

## Multiculturalism online

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# Multiculturalism online

## *The internet and the dilemmas of multicultural politics*

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**ABSTRACT** This article is concerned with the politics of multiculturalism as encountered on the internet. Theoretically, it examines the different normative positions vis-à-vis multiculturalism in the works of Charles Taylor, Jürgen Habermas, Jeremy Waldron and Nancy Fraser. Three main dilemmas emerge: essentialism or fluidity of identities; universalism or particularism; and recognition or redistribution. These are empirically examined subsequently through online portals developed by four minority communities in the UK. Eight portals, developed by black British, Indian/South Asian, Chinese and Muslim communities were analysed with a view to understanding how such dilemmas are understood in online environments, taken to represent a version of everyday political conduct. The analysis focused on addressees/interlocutors, communicative forms and users, indicating that all multicultural dilemmas are enacted online. Following an agonistic model of politics, the article suggests that multicultural politics should be understood as an open arena for the struggle between these dilemmas.

**KEYWORDS** *agonistic politics, internet, minority communities, online politics, portals*

## **Introduction**

The issue of how to live with the other remains a central dilemma for both academic theory and political action. In this respect, the current effort does not purport to have any answers. However, drawing on recent developments in political theory, it suggests that it is precisely the lack of any definitive solutions that guarantees the openness and pluralism that one associates with democratic politics. This proposition draws upon agonistic models of democracy (Mouffe, 1999, 2000; Tully, 1999, 2000) and their argument that continuous struggle is the means by which democracy can be guaranteed. Indeed, looking at the ways in which ‘minorities’ conduct



their politics through the internet suggests that there is neither the need nor justification for any closure or push towards any one direction.

There are at least three dilemmas in political theoretical accounts of multiculturalism, representing different aspects of the challenges of common life. The first dilemma concerns the contradiction between the desire to acknowledge difference and the potential negative results of such an acknowledgement, including the reification and essentializing of identities. A second dilemma concerns the question of how to reconcile difference with a universalism that may be necessary for political life. The third dilemma points to the contradictory logic involved in demands for recognition, which are predicated on difference, and demands for redistribution, based on equality. While theorists engaged in such debates offer examples from the empirical world, the debate is conducted mostly in highly abstract terms. Moreover, the examples are drawn often from exceptional cases that have made the headlines or seminal court cases. This has led to a disregard of other types of politics, characterized as more prosaic and everyday, in the sense that they concern non-organized, informal parts of life. This disregard of everyday politics has created a gap in our understanding of multiculturalism and its dilemmas, one that can be filled only through examining the actual practice of politics in spaces understood as public. It is here that the relevance of the internet becomes apparent.

The internet as a public space for observing 'prosaic' politics may be able to contribute to discussions of multiculturalism. Given that the mass media has a high threshold for minority politics, and since most other ways of informal politics do not very easily qualify as public, the internet seems an ideal choice, notwithstanding digital divide issues. Despite the heated debates inspired by the new technology, the internet's relationship to politics remains as elusive as ever. In the light of such debates, we can consider a study of the actual conduct of politics online as a contribution to understanding the internet and its relationship to, in this case, multicultural politics. Thus, the current study seeks to address a specific question: in what type of politics are minorities on the web engaged? And how can this be understood in the light of the dilemmas of multiculturalism? The empirical question posed here concerns an identification of the range of online uses that can qualify as political, with a view to provide subsequently a link between some of the debates on multiculturalism and the empirical world. The focus on 'everydayness' suggests an expansion of the realm of the political which, very broadly, subsumes all elements of common life, and life in the commons.

The material examined here comprises portals of four types of minority communities in the United Kingdom: South Asian, black, Chinese and Muslim communities. The most striking finding of the analysis is that these websites seek to address and represent minority communities or publics<sup>1</sup> in a singular, culturally enclosed way, thereby repeating the history and process of community formation with all its exclusions,



essentialisms and simplifications. However – and this forms part of the same finding – they cannot do so because of the character of the cyberspace environment, which resists this setting of clear boundaries. Yet to celebrate this as ‘resistance’ seems inappropriate in light of the dilemmas of multiculturalism. Furthermore, from the viewpoint of the debates on multiculturalism, these findings indicate the existence of varied types of online politics, throwing into question the view of minority politics advanced in multicultural debates as concerned primarily with the formulation and advancement of claims. This internet-supported expansion of multicultural politics leads to certain modifications in the debate of multiculturalism, placing the accent on multiculturalism in areas ignored in political theoretical debates, and specifically, on the political necessity to provide a platform for struggles preceding the formulation and justification of claims. First, these arguments will unfold through a discussion of the debates on multiculturalism and second, through an analysis of the websites or portals.

