



# Enemy on the screen

Many participants are wary initially. Just don't say anything wrong! Don't tread on anyone's toes! When students from Western countries first meet students from the Middle East in the *Soliya* online seminars, everyone is extremely polite. But the soft-line approach doesn't last very long.

FRANK STERN

"I used to think that the West didn't care about other people, particularly people in the Middle East."

Egyptian student

The internet is a dangerous tool. It can drive a wedge between people and peoples. It can reinforce prejudices and become a vehicle for disinformation and hate. But it can also connect people. It can resolve issues and create trust. The internet is the disease and the cure – depending on who uses it.

"In the USA there's extreme unease with regard to Islam, but *Soliya* has taught me to see people as individuals and to find out what they think instead of tarring everyone with the same brush."

American student

The terrorist attack on New York had occurred just two years previously when Lucas Welch set up *Soliya* in 2003 to build bridges through intercultural exchanges. While the world was exhausting itself in the Clash of Civilizations, the American, a former TV producer for the broadcaster ABC and media lecturer at the Bir Zeit University in Ramallah, was developing a concept for understanding and conciliation. It's not by chance that *Soliya* is a combination of the Latin *sol* (sun) and the Arabic word for light.

*Soliya* uses the internet to bring students together from various countries via video conferencing. The 10-week Connect program is now running in over 100 universities in 27 countries – from Egypt to Indonesia and from the USA to Switzerland. Some institutions have even included Connect in their regular study program. The Allianz Foundation of North America became a sponsor of *Soliya* last year. "It's about understanding, overcoming prejudices and respecting each other," says Foundation head Christopher Worthley. "A goal that we're also committed to."

The internet as a bridge between peoples and cultures that could hardly be more different from each other: Osama Madani, English professor at Menoufia University in Shubin El Kom, 75 kilometers from Cairo, witnessed how his students were on the defensive when they first sat at the screen in front of Jewish students from the USA – effectively their arch enemies – and how in the course of the discussions each found common ground

## SOLIYA

*Soliya* was set up ten years ago with the aim of providing young people from Muslim and Western countries with intercultural experiences. The NGO with offices in New York and Cairo relies entirely on the internet to put students from all over the world in virtual contact with each other. Over 100 universities worldwide are now involved, and many of them have integrated the online training program Connect into their syllabus.

[WWW.SOLIYA.ORG](http://WWW.SOLIYA.ORG)

or at least an understanding of their counterpart's attitudes. "By the end of the semester the mindset of many of my students had completely changed," says Madani. Meanwhile, the list of students who want to take part in the program has grown ever longer.

Moderators supervise the online discussions to overcome initial anxieties or to avoid overheated debates. "Sometimes they even have trouble getting a discussion going because the participants are just too polite to each other," explains *Soliya* CEO Shamil Idriss. On the other hand, there's no shortage of topics to ignite an argument between the West and the Middle East. And in the course of the semester nothing is taboo – whether Islamist terrorism, Islamophobia, the relationship between religion and the state, the role of women in society or homosexuality.

The difference in their worldviews is regularly demonstrated when the participants are asked to edit a news item based on raw footage provided by the US wire-service Associated Press and the Arabic broadcaster Al Jazeera in a balanced manner. Up to that point the online discussions may have been somewhat hesitant,



but when the participants view the two-minute clip by their fellow students on the Middle East conflict from their different perspectives, reticence soon flies out the window.

The *Soliya* seminars bring together people who would normally do their utmost to avoid each other. They range from atheists from Amsterdam to evangelical Christians from Kentucky and Muslim Brothers from Cairo. And maybe that's the best service that *Soliya* has to offer: The students talk to each other about God and the world. They discuss and they argue – but they don't smash each other's heads in.

In times when fundamentalists on both sides incite enmity and hate and the internet is used to promote those ends, *Soliya* provides the technology to make young people less susceptible to such extremes. Armed with intercultural experience, the capacity to respect other opinions and to question their own attitudes, they

should be in a position to overcome deep schisms in the world. Shamil Idriss is convinced that schools and universities provide the path to that goal.

If such exchanges across ideological and cultural gulfs were a standard part of university education, and if as many young people as possible in Western and Islamic countries grew up with this schooling – a critical mass who see their differences as something to be worked out and not as a reason to go to war – then, says Idriss, a pastor burning a Koran would no longer cause such outrage and blinkered young men wouldn't fly planes into buildings. "If we could reach a million students a year," he adds, "they would be changing the world already."

"To begin with I didn't want to take part in the Connect program. My professor urged me to do so. In retrospect, I'm honestly glad that I did it."

**Palestinian student**