional institutions, some of which have sought to prescribe such sites with varying degrees of success. The same mechanics of online debate in identity creation have been targeted as potentially subversive by governmental organizations unable to censor or regulate Internet pronouncements and activities that conflict with their policies.

[282]   *Conclusion*

Historical models

Authority figures

Interpretative models

Political Islam

Militaristic jihadi

*i*Muslim

Content development — enthusiasts / innovators

Social networking — advocates / geeks / professionals

Regional Islam

Community centered

Globalized Islam

iMuslims Categorization Model (Gary R. Bunt)

Figure 7.1 From iMUSLIMS: REWIRING THE HOUSE OF ISLAM by Gary R. Bunt. Copyright © 2009 by the University of North Carolina Press. Used by permission of the publisher. www.uncpress.unc.edu.

Therefore, these CIEs can facilitate activism, marginal Muslim identities and diverse formations of transnational Muslim communities. These CIEs have even displaced the role of mosques for some youths. Bunt (2009: 10) notes that some Muslims now identify their worldviews with particular Islamic websites rather than a local mosque or specific religious network. This is a phenomenal change which should not be underestimated. Ultimately, Bunt (2009: 282) concludes that '[s]tudying Internet activities relating to Islam should form part of any equation that seeks to approach contemporary Muslim discourse'. My study of Taqwacores echoes this conclusion in that, if you exclude the CIE element of Taqwacores, one is merely left with a partial account of the scene. Taqwacores uses non-Islamic webspaces, such as Facebook and MySpace, to create a CIE which is critically important to the functioning of their scene. The MySpace page for a band called 'The Kominas', who describe their music as 'explosive Pakistani punk rock', has been one important gateway for individuals to become exposed to the Taqwacores scene.[6] The Kominas' MySpace presence consists mostly of album track samples, tour dates and corresponding images from their debut album, *Wild Nights in Guantanamo Bay*. Their music and visual aesthetic, like that of the UK-based band Fundamental's most recent album *All is War*, is a response to post-9/11 and 77 Islamophobia.

The Taqwacores

The Taqwacores scene was inspired by a novel of the same name written by the white Muslim convert Michael Muhammad Knight. His book is set in Buffalo, New York and centres on a house shared by a group of 'punk Muslims'. The novel chronicles their negotiation/reconciliation of punk music and Islam and has become a coming of age novel for some progressive young Muslim Americans. The fiction of Taqwacores became fact through bands such as The Kominas, Vote Hezbollah, Al-Thawra and Secret Trial Five (an all-women band), to name but a few. Vote Hezbollah, the name of one of the bands in Knight's novel, was brought to life by Kourosh Poursalehi, a Sufi Muslim teenager in San Antonio, Texas. In 2004, he put to music a poem at the start of Knight's book entitled 'Muhammad was a punk rocker', unwittingly sowing the seed for the Taqwacores scene in the US.

Poursalehi sent the track to Knight. Around the same time, a young diasporic Pakistani Muslim in the Boston suburbs, Basim Usmani, had been in touch with Knight, impressed by his novel. Usmani also loaned the book to his close friend Shahjehan Khan. Knight visited them both and brought along Poursalehi's track. Listening to it on repeat in Knight's car, Khan was shocked that 'there was this kid down in Texas writing this music' (cited in Crafts, 2007). Khan and Usmani, deeply inspired by Knight's novel and Poursalehi's track, were later to start 'The Kominas', the most recognized of the Taqwacores bands. Though the Taqwacores scene was initially spawned by Knight's book and the physical exchange of tracks (e.g. CDs in the mail), its recent exponential growth has been largely mediated by the Internet, which has been a prime breeding ground for Taqwacores. The Kominas' MySpace page provides tracks from their album alongside photographs and information regarding performances. Similarly, the embedding of YouTube videos in Facebook groups alongside textual dialogue has provided a highly expressive space for the anti-essentialist politics of the Taqwacores. The rough DIY aesthetic of blogs (with images and text sometimes quickly thrown together) often oozes a quasi-punk aesthetic, which is reminiscent of early (offline) punk 'zines' (home-made fan magazines). Interestingly, the 'zine' for the Taqwacore scene is not a taped together affair handed out at the back of clubs, but rather a crisp and professionally rendered blog, The Taqwacore Webzine.[7]

