

# **FINAL REPORT**

**Fitna, the video battle:**

**How YouTube enables the young to perform their religious and public identities**

**In this report we recapitulate aims and questions that we put in the research proposal and sum up our proposed methods, including the changes and modifications that occurred during the research. We then discuss the answers to the research question, focusing very much on the empirical outcomes. In our conclusion we discuss the empirical outcomes in terms of the contributions they produce for theories about the performance of political and religious identity and the articulation of religion with citizenship.**

**With the report we also aim to demonstrate how the project has contributed to the themes 'Religion, violence and conflict resolution', and 'Religion, media and the arts' as listed in the Religion and Society Youth call of November 2007.**

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## **1. Proposed aims:**

The aims of the research have remained the same as in the proposal, i.e: in March 2008, Dutch extreme-right parliamentarian Geert Wilders released a 16 minute anti-Islam movie called Fitna. Wilders had a hard time finding a broadcaster or internet provider willing to air the film, because his mere idea caused an immense global controversy, leading to death threats, violent protest, diplomatic incidents and fierce public debate. One of the reactions consisted of organised and unorganised video protest by young people from all over the world, who uploaded their reactions to websites such as YouTube or LiveLeak. These videos form the material for this research project and enable the description of the visual resources young women and men use to perform their religious and public identities, the articulation of their motives and beliefs with their particular visual styles, and the exploration of the type of arguments that visual culture allows for in religious and public debate.

The research will contribute to academic work on youth and religion in three ways: first it will provide more insight into the mediation and public performance of the young religious self, processes which are usually less publicly visible and restricted to situated local and religious contexts. Second, most studies about young people and religion have been carried out in the psychology discipline focusing mainly on Christian religions. While young people of all religious and non-religious backgrounds posted their Fitna-videos, the focus of this study is on Islam, and the political and cultural battle surrounding it, therewith providing a relatively exceptional entry to the study of youth and religion. Third, the Fitna-battle was as much a political and social struggle as a religious one. This combination takes this study into the wider field of public sphere studies and theories, which assumes traditionally a literate, informed and rational public. The increasing public importance of both religion and visual culture has challenged these assumptions and necessitated the question of whether and how they can be incorporated in public debate.

## **2. Proposed research questions**

The aims of the proposed research have remained the same and were to describe and produce a typology of the themes, genres and audio-visual codes of the videos, analyse whether and how particular types of videos coincide with particular beliefs and motives of the young people that posted these videos, and explore the potential and limits of visual language for religious and public debate, in other words what can and cannot be said with visual means? Because the position of women is a core issue in Islam debates, with the headscarves as its metonymic symbol, gender was taken as a key dimension running through the research questions that were specified as:

1. What are the thematic, generic and audio-visual features of *YouTube* videos posted in response to the anti-Islam movie *Fitna*?
  - a. Which cultural symbolic resources do they contain?
  - b. How is gender performed in those videos?
2. How do particular types of videos, identified in question One, correspond to specific motives, beliefs and arguments of - especially - young people uploading the videos?
3. Which arguments are specific to the video debate and which arguments have not been made in the videos?

### **3. Design and Methods**

Given the descriptive and exploratory aims of the research, and the relatively limited knowledge available about religious experiences and performances of the young, an inductive, interpretative research design was proposed, with qualitative methods of data gathering, and discursive and semiotic methods of data analysis to be used in a constant comparison approach, employing dedicated software for the analysis of qualitative and visual data. In practice this meant that we used targeted designs and methods for each separate study. The details of these are provided in the respective publications. During the course of the research one important additional method emerged necessary to cover the large number of videos that were found. The identification, description and quantitative analysis of the videos and the people that made/uploaded them were greatly facilitated by the collaboration we initiated with the Cybermetric Research Group of the University of Wolverhampton. Professor Mike Thelwall developed a custom-made electronic tool for us, to select videos, register basic information of the posters and identify links between the videos and the posters. This tool was made available for free academic use through the *Fitna*-project website, and the website of the Cybermetric Research group: <http://lexiurl.wlv.ac.uk/searcher/youtube.html>

### **4. Outcomes**

The outcomes of the research directly answered the first two general research questions. In the proposal the specific choice of material to answer research question Three, was made dependent on the outcomes of the first two questions. The results for question One in particular lead us to focus question Three on the links between the videos and the posters and conduct a network analysis of friends, subscriptions and comments, in order to assess whether a 'debate' between them took place at all. This is slightly different from the material we envisaged to use. Nevertheless, the third question has been answered extensively and satisfactorily. In addition, extra analyses were

conducted on the basis of in-between developments and findings. These concerned particularly a study of stand up comedy as an addition to the analysis of symbolic and cultural resources, and a study on the effects of *Fitna* itself on young individuals. We will first summarize the results for the three research questions, and then briefly run through the outcomes of the effect-study.

