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DAWN Magazine

November 19, 2006

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The Orkut experience

By Shane Leavy

Gaining notoriety recently when an Indian court served them notice over a hate campaign against India that featured on the social network service, the virtual community on the internet has hundreds of thousands of Pakistanis taking part in a vast array of discussions with people from around the world. Some of them though seem to be conveying the kind of image that may not be representative of the nation at large



SHORTLY after joining Orkut I posted a topic on the International Relations community for fun: imagine you were sent back in time to Germany in the 1920s and you bumped into a young Adolf Hitler. If you only had time to either kill him or let him go, what would you do?

Well, a stream of replies followed, with big-hearted pacifists saying they wouldn't kill him, cynical pro-war hawks saying they would, and sniggering smart alecs saying they would introduce him to some beautiful Jewish women instead. But quite a few of those replying ignored the question and asked one of their own, which offended the Muslims on the circuit.

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This was my introduction to one of the staple hot spots on Google's social network service Orkut, a deep hatred and anger on all sides over Islam. With 1.74 per cent of Orkut's 30 million or so members coming from Pakistan, it is the most active Muslim-majority country on the service.

For a complete outsider like me, watching their arguments and discussions with Indians and westerners over every manner of cultural and political issue has been eye-opening, to say the least. As a European, though, for one of the most startling attitudes I have come across on Orkut we must refer back to Hitler again.

While the pacifists said they would not kill him for moral reasons, a small but surprising number of young Asian men clearly would not only spare the dictator, but join him.

When person in Europe wants to really criticise a particular point of view, they compare it to Nazism, because it is pretty much universally agreed that Nazism was the sickest, most unworkable and evil ideology ever tried on the continent.

The only real disagreement about Hitler is over whether he was simply insane, sheer evil or just deluded. To me, 'neo-Nazi' movements (pretty much unknown in Ireland) are white supremacist organisations who lash out violently against immigrants, many of whom are Indians or Pakistanis.

Little did I know. I have been utterly stunned by the enthusiastic admiration of a number of sub-continental Orkut members for Hitler. The most disturbing of these - a tiny, tiny minority, I add - look on Hitler as a genius for slaughtering so many of the Jews. Anti-Semitism is something we used to joke about in university because it seemed to belong to such a distant past. It was disturbing to realise that it was so alive and well among so many in the world.

The majority of the Hitler fans, however, seem to come from India. They admire that "Hitler was a great patriot who made a country among the toppers" and because "he was the perfect man who ruled and managed his subjects in a proper way." It seems bewildering that they would support someone who would unquestionably have mass-murdered every one of them if they had been around in Europe in the 1940s.

Before I joined Orkut, the few Pakistanis I had met were all easy-going, music-loving moderates. The first Pakistani I ever met was also the first Muslim I had met, and ended up being a good friend. Hardly fitting the Muslim stereotype, she was obsessed with fashion and pop music, and her favourite country was the United States.

The media here in Ireland tended to assume that the vast majority of Muslims around the world were of the 'non-terrorist' nature, and our journalists spent more time lambasting US foreign policy than in criticising the extremists. There was always a clear distinction drawn between ordinary Muslim men and women trying to live their lives and those leaving civilian corpses strewn around the world.

Yet on Orkut, religion is dragged into nearly all the international or religious discussion topics. Anti-Islam protesters solemnly warn me that the vast majority of Muslims are fascists in disguise. When I exclaim that I keep meeting totally decent,

easy-going Muslims they just repeat their claims that “deep down in their hearts they hate the infidels.”

On the other hand, hundreds of conservative Muslims seem determined to prove their point. “I think that in those postings that justify religious concepts, Pakistanis are voicing public opinion in general,” says 22-year-old Kiran Shah of Karachi. “I have heard this time and again that scripture and religion can be proven. The moderate people represent the general public behaviour because their views and discussions are quite similar to the discussions I have come across here, whereas the real extremist threads show a kind of immaturity and emotionality which I don’t think is very common.”

That is a relief, but it seems that the extremists on both sides have the same agenda: to make Islam into an ‘issue’. One extreme side wants to make the entire world conform to Islam; the other side wants to wipe it off the earth. Both are hyper-sensitive and I have seen many shockingly abusive messages sent by Muslims to those who insult the religion, including some death threats.