Furthermore, Facebook groups discussing Taqwacores have enabled old and new scene members to critically discuss both the novel and its offshoot music scene. The Punkistani Live Journal, for example, comments on The Kominas' album and the Taqwacore Forum showcases posts ranging from the scene to a critique of popular orientalist imagery.[8] [9] This blog is maintained by Usmani and serves as both a site to showcase the Kominas' music but to also engage readers with his politics. Take this post from 7 February 2009 for example:

> I'm so frustrated with Muslims online, and in Pakistan. None of them can talk about the Taliban with any sort of conviction, I find myself

having the same conversations about the great game, Soviet's [sic.] in Afghanistan, and CIA/ISI trained mujahideen. It's like Pakistani Muslims are stuck talking about the 80s. […] Yeah, but what about the people of Swat, Bajaur, Waziristan, or dare I say it (dare! dare!), Kabul? Are they worth less than Palestinians?

It is this melange of discursive multimedia which facilitates both the functions of piety and protest which Taqwacores espouses. Social networking websites – especially MySpace and Facebook – have played the greatest role in this process.

'Taqwatweet'

Walk Tall,kickass,learn2speak Arabic,love music& never4get u come 4rm a long line of truthseekers,lovers-H.S.Thompson

Twitter post by a #taqwacore member

The micro-blogging website Twitter, however, seems to be partially displacing Facebook in the day-to-day happenings within the Taqwacores scene. I will come back to social media later in the chapter. However, to give a specific example, Usmani's Punkistani Live Journal mentioned in the preceding section is now updated very infrequently. Contrast that to Usmani's presence on Twitter in which he posts updates several times a day. Contributions to Taqwacore-related groups on Facebook or similarly Twitter posts are not just focused on textual commentary, but rather on individuals uploading their own images/videos. Furthermore, their textual contributions may be an exegesis of the multimedia material contributed by other individuals. Basim Usmani's Punkistani blog became a conduit for like-minded Pakistanis, both on the subcontinent and in the diaspora, to connect. Usmani's own experience highlights how his online interactions shaped his offline interactions:

My first interactions with sympathetic Pakistanis who I went on to meet afterwards started online.[10]

After The Kominas had gained a measure of success in the US, Basim moved back to Lahore (where he was born) from suburban Boston. He soon met these 'sympathetic Pakistanis' in person and started a new Lahore-based Taqwacores band, Noble Drew. This band also used the Internet to spread their music and its progressive politics. For example, Noble Drew posted a video on YouTube for their track 'Thaliyon vi chimero', which explores the dissonance between *de jure* and *de facto* gender issues in Pakistan (including the inability of women to participate in many aspects of the Pakistani public sphere).[11] In Usmani's case, the Internet was critical to the transnationalization of Taqwacore and its politics. He recounted to me how The Kominas' MySpace page attracted punks from Indonesia, Malaysia and Singapore.[12] Similarly, the

editor of the Taqwacore webzine Marwan (who is in the band Al-Thawra), emphasizes that Taqwacore was 'born as an Internet phenomenon' and the scene was made possible through the global support of 'friends in far-flung places'.[13] Usmani has now shifted his posts from the Punkistani blog to Twitter. He posts messages regularly (many times a day when the band is on tour).