## **Multicultural debates**

The simple definition that multiculturalism is concerned with the question of how to deal with heterogeneity (Werbner, 2002) belies the complexity of the issues involved. The three dilemmas of multiculturalism alluded to in the introduction clearly attest to the difficulties encountered in addressing such heterogeneity in a theoretically clear and politically satisfactory way. These dilemmas will be discussed in this section which, for the dual sake of clarity and brevity, will evolve around the work of specific theorists, for whom the dilemmas are more pronounced or addressed directly. The dilemma of essentialism versus fluidity will be discussed in the work of Charles Taylor (1994[1992]); Jürgen Habermas (1994, 1998) and Jeremy Waldron (1999) are cast as representing the two poles of the universalism versus particularism debate; and lastly, the recognition–redistribution debate took off in the work of Nancy Fraser (1997, 2000). The purpose of this section is to outline and review the debate, concluding with a proposition. Although such theoretical discussions rightly point to the complexities and difficulties involved in our life together, and the injustices that people suffer, it is also the case that we manage to live together more or less successfully in the end; this implies that observing the ways in which everyday politics is conducted may well provide new insights into the dilemmas of multiculturalism.

### **Essentialism or fluidity?**

In many respects, Charles Taylor’s seminal essay on the politics of recognition (1994[1992])<sup>2</sup> has kick-started multiculturalism as we now know it. Drawing on Hegel, Taylor holds that self-identity is constructed through



reflection upon the identity of others, through mutual recognition. Misrecognition, or the failure to recognize certain identities, leads to injustice, and does not allow the bearer(s) of such identities to participate fully in society as someone of equal worth. Full recognition would demand that misrecognized identities and the cultural values, ethical perspectives and lifestyles that they entail, are accorded equal status and worth, thereby allowing their bearers equal dignity and the right to live their lives in an authentic manner. And therein lies the problem: insofar as a cultural group is seen as the embodiment of an identity that needs to be recognized, and insofar as recognition is offered to the group *en masse*, this identity is conceived in an essentialist manner as having a stable, fixed meaning, understood in the same way by all. This position is not only theoretically problematic for its disregard of historicity and change and assumption of a naive ontology of things or persons endowed with essences, it is politically problematic, for it holds persons forever captive in their group memberships. This view of static, essentialist and quasi-fundamentalist identities has been rectified in recent reports, such as *The Future of Multi-Ethnic Britain* (Parekh, 2000), where communities and their identities are seen as 'neither self-sufficient nor fixed and stable. They are open porous formations' (2000: 37). The assumption of fluidity, however, is not without its problems: if we accept that borders are permeable and definitions are in flux, how can a minority politics be conceived and pursued? How can the interests of a minority be protected and upheld, if belongingness and boundaries are continually reset?

### **Universalism or particularism?**

On the other hand, too much difference is seen as standing in the way of 'social cohesion'. Recognizing difference is problematic insofar as communities are diverging and are less and less connected by shared values and ideals. For example, the Cattle Report on the aftermath of the race riots in Britain in the summer of 2001 recommends that minority communities develop 'a greater acceptance of the principal national institutions' (Cattle, 2001: 19). This is precisely the dilemma of universalism versus particularism. Is acceptance of a general set of values a necessary requirement for living together? It is, according to Habermas, for whom certain universal characteristics and values have both an empirical reality and a normative force necessary for democratic politics in a multicultural society. Habermas argues that a politics of recognition should 'protect the individual in the life contexts in which his or her identity is formed' (1994: 113), thereby accepting difference in the cultural sphere. However, for a democratic society to function effectively, its constituent communities should learn a common political language and conventions, if only in order to be able to participate in the political public sphere on a par with others. He thus effects a dichotomy between a cultural sphere, where difference



is acceptable, and a political sphere, where common values have to be shared by all – people have to be ‘constitutional patriots’ even if they are not ethically or culturally members of the same community. This emphasis on the need for universally shared values as the necessary premise for politics is disputed by Jeremy Waldron, for whom current societies are characterized by increased interdependencies. Such societies are incommensurable with the preservation of separate different communities, but rather give rise to hybrid communities and individuals within these. This anti-essentialist position is taken further by Waldron, who argues that there is no reason to assume an *a priori* allegiance to a given set of common values; rather, it is precisely because of this pluralization of cultures and communities that people have a stake and interest in supporting their continued existence and well-being. As such, any common framework for living has to be constructed in the form of a positive law (Waldron, 1999): that is, to follow rather than precede a multicultural society.

### **Recognition or redistribution?**

Waldron’s radical anti-essentialism is as attractive as it is fascinating, but his celebration of hybridity and cosmopolitanism rings somewhat hollow in the face of persistent injustices and discrimination faced by certain communities. This emphasis on social justice is central to the work of Nancy Fraser (1997, 2000, 2001), for whom multiculturalism subsumes two different aspects: recognition<sup>3</sup> and redistribution. Fraser imposes a ‘perspectival dualism’ in which injustices are seen as taking two forms, cultural and economic, thereby requiring different remedies. She proposes an emancipatory politics of recognition to address cultural injustices and the misrecognition of certain identities, and an egalitarian politics of distribution targeting the economic inequalities underpinning current societies. While the former rests on deconstructive cultural strategies and practices, the latter requires socialist economic policies. Thus Fraser simultaneously dichotomizes and seeks to transcend the dichotomy between economy and culture in an attempt to combine both the insights of the linguistic turn and its emphasis on culture, as well as the contributions of Marxian scholarship in addressing questions of social justice. Therefore, multiculturalism should make use of both socialist egalitarian practices as well as deconstructive insights. Although ingenious, Fraser’s solution has been extensively criticized (Butler, 1998; Young, 1997) precisely because of this dichotomization between the cultural and the economic. Although she is at pains to show that this is only an analytical distinction, nevertheless it has the effect of reifying these two domains and overlooking the ways in which they are inextricably intertwined. In this respect, what at first sight may require a deconstructive politics of recognition (e.g. a ‘despised’ sexuality) in fact may be due to an unequal division of labour (such as capitalism’s investment on heterosexuality – see Butler, 1998). Conversely,



