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Comment on Possamai, Turner, Roose, Dagistanli and Voyce/3

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Comment on Possamai, Turner, Roose, Dagistanli and Voyce/3.

by Ermete Mariani

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The re-territorialisation and localisation of the cyberspace is surely amongst the most relevant undergoing transformations of the Internet. Technological developments made on geolocated-internet-based services and the consequent impressive market growth of this kind of services, are there to prove that the Internet is not uniquely pushing for globalization, but also for localisation of processes and interactions. Therefore, in this wider context is of utmost interest analysing if and how the Internet is facilitating the re-territorialisation and to some extent even the creation of an Australia Muslim community.

Possamai *et al.*'s essay [2016] suffers of the two main limits of most of the researches in this field. As the cyberspace is a liquid space in perpetual change to grasp the long-term trends and key features is probably more appropriate to analyse the wider communication strategy of the organizations behind the websites and to struggle for speeding up the research, writing and publication process of academic publications as the data collected can become quickly out-dated (sic!).

In an effort to keep their analyses well grounded on a thick description, the authors have opted for a very narrow scope and from the on-the-field research to the publication almost four years have passed. Therefore, the conclusions drawn in this paper do not seem to be grounded on sufficiently wide set of data. They rely mainly on the contents analysis of three institutional websites without taking into due account the political and sociological context of the Muslim immigration in Australia, the technological developments of the Internet and, finally, the current evolution of

Islamic religious institutions. On the top of this, considering the rapidity at which Internet changes, the data collected are a bit too old: the websites were analysed between spring and summer 2013 and the only interview quoted in this article dates back to September 2012. In the meantime, of the three websites analysed here only the *Darul Ifta Australia*'s one has remained the same, while *Darul Fatwa – Islamic High Council of Australia* has been deeply revamped, and *Sydney Muslim Youth*'s website has disappeared and its URL redirects automatically to its Facebook open group page.

The criteria adopted to identify the sample to analyse are a bit too vague and some crucial choices are not sufficiently motivated and might have hampered a more profound analysis. For example, it is not clear enough why the authors have chosen to exclude Sufi and Shia websites as well as the ones exclusively in Arabic though based in Australia like <http://www.shia.com.au/>. Having ignored these two relevant parts of the Muslim world, present on Australian soil too, might be at the origin of some very partial interpretations of what *Shari'a* is and how it works, like the following one:

Finally it is also important to remember that, in Islam, what counts as good practice has to have collective or communal consent: Islamic Law or *Shari'a* is based on communal approval and consensus, not on competition and adversarial confrontation as is characteristic of Western common law [Possamai *et al.* 2016, 13].

A deeper historical perspective on Islamic religious institutions with a specific focus on Islamic law and *fatwas* – starting for example by the excellent works of Sami Zubaida [2003] and Brinkley Messick [1993] – could have helped the authors appreciate the complex and controversial nature of *Shari'a* and of historical tradition of “*fatwa* shopping.”

From a reader's point of view, this article does not shed any light on the links between the three websites analysed here and the real life of the Muslims in Australia: their demographics, ethnic origins and the languages they speak. Therefore it is quite difficult to understand why a Deobandi sheikh and a South African one are reaching out to Muslims in Australia. As the contents of the few *fatwas* highlighted in this article are not really put into a real context, it is almost impossible to understand the assessment of their social and political consequences made by the authors. When it comes, for example, to the debate concerning the prohibition of conventional mortgages based on fixed interest rate – *riba* – the authors do not provide any information on the availability of Islamic compliant financial services in Australia. Therefore they seem to jump too quickly to the conclusion that this kind of teachings might inhibit Muslims home ownership and therefore their social mobility. Their argument is based on 2011 statistics that shows that Muslims in Australia prefer to rent rather to

buy houses compared to the average population, at a time when the Islamic finance and banking institutions in Australia were at their inceptions.

A wider methodological approach would have permitted the authors to overcome the limit of a quickly out-dated database, a common issue to every researcher in this field, and eventually to draw more long-term conclusions. Engaging more in a dialogue with the people, teams and also companies and organisations behind the websites would have brought some precious insights and eventually it would have helped them to understand the role of the websites in the organisations' broader communication and community engagement strategies. This would have probably permitted the authors to get real figures on websites visits and views – even though Alexa is a good tool, the most reliable and detailed figures come from Google Analytics – and to measure the level of engagement the organizations actually seek and have gained with their audiences, as well as their expectations. In other words this approach would have helped the authors to get a more articulated answer to the first question they want to ask in this kind of research “Who uploaded the contents and why?”

As for answering the other questions they used to guide their research that focus more on the interactions with the audience, the choice of analysing exclusively websites contents does not seem to be the most appropriate, or at least it would have deserved a better explanation.

- How have viewers and participants reacted to it [published contents, n.d.r.]?
- How are site visitors invited to interact with the material (if they are)?
- How is content presented and controlled in the face of contradiction or challenge?”

The study of the contents curated, shared, commented and liked on social media could have provided more interesting insights, especially in a stage of the evolution of the Internet when websites are not anymore the place where people interact. Since more than ten years now, social media have become the privileged place for exchanges, even though the authenticity of the exchanges is questionable.

Finally, to enquire the de-territorialisation and re-territorialisation processes of virtual communities, the main objective of this paper, we wonder if it wouldn't have been wiser to include into the analysis these institutions' presence on mobile devices through responsive websites and the offer of apps and services – usually geolocated – on the two main mobile platforms. Actually, since 2014 mobile overtook fixed Internet access worldwide and few online marketing analysts predicted this trend well before it happened.

Mariani, *Comment on Possamai, Turner, Roose, Dagistanli and Voyce/3*.

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Abstract: The re-territorialisation and localisation of the cyberspace is surely amongst the most relevant undergoing transformations of the Internet. In this wider context, is of utmost interest analysing if and how the Internet is facilitating the re-territorialisation and to some extent even the creation of an Australian Muslim community. This is the topic addressed by Possamai *et al.*'s essay. However, the choice of focusing exclusively on the content analysis of three websites without putting them into a wider context and taking into account their social media presence makes the analysis based on too limited and soon out-dated set of information and therefore their conclusions do not seem to be strongly grounded.

Keywords: Muslims; Social Media; Internet; Cyberspace; Shari'a.

Ermete Mariani is an independent researcher on the production of Islamic discourse on line and new media in the Arab and Muslim context, and he has published several academic articles on the subject. He is currently working as consultant on strategic communication for think tanks and international organizations.