Twitter is a micro-blogging service via which users can post updates which are of 140 characters or fewer, approximately the same length as a cell/mobile phone text message. Known as 'tweets', short messages can be sent by individuals in a variety of ways – by text message from a cell/mobile phone, through the Twitter website, from smart phones such as the iPhone or Blackberry, and from other mobile devices. Twitter marks a profound shift in media use in that it produces a certain constancy, or at least a perceived constancy, of information. For example, if you search for 'Taqwacore' at any given moment, someone will have 'tweeted' something about it in the previous few hours or on that day.[14] This is distinct from the sparser comments on the Taqwacore-related Facebook and MySpace pages. This is not to say that the discussions on Facebook and MySpace pages are not important or are insignificant in any way. Rather, the immediacy of Twitter has made it a preferred venue for communicating information about the scene. At the time of writing, one Twitter user involved in the scene has compiled a wiki page of Twitter users interested in Taqwacore.[15] There is an active group, which marks its tweets with '#taqwacore', allowing members in the scene to cultivate a niche Taqwacore community on Twitter.

Piety and protest offline and online

In a previous section, I quoted a controversial entry from Usmani's Punkistani blog. Similarly, many of the tweets sent within the #taqwacore group openly and freely express political positions which are either marginalized or explicitly censored offline. Printed books regarding Muslim subcultures are subject to particularly stringent scrutiny. The British printing of the novel Taqwacores was censored as the UK publishers, Telegram Books, feared some of the actions and words of Muslim punks in the novel might spark another Rushdie Affair. However, the American publisher of the book, Autonomedia, used the Internet to allow British readers access to the censored sections.[16] The section of the passage below in square brackets was censored in the British imprint:

> You have to stop trying to make sense of Punk – what it's for, what it's against. It's against everything. [The singer from Vote Hezbollah pissed on a Quran.] Everyone loved it. Then he picked up the kitab, shook some drips off, carefully turned the frail wet pages and recited Ya Sin with absolute sincerity. Somehow the whole thing made sense.

(Knight 2007: 231)

This graphic portrayal of a negotiation of piety and protest by the singer of a Taqwacore band, Vote Hezbollah, critically interrogates individual and group identity discourses amongst some subcultural diasporic Muslim youths. Though contentious, it portrays an assertive Muslim (male) identity which is neither orthodox nor violent. No call is made to jihad. Rather, the censored passage reveals a frustration with the identity of being Muslim and American post-9/11. This negotiation of piety and protest in Knight's fiction and in reality in the live performances of Taqwacore has been invaluable to the scene. The censorship of the section where a Muslim punk urinates on the Quran also serves as a reminder of existent orthodox boundaries of public Muslim identities. Most importantly, it has pushed progressive young Muslims involved in Taqwacore deeper into the fold of online forums and groups rather than offline ones. Several of my respondents emphasized that they would not be able to protest against dominant Islamic identities through offline venues in the same ways that they do online, as powerful orthodox groups patrol these physical spaces (e.g. one respondent emphasized that ultra-conservative factions of Wahhabi Muslims would become aware of these forms of offline protest). Twitter, for the most part, is an uncensored space and so the discussion of Taqwacore is relatively unfettered. Scene members send their 140 character tweets without too much thought as to whether a message is blasphemous or otherwise offensive. Of course, part of this open flow of messages is a product of the medium of Twitter (and other social networking sites). But, part of Taqwacore's embracing of online spaces stems from the inability of Muslim youths to be similarly expressive in offline ways. The literature (Gottschalk and Greenberg 2008; Kaplan 2006; Semati 2007; Sirin and Fine 2007) shows that prominent media outlets continue to portray Muslims as dangerous terrorists. One by-product of this is that not all public spaces for discursive representation (e.g. community centres) are accessible to Muslim youths. Online spaces face no such barriers.