Yar (2001) argues that the logic of distribution is subsumed and already contained in the logic of recognition, as economic injustices are already moral and thus recognitive injustices. But does this imply that such economic inequalities can be addressed merely through exposing their (im)moral underpinnings? Regardless of the view one chooses to adopt, it seems that the dilemma of redistribution and/or recognition persists.

This exposition of the dilemmas of multiculturalism illustrates the complexities involved in living together and the plurality of opinions, views, theories and ontologies contained in multicultural politics. Rather than damaging multiculturalism, however, the persistence of its questioning points to the apparent incompatibility between multiculturalism and its focus on difference and acceptance of plurality, and the epistemological assumption that *one* or *the* truth should prevail in politico-social scientific debates such as on multiculturalism. In this, the current argument follows Tully (2000) in holding that, rather than prioritizing the goals of struggles over multicultural practices and the theories of justice on which these rest, one should focus on the struggles themselves. For Tully, the aim should not be 'to discover and constitutionalize the just and definitive form . . . but to ensure that ineliminable, agonistic democratic games . . . can be played freely, with a minimum of domination' (2000: 469). It is this call for a focus on multicultural struggles that this article takes seriously. The next empirically oriented part of this article seeks to outline the ways in which communities conduct their everyday multicultural politics in cyberspace.

### **Multicultural practices online**

Taking seriously Tully's injunction means that it is necessary to find at least one of the platforms for multicultural struggles. The platform chosen here is the internet or world wide web, which offers a unique opportunity to observe the communications within and between communities and the demands and claims pursued, as well as the type of everyday politics that is of interest here. Four minority communities were selected: three of the most populous ethnic minorities in the UK, Asian, Black and Chinese,<sup>4</sup> and a religious minority – the Muslim community. Our concern is not to exhaust all minority communities and their politics online, but rather to provide an indication of the type of politics that they conduct, which can be discussed in the light of the multicultural dilemmas outlined earlier. The websites were chosen through a search engine (Google) query, using the keywords 'Asian', 'black', 'Chinese' or 'Muslim UK community portal' and then selecting two of the sites appearing. These were: Barfi Culture ([www.barficulture.com](http://www.barficulture.com)) and Clickwalla ([www.clickwalla.com](http://www.clickwalla.com)), serving the UK (South) Asian community; Black Britain ([www.blackbritain.co.uk](http://www.blackbritain.co.uk)) and Blacknet ([www.blacknet.co.uk](http://www.blacknet.co.uk)), catering for the black community; Salaam ([www.salaam.co.uk](http://www.salaam.co.uk)) and UK Islamic Mission ([www.ukim.org](http://www.ukim.org)),



linked to the Muslim community; and British Born Chinese ([www.britishbornchinese.org.uk](http://www.britishbornchinese.org.uk)) and Chinatown Online ([www.chinatown-online.co.uk](http://www.chinatown-online.co.uk)), covering the Chinese community.

It is significant here is that the websites selected for analysis were portals, that is, 'gateways' to the internet belonging to or provided by these minority communities.<sup>5</sup> This means that rather than representing offline organizations, which also have a presence online, these websites operate only online and with no predetermined political goals. The only exception is the UK Islamic Mission, which is in fact a well-known British Muslim organization; nevertheless, its website acts as a portal to the internet and as such it was found appropriate for inclusion in this study. Focusing the analysis on portals should enable the observation of the type of everyday politics encountered in cyberspace.

Following the selection of sites to be observed, the issue arising concerns the way in which these sites can be approached for analysis. Given that the focal point in the analysis is the politics of these community sites, and on the basis that politics always necessarily involves more than one interlocutor, the first analytic question put to the websites was 'who is addressed?'. Second, the form of communication, or how the interlocutors are addressed, is equally important, since this will determine the range of practices in which these websites are engaged. Finally, the above two analytic questions give rise to a third aspect, concerning the actual users and/or visitors of the sites.

### **The addressees**

The addressees of these websites appear to be of three types: a general public, including those who are not members of the community; a community public, which is in fact the 'target group' of the sites, consisting of community members; and a business public, with whom the websites want to do business. These categories were discerned by looking at the rhetoric and links provided at the websites' homepages; the homepage acts as a means of drawing in and subsequently guiding users, offering introductory information on the website, its purpose and aims and the most important internal links of the site (see Chan-Olmsted and Park, 2000).

