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Conflict and Affect Among Conservative Christians on Facebook

Mona Abdel-Fadil

Abstract

Drawing on the ethnographic study of the Norwegian Facebook group *Yes to wearing the cross whenever and wherever I choose*, this article focuses on the emotive performance of conflict. The author delves into the multitude of ways in which emotion appears to drive the conflict(s) in *Yes to wearing the cross whenever and wherever I choose*. This Facebook group, by virtue of dealing with religion and identity issues contains typical trigger themes, which may lead audiences to emotively enact conflict. Still, these modes of enactment of conflict cannot be understood as a characteristic of religious strife alone. Drawing on Papacharissi's concept of 'affective publics' this article compares the modes of conflict performance, the most salient frames, trigger themes, and emotive cues in this Facebook group to findings from other studies about mediatized conflict. The analysis demonstrates that mediatized conflicts appear to be emotively performed in very similar, at times even identical ways, across a variety of themes and contexts. Participatory media audiences' tendency to remediate conflicts in ways that draw on an abundance of emotional cues appears to be integral to the enactment of mediatized conflicts. It is argued that we ought to speak not only of affective publics but also of the politics of affect.

Keywords

Mediatized conflict, media and religion, affect, affective publics, performing conflict, Facebook, political engagement, social media users, media audiences, emotive politics, online ethnography, media anthropology

1 Introduction

The Facebook group *Yes to wearing the cross whenever and wherever I choose*, was established at a politically charged moment in November 2013,¹ in response to an impassioned debate on the visibility of religion on NRK (Norwegian Broadcasting Corporation). In this sense, the Facebook group can be defined as a ‘special interest’ group that primarily (but not exclusively) attracts people who believe in the importance of preserving Christianity (Abdel-Fadil, *forthc.*).² The conflict and subsequent protest group was sparked by a cross-pendant worn by, Siv Kristin Sællmann, a news anchor while reading the news on TV and subsequently raced across multiple media platforms. The Norwegian Public Broadcasting Council swiftly ruled that wearing the cross in the newsroom was a breach of policy. The tininess of the cross – a mere 14 mm - is emphasized by many debaters in the pro-cross camp, and a number of the images that are used to illustrate the case in main stream media, feature the journalist holding up the cross - thus accentuating how small the cross pendant is compared to her (by comparison) enormous hands and/ or face. Still, according to NRK’s regulations, it is the symbolism and affiliation to Christianity, which is a breach of policy for news anchors and hence size is irrelevant.

Yes to wearing the cross whenever and wherever I choose swiftly received vast support, reaching over 120 000 likes during its first few weeks of existence. The initiator and administrator of the Facebook group *Yes to wearing the cross whenever and wherever I choose*, also launched a letter-campaign, inviting and encouraging everybody in the Facebook group to send their letters of complaint to The Norwegian Public Broadcasting Council, in the hope that the council would overturn their verdict. This outcome never materialized, much to the frustration of the majority of those involved in discussions in the *Yes to wearing the cross whenever and wherever I choose* Facebook group.

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- 1 ‘Politically charged moments’ used by Miller et al, “(2015: 145), shares many communalities with the term ‘mediatized moment’, as used in Sumaila (2015: 111), and the concept “critical moments” as employed by Terje Colbjørnsen (*forthcoming*), though originally Boltanski & Thévenot’s concept (1999).
 - 2 Kushin and Kitchener (2009) appear to be arguing that Facebook facilitates for a more productive and civil type of conversation, I do not subscribe to this view. In my opinion, social network sites such as Facebook, do not in themselves encourage civil conduct or productive arguments, any more than they encourage confrontational or battling styles of interaction. It is important to examine what types of audiences that get pulled into the various online discussions or discussion groups. For instance, Enli (2007: 53-9) demonstrates that a high percentage of the participatory audience who interacted with a popularized political TV debate program, had xenophobic and right wing leanings. This appears to be true of a number of the participants in the Facebook group under study here, too. However, this is in stark contrast to the Facebook group studied by Kushin and Kitchener, which is a group for those who are opposed to torture as an interrogation tool, and by implication will attract a certain segment of society – that a group like *Yes to wearing the cross whenever and wherever I choose*, may arguably draw fewer of. Against this backdrop, it seems of utmost importance to not only discuss the type of theme, but also discuss the ideological sympathies represented amongst the debate participants before making claims about Facebook inherently inducing a more civilized or uncivilized debate.

NRK's decision to disallow the news anchor Siv Kristin Sællmann from wearing the cross on TV did however receive an unprecedented number of complaints from viewers. Reportedly, the cross controversy alone received twice as many complaints as the total number of complaints the previous year (185).³ The head of the committee reports that he received hate mail for NRK's decision on the cross. He adds that blaming Muslims appears to be the main concern of those who penned the hate mail (Jakobsen 2013). On similar note, the secretary of The Norwegian Public Broadcasting Council, tells NRK that he attributes most of the complaints to the *Yes to wearing the cross whenever and wherever I choose* Facebook page. He elaborates that he does not think that this level of engagement is only about the cross on the news, and suggests that conservative Christians are disenchanted by how NRK and other TV channels broadcast too much sex and too many swearwords (Eie 2013). Indeed, the last time audience complaints poured in, was when the TV series 'Threesome' (Trekant) was broadcast, and mobilized protest from similar conservative for its blunt, no strings attached, and experimental attitude to sexual relations. As the analysis will elucidate, the NRK cross-conflict may not be as intrinsically tied to conservative views on sexuality and coarse language, as the secretary of The Norwegian Public Broadcasting Council proposes. Nonetheless, the secretary hits the nail on the head in the assumption – that the level of engagement in *Yes to wearing the cross whenever and wherever I choose* suggests that this must be about *far more* than the cross on NRK news.

The Norwegian Public Broadcasting Council ruling was a blow to the majority of those actively debating on the Facebook page in question. Yet, while, *Yes to wearing the cross whenever and wherever I choose* initially was created to protest the prohibition of the cross for NRK-news anchors, many of the discussions and audience interactions transpired into heated religio-political debates with strong elements of anti-Muslim, xenophobic, anti-secular and anti-atheist sentiments. Even from the very start, the cross-case functions as a springboard to numerous other religio-political debates within the Facebook group. In this sense, the scope of the group's discussions supersedes the original protest campaign by far.⁴ As such the Facebook group *Yes to wearing the cross whenever and wherever* in question is a locus of opposing interests and struggles over

3 as of December 15th 2013.

4 Some anthropologists are slightly dismissive of the value of studying one interface, special interest groups, or fleeting politically charged moments – as they do not deem them as representative of the complex every day social media practices of 'most people'. While these are valid inferences, I believe that studying a special interest group at a particularly charged political moment, may yield additional insights that nuance our understanding of social media users' engagement with religio-political topics and elucidate other aspects such as group dynamics. As I have argued elsewhere, rather than 'the spiral of silence', such milieus may represent a spiral of speaking out – and contestation. In fact, engaging with other users, and their performance of the conflict through contestation is one of the key aspects of the performative agency of each individual debater (Abdel-Fadil, forthc.). People may be drawn to conflict performance for a variety of reasons, to support the cause or to critique the cause in a spectrum of ways linked to a series of ideological or religious positions. My study of *Yes to wearing the cross whenever and wherever I choose* suggests that rather than shun conflict, a number of users face conflict head on.

meaning - in my view - far beyond protests against too much sex and swearing on TV. Indeed, the fact that *Yes to wearing the cross whenever and wherever* is still the locus of livid debates about religion in public space, demonstrates that the discussions are indeed not solely about allowing the cross on the news, but that much deeper values are at stake.

At first glance, it may appear as if all those active in this particular debate environment participate because they have a clear religious, ideological, or political agenda. It can certainly be argued that many of the comments posted in *Yes to wearing the cross whenever and wherever I choose*, speak to particular stances on religion and identity politics. There is, however, a danger of over-emphasising the ideological *intent* of the individual debaters. Hence, it is important to take into consideration that many participants may be performing the conflict for other, more mundane reasons such as: letting off steam, boredom, or the need for entertainment (Skogerbø & Winswold 2008:48, Michailidou & Trenz 2015). Elsewhere, I analyse the different types of participants in the Facebook group and their various roles and positions (Abdel-Fadil, forthcoming). Here, I focus on and analyse the various emotive elements of the most salient, overarching narrative which dominates the Facebook page, and to which all participants in this online milieu must relate to.⁵ Mediatized debates may attract various constellations of actors, and *Yes to wearing the cross whenever and wherever I choose* is not exception, here I focus on the most ‘typical’ participants, the most salient frames and their emotive offshoots.

The omnipresence of emotion in *Yes to wearing the cross whenever and wherever I choose* is palpable and deserves analysis. Cottle (2006) refers to the need for research that explores: ‘what makes certain conflicts high in meaning and affect?’ On a similar note, Beckett & Deuze (2016) argue that there is a need for more research and analysis of what Papacharissi (2015) labels ‘affective publics’ and a need for more studies that examine the question: ‘What motivates attention and agency related to media?’ This article is my modest attempt at trying to contribute to filling this knowledge gap. Here, I delve into the multitude of ways in which emotion appears to drive the conflict(s) in and evaluations of opponents in *Yes to wearing the cross whenever and wherever I choose*.

I situate my study within the broad category of ‘media anthropology’. My methodology and research approach to the *Yes to wearing the cross whenever and wherever* group is ethnographic and founded on online fieldwork. I also draw extensively on studies about mediatized conflict (Hjarvard et al. 2015, Averbek-Lietz et al 2015, Chouliaraki 2015, Michailidou & Trenz 2015, Figenschou

5 Elsewhere (Abdel-Fadil, forthcoming) I focus more on competing narratives, and how participants relate to the master narrative – either by condoning – or contesting it.

2015).⁶ Tricia Wang coins the term ‘thick data’, an adaptation of Geertz’ iconic notion of ‘thick descriptions’, which I consider a good match to my own approach. In her own words:

Thick Data is data brought to light using qualitative, ethnographic research methods that uncover people’s emotions, stories, and models of their world (Wang 2013).

I am particularly interested in how people’s emotions, stories and models of the world shape the way they engage with mediatized conflict. In terms of method, I observed (and logged) interactions, repetitive communication patterns, positions, and roles, in the group, during the first weeks of peak activity from November 4th of 2013 until December 13th of 2013.⁷ I conceptualize my research as a (time-delayed) online ethnographic fieldwork of the *Yes to wearing the cross whenever and wherever I choose* Facebook group. In a sense, my observations can be considered a form of non-participant observation, because I observe discussions that have already taken place, and I am not a member of the group I am studying.⁸ The quotes in this article are reconstructions of arguments (and not direct quotes) from the *Yes to wearing the cross whenever and wherever I choose* Facebook page. The reconstructions represent common positions among debaters, and illustrate repetitive patterns of communication and modes of enacting the conflict. I use NetCapture (a Google Chrome extension) to archive the Facebook discussions for coding purposes in the qualitative analysis software program Nvivo.⁹ The Facebook group is open, and I do not need to log on to my Facebook account to observe the interactions that go on in the group.¹⁰ It is evident that I do not influence the

6 My focus on mediatized conflict may prompt other scholars to place my research within what Rasmussen (2016) calls a ‘Contestation- and conflict-oriented’ approach to social media.

7 This period covers the weeks with the highest levels of activity and discussions and during this time frame all postings are related to the NRK-Cross case. Discussions on the *Yes to wearing the cross whenever and wherever I choose* Facebook page are still going strong, including a wide range of issues that pertain to the cross and Christianity in Norway, and at times, the world at large. The Facebook group is still active at the time of writing, September 2016, though the number of likes has decreased to 117 240, suggesting that roughly 3000 people unliked the group since I started collecting data in the spring of 2015.

8 During the process of data collection I quickly discovered the benefit of not being logged onto Facebook while collecting the data, in the sense that my name and profile picture would then not feature a zillion times in the material for coding.

9 Each individual post with the debate and comments it sparks is saved as PDF. NetCapture PDFs a Facebook discussion with all the comments, but entails a meticulous eye for detail on the part of the researcher in terms of including all the comments, and replies to replies on a post that may have elicited a very high level of activity. Furthermore, it is worth noting that one of NetCaptures ways of ‘capturing’ the data entails giving the application highly intrusive access to near all the information on your Facebook profile and the profiles of everybody on your friend list. I chose the option that did not grant such access, but it may possibly be more tedious in terms of usage.

10 I treat the Facebook group discussions as interactional transcripts and consequently conceptualize them as my field notes. It is these field notes that I code. In addition, I keep a field diary, which includes a log of technical and methodological queries and challenges, adjustments of the substantive codes and preliminary analysis and reflections. I code the data within four main codes; themes, roles, styles and arguments. The codes function as a springboard to further analysis. I write in ethnographic present.

online milieu but instead observe what has already happened.¹¹ Most importantly, this approach allows for a deeper study of group dynamics and analysis of the emotive performance of conflict - in a particular environment at the very peak of the conflict.

Several of the contributions to the anthology *The Dynamics of Mediatized Conflicts* (Eskjær et al. 2015) provide a detailed analysis of bottom-up emotional engagement with mediatized conflicts or what Papacharissi (2015) terms ‘affective publics’. In this article, I survey the common characteristics of audience engagement across the mediatized conflict cases and analyse my empirical data from *Yes to wearing the cross whenever and wherever I choose* in relation to the findings from these other studies about mediatized conflict. The article is structured as follows, in the first two sections I briefly summarize relevant scholarly work on mediatized conflict, and affect. In the main body of the article I analyse the main narratives within *Yes to wearing the cross whenever and wherever I choose* in relation to the findings of other studies on affect in mediatized conflicts (Averbeck-Lietz et al 2015, Chouliaraki 2015, Michailidou & Trenz 2015, Figenschou 2015). I employ the findings as section headings, for example ‘Shaming and Blaming’. The clear separation of the findings into separate headings, are analytical constructs to ease the analysis. Often the mechanisms and characteristics described in the various headings in actuality intersect. Before delving into the data, I sketch out some basic observations about both mediatized conflict and affect.

1.1 On Mediatized Conflicts

‘Conflict’ can take a variety of forms, ranging from verbal disagreements to war. In his seminal study ‘Mediatized Conflict’, Simon Cottle (2006) argues that at the very core, ‘conflicts’ invariably reflect ‘a struggle over interests and outlooks’. As will be demonstrated, this basic definition is in fact a very good match for the case at hand. Integral to the notion of conflict is dispute. ‘Making a drama of a crisis has always been part of mass media’ argue Beckett & Deuze (2016: 4). Against this backdrop one can argue that ‘the drama of conflict’ simply spilled over to social media. On a general level, conflicts can be latent or manifest, but tend to include disputes, contentions, and struggles over meaning. Moreover, conflicts may range from single-issue campaigns to complex multi-layered disputes (Cottle 2006). I will argue that some mediatized conflicts fluctuate in-

11 This applies to the time-frame of study. It is important to note the research is not covert and the moderator of *Yes to wearing the cross whenever and wherever I choose* announced my research in the group, and linked to my university profile page. Discussions that took place immediately after this announcement may possibly be influenced by the knowledge that a researcher was analyzing interactions, but these interactions are not included in my time-frame. The announcement of my study did elicit some response amongst the group members, mostly in the form of confirmation of the importance of studying this group, a long the lines of this possibly affecting the cause in positive way.

between these two. Digital media change the preconditions of public communication through use-generated content and participants actively framing debates and conflict (Averbeck-Lietz et al. 2015). Of particular relevance to the current text, is that conflicts may range from the ‘objectively real’ to the ‘subjectively perceived’, and that conflicts are invariably both ‘pursued’ and ‘purposefully enacted’ (Cottle 2006).

The idea of both pursuing and enacting conflict is central to theoretical frameworks of many other scholars who work on mediatized conflict, myself included. In his elaborations, Cottle discusses how media perform and enact conflict, and draws attention to both how media ‘do’ conflict, but also how audiences engage with conflict. In this article, I shift focus slightly away from media performance per se, and focus instead on how social media users perform and enact conflict. In this sense, I place my study within what can be considered the bottom up dynamics of mediatized conflicts. I build on Cottle (2006) and Hjarvard et al.’s (2015) discussions of mediatized conflict in order to focus on the ways in which media audiences may ‘add a series of dynamics to conflicts, namely, amplification, framing and performative agency, and co-structuring’, as formulated by Hjarvard et al. (2015:6). According to Hjarvard et al., there are four possible outcomes of mediatized conflicts: 1) reduce or resolve conflicts, 2) generate new conflicts, 3) transform existing conflicts, and 4) intensify or prolong conflicts (ibid.:11). This article focuses in particular on the amplification of conflict. Drawing on Hjarvard et al.’s (2015) framework and several of the contributions to the edited volume *The Dynamics of Mediatized Conflicts*, this article seeks to contribute to deepening our knowledge with regards to how social media users enact and perform conflict in ways that intensify, transform, , or multiply the conflict(s) (Averbeck-Lietz et al 2015, Chouliaraki 2015, Michailidou & Trenz 2015, Figenschou 2015)¹².

Conflicts are generally ‘high in meaning’ and ‘high in affect’ for those involved, and some conflicts burn briefly whilst others rage on for years or even generations (Cottle 2006). Why do some conflicts become infused with moral charge?, asks Cottle. In a European context, ‘trigger themes’ (Hagen 2015: 116-118) such as ‘immigration’ ‘religion’, and ‘climate’ are more likely to induce spiralling arguments and the escalation of conflicts, and to draw the interest of particular types of audiences (Ibid, Enli 2007 54-7, Michailidou & Trenz 2015, Figenschou et al 2015) . In addition, I would argue that trigger themes paired with topics that pertain to personal belief systems and identity politics may be particularly well-suited to draw out emotive responses, a point to which I will return. Conflicts may be ‘visualised’, ‘dramatized’, ‘narrativised’, ‘mythologised’, in particular ways that may lead to the amplification of conflict (Cottle 2006). Several scholars discuss the multiple ways in which media may ‘perform conflict’ in modes that are high in affect (Hjarvard

12 This study is a subproject of the Scandinavian study Engaging with Conflicts in Mediatized Religious Environments (CoMRel) <http://www.hf.uio.no/imk/english/research/projects/comrel/>.

et al. 2015, Averbek-Lietz et al 2015, Chouliaraki 2015, Michailidou & Trenz 2015, Figenschou 2015).

Typically, posts on *Yes to wearing the cross whenever and wherever I choose* are news-stories posted by the administrator twinned with his personal introduction. The comments from participants in the Facebook group deal with the news-story and/or introduction to a varying degree. User-engagement often entails a display of emotion. Intriguingly, in this online milieu, stances rarely stand entirely uncontested. Hence, this Facebook page can be viewed as a mediatized religious environment where identity politics and religious disputes are played out openly. As shall be demonstrated, the performance of the conflict entails both constructions and contestations of religious realities and religiously grounded positions, and formations, negotiations, and reconfigurations of religious and non-religious identities (both individual and national). In this article, I substantiate and illustrate the multiple ways in which the conflict is driven by emotion.

Hjarvard et al. maintain that mediatized conflicts involve particular dynamics such as amplification and co-structuring, which are extensions of performative functions of agency, lending a dramaturgy to a conflict. If applied to the case of social media, users enact and perform the conflict in multiple ways in order to attract attention. Performative agency¹³ then may include the ways in which actors frame the conflict, the repetitive patterns of communication through which they communicate, such as trigger themes and emotional cues.¹⁴ I am particularly interested in the group dynamics that may come into play amongst social media actors during a mediatized conflict. How social media users engage with one another, put forward - and evaluate each other's statements, is in my view part and parcel of users' performative agency and power to shape the conflict itself.

It can be argued that those who participate in - or perform mediatized conflicts over time are motivated by something in particular be it a political leaning or an activated set of emotions (Averbek-Lietz et al. 2015, Abdel-Fadil, forthc.). They not only represent a type of 'performative involvement' in the mediatized conflict, but in fact play a 'constitutive role' in the conflict itself (Averbek-Lietz et al. 2015). Stamina and persistence may be considered a crucial part of conflict performance in online milieus. Participating in the debates over an extended timeframe, incessantly arguing a particular point of departure, or unremittingly pushing a specific frame or remediation of conflict are both key to enacting conflict and ensuring that a perspective gains attention (Abdel-

13 I employ the concepts 'performing conflict' 'dramaturgy', 'enactment of conflict' and 'performative agency' based on my reading of Hjarvard et al. (2015), Sumiala (2015) and Chouliaraki, (2015).

14 I borrow the term 'emotional cues' from Figenschou et al (2015: 131). My understanding and use of the term 'emotional cues' also draws on the concept 'emotionally charged phrases' as employed by Michailidou & Trenz (2015).

Fadil, forthcoming.). As will be demonstrated, emotional framing is a significant factor, with regards to creating audience engagement.

1.2 On Affect

Emotion drives people’s increasingly intimate relationships with technology, fuels engagement with news and information (...) It inspires connection. As journalism and society change, emotion is becoming a much more important dynamic in how news is produced and consumed. (Beckett & Deuze:2).

Emotional engagement¹⁵ with news or politically charged moments is commonplace. Rather than assume that this is an entirely novel trait attributable to social media, it is important to acknowledge that news has always tugged at emotional strings, but that today there a wider range of ‘emotional styles’ and audiences are explicitly encouraged to engage (Beckett & Deuze 2016: 3). Indeed, it has been documented that stories with emotional cues tend to both gain audience attention and prolong audience engagement (Beckett & Deuze:3, Figenschou et al. 2015).

‘We know from politics that people respond to emotion not ideas or facts—inspiring the rise of the so-called “fact-free” politics’ maintain Beckett & Deuze (2016: 3). A similar point is fetchingly formulated by Clay Shirky, who states: ‘As a medium gets faster, it gets more emotional. We feel faster than we think’ (ibid.: 4). Aside from the catchy packaging of the argument - is Shirky’s dismal picture accurate – and - do emotions and thoughts necessarily need to contradict one another? (Pfister 2015). These are very important queries, however I do not think that these questions can be sufficiently answered with a simple yes or no, mainly because it depends on the composition of the publics.¹⁶ Papacharissi’s (2014) concept of ‘affective publics’ is a term that fittingly, covers the affective ways in which social media audiences engage with news and mediatized conflict. Indeed as Beckett & Deuze (2016: 3) argue:

One key motive for consuming and certainly for sharing news in the social media space is personal. The consumer is acting in an emotionally charged way in connection with their community or wider networks.

15 Papacharissi (2015: 20-5) operates with a clear distinction between affect on the one hand and feelings/emotions on the other. Affect is held to be an energy or a mood, which may be subconscious, while feelings and emotions are theorized as being identified. I do not operate with a similar distinction. I use all three terms interchangeably, to describe both phenomena.

16 Audiences can constitute a variety of publics depending on the cause or topic, and a variety of background factors. See also footnote 2.

Papacharissi (2015:131) argues a similar point, arguing that narratives fuelled by personal affect, may be particularly well suited to counter politically dominant narratives:

These affectively charged micro-narratives typically produce disruptions or interruptions of the political narratives, inviting others to tune in and feel their way into their own place in politics.

Engaging in online debates about a mediatized conflict in a Facebook group like *Yes to wearing the cross whenever and wherever I choose* certainly fits the bill, in that 1) most of the initial posts by the group administrator are links to news, 2) the emotionally-charged responses from engaged audiences – ubiquitous, and 3) the dominant narratives in the online milieu can be considered in opposition to dominant political and mainstream media frames. In the next section I turn to how these characteristics manifest themselves in practice, as affective performances of conflict. I focus on both the specifics of *Yes to wearing the cross whenever and wherever I choose*, and the clear parallels across mediatized conflicts about entirely different themes.

On a general level, the discussion will provide layered insights on how mediatized conflicts about religion and media are instigated and performed in particular social contexts, by social media users. The goal is to shed light on the role of participatory audiences in framing and amplifying mediatized conflicts about religion, especially on the ways in which conflicts are intensified through what I call the politics of affect.