#### 4.1. *Thematic, generic and audiovisual features of the YouTube videos* (studies One, Two, Three).

Three papers contain the results of this question, of which two have been accepted for publication in *Critical Discourse Studies* and *Feminist Review*, respectively. One has been accepted for an academic conference about *Contesting Religious Identities* and is prepared for submission to the *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion*.

##### 4.1.1 Cultural and symbolic resources

In our first study (Van Zoonen, Vis and Mihelj, 2010) we found, on the basis of our quantitative analysis, that the most common YouTube reaction was for Muslims was to upload copies of videos that expressed their own understanding of Islam as a peaceful religion in contrast to the picture drawn in *Fitna*. In many of these cases, the video did not directly address *Fitna* or Wilders, but the titles and tags that the posters added to their videos made clear that they performed their religious selves in the context of Wilders' and other anti-Islam messages. Their videos thus perform a kind of citizenship, an outreach to strangers as it were, that is based on the desire to present a true picture of oneself to others, and to solve misunderstandings. Our more detailed analysis of the video genres unique to visual digital culture (tagging/jamming, cut-and-mix and vlogs) showed that each invited their own kinds of political and religious performances, and assumed particular traits and interests of their audience. An organised series of jamming videos was made in order to apologize for Wilders. They were unique digital means of activism, enabling a particular participation in the controversy around *Fitna* that assumed a global audience open to such apology. It can be seen as a performance of a civic virtue that feminist authors have identified as crucial for citizenship in multicultural societies, that is cultural recognition, which entails the willingness and capacity to align with the experiences of cultural 'others'. The apologies in these 'Sorry-videos' testify in that sense of an understanding, on the side of the posters, of the damaging effects of stereotypical and insulting representation of Islam on its adherents. The cut-and-mix videos, appeared to be especially welcome means for satire and parody demonstrating both the posters' immersion in global popular culture, and their political selves in protest to Geert Wilders and his anti-Islam project. The particular performance of citizenship taking place here, has historical roots going back at least to the 17<sup>th</sup> century satirical pamphlet culture which attacked many a royal or regent in power, and

which has undermined dominant political culture ever since. While these kinds of cut-and-mix videos primarily addressed audience emotions (anger, fear, contempt), a particular kind of cut-and-mix video positioned audiences as cognitively competent and capable to disentangle the visual demagoguery in *Fitna*; these videos presented a similar demagogic treatment of religion as *Fitna* did, but based it on the Bible in contrast. Together with the vlogs, these videos are best understood as performances of well informed selves articulated with a classic modernist understanding of citizenship, addressing others equally well informed or – at least – willing to be informed. It ties these videos and vlogs about *Fitna*, to a classic conceptualization of the public sphere, as the term ‘vlogosphere’ as it has been called in analogy with the blogosphere (Griffith and Papacharissi, 2010) suggests.

The first study demonstrated that the YouTube videos cannot be typified as enabling one kind of political or religious performance; we found several ones instead that nevertheless have one thing in common and that is their assumption about an audience out there. This implies a fundamental ‘connectedness’ of the YouTube performances that takes two forms: that of real connections to an already existing practice of religious and political participation, as is clear from the videos connected to the vlogosphere and from the many online manifestations of Islamic faith, and that of individual, one-off acts of video participation in the *Fitna* controversy and the assumed virtual audience. A desire to make a connection to dispersed others is thus what binds both the occasional acts and embedded practices of political and religious performance in reaction to *Fitna* on YouTube. A further commonality is that these attempts are molded in cognitive, emotional, humorous, denigrating, amiable, absurdist and other ways, but that none of them were violent or aggressive. Although we found many references to Wilders as Hitler, we did not find videos actually engaging in neo-Nazi hate speech; similarly, while many videos showed Islamist terrorism there were none in our data that supported extremist Islamism and propagated violence. Obviously, such videos do exist, but they did not come up in this YouTube debate. This maybe as much the result of enforcement of the YouTube user guidelines, as it could be of the way the posters want to make connections, within the admittedly wide boundaries of online civility.