Perhaps the category of the general public should form the category of who is *not* addressed. While not explicitly excluded, non-community members are directly addressed in half of the eight websites: Barfi Culture, British Born Chinese, Chinatown Online and UK Islamic Mission all refer to the general public. The first two clearly state in their 'About Us' section that they welcome non-community members. UK Islamic Mission only implicitly makes reference to a general, non-Muslim public, to whom they issue information about Islam in the form of a downloadable book and PDF files with questions and answers on Islam. Chinatown Online



offers the non-community member a lot of general information on China as well as on the British Chinese community. The remaining sites directly address only community members, even though (as we shall see later) non-community members do appear in the sites. Although this general public address is highly suggestive, both the relative lack of an address towards non-community members, as well as the brevity of the existing address, are of significance here. This lack appears to have important implications regarding multicultural politics, as it indicates a 'self-' or inner-directed gaze. In this respect, it appears that in their disregard of the general public, these community portals repeat the dilemmas of multiculturalism, in particular those concerning the creation of group enclaves associated with the reification, particularism and recognition aspects of the three dilemmas. In focusing almost exclusively on themselves, these sites appear reluctant to address directly and draw in non-community members, thereby contributing to the perpetuation of boundaries separating communities.

Turning to the second type of addressee, the majority of links in all the websites were addressed to the community as a whole. Nevertheless, some links were addressed to specific sections of the community, such as women and the young.<sup>6</sup> The community as a whole is addressed at the homepage which, as already indicated, typically acts as a compass for the rest of the site. This initial address takes a general form, including a welcome message and information on the site and its aims, along with a list of internal links and categories from which visitors can choose.

The third type addressed is a business public which may be interested in advertising on the websites. Not all of the sites offer this possibility – Barfi Culture explicitly states that it will keep its site 'free from annoying banners and pop ups', while neither British Born Chinese nor Chinatown Online carry any advertisements. Black Britain, Blacknet, Clickwalla, Salaam and UK Islamic Mission all advertise, but only Black Britain, Clickwalla and Salaam directly solicit advertisers and appear to depend, to an indiscernible extent, on such an income. This business public appears to be a marginal or indirect public since not all the sites address it, while those that do, do not offer to it any particular content but a service – in these terms, the primary addressee of all sites remains the public consisting of community members.

At this stage, it seems that if multiculturalism is conceived as the politics of living together, these websites cannot be seen as serving this politics. In focusing only or primarily on their own community, they appear to enact a politics of separatism and particularism in that they are largely uninterested in fostering intercommunity dialogue and appear oblivious to any internal diversity and dissent. In this politics, community is constructed in its essentialist dimension and sharp boundaries are drawn between communities. In other words, the community that these addresses call into being is both unified and unifying, providing no means of intercultural,



intracultural or multicultural exchange. Yet this conclusion is drawn prematurely, since the analysis of the communicative forms paints a rather different picture.

### **Forms of communication**

The analysis of the forms taken by these communications presents a challenge. All the sites contain a wealth of links that defy any straightforward classification. The classificatory scheme devised here draws on the categories used by the websites themselves and has included as many categories as necessary to ensure that all the links encountered could be fitted into one of the categories. The scheme that emerged includes news, community, business, culture/lifestyle and cybercommunication.

The first communicative form covers a wide array of material, broadly subsumed under the category of news. News offered by the websites includes world and local news, often in the form of providing links to news agencies or other online news facilities. Both world and local news only include news concerning the community that takes place either in the world or in the locality where the community lives. Thus Barfi Culture, Black Britain, Blacknet, Salaam and UK Islamic Mission all have a section with news articles concerning their community. Of interest here is the transnational dimension of the news in Salaam, which offers a searchable database containing news on Muslim majority countries. British Born Chinese also features a news section with news on China and the Chinese diaspora. The news category further includes editorials, opinion articles and in-depth reporting, found in Barfi, Black Britain British Born Chinese, Salaam and UK Islamic Mission. News on entertainment covered a large section of both Blacknet and Black Britain, with references to black entertainers, while both Barfi Culture and Clickwalla extensively referred to Bollywood actors and films, featuring previews, reviews and interviews. In addition, all the sites offer an email newsletter to those who subscribe which contains information of interest to community members. Another common feature in this category is the provision of listings or diaries of events that concern the community, ranging from announcements of festivals to listings of members' birthdays and the opening of a Muslim women's gym. The prevalence of the news section in all websites points to its importance and centrality for these community portals.

This category appears to serve a function close to that traditionally associated with the press and news media: to inform, provide in-depth analysis and offer a platform for comment and opinion. In this respect, it seems that these community portals function as publicity agents for the community in a way that brings to mind the Habermasian public sphere (Habermas, 1989[1962]) and its conception of the media as agents of publicity, acting for and on behalf of the community. But Habermas' conception was premised on a unitary public, or a public that would be



united on the basis of common participation in the public sphere. Despite Fraser's (1992) useful notion of counter or subaltern public spheres, Habermas argues that for democratic politics, an overarching common political public sphere is a necessary requirement. From this point of view the existence of factional and fragmented public spheres, each catering to a different public or community, appears closer to Waldron's particularism. Thus, the provision of news and the 'mass media' function of these websites enact the dilemma of universalism versus particularism.