2 Affective Performance(s) of Conflict

2.1 Giving the ‘Voiceless’ a Voice: Claiming to Be the Silent Majority

Yes to wearing the cross whenever and wherever I choose, carries the characteristics of many other types of online environments. By virtue of its thematic (and initial protest-) focus, it appeals to particular interest groups, such as, those I have categorized as ‘conservative Christians’ and ‘nationalists’, which some times are overlapping categories.¹⁷ Conservative Christians and nationalists, are characterized by being the most voluminous in terms of unique Facebook

¹⁷ It is important to note that, *Yes to wearing the cross whenever and wherever I choose* also attracts debaters who do not share the group’s main point of departure, which makes for a very lively and at times livid debate climate, the intricacies of which I discussed in more detail in Abdel-Fadil, *forthc*. Broadly speaking those who are the most active on *Yes to wearing the cross whenever and wherever I choose* and the enactment of the conflict(s) can be divided into five clusters and ‘types’ of participants: Conservative Christians, Nationalists, Mediators, Fortified Secularists, and Ardent atheists.

profiles/individuals¹⁸ and the number of comments in this group. Hence their enactment of the conflict can be said to dominate the page, and hence conservative Christians and nationalists play an active role in shaping the conflict(s) and the outcomes, and are the focus of the current article.¹⁹ On a whole, conservative Christians main concern is the preservation of Christianity in Norway (and at times the world). They rally for more visibility of Christianity in public space, and often equate the nation with themselves. Their language tends to be more prone to a transcendental vocabulary, includes prayers, and is void of profanities. Conservative Christians, often express that they feel marginalized in Norwegian society, due their conservative religious views. Conservative Christians zealously focus on preserving Christianity in their performance of the conflict. As for the nationalists, they tend to be more liberal with the use of swearwords, and more into the preservation of ‘Norway’ than Christianity. Nationalists, often express xenophobic views with or without explicit Christian leanings. These individuals extensively focus on the preservation of ‘Norwegian heritage’ In their own rendition, conservative Christians and nationalists seem themselves as representing the majority of Norwegians, and that Norway is a ‘Christian nation’ founded on ‘Christian cultural heritage’.²⁰ It is worth noting that these claims do stand uncontested, and as I have demonstrated elsewhere, atheists and secularists ferociously battle against this reading of their nation and national identity (Abdel-Fadil, forthc.). However, an elaboration of these stances is beyond the scope of this article. Suffice it to say that the worldview the typical participants in *Yes to wearing the cross whenever and wherever I choose* is that they speak *for* the Christian nation. This starting point is significant in terms of affect, and shapes much of their emotive engagement with the mediatized conflict.

How then, do conservative Christians and nationalists (on a whole) perceive and frame the original NRK-cross conflict? All the data referred to in this article reflects main tendencies in the data, and in no way claims to be the only view purported by those I categorize as conservative Christians or nationalists. Part and parcel of their overarching conflict narrative, is that the pro-cross complaints were in the hundreds, while the against the cross complaints are reported to be a mere handful. This is referred to in an attempt to add credentials to their claim that they represent the majority view on the issue. Such descriptions of the state of affairs give rise to arguments of the type: ‘we are the real people’s voice’ and ‘Norwegian PBS is forced to allow a small minority dictate it’. Similar findings are found in Michaeliou & Trenz’s (2015) study about EU and

18 There is of course a hypothetical possibility that some users have created more than one Facebook profile and are commenting under several names. I have not scrutinized this further.

19 For a more detailed description of the various types and an elaboration on their performance of the conflict(s) in relation to one another, see (Abdel-Fadil, forthc.).

20 This is not entirely straightforward. For there is an intriguing paradox whereby conservative Christians and nationalists seem themselves as both in majority and marginalized or silenced.

environmentalism where some of the debaters self-identify as the ‘silent majority’ or what I have called ‘the will of the people’, elsewhere.²¹

Even if some individual journalists within NRK may sympathize with the idea of a news anchor being able to wear a cross, this is not the official stance. Rather, NRK maintain that their dress code policy was clear on this matter long before the journalist Siv Kristin Sællmann chose to adorn herself with the cross pendant when reading NRK’s local news in what is popularly termed ‘the Bible-belt’ region of Norway. In fact, NRK’s policy prohibits news anchors from wearing any garments or symbols, which may signify any religious or political due to a commitment to ‘neutrality’ in that particular role. In this reading, the complaints from viewers displeased with the cross on Norwegian TV-screens and PBS –news may have sparked NRK to enforce their policy – but they did not instigate the ban itself.

In contrast, within the ‘silent majority’ remediation of the conflict the ban is perceived as a direct result of NRK’s cowardice when faced with (at most) a handful of complaints from viewers outraged by a Christian cross being exhibited on PBS- news. Proponents of this view consider themselves the real representatives of the majority of Norwegians and thus claim to have ‘the Norwegian people’ on their side when they demand that NRK news anchors be allowed to wear the cross when on NRK.

In the remediation of the cross-ban conflict in *Yes to wearing the cross whenever and wherever I choose* it is often portrayed as NRK targeting either Siv Kristin Sællman (the personal angle) or Christians (the religious persecution angle). Both of these remediations tell the story of undue maltreatment, and hence are well-suited to stir up emotions amongst audiences with similar leanings. Furthermore, part and parcel of this framing is that the pre-existence of NRK’s rules and clothing policies is overlooked. Instead, the story is portrayed as if Sællmann (or Christians) are unfairly treated by a totally random, ad hoc regulation that came into being when Siv Kristin Sællmann wore her cross pendant in the NRK newsroom. Much as NRK’s regulations for attire and neutrality are ignored, the fact that they not only exist but also apply to people of other religions or political affiliations is often similarly brushed over. Frequent references to arguments of the type ‘if she /we can’t wear the cross then they shouldn’t be allowed to wear the hijab’ evidence this disconnect, and the disregard for the policy that NRK’s verdict is founded upon. In arguments of these types who is who gets a bit blurry. The journalist ‘Siv Kristin Sællmann’ becomes interchangeable with ‘we’, and hence who is allowed or disallowed from wearing a cross (and when

21 For instance in my analysis of (top-down) media frames in Post-Mubarak Egypt demonstrates how opposite political fractions claim to represent ‘the will of the people’, which in turn appears to be interlinked with an attempt to dictate the political process in a particular direction (<https://newmeast.wordpress.com/2013/08/03/the-good-the-bad-and-the-ugly-egypts-propaganda-war/>).

and where) becomes equally fuzzy. Together, these aspects lay the foreground for the conversation to transpire into one about the visibility of religion, and who's religion it is OK to show in public.

With this as a backdrop, the question of the size of Siv Kristin Sællmann's cross becomes very important to the debaters, the argument is: Its mere 14mm ought to be a sight to be tolerated. Also here the contrastation to the hijab serves to highlight that the cross is so tiny while the hijab is protruding. Particularly when the debate transcends its original boundaries and the conflict rages on as if the cross is forbidden in the Norwegian public sphere in general, the conflict transforms into one about the general visibility of religion, and which religion it is ok to display in public, or has the privilege of being 'the right religion'. The conceptualisation of a minority trying to dictate the majority is an emotional trigger theme, that pushes forward narratives about right and wrong – and upholding justice.

2.2 Separating 'Right' from 'Wrong': Moral and Normative Claims

When conservative Christians and nationalists demand that the cross be allowed to flash on the TV screen during news bulletins, they are in fact making a normative claim. Put simply, in their worldview it is immoral to forbid news anchors from adorning a cross. In this light, the prohibition of the cross is seen as a great injustice to 'Norwegians' – often equated with 'Christians'. Indeed, as other scholars have pointed out, normative claims and public negotiations of meaning and controversy are an integral part of the dynamics of mediatized conflicts (Sumiala 2015). Remediating and reframing conflict is thus a significant part of conflict performance and social media users' engagement with mediatized conflict (Cottle 2006, Eskjær, et al. 2015, Abdel-Fadil, forthc.).

Reframing and restructuring conflicts by positing alternative frames, is part and parcel of contesting and remediating conflict as interpreted and mediated by both mainstream media and co-debaters. In this sense, there is an element of public opinion making, in the performance of mediatized (Cottle 2006, Eskjær, et al. 2015). Put simply remediations contribute to shaping audience perceptions. The discussions between debaters in social media tend to reveal conflicting moral problems, and different senses and parameters of or for morality (Averbeck-Lietz et al 2015, Chouliaraki 2015, Michailidou & Trenz 2015, Figenschou 2015). On the one hand social media users engage in what can be defined as both an ideological and a moral battle, when performing conflict. At the same time, debaters also compete for attention, and ultimately there are winners and losers in all performances of conflict (Cottle 2016, Hjarvard et al, 2015, Michaeliou & Trenz 2015). According to this perspective, the most salient frames gain the most attention and dominate the debate, and are thus indicative of who wins and loses ground in the performance of conflict. In the case of *Yes to wearing the cross whenever and wherever I choose*, there is a somewhat skewed

starting point since the most salient frames and the narratives that branch out from them stem from the two groups of participants with the most obvious presence in the Facebook group. These frames draw on a particular type of emotive framing, as I will discuss further, in subsequent sections.

Remediations of conflict often entail restructuring the conflict in a manner that puts forward moral and normative claims. Figenschou et al. (2015) argue that audiences may experience a clash between news coverage and their own ‘common sensical popular morality’ and react to news frames on the basis of a ‘intuitive ethics’. For instance, in contentious public debates about immigration, debaters expressing pro-immigration stances often argue on the basis of what they consider the moral obligation of a society to treat immigrants and refugees with decency.²² By redressing the moral claims of a story, engaged audiences are able to gain attention and following for their remediation of the conflict. For instance, in the case of *Yes to wearing the cross whenever and wherever I choose*, conservative Christians and nationalists redress the morals by reframing the core of the conflict in the following emotionally charged and normative manner: it is a moral disgrace to ban the display of Christian symbols in a Christian nation. Neither of these claims go uncontested among other types of participants (Abdel-Fadil, forthc.). Among likeminded participants however, the normative and emotive frame is both compelling and grounds to ‘rise and revolt’ against opponents. By remediating the conflict, and emphasizing shared ideas of morality and moral justice, conservative Christians and nationalists are able to draw attention to the moral claim (and amplification of the conflict) that it is wrong to target and discriminate Christians in such an adversary way. By appealing to core identity issues and the moral justice of protecting Christians against undue discrimination, NRK ultimately represents a breach of justice. The perceived remedy is that NRK follow their (true) moral obligation to protect Christian values and preserve the national religion rather than forcefully and unjustly dictate the politics of a tiny minority. Injustice alone, is a powerful mobiliser of affect, but when it is coupled with such emotionally charged identity politics it gains even more potency. In effect, such normative remediations are packed with trigger themes and emotional cues, designed to tug at the very core fabrics of emotion that constitute a sense of self, and mobilize people into affect.

Central to the most salient framing of the cross-conflict is NRK’s skewed moral compass that defames Christians. The only way to correct these ills is to pressure NRK to restore the correct moral order of things, by calling them out. Justice is served when Christianity is awarded special treatment over other religions. NRK ought to grant Christians the right to wear the cross when reading the news because Norway is a Christian nation, and jewellery that signifies affiliation to Christianity is a ‘natural’ expression of identify. Prohibition on the other hand is unjust and

22 In cases of for instance deportation of immigrants, case which are both dramatic and emotively potent, audiences protest. Their sense of justice is drawn from their intuitive ethics, since they see it as simply wrong to throw out a person or family who thrives in this country, due to bureaucratic details (Figenschou et al. 2015).

outrageous. In effect, the demand to wear the cross expands from NRK newsrooms to all areas of public sphere. In this sense the frame transitions into a call for the freedom to wear the cross wherever and whenever in a more literal sense, as if the cross was prohibited from all public space in Norway.²³

An expansion of whom the cross is forbidden for is observable in one of the main frames of the conflict in this Facebook group. While the cross is initially understood as being prohibited for NRK news anchors, the understanding gradually expands to include all employees in NRK, after which all employees in the public sector are considered to be bound by a cross-ban, and then finally, the prohibition is envisioned as applying to all Norwegians. In the imaginations of the most active in the online discussions on *Yes to wearing the cross whenever and wherever I choose*, the conceptualizations of the ‘cross-ban’, are thus ever expansive. Hence, the prohibition of the cross, is exceedingly understood as a national ban in this online milieu. This is an example of the aforementioned spiralling argumentation style, sparked by a trigger theme, which in turn induces emotive responses. In Abdel-Fadil, *forthc.*, I demonstrate how this very spectacular understanding of the cross-ban is both a core characteristic of the debate while simultaneously also a highly contentious trait of performing the conflict for many of the debaters. Here it serves as an example of how the most salient frames of conflict are both high in effect and symbolic value because they relate to identity politics.

It is against this background, that many debaters call for increasing the visibility of the cross in public space in Norway. This call for the cross in public space is not to be confused with the right to display all religions in public. For the conservative Christians and nationalists, the moral order entails a hierarchy that Christianity ranks higher than other faiths (or non-religion), and ultimately links Christianity to territorial claims of the type: Norway is Christian, not Muslim.²⁴ Fear of Muslims or atheists gaining territory or dictating regulations about the public display of religion in Norway, is tangible.

Some conflicts and frames are better suited to draw out audiences’ sense of justice and moral obligations. Trigger themes are inherent to this type of conflict. The totality of these aspects lays the foreground for emotional involvement in conflict performance. Emotional engagement in the enactment of the conflict may in turn lead to a sense of a media slant.

23 As discussed in detail in (Abdel-Fadil, *forthc.*) this is a fairly common point of departure in the debates in the Facebook group in question.

24 While the superiority of Christianity is wildly and ferociously contested by other types of participants, Only a fraction of those rallying for the cross in this Facebook group do so with a ‘pro-all-religions- in public attitude’ (Abdel-Fadil, *forthc.*).

2.3 Restoring ‘Balance’ to a Perceived Media Slant

Rebellion against mainstream media representations of the NRK-cross case is perhaps not surprisingly at the core of many of the lively discussions in *Yes to wearing the cross whenever and wherever I choose*. This actually appears to be a fairly common trait with regards to audience engagement with mediatized conflicts, in the sense that debaters may experience a news slant that contradicts their ‘sense of justice’ (Figenschou et al. 2015) In their discussion of immigration debates in Norway, Figenschou et al. (2015) demonstrate how many of the debaters appear to believe in the ‘significance of news’, and in the importance of ‘speaking truth to power’ by critiquing news frames. This leads to stories with emotional cues, and the emotional involvement of the debate participants, which in turn, fuels stories of causal effects or blame, a point I shall return to. When dealing with topic of media bias, Cottle (2006) contrasts research findings of actual media slants to common sensical ideas about propaganda, media bias, distortions, in everyday experiences. Put briefly, people tend to have an exaggerated sense of media bias. Even if it is a very common perception the idea of media slant or propaganda doesn’t hold, according to Cottle (2006).²⁵ Several studies of bottom up mediatized conflict, demonstrate that perceptions of media bias are commonplace (Averbeck-Lietz et al 2015, Chouliaraki 2015, Michailidou & Trenz 2015, Figenschou 2015). In fact, it may even be seen as one of the most common traits across conflicts. It appears to be the driving force for numerous social actors who may enter the debate and perform the conflict on the basis of the need to balance out the slant, tell the truth, and remediate the conflict from the ‘right angle’. Costructuring the conflict from another vantage point as an attempt to counteract perceived media bias is certainly evident across several mediatized conflicts.

In the *Yes to wearing the cross whenever and wherever I choose*, the main claim about media bias revolves around NRK being leftist and secularist in its media reporting. The most vocal proponents of an alleged media slant, consider NRK a media outlet for socialist propaganda. They lament that NRK’s lack of neutrality earns them the name ARK rather NRK. AKP is reference to the Labour Party in Norway, which is abbreviated AP. The current Labour party is charged with fuelling PBS with a politicized leftist agenda. This in turn evolves into a critique of the PBS license which all Norwegian households with at TV-set are obliged to pay: the argument being that one should not have to pay to listen to AKP spewing out communist propaganda. A call for boycotting NRK is linked both to the idea of communism and the presumed anti-religious stance of the media outlet.

The link to party politics and politicians is not insignificant. The case of *Yes to wearing the cross whenever and wherever I choose* shows how particular political parties are blamed for the curtailment of religious expression in public spaces. In short, leftists and socialists are seen as ruining Norway with both their naïve immigration politics and their ban of religiosity from public

25 Arguably media slant may hold better in some corners of the world.

spaces. To top things off these same political parties are seen as also dictating Norwegian media, and manipulating the news to suite their ideological agenda(s). An interlinked emotive response is the condemnation of NRK expressed as ‘To hell with NRK’ or the like. Many debaters tune in stating that they too, do not want to economically support biased, media slant, unfair representation and hence call for a boycott of NRK and the compulsory payment of a TV license per household.

Others call for the dismantling of NRK as a PBS or selling it off altogether: ‘Do they even know they are in Norway?’ ask a number of debaters– an emotive rhetorical question which connotes NRK selling out Norway. In this emotionally charged manner, allowing the cross to be worn by NRK news anchors, is framed as a question of protecting the nation. Part and parcel of this remediation is that socialists and atheists and Muslims are to blame for the nation dissolving. Common arguments include: ‘How can they pose as a Public Service when they do not stand up for - or protect - our Norwegian values? How can they expect us to pay for that crap?’ These types of arguments are often linked to the conviction that NRK only represents a very marginal segment of society - whilst those arguing against NRK or ARK represent the mainstream view in Norway or the ‘silent majority’. Reiterating many of the same points in the very media outlet he seeks to critique Hoelseth, a local politician from the Progress Party, argues that NRK/ARK is ‘Fox News for Socialists’ and that weakening NRK’s grip on the mediascape will lead to more democracy (Hoelseth 2015).

It is important to acknowledge that perceptions of media slant can be seen to represent: ‘a disconnect’ between mainstream media and its audiences, which ‘grows as the industry suffers from a loss in public trust and confidence’ (Witschge & Nygren, 2009: 41 in Beckett & Deuze 2016: 2). This lack of trust in itself may ride on a series of emotions ranging from frustration, fear, to anger leading to the wielding of increasingly emotionally charged frames of mediatized conflict(s). Indeed, similar emotionally charged accusations of media slants and political dictatorship are for instance found in the modes in which publics engage with debates about the EU environment debate, which suggests yet another cross-topic communality of engaged audiences (Michailidou & Trenz 2015). Claims that a minority is dictating a majority, are made in several mediatized conflicts and seem to inspire dictatorship metaphors.

2.4 Of ‘Dictatorship’ and ‘Tumors’: Evaluation and Devaluation of Co-Debaters

Audiences often compete for attention. In fact, one of the main characteristics of social media audience’s online engagement with conflict is that it often plays out in the form of competition of perspectives and audience attention. Part and parcel of competing is evaluating other performances of conflict. Audiences then, not only evaluate mainstream media coverage of the conflicts they are engaged in – they also scrutinize and evaluate each and those they hold responsible for the current

state of affairs. Averbek-Lietz (2015) outline the ways in which media audiences interact with one another, and the ways in which they evaluate each others' statements. More specifically Averbek-Lietz (2015) argue that debaters withhold or extend respect in their social evaluation of one another, and thus frequently pass social judgment of others in their interactions. They often do so by either praising arguments as good, or devaluating arguments as bad. These types of evaluations are often extended into evaluations of co-debaters. As I have illustrated elsewhere, in its more extreme iterations take the form of coarse personal insults. The general gist of such insults is to classify opponents as imbeciles (Abdel-Fadil, forthc.).

Affective publics are moved by emotions. Evaluating one another in an emotive fashion, sparks interest and may lead certain frames to gain more attention than others. Michaeliou & Trenz (2015), demonstrate how evaluating others and their user comments, is a key characteristic of the contentious environmental debates in Europe. In the bottom up enactments of the conflict, winners and loser of the debates emerge. Who wins or loses a debate is tied to the overall strategies and the modes of conflict performance (ibid).

Defaming opponents makes for a livid debate, and certainly serves to draw audience attention. Metaphors of disease or political demise are not uncommon. Debaters may be tempted to depict the authority behind an unpopular decision as inflicting 'cancer' or a 'tumour', or classify their opponents as 'North-Korean dictators' or 'EU-dictatorship' or the like (Averbek-Lietz et al. 2015). It is interesting to note that similar tactics and emotionally charged descriptions of opponents, are employed by audiences across various mediatized conflicts, on rather dissimilar topics. Discussions about the EU financial crisis, and the NRK Cross-Case are framed in intriguingly similar ways.

In both cases, audiences lament that they have no autonomy or freedoms and provide emotionally charged comparisons to being governed by dictatorships or living in North Korea. In both cases, the governing authorities, (perceived or real) such as specific European governments or the EU parliament in the first case, and the Norwegian government or the Norwegian Council of The Norwegian Public Broadcasting Council are accused of imposing their authorities in autocratic ways and are depicted in similar ways as representing either terminal disease or a dictatorship. The former implies death and the latter implies suffocation or no room for manoeuvre. Certainly such imagery is tailored to evoke emotive responses. References to being quelled from speech or action, and the looming risk of mortality, serve to ignite the debate in a way that invites more affect to the performance of conflict. Such depictions are well suited, to stir up anger, sadness, or other emotive reactions and hence pushes social media audiences to perform conflict in more emotive ways. The us vs. them divide and mechanisms of othering and blaming are evident in all the bottom up mediatized cases examined, and comes in varieties (Abdel-Fadil, forthc., Michaeliou & Trenz 2015, Averbek-Lietz et. al 2015), and are appear to be defining characteristics of performing conflict.

Metaphors with a certain flair for drama, are both salient and effective attention grabbers. In *Yes to wearing the cross whenever and wherever I choose*, one recurrent emotionally charged argument is the somewhat melodramatic argument: what if I tattoo a cross on my arm, what will they do then – chop off my arm? Such dramatic images thrive in (online) debates because they are founded upon trigger themes, which connect to audiences' self-perceptions and identities. This may explain why I come across several instances of the tattoo and chop the arm off argument. In addition, quite a few debaters proclaim (in a far less dramatic fashion) that they plan to tattoo a cross on their body in response to the alleged cross-ban. This comes in addition to all those who announce that they will either brush the dust off their old cross-pendant or purchase one for immediate wear. Within this worldview, such declarations serve to emotionally validate the necessity of exhibiting affiliation to Christianity in public space, at a time when such displays of religiosity are considered problematic or against the law. In this way the conflict is framed as fighting for the right to *be* Christian. Against this backdrop, visibly marking oneself with a cross, is not only an act of defiance, it is also an act of everyday heroism of saving Christianity from its demise.

Affective publics not only play the part of the hero, they also tend to point out the villains.

2.5 Shaming and Blaming Tactics

Cultivating an 'Us vs. Them Divide' is, perhaps not unsurprisingly, integral to the enactment of mediatized conflicts. Othering, shaming and blaming, go hand in hand and are core characteristics of the ways in which engaged audiences perform conflict (Abdel-Fadil, forthc., Michaeliou & Trenz 2015, Cottle 2016, Averbek-Lietz et. al 2015). In previous sections, I outlined how emotionally charged evaluations and descriptions of opponents as 'dictators', 'tumours' or 'imbeciles' are commonplace in mediatized conflict dealing with rather different topics. For instance, in *Yes to wearing the cross wherever and whenever* leftist politicians are often described as spineless and resented for being oh-so-politically correct, in their lack of sufficient defence of Norway and Christianity. Still, the main frames involve many different 'others'. Put differently, there is a lot of blame to go around. The main targets are socialist politicians, Muslims, immigrants, atheists, and secularists. For instance, the prohibition of the cross from NRK news is often presented as a cowardly act on behalf of NRK, and as caving into the momentous pressure from a few immigrants, Muslims, leftists, secularists or atheists – who insist on banning the cross – and indeed all Christian symbols from the public sphere in Norway. The blaming comes in different variations. For instance Muslims, immigrants, leftist politicians, secularist and atheists - are accused of De-Christening Norway bit by bit. In this reading these villains are the puppeteers and NRK the puppet. The 'political correctness' of various others is seen as key to the demise of Christianity in Norway, and

is often expressed in protectionist ways of protecting Norway from immigrants or Muslims especially. One of the elaborate spin offs of the main frame, is that socialist politicians are clearly to blame, and are dictating NRK with their secularist agenda, and allowing immigrants and Muslims to be used as pawns in the de-Christening of Norway. Another spin of the blaming and shaming tactic is the following: leftist politicians/NRK are so politically correct and naïve, that they end up ‘gifting’ Norway to immigrants/Muslims. In this reiteration, Christianity is sacrificed at the expense of political correctness. A common denominator is that the ultimate goal of all others, is to de-Christianize the nation.

Shaming and blaming are arguably emotive acts, they are projections of negative emotions. Indeed the majority of emotions expressed by audiences when engaging in mediatized debates may be negative. For instance, Michaeliou & Trenz (2015) illustrate how the emotionally charged phrases in the EU environment policy debates, take the shape of negative emotive commentary, and hence the debaters often remediate the conflict in ways that amplify or multiply the conflict(s).²⁶

Intriguingly, part and parcel of the blaming game in this online milieu is that those purporting the main frame of blaming Muslims or immigrants are blamed by other debaters for derailing the debate and maliciously scapegoating people who have nothing to do with NRK-cross conflict and using this debate as a springboard to spread xenophobic spew (Abdel-Fadil, forthc.). Still, the main culprits are Muslims, immigrants, atheists, secularists and leftists. Sumaila (2015) discusses how the Us vs. Them divide often takes the form of ‘the ideal victim’ vs. ‘the absolute other’. In my reading, Christians are projected as the ideal victims who endure the most suffering, in the overarching master narrative in *Yes to wearing the cross whenever and wherever I choose*. While, Muslims are depicted as the absolute other, with negative commentary, in ways unparalleled to other groups blamed. Some frames are simply more polarizing than others, and represent what Michaeliou & Trenz (2015) call ‘septic frames’. The most septic frames appear to be reserved for othering Muslims, and will be discussed and contextualized in the next section.