#### The case of standup comedy

Two extremely popular videos among the total of *Fitna*-response videos were stand up comedies, one made by the Muslim America Foundation, the other one by British stand-up comedian Pat Condell who uses YouTube to tell his ‘godless jokes’. Each video drew millions of viewers, and hundred thousands of reactions, some of them in the form of new videos, most of them as comments left on the video page. We are in the process of analysing these two stand-up

performances and their responses to provide more depth results about the usage of comedy as a cultural and symbolic resource (Hirzalla and Van Zoonen, forthcoming), addressing the following issues:

- which styles of comic performance do these stand up comedians use in articulation with which particular themes in the global Islam debate?
- what kind of video responses did the two videos evoke?
- how can the written comments be typified?

#### 4.1.2 Gender performance in *Fitna* and the *Fitna*-response videos.

Our second study (Vis, Van Zoonen and Mihelj, 2011) focused on the portrayal of men and women from Muslim and non-Muslim background in *Fitna*, and the alternative perspectives and voices expressed in the response videos. We concluded that *Fitna* was framed in a traditional Orientalist narrative in which women are presented as the present and future victims of the oppression of Muslim men and Islam. In such a discourse, which dates back at least to the colonialist enterprise of the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> century, white European, non-Muslim men are constructed as rescuers and protectors. We also observed, on the basis of secondary sources, that mainstream media coverage in Britain and the Netherlands opened up space for experts, civic leaders, politicians and journalists to express their views on *Fitna* and Islam, but that ordinary citizens including Muslims were rarely given a voice. Our analysis of the response videos uploaded by women showed that YouTube clearly offers an alternative and an important space to discuss *Fitna* and Islam. Firstly, the women uploading their videos are a different kind of actor in public debate than the ones participating in mainstream media discussions: they come from across the globe, they are relatively young and many of them are active Muslims. Secondly, while many of them express their ideas by copying and pasting footage from existing media, the majority of the women uploading their videos produced their own material by cutting and mixing images, sound and texts or by speaking directly to the camera in a testimonial. In these alternative expressions, there was only rare support for Geert Wilders or a staunch anti-Islam standpoint. On the contrary, direct criticism and ridicule of Wilders were common, as were serious and committed explanations of Islam and how Muslim women themselves interpret their religion. Overall, the portrayals of women and men in the videos were radically different from those in *Fitna*; although relatively few women appeared in the videos, they were not typified in terms of 'us' versus 'them' through headwear or other sartorial markers; they also received lengthy attention, spoke for themselves and were shown in an everyday ordinary work context or in the setting of religion, instead of as victims of conflict, as in *Fitna*. Women also actively explained and discussed their

understanding of Islam, thus not only taking on Wilders, but also claiming their right to speak within Islam.

It thus seems justified to conclude that women, Muslim and non-Muslim, have used YouTube to give themselves both a political and a religious voice in the global Islam debate, in which *Fitna* presents an extremist position. It also seems legitimate to say that these voices are heard, given the significant amount of views that the total and most individual videos received. Without knowing too much yet about the background of the posters, our data nevertheless demonstrate how these women constituted themselves as global citizens through their act of copying or making videos and uploading them to YouTube. Notwithstanding the absence of a global polity in which to claim citizen rights and perform citizen duties, their videos are typical 'acts of citizenship', by women claiming their right to speak to wider audiences, and to political and religious actors that have often prevented them from speaking or have not bothered to listen to them.

#### 4.2. *The nature of the video debate* (study Four)

In our fourth study, we analysed the nature of the video debates by conducting a network analysis of comments, subscriptions and friendships among the YouTube posters. The article has been positively reviewed by the journal *New Media and Society*, and has (August 2010) received the advice to revise and resubmit.

On the basis of secondary sources about the newspaper coverage of the *Fitna* controversy in the UK and the Netherlands, we established that the mainstream news debate was characterized by 4 elements (Van Zoonen, Müller and Hirzalla, 2009):

- mainstream news genres such as reports, analysis, comments, op-ed pieces and letters to the editor dominated in the newspapers;
- political and religious experts, political and religious leaders and Wilders himself were the most prominent actors in the newspapers;
- the main theme was freedom of speech, regarding the question whether Wilders should be allowed to ventilate his views. The nature of Islam or the position of Muslims in the UK and the Netherlands were much less discussed in the newspapers
- ordinary citizens, and Muslims in particular were mostly absent from newspaper coverage.