The second cluster of links that are common and prevalent in all the websites is the community communication category. This category is a user or visitor-driven category, including links to areas where users can make their own contribution; these comprise discussion forums and chatrooms, personal ads, as well as external links to other sites of interest and/or relevance. Discussion forums are provided by all the sites under study, with the exception of Clickwalla – indeed, they all offer a set of more or less vibrant discussion boards, which are classified often under several sections. While discussion forums evolve around 'serious' topics, the chatrooms (found in Barfi Culture and Blacknet) offer the possibility for more informal discussion; chatroom contributions are also very short and often coded, or use jargon common to mobile phone users. The provision of links to external sites is also of importance here: most sites have a links area where users can find links to websites of interest and where they can submit their own links. The notable exception here is Barfi Culture, which offers no external links at all; Blacknet offers no links area as such but has a search engine that searches for black sites. The two Chinese sites have joined forces and offer a China–UK web ring.<sup>7</sup> Finally, some of the sites, notably Black Britain and Blacknet, offer links to personal services such as dating adverts, where users can search for potential partners.

This form of communication, described here as community communication, appears to have a dual function: that of providing a platform for discussion and connecting community members. In this respect, these portals gather dispersed community members and provide a forum in which they can 'meet'. In contrast to 'top-down' news communication, this is a user-to-user communication with websites acting more as agents connecting community members. Clearly dialogical, it can be contrasted with the 'monological' communication of news. Moreover, this dialogic character seems to provide evidence against the essentializing elements implicit in having community members as a primary and main audience. That community members can converse freely, exchange opinions and information implies that communities evolve and change, move from one position to the other, as well as disagree and argue. In addition, the connectivity implicit in providing links to other community sites points to the building of a network among community members. To the extent that this form of communication is open to anyone – in principle, it is – and



given its dialogic character, it can be seen as ‘redeeming’ the websites from their ‘essentialistic’ and ‘group enclave’, ‘particularistic’ aspects.

The third form of communication, business communication, includes both communication concerning business-related matters as well as communication addressing users or visitors as customers or clients. This comprises the offer of products for sale or services for a fee, advertisements for businesses, products or services and job offers. The only site that does not offer any business communication is Barfi Culture. Black Britain and Blacknet both have a link to business that is in fact an external link to two websites, Black Enterprise ([www.blackenterprise.com](http://www.blackenterprise.com)) and Black Professional ([www.blackprofessional.co.uk](http://www.blackprofessional.co.uk)) respectively, while Chinatown Online offers the most extensive information on business-related matters, including a Chinese business directory and information on how to do business in China. Job offers and requests are found in Black Britain and Salaam, while advertisements feature in all the sites except Barfi Culture. Black Britain, Blacknet and Salaam offer classified sections where users can submit their own classified adverts, while UK Islamic Mission offers a comprehensive set of Muslim business websites. Although Barfi Culture is reluctant in general to engage in any business dealings, it does have a chatroom on ‘business/technology’ where chatters can request and/or offer items for sale. Finally, online shopping is offered by Chinatown Online and Salaam.

This focus on the economic domain is significant as it ties in with the issue of redistribution. This emphasis on this online community market certainly points to the issue of economic empowerment, long in the political agenda of minority groups. In this respect, these websites attempt to redress some of the offline inequalities and discrimination faced by community members through the creation of an online marketplace. The importance and significance of business communication, alongside the earlier two forms of communication (news and community), point to the relatively greater weight placed upon self-empowerment compared to making recognition claims and attempts to engage in a wider dialogue with other communities (including the dominant ones). Thus, it can be argued here that there is an apparent prioritization of equality or redistribution evident in the business form of communication.

Yet this emphasis on the economic or material is tempered by the contemporaneous existence of a form of communication labelled here as ‘cultural’ communication. This includes communication on cultural matters, including history and education, lifestyle issues as well as religious and spiritual matters. All websites employ this form of cultural communication. Barfi Culture has a feature on the top 10 Asian ‘achievers and losers’, a survey on ‘Asians, Sex and Drugs’ as well as on ‘Asians and War’. Blacknet has several cultural links including black history, education, homelands (African nations), beauty and religion while Black Britain offers a link to an affiliated lifestyle site ([www.live247.co.uk](http://www.live247.co.uk)). The



two Chinese sites collaborate in offering a common set of links to Chinese culture including language, legends, customs, history, festivals and so on; at the same time, Chinatown Online offers a set of links to lifestyle aspects such as Feng Shui, martial arts, gardening and so on. Salaam and UK Islamic Mission offer extensive links to religious and spiritual matters including religious quotes, history and biographies of Muslim personalities. Finally, both Muslim sites provide an interactive advice link where one can 'Ask the Imam' or seek the advice of a religious specialist or a Muslim psychotherapist.

The ubiquity of such links indicate their significance for the communities. This emphasis on shared culture directly points to the issue of recognition discussed earlier.<sup>8</sup> The focus appears to be the preservation of a common culture, the dissemination of a common knowledge and understanding of the community's culture while also acting as protectors of such a heritage. In this sense, this form of communication precedes the formation of any recognitive claims and should be seen as part of an identity-formation process. If this is the case, then it is significant that there is no possibility of questioning or disputing the information offered by these sites.<sup>9</sup> This cultural form of communication appears to be didactic and 'top-down' – the exception being Barfi Culture, whose more youth-oriented style is a user-based, interactive one. It seems that in their quest to preserve and highlight their cultural uniqueness, these websites have fallen prey to essentialistic identity formation processes.