2.6 Emotional Cues and ‘Enraged Fans’

The ubiquity of affect marks audience engagement with mediatized conflict. For instance, a defining characteristic of the EU environment debates, as characterized by Michaeliou & Trenz, is the way the conflict is remediated in a fashion that incorporates stories with emotional cues, and negatively emotionally charged phrases. In the case at hand, the very name of the group, *Yes to wearing the cross whenever and wherever I choose*, can be understood as an emotionally charged

26 In (Abdel-Fadil, forthc.), I discuss the role of participants in *Yes to wearing the cross whenever and wherever I choose* whose main mission is to mediate between participants and defuse the conflict.

name. While it may not have been intended as a literal description of the Christians' plight in Norway, it does however seem to gradually take on a literal meaning as the enactment of the conflict progresses. It can be argued that for many of the participants in the Facebook group, the name of the group, over time, symbolizes the emotionally charged postulate that the cross is forbidden in all public spaces in Norway. Thus the name of the Facebook group can in itself spark emotive responses amongst some debaters and simultaneously instil the perception that Christians in Norway need to fight for their individual right to bear the cross in public. As an observer, one may feel overwhelmed by what appears to be the dominant mode of performing the conflict. The sheer number of posts that argue that: Muslims and immigrants are to blame for the cross-ban, or claim that there is no freedom of speech or freedom of religion in Norway, or claim that there is a general cross-ban in Norway is somewhat daunting. Certainly, the conflict is frequently enacted through amplification, transformation, and generating new conflicts. Indeed, one of the most extraordinary characteristics and amplifications of the conflict on this Facebook page is what can be described as an expansive understanding of for whom the cross is perceived as forbidden for.

The fervent performance of conflict rides on emotions. Media audiences exchange moral claims, discuss rights and wrongs and uncertainties, thereby mobilizing emotions (Averbeck-Lietz et al 2015, Chouliaraki 2015, Michailidou & Trenz 2015, Figenschou 2015). Choulikarki (2015), working on mediatized death in the Arab world, demonstrates how the mobilization of emotions is interlinked to 'affective attunement'. Thus, even if remediations tend to ride on the emotions of the person(s) remediating, they may also serve to mobilize and fine-tune the emotions of their audiences (Choulikarki 2015). In the case of *Yes to wearing the cross whenever and wherever I choose*, as has been illustrated throughout this article, many of the frames tug at the strings of emotive perceptions of self, religious and national identity. Yet another example is the claim that the cross will be erased from all public and places and symbols, planting the suspicion that the cross will ultimately have to be erased from the Norwegian flag, rendering it entirely unrecognizable as a national symbol. The invitation to visualise the Norwegian flag without a cross – is highly powerful because it may give associations to being erased or wiped out as both a nation and a religion. In addition, by removing the blue and white cross in the centre of the Norwegian flag, one is left with an entirely red flag – a very suitable symbol for those arguing that Norway is a socialist dictatorship. The latter is a frame with less emotive appeal among the debaters in this online context, than the former. One of the emotions that drives these types of frames is rage.

Social media users who immerse themselves in rage and who frequently unleash embellished, emotionally charged phrases, and septic frames, are classified as 'enraged fans' by Michaeliou & Trenz (2015). The most septic frames in *Yes to wearing the cross whenever and wherever I choose* are reserved for blaming Muslims, and put forward by 'enraged fans'. Part and parcel of enraged fandom is cultivating an 'us vs. them divide' only in more extreme renditions. Enraged fans take

emotional cues up a notch. In the case of blaming Muslims, outrage at Muslims' (perceived) inherent wish to take over Norway and Europe and eradicate Christianity is expressed in a manner reminiscent of Eurabia theories (Bangstad 2014). These blaming tactics differ from other forms of othering, in that the enraged fans, embellish in antagonistic descriptions of Muslims classifying them as murderers, rapists, criminals, thieves, or cockroaches. Debaters who embellish in their 'absolute othering' of Muslims in this manner, transition from being emotionally engaged to being utterly outraged can be said to constitute 'enraged fans'. In my interpretation, 'enraged fans' are a priori angry, in the sense that they bring their rage to the mediatized conflict. That is, enraged fans are already angry before they enter this particular space in order to enact the conflict. When further immersed in other debaters' negatively charged phrases and septic frames, their anger swells, and the transition to enraged fan ensues.

The septic frames of the enraged fans do not go entirely unsanctioned: they are ferociously contested by debaters with other convictions (Abdel-Fadil, forthc.). In addition, the administrator of the group has blocked a number of the enraged fans and deleted some of their comments due to unsuitable content.²⁷ Nonetheless, septic frames and enraged fans are present in the empirical material I analyse. Some enraged fans lament that they are being censored and that they plan to leave the Facebook group because they cannot exercise their freedom of speech in this online forum.

While enraged fans amplify their rage and invite others to join in and ride a wave of anger, there are other emotions that audiences may seek to fine-tune when participating in mediatized conflicts about religion.

2.7 Affective Publics and Fine-Tuning Emotion(s)

Anger is an emotion that appears to motivate and shape much of audiences' performance of conflict. Yet as argued by Beckett & Deuze (2016:4) media audiences tend to yearn for the full range of emotions (e.g., love and desire, wonder and surprise, fun, anger and fear, disgust). Remediating conflict(s) mobilizes and in Choulikarki's terminology 'fine-tunes' emotions in both audiences and other debaters, and may activate a spectrum of emotions such as: outrage, compassion, contempt, vengeance (Choulikarki 2015). In other words, a range of emotions may connect with - and engage audiences. Against this backdrop, it is important not to overlook that anger may not be the only emotion that is being nourished and encouraged to flourish in *Yes to wearing the cross whenever*

27 In the administrator's own rendition, he says he does not have the capacity to moderate the group, but that he has blocked or deleted 10-15 users from the Facebook page due to extremist views. He says his aim is to allow for a vibrant debate but draws the line at vulgar language and hateful comments. The number of 'members' or 'likes' fluctuates, as some leave the group, and new members join (Abdel-Fadil, forthc.).

and wherever I choose. Sentiments of compassion and love for fellow humans regardless of religious or political affiliations shape a few of the counter narratives in *Yes to wearing the cross whenever and wherever I choose*, but an elaboration of this is beyond the scope of this article. Still, it is interesting to note that some frames of conflict appear to be driven by feelings of boredom and the need for distraction, gratification and entertainment (Abdel-Fadil, *forthc.*, Skogerbø & Winsvold 2008).

Rage and outrage are certainly well represented in the main frame(s) of the NRK cross-conflict as put forward in *Yes to wearing the cross whenever and wherever I choose* as evidenced in this article. The main targets of anger are: Leftists, Muslims, immigrants, atheists, secularists as previously demonstrated. Nonetheless, other types of participants also express rage. For instance, atheists unleash much rage, by scapegoating religious people who are often likened to imbeciles (Abdel-Fadil, *forthc.*). It is also interesting to note that rage is as at times expressed as part of an exasperated evaluation of other debaters who are perceived circulating unfounded remediations of the conflict. Accusing other debaters of being unhinged or racist may at times be part and parcel of their fury (*ibid.*).

Still the analysis of mediatized conflicts has to take into consideration that some times emotions are muddled. For instance, the main frame(s) that are discussed in this article appear to be driven by anger or at times even outrage, but may actually ride on a more complex set of emotions. One emotion does not necessarily rule out another. Affective reactions can draw on a series of either complementary or contradictory emotions simultaneously. It appears equally likely that some of the remediations are fuelled with sadness and fear in addition to anger. Both sadness and fear may pose as anger, but more importantly all three emotions may coexist and intermingle and together drive a narrative or worldview. For instance, the nostalgic longing for a Norway (real or perceived) that once was, can be understood as an expression of sadness for what was lost. At the same time it can be interpreted as an expression of the fear of irrevocable damage to the nation or the extinction of Christianity all together. Both sadness and fear can fuel anger or all three emotions may inhabit a narrative side by side. By incorporating emotive cues and trigger themes of this sort into the remediations of the conflict, emotive reactions among fellow debaters are likely to ensue.

Enraged fans take the emotional rollercoaster to its extremity, by immersing themselves in variations of outrage, contempt and vengeance. The dedication to vengeance is particular to enraged fans. By fine-tuning emotive narratives, participants are able to draw the attention of audiences and the push the emotional buttons of co-debaters, sparking affective responses.

3 Concluding Reflections

Yes to wearing the cross whenever and wherever I choose is a special interest Facebook group and online milieu, which shares a number of characteristics with other bottom up performances of mediatized conflicts. If we are to sum up some of the findings, across cases then we find that mediatized conflicts tend to entail: a struggle for audience attention, ideological confrontations, remediation of conflict, the evaluation of other debaters' user comments, passing both social and moral judgment. Moreover, typically mediatized conflicts entail moralizing the conflict and mobilizing emotions that centre around trigger themes, which in turn may lead to shaming & blaming participants with opposing views. Ultimately we find that the multiple ways in which social media users perform conflict leads to winners and losers of the debate(s). Dominant affective narratives in a given digital setting may run counter to dominant political narratives.

Debaters remediate conflicts in ways that draw on an abundance of emotional cues and efficiently grab the attention of co-debaters and other audiences. Calling upon particular sets of emotions (over other types of feelings) may be crucial to the enactment of both the conflicts that play out in *Yes to wearing the cross whenever and wherever I choose*, but also mediatized conflicts in general. In this sense we can talk not only of affective publics but also of politics of affect.

Still, certain emotions may simply be better suited to amplify conflicts and thrust audiences into emotive states, creating affective publics. *Yes to wearing the cross whenever and wherever I choose* suggests that anger may be such a driving emotion, but not exclusively so. This Facebook group, by virtue of dealing with religion and identity issues contains typical trigger themes, which may lead audiences to emotively enact conflict. Still, these modes of enactment of conflict cannot be understood as a characteristic of religious strife alone. It is evident that the same mechanisms are in play when social media users engage with other topics or non-religious themes and entirely secular topics. Affective publics appear to perform conflict in particular ways if the same emotional push buttons are pushed. It seems then, that affect, rather than religious conviction may be the driving force behind the dramaturgy and amplifications of bottom up mediatized conflicts.

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Biography

MONA ABDEL-FADIL is currently a postdoctoral researcher at the Department of Media and Communication, at the University of Oslo. Her ongoing research is part of the [Engaging with Conflicts in Mediatized Religious Environments: A Comparative Scandinavian Study](#) project. Mona Abdel-Fadil is Editor in Chief of the [Religion: Going Public Blog](#) and the Coordinator of the Nordic Network on Media and Religion.

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The Word Has Become Game: Researching Religion in Digital Games

Frank G. Bosman

Abstract

In this article, the author proposes a multi-layered methodology for researching religion in video games. The author differentiates between five levels at which religion can be encountered in video games and/or video game research: material, referential, reflexive, ritual and meta level. These levels range from explicitly religious to implicitly religious, from game-immanent to game-transcendent, and from developer-intended to gamer-experienced. In this context, the author proposes a four-step methodology, which incorporates insights from both game-immanent and actor-centered approaches: internal reading (playing the game), internal research (collection of in-game information), external reading (mapping the intermedial relationships), and external research (gathering out-game information). Before doing so, the author proposes a new definition of video games as ‘digital, playable (narrative) texts’ that incorporate both ludological and narratological elements.

Keywords

Methodology, narratology, ludology, religion, theology.

1 Introduction

During one episode in *Metal Gear Solid V: The Phantom Pain* (2015), the game protagonist Big Boss sits in the back of an open jeep. He listens to a long speech by his archenemy Skull Face, the physically deformed commander of a private army. In his hands, Skull Face holds a test tube containing a contagious and deadly parasite that nestles on the vocal cords of its victims and that is activated when the host speaks a certain pre-programmed language. Speaking English, German or any other programmed language will lead to certain doom and death. When Skull Face raises his biological weapon, he utters the words: ‘The Word became flesh.’ This unexpected quotation of the

opening words of the Gospel of John (1.14) is remarkable. The quotation is appropriate to the context of the game, but its original meaning is turned inside out. The real question is: what does it mean? Why did developer Kojima interpose this reference to a well-known Biblical verse into a game that cannot be called ‘religious’ in the strict sense of the word?

Religion, however, is no stranger to the world of modern video games. In *Fallout 4* (2015), for instance, there is a little chapel in the town of Diamond City. Pastor Clements welcomes the player to his one true pluralistic church of the Wastelands:

I suppose I should say this chapel really belongs to God. But since I never get around to deciding which God in particular, I guess you could say it belongs to all of them.

In *The Talos Principle* (2015), a voice from above guides a young robot in search of a purpose in life, identifying itself as ‘Elohim’, which means ‘God’ or ‘Gods’ in Biblical Hebrew and denotes the God of Israel. And in *Child of Light* (2014), a young princess, Aurora, is executed on a Good Friday in order to be resurrected on the following Easter Sunday, after having rescued a hellish underworld from an evil queen. The list is almost endless: a statue of the Virgin Mary surrounded by written supplications in *Hitman: Absolution* (2012), an enforced and deadly baptism in *Bioshock Infinite* (2013), an eerie gun-selling priest who is called Longinus in *Far Cry 4* (2012).

Although it is certainly not the largest section of the relatively new field of digital gaming research, the study of religion and video games has expanded quite considerably since 2010 at least. Through landmark publications such as *Halos & Avatars* (2010), *Godwired* (2011), *eGods* (2013), *Of Games and God* (2013), *Religion in Digital Games* (2014), *Playing with Religion* (2014) and *Religion in Digital Games Reloaded* (2015), ‘religious game studies’ has become a multidisciplinary field of research that has attracted experts from scholarly disciplines such as anthropology, sociology, psychology, philosophy, religious studies and theology (Grieve/Campbell 2014, pp. 51-66).

This overview – which is anything but exhaustive – shows the richness of the scholarly research of religion and digital games, but at the same time illustrates that the discipline as such is only in its adolescence (Heidbrink, Knoll & Wysocki 2014, pp. 5-50; Grieve & Campbell 2014, pp. 51-66). The ludology-versus-narratology debate still lurks in the background, despite having been declared ‘over’ (Heidbrink, Knoll & Wysocki 2014, pp. 11-13). Game-immanent approaches compete with actor-centered alternatives (Heidbrink, Knoll & Wysocki 2015, pp. 67-79). I will return to these discussions later on in more detail. And there continues to be debate about how to define what video games actually are (Schut 2013, pp. 15-28).

In this article, I wish to propose a multi-layered methodology for researching religion in video games (third part); a methodology that differentiates between five levels at which religion can

play a role in video games (second part). These five levels run from explicitly religious to implicitly religious, from game-immanent to game-transcendent, and from developer-intended to gamer-experienced. Before I do so, however, I will also propose a new definition of video games as ‘digital (interactive), playable (narrative) texts’ that incorporate both ludological and narratological elements (first paragraph). By way of conclusion I will articulate two suggestions for further research.

2 The Definition of ‘Video Game’

What is a video game? The answer to this simple question also seems simple enough. Virtually everyone, even non-gamers, has some idea what a video game is. Ask a random person on the street to name a video game and some iconic game titles such as *Pacman* (1980), *Super Mario Bros* (1983) or *World of Warcraft* (2004) will probably be mentioned. It is not even necessary to have played any video games to know that they exist and to grasp the impact they have on our society and culture (Lauteren 2002, p. 218). But at second glance, the question is much more complicated. What do these video games have in common? Games such as *Tetris* (1984) and *Final Fantasy XII* (2006) may both be called ‘games’, but ‘what they have in common may in fact be rather less interesting or important than the ways in which they differ’ (Carr 2006, p. 7).

Discussion of the definition of a video game has surfaced most distinctly in the so-called ‘ludology-versus-narratology debate’. Ludologists such as Markku Eskelinen (2001), Jesper Juul (2001) and Gonzalo Frasca (1999) view video games (exclusively or primarily) as *ludus*, as a game to be played by players. Eskelinen: ‘True stories are just uninteresting ornaments or gift-wrappings to games, and laying any emphasis on studying these kinds of marketing tools is just a waste of time and energy’. Narratologists such as Chris Hansen, on the other hand, approach games (exclusively or primarily) as narratives that the game tell the gamer, through the interaction between game and gamer (Hansen 2010). The sharp edges of this debate seem to have softened a little over the last decade, as both ludologists and narratologists have agreed that their debate is difficult to settle (Frasca 2003; Jenkins 2004; Murray 2013). Jan Simons has suggested, however, that ‘the issues at stake seem to have been blissfully ignored rather than resolved (Simons 2007).

In 2008, Robert Buerkle (pp. 46-66) formulated seven differences between video games viewed as texts (narratological approach) and video games viewed as games (ludological approach). As texts, video games are fixed tangible objects, produced by a semiotic system, that utilize a one-way flow of information from source to author, address a mass audience, provide a definite object of analysis, imply past tense (evincing predetermination) and foreground their mediation. As games,

on the other hand, video games are activities that create their own system of meaning, allow a two-way flow of information between gamer and player, address individual players, imply present tense (evincing uncertainty) and suggest immediacy. In short: as texts, video games are written and read, and as games, they are played.

Buerkle's distinctions, as well as the implications of the narratology-ludology debate, suggest that every definition of the concept of a video game must incorporate both dimensions, which at the same time makes such an endeavor extremely difficult (Mukherjee 2015, pp. 76-77). Some scholars have proposed a very simple but effective definition. Richard Ferdig (2014, p. 71), for example, defines video games as all 'digital games played on a television or computer screen'. Others, such as Oliver Steffen (2012, pp. 249-250), have proffered elaborate descriptions of all the different elements that constitute a video game: they are simultaneously 'entertainment software', 'system(s) of rules and control' and 'sign-producing machines [with the] ability to tell stories'.

I wish to propose a new definition for the purposes of researching religion in video games; a definition that takes into account both ludological and narratological insights, and that distinguishes video games from 'regular' games. Video games are digital (interactive), playable (narrative) texts. The five terms that constitute this definition – digital, interactive, playable, narrative and text – need further clarification.

In the first place, video games are *texts*. The problem with the notion of 'text' is similar to that which bedevils 'video games'. Everybody knows what it means, but when you try to give a definition, the concept proves elusive. In the classical definition, a 'text' is 'any discourse fixed by writing' (Ricoeur 1981, p. 145). But in postmodern contexts, the notion of 'text' includes far more than just written words and sentences, such as films, paintings, clothes, architecture and – even – video games (Buerkle 2008, pp. 26-35). In other words, in the postmodern context, any object that communicates information in such a way that it can be conceived as doing so, and interpreted in any way, is considered a 'text'. The hypothetical character of the interpreter makes it possible to identify something as communicating information even though an actual interpreter does not (yet) view it as such. To put it differently: a text is an object that can in any way be interpreted as communicating information.

Video games certainly qualify as text, as Buerkle has shown. Video games are fixed objects, traceable as coherent, limited units on a storage medium. Video games have a discursive instance, that is, a communicative exchange occurs between game and gamer. And video games have exterior meaning, that is, they can only exist because of the intertextual relationship between the game itself and all other media it is dependent upon (Allen 2000, pp. 8-60). Video games are texts in so far as they are 'mediated sign systems and they are given meaning by their audience, not only through and

during the act of playing itself, but also through the extensive, intertextual culture associated with games' (Lauteren 2002, p. 218).

Video games are *digital* texts. As Marie-Laure Ryan (2006, p. 98) has described, video games are digital systems that have the following features:

1. an interactive and reactive nature,
2. volatile signs and variable displays,
3. multiple sensory and semiotic channels, and
4. networking capabilities.

The first property of video games in particular is very important, as Chris Crawford (2002, p. 191) has explained: 'It mandates choice for the user. Every interactive application must give its user a reasonable amount of choice. No choice, no interactivity. This is not a rule of thumb, it is an absolute, uncompromising principle'. Without interactivity, there is no game at all, and certainly no video game. The interactivity of video games can take different forms, as Ryan (2006, pp. 108-122) has suggested: internal (the player exists in the game world by means of an avatar) versus external (as in the god game genre), and exploratory (the choices of the player do not alter the game world) versus ontological (the choices of the player alter the game world).

In order to incorporate the issues raised by the ludology-narratology debate, it is necessary to add two more elements to the definition of video games: narrativity and playability. For narrativity, I turn – again – to Ryan (2006, pp. 8-9). She has organized the conditions of narrativity into three semantic dimensions (spatial, temporal and mental) and one formal/pragmatic one:

1. Narrative must be about a world populated by individuated existents.
2. This world must be situated in time and undergo significant transformations.
3. The transformations must be caused by non-habitual physical events.
4. Some of the participants in the events must be intelligent agents who have a mental life and react emotionally to the states of the world.
5. Some of the events must be purposeful actions by these agents, motivated by identifiable goals and plans.
6. The sequence of events must form a unified causal chain and lead to closure.

7. The occurrence of at least some of the events must be asserted as fact for the story world.
8. The story must communicate something meaningful to the recipient.

It is easy to see how elaborate role playing games such as *The Elder Scrolls: Skyrim* (2011) or *Fallout 3* (2008) meet these requirements of narrativity. But it is more difficult to maintain that narrativity is a prime feature of video games when we consider abstract games such as Chess or Go (abstract ludic actions), or games that consist of a simulation of real-life games such as soccer or tennis (simulation of abstract ludic actions). Ryan (2006, p. 194) tries to establish, successfully I believe, that even these abstract (video) games have a narrative dimension. Using the example of a hypothetical radio broadcast of a local baseball game, Ryan (2006, pp. 75-93) shows that it is almost impossible for human psychology not to interpret this game *as a narrative*. The same applies to chess or tennis. It is almost impossible for any person feeling at least some excitement about the game (sufficient to bother participating in or watching it), not to make up some basic narratives, at least in the safe environment of their own thoughts (Worth 2004).

Incorporating the narrative (or narratological) element of video games is not enough, however. We have to add the ‘strategic dimension of gameplay to the imaginative experience of a fictional world’ (Ryan 2006, p. 203). In other words: it is necessary also to include the ludological approach in our definition. Georg Lauteren (2002, p. 218) has suggested that video games must be viewed as ‘playable texts’. We have already seen in what way video games might be interpreted as ‘texts’. And quoting Huizinga’s famous *Homo Ludens*, Lauteren has accentuated the ‘game as contest’ (Huizinga 1987, p. 9). Similarly to Huizinga, Roger Caillois (2001, pp. 9-23) has distinguished four types of play: *agon* (competition), *alea* (chance), *mimicry* (simulation) and *ilinx* (vertigo). All of these can also be applied to particular video games.

We may conclude this section by formulating the following definition. Video games are digital (interactive), playable (narrative) texts. As a text, a video game is an object of interpretation. As a narrative, it communicates meaning. As a game, it is playable. And as a digital medium, it is interactive.

3 Five Levels of Religion in Video Games

After having established a working definition of the video game, we now turn to the phenomenon of ‘religion’ in the context of such digital games. Scholars have published on religious aspects of

individual games, such as *Dragon Age II* (2012) or the *Mass Effect* trilogy (2007, 2010, 2012). Others have studied religious notions and figures in video games and game series, such as for example on transcendent horror in the *Silent Hill* (1999~2012) series and *Fatal Frame* (2001~2015) series, on dystopia and religion in *Bioshock* (2009), *Bioshock Infinite* (2013), *Dishonored* (2012) and *Brink* (2011), or on the appearance of old Jewish mythological figures such as Lillith and Nephilim in *Diablo 3* (2012), *Darksiders 1 and 2* (2010, 2012), and *DMC: Devil May Cry* (2013) (Bosman & Poorthuis 2015). Other scholars have examined ritual behavior found in players of MMORPGs (Gazzard 2013, pp. 95-102). And some scholars have construed video gaming as a kind of religion in itself (Wagner 2012).

Ferdig (2014, pp. 71-77) has advanced a framework to negotiate the different ways in which religion can and has been studied in the context of video games. The four components of Ferdig's framework are:

1. game content: content explicitly related to religion;
2. game context: story, environments and situations within the game that explicitly or implicitly refer to religion;
3. game challenge: actual goals and presupposed outcomes of the game that are connected to religion;
4. layer capital: the religious element introduced by the gamer him- or herself.

Anthony (2014, pp. 29-39), on the contrary, has proposed seven 'religious game' types, partially based on classical Greek mythology and religious play (such as the Olympic Games):

1. didactic games: games by which the player is instructed about a religion (*Left Behind: Eternal Forces*, 2006);
2. hestiasic games: games as a religious celebration;
3. poimenic games: the 'divine' as an active player in the game;
4. praxic games: devotional games (*Leela*, 2011).

These first four categories of Anthony's classification system are not very convincing. The categories of hestiasic and poimenic digital games are particularly problematic, and even Anthony fails to mention actual video game examples. Moreover, examples of the first two categories are few and far between. The last three categories, however, are very interesting:

5. allomythic games: games that explore non-existent traditions (*Mass Effect* trilogy);
6. allopolitical games: games that ‘hinge on digital social space, a community that exists only online, where identities are mediated by screen names or avatars’ (*Second Life*, 2003);
7. theoptic games: these games fall into the traditional category of ‘god games’ such as *Black & White* (2001) or *Godus* (2013). Despite its interesting nature, Anthony’s typology cannot – as we will see – cover all cases of religion in video games or of scholarly research of them.