Our analysis of the cultural and symbolic resources already showed the distinct nature of the response videos compared to the mainstream news coverage, especially with respect to the genres used and the prominence of Islam interpretations. The role of comedy and satire was particularly striking compared to the mainstream news genres (see results Q1a above). From our gender research (see results Q1b above), it showed that Muslim and non-Muslim women used YouTube to



acquire a voice they did not have in the mainstream news debate. Yet, both studies also suggested that the videos seemed to be aimed at performing a political and religious identity rather than at discussing or deliberating it. We therefore conducted an additional study based on three types of links between the videos to assess what kind of interactions took place between the posters (Van Zoonen, Vis and Mihelj, under review with *New Media and Society*).

Our analysis of the reactions to the Fitna-response videos and the interactions in which they are embedded, whether in the form of comments, subscriptions or befriending, show that the great majority of YouTube communication surrounding Fitna (over 85%) consisted of reactions without interactions. While these videos often reached large audiences, only 13 % or fewer of the posters engaged with each other through comments, subscriptions or 'friendship'. Our analysis showed evidence of antagonism, agonism and dialogue, but in a much skewed distribution. As with the majority of videos uploaded to comment on Fitna, the overwhelming majority of reactions and comments were single interventions. In addition, comments on the videos in particular could be qualified as either antagonistic or agonistic, but very rarely involved dialogue (be it an agonistic dialogue between opponent, or a dialogue between likeminded participants) – a fact that could in part be explained by the unmoderated nature of YouTube comments. However, links based on the YouTube options of subscription or befriending were also not particularly conducive to dialogue. The reason for this lies in the fact that these links were established between like-minded others: the two strong and somewhat bigger subscription and friends networks that we found both involve pro-Islam channels that are constitutive of the wider online Ummah. A closer look at the strong ties in this network (between people who are both friends and subscribe to each other) furthermore revealed that there was little other exchange in the network and that this network could thus be better described as a multiplication of sites and a performance of (religious identity) than as a form of dialogic interaction between them. On a smaller scale we observed the same phenomenon in the MediaMatic network, which used the linking possibilities of YouTube to create a larger platform for the Sorry-videos instead of as means for interaction.

In line with the above, the majority of videos uploaded and comments added in response to the videos can be seen as an extension of the off-line demonstrations that went on worldwide in the immediate aftermath of its release. In the few cases that discussion did arise in the form of comments on these videos, they were usually either agonistic or antagonistic, turning YouTube into an antagonistic battlefield about Islam, as well as a platform for the public expression of pluralistic agonism, but without much political discussion or dialogue (with the exception of the Egyptian young women, see Q1b, above). The video practices that emerged in reaction to Fitna can thus be qualified as a 'video sphere' that provides opportunities for both antagonistic and agonistic

expressions of passions and views, but is not particularly conducive to the transformation of antagonism to agonism. Given the presence of agonism, such a video sphere may contribute to the establishment of the public sphere, but is certainly not equal to it. Still, we could argue that such a video sphere is a necessary prerequisite of democracy and public sphere, insofar as it provides opportunities for public recognition of irreconcilable differences and conflicts, and thus helps reaffirms and maintain the inherently antagonistic nature of democratic politics.