Some Muslims even boast about the fact that Islam is growing so quickly, and smugly announce that one day it will take over Europe. Imagine how that makes people feel in Madrid or London. “Hate sites are often trolled by the same 20-30 people and considering the amount of Pakistanis on Orkut, that is a negligible percentage,” points out a 25-year-old Pakistani native living in London, Asad Nasir. “Hate sites are looked at with disgust by most people and this is the reason why none of them really join the forum.”

He too thinks the levels of extremism on Orkut are not representative of the Pakistani population in general. The people who post on forums like the International Relations one I help to moderate are obviously already interested in politics and many have strong opinions to start with.

“Overall Orkut does not give a fair reflection as the vast majority of the 160 million people in this country are only interested in leading a peaceful, honest, happy life and that is no different to anyone else anywhere in the world,” says Asad.

He is right in that, of course. While passionate politically-minded folk make lots of noise, most people are just trying to change their own ordinary lives for the better. Yet the hostility among some Pakistanis for anything western, and their strange assumptions that all we care about is the destruction of Islam, suggest that they share the same misconception.

The ‘Down With Western Countries’ community, for example, includes an invitation to Muslims to change their Orkut display pictures to Muslim propaganda images. The new pictures on offer are of people walking on Danish flags, a woman in a niqab wielding a poster that said, “Be Prepared for the Real Holocaust”, and so on.

Terrifyingly there are also two photographs of Danish streets, one with ordinary people walking about and a blood-spattered machinegun with the words. ‘Denmark is next’ written in gory red beside it, the other promising a ‘Bombing Soon in Denmark’ and another bloody picture of a time bomb.

As Asad and Kiran have already said, this extremist attitude is not one shared by the majority of Pakistanis. Still, there is an understandable sense of bitterness among many that 'western' nations keep attacking and bullying Third World countries. But what many of the Muslims on Orkut do not seem to understand is that this anger is shared by millions of us in the West.

Their constant criticisms of the biased or even 'Zionist-controlled' western media are baffling. The West is not one country, but dozens. With hundreds if not thousands of independent media sources, it is practically impossible to generalise about them.

Here in Ireland the media tend to be very critical of US foreign policy. British journalist Robert Fisk who is wildly disapproving of US and Israeli policy in the Middle East is greeted as a hero on television talk shows.

These bitter Muslims, perhaps understandingly, fail to remember the millions of anti-war protesters who took to the streets in Europe before the invasion of Iraq. When I protest at their dismissal of the entire West as being a 'Zionist puppet', they quite often refuse to believe me.

Sometimes they show amazement once they get over their disbelief as I start quoting anti-American articles in Irish newspapers. They seem stunned when I insist that the prevailing mood in Ireland at least is one of contempt for the so-called war on terror.

"The anti-West sentiment is not shared that widely," says Kiran, however. "I have come across people who would talk about all the injustices of the First World, yet are always eager to migrate there. I don't think that extreme hate sites are really representative of public opinion, as the people I am acquainted with are really against such extremist sentiments. If something is responded to with violence, it is considered as being against religion and a madness."

Needless to say, there are plenty of westerners and Indians stirring up hatred right back at Pakistan. The 'Anti-Terror and Anti-Paki' community declares that "this is a place which is just for Indians anywhere in this world who think that it's Pakistan behind all the barbaric acts of terrorism."

Whatever the tension between the more extreme westerners and Pakistanis, they share a cordial friendship compared with the open hatred displayed by some Orkut members over India and Pakistan. "The majority of Pakis are bad," says one Indian man on the 'We Hate Those Who Hate India' community. "Even scientists too help the terrorists. Such bad people ... we must hate Pak."

This kind of nationalist hatred, shocking to me, is widespread and almost constant on Orkut. Extremist Indians and Pakistanis pour racist abuse back and forth, with Pakistanis claiming that Hindus drink cows' urine, and the Indians insisting that Pakistanis are terrorists. Religious figures are dragged into discussion more often than not by both sides as well.