Based on these studies, and on my personal experience over the past three decades of playing over a hundred and fifty different games, I wish to introduce five different levels at which religion occurs in these games, ranging from explicit to implicit, from game-immanent to game-transcendent, and from developer-intended to gamer-intended. Religion can be found at the following levels (instances may pertain to more than one level) in video games: the material, referential, reflexive, ritual and meta-level.

Material religion is the explicit occurrence of (existing or fantasy) religion within the game itself. Examples are the buried church in the ‘Our Daily Bread’ mission in *Mad Max* (2015), the ‘Church of the Children of Atom’ in *Fallout 3* or the celebration of holy mass in *Assassin’s Creed II* (2010). Every player will identify these elements as religious, whether or not they are religious themselves.

The second level on which religion may occur in digital games is **referential**: the implicit or explicit reference in the game to an existing religious tradition outside the game. The mass just mentioned in *Assassin’s Creed II* is an example (this is a reference to the Roman Catholic liturgy), but so is Skull Face’s reference to the Gospel of John (‘The Word became flesh’) in *Metal Gear Solid V: The Phantom Pain*. Another example of the referential use of religion in games is the ‘Kyrie Eleison’ mission in *Assassin’s Creed Rogue* (2014), a clever and critical reference to the historical Lisbon earthquake of 1755, which has played an important role in the discussion about the existence of evil in Christian theological tradition.

Thirdly, there is the level of the **reflexive** occurrence of religion in games: reflection on existential notions that are traditionally associated with religion within the game itself. Many games, especially those with elaborate narratives, reflect more or less implicitly on the existential themes of humankind: friendship, love, sacrifice, birth, life, death, sin, salvation, forgiveness et cetera. Religions have been reflecting on these existential themes for as long as they have existed, and they are part of their ‘core business’. Examples are: freedom versus predestination in *Kingdoms*

of *Amalur: The Reckoning* (2012), redemption and violence in *Hitman: Absolution*, or the question of ‘being human’ in *The Talos Principle*.

The fourth level at which religion can be found in video games, is the **ritual** level: players who are involved in in-game behavior that is traditionally associated with religion. Interesting examples can be found in ‘Capsuleer Cemetery’ in *Eve Online* (2003), created by players as an unofficial monument to dead clones, or in the case of James Payne, who dies of cancer and is immortalized as a Roman commander in *Total War: Rome II* (2013). This ritual behavior is not typically the result of intention on the part of the game developer, although this can be the case (as it is in the forced baptism at the start of *Bioshock Infinite*).

The fifth and last level at which religion occurs in video games is the **meta**-level, where the experience of gaming itself is identified as religious (by scholars and/or the gamers themselves). This level is often associated with the genre of the god game, such as *Black & White* and *Godus*. In her famous book *Godwired*, Rachel Wagner (2012, p. I) has considered virtual experiences – such as stories, games and rituals – as forms of world building or cosmos construction that serve as a means of making sense of our world. Such activities, Wagner has claimed, are arguably religious.

Of course, instances may pertain to more than one of these levels. The mass celebrated in *Assassin’s Creed II* is effective on a material, referential and even a ritual level. It is a performance that can be easily identified as religious, it refers to the real-life Roman Catholic liturgy and it is even possible for the player to go in among the worshipers in the Sistine Chapel to ‘attend’ mass. And Skull Face’s exclamation in *Metal Gear Solid V: The Phantom Pain* is not only referential (to the Gospel of John), but also functions on a reflexive level by symbolizing the evil nature of his plans to destroy the English language and everyone who speaks it. Moreover, in a much more complex way, the gamer of *Wolfenstein. The New Order* (2014) is invited (or forced) to restore the true cause of history by in-game utilization of Judaist religious notions such as *Da’at* (‘knowledge’), *Yichud* (‘communication’) and *tikkun* (the ‘restoration’ of the cosmic order) in the game. *Wolfenstein*’s use of religion is referential, reflexive and ‘meta’ at once.

These five forms or levels run from explicitly to implicitly religious, from game-immanent to game-transcendent, and from developer-intended to gamer-experienced. The material level tends to be more explicitly religious than the meta-level. And while the material and referential levels tend to be intended as such by the game developer, the ritual and meta-levels are often non-intentional on the part of the creator. The players are typically ‘responsible’ for experiencing (and reflecting on) the reflexive, ritual and meta-levels of religion in any particular video game. The first two levels are therefore more likely to be game-immanent, while the other levels are more usually player-immanent.

4 Methodology of Studying Religion in Digital Games

Espen Aarseth (2003, p. 3), one of the founding fathers of modern video game research, has formulated three different ways in which knowledge about games can be acquired.

Firstly, we can study the design, rules and mechanics of the game, insofar as these are available to us, e.g. by talking to the developers of the game. Secondly, we can observe others play, or read their reports and reviews, and hope that their knowledge is representative and their play competent. Thirdly, we can play the game ourselves. While all methods are valid, the third way is clearly the best, especially if combined or reinforced by the other two.

Aarseth thus combines the two mainstream approaches to game research (game-immanent and actor-centered), while underlining the importance of the actual playing of the game by the gamer/researcher. According to Aarseth (2003, p. 6), however, there are also ways of carrying out ‘non-playing analysis’:

Previous knowledge of genre, previous knowledge of game-system, the player’s reports, reviews, walkthroughs, discussions, observing others play, interviewing players, game documentation, play testing reports, interviews with game developers.

The two approaches, the game-immanent and the actor-centered approach, should ideally be combined, as both the information and experience received by playing the game, and the information and experience of other gamers (be they hobbyists, professionals and/or researchers) are equally important to the research itself (Heidbrink, Knoll & Wysocki 2015, pp. 63-79). Other game researchers have developed similar methodologies (Bainbridge 2013, pp. 19-20; Masso & Abrams 2014, pp. 51-56).

In the context of researching religion in video games, I would like to propose a four-step methodology, which incorporates insights from both game-immanent and actor-centered approaches. The first two steps, *internal* reading and research, can be done more or less simultaneously, because both are done within the game world itself. The third and fourth step, *external* reading and research, can be done at any time, but are typically done during the later stages of the research process (Van Wieringen 2012).

The first step is **internal reading**. This deceptively simple step involves **playing** the game. There are many different arguments for a ‘hands-on’ approach to game research. In this phase the following holds true: researching = playing. This step may seem too obvious to mention, since no serious scholar would presume to write an article on a movie or a book without having watched or

read it. But in the context of video game research, a warning is not amiss (Heidbrink, Knoll & Wysocki 2015, p. 71). And, ‘playing the game’ means a lot more than just racing through the game to only one of several possible endings.

All possible features of the game should be tried by the researcher, or as many of them as is practically possible. This means playing the game multiple times (playthroughs), including main quest (mission) and side quests (missions), reaching every possible ending (where this is humanly possible). This requires quite an investment from the gamer/researcher, because even a linear game (without side quests and only one ending) can take up several dozen hours of play time, while more open-world games (with multiple side quests and/or multiple endings) can require more than a hundred hours. And games that concentrate on multiple players who compete against each other (such as *World of Warcraft*), or games without any fixed end (open-ended games such as *Minecraft*) can require an undetermined, possibly endless amount of playing time. It is for this reason that I have added the clause ‘or as many of them as is practically possible’ to the description of this step – researchers, like gamers, are only human.

The second step is **internal research: collection** of all the in-game information, for example (the list is not exhaustive), texts, audio, video, pictures, NPC stories, and such like. Just as the first step, this collection is part of the in-game world, that is, it is restricted to the digital world, created by the developer, ‘inhabited’ by NPCs and engaged in by the player. During the phases of internal reading and research, the player/researcher is primarily the player, who pretends during the process that there is no other world except the game world, and that no player is engaged in the game other than he himself (with the possible exception of other players playing together or against each other in the one game world).

In the third step, **external reading**, the gamer/researcher must become less of a gamer and more of a researcher. His or her identity as a researcher takes over from his or her identity as a player. The researcher/gamer widens his or her scope of the world *outside* the game, **mapping** the intermedial relationships between his particular game or game series and all other media that provide background information for the game, the game world and the game narrative. ‘Intermediality’ in the broad sense is usually understood as the medial equivalent of intertextuality, and it covers any kind of relation between different media (Grishakova & Ryan 2010, p. 3). But in the case of this specific methodology, it is used as a term to denote additional medial objects, usually generated by the game developer, to extend the narrative and the world of the game beyond the limits of the game itself. Elaborate game series such as the *Assassin’s Creed* and the *Mass Effect* series are ‘surrounded’ or ‘enriched’ by all kinds of other media (websites, Facebook pages, novels, comics and the like), which convey information about the game world.

The fourth step is **external research**, the **gathering** of all out-game information that is not provided by the developers of the game themselves: articles by game enthusiasts and fellow game researchers; professional game reviews by specialized magazines and websites; interviews with the developers, voice-actors, and writers of the game and the corresponding additional media; and playthroughs and walkthroughs by other players on platforms such as *YouTube* and *Twitch*.

5 Future Research

The study of religion and video games is a young discipline that is developing very quickly. In this article, I have tried to contribute three things to its development: a new definition of video games as digital (interactive), playable (narrative) texts; a five-level classification system of the occurrence of religion in video games (the material, referential, reflexive, ritual and meta-levels); and a four-step methodology of studying video games (internal and external reading and researching).

There are, however, many issues that require further research. I will name two of them, which I think are pressing at the moment. The first one is the dominant reductionist or instrumentalist interpretation of religion in video games. As Kevin Schutt has observed, the majority of material religious phenomena in video games are instrumentalized by the developers to achieve certain goals which are outside the religious realm itself: to serve as a background story, to provide a motivation for NPCs, to ground the morality of the inner game world, et cetera. Schutt (2014, p. 273): ‘Uncorrected by any contrary force, video games have a tendency to mechanize faith, presenting an impoverished vision of what religions mean to adherents’.

The second topic deserving further research is the question of religion itself: what do we mean by ‘religion’? Although the definition of a ‘video game’ is heavily debated among game scholars, discussion of the definition of ‘religion’ in this context has been almost totally neglected. This is surely caused by the complex nature of ‘religion’, which therefore eludes precise definition, but also by the fact that most people (gamers included) do in fact have some kind of idea of what is meant by the term ‘religion’.

In postmodernism, the phenomenon of ‘religion’ is described as ‘a system of beliefs and practices that are relative to superhuman beings’ (Smith, Green & Buckley 1995, p. 893), ‘a search for significance in ways related to the sacred’ (Pargament 1997, p. 32) or comparable formulas (Newman 1998, pp. 129-133). In the context of video game and religion research, other definitions have been used. Ferdig (2014, p. 70) has defined ‘religion’ as ‘a belief in a god or group of gods or

an organized system of beliefs and rules used to worship that god or gods'. Luft (2014, p. 156) has taken a different approach: 'the ceaseless effort to negotiate what is necessary to construct a meaningful space'. But this discussion is far from over, particularly in the realm of religious game studies.

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Biography

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The Importance of Web 2.0 for Jihad 3.0¹

Female Jihadists Coming to Grips with Religious Violence on Facebook

Claudia Carvalho

Abstract

The Jihadist phenomenon has a privileged space in Web 2.0 where contents can be created, networks can be global and all exchanges of information have significance. The emergent Jihadist organizations have been profiting from these digital communication features to enlarge, diversify and connect with their audience.

On the one side, the virtual framing of Jihad through the manipulation of the sacred Islamic texts and its transformation into an ‘authentic’ religious discourse has given the Jihadists an opportunity to justify any religious violence associated with the performance of Jihad. On the other side, the virtual performance of Jihad through a ritualization process that combines ritualistic innovation with the use of cyber tools has allured individuals to engage and participate in Jihadist acts, both online and offline. Moreover, and in the light of the Jihadist warfare in the Middle East, the article will reveal the importance of e-Ritualization of Jihad into shaping these individual representations into a community both offline and online.

Keywords

Female Jihadists, Facebook, religious violence, ritualization, web 2.0, Jihad 3.0

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1 Introduction

The Jihadist movement sets great store by the possibilities offered by present-day technology. They have at their disposal the World Wide Web 2.0 as a convenient platform for creating, distributing and exchanging content. As a result of Internet services being available almost everywhere nowadays and huge numbers of people owning smart phones, established and emerging Jihadist organizations can reach people in virtually every corner of the globe and thus expand and diversify their audience.

By manipulating sacred Islamic texts and thereby framing their interpretation of Jihad as an ‘authentic’ religious discourse, Jihadists have fabricated a divine justification for the (religious) violence perpetrated in their performance of this ‘divine war.’ It is a performance characterized by ritualized acts, including newly invented ones, making full use of the available cyber tools, and it has managed and still manages to allure individuals into engaging in and/or participating in Jihadist acts, both online and offline. In the light also of the Jihadist warfare in the Middle East and its terrible consequences, this article draws attention to the e-Ritualization of Jihad as an important cornerstone in the building of a world-wide Jihadist community, both offline and online.

2 e-Jihadism, *embedded, embodied and everyday*²

Recently, the members of the Association for Internet Researchers held an online academic discussion on the fourth age of Internet Studies, more particularly on how to update the scope of the discipline and eventually modify its name. Barry Wellman, a household name on the matter of Internet research (networks, digital communities, communication, computers, methods) advanced the idea that instead of Internet Studies we might call it Digital Media Studies in order to integrate in it the studies of the ‘Internet of Things’ and of all things connected with the ‘Mobile’ world.

The digital space we find ourselves in today has expanded tremendously, having spread from the main arteries to even the tiniest capillaries of our everyday lives. Mobile devices provide instant access, and M2M (machine-to-machine) applications are no longer a thing of the future. As a result, communication networks are no longer bound by time, space, location or accessibility.

2 Implicit reference to the book by Christine Hine: *Ethnography for the Internet, embedded, embodied and everyday* (Huntingdon 2015).

Back in 2005, O'Reilly coined the expression Web 2.0³ to explain the World Wide Web as a social platform. Later Fuchs⁴ would add an important perspective to the understanding of the Web 2.0, a perspective that hits a higher note when we look at it in the context of online Jihadism, namely that of surveillance:

One important characteristic of many contemporary web platforms is that they store, process, assess and sell large amounts of personal information and usage behavior data. It is therefore important to theorize web 2.0 surveillance and conduct empirical research about the surveillance and privacy implications of web 2.0.

Online Jihadism is a cultural, political and religious phenomenon embedded in Web 2.0. Web 2.0 could be said to be the 'new media ecology'⁵, a platform where individuals create their own content, where ownership of data is substituted by sharing data, where collaboration, cooperation and establishment of networks are vital components. While this article concentrates on female Jihadists and their response to and/or involvement in religious violence on Facebook, Web 2.0 has obviously also had harmless positive effects for women in the Muslim community, benefitting as they do from the social networking capacities involved and particularly from the physical mobility that it offers, freeing them from religious restrictions in this regard (no longer any need for a male companion, *mahram*, for instance).

I carried out my investigation of Jihadism⁶ by conducting interviews on the subject (via instant messaging) with online informants. The aim of my research was to come to understand these women's interpretation of and their views on Jihadism and Jihadism online. For the present study I have selected one of the most recent definitions of Jihadism, given by by Fawaz Gerges, who reckons that the Jihadist movement has entered its third wave with the emergence of ISIS (Islamic State of Iraq and Syria). Gerges relates the evolution of Jihadism to the tactical approach adopted by ISIS: "ISIS's swift military expansion stems from its ability not only to terrorize enemies but also to co-opt local Sunni communities, using networks of patronage and privilege."⁷

3 T. O'Reilly: 'What is *Web 2.0*? Design patterns and business models for the next generation of software' (2005), available at <http://www.oreilly.com/pub/a/web2/archive/what-is-web-20.html> (accessed May 2015).

4 C. Fuchs: 'New media, Web 2.0 and surveillance', in *Sociology Compass* 5/2 (2005) 137.

5 A. Awan, A. Hoskins & B. O'Loughlin: *Radicalisation and media: Connectivity and terrorism in the New Media Ecology* (London 2011); V. Sisler: 'Cyber counsellors: Online fatwas, arbitration tribunals and the construction of Muslim identity in the UK', in *Information, Communication & Society* 14/8 (2011), available at <http://www.digitalislam.eu/article.do?articleId=7895> (accessed May 2015).

6 Y. Al-Qaradawi: 'Extremism', in C. Kurzman (ed.): *Liberal Islam: A source book* (Oxford 1998); K. Armstrong: *Holy war/Jihad* (London 1988); D. Cook: *Understanding Jihad* (Berkeley 2005); B. Lawrence: *Messages to the world: The statements of Osama Bin Laden* (London 2005).

7 F. Gerges: 'ISIS and the third wave of Jihadism', in *Current History* 113/767 (2014) 339-343, p. 340, available at http://currenthistory.com/Gerges_Current_History.pdf (accessed May 2015).

To properly grasp the ideological positions taken by Jihadism, and more particularly by Salafi-Jihadism⁸, we need to turn our attention to the Sunni theological school of Salafism.⁹ Etymologically speaking, Salafism derives from *al-salaf al-salih* ('the pious predecessors who were contemporaries of the Prophet'). It defends the strict observance of the Sunna, rejecting theological innovations (*bid'a*), standing by the proclamation of the unity of God (*tawhid*), endorsing the traditionally declared grounds for excommunication (*takfir*), and adhering to the purification of practices.

The practical, easy, and accessible mechanisms of Web 2.0 offers Muslim women an online role equal to that of men. Online they have the same power of creating content, of collaborating, participating and designing their own social networks. However, being Muslim women, their online freedom, mobility and interaction are still restricted by the rules of moral religious behavior. What the observance of these rules means for their online behavior can be read in the numerous posts on this, for instance on they are not supposed to put up personal photos, more particularly photos of their own faces (unless they are covered by the *hijab*, the Islamic head cover on), and on not accepting men in their Facebook accounts. By sticking to these moral fundamentals in their online behavior they feel they are making 'sacred' use of the web. Another way of making sacred use of the web is to use it as a means to spread Islamic knowledge, more specifically Salafi-Jihadist knowledge. The task of disseminating Islamic knowledge (*da'wa*) goes together with the task of also giving advice (*nasihah*) on religious matters to other sisters. The two tasks are part of daily practice for online female Jihadists, to the extent that they even include it, in parentheses, in their profile names¹⁰: *Maryam maryam (Salafism counsellor)*.

Facebook has become the location *par excellence* for the promotion of Jihadism among women. The female participants in this study have this to say about how others see their online performance: "Violent, us? That makes me *furiosa* ('furious' in Spanish). If by defending Islam, the Prophet (PUB) and Jihad we are violent, well so be it, then we are violent women!"

8 G. Kepel: *Muslim extremism in Egypt: The Prophet and Pharaoh* (Berkeley/Los Angeles, ca 1985).

9 R. Meijer: 'Salafism: Doctrine, diversity and practice', in K. Hroub (ed.): *Political Islam: Context versus ideology* (London 2010); J. Wagemakers: "'Seceders" and "postponers"? An analysis of the *khawarij* and *murji'a* labels in polemical debates between quietist and Jihadi-salafis', in J. Deol & Z. Kazmi (eds.): *Contextualising Jihadi thought* (London 2012) 145-164; Q. Wiktorowicz: 'The new global threat: Transnational Salafis and Jihad', in *Middle East Policy* VIII/4 (2001).

10 Spanish Muslim women use fake names as their profile names. The fake names represent religious expressions, for example, 'Muslim by the Grace of God', or refer to their motherhood, for example, 'Umm Amin'. Although the names are fake, I still use names for the participants that are different from their real profile names to preserve their anonymity.

3 *Furiosa* – Digital research(er) on Facebook

I first started my online fieldwork on Facebook in 2012 with an open profile and a direct link to my university webpage. A couple of months later I had a network of more than 50 ‘friends’ or informants and I was joining groups under the Jihadist theme. My first methodological step to collect meaningful data was to monitor Spanish Muslim women producing open source Jihadist content, to subsequently add them as friends or follow them, map out their connections and finally to establish contact with them in writing.

I used the following criteria to select my participants: They were to be female¹¹ Spanish-speaking individuals, indicating that they lived in the area of Catalonia, claiming to be Muslims (born-Muslims and/or converted Muslims) and producing violent content online. I traced their connections and established their social networks through their shared interest in Jihadism, which yielded the following selection:

- Female participants who are from and/or have relatives in Morocco;
- Female participants who live in Morocco, The Netherlands, Belgium and/or France;
- Female participants who communicate in Spanish, transliterated Arabic and French.

This part of my research lasted until February of 2015, when my Facebook account was blocked as a consequence of my online activities, reflecting as they did according to the administrators, ‘my sympathy for Jihadism’. This time it was my turn to be *furiosa*, because I had invested much time and effort in constructing a relationship with these women, to line up their networks, to collect and select relevant data for my research.

As we saw, academia is still in the process of exploring and defining digital space. In exploring the digital territory researchers are faced with a number of obstacles, which include the problem of the authenticity of sources, the irregular working times involved, the immediacy of the data, and in our specific case of Jihadism research, the sensitivity of the subject of religious violence.

As a digital space, Facebook is paradoxical in the way it formulates violent content and consequently also in the criteria adhered to in deciding what can be defined as violent content. The consequent acceptance or refusal of certain contents without there being an observable, explicit and coherent pattern underlying these decisions makes one question what Facebook administrators

11 To have a comparative measure I also investigated male Facebook accounts. The result was interesting. The Spanish-speaking Muslim males retain their Jihadist profile on Facebook. Some of them are even reporting directly from Syria, posting pictures of their daily lives.

define as violent content. When conducting ethnographic research online my aim is to analyze the meaning that individuals attribute to their performances online. I did not quite know how to formulate my activities on Facebook being blocked. Was I to say ‘I was blocked’, or should I rather say ‘my account was blocked’? As I will argue further on in this article, this doubt on how to phrase it really revolved around the physical element involved in being online.

While there are restrictions on content, Facebook for Jihadist individuals constitutes an interesting open space because the platform allows them to act as if they have religious authority, or as Nico Prucha¹² observes, “within these Online Territories of Terror, the jihadists assume the role of authoritative religious scholars, who define what is legal and who the ‘enemies of Islam’ (...) are.”

Facebook thus offers to Jihadists a suitable platform to disseminate their distorted religious Islamic values and to wave violence as an Islamic sword. In the words of Hans Kippenberg: “The change from toleration of the unbelievers to violence against them is a central theme of Islamic theology. Some Muslim scholars hold that the ‘sword verse’ has replaced other revelations that sound a different note.”¹³

Contemporary Muslim scholars have the digital techniques at their disposal (simple, clear theological messages) that grant them ‘celebrity sheikh’¹⁴ status. Anwar al-Awalaki (1971-2011) was and still is a celebrity Salafi-Jihadist sheikh, capturing the global attention of Jihadists. In this article I consider the significant theological model in which Awalaki presents Islamic migration (*hijra*) and violent Jihad as the educative (*tarbiya*) guidelines¹⁵ that could foster the identity of the Islamic community (*umma*).

After a while I opened up a new account on Facebook and partially restored my former network of informants, being more careful this time and giving preference to open source Jihadist contents in the form of images, photos or texts. My choice of method to collect and select the data once again reflects the sensitivity of the subject of religious violence as well as the vulnerability of the digital researcher investigating it.

The present article addresses the question: How are the Spanish-speaking Muslim women using both Jihadism and Web 2.0, more particularly Facebook as the preferred social networking platform¹⁶, to create a sacred space that reinforces the ritualization of online Jihad and at the same time the acceptance of religious violence as a mandatory ritual?

12 N. Prucha: ‘Online territories of terror – Utilizing the Internet for Jihadist endeavors’, in *Orient IV* (2011), available at http://www.jihadica.com/wp-content/uploads/2013/04/Article_ORIENT_IV_NicoPrucha.pdf (accessed May 2015).

13 H. Kippenberg: *Violence as worship: Religious wars in the age of globalization* (Stanford 2011) 175.

14 J.M. Brachman & A.N. Levine: ‘You too can be Awlaki!’, in *Fletcher Forum of World Affairs* 35/1 (2011) 30.

15 A. Meleagrou-Hitchens: *As American as apple pie: How Anwar al-Awalaki became the face of Western Jihad* (London 2011) 40.

16 D. Boyd & N. Ellison: ‘Social network sites: Definition, history, and scholarship’, in *Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication* 13/1 (2007) 210-230.

In Section 3, I will present a more detailed definition of online ritualization of Jihad, fundamental to comprehending the promotion of religious violence.