#### *4.3. Motives, beliefs and arguments of YouTubers (study Five)*

In our third study, we aimed to combine the particular arguments of the various response-video genres with the specific motives and beliefs of the posters. The outcomes will be presented at the European Communication Conference taking place in Hamburg, October 12-15, 2010 (Mihelj, Vis and Van Zoonen, 2010), and are prepared for submission to the *British Journal of Sociology*. We found that Muslims were on average more willing to engage in reasoned exchanges with cultural others and ideological opponents, gave a clearer indication of their own geo-cultural identity (as Muslims), while at the same time behaving as cosmopolitan communicators, explicitly reaching out to non-Muslim addressees. In contrast, the majority of non-Muslim posters spoke from a seemingly de-territorialized position, yet at the same time gave little indication of any explicit wish to communicate with individuals beyond their particular cultural, territorial or ideological locale. The two groups also differed in their choice and application of normative values. Those who approached Fitna primarily from the perspective of freedom of speech were all non-Muslims, and regardless of whether they agreed with Wilders' claims or not, either assumed that freedom of speech was incompatible with Islam, or gave no indication that Muslims may share a commitment to this norm. In contrast, all Muslim posters judged Fitna primarily from the perspective of its objectivity, assumed that the truth about Islam is in principle transparent to anyone, and posted a YouTube response with the intent to contest Wilders' claims and explain their own view of Islam to non-Muslims with the help of facts and reasoning. In contrast, the majority of non-Muslim posters who judged Fitna to be untrustworthy provided little factual support for their claims, and did not invest much effort into explaining their views to distant others.

#### *4.4. Effects of Fitna (study Six)*

When Fitna was released authorities and citizens expressed fears that the film would evoke riots between the white Dutch majority and the Muslim minorities. While nothing of the sort took place, the film was watched massively, making it one of the biggest anti-Islam propaganda films of the last decades. This makes the question of its direct effects on non-Muslims pertinent, not only for

academic reasons but also out of concern for its societal impact. In addition, much of the mainstream debate around *Fitna* focused on the question as to how much attention to pay to it, specifically asking whether all media attention would exacerbate the possible negative effects of the film. We therefore decided to contribute to a study about the effects of watching *Fitna* on individual young Dutch audiences (Müller and Van Zoonen, 2011). We postulated that the effect of *Fitna* could be rooted in the combination of affective cues combined with cognitive cues that produce a *fear appeal* in concert. We also hypothesised that being aware of the mainstream news about *Fitna* would inoculate viewers against the fear appeal of *Fitna* because they would be able to mobilise different interpretations and criticisms while viewing the film. We asked 118 young Dutch individuals to watch *Fitna*. We manipulated the film so that one group of respondents would see the whole film, including cognitive and affective cues, while a second group would watch *Fitna* without its cognitive cues that tie extreme violence to the Qur'an. In addition, we created a third, control group that did not watch *Fitna* at all, and was neither subject to another stimulus. The outcomes show that *Fitna's* production of fear about Islam and Muslims was indeed dependent on the combination of cognitive and affective cues. Participants who saw the full *Fitna* and had not followed the media debate about *Fitna* did express a higher level of threat from Islam and a higher prejudice against Muslims. This effect was absent among people who were slightly or highly aware of the media debate. In addition, participants who had seen *Fitna* without the cognitive cues, experienced the same level of anxiety and mood changes due to the images of violence and terrorism as participants who had seen the full *Fitna*, but they failed to change their attitudes towards Muslims and neither did they perceive increased levels of Islamic threat. Overall, the study suggested that only those individuals who did not have prior knowledge of the *Fitna* debate and were confronted with the combined cognitive and affective fear appeal of *Fitna* were seriously affected by it. This suggests that the media storm and the immense amount of counter reactions, among others on YouTube, diminished the damaging effects of *Fitna*. Instead the outcome seems to have been a more critical view of anti-Islam propaganda rather than a passive acceptance of it.

##### **5. Methodological challenges and reflections (study Seven)**

We have an agreement with Professor Linda Woodhead, the director of the Religion and Society Program, to contribute to her forthcoming book with a chapter reflecting on the methodological challenges of the research, building on a paper we presented at a conference (Vis and Thelwall, 2010).

Our core body of material seemed easily available on YouTube, in its suggestion of being a publicly available and unobtrusive repository of videos. Yet, it did not turn out to be the naturalistic data

