Birgit Bräuchler Cyberidentities at War

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Rights

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Brauchler, Birgit (2013) *Cyberidentities at War: The Moluccan Conflict on the Internet.* (J. Gaines, Trans.). New York, New York: Berghan (Original work Published 2003).

Violent conflict, sadly, is not new to human interaction. But violent conflict continued on the Internet is new, as anthropologist Birgit Bräuchler demonstrates in her recently translated book, Cyberidentities at War: The Moluccan Conflict on the Internet. Bräuchler aims to get anthropology up to speed with current studies of the Internet, by conducting an ethnography of the clash between Muslims and Christians in the Moluccas that took place both on the ground and in cyberspace. Bräuchler's dual-sited ethnography challenges anthropologists to look beyond terrestrial field sites for studies of cultural change, conflict, and identity politics. What Bräuchler offers in her cyberanthropological study is an investigation of how geographically situated conflicts can be extended online. In Bräuchler's terms, Internet identities are expanded domains of socio-spatial contexts, [1] thus, offering anthropologists insight into the means and media of how territorialized subjects expand identities in deterritorialized spaces. [2]

Violent conflict erupted in 1999 in the Moluccas after long simmering tensions between Muslims and Christians boiled over after a seemingly minor and, not surprisingly, contested event involving a bus driver and a passenger. [3] What precisely happened is not clear, but the aftermath certainly is. Hundreds of mosques and churches were torched and thousands of lives were claimed, mostly in horrific massacres. Each act of destruction touched off a new episode in a blood feud that took four years to settle. Making matters worse, the conflict was exacerbated by outside actors, including the Indonesian government, who had vested interests (mostly monetary) in prolonging the feud. Within weeks of the outbreak of violence, several websites emerged that aimed to organize followers, garner support from around the world, and broadcast details of the conflict as the writers saw it.

Bräuchler's aim was to sort through the many websites, join mailing lists hosted by Christian and Muslim groups, and follow online discussions. In addition, Bräuchler spent a year in the Moluccas from 1996-97, two years before the outbreak of violence. Her customary year of territorialized field-

work provided her with the lived context necessary to make links between the emergent discourses online and the lives of the Internet actors offline. Through this method, Bräuchler distinguishes her work from other online ethnographic projects that make no attempt to document and analyze offline contexts. [4] The dual-sited approach allowed her to analyze the ways in which identity politics in the Moluccas were transferred to the Internet, thus intensifying the conflict.

The content Bräuchler discovered on several of the busiest websites is hardly surprising. The first and most prolific Christian site to emerge, the Masariku Mailing List (MML), at first attempted a somewhat even-handed account of the conflict. This soon gave way to fear mongering, slander, and outraged reports of the "cruelty of the Muslim attackers, their superiority with regard to weapons, and the involvement of the military and jihad fighters." [5] The Muslim websites hardly differed. Here Muslims cast the conflict as one not simply between Moluccan Christians and Muslims, but one of a global conflict between Judeo-Christian imperialists (of which the US is a key actor) and Islam. In this conspiratorial accounting, the US, in collusion with Israel, is attempting to Christianize and Zionize the world, starting with (where else) the Moluccas. [6] The rhetoric of one Muslim website states emphatically that, "We are prepared to destroy the American troops!!!...America has never won [a war, presumably] apart from Rambo!" [7]

Bräuchler ultimately concludes from her exhaustive study of online material that a pattern of action/reaction emerged, just as conflicts offline do. [8] Both sides feared "religious cleansing" and sought to remedy that possibility by using the Internet to control their identities, representation, and accounts of the offline events. [9] The Internet offered Christian and Muslim cyberactors a medium to promote a sense of authenticity and provide evidence to support their arguments. Additionally, each side could enlist the support of distant communities and keep them updated, often by the minute, on the conflict.

Bräuchler's ethnography offers anthropologists valuable insight into uses of new technologies to expand offline realities. Indeed, her biggest contribution to anthropological theory is this very point. That said, such a conclusion offers little insight into the ways in which technologies shape, transform, or contour interpretive logics or discursive frameworks. While the ethnography does alert readers to uses of the Internet in violent conflict, it reads like a protracted accounting (354 pages) of, as the great anthropologist Clifford Geertz would put it, "one damn thing after the next." Bräuchler's analytical framework only illuminates how the Internet continues offline hostilities online. Beyond that, there is virtually no analysis of Internet technology's effect on performative logics. This problem is compounded by the simple problem of rapid obsolescence. Bräuchler's book was published in German in 2003. En-

glish readers couldn't get their hands on it until 2011, well after the advent of YouTube, Facebook, Twitter, Tumblr, and countless other networking sites. Bräuchler addresses this problem in an epilogue from 2011, which attempts to bring the ethnography up to date. The problem however is that the 340 pages previous to it read like a 1950s account of space travel. As a snapshot in the early life of the Internet and its role in a regional conflict, the book is rather unique. But beyond that, it fails to say anything surprising about the Internet and modernity.

Notes

[1]   Brauchler, B. (2013). *Cyberidentities at War: The Moluccan Conflict on the Internet.* (Jeremy Gaines, Trans). New York, NY: Berghan. pp. 17-18.

[2]   Brauchler (2013), p. 43

[3]   Brauchler (2013), p. 64

[4]   Brauchler, (2013), p. 43

[5]   Brauchler, (2013), p. 103

[6]   Brauchler, (2013), p. 182

[7]   Brauchler, (2013), p. 180

[8]   Brauchler, (2013), p. 260

[9]   Brauchler, p. 314