4 Online ritualization of Jihad

In this study I draw on the ritualization notion developed by Catherine Bell as “(...) a way of acting that specifically establishes a privileged contrast, differentiating itself as more important or powerful.”¹⁷

Jihadist scholars aim at establishing themselves as having the most powerful extremist ideology and one of the strategies they employ to attain their goal of domination is online ritualization of religious violence, i.e., “(...) a ritualistic innovation that allows its agents to establish, structure and control all activities that occur in cyberspace in the name of Jihad.”¹⁸

To understand the online ritualization of Jihad, it is important to grasp the notion of the ‘ritualized body’ and of ‘embodiment’ in cyberspace. The ‘ritualized body’ was defined by Catherine Bell as “a body invested with the ‘sense’ of ritual.”¹⁹ In her vision, it is a product of the dynamic relationship between ritualization and the ‘structuring environment.’²⁰

Online space is the ‘structuring environment’ where ritualization occurs and it produces the online ‘ritualized body’. The task of describing online embodiment, however, is quite a theoretical challenge. It was a challenge that Christine Hine faced in her most recent work, *Ethnography for the Internet: Embedded, Embodied and Everyday*.²¹ The author considers that ‘being online’ is another example of the ‘embodied ways of being and acting in the world’²² and therefore ‘the Internet user is an embodied user.’²³ David Bell in his book on cyber culture addresses the online body presence using the terms ‘digital meat’ and ‘the flesh made code.’²⁴

Following online body representations and the communication through physical manifestations, Nanako Hayami addresses the question of “the significance of the ritualized body in the contemporary society.”²⁵ In this he points to applications such as the “emotion icons”

17 C. Bell: *Ritual theory, ritual practice* (New York 1992).

18 C. Carvalho: ‘Okhti Online. Spanish Muslim women engaging online Jihad: A Facebook case study’, in *Online Heidelberg Journal of Religions on the Internet* (2014) 32.

19 Bell: *Ritual theory* 98.

20 Ibid.

21 Hine: *Ethnography for the Internet*.

22 Hine: *Ethnography for the Internet* 14.

23 Idem 43.

24 D. Bell: *An introduction to cybercultures* (London 2001) 156.

25 N. Hayami: ‘Ritualized body: Goffman’s theory derived from Durkheim and Bateson’, *CDAMS Discussion Paper* 04/16E (2004) 5.

(‘emoticons’) that represent “human facial expressions of feelings”²⁶ because: “Even in the absence of the physical human face, the importance of the face remains.”

The main categories of Islamic rituals are the *shahada*, or the declaration of faith by which one officially becomes a Muslim, the *salat* or prayer (performed five times a day), the *zakat*, the act of giving to the poor people of the Muslim community, *sawm*, fasting, and *hajj*, the pilgrimage to the holy city of Mecca in Saudi Arabia.

The Islamic rituals can be studied on three principles: spiritual submission, body conformity, and purity. According to Islamic dogma the performance of the rituals is anticipated by the act of voluntarily submitting them to the will of Allah, in other words, the believer engages in the worshiping activities with the feeling of wanting to obey the divine laws. The feeling of obedience and respect for the rituals is succeeded by the physical ability to perform all the five pillars of Islam. The believer needs to be of sound body, Islamic jurisprudence granting dispensation to people with physical disabilities or problems. The bodily discipline required to execute the prayers is at the same time an instrument to concentrate one’s mind and spirit fully on the faith. The respect for and of the body is injected and incorporated in Islamic living through the Qur’an and can be seen in themes such as funeral rites or the covering of intimate parts of the body (*awra*).

The last principle, that of purity (*tahara*), concerns mind, body and environment, more specifically it involves that all Muslims should have pure intentions (*niya*), pure bodies (*ghusl*) and be members of a pure Islamic community (*umma*). In fact, Jihad and martyrdom, due to their features and as commands of Allah, belong to the ‘ritual-purity’ themes²⁷. Kippenberg concurs with the idea that in order for an act to be considered an act of jihad, the individual needs to act in (good) conscience when inflicting death ‘against the impure’.²⁸ The linkage between purification rituals, blood, and Jihad shapes the justification that Salafi-Jihadist scholars needed to promote religious violence.

Women initialize the process of online ritualization of Jihad employing the same methods of theological purification as presented above. First, they consider the online space as a sacred space that they need to respect in the same way as they respect the mosque. The online intentions (*niya*) need to be pure and for the benefit of God, the guiding principle justifying the legitimization and acceptance of violent jihadist performances.

In Section 4 we see how Facebook surveillance and censorship features are carving the new phase of online Jihadism.

26 Hayami: ‘Ritualized body’ 6.

27 R. Gauvain: *Salafi ritual purity: In the presence of God* (Abingdon/New York 2013) 169.

28 Kippenberg: *Violence as worship* 65.

5 Jihad 3.0 – ‘Boiling the frog’²⁹

The development of a Jihadist Global Communication strategy has its roots in the activities undertaken by Al-Qaeda to disseminate their messages throughout the world. In fact, Al-Qaeda understood very well the strategic value of the web as a vital way to attract more adherents to its cause.

ISIS is Jihad 3.0, as the North-American newspaper *The New York Times* pointed out in August 2014.³⁰ The Jihadist organization took Al-Qaeda’s online project further down a notch by guaranteeing a continuous stream of contents to flow in cyber space. Moreover, Jihadist ISIS contents are found in all forms of social networking, chatting, blogging, messaging available online. The contents are well thought-out, and well worked-out, using simple texts combined with powerful imagery to appeal to the largest possible audience. Most importantly, they are translated into a variety of languages. The contents are also tailor-made, according to gender, generation and geographical location of the audience. ISIS has been aiming especially at winning the hearts and minds of the youth, working on closing the gap that Al-Qaeda failed to bridge, not paying any attention to it, power being in the hands of its senior elements.³¹

Last but not least, the online jihadist contents put up by ISIS are produced professionally, employing cutting-edge cyber tools to reach an ever-expanding audience. They also have enough readiness and preparation to quickly adapt, to move and settle into new cyber scenarios. Indeed, the Jihadist phenomenon is continuously evolving within the ‘new media ecology’ space that characterizes the Web 2.0. One of the main factors promoting online evolution and modification of the Jihadist landscape is the topic of ‘trust and privacy’.³² The efficiency and efficacy of the Facebook censorship program are causing Jihadist individuals to act online in a more precautionary fashion. Facebook administrators are particularly effective and fast in detecting Jihadist contents. Once the Facebook administration signals Jihadist contents (‘activation of all types of alarms’ as I was told in my case by an internal source) the corresponding accounts are cancelled. For a comparative analysis of censorship exercised on online social networking, I refer to fieldwork I did on Tumblr, where Jihadist users, on a daily basis, blog Jihadist-related contents (photos, images,

29 In the popular story of ‘Boiling the frog’, a frog that is placed in hot water jumps out immediately, while a frog that is placed in cold water that is slowly heated fails to register the alarming signs that will lead to his death. Surveillance and censorship are the hot water that made Jihad 3.0 jump to other forms of online identification. The same analogy was used in regard to the question of computers, privacy and personal data protection in the business world by the Advice Project. I apply it here as the image of frogs was actually used in the context of representing Jihadism.

30 *New York Times*: ‘ISIS displaying a deft command of varied media’, available at http://www.nytimes.com/2014/08/31/world/middleeast/isis-displaying-a-deft-command-of-varied-media.html?partner=rss&emc=rss&smid=tw-nytimes&_r=0 (accessed May 2015).

31 M.R. Torres Soriano: ‘Jihadist propaganda and its audiences: A change of course?’, in *Perspectives on Terrorism* 1/2 (2007) 1-3.

32 C. Dwyer, S. Hiltz & K. Passerini: ‘Trust and privacy concern within social networking sites: A comparison of Facebook and MySpace’, in *Proceedings of the thirteenth American conference on information systems* (Keystone, co 2007) 339.

texts). The violent contents on Tumblr are graphic; the names of the users and their comments clearly indicate their Jihadist affiliations, yet censorship in this social platform is less effective than on Facebook or even on Twitter.

Aware of the censorship measures, online Jihadist users are in the process of transforming all the elements that gave away their online Jihadist identity. Black horses, banners, lions and other images commonly associated with Jihadist content are now being replaced by a ‘gentle Jihad’.³³ The details of the profile photos show good indicators of how the individual wants to be perceived online, from the close-up photo, to the use of well-known Jihadist pictures, or symbolic representations of their current feelings on a certain theme, which only a trained audience will be able to recognize. For example, since Mohammed Morsi (former head of the Muslim Brotherhood and former President of Egypt) was condemned to death many Jihadists have chosen the image/photo of a frog as their profile. The frog represents the first fatwa issued after Morsi was installed as president of Egypt and refers to the need to protect the frogs as they were special creatures to God, ‘a frog’s croaking is praise [to Allah].’ The profile picture in this case is a clear indication of where one stands politically and religiously, and expresses the person’s solidarity with the members of the network members and their allegiance to the Jihadist cause represented by the Muslim Brotherhood.

Despite all censorship online to control, filter or block Jihadist contents, Jihad 3.0 has been resistant to all these obstacles. Instead it is thriving with an ever-stronger and ramified online presence. Section 5 takes a closer look at the role of imagery in the new online Jihadist female profile.

6 Black butterflies: Imagery, meaning and communication

The increasingly rigid norms for surveillance and censorship (employed both by Facebook administration and by police and security forces) has made Jihadist women more careful in their online activities and less available for interviews. They have changed their profile pictures from photos with classic Jihad symbols to (seemingly) ‘harmless’ pictures such as those of flower compositions, birds, or short texts (‘I love my prophet’), or to generic photos representing Muslim women. They seldom post selfies, or self-portraits. In this day and age, however, selfies and social media platforms are inseparable components of the embodied online being. Muslim women are directly affected by the posting online of personal photos/selfies because it is an offense to their honor (*ird*) in the strictest sense of Islamic precepts. While this new form of self-

33 B. Barber: *Jihad vs. McWorld: Terrorism’s challenge to democracy* (New York 1996) 171.

representation clashes with the Islamic jurisprudence on photography (*taswir*)³⁴, it does not stop Jihadist individuals from posting personal profile photos online. There is debate among Muslim scholars and Muslim believers whether sharing personal photos online should be permissible (*mubah*) or prohibited (*haram*). An informant of mine just recently posted a fatwa that she found online on putting up personal pictures on websites, especially on Facebook and Twitter:

Abdillah Ubayd Sheikh bin al-Jabiri: I say that the images of souls are *haram* and *kaba'ir* (grave sins). The Messenger (PUB) said: Those who will be most severely punished on the Day of Judgment will be those who make images. (...) And by this we know that it is not allowed to publish photos (pictures) of people on Twitter, Facebook or other networks.³⁵

As we saw, apart from religious reasons, self-censorship also take place for security reasons (so as not to attract attention in surveillance activities). This may be a reason for Jihadist women to change their names from 'Umm' into 'Black butterfly', for instance, where the imagery enclosed in the name hides its deepest symbolism (death). The contents they produce no longer present a direct, obvious link to Jihadism or to the Jihadist fight in Syria. They do however continue to disseminate the Salafi-Jihadist doctrine and the passages from the Qur'an and from the Sunna that according to the Salafi-Jihadi doctrine justify violent Jihad. The themes associated with Salafi-Jihadi theory and eschatology, references to salvation and Paradise, either through images or through texts, are as frequent as ever.

Jihadist videos are an equally vital source of Jihadist embodied online performances, be it those of executions or those showing war scenes. Violent footage continues to be widely accepted within the online Jihadist community, al-though it is gradually being replaced by other types of videos that highlight the soft Jihadist lifestyle.

As we saw in the introduction, Facebook has a 'complicated' relationship with Jihadist content, and videos are no exception in this regard. Knowing that the videos are the first items to be reported or blocked by Facebook administrators, part of the thrill for the producers of using this online space to publish videos lies in the online chase, in whether or not they will be able to get it out in digital space long enough for it to be viewed, while for the consumers and analysts the thrill is whether or not they will be able to watch the content before it is taken down by the administrators.

In a Facebook community account entitled 'Meaning and Understanding of Jihad' that I had access to via an informant, the administrator explains the goal of the page: "This Page is to

34 Photography and statues as well, the legal framework on the matter is related with ISIS destruction of Human Heritage sites and with the attacks on cartoonists who depicted images of the Prophet.

35 Transcriptions will be directly translated into English due to the limitations on the number of words.

Enlighten those About The Greater Jihad which is in the Battlefield for the sake of Allah and True Islam. May Allah guide us!!!” The core of his or her productions is a set of elaborated compositions of images with small poignant sentences. On May 17th, 2015, a new video was put up under the title: ‘Mujahideen’s response to the HATERS, Speech by Muhammad bin Abid.’ The speech is in English and is uttered by a male voice adopting a sermon-like tone. Its main message concerns the qualities it takes and the sacrifices it requires for *Mujahedeen/Mujahidun* (Jihadist fighters) to protect the *umma*. The narrator also has a rather unpleasant message for those Muslim listeners living comfortably in the Western nations, eating fast food and not supporting the Jihadist fighters: ‘they should get ready to embrace their near future, which is death without salvation.’ His speech is emotionally charged, with nothing but positive feelings for the Jihadist fighters, who deserve nothing but admiration, sympathy and gratitude from his listeners. It ends with an appeal for a change of heart among those who so far have not supported the Jihadist fighters, to please God and guarantee His forgiveness. The most interesting aspect of this video is the comments made by the followers of this page, who merely mention it and notify a friend (placing the name of the friend in blue letters). The name notifications are a Facebook interactive tool linking the post to the friend’s page and thus spreading the content to and subsequently through multiple recipients. The interactive tools have a direct impact on the construction of social networks: suddenly participants without any previous connections to each other are marked together in the same post. Thus, if a person likes a post and marks, let us say, four other persons (as a woman in the example actually did), we therefore need to multiply these four participants by the number of women that they are ‘friends’ with to get an estimate of how many women are now aware of the existence of the video aimed at giving meaning and value to the role of Jihadist fighters. In these circles of communication on Facebook, in spite of efforts to keep genders separated (and thereby respect Islamic rules), these attempts are sometimes frustrated, causing men and women to become associated to the same content. Suffice it here to make just a quick remark on gender online coexistence: the concern of respecting and keeping gender separation as an online behavioral principle only reinforces the sacred value individuals attribute to the online space. In the offline world, Muslims follow and respect the rules of gender separation and if they extend this Islamic principle of conduct to the online space it is because in their perspective, the digital space has a sacred value.

Back to the circles of communication; they broaden women’s understanding of online Jihadist contents, being exposed as they are to information that would not normally be accessible to them in the offline space.

In Section 7.I will deal with my online and offline case study of female Jihadism in Spain.

7 Immigrants in digital space

Spain and Morocco have a historical connection that goes back many centuries. Geographically located on either side of the Strait of Gibraltar, the two countries share important experiences linking the populations of both nations.

During the 1970s, the first Moroccan immigrants began to arrive in Spain, initially as guest workers, mainly men, travelling alone and returning to their homeland after a short period of time.³⁶ A decade later, Madrid signed the agreement to become a member of the European Community (a name that was changed to the European Union after the Maastricht Treaty in 1993), after which the country's economy entered a phase of exponential growth and development. Labor was in great demand and workers were given legal permission to extend their stay and bring along their families.

Catalonia likewise pursued this open-immigration policy, encouraging North African people from across the Mediterranean to work and live in this province of Spain. Catalonia these days is home to about 226,321 Muslims,³⁷ an estimated 20 percent of whom follow the precepts of Salafism. The contours of the lines shaping the integration of Moroccan immigrants in Catalonia is determined by the contrasts involved in ethnicity, identity and religion. Much has been said about the general struggle of the diasporic groups to adapt to the new living and working conditions and to 'gain access to the culture of their host societies'.³⁸ Family life among the Maghreb population in Catalonia is pretty much what it would be like if they were still living in Morocco. Men are in charge of the family's earnings and take the decisions, while women occupy themselves with domestic chores and the raising of their children. This situation implies "a reinforcement of a traditional stereotype that connects women to the sphere of care and affection."³⁹ The women are also in charge of maintaining international contacts with the rest of the family, keeping in touch, either with relatives in Morocco or with those who have emigrated to other places in the world. Next to any Jihadist-oriented use, Facebook offers these women a suitable social networking platform to reach family members, and to keep in frequent contact with them by sharing family photos, special moments or to exchange traditional Moroccan recipes.

36 N. Empez Vidal: 'Social construction of neglect: the case of unaccompanied minors from Morocco to Spain', *Max Planck Institute for Demographic Research Working Paper 7* (2007) 9-10, available at <http://www.demogr.mpg.de/papers/working/wp-2007-007.pdf> (accessed May 2015).

37 UCIDE: 'Estudio demografico de la poblacion musulmana', (2015) 9, available at <http://observatorio.hispanomuslim.es/estademograf.pdf> (accessed May 2015).

38 D. Conversi: 'Irresponsible radicalisation: Diasporas, globalisation and long-distance nationalism in the digital age', in *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies* 38/9 (2012) 1357-1379, p. 1371.

39 Y. Martínez & A. Huertas: 'Las adolescentes migrantes ante las Tecnologías de la Información y la Comunicación (TICs): Prácticas mediáticas y relaciones socio-afectivas', in A. Huertas & M. Figueras (eds.): *Audiencias juveniles y cultura digital* (Barcelona 2014) 175-189.

While Facebook offers them an easily accessible opportunity to stay in contact with relatives, the common denominator that draws them into the Jihadist networks is the wish to gain Islamic knowledge (*ilm*). The former administrator of a Facebook page called *Muyahidines los guerreros de Allah* ('*Mujahedeen/Mujahidun* the warriors of Allah') explained to a woman the purpose of his page: "Alhamdulillah sister, that is what this page was made for, to teach about what is going on in the world and that Jihad is also Islam, even if some do not agree (...)."

The Internet is fairly accessible to my informants, many of whom already own smartphones, allowing them to be connected anytime, anywhere. The older informants demonstrate a certain resistance to adapting to new social networking tools. One of the informants complained about what she feels is an excessive use of Facebook compared to the time devoted to praying:

And what hurts the most is that when one sees the register of Facebook, one sees that he/she has sent more than 5000 messages, and if you compare that with how many verses of the Qur'an you have read ...'wallah'... I cry.

The use of Whatsapp is viewed differently by different generations. To the younger ones it is a valid tool of communication while the older ones consider it a possibly harmful tool to the community, as an older informant asserted:

The new updated version of Whatsapp [the double check symbol] is creating *fitna* (division) among Muslims because you know when the message was read. Fear Allah, do not let the devil whisper into your mind and do not judge your Muslim brothers/sisters.

To that a younger informant replied: "Each one of us must know how to organize herself with the social networks, but Whatsapp is more practical, easier and simpler."

As a matter of fact, the younger ones, who have access to longer and better education, profit from the fact that they have access to Internet services at school to create and manage different web accounts (Twitter and Instagram, for instance).

With regard to women's radicalization in Spain, I have come to the conclusion that there are two distinctive web layers within the same 'community of practice'⁴⁰ that play a significant role: the digital (Internet) and the mobile (smart) phones.

A 'digital media community' shifting its space from what we might call 'stationary' connections to mobile ones is especially crucial for the Spanish Muslim women who wish to accomplish their radicalization process. In a recent Skype interview with a Muslim Spanish-

40 E. Wenger: 'Communities of practice a brief introduction' (2006) 1, available at <http://wenger-trayner.com/wp-content/uploads/2012/01/06-Brief-introduction-to-communities-of-practice> (accessed May 2015).

Moroccan leader of an Islamic Organization in Catalonia (whom I cannot name for privacy and security reasons), the man pointed out that the process of women's radicalization is migrating from a virtual community on Facebook to a mobile community on Whatsapp and/or Skype (online communication software product). This move, so he explained, takes place when the phase of radicalization enters a deeper level of commitment and the sources of communication can no longer be open ones. This different layer of online space, which is shielded from the public eye, has been referred to as the 'Invisible Web'.⁴¹ As a result of it being secret the mobile relationship is more individualistic and intimate and most importantly free of all features that make operating on the open source internet so dangerous: control, lack of privacy and exclusion. This is what Nour Nour has to say about this:

Salam aleikum sisters. I would like to communicate to you that you are added to certain groups, do not accept this, and if you are already in them, get out of them, because the TAGUT pass themselves off as Muslims so that they can locate where you and all of us are, to search for us, to calumniate us, and thus to arrest us, because to them, the TAGUT, it is important to have more security that Jihad will not be accomplished... (...) I tell you this because there are many brothers in Morocco that have been arrested because of this...the location of their data. I know of sisters whose husbands have been arrested because of this and have asked me to get this message across to all Muslims. Do not publish your authentic data, we are here for one cause only, and that is the cause of ALLAH (...)

According to the male informant mentioned earlier, the process of mobilization, radicalization and recruitment is quick (eight weeks maximum, including logistic arrangements) and aims at very young women, more vulnerable and eager to abandon their lives in Spain. The speed of the process is related to the need of 'sending them there, before they change their minds.' "And what if they change their minds?" I asked him.

You know, they just say to the girls that their families will be informed of their acts, bringing dishonor upon them and the families will also pay the price. Summing up, if they change their minds they are violently threatened so they have no other alternative but to go to Syria.

Samir Yerou, a Moroccan immigrant in Rubi (Catalonia) was travelling together with her three-year old son to Syria when the Turkish authorities arrested her and sent them back to Barcelona.⁴² There the Minister of Internal Affairs accused her of having Jihadist affiliations, an accusation that was formulated after the police intercepted conversations between her and a Jihadist fighter in which she

41 M.K. Bergman: 'The deep web: Surfacing hidden value' (2000), available at <http://brightplanet.com/wp-content/uploads/2012/03/12550176481-deepwebwhitepaper1.pdf> (accessed May 2015).

42 *El Pais*: 'El viaje radical de Samir Yerou y su hijo' (2015), available at http://politica.elpais.com/politica/2015/03/10/actualidad/1425998844_927245.html (accessed 2015).

confirmed her adherence to the cause with sentences defending violence: “(...) he [three-year old son] only wants the knife of the beheading.”⁴³ Samir’s husband in December of 2014 had reported them as missing to the Spanish police. The husband suspected that Samir was keen on migrating to Syria, having noticed a marked change in her behavior since her last visit to Morocco.

In May of 2014, I was in the Islamic Center of Rubi, Catalonia, where I interviewed 20 women (including a female scholar) precisely about these subjects: Jihadism, online radicalization and *hijra* to Syria. I asked them: “What would you say if your son were to ask your permission to become a Jihadist fighter in Syria?” Their answer was a unanimous: “No!” The female scholar agreed and entered on a lengthy theological explanation why all those subjects were not part of the Islamic doctrine. However the voices of reason at the local mosque have little impact compared to the online radical networks. According to the court, Samir is indeed responsible for a Jihadist recruiting network taking women from Europe and Morocco to Syria.

In the following section, I will present my concluding remarks, inviting further studies on the new digital landscapes of female Jihadism and the new challenges for digital researchers.

8 A new digital Jihadist female landscape? – Concluding remarks

Due to the effectiveness of Spanish Security and Defense institutions and their active collaboration with similar European and International institutions, particularly the Moroccan Counter Terrorism Institute, the number of apprehended Jihadist individuals and the amount of Jihadist material confiscated or removed has increased significantly over the last few years (28 individuals in 2015, compared to 11 in 2013).⁴⁴ This increase is directly connected with the increase in online radicalization and recruitment. As we have seen, female Jihadist individuals are aware of counter terrorist activities and of the need to adopt a more discrete online profile as a result. The process of online ritualization of violence that they are involved in is changing into more subtle Jihadist performances that require from the digital researcher sharper observation skills, edgier analysis and faster adaptation to new digital landscapes.

A final example to illustrate this change are the new Jihadist landscapes being proposed online to attract female individuals to perform the *hijra* to Saudi Arabia and/or Morocco and Algeria. In fact, I analyzed two Facebook pages (which I had access to via an informant) offering

43 *El Confidencial*: ‘Una yihadista a su hijo de tres años dile deguello al policia y voy’ (2015), available at http://www.elconfidencial.com/espana/2015-03-10/una-yihadista-a-su-hijo-de-tres-anos-dile-deguello-al-policia-y-voy_725520/ (accessed May 2015).

44 *El Mundo*: ‘Los presos preventivos por yihadismo en España superan ya a los de ETA’ (2015), available at <http://www.elmundo.es/espana/2015/04/26/553ccd61ca47414e0d8b4571.html> (accessed May 2015).

their services for those who wish to live in a proper Islamic land. The distinctive feature of the Facebook pages whose purpose is to facilitate the *hijra* is their mentioning ‘Salafiya’, or as can be read on the Hijra Algerian page: “Information Page for *hijra* in Algeria, according to the Qur’an, the Sunna and the understanding of the pious predecessors.” Here the reference to Salafism is implicit in the reference to the ‘pious predecessors’ or ‘salaf’, one of the core foundations of the Salafist doctrine. Another very interesting fact is that when I clicked on the link leading to their blog, I noticed that the cover image is a passage of the Qur’an, more exactly Sura Al-Nisa, aya 97-100, which narrates the reward of Allah to those who complete the *hijra*. At the end of the quote and in orange letters, one can read: “reserved for women only.”