archive that we assumed, as it was in continuous flux and lacked public information about inclusion, suspension, maintenance, changes and other interventions in the videos. From the beginning we ran into a number of methodological questions and analytic challenges that were unforeseen in the grant proposal. Our intention was to begin with a sample of 100 videos and categorize them through a bottom-up procedure of constant comparison. In a pilot study conducted in April 2008 we found 3190 hits for the search term 'Fitna'. When adding 'Wilders' to this search, the amount of hits went down to 2140. These numbers would change within one search session. When revisiting YouTube for the research purpose in September and December 2008, some videos had been removed while the total number of hits for 'Fitna' had gone up to over 6000; 'Fitna Wilders' produced over 2300 hits (see Van Zoonen, Hirzalla, Müller, 2009). After the research grant had been awarded, we started with another search based on the same keywords, and again we found different numbers, new titles, double counts and disappeared videos. This meant first that it seemed impossible to establish a stable 'population' of videos, and second that it was difficult to know what our foreseen sample from this population would represent. We deemed it necessary to solve the 'population' problem first and sought contact with the Cybermetric Research Group of the University of Wolverhampton which had already developed a reputation in making electronic tools able to handle large amounts of internet data. In conversation with us, Mike Thelwall, professor of Cybermetrics, developed a specific tool for YouTube that prevented double-counts by identifying unique upload codes and that automatically coded all API (Advanced Programming Interface) data such as date of upload, length of video, number of views and comments, country of origin and gender as registered by the poster. The E-tool facilitated final search in September 2009 using ten different keyword combinations delivered 1413 unique uploads that formed our 'population' from which we could sample. Yet, the additional data delivered by the E-tool made it possible to sample more strategically and we focused on the videos that were uploaded in the immediate build up and aftermath to the release of Fitna. We thus limited our analysis to 776 videos that were online in September 2009, and uploaded in February, March, April and May of 2008. These formed the core material for all further project analyses and publications. The e-tool also enabled us to automatically select all videos uploaded by women, to select the most watched videos (which resulted in the separate analysis of stand-up comedy videos, see above paragraph 4.1.1) and to conduct a network analysis (see above, paragraph 4.3)

To analyse the videos more substantively we used a combination of content, critical discourse and visual analysis, survey data and the described cybermetrics. While these analytic techniques worked satisfactorily with most selected videos, it should also be noted that the nature of the YouTube material defies a watertight capture of all that goes on in the videos. Partly this problem ties in with

the classic contradiction between the goals of general and case study methods, but the YouTube videos offer an additional challenge because of their multimedial and unpredictable articulation of images, sounds and words. Often, the videos follow the traditional codes and conventions of professional television and film making, which made them relatively easy to analyse. Yet, we also found many highly personal videos that used absurdist and sometimes incomprehensible combinations of sound, image and words, often cut in rapid sequences of 1 or 2 seconds. The resulting ‘flows’, especially in the cut-and-mix videos, could be matched to the categories of our analyses, but at the loss of losing the particular and creative nature of the video in question. We therefore chose to add detailed descriptions of these videos to our analyses, and include those in our presentations and publications where possible and relevant.

Finally, the main methodological challenge was how to make sense of the videos as an individual practice of performing religious and/or political identities, and as a social-cultural practice of debate, inclusion and exclusion or community building. Both the volatility and the variability of the videos tested our academic capacity to provide a parsimonious analysis that captures the meaning of these videos in a comprehensive framework. The subsequent articles resulting from the project reflect the developments in our thinking. Thus, while our initial questions concerned the (gendered) performance of religious and political identities by the young reacting on Fitna (studies One, Two , Three), we then asked whether and how these performances could also be seen as ‘acts of citizenship’ and proposed that the answer depended on the presence of indicators of interaction between the posters and their videos. The fourth and fifth study therefore focused on actual and reported interactions of the posters by conducting network analysis and a survey among the posters about their motives and practices. This moved us towards theories of pluralistic antagonism and cosmopolitanism, both in relation to religion. At present, we are writing up what can be seen, with the benefit of hindsight, the answer to this cumulative set of questions that together provide a full theoretical and empirical understanding of the YouTube videos, and their wider societal meaning. A brief outline with the main highlights is below.

#### **6. Contribution to social debate and theory** (study Six and Eight)

This research project about the responses to Fitna on YouTube derives both its academic and social relevance from the global and local debate around Islam, especially with respect to the question of how relatively voiceless young people perform their political and religious identities in these debates. A premise of the research is that such debate is necessary, relevant and useful for the co-existence of people in multireligious and multicultural democracies. Our studies provided evidence of that in direct and indirect ways:

- the more young people knew about the Fitna debate, the less they were susceptible to its Islamophobic message. This suggests that silence, or a ‘cordon sanitaire’ around Islamophobia and its proponents is counterproductive;
- otherwise inactive youth, both from Muslim and non-Muslim backgrounds, felt forced by the release of Fitna and its demagogic content to make a video and insert themselves in public debate. First, Fitna and the ensuing debate mobilized young people to act as citizens, including an exceptional case of young Egyptian women claiming their right to speak in both global debate and the Muslim *Ummah* online, and second, YouTube in particular offers a unique space for young people to express their views in their own multimedially inspired and coded ways;
- YouTube also provides a global platform to youth across the globe, whose choice of this medium and videos (mostly done in English) testify of a desire to ‘speak’ to a global audience. This holds especially for Muslim YouTubers, who on the whole adopt a more open attitude in the debate, than those with a western background, and/or performing a political identity.

Nevertheless, our studies also showed that the YouTube debate about Fitna had particular features and limits that need to be articulated with religious and political theory about dialogue and conflict, and identity and citizenship. In subsequent steps, our studies suggests the following:

- YouTube reactions on Fitna involved mostly performances of religious or political identity;
- These identities were differently articulated with political and religious practices:
  - o Some videos were clear cases of online political activism, for instance those aimed at making *Fitna* invisible, those producing satire of Wilders, or those that shared Wilders’ hostile Islam agenda;
  - o Other videos were clear invitations to dialogue between Muslims and Wilders, or those sharing his Islamophobia. Especially those of a group young Egyptian women can be considered model examples of inviting interreligious dialogue;
  - o Some videos were an obvious part of an already existing vlogging community, linked to each other because of a shared conservative view, or as part of the online *Ummah*; they are part of the online public spheres that the internet enables;
- Most videos however, were one off uploads of existing or self-created material that seemed limited to a performance or demonstration of the political and religious self. These one off videos are not easily understood and assessed in the frameworks of democratic theory, interreligious dialogue or the public sphere. They necessitate a different understanding of the performance of religious and political identities on YouTube, that recognizes that they

involve an active insertion of the posters into the public eye, but are not necessarily aimed at direct debate with others.

- The concept 'act of citizenship' proved helpful for us, in the sense that it designates an occasional act that disrupts social patterns, but is not part of a routine practice or stable identity. Posting a YouTube video in protest or support of Fitna matches such a concept well, especially given our finding that many young people responding had not done something similar before.
- The choice of YouTube for these particular performances of religious and political identities contributes to their character as an act of citizenship in a global context, because the platform is distinguished by its openness to comments, its social network features (channel membership, and friendship) and its global reach.
- Our distinction between the performance of political and religious identities, and their theoretical articulation as acts of citizenship in a global context, furthermore invited additional reflections on the relationship of these identities with cosmopolitanism, as a set of both cultural and normative ideals acknowledging in their most basic form that each individual belongs to the worldwide community of human beings. Contrary to much current theorizing, our videos show that an articulation of a religious identity with such cosmopolitan sensibilities is entire possible. Our data about the videos and the posters showed that many young Muslim posters demonstrated cosmopolitan sensibilities - in content, form and explanation of their videos - often cast in the vocabulary of Islam. Nevertheless, this rarely translated in concrete interactions or discussion with different minded others. In contrast, those performing clear political identities rooted in an unmitigated belief in freedom of speech implicitly or explicitly rejected Islam as compatible with this norm, and therewith placed themselves outside the realm of cosmopolitan sensibilities, but also outside the realm of other normative democratic ideals, as formulated in deliberative and public sphere theories, or in approaches to interreligious dialogue for instance.
- However, the important theoretical connection of our research is not primarily with normative approaches like cosmopolitanism or interreligious dialogue. It is somewhat predictable that internet or YouTube practices do not live up to the norms set out in such approaches. The question is how to qualify what happens instead - the serious, occasional, sardonic, hostile, open, absurdist, satirical, cognitive and emotional videos we found – without dismissing it as not cosmopolitan, deliberative or dialogical. As said, the concept of act of citizenship provides the first step for such an approach, but it is especially helpful

when combined with Chantal Mouffe's theory of agonistic pluralism. For Mouffe, the challenge is to transform current antagonism between different religions and politics, into a pluralistic agonism that does not necessarily engage in dialogue with others, but that nevertheless acknowledges the right of others to differ and speak. While the politically activist videos are clear signs of antagonism, denying either Wilders or Muslims the right to speak, the larger body of our videos can be qualified as quintessential pluralistic agonism, voicing audibly and showing visually one's religious or political identity, without any self-doubt, reflection or negotiation, but accepting that others can and will do the same.

In sum, the project contributed to social debate by finding that the Fitna video and the ensuing global debate both immunized young people against its vitriolic effect, and mobilized them into acting as citizens themselves, on a platform that suits their cultural frames and expectations and does not require continued investment in the form of debate or dialogue. As such, the YouTube response videos present a quintessential case of pluralistic agonism, rather than one of outright hostile battle, or one of deliberation and dialogue.

### **7. Summary of contributions to the Religion and Society Program.**

In terms of the aims, questions and themes of the Religion and Society Youth call, we see our contribution in particular as providing:

- **Empirical answers** to two key questions of the Religion and Society Program, in particular:
  - How might religious groups negotiate their relations with each other and the wider public sphere in modern society?
  - How can we understand the complex relations between the religious and the secular in different social and cultural contexts?

The previous paragraphs can be read as answering these questions in the context of the Fitna controversy and the global Islam debates.

- **interdisciplinary results**, relevant to religion, media and cultural studies, political theory and identity research, as summarized in the previous paragraphs;
- **innovative methods** to study religion, youth and society, by developing, testing and applying a cybermetric research tool in collaboration with the Cybermetric Research Group of Wolverhampton University;
- **international impact** through:
  - seven articles that are (or will be published) in international peer reviewed journals of high standing, and one chapter in an edited volume;



- three keynote addresses about the research at international conferences
- seven conference papers presented at international conferences and seminars
- a comparative research proposal submitted to the ECRP, in collaboration with key media and religion researchers from Norway, The Netherlands, the UK and Germany. The proposal was not funded, but will be resubmitted to the AHRC standard research grant route.
- **an addition to the research community** by employing a young researcher, whose research work and publications in the program contributed to her appointment as lecturer at the University of Leicester.
- In terms of contribution to public awareness and targeting a wide, non-academic audience, the research has not realized its full potential yet at the moment of writing this final report. While a website is in place and well used, some media contacts have been made and some outreach activities have been conducted, the full dissemination of the results for media and stakeholders will take place in the fall of 2010 (see appendix on Impact).

**Studies and references** (\*= published, accepted for publication, or commissioned for publication)

0. Pilot study

\* Zoonen, L. van, Müller, F. and F. Hirzalla (2009). De slag om Fitna [Fitna, the video battle]. In M. Aarts and M. van der Haak (eds). *Popvirus: popularization of religion and culture*. Amsterdam: Aksant Publishers.

1. Study One: Performance of religious and political identity

\* Zoonen, L. van, Vis, F. and S. Mihelj (2010). Performing citizenship on YouTube: activism, satire and online debate around the anti-Islam video Fitna. *Critical Discourse Studies*, vol.7(4), p.249-262.

2. Study Two: Gendered performance of religious and political identity

\* Vis, F., Van Zoonen, L. and S. Mihelj (2011). Women responding to the anti-Islam film Fitna: voices and acts of citizenship on YouTube. *Feminist Review*, accepted for publication.

3. Study Three: Stand up comedy and the performance of religious and political identity

Hirzalla, F. and L. van Zoonen (2010). Islam on the popular battlefield: comedy vlogs and their responses. Paper accepted for the conference *Contesting Religious Identities*, Utrecht University, October 13-15, 2010. In preparation for the *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion*.

4. Study Four: Performance as an act of citizenship, network analysis

\* Zoonen, L. van, Vis, F. and S. Mihelj (under review). YouTube interactions between agonism, antagonism and dialogue: video responses to the anti-Islam film Fitna. Status: revise and resubmit with *New Media and Society*.

5. Study Five: Performance as an act of citizenship: motives of posters

Mihelj, S., Vis, F. and L. van Zoonen (2010). Cosmopolitan citizens on YouTube. Paper presented to the Third European Communication Conference, Hamburg October. In preparation for submission to the *British Journal of Sociology*.

6. Study Six: Effects of Fitna, and the debates about it.

Müller, F. and L. van Zoonen (2011). The Fear Appeal of Fitna. Charting and understanding the effects of fear based political communication. In progress.

7. Study Seven: Methodological reflections

\* Vis, F. and M. Thelwall (2010). Innovative methods for studying YouTube videos. Presentation at the AHRC/ESRC Religion and Society Program Conference: *Innovative Methods in the Study of Religion*, London, 29-30 March 2010. In preparation for an **edited volume** by professor Linda Woodhead.

8. Study 8: Contribution to theory and social debate

In progress