The final form of communication is computer-oriented cybercommunication. This form subsumes four different aspects: games, search engines, downloads and email services. All sites offer one or another of these cyberlinks. Online games are offered by Blacknet and Chinatown Online, while internal search engines are offered by Barfi Culture, Black Britain, Blacknet, Chinatown Online and Salaam, with Blacknet and Black Britain also offering a general web search engine. An extensive set of download materials is provided by Salaam,<sup>10</sup> while e-cards are offered by Black Britain, Chinatown Online, Salaam and UK Islamic Mission. Email services offer the provision of an email account and mailing lists, emailing information to users. A free email service is offered also by Barfi Culture, Black Britain, Blacknet, British Born Chinese, Salaam and UK Islamic Mission. Not surprisingly, cybercommunication in one form or another is an integral part of the websites under study.

To think of this form of communication merely as a result of using new technology would overlook its contribution to the community. Although the involvement of new technologies in social life has yet to be understood, the prevalence of discussions on the digital divide and the 'information poor' points to the increasing relevance of new technologies for questions of social justice. From this perspective, the dissemination of 'cybercommunications', irrespective of their content, can be seen as a strategy for addressing the unequal politics of information. In this respect, this form



of communication can be seen as a strategy for empowerment through learning and using new technologies. Yet there is another element involved here as well: this communicative form contains the important element of dissemination; consider the electronic cards sent, the sending of emails, or the use of email accounts from which to send emails. Such dissemination can be linked to the proliferation of the website in cyberspace and its subsequent recognition by community members and others – put simply, the more spread the website is, the more known it will be and the more users it will have subsequently. This form of communication is tied to the websites' survival, which is crucial if they are to be used strategically for multicultural politics. But perhaps more importantly in terms of multicultural politics, the continued presence of minority community websites or portals in cyberspace is crucial for claims of recognition, since it ensures their continued visibility. What appears primarily as a bid for online survival has important implications for the formulation and support of subsequent political claims.

All these communicative forms contain essentialist and particularistic tendencies – more apparent in news and cultural communications and perhaps less problematic in the empowering strategies aimed at redressing inequalities, as witnessed in business and cybercommunications – which are redeemed only potentially through the dialogical community communication form. Moreover, it seems that claims for recognition are addressed only implicitly in the cultural form of communication, a finding commensurable with the earlier finding that these portals primarily address community members. From the perspective of multicultural politics, the conclusion drawn is that these communicative forms enact multicultural dilemmas online, contributing to the creation of neat group enclaves firmly oriented towards the inside of the community. This community is constructed in turn as predominantly sharing a set of common concerns (news), a common background and lifestyle (culture) and common interests (business).

### **The users**

Getting to know who is actually using these sites is neither easy nor straightforward. This part of the empirical analysis has attempted to compile information through what is offered on the sites, either directly as information on users, or indirectly through looking at discussion forums in order to get an idea of the user base of the sites.

The sites with numerical information on their users include UK Islamic Mission, with 233 registered users, Barfi Culture with 5000 and British Born Chinese with 3186. Both Clickwalla and Salaam report 10,000 subscribers; Black Britain has an undisclosed membership, while Chinatown Online and Blacknet have open use requiring no registration at all, thereby making it difficult to trace users. Salaam offers detailed charts on



user demographics, but these are limited to age, gender and occupation, while it focuses on page requests as a measure of its traffic.<sup>11</sup> Similar user profile information is offered by Black Britain to potential advertisers.

The most noticeable issue is that no information on the actual ethnic constitution of the users is provided.<sup>12</sup> This seems to imply that either such information is not relevant, or that the users are homogenous and no more needs to be said on the subject. Yet a closer look at the users reveals a different picture. First, there is an important transnational component; second, there are non-community members participating or using the discussion forums; and third, there is an internal differentiation among community members. Evidence for transnational use abounds in all sites: Black Britain has users from Canada and the US, Blacknet from the US, Barfi Culture from Canada, Europe and the US, British Born Chinese has users from China, Hong Kong, the Netherlands and the US, Chinatown Online has users from China, Hong Kong and Taiwan, some of the Salaam transnational users are from India, Mexico and the United Arab Emirates while UK Islamic Mission has users from France, Pakistan and Spain.<sup>13</sup>

Next, there is evidence that non-community members are using the sites: non-black users are found in Blacknet and Black Britain, non-Muslim users in Salaam and UK Islamic Mission, non-Chinese users of both British Born Chinese and Chinatown Online and non-Asian users were found in Barfi Culture. At the same time, although most non-community member users are bona fide users, there is also some evidence of flaming, of racist users in Blacknet and of Islamophobic users in Salaam.<sup>14</sup>

Further, there is ample evidence of diversity within the community users both in terms of constitution as well as in terms of lifestyle and opinion. Barfi Culture's profile section reveals users from different religious backgrounds while religious diversity is also found in Clickwalla, which provides information on all important Hindu, Muslim and Sikh cultural and religious festivals. Blacknet has users referring to themselves as 'mixed race' and Black Britain's 'OneLove' dating facility has a category for gay and lesbian users. Chinatown Online has Hakka and Christian Chinese users and British Born Chinese has Hakka users as well as users with politically opposed views; political disagreements are found also in Salaam and UK Islamic Mission, with users describing themselves as socialist or in favour of an Islamic state. Finally, gender is an issue in some websites, with Blacknet having separate women and men's forums, UK Islamic Mission providing a 'Sisters' Corner' and British Born Chinese having a 'Yin' forum for women.

The information on the users points to the difficulties involved in drawing any straightforward conclusions. While the communicative forms and addressees of the websites are inner-directed, the view from the users destabilizes this 'inner' and disperses it across different planes. We have



seen that users may not be community members, which implies that although they are not directly addressed in any significant way, ‘eavesdroppers’ will take part, albeit more often in a passive, instrumental or even overtly hostile manner. This gives these websites a character that is more open and public than that inferred by looking at the addressees and forms of communication. In addition, we have seen that users may come from completely different geographical locations and are brought together through these websites. This gives rise to several speculative propositions regarding the online function of these websites as gathering dispersed communities – acting quite literally as the reversal of a diaspora. Finally, the internal diversity of the community in terms of ethnicity, religion, gender and opinion directly links with non-essentialist theories.

These findings appear to contradict the analyses of the addressees and communicative formats of these websites by correcting the essentialism encountered earlier in the analysis of the addressees and forms of communication. Yet this essentialism and re-enactment of the multicultural dilemmas found in the first two categories is a reality parallel to that of the category of users – in other words, all these multicultural dilemmas are encountered online. Thus, rather than concluding that the insights gained through looking at the users are the ‘correct’ or true conclusions to be drawn, this online performance of the dilemmas denotes that the ongoing tension between them is the ever-present condition of possibility for multicultural politics. This argument will be elaborated further in the concluding section.

## Conclusions

Table 1 presents a summary of the current findings and interpretation ventured in the analysis.

The multicultural dilemmas discussed include the universalism versus particularism dilemma, the essentialism versus fluidity dilemma and the recognition versus redistribution dilemma. All of these tackle different aspects of the challenges facing multicultural societies and the more general question of living with others. In the end, what is at stake is indeed multiculturalism or, as Pnina Werbner has referred to it, ‘the political imaginary of heterogeneity’ (2002: 276). As such, it is crucial that it remains open, that it remains an imaginary, capable of being imagined differently and that any resolution or closure is temporary. It is from this perspective that the apparently contradictory findings of this study can make sense.

The possibility offered by the internet portals to observe a form of multicultural politics, understood as the goings-on within and between communities, represents a unique opportunity to observe this politics in its everydayness – comparable to the ethnographies conducted by anthropologists but focusing on describing and understanding political conduct, not



Table 1 Summary of empirical analysis

<i>Analytical categories</i>	<i>Publics addressed</i>	<i>Forms of communication</i>	<i>Users</i>
Findings	General Community  Business	News (informational) Community (dialogical) Business (instrumental)  Culture (unifying/ didactic) Cyber (instrumental) Business and cyber-address inequality/ redistribution issues	Transnational Non-community members Community members differ in location, gender, ethnicity, opinions
Interpretation emphasis on,	Primacy of, and communication community re-enacts universalism– particularism dilemma	Cultural boundaries erected addresses differences/ recognition claims News is inner directed Community dialogue potentially redeems the essentialism implicit in all forms	Pragmatic corrective to essentialistic by addressees and forms of communication Internal diversity and flexible boundaries denote ongoing struggle and dialogue

specific communities. We have seen that in addressing mainly or primarily their own community, these websites perform a politics of particularism, setting apart their community from others. The communicative forms addressing this community offer a mixed picture, including elements of particularism and essentialism but also of dialogue, seen as enacting a politics of compromise. This promise for redemption from multicultural dilemmas is encountered also in finding great diversity among these website users. The users' perspective is evidently one that does not respect the boundaries set either within the community or between different communities; in so doing it seems to side against the politics of particularism and essentialism. But respecting no boundaries implies respecting no difference and points to the formation of the type of a community bound



by dialogue associated with Habermasian universalism. In these terms, the user perspective points to the enactment of a politics of universalism and does not, or cannot, resolve the dilemmas of multiculturalism.

In many ways, therefore, the crucial finding here is that the closure imposed or enacted by these websites is displaced and destabilized by the users. If the moment of ‘encoding’, to use Stuart Hall’s (1980) terminology, seeks to impose an identitarian logic through addressing a single community, smoothing out any differences and excluding or ignoring outsiders, the logic of cyberspace actively undermines such a movement. The publicness of the medium, its lack of a fixed geography, its wide dissemination and accessibility to all those using an internet connection and, not least, its interactive character, which offers the possibility and means to participate, destabilize this identitarian logic and movement towards closure. On the one hand, to view this as unequivocally positive would ignore one of the most persistent dilemmas of multiculturalism: that of a particularism that leads to isolation and fragmentation and of a universalism that ultimately negates all difference. On the other hand, to see these opposing tendencies as negating each other would miss the important contribution of the internet to the politics of multiculturalism, which is precisely that of enabling this politics to take place – at least insofar as it enables the continuous negotiation between opposing poles and contradictory elements within multiculturalism.

Thus, this performance of multicultural politics online may re-enact all its dilemmas, but in so doing it points to an ongoing struggle between the different versions of the political imaginary of heterogeneity. It is precisely this struggle that guarantees the openness and thus the continued existence of multicultural *politics* – at least insofar as politics is understood as entailing the antagonism accompanying life in the commons (see Mouffe, 2000). Bar this struggle and antagonistic positions, multiculturalism would dissolve in one or the other resolutions preferred; it would transform into universalism, particularism, redistribution, or any of these dilemmatic opposites. It is in this sense that the struggle between the different problems and proposed solutions entailed in multiculturalism forms the condition of possibility for multicultural politics – without this, multiculturalist politics cannot exist. But for such a struggle to be maintained as open and democratic, all aspects of the dilemmas should be present in the conduct of multicultural politics and the prevalence of one over the others should always remain temporary. In observing multicultural dilemmas when they come to a head, such as the issue of wearing headscarves in public places, when a resolution and a (temporary) closure is demanded, political theorists disregard the everyday or more prosaic multicultural conduct where one can observe the ongoing struggle between different understandings of our life together. Focusing on this more prosaic form of politics displaces the urgency of a solution and allows for an appreciation of the struggle, the elements that constitute it and the



ways in which they are inextricably bound in forming multicultural politics. Thus, rather than negating their ultimate political goals, the portals of different communities in their oscillation from one end to the other safeguard the continuity of the possibility for multicultural politics. In this respect, the technological capabilities that enable websites to be both one-way and interactive, both specifically targeted and publicly available and both to occupy a space but not be bound by location, appear particularly suited to the politics of multiculturalism.

### Notes

1. I follow here Michael Warner's (2002) argument that publics come to existence through interpellation.
2. Taylor has addressed the universalism versus particularism dilemma also, arguing that that insofar as universalism leads to acceptance of equality as a valid principle in liberal societies, recognition of difference can be addressed only in this context.
3. More recently, Fraser has embarked on a debate with Axel Honneth, who argues in favour of the precedence of recognition as opposed to Fraser's argument regarding the mutual irreducibility of the categories of redistribution and recognition (Fraser and Honneth, 2003).
4. According to the 2001 census by the Office of National Statistics, the three main ethnic groups in the UK are black (2% of the total population), Indian (1.8%) and Pakistani (1.3%), Bangladeshi (0.5%) and Chinese (0.4%). In terms of religion, 2.7 percent of the general British population are Muslim (Office of National Statistics, 2005a, 2005b).
5. The Princeton University's online dictionary gives the following definition for portals: 'a site that the owner positions as an entrance to other sites on the internet' (see <http://wordnet.princeton.edu/perl/webwn>, word search 'portal'). Wikipedia offers a similar definition of portals as enabling 'passage to other web sites' (see <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Portal>).
6. Women are an audience specifically targeted by most sites, indicating their status as a separate section of the community. The ways in which women are addressed vary dramatically, ranging from the fashion and beauty links in Clickwalla to the 'Sisters' link of the UK Islamic Mission, showing the different femininities among communities. Similarly, the young are specifically addressed in a variety of ways, including the student links in Clickwalla, the 'Clubs etc.' section in Barfi Culture, games in Blacknet and British Born Chinese, the 'Youth Section' in UK Islamic Mission and the education link and FAQs on the GCSE in Islamic Studies in Salaam.
7. China UK web ring links sites in the UK which are about China, the Chinese, Chinese culture or related areas. This may include, among others, commercial sites, non-profit-making organizations, individuals' homepages, etc.
8. The question of recognition is explicitly addressed in Salaam, which in the context of what we call here cultural communication offers a link to 'recognition in the public sphere', (see [http://www.salaam.co.uk/themeofthemonth/september03\\_index.php?l=4](http://www.salaam.co.uk/themeofthemonth/september03_index.php?l=4)), which discusses public aspects of life as a British Muslim.



9. Or at least to do so publicly: there is always the possibility to respond with comments and suggestions to email addresses found at the sites.
10. Including MP3 files with prayers, guides to prayers and prayer calculators as well as materials for teaching Arabic to children.
11. Salaam reports 2.5 million successful requests in the months between May 2002 and April 2003.
12. The exception here is Barfi Culture, which describes itself as a 'website primarily populated by the British Asian community. By Asian we mean those who originate from the Indian sub-continent: India, Pakistan, Bangladesh and Sri Lanka' (see <http://www.barficulture.com/barfi/>).
13. This information was compiled based on self-disclosed information about country of origin as found in the websites' discussion forums (Barfi Culture, Black Britain, Blacknet, British Born Chinese, Chinatown Online and UK Islamic Mission), in the advice section of Salaam and in the publicly available profile section of Barfi Culture.
14. It seems that the registration process, which requires a valid email address, along with a moderated forum deters and/or prevents flaming and abuse in most sites. In Salaam most non-Muslim users requested information on Islam and its practices while UK Islamic Mission attracted non-Muslim users for research. Both instrumental and social use is made of British Born Chinese and Chinatown Online, while non-Asian participants to the online forums of Barfi Culture seek to gain both information and insight into the community's cultural practices.

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