The pages are fed daily with new tips and recommendations and there is a monthly lengthy post where one of the sisters that have already performed the *hijra* tells her sisters online about her experiences. One of the migrants (*muhajirun*), as they call themselves, had this advice (originally written in French and Arabic) to the women thinking of performing the *hijra*:

Also to live in a country that does not insult our Beloved Prophet Allah (PUB) is more rewarding than the opposite. May Allah grant to all of those who have *niya* (intention) to make *hijra* and allow us *mouhajirouns* (migrants) to prolong ours until we die *Inscha'Allah*.

The cycle of events is similar to that in the female online radicalization route (exposition and acceptance of the Salafi-Jihadist fundamentals), migration to Syria (transfer of the acquired cognitive skills to the offline space) and then return to the online space to report back on their *hijra* experiences (making use of one’s authority gained from first-hand experience to get other women to embrace *hijra*). The critical difference when compared to the online ritualization of Jihad is the absence of the practice of ritualization of violence in the *hijra* performance.

In conclusion, the complexity of this brand new phenomenon, the female Salafist (Jihadist?) migration, its insertion in the new concept of Jihad 3.0 and its possible proximity with more deeply rooted Jihadist goals constitute an important novelty within the online-offline Jihadist space research, which, also because of its profoundly disquieting aspects for the world at large, deserves future and further study.

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Biography

CLAUDIA CARVALHO is a PhD student at Tilburg University, School of Humanities, analyzing the theme of religious violence in the form of Jihad, Cyber Jihad and Islamic Terrorism. In 2003 she completed summa cum laude her Master Degree in International Relations with a thesis about the Israeli-Arabic conflict that was later published as a book. Pursuing further her education she attended the Course of National Defense promoted by the Portuguese Defense Ministry in 2005. Also in this year she co-wrote a book, *Islam in Europe*, where she traced the profile of Islamic communities in Scandinavian countries. Since then she has been actively participating in International and national Conferences over Islam, Jihad and Terrorism, either as a key speaker or as a panelist. In June 2014 she finished an online Advanced Course on Jihadism and Terrorism in Spain promoted by CISDE (International Campus for Security and Defense). She is a project member of Euro-Islam.info ([GSRL Paris](#) / CNRS France and Harvard University), NISIS (Netherlands Interuniversity School for Islamic Studies), [Network for New Media, Religion and Digital Culture Studies](#) (Evans/Glasscock Digital Humanities Project, at [Texas A&M University](#)), among other organizations.

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Facebooking Religion and the Technologization of the Religious Discourse: A Case Study of a Botswana-based Prophetic Church

Gabriel Faimau, Camden Behrens

Abstract

Technologization of discourse is generally conceptualized as a process of influencing people's way of thinking through the use of certain linguistic strategies. In this process, power is exercised through the use of linguistic strategies that shape the construction of identity as well as socio-religious vision. This study analyzes the ways in which certain linguistic strategies and religious discourses used in Facebook posts, reviews and comments on a religion-based Facebook page create and shape the narratives of religious authority, religious identity and religious community. Using the Facebook page of a popular prophetic Christian church in Botswana, Gospel of God's Grace (3G Ministries), as a case study, this study examines the following questions: in what ways can an active religion-based Facebook page reconfigure and provide a platform for religious practice? To what extent does the use of various linguistic strategies inform and shape religious discourses found in various Facebook postings and comments? And how does a religious Facebook page provide a venue for the discursive interpretation of religious authority, the negotiation of religious identity and the development of socio-religious vision?

Keywords

Facebook, Technologization, Religious Authority, Identity Construction, Religious Discourse, Prophetic Ministries, Botswana

1 Introduction

This article examines the extent to which Facebook has emerged as a powerful media tool used by prophetic ministries in Botswana in mediating various religious events and strategies. While focusing on the appropriation of Facebook among the prophetic ministries, particular attention is

given to the content of Facebook postings and users' comments in order to examine how religious discourses are technologized and how such technologization of discourse is used as a medium for the discursive interpretation of religious authority, religious identity and socio-religious vision.

Through the use of the Facebook page of a popular prophetic Christian church in Botswana, Gospel of God's Grace Ministries (3G Ministries), as a case study, the article addresses the following specific questions: in what ways does the development and use of a religion-based Facebook page reconfigure and provide a platform for religious practice? To what extent does the use of various linguistic strategies inform and shape religious discourses utilized in various Facebook postings, reviews and comments? And how does a religious Facebook page provide a venue for the discursive interpretation of religious authority, the negotiation of religious identity and the development of socio-religious vision?

In an attempt to address these questions, we will first provide a background to the prophetic ministries and the use of new media in Botswana. We will then provide an explanatory framework of the technologization of discourse before discussing the methodology used in the study as well as the study findings.

2 Prophetic Ministries and New Media in Botswana: An Introduction

Botswana is a landlocked country in Southern Africa and shares borders with South Africa, Namibia, Zambia and Zimbabwe. Contemporary Botswana is home to hundreds of Christian denominations. Although officially a secular country, Botswana is often considered a Christian country with a predominant view that to be a Motswana¹ means to be a Christian. According to the 2011 Population and Housing Census, Christianity (79%) remains the predominant religion in Botswana followed by African Traditional Religion (4.1%) and Islam (0.74%); at least 15% of the population is not associated to any religion. The census results demonstrate an increase in the levels of religiousness in the country with Christianity levels increasing by at least 7% from the 2001 Population Census (Statistics Botswana, 2014).

Studies on Christianity in Botswana generally classify Christianity into three main families of churches: Mainline churches; Africa Independent churches; and Evangelical, Pentecostal or Charismatic churches (Haron and Jensen, 2008). Prophetic ministries have recently begun to emerge in the religious landscape of Botswana and now form a 'new' and forth classification. Christianity in Botswana has seen a growth in the number of registered churches in the country. As

1 The term 'Motswana' refers to either a citizen of Botswana or a person from the Tswana ethnic group in Southern Africa. The plural form of Motswana is 'Batswana'.

of May 2015, Botswana had 1,936 registered churches; the majority of which are Evangelical or Pentecostal Churches, including the newly emerged prophetic ministries.²

One of the characteristics of prophetic ministries is the use of media and, in particular, new media. The use of media among prophetic ministries clearly sustains the appropriation of media in ‘mediating Gospel’ used in Pentecostal churches. In his article, Togarasei (2012) concluded that Pentecostal Churches, particularly in Zimbabwe and Botswana, have fully embraced the use of media technology to spread the Gospel faster and wider. This includes the use and appropriation of radio, television, the Internet, e-mail, mobile phones, and various forms of print media.

Most, if not all, of the prophetic ministries in Botswana use at least one new media platform. This includes the use of websites, Facebook pages, twitter accounts, YouTube channels and the messenger service, WhatsApp. Among social media networking sites, Facebook is the largest and most popular. In June 2016, Facebook reported that globally there were 1.71 billion Facebook users who were active on the site on a monthly basis (Facebook, 2016). In the context of Botswana, Facebook is the most popular social media site. A recent report on internet accessibility by Nielsen Company ranked Botswana as one of the top three countries in Africa (Nielsen, 2016). With the escalation of internet accessibility, hundreds of thousands of people in Botswana have created Facebook accounts. The 2011 Botswana Population and Housing Census counted a total population of 2,024,787 while the Africa 2016 Population and Internet Users Statistics, provided by the Internet World Stats, noted that Botswana had 620,000 registered Facebook users as of November 2015.³ In its report, Nielsen Company claimed that Botswana has the highest rates of Facebook use in Africa (Nielsen, 2016). With a high rate of Facebook use, the report concluded that Botswana has become a highly socially active society.

Facebook pages dedicated to religion are some of the most popular in Botswana. For example, Social Bakers, a social media monitoring and statistics site, listed Prophet Shepherd Bushiri⁴ and TB Joshua⁵ at numbers seven and eight respectively on the list of ‘what Botswana fans like on Facebook.’ Prophet Shepherd Bushiri, for example, has 1,010,700 global fans on Facebook, of which 145,620 (14.4%) fans reside in Botswana.⁶

2 Data related to the number of churches in Botswana was provided by the Office of Registration of Societies, Ministry of Labour and Home Affairs, Botswana, in 2015.

3 See <http://www.internetworldstats.com/stats1.htm>. Accessed on 1 September 2016.

4 Prophet Shepherd Bushiri is a Malawian preacher, founder and leader of the Enlightened Christian Gathering (ECG) and Shepherd Bushiri Ministries International. ECG church has its headquarters in Lilongwe the capital city of Malawi and branches across the African continent

5 T.B. Joshua is a Nigerian prophet and a televangelist. He is the General Overseer of The Synagogue, Church of All Nations (SCOAN). SCOAN is a religious organization that runs the popular Gospel tv channel ‘Emmanuel TV’ from Lagos, Nigeria.

6 For a comprehensive overview, see <https://www.socialbakers.com/statistics/facebook/pages/total/botswana/>. Accessed on 1 September 2016.

The majority of the prophetic ministries in Botswana have Facebook pages. While the content of the Facebook postings on the prophetic ministries pages vary, the postings generally include biblical verses, well-formulated religious messages, words from the prophet or prophetess who leads the prophetic ministries, blogging of religious services, postings of pictures or videos, testimonies and postings of religious products.

The Gospel of God's Grace Ministries (3G Ministries) is one of the most popular prophetic ministries in Botswana. 3G Ministries, also known as Prophet Cedric Ministries, was started in 2011 with 37 members and is based in Kopong Village.⁷ It is led by Prophet Cedric Kobedi and uses the tagline 'The Grace of God is sufficient for you'. 3G Ministries currently has over 6000 regular members or followers. This prophetic church organizes a variety of public events, often at sports stadiums, which normally attract thousands of people. 3G Ministries has a website, Facebook page, twitter account, blog account and YouTube Channel. The 3G Ministries' Facebook page is registered in the name of its leader: Prophet Cedric Ministries Facebook page and is updated on a daily basis. As of August 2016, this Facebook page has over 41,000 likes and 662 reviews.⁸

3 Digital Religion and the Technologization of Discourse

Religion and its relationship with technology has been a growing area of inquiry among scholars (Newman, 1997; Noble 1997; George, 2006; Karaflogka, 2006). At the heart of this inquiry are questions related to the extent to which religion influences technology and how the secular nature of technology has an impact on religion. Examining these substantial questions, Newman (1997) presents a thought provoking proposition that as religion is a product of mankind it may, in essence, be a form of technology; and as technology is at the very center of human culture, it is also a religious endeavor (see also Karaflogka, 2006, p. 53). Within the context of religion and technology, communication technology, in particular the technology of new media, has played a crucial role in the development of religion. Drawing on the evolutionary theory of communication and culture, Ong ([1982][1988) argues that religion and religious practice has utilized communication technology through a series of stages from 'primary orality' to 'secondary orality'. The Primary orality stage refers to the pre-literacy period whereas the secondary orality stage signifies the period where culture and society is equipped with the technology of writing and printing. The presence of the

7 Kopong is a small village in the Kweneng district of Botswana. It is 27 kilometers away from Gaborone, the capital city of Botswana. Information about the Gospel of God's Grace Ministries (3G Ministries) is available on its website <http://www.3gministries.co.bw/>, accessed on 1 September 2016.

8 The official Facebook page of 3G Ministries is Prophet Cedric Ministries: <https://www.facebook.com/prophetcedricministries/?fref=ts>, accessed on 4 September 2016.

internet adds nuance to the understanding of Ong's secondary orality– the internet provides a space for religion and religion finds a platform in cyberspace.

It is then important to consider how religion presents itself in cyberspace. According to Helland (2000, 2002, 2005), religion manifests itself on the internet in two different forms: religion online and online religion. Religion online is based upon a traditional religious hierarchical structure where the internet is a tool of the top-down communication structure and is simply a tool for communication. On the other hand, online religion represents a new development of religious praxis with new forms of communication. These new forms of religious communication are characterized by unstructured, open and non-hierarchical interaction. Here, the internet offers users a form of religious expression outside the traditional religious structure and offers a space for interaction (Helland, 2000, pp. 205-233; 2002, p. 294). Hadden and Cowan (2000) modified Helland's original theoretical framework and describe religion online as a form of communication that provides information about religion and online religion as an invitation to cyberspace users to participate in religious practices via the web. Religion online provides information while online religion facilitates religious praxis among internet users (Hadden and Cowan, 2000, pp. 8-9; Dawson and Cowan, 2004, p.7).

The theoretical framework proposed by Helland can be understood in two dimensions: information and formation. On one hand, religion online provides information and on the other hand, online religion offers formation to internet users (Faimau, 2007). By providing information, religion online strives to allow internet users to gain knowledge. By offering formation, online religion allows communication with internet users for personal religious decisions, religious renewal or prayer requests.

The above explanatory framework allows us to analyze the locus of the internet between religion and the internet users and to determine to what extent the presence of the internet provides meaning for both religion and internet users. The internet creates a unique and new space that "blurs the boundary between the private and the public sphere, allowing for a new form of religious participation in the modern world" (Helland, 2000, p. 221). With the rise of the internet, control over religion and people's religious participation has been removed; both religion and people are free to choose the ways in which they express themselves. The logic behind this virtual culture is the more creative, attractive and presentable the website, the more visits or 'hits' it may expect. Employing this logic, the internet has forced religion to be more creative, attractive and presentable. This means that the internet is not simply a medium for the transmission of religious messages or a medium for information and participation in religious affairs. For both religion and the internet users, the internet also has its own message and therefore religion and the internet users arguably depend on the effects produced by the internet itself.

Helland suggests a strategy for categorizing the praxis of digital religion which focuses on how religion finds its space on the internet, and how the internet influences the religious belief as well as spiritual endeavors of internet users. This categorization is very important because it provides the basis for current Digital Religion Research. According to Campbell (2016), current Digital Religion research deals with basic topics such as “how religious communities engage with the internet to ways religiosity is expressed through digital practices and the extent to which technological engagement can be seen as a spiritual enterprise” (Campbell, 2016, p. 2). The present wave of Digital Religion research has taken, what Campbell (2016) calls, the ‘theoretical turn’ where the focus is on how internet users who are religious negotiate their online and offline lives. In this process of negotiation, religious internet users rely on religious discourses which circulate in both the online and offline world. These religious discourses generally include discursive formations that influence human interaction, sociability and institutional development. Moberg (2016, p. 3) notes that “discursive formations contain particular *ideational* dimensions that serve to not only encourage Christian organizations and institutions to ‘engage’ with but also to *adapt* and *conform* to new technological realities” (emphasis in original).

This brings us to the notion of technologization of discourse. The phrase technologization of discourse was first coined by Fairclough (1992; 2013) who, himself, was influenced by Foucault’s analysis of knowledge, power and discourse. According to Fairclough (2013, p. 137), technologization of discourse is “the process of intervention in the sphere of discourse practices with the objective of constructing a new hegemony...”. In a more practical sense, technologization of discourse can be defined as the process of influencing people’s way of thinking through the use of certain linguistic strategies (Smirnova, 2011, p. 38; see also Moberg, 2016). In this process, power is exercised through the use of linguistic strategies that shape identity construction as well as socio-religious vision. The common linguistic strategies in the technologization of discourse include: metaphorical expressions, contrastive technique, and repetition.⁹ These strategies are normally used not only to engage an interlocutor but also to define and redefine the relationship between the interlocutors involved in a certain conversation. Norton (1997), for example, argued that when speakers engage in a conversation, they are not only “exchanging information with their interlocutors; they are also constantly organizing and reorganizing a sense of who they are and how they relate to the social world” (Norton, 1997, p. 409). In this sense, technologization of discourse establishes “a close connection between knowledge about language and discourse, and power” (Fairclough, 1992, p. 216). As a result, the process is designed to ensure that the choice and use of linguistic strategies within the realm of discursive practice affects or has effects on publics and/or audience. This includes the use of different techniques such as persuasion, thought-control and even

9 Our data analysis in the following section will show how these strategies are used.

manipulation. What is important here is not the actual linguistic strategies used in various utterances but rather the intended effect of the discourses.

Smirnova (2011) highlights three levels of technologization of discourse. The first level involves the use of technological syntax that relies on the production of rhythm and rhyme through careful choice and selection of words. The main purpose of this strategy is to magnify the effect of the message and meaning that ‘a technological expert’ wants to convey as well as provide a horizon for public imagination that takes into account the audience’s experiences and feelings. The second level of technologization focuses on developing a “technological chain...to exploit archetypal meanings and culturally established interpretations” (Smirnova, 2011, p. 43). At this level, the known context or the reality is examined to generate new meanings and introduce a new order that will replace the current reality. The third level of technologization refers the audience to events or objects that they are familiar with. Such events or objects are used as points of reference through which new meanings are imposed on the audience.

While we have highlighted the relationship between religion and the internet more generally, this study focuses specifically on the use of the online social media site, Facebook. In an online world, including the Facebook world, texts and images are posted (Wilson, Gosling and Graham, 2012; Miller, Munday and Hill, 2013). The process of constructing texts and images for distribution on Facebook includes the process of technologization of discourse, as already explained. This is because the postings made on Facebook pages most often pay particular attention to the choice of linguistic strategies and the expected effect generated through the use of such linguistic strategies. In this context, Facebook postings are discursive techniques designed to maximize the effectiveness, and affectiveness, of communication and comments that are posted in the context of social relationships with a strong interpersonal function (Johnson, 2014). It is within this explanatory framework that this case study analysis will be situated.

4 Digital Ethnography: A Methodological Approach

This study focuses on the Facebook page created and maintained by the 3G Ministries registered under the name Prophet Cedric Ministries. As a specific Facebook page is our focus of research, we assume Facebook to be our research field and have, therefore, employed a digital ethnography approach to gather data in response to our research questions.

Scholars generally argued that “ethnography is about telling social stories” (Murthy, 2008, p. 838). Although an ethnographic approach has many characteristics, observation and participation are central to ethnographic studies. Using digital ethnography as a methodological approach, we

develop new understandings of ‘observation’ and ‘participation’ as we engage in a digital research fieldwork (Markham, 2013). Our observation includes archiving reviews as well as posts and comments placed on the 3G Ministries’ Facebook page during the period December 2015 to May 2016. After archiving the reviews, posts and comments, we categorized the data using pre-coded themes that assist us in the process of analysis in response to the research questions. ‘Digital participation’ encompasses engaging and following closely all posts and comments made on Facebook pages. This includes noting down how the 3G Ministries’ Facebook page provides venues for religious events and how Facebook users engage in religious events through various posts and comments placed on the 3G Ministries’ Facebook page.

Our digital fieldwork was conducted from December 2015 to June 2016. During the fieldwork, we archived over 100 Facebook posts, over 200 reviews, and over 2,000 comments which were placed as responses to the reviews and posts. Each post on the 3G Ministries’ Facebook page is normally accompanied by a picture selected and posted by the Facebook page admin.

Neither of the two researchers is a member or follower of 3G Ministries. While the Facebook page for the church is an open page where anybody can read and participate, we did not participate in posting comments. Nevertheless, we participated in the sense that we closely followed the dynamics of the Facebook posts and comments. We consider the 3G ministries’ Facebook page a public environment because the page is available for all Facebook users and registration is not required for the reading of posts, comments and reviews (Peuronen, 2011). Informed consent was therefore not sought from Facebook users who posted reviews and comments on the page. While posts placed on the Facebook page are easily available to the public, we will use the initials of those whose real names are mentioned on posts in this case study.¹⁰ We did, however, receive permission from 3G Ministries to include the Gospel of God’s Grace Ministries in our research fieldwork in relation to our umbrella research project, *New Media and Cultural Application on Religion*.¹¹

One of the major challenges when studying observational data, including data generated from Facebook, is assessing the impact of potential ‘hidden biases’ as well as drawing conclusions that are free from bias (Kosinski, Matz, Gosling, Popov and Stillwell, 2015, p. 548). With reference to this challenge, we employ framing analysis to determine the technologization of discourse in the posts, reviews, and comments. Framing analysis has become popular when analyzing news and media discourse, including new media discourse (Pan and Kosicki, 1993; Chong and Druckman, 2007; Al-Rawi, 2016). To facilitate the framing analysis, we implemented three stages of data

10 See Kosinski, Matz, Gosling, Popov and Stillwell (2015) for explanation concerning boundaries of individual consent when Facebook is used as a research field.

11 This study is funded by the Nagel Institute with generous support from the John Templeton Foundation in the U.S.A. Information regarding the study can be seen here: <http://www.cascafrica.org/social-content.php?cid=25/>, accessed on 4 September 2016.

coding: open, axial and selective coding (Strauss, 1987; Corbin and Strauss, 2008; Boeije, 2010; Al-Rawi, 2016). Through open coding, we explored, divided and grouped our data into different categories based on the themes and content of each Facebook post, review and comment. In the axial coding phase, we increased the level of conceptual abstraction and determined the relevance of the categories for our analysis. Using this strategy, we developed a number of main categories guided by the study questions. The third phase, selective coding, involved identifying “connections between the categories in order to make sense of what is happening in the field” (Boeije, 2010, p. 114). Through the coding process, four related categories or themes were identified: reconfiguration of religious authority; construction and negotiation of religious identity; formation of a virtual religious community; and, religious product attachment.

5 Findings, Analysis and Discussion

The four related themes that emerged during the digital ethnographic study will be discussed in more detail. These include: reconfiguration of religious authority, construction and negotiation of religious identity, formation of virtual religious community, and religious product attachment. Before such a discussion, it is necessary to consider the structure of the posts on the 3G Ministries’ Facebook page.

5.1 Structure of Posts

The 3G Ministries Facebook posts are updated by the 3G Ministries Facebook admin. All posts can therefore be considered official posts of 3G Ministries. Although the editing process of each post is unknown to both researchers, one would assume that like any institution, official positions normally go through various stages of approval before a final “Facebook status” is posted. Facebook users do not have the option of posting directly onto the page. They are only allowed to comment on the posts. Based on this, it would be fair to suggest that there is a certain degree of control as well as a top-down approach as far as updating posts on the 3G Ministries Facebook page is concerned. It is, however, important to note that comments posted by Facebook users in response to each post seem to be allowed without an internal system of censorship. A number of criticisms towards 3G Ministries and its prophet, for example, are left on both the review and comment sections without being deleted. We also noticed through our digital observation that the admin normally did not respond to comments or reviews by Facebook users.

The 3G Ministries updates its Facebook page on a daily basis. When there is a church event or service, the page is regularly updated by 3G Ministries with posts focusing on the main highlights of the event or service. The Gospel of God's Grace Ministries has a church service every Friday evening and Sunday from 06:00hrs to 18:00hrs. We observed that 3G Ministries uses its Facebook page as a platform for 'live blogging' where summaries of the actual events are posted during church services predominately for those who cannot attend the service. Our examination of the various posts placed on the 3G Ministries' Facebook page during the period of the study determined that the posts, generally, addressed four core aspects: allowing the public to participate in a church event or service and a summary of the event; a message from the prophet which normally highlights core messages, summarized from the sermon; testimonial narratives from church attendants; and welcoming of visitors to the 3G Ministries' service.

Allowing the public to participate in a church event or service usually takes the form of an invitation that emphasizes the value of participating in the service and what one should do in order to benefit from the service. A post placed on 17 January 2016 highlights this idea: "Brethren, welcome to the Gospel of God's Grace Ministries Sunday Service where all things are possible for he who believes. Wherever you are, prepare your heart, soul and Spirit to encounter Christ Jesus today. Remember that when you meet Him, Your dream will be reborn and He will strengthen you to realize it in Jesus' name." The use of the phrase 'wherever you are' underlines the fact that Facebook is used as a medium to reach those who physically cannot attend the Sunday Service. Moreover, in welcoming Facebook users to participate virtually in the service, the ministry encourages the virtual movement and participation of Facebook users. This participation can be seen as controlled by 3G Ministries. The element of virtual thought-control or even manipulation can be seen, for example, in appealing statements such as "your dream will be reborn". A summary of the event or service is normally posted after a service or a religious event emphasizing the message delivered by the prophet and how that message may function in one's life. The main message of the Friday Service on 8 January 2016, delivered by Prophet Cedric, was "Christians are not supposed to be mere dreamers". A Facebook post after the service depicts this message: "We have come to the end of the Friday service; we believe that the word that you have received has energized your spirit and encouraged you to pursue your dreams. Remember as a Christian you are not supposed to be a mere dreamer for you have faith at your disposal which is an instrument to realize every dream."

The second type of posting focuses on the message delivered by Prophet Cedric Kobedi and includes some selected quotations from what he delivered during the sermon and service. Using various rhetorical techniques and devices such as repetition, antithesis, metaphor or semantic move, the selected quotations are drafted and framed to create a profound impact on the audience. The following message posted on 18 February 2016 is an example: "The world around you may be dark

but you shall never be dark because your dream shall light up your world. It shall light up your finances, your career, your marriage, your health and your spirituality in Jesus name.” This post applies two related linguistic strategies: contrastive strategy and metaphoric expression. In the first part of the first statement, a contrastive strategy is applied with a binary appeal of dark versus light where light is set to overcome the darkness. The second part employs a metaphoric expression by using and linking “dream” and “light” while stating the role of “dream” in “lighting up” one’s world. The term “world” itself is also used metaphorically. Here, the term “world” is related to practical issues such as finances, career, marriage, health and spirituality.