Post-9/11 and 7/7

> … we go to [a] church and we sit down. And it gets mentioned again that I'm Pakistani, and [someone] pulls out this long knife. Like about that long (gestures), and waves it around my face. And I'm totally in the back and awkwardly I start smiling, like 'What the fuck, why do you have a knife on me?' […] I mean it was a knife pointed in my face. And that was after 9/11.
>
> – Basim Usmani[17]

Usmani's experience is powerfully moving. Many of my respondents described incidents of violence, harassment and extreme discrimination, post-9/11. These personal experiences have directly fuelled the politics of Taqwacore. One respondent, Marwan, a 23-year-old orderly and musician (in the band

Figure 7.2 'Taqwacore' tagged posts on twitter.com: a selection of tweets with the hashtag or keyword #taqwacore

Al-Thawra), talked about the discrimination he faced at airports and how the paranoia of Muslims as terrorists was an issue he felt he had to address in his music.[18] Along with Shahjehan Khan, another respondent, they started a 'Terror Schtick' joke band, 'Box Cutter Surprise', to challenge pejorative essentialisms of Muslims. In the words of Marwan, 'that [stereotypical] shit is stupid' and had to be challenged.[19] For example, a track by The Kominas entitled 'Suicide bomb the Gap' simultaneously protests against American corporatist imperialism and the essentialism of Muslims as suicide bombers. The lyrics and titles of The Kominas' tracks (and this holds true for other Taqwacore bands) rise to the resistant activism of the punk music genre by challenging religious, gender and national stereotypes. 'Rumi was a homo', another Kominas track, encompasses all three. As mentioned previously, the extreme progressivism of some of this music ends up drawing fire even in offline venues assumed to be 'safe'.

In 2007, several Taqwacore bands (including the all-women Secret Trial Five) were scheduled to perform at The Islamic society of North America (ISNA) annual conference. The ISNA was born out of the Muslim Students Association (MSA) in the 1980s (Malik 2004: 178). It today serves as an umbrella organization which organizes activities and conferences for Muslim professionals and students. It is perceived as being relatively progressive due to its core focus on Muslim students. It was this belief that led Taqwacores bands to sign up to perform at ISNA in the first place. Indeed, as the Taqwacore bands performed, the crowd began to respond to their lyrics and sounds positively. This

is well conveyed by the words of one female poster on the TAQWACORE Facebook group page: 'All of the hijabi girls were going gagaaa [sic.] over you guys!' Perhaps the ululations of hijabi women were too much for ISNA's organizers as they called in the local police to eject any Taqwacore scene members. In response, Muslim punks smashed a guitar on thesidewalk outside the conference venue while shouting 'music is haraam (forbidden)'.

Barrett (2007) believes that ISNA is 'predominantly immigrant' and this has sometimes led to a failure to understand some of the nuances of diasporic Muslim identities. He also notes ISNA's historical lack of a moderate Muslim leadership. Barrett's conclusion provides one explanation for why Taqwacores was marched offstage by police officers at the request of ISNA conference organizers.[20] Because of Taqwacores' philosophical goal of challenging dominant Muslim orthodoxies and the marginalization of diverse Muslim identities, members of the scene worked to organize a side event during ISNA 2009, featuring The Kominas and other bands. Though the event was not at the conference site, some ISNA attendees did participate. Predictably, despite its efforts, Taqwacore was only able to lie at the periphery of ISNA, per-forming in, of all places, a Roman Catholic church. That said, discussion on Taqwacore-related Facebook and Twitter group pages relating to ISNA does indicate future possibilities to infiltrate the prevalent orthodoxy of the con-ference, an act which would signal a watershed in post-9/11 Muslim American identities.

Conclusion

This chapter has investigated the rise of Muslim piety and protest in the digital age. I have used the emergence and growth of Taqwacore, a transna-tional, predominantly South Asian, diasporic 'Muslim punk' music scene to explore the roles which new media play in the development of post-9/11 and 7/7 diasporic Muslim identities. Specifically, this chapter has argued that marginalized diasporic Muslim youths have been unable to use traditional offline outlets to express their negotiations of post-9/11 identity as Muslims and Americans. The case when Taqwacore musicians were ejected from the 2007 ISNA conference by police is a case in point. The Internet, however, has proved a critical medium that allows these Muslim youths to express their progressive politics.

The Internet has played more than a role as mere mediator in this diasporic musical scene. Rather, Taqwacore was made possible by the Internet. Because the offline Muslim public sphere disallowed discursive engagement by Muslim punks, the Internet was the only real way to create a national and later transnational subcultural movement. The case of one of my respondents, Marwan, who started the band Al-Thawra in Chicago, is a good example. Marwan had been writing music critiquing powerful orthodox Islamic cur-rents. He decided to create a MySpace page and the first track he uploaded was centred around 'questioning the clergy in Islam'.[21] His rationale for

putting the track on MySpace was that he 'wanted to put it out there to the world'.[22] Interestingly, shortly after he uploaded this track, Michael Knight, the author of the Taqwacore novel, contacted him through MySpace's messaging function. Marwan read the book and attributes his decision to join the Taqwacore movement to these contacts with Knight through MySpace.

Besides connecting geographically distant (and potentially invisible) marginal Muslim voices, Taqwacore's accessible presence on the Internet has allowed many non-Muslims to participate meaningfully in the scene. One respondent, Kaitlin Foley, a non-Muslim white woman involved in organising Taqwacore events and blogging about them, has played a central role in Taqwacore's presence on Twitter. She described to me that she views Twitter as 'the Red Light district for ideas, a place to be open and share thoughts, regardless of how polished and complete the thought is', making it a perfect medium for connecting the socioeconomically and ethnically diverse (though progressive) individuals involved in Taqwacore.[23] Also, as discussed in this chapter, the Internet (and especially Twitter) simultaneously facilitates the growth of the medium as 'Muslim punk', while encouraging non-Muslims to participate actively in the scene. Ultimately, Taqwacore's digital negotiations of piety and protest have not only articulated new diasporic Muslim youth identities, but are also (re)creating these vis-à-vis meaningful engagements with like-minded non-Muslim activist youths, processes which often meet with limited success offline.

Notes

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2 Christian organizations in the US have been following a similar strategy. Florida Christian University, for example, supported the publication of Gabriel's (2002) *Islam and Terrorism*, a book which crassly attributes terrorism with Islamic theology and paints Christianity as noble and pacific.
3 <http://learn.bowdoin.edu/sociology/taqwatweet> (accessed 15 March 2009).
4 There is, of course, diversity amongst Muslim groups in the US, including many working-class Muslim communities in the US. The Arab community in Dearborn, Michigan, for example, is dominated by those working at nearby auto manufacturing plants (Abdo 2006).
5 Interview with Shahjehan Khan.
6 <http://cdbaby.com/cd/kominas> (accessed 15 March 2009).
7 <http://taqwacore.wordpress.com> (accessed 15 March 2009).
8 <http://punkistani.livejournal.com> (accessed 15 March 2009).
9 <http://taqwacore.forum2u.org> (accessed 15 March 2009).
10 E-mail interview with Basim Usmani.
11 <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2Jz4vwPjzHU> (accessed 15 March 2009).
12 E-mail interview with Basim Usmani.

13 <http://taqwacore.wordpress.com/2009/04/11/taqwacore-webzine-manifesto>
   (accessed 15 March 2009).
14 A demonstration of this can be seen in an embedded visualization on my research
   website<http://learn.bowdoin.edu/sociology/taqwatweet/visualization-data> (accessed
   15 March 2009).
15 <http://twitterpacks.pbworks.com/Taqwacore> (accessed 15 March 2009).
16 <http://autonomedia.org/taqwa_censorship> (accessed 15 March 2009).
17 Interview conducted with Basim Usmani.
18 Interview conducted with Marwan.
19 Interview conducted with Marwan.
20 <http://www.facebook.com/video/video.php?v=7385452533&oid=4198903282>
   (accessed 15 March 2009).
21 Interview conducted with Marwan.
22 Interview conducted with Marwan.
23 E-mail interview conducted with Kaitlin Foley.

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