"When I joined Orkut, I was appalled to see the hatred that was shown on communities against Pakistanis," says one Pakistani woman who asked to be called

by her Orkut name, Amn. "One of the first few communities that I came across was 'Nuke the Pakis'. It was a few days later that I saw some people from our side come back with the same hatred and hostility, and communities against Hindus and Indians which were equally sickening as the ones against Pakistanis."

It can be depressing at times. While looking at this abuse one thinks that if India and Pakistan were to close down both of their respective tourist boards, and rely entirely on members of Orkut to advertise their countries, tourism would probably take quite a dip in both countries.

And yet despite the anger and hatred, the vast majority of communities on Orkut are fun, friendly and well-meant. "My time on Orkut has been very enlightening," concludes Kiran. "I have come across healthy debates about various cultures, critical studies of Islam and various kinds of opinions shared by people around the world which has made me understand foreign behaviour and views. I have come across some wonderful people."

I too have made some good friends on Orkut, several from Pakistan, and I hope I have gained some real insight into the politics and cultures of many different countries. Hopefully if the bitter knee-jerk extremists can be kept in check, more cross-border friendships could emerge from the Orkut experiment. There is potential here for something great.

A peek at the communities

SO, what occupies the minds of Pakistani youth so much that they create Orkut communities to discuss them? Despite the protestations of the many who insist that the nation is nothing but a burqa-clad army of unhappy souls, a first glance shows quite a cheerful, fun-loving bunch.

'Lahore Dance Parties' has a whopping 9,400 members mostly flirting hesitantly (and some not so hesitantly) and discussing good places to eat or go out in Lahore. Apparently the murkier side to Lahore's nightlife is catered for too, in the 'Illegal Street Racing in Lahore' community. Here young men discuss cars, boast about being faster than Karachi drivers and even appear to be arranging street races.

The Karachi Orkut users are pretty much up to the same thing, with 'Karachi Teens' and 'Karachi Saturday Night' members all flirting away to their hearts' content. The rather more serious Orkuteers are posting on environmental communities like the dreadfully spelt 'Mother Earth - Plz Save Her'. Vast numbers post on any of the many India-Pakistan politics, culture or cricket communities.

One thing I found astonishing was the number of communities dedicated to the beauty of feet. There are not one, not two, but fourteen Pakistani communities all discussing the glory of feet - thirteen of them about female feet, and a solitary male one. In addition to these are a handful of Indian communities along the same lines and one or two American ones. The biggest community, 'Paki Feet Heaven', has over 2,300 members and appears to be quite active. People post images of their feet or the feet of other women and then members openly admire them.

Having always considered the feet to be one of the ugliest parts of the human body, perhaps I have discovered something profound here: are Asian feet better-looking than European? I briefly thought I could comfort my feet's ego by noting that there was a Pakistani community called 'Stinky Feet' too, but alas it has only twelve members and appears to be dedicated to a particular individual.

Apparently, "if you have couple of rats or roaches in your home and you want to kill them" you can contact this person whose stinky feet will exterminate the lot. Orkut is full of such silly and fun communities, but the massive Pakistani presence on the site delves into some darker corners too.

Some of the more extreme Pakistanis seem to almost have a siege mentality towards India and the West. The 'Media War Between Pakistan and India' community urges people to "boycott Indian dramas if we want to see a successful young generation of Pakistan, because right now some of our youths are so much into the Indian stuff that they have forgotten their own aims." They believe Indian dramas are "ruining" Pakistan's youth.

"When opposite sexes get closer to each other, other than marriage, they tend to get into relationships which create social chaos and don't let the youth spend their efforts on constructive aspects of life," argues one young Pakistani. He then cryptically adds, "Western media does that unintentionally; the Indian media does that intentionally."

On a more violent note, the 'Anti-Israel (Anti-Zionism)' community might have a fairly specific title, but its description reveals racist hatred of the "Jew rats" who, they claim, run the US government. "The biggest enemy of humanity are the Jews," claims the community.

Yet there are vast numbers of really positive communities too, inviting friendship between religions and nations.

"Let's make a new beginning with new friends. Let's get over our pre-conceived notions and convictions and write a new chapter in the history of Indo-Pak relations," proclaims the 'India Pakistan Friendship Club'. I hope they achieve it sooner rather than later. — **Shane Leavy**

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