Testimonies are very central in the tradition of Pentecostal movements and thus posts related to faith or religious testimonies are very prominent on the 3G Ministries’ Facebook page. This tradition of testimonies is maintained by the current prophetic ministries in Botswana and it is fair to say that there is no church service without testimony. Giving testimony is a core value in Pentecostalism because it is regarded as the best way to express the good that God has done for an individual. Given the importance of giving testimony in the prophetic ministries circle, it is logical that the posting of testimonies is considered one of the best ways to attract people to the Christian faith. Although the content of testimonies varies, the framing of the Facebook posts based on these testimonies highlights the following key aspects: the problem faced by an individual, what God has done to help the individual through the hands of the prophet and through 3G ministries, confirmation of the prophet’s power, confirmation of the benefits of attending religious events organized by 3G Ministries, and confirmation of the influencing power of religious products such as Living Water and Living Sticker.¹²

In every church service, 3G Ministries allocates time to welcome those who are visiting 3G Ministries. A portion of the seating inside the church is dedicated to the visitors. Some visitors are also given a name tag that clearly identifies them as visitors. When the service is over, the media team of 3G Ministries usually approaches visitors for an interview. The interview is later summarized and uploaded on 3G Ministries’ Facebook page. The visitors’ Facebook posts focus on their impression of 3G Ministries, the message of the Prophet and what they expect from the church. An interview posted on 3G Ministries Facebook page underlines the focus that we have just indicated. On 17 January 2016, Mr T.H. visited 3G Ministries from Lesotho. He said: “I wish a ministry like this was there in my country Lesotho, I intend to invite my family to come and experience Christ the same way I did”. The interviews with visitors play a role in ‘marketing’ 3G Ministries to others. As the above quote demonstrates, visitors play an important role in voicing

12 Living Water and Living sticker are two religious products offered and sold by 3G Ministries. Those who purchase both products are believed to be protected from evil by God. Living sticker contains the following message: “Be conscious of your dream”. Those who have the sticker normally attach it to the bumper of their cars or the doors of their houses.

what the church has to offer and why it differs from other churches. In effect, Facebook becomes an avenue for extending the influence and reach of the ministry through the voices of visitors.

5.2 Facebook Posts and the Reconfiguration of Religious Authority

Authority, particularly religious authority, is an emerging theme in the study of religion and new media (Campbell, 2010, 2012). Studies on digital religion suggest that with the emergence of the internet, religious authority has been challenged. Cheong (2013, p. 74) notes that “digital media are framed as corrosive and disruptive to traditional religious authority, stressing an erosion of the power of traditional institutions and leaders to define and determine the meaning of religious symbols”. Recent perspectives, however, view the presence of digital media as complementary and supportive of religious authority (Campbell, 2010, 2012; Cheong, 2013).

In the prophetic ministries circle, the presence of a prophet is the main attraction of a church or ministry. 3G Ministries and its prophet can be seen as one item as 3G Ministries cannot be understood without its prophet. Using a marketing term, one would argue that the prophet is the brand of 3G Ministries. The centrality of the prophet in the church affairs is clearly demonstrated in the Facebook posts. Throughout our digital ethnography, we noticed that all posts make mention of the prophet. The prophet is the main attraction of the church and the point of reference. Prophetic ministries maintain the Pentecostal understanding of prophecy, healing and deliverance. In an offline world, the role of the prophet includes providing prophecies, ministering the Word of God and performing healing miracles and deliverance. The presence of a prophet therefore signals the presence of prophecy, healing and deliverance (Chitando, Gunda and Kugler, 2013). Our data clearly indicated that the perception of the prophet in the virtual world is an extension of the general perception and understanding of the prophet’s traditional role in an offline world. For example, in various comments, Facebook users continue to address the prophet as “the prophet of God”, “man of God”, or “servant of God”. The same phrases are traditionally used in the offline world:

Through our digital observation, we determined that posts on the 3G Ministries’ Facebook page are designed to enhance the authority of the prophet and, we argue, apply the traditional model of the Greek rhetoric style. This rhetoric style functions using three related appealing models: *ethos*, *pathos* and *logos* (Demirdogen, 2010). *Ethos* refers to ethical appeal and relates to the question of credibility. Ethical appeal aims at the audience’s perception of the credibility of the prophet. The Facebook posts are structured to ensure credible story-telling on the part of the Prophet while appealing to followers or potential followers as well as Facebook users. Therefore, 3G Ministries’ Facebook posts place emphasis on how the “prayer” or “laying on of hands” or “prophetic word” of the prophet bring instant healing or how a prophecy given by the prophet always comes true. In this sense, the posts are framed or designed to offer a strong sense of the prophet’s credible authority.

Pathos relates to emotional appeal. Within the sociological domain, emotional appeal is known as discursive effect. In the discursive effect, the main focus is on the emotional appeal of the story rather than its factual accuracy. Following this logic, Facebook posts present emotional appeal that reinforces the life transformational and relational authority of the prophet. A Facebook status posted on 12 June 2016 highlights the experience of KD who attended the church service that Sunday as a visitor: “She was captivated by the teachings of the prophet and his humility”. The use of terms such as “captivated”, “teachings” and “humility” in this post provide an emotional appeal that functions as a technique to persuade the audience, including Facebook users, to listen to and follow the prophet. *Logos* refers to logical appeal. Logical appeal is not about the extent to which a statement is logical; it is the attempts to persuade the audience by making reasonable claims. Reasonable claims often influence the ways in which the audience thinks. Facebook posts are designed to persuade the Facebook users’ religious imagination to welcome the prophet’s authority through his message. The story of Mrs KT, posted on 12 June 2016, is a good example of how logical appeal is used to reinforce the prophet’s authority. “Mrs KT made all efforts to find solution to her ailment but to no avail; she sought for medical assistance and even patronised traditional doctors but all to no avail. Today she came to the church with this seven year ordeal and God did what man could not do. When she met the greatest physician of all time, Jesus Christ through His servant Prophet Cedric, Mrs KT was instantly healed of her affliction.” In this testimonial narrative, logical reasoning through the use of data such as efforts to “seek for medical assistance” and “patronize traditional doctors” is applied to narrate the prophet’s authority as a divine authority beyond “medical assistance” and “traditional healing”.

As far as discursive practice is concerned, in our view, the religious authority of the prophet in the 3G Ministries’ Facebook posts manifests in three related ways: perceived charisma with divine power, perceived life transformational coach, and perceived relational authority. We use the term “perceived” to emphasize how the prophet is perceived by Facebook users who access the 3G Ministries’ Facebook page. According to Weber (1947), religious authority is normally perceived as a charisma of ‘being instilled with divine or supernatural power’. Posts on the 3G Ministries Facebook page maintained the charismatic power of the prophet and described his authority as one that was divinely given to him. This is clearly demonstrated through the use of linguistic strategies such as ‘Servant of God Prophet Cedric’, ‘the man of God Prophet Cedric’, ‘prophetic revelation from the man of God’ and ‘God’s faithful servant’. We view these phrases as “linguistic strategies” because the phrases provide religious imagination as well as a metaphoric link between their prophet, Prophet Cedric, and the biblical description of prophets. These linguistic strategies play a crucial role in maintaining and reinforcing the prophet’s charisma.

In responses to the posts uploaded onto the Facebook page, comments maintain the use of repetitive linguistic strategies including addressing the prophet as ‘prophet of God’, ‘the chosen

one', 'the vessel of God' and 'true man of God'. When a Facebook user calls upon the name of God, the prophet's name is attached to the call through the use of phrases such as 'the God of Prophet Cedric'. Again the 'divine power' of the prophet is also perceived through the use of linguistic strategies that raise the religious imagination of Facebook users. The following quote captures this point: "...just as the servant of God Prophet Cedric laid a hand on her she felt the baby moving in her uterus" (6 March 2016). For religious Facebook users, this narrative line would drive their Christian imagination to the biblical narrative written in the Gospel of Luke 1:41 where the baby [John the Baptist] leaped in the womb of Elizabeth, his mother, when Elizabeth heard Mary's greeting. In using this strategy, the post does not only reinforce the prophet's authority or power. To a certain extent, the discourse is controlled and so is the Facebook users' religious imagination.

The authority of the prophet in the 3G Ministries' Facebook posts, reviews and comments is also narrated as a perceived life transformational coach (a term we developed to capture the perception of the prophet as a life coach). Through this narrative, the prophet is described as someone with an authority to transform one's life for the better. According to the Facebook posts, the transformational life coaching of the prophet occurs through the delivery of prophetic messages, divine teaching and acts of mentorship in a wide range of areas including striving for academic achievement and excellence, working for a love relationship and maintaining a faithful married life. Rather than just calling Prophet Cedric 'the prophet', Facebook users also address him as 'mentor' and 'teacher'.

Through Facebook posts and comments, religious authority is transformed into relational authority. Relational authority is characterized by an individualized relationship. Within the context of the Facebook posts, authority in relational terms is translated using family lines, particularly the parental relationship. Here the prophet is called 'spiritual father' or, more intimately, 'dad' or 'daddy'. While the use of terms such as 'father', 'papa' or 'daddy' to address the prophet signifies a personal and intimate relationship between a church attendee/Facebook user and the prophet, such constructions, in turn, foster a sense of loyalty towards the prophet. This loyalty is demonstrated through the telling of stories or providing narratives of faith using a single lens, the prophet's lens. The following quotes posted by Facebook users on the review section of the 3G Ministries' Facebook page highlights these points.

"Prophet Cedric is a true Man of God who has earnestly restored the true zeal of the people for Jesus Christ our Saviour and he has used the most basic method ever; bring hope to the hopeless."

"This is the Prophet whom God is pleased with, He is a true and real Man of God sent to heal us, deliver us, save us, rescue us, pray for us and bless us. His teachings are exceptional. I see Jesus in him".

“The Word being preached here (Gospel of God's Grace Ministries) is so powerful that it change lives. Daddy, you are truly a Man of God and we thank God for your life”.

As far as technologization of discourse is concerned, the prophet's religious authority is perceived as both transcendent and immanent. On the one hand, addressing the prophet as “man of God” suggests that the prophet's authority transcends human form of authority on the basis that he has the divine power from God. On the other hand, the immanent nature of the prophet's religious authority is bound to the relational character of the prophet when he is perceived as teacher, mentor and daddy. One would therefore argue that the participation of religious Facebook users perpetuates the authority of the prophet. This means that the online network not only introduces new forms of governing authority, as suggested by Thumma (2000) and Campbell (2010, 2012, 2013), but also offers an avenue for expanding the prophet's authority (see also Cheong, 2016). The expansion of the prophet's authority can be seen as a virtual authority as the prophet influences those who read his messages on Facebook and the healing power performed offline can be virtually extended to those who follow the miraculous process through Facebook posts. Three related aspects can be highlighted here: the prophet's authority, Facebook as a medium, and the participation of Facebook users in extending the prophet's authority. It could be argued that Facebook extends the prophet's authority beyond offline boundaries. In this context, posts and comments demonstrate a dynamic interplay between the power of the prophet and its manifested relations with followers and Facebook users.

5.3 Facebook Posts and the Construction of Religious Identity

The central role and authoritative presence of the prophet provides ‘a template’ for the construction and negotiation of identities among those whose testimonial stories are posted on the Facebook page and Facebook users who participate in the testimonial narratives by reading and responding to them. As such, testimonial stories posted on the Facebook page provide an avenue to display religious identity narratives. The Facebook users' views and perceptions of the prophet also shape the ways in which they perceive themselves. According to Bauman (2000, p. 1) identity is “the situated outcome of a rhetorical and interpretive process in which interactants make situationally motivated selections from socially constituted repertoires of identificational and affiliational resources and craft these semiotic resources into identity claims for presentation to others”. Through personal identification with the life of the prophet, the prophet clearly becomes a mirror through which Facebook users view their own identity construction.

The question is, what do these religious identity narratives tell us about the construction and negotiation of religious identity? According to Hewitt (2000), identity construction is “the process

by which an individual develops the capacity to grasp the meaning of situations in everyday life and their own position in relation to them” (Hewitt, 2000, p. 79, cited in Lovheim, 2013, p. 42). The testimonial narrative posts on the 3G Ministries’ Facebook page consist of two main parts: autobiographical stories of the individual providing the testimony; and the description of new meaning that has shaped the past ‘autobiographical story’ following an encounter with the prophet and 3G Ministries. The first section presents a dark past identity characterized with problems, difficulties, temptations and sickness. The second section presents a new identity characterized by light, joy and happiness. The encounter with the prophet and 3G Ministries is, therefore, represented as a defining moment for the construction of a new identity. In this defining moment, the story teller is ‘a new born’, 3G Ministries is represented as a home, and the prophet is the ‘Father’ who has shaped the newborn’s identity. To illustrate this interpretation, we provide a testimonial narrative posted on the 3G Ministries’ Facebook page on 20 March 2016.

“For over 15 years of her teaching career, Ms J. M. was hard-hit by limitation in progress. She only had a diploma in her field and therefore it became really hard for her to ever be promoted. As a result Ms M. decided to apply for sponsorship in order to further her studies; she applied countless times but all she got were regrets. This situation brought her a lot of distress as she wondered if she would ever progress in life. Through this dire time Ms M. had not come to the knowledge of Christ Jesus so she lived a hopeless life of drinking alcohol and satisfying all the worldly desires. There was nothing right in her life and the future looked grim for her. In November 2012, it was revealed that indeed God had plans to prosper and not to harm Ms M., plans to give her hope and a future despite all her short comings. "I had a strange vision where I saw a man telling me to stop drinking alcohol and ordered me to wash a car that we were to use in a journey" she added. In just a week she was privileged to come to the Gospel of God’s Grace Ministries and to her utter shock, she realised that the man she saw in the dream was the man of God Prophet Cedric, she suddenly got to realise that God had sent His servant to caution her on the wrong-doings she was involved in. Upon realising this, she made a heart's decision to act in accordance with what she saw in the dream; she stopped drinking alcohol, aligned her life to God’s word and began her Christian Journey through fellowship in the church.”

The above example clearly highlights the structure of testimonial narratives where a dark past was presented followed by a bright future after a defining encounter with the prophet and 3G Ministries. Although this structure is similar to that of conversion narratives, testimonial narratives generally emphasize ideas of self-discovery and self-transformation, a reinterpretation of past life and planning for the future. While conversion narratives focus on the efficacy and experience of the conversion, testimonial narratives focus on the beneficial outcome under ordinary day-to-day circumstances in a collective context because they are designed for and located before specific audiences (Westerink, 2013).

Although accounts of identity through religious testimonial narratives are highly personalized experiences of faith, when the narratives are presented in a post on a Facebook page the autobiographical story of an individual becomes a shared narrative. Through the posting of an individual's autobiographical narrative of identity on the Facebook page, the autobiographical story becomes a shared religious experience that gives meaning as well as shapes the identity negotiation of other Facebook users. This can be seen in the Facebook users' comments on the testimonial narratives posted on the 3G Ministries' Facebook page. The following two comments from two Facebook users illustrate this point:

“That is the work of God of my proffet”[prophet]. [I] am awaitin [awaiting] my miraculars [miraculous] transfer [transfer]. I hv [have] been waitn [waiting] 4 [for] 7 years. God tim [God's time] is the best. Whn [When] God says yes no man can say no. Heavenly father my family needs me. In Jesus name [I] am joinin [joining] my family frm [from] the testimony givn [given].”

“...promotion for one [is] promotion for all. I am not there in person but am there in spirit. I receive mine which is also long overdue in Jesus name.”

Based on the above accounts, one could argue that in relation to the formation of religious identity, a Facebook post facilitates the intersections of two stories: the story of the past and a new identity in an individual's religious autobiography and the story of the 'shared' identity where Facebook users 'align' their religious identity negotiation with the religious autobiographical story posted on the Facebook page. Facebook posts and posted comments therefore create spaces for the discovery of a 'shared identity' among Facebook users. Facebook users who commented on specific testimonial narratives posted on the Facebook page immediately aligned themselves with the autobiographical narrative of the one who shared the testimony. For a religious Facebook user, the religious identity of the person who provided the religious autobiographical narrative is now his/her 'second self' (Turkle, 1984, 1995). As a platform, Facebook therefore empowers religious Facebook users “to create and perform religious identity online” (Campbell, 2012, p. 8) and allows for religious identity performance (see also Campbell 2013). This confirms Ammerman's contention that religious identity narratives are framed by two kinds of stories: autobiographical stories of individuals and stories of shared religious experiences that shape the meaning of autobiographical stories (Ammerman, 2003; see also Clark and Dierberg, 2013, p. 147).

5.4 Facebook Posts and the Making of a Virtual Religious Community

3G Ministries welcomes the faithful in a Facebook post on its Facebook page before a church service begins. During the service, new items are posted regularly to keep the Facebook users

updated on the proceedings of the actual Church service. Events are often described in such a way that Facebook users feel they are participating in the church service. This can be clearly seen in the following statements: “The man of God is *now* at the altar to deliver the message of God”, “It is *now* time for as to get [receive] God through His word and by His Spirit”, “It is *now* time for you to hear the voice of God through His servant Prophet Cedric” (emphasis added). The linguistic tool applied in these quotations is repetition where the term “now” is repeated a number of times. The repetition of the word ‘now’ certainly offers a discursive sense, at least to the Facebook users. It not only provides a sense of urgency; it also provides a practical guide of the proceedings for Facebook users and allows them to actively participate in the service by following the live updates on Facebook. Here, Facebook is used as a space for live-blogging or live-broadcasting and allows Facebook users to virtually participate in the service. However, as the posts do not indicate a specific time frame, the term “now” is also used metaphorically to allow a sense that the church service is continuous and on-going in a virtual world. Whenever the posts are read, Facebook users believe they are participating in a religious event virtually although the actual event may be over.

The virtual active participation of Facebook users can be tracked through the linguistic strategies they use in response to the welcome invitation and live updated posts on the Facebook page. Through the use of specific linguistic strategies, the discourse of their religious practice is technologized. The following quoted comments underline this point: “Today though I won't be at church coz [because] of work, I too believe that today is my day in Jesus name. Distance is not a barrier”, “[I] am connected...distance [is] not a barrier in Jesus Name!”, “Amen distance is not a barrier in Jesus name”, “Distance is not a barrier. I tap on the grace and take it for myself”, “I'm connected by faith in Jesus name”, “I am not there in person by am there in spirit”. The choice of linguistic phrases such as ‘distance is not a barrier’, ‘I am connected’ and ‘I am not there in person but am there in spirit’ demonstrate the development of religious creative imagination to the extent that virtual presence and participation in the church service or event is considered to be as ‘real’ as the physical presence and participation in the service.

The virtual participation also provides space for virtual divine intervention when testimonial stories are told, healing and deliverance is performed and prophetic messages are delivered. Other than the use of the acclamation ‘Amen’ in response to Facebook posts, the responses of Facebook users to the posts on the 3G Ministries’ Facebook page suggest that they too receive the divine intervention, but virtually. Phrases such as ‘I receive’, ‘I trust and believe’, ‘I receive my healing’, ‘I receive my freedom’, ‘I receive my promotion’, ‘I receive breakthrough’ and ‘I receive light’ appear hundreds of times in the responses of Facebook users to posts on the Facebook page. These responses often emphasize the uniqueness of the 3G Ministries’ virtual church. One of the Facebook users, for example, said this: “Now I know why the gospel that I receive from 3G is very unique, it comes like rain the time of draught. I dnt [don't] think I wil [will] survive without it!”

The creating of a virtual community is demonstrated through the active participation of virtual attendants in prayers. Again, the Facebook space allows Facebook users to ‘type’ their prayers as they follow the service through Facebook posts. The following prayers posted as a comment on posts uploaded onto the 3G Ministries’ Facebook page support what we have described: “I am really struggling to let go...Jesus I pray [that] u[You] break the bondage of hurt in my life”, “ Lord help me forgive my offenders in the Mighty name of Jesus Christ”, “Father forgive all my offenders and release your mercy and your favour in Jesus name”, “Lord I need your touch. See me thru [through] dis[this] misery [that] I am facing. I have put my trust in you.” These prayers in various ways have a re-enforcing effect to the extent that those who were at the service physically can ‘re-experience’ them in the virtual world when they read the Facebook posts. This extends the influence of the church.

What we have presented above supports the idea that Facebook, and Facebook posts, play a crucial role in the development of a virtual religious community (Johns, 2012; Lomborg and Ess, 2012). For many religious Facebook users, Facebook is a church. In the virtual church, Facebook users follow the same service, hear the same message, listen to the same prophet and experience the same divine intervention as physical church attendees. Following this logic, we could argue that Facebook posts bring both actual attendants and Facebook users together as they produce a new understanding to being connected to God, the prophet and the church. Facebook becomes a religio-cultural tool when interconnectedness, in the sense of being connected to one another, is redefined (Campbell, 2005, 2010; Hackett, 2006). In other words, Facebook does not only provide a venue for socio-religious interaction but also facilitates moments of configuring new understandings and meanings of the socio-religious relationship. Through the active virtual participation of Facebook users, Facebook shifts the idea of location as a space to a process of meaning-making. As a location, Facebook offers three dimensions of interpretation for Facebook users: a location for an individual to relate to his/her religious experience; a location for an individual to relate to religious meanings, practices and ‘virtual religious touch’ communicated through the participation in the religious virtual community; and a location where the power of 3G Ministries and its prophet is extended.

5.5 Facebook Posts and Religious Product Attachment

Scholarly studies have found that religious products play an important role in the presence of religion on the internet. In many cases, religious products give brands to religion and become marketing tools for religious expansion (Einstein, 2008; Bailey and Redden, 2011; Usumier and Stolz, 2014). The discursive practice in the Facebook posts of 3G Ministries perceives the world through a binary approach whereby the reality of life stands between two competing worlds: the world of darkness where human beings continually fall due to problems, difficulties and challenges,

and the world of light where human beings enjoy their freedom and happiness. Through the posts on Facebook, 3G Ministries represents itself as a church that can facilitate the cross-over from the world of darkness to the world of light. The posts also represent the prophet as a helping hand that is anointed to bring people out from the bondage of darkness to their perceived promised land. Religious products are created to facilitate the process of moving from one world to the other. On its website, 3G Ministries has called these products the 'living package'. Among others, 3G ministries offers the following: Living Water and Living Sticker.

A good number of the testimonies posted on the 3G Ministries' Facebook page include narratives of the Living Package and how it can transform one's life. Our digital observation found that narratives of the Living Package are generally related to descriptions of academic struggles. The following are two examples:

"...from a tender age, M.P. was renowned by his teachers as a well behaved and responsible student. This all disappeared into thin air as upon entering Junior School he began to mix with wrong crowds...Consequently, his marks started to deteriorate from grades A and B, to grades D and E... During his examinations, he studied hard and prayed in faith using the Living Water believing God to help him during his examinations. When the results were released, for the first time in his academic history, he had scored an overall of 38 points all to the glory of God!"

"Ms M. also ministered the Living Water in faith throughout all her examinations and by God's grace she has managed to complete her studies and even obtained seven distinctions all for the glory of Jesus Christ."

The above narratives of the use of the Living Package clearly emphasize the power of using religious products. The Facebook posts of those narratives send a single message: "The solution to these problems...is to buy something that will alleviate the fear" (Einstein, 2008, p. 11). As such, Facebook users are viewed not only as active virtual church attendees but as religious customers.

Narratives of religious products through various testimonies described in Facebook posts can be understood as a discursive strategy leading to religious product attachment. Product attachment is characterized by the connection between the self and a product. This connection is possible when meaning is attached to the product. Once meaning is attached to a product, people view themselves through the quality and value of the product to the extent that they are defined by the product they use. In the theory of product attachment, scholars highlight this connection by arguing that when people have a strong attachment to a product, they also feel attached to the groups that produce and/or attach meaning to that same product (Soloman, 1983; Zimmerman, 2009). In other words, the product becomes the bridge between the self and the group. It is within this logic that narratives

of religious products through various Facebook posts can be understood. Facebook posts facilitate the process of meaning-making in relation to various religious products as well as the attachment of followers and Facebook users to those products.

6 Conclusion

Facebook has emerged as one of the digital devices with the capacity to mediate religious behaviors, interactions and discourses. In Botswana, Facebook has attracted many active users. In order to capitalize on this use, many prophetic ministries in Botswana use Facebook as a medium for communicating religious messages online. The Facebook page of the 3G Ministries is one of the most active Facebook pages among prophetic ministries in Botswana. Posts on this Facebook page include virtual invitations to participate in church services, messages from the prophet highlighting his sermons, testimonial narratives of church attendants, and special welcoming posts for ‘visitors’ to 3G Ministries. The purpose of 3G Ministries’ Facebook page is to maximize the effectiveness and affectiveness of communication between the church and its members, as well as Facebook followers. This is clearly demonstrated through the regular postings on the Facebook page and thousands of comments or reactions posted on the page in response to various Facebook posts and reviews.

Our digital ethnographic study found that posts, reviews and comments on the Facebook page of 3G Ministries facilitate technologization of discourse through which certain linguistic strategies are used to influence people’s religious imagination, interactions and vision. This can be seen particularly in the posts of testimonial narratives on the 3G Ministries’ Facebook page. Within the context of our study, we argue that the process of technologization of discourse is particularly designed to enhance the religious authority of the prophet, the construction and negotiation of religious identity, particularly among Facebook users, the formation of a virtual religious community, and the expansion of religious product attachment.

For 3G Ministries, its prophet is the face or the brand of the church and the point of reference for church members and Facebook followers. Religious discourses in the posts, reviews and comments on the 3G Ministries’ Facebook page translate the prophet’s authority as perceived charisma with divine power, perceived life transformational coach and perceived relational authority. The central discursive role of the prophet is to provide ‘a template’ for the construction and negotiation of identity among church members and Facebook followers. With regular updates on the page and live blogging of church services the 3G Ministries’ Facebook page offers a virtual church for Facebook followers. In this virtual church, Facebook users and physical attendees are

connected as they follow the same service, hear the same message, listen to the same prophet and experience the same divine intervention.

This study also examined the ways in which the world is perceived through the lens of Facebook posts, reviews and comments. Posts on the Facebook page of 3G Ministries depict life as a reality that stands between the world of darkness and the world of light. Through the Facebook posts, 3G Ministries represents itself as a credible church that can facilitate socio-religious vision and the cross-over from the world of darkness to the world of light. Within this context, religious products such as Living Water and Living Sticker are narrated as solutions to the fear of the dark world. Here religious meaning is attached to the product to the extent that religious disposition is defined by the use of those products. The Facebook page of 3G Ministries therefore becomes a space that encourages attachment to religious products in the hope that strong attachment to such products will lead to virtual and physical attachment to the church.

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The Design of Educational Materials for Teaching the Most Common Religions to Students in their Final Year of Primary School:

A Cross-Curricular Approach of Religious Studies and Music, Through the Use of Augmented Reality

Polykarpos Karamouzis & Michalis Keffalas

Abstract

The aim of this research is to establish whether teaching approaches based on the use of Augmented Reality (AR) facilitate deeper and more engaging learning. The religions of Christianity, Islam, Hinduism, Buddhism and their sacred musics were taught through an interdisciplinary methodology.

Qualitative research was conducted with a sample of 34 final-year, Greek primary school students. The syllabus and teaching conditions were identical for all students. However, the experimental group was taught using educational materials designed on the Aurasma AR application. The research findings suggest that the use of AR supported deeper and more engaging learning, confirming the limited relevant findings in international literature.

Keywords

Educational material, cross-curricular approach, religious studies, sacred musics, augmented reality, *Aurasma*.

1 Introduction

The contribution of new technologies has greatly changed the structure and demands of modern life. ‘Traditional’ teaching is gradually being replaced by a new model of education, which enforces its own parameters on the educational process. Despite the undeniable current pervasiveness of technology in the school environment, endeavours to use technology, such as Augmented Reality (AR), within school education remain exploratory and experimental. However, these technologies have much to offer and can bring about radical change in the field of education.

2 The concept of Augmented Reality

The technology of AR allows the live presentation of the natural environment, augmented through additional information, as well as the presentation of virtual characters or spaces designed and processed through a computer. The systems which allow real and virtual objects to co-exist in space and to interact in real time are defined as AR systems (Azuma 1997). The process of combining virtual data with real world data allows users to access a rich, direct and interactive content (Billinghurst, Kato & Poupyrev 2001).

2.1 The Augmented Reality application *Aurasma*

The *Aurasma* application (<https://www.aurasma.com/>) uses the smartphone or tablet camera to recognise real-world images (trigger images), which are overlaid with content in the form of images, videos, animations, 3D models and websites. This way *auras* are created, which are activated when the smartphone camera focuses on the specific object or image. This technology, according to the categorisation by Pence (2010), belongs to the category of AR systems, which use QR codes to allow the smartphone or table to connect with the codified information (marker based). Furthermore, *Aurasma* allows these *auras* to be published and shared, through a free online platform (*Aurasma Studio*, <https://studio.aurasma.com/login>). Both the abovementioned tools, *Aurasma* and *Aurasma Studio*, are supported by the *Hewlett Packard Corporation*.

The application is free and easy to download and use both on the IOS 7.0+ and Android 4.0+ operating systems. Detailed instructions on how to use *Aurasma* for educational purposes are available on the *Autonomy Software Company* (Cambridge) website, the application’s creators, as

well on YouTube¹. *Aurasma* provides teachers the opportunity to enrich their teaching materials through the integration of AR in the curriculum, without requiring specialist programming knowledge. It is directed towards primary school students over 6 years old, as well as high school students, provided that its use is adapted to the needs and interests of the different student age groups. This use of AR supports the students in developing their critical thinking regarding the curriculum content, the *auras* (additional information) and the trigger images, while the *auras* themselves can be applied in virtually all teaching subjects.

2.1.1 Prospective educational applications of Aurasma

The *Aurasma* application can be used to:

- enrich school course books with further information, par example, in the form of a label on a graph or diagram, a demonstration of a definition, synonym or antonym of a word, the solution to a calculus task, the dramatization through animation of the class rules, or the explanation of laboratory equipment,
- the creation of workbooks through images (the *auras*), which will be able to play video, audio and a live projection of images,
- the presentation of historical figures as a ‘live’ characters who are able to speak,
- the connection of *auras* to revision notes, articles, or practice through games.

2.1.2 Educational and pedagogic objectives of the Aurasma application

It is expected that the students:

- will use communicative learning methods, which ensure their active and creative engagement in the educational process,
- will develop their understanding regarding the value of group work,
- will develop exploratory learning,
- will come into contact with the arts as different forms of creative expression (music, art, fashion, architecture, theatre, cinema, dance),

1 <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GBKy-hSedg8> and <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uHlxYpBW7sc>.

- will understand the different forms of speech, such as, for example, recitation, chanting and singing.

2.1.3 Technological objectives of the Aurasma application

Through the use of the *Aurasma* application, students will be able to develop innovative forms of expression, communication and collaboration skills, and alternative approaches towards exploring and constructing knowledge (digital and visual literacy). Specifically, children can:

- become familiar with the critical exploration of webpages, in search for the appropriate materials to be used for the creation of *auras* (overlay)
- create and publish their own presentations, leading to the widespread sharing of digital content and the students' participation in new, extracurricular, learning environments and communities (for example, the *Aurasma Studio* online community),
- learn to use, apart from the specific application, further AR applications focusing on a range of subjects and activities, such as *Augmented Pixels* (games), *Word Lens* (translation), *Imag-n-o-tron* (storytelling), *Zooburst* (creation of stories with animals), *Cromville* (art), *Star Chart and Sky View* (space, planets, asterisms), *Arloon Geometry/Anatomy/Chemistry* (Geometry, Anatomy and Chemistry, respectively).

2.1.4 Further benefits – Particular characteristics of the Aurasma application

The *Aurasma* application has much to offer, through simpler or more imaginative and enriched use, depending on the students' knowledge level. It makes learning more exciting and interesting, and can provide further motivation. However, *Aurasma* is yet difficult to use within the Greek educational context, since the use of smartphones within the school environment is very limited, while there is no mention whatsoever of such methods within the Greek public education curriculum.

2.2 Applicability of Aurasma and other Augmented Reality applications in the teaching of religion and music – A Literature review

This section discusses the limited findings of relevant research. While AR is not so new, it is still at its initial stages, particularly regarding its application in educational contexts. There are yet many challenges to be overcome and explored in order for the existing AR technologies to be utilised for

educational purposes in the best possible way (Yuen et al. 2011, p. 133). Bacca et al. (2014) endeavoured the first systematic review of relevant literature, exploring the efficiency and different applications, benefits, limitations, challenges and characteristics of AR within educational contexts. Undertaking content analysis, they examined thirty two (32) studies published between 2003 and 2013. In summary, their main findings are the following:

- The number of published studies on the use of AR within education has progressively increased, particularly during the last four years,
- AR has been used to enhance learning mainly in the Sciences, Humanities and Arts,
- AR has been used mainly in the higher levels of compulsory education, in order to motivate students,
- AR applications, which use a QR code to connect smartphones and tables to marker based information are the technologies which have been used most. Location-based AR is also popular,
- the main aim for using AR is the explanation of teaching subjects, as well as to provide additional information. The use of AR educational games and AR for laboratory experiments is also increasing,
- the main limitations of using AR are the difficulties in maintaining the superimposed information, the excessive attention to virtual information, and the perception of AR as ‘intrusive’ technology,
- AR is especially effective in increasing learning outcomes, motivation for learning, and the development of commitment and positive attitude in students,
- there is a lack of studies regarding the special needs of students,
- most studies have used medium-sized research samples (between thirty and three-hundred participants) and have adopted a mixed methods approach. The most popular data collection tools were questionnaires, interviews and surveys, while most research is cross-sectional.

According to Bitter and Corral,

AR apps have also been developed for teaching chemistry, biology, physics, languages, English, religious studies, astronomy, geometry, medical practice, musical education, education support, visual art, and library studies (2014, p. 15).

Chow et al. (2013) in their article *Music education using Augmented Reality with a head mounted display* discuss individual piano lessons for beginners, but do not refer to the group sessions which take place at school. Liarokapis (2005), furthermore, in his article suggests the use of AR in individual guitar instruction.

Martins et al. (2015) highlight the difficulties and applicability of AR in education, particularly within school music education, through a case study. They developed *Music-AR*, an AR application which teaches the main characteristics of sound, such as pitch, volume, hue and tempo. *Music-AR* is a series of brief, easy to understand, test-games, which was designed to be used by 14 children (9 girls and 5 boys), 5 to 10 years old, at a private primary school in Sao Paulo, Brazil. Through observation, the researchers found that the children were able to understand the abovementioned main characteristics of sound before engaging in music education, through the use of AR, while based on the questionnaire findings, the children were motivated to use this technology. Martins et al. (2015), furthermore, highlight the significance of the fact that the children seemed to understand how to use AR as soon as they began engaging with the technology. Interviews conducted with the childrens' teachers also supported that AR can be used effectively in music education. In addition, AR seemed to be effective and appropriate to be used by young children, due to its playful character. AR can be an effective tool used to learn the main characteristics of sound (Martins et al. 2015, p. 231, 232).

Brown (2014) developed *Prelude*, an AR iOS application for music teachers, which is used as a music notation recognition tool to support teaching. *Prelude* is comprised by two elements: i) an iOS application with quizzes, which allows students to practice recognising the various music notation symbols, and ii) a website which is managed by teachers, in order to adapt the music quiz games to the individual needs of their students and assess their performance. Therefore, it is a two-way, collaborative communication and approach, in which teachers develop materials for their students, who, in turn use the application, obtaining deeper understanding of the taught subject. Brown (2014) closes by suggesting various future expansions and functional amendments to the application, such as having the ability to recognise music phrases and scales, execute phrases and individual notes simultaneously, and playback further educational information, when the student scans a notation symbol which does not correspond to the value of a note. The researcher believes that *Prelude* is an example of an AR application, which increases the engagement of students in the learning process and an alternative –technology-focused – method of teaching in 21st century schools.

Figueiredo et al. (2014) discuss in their work the most popular AR applications used in everyday school activities, within nurseries, primary schools, and high school, which satisfy three criteria: i) they are user-friendly, ii) do not require specialised programming skills, and iii) they are free. These tools aim towards the improvement of reading, understanding and learning of music,

and are to be used by students of the Algarve University, Portugal, future teachers. According to the writers, the most popular AR applications are: i) *Wikitude*, ii) *Layar*, iii) *Metaio*, iv) *Aurasma*, and v) *Augment*. As they discuss, a project was undertaken in the *Padrão da Légua* school complex in Portugal, which aimed to combine AR technology with the use of mobile devices for learning. The main aim of the project was to create an artefact, through the contribution of different disciplines and the collaboration between teachers and students. This artefact would then be potentially integrated in the learning and teaching processes in this educational context. Teachers and students from a wide range of disciplines, such as music education, art, audio-visual art, as well as from the centre of education resources, and the *Leça do Balio* special education school in Portugal, contributed to this project. The design focused on a shared topic, the sea, and was selected between sixty other designs, to be presented at the *Fourth National Competition of Marine Equipment*, in the Building of Knowledge, in Lisbon, on the 17th of May 2013. The project outcomes were published in the form of a book, augmented with audio-visual elements through the use of the AR *Aurasma* software.

Gomes et al. (2015) discuss an interactive exhibition based on AR technology. The exhibition focused on the aesthetic periods of music history, and was directed towards students of the 2nd and 3rd cycle of basic public education in Portugal. The writers highlight that

Technology is essential in teaching, communications, mathematics and science, and it is no less important in the arts. Technology is an important tool that can improve the educational system, but the challenge of integrating technology into the delivery of content remains. Digital technologies, in all areas, can enhance student achievement by addressing introductory and advanced skills, assessment of student progress and student motivation (2015, p. 31).

The history of music is traditionally taught in schools, conservatoires and Universities around the world through the method of direct instruction. In contrast, Gomes et al. (2015) use the AR *Music Gallery*, which adopts a constructivist approach towards the learning and teaching process of music history, and supports the use of an advanced AR technology for the delivery of audio-visual material to students. The AR *Musical Gallery* is characterised by:

- the role of existing knowledge,
- the role of the specific context and learning experience,
- the element of interactive and cooperative learning,
- the focus on change in order for learning process to be more effective,
- the new roles which are undertaken by teachers and students,

- the significance of the students' correspondence with the agreed educational process,
- the idea of strengthening one's ability to "learn how to learn" (Gomes et al. 2015, p. 32, 33).

Music and other forms of art are known to develop discipline, higher-level cognitive skills and creativity, and engage students in a wide variety of learning styles.

Technology in [...] arts education can be thought of as applied science [...]. It is an extension of a person's capabilities as well as a way of expanding his/her ability to learn (Assey 1999, p. 2).

The use of technology can accelerate learning in the arts, while this is also true for music history, where the understanding of a given aesthetic period requires of the students to listen to music excerpts of works of this period, study the biography and works of composers and analyse music instruments, paintings or photographs, which reveal the wider historical context and environment. It is necessary for different technological mediums to be used, in order to understand the development of music in time, its value and influence on different cultures.

The exhibition, which took place at the *Basic School Maria Manuela de Sá* in Portugal, on October 2014, was presented through ten A3-sized posters, which displayed images and information in the form of text. In order to enhance the informative material available to students, further interactive digital materials were available through the use of AR technology, such as video, audio and 3D depiction of musical instruments. The posters were displayed on boards at the entrance of the library, in such a way which allowed individual and group exploration.

Other examples of the use of the AR *Aurasma* application in school music lessons were documented in the educational materials of Rebecca Dennis (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zQsKwgclbQg>), focusing on primary schools in Kentucky, the *Bullitt County Public Schools* and *Cedar Grove Elementary School*. In 2012 Dennis displayed her students playing musical instruments on the relevant board in the school corridor, while in 2013 she submitted a 45-minute video with her students' most significant work. These videos show students in their 5th year of primary school, playing xylophones and glockenspiels, singing, talking and dancing. During this project, the Dennis quickly noted that the use of the *Aurasma* application worked encouragingly towards the students: "I've noticed that the kids are trying more in the classroom [...], they want their video to go in the hallway" (Roscorla 2016, p. 1-3).

While Bitter and Corral (2014, p. 15) discuss the use of AR applications within a wide range of disciplines, including religious studies, they do not discuss specific cases. Extensive research within relevant literature produced no further outcomes. In summary, this section discusses five

examples of the use of AR applications, based on a literature review, focusing on music education in schools, as an independent subject or through an interdisciplinary approach, combined with art, audio-visual art, music history and others.

The examples discussed, alongside this study, are summarised in the following table:

Researchers / teachers	Publication year	AR applications	Teaching subject	School/University	Country
Brown	2014	Prelude	Music notation	<i>Bowling State University, Ohio</i>	U.S.A
Figueiredo et al.	2014	Aurasma & other applications	Interdisciplinary approach of music, art, audio-visual art, main theme: the sea	<i>Padrão da Légua & Leça do Baliop</i> public primary schools	Portugal
Gomes et al.	2015	Aurasma & other applications	Music history	<i>Basic School Maria Manuela de Sá</i> public primary school	Portugal
Martins et al.	2015	Music-AR	Main characteristics of sound	<i>San Paolo</i> , private primary school	Brazil
Dennis	2016	Aurasma	Musical instruments	<i>Bullitt County & Cedar Grove</i> , Kentucky, public primary schools	U.S.A
Karamouzis, Keffalas	2016	Aurasma	Interdisciplinary approach to religion studies and music	<i>91st public primary school of Athens</i> , Pagrati	Greece

Table: Literature review summary on the use of AR Software in teaching music in schools, independently or through interdisciplinary approaches combined with other subjects

3 Research methodology

3.1 Objectives, benefits and innovation of this research

The purpose of this study was to explore the depth and appeal of learning when using Augmented Reality Technologies (ART), and especially AR, in designing the educational materials. The use of AR applications in education is still at its early stages, while there is limited relevant bibliography. The element of innovation in the educational approach adopted during this study is based on the use of the *Aurasma* application. The value of this research is based on the endeavour to suggest ways through which modern technological applications can make teaching more interesting and valuable for the students, but also to discover the level of success of using AR within an interdisciplinary approach towards religious studies and music.

3.2 Research sample

This research was conducted using a participant sample at the 91st Public Primary School of Athens, in the area of Pagrati, Athens, Greece, as the researcher Michalis Keffalas is currently positioned as a music teacher at this school. The sample was comprised of 34 students, in their 6th, and final, year of primary school. ST 1 (7 boys and 11 girls) were the control group, and ST 2 (6 boys and 10 girls) were the experimental group for this study. The specific age group was chosen as it is this class's curriculum that includes teaching religions other than Orthodox Christianity, the country's 'official' religion. Furthermore, this age group is able to provide high-quality information, since the students have already been in education for 5 years and are able to express their personal opinions and perceptions in a fully articulate way.

3.3 Experimental design

The chosen matched subjects design is a form of experimental process, according to which the experimental groups are initially quantitatively matched, according to one or more variables, which are relevant to the focus of the study. In this study, therefore, the matched variables were the common design of the syllabus and the educational material which were presented to the students by the researcher himself, the identical period of time and conditions in which the sessions took place (1 teaching hour per week, for the duration of 1 ½ month, on the same day of the week). The only non-matched variable was the use of AR technology. The control group (ST 1) was taught the defined syllabus through the traditional approach, whereas the experimental group (ST 2) was

taught through an alternative approach, based on the use of ART, such as the use of computers, internet, virtual tours and, mainly, educational materials designed for the AR application *Aurasma*.

3.4 The educational intervention design

A cycle of 5 teaching sessions was designed focusing on the five most widespread religions of the world and their holy musics. Atheism (16.4% of the world population, according to the Pew Research Center Forum on Religion & Public Life, 2010) was excluded, rather arbitrarily; however it was clearly discussed during the sessions, especially during the presentation of the relevant map. In the case that Atheism was to be included, there would be two significant difficulties: i) comprehensively explaining the concepts of Atheism and Agnosticism to primary school children, and ii) finding, if it indeed exists, the ‘holy’ music of this specific population.

The learning journey began from the ‘familiar’ Orthodox Christianity, followed by a class on Catholicism and Protestantism (31.5% of the world population based on the Pew Research Center Forum on Religion & Public Life, 2010). These were followed by a presentation of Hinduism (15%, *ibid*), Buddhism (7.1%, *ibid*) and Islam (23.2%, *ibid*). The sessions were designed to present and discuss each religion (50% of the class duration) and its holy music (50% of the class duration). The researcher, given the specific conditions, endeavoured to discover the ‘gold balance’, which would allow the selection of specific, representative and valuable topics to focus on, that would also interest the students. It was not possible to teach all the topics discussed in the relevant bibliography, nor teach these in depth.

Every teaching session was concluded by the completion of a survey. Half of the questions focused on topics such as the central character or founder of each religion, the population size of its believers and the countries they come from, the name of the God and the appearance of the temples. The rest of the survey questions focused on whether the holy music of each religion is polyphonic or monophonic, phonetic or phonetic and instrumental, the names of their music notes, notation systems, intervals, modes, musical instruments and music ensembles that they use. This second group of questions was followed by music listening exercises and tasks where students were asked to identify music excerpts. For the students of the experimental group, each session began by approaching the topic and engaging the students’ interest through a short virtual tour of a temple, or a video with each religion’s respective choral or instrumental ensemble, displayed on the class’s interactive blackboard. Furthermore, the students of the experimental group were also able, at the end of the session, to use their smartphone or tablet camera, focusing on each survey question, in order to see the letter corresponding to the correct answer in their screen, as well as the text of the answer itself, usually accompanied by an image (map, image of a temple or sheet music). In some

question, using their devices activated a short video of a holy music being performed live. Representative examples of the AR educational materials used in this research are presented below.

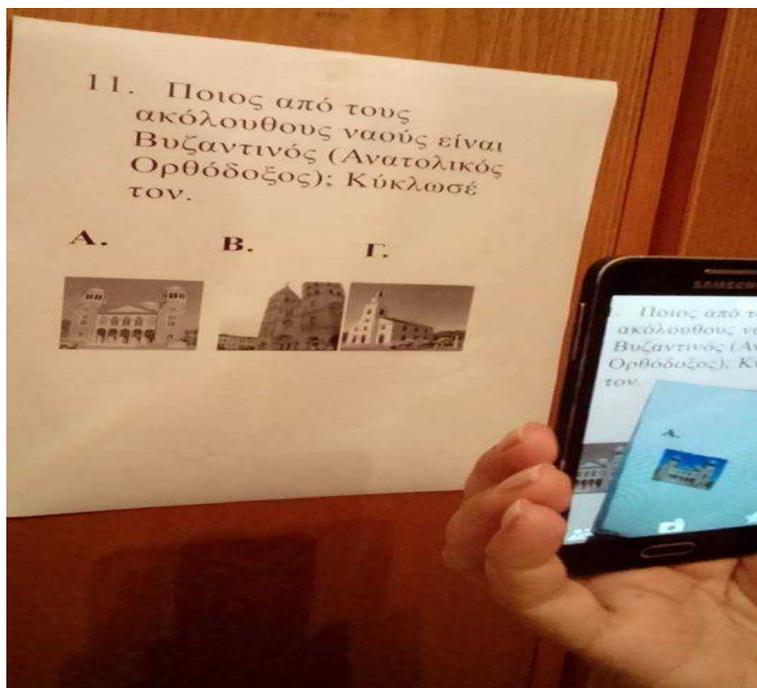


Image 1: An answer to question 11 of the final survey, which focused on the architecture of temples within different religions

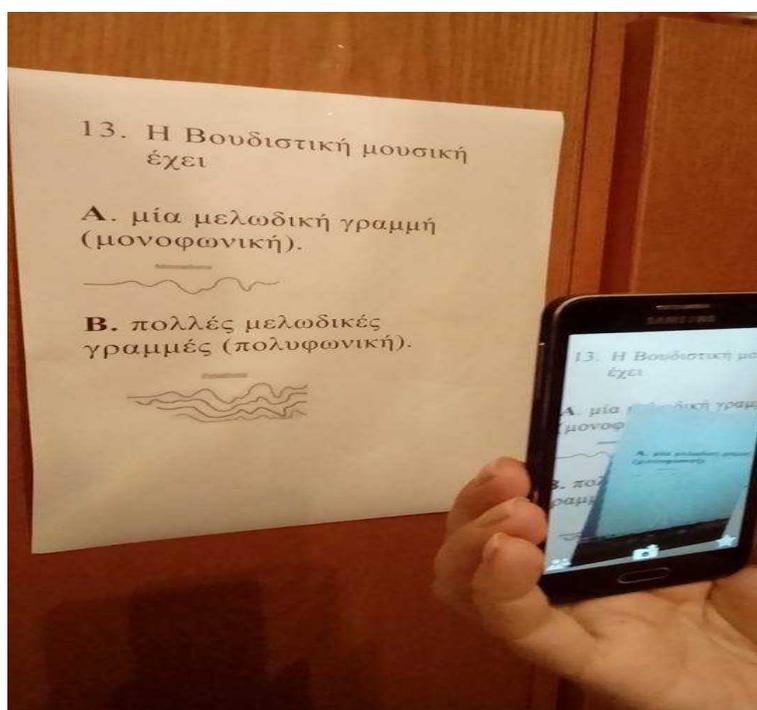


Image 2: An answer to question 13 of the final survey, which focused on the main characteristics of the different holy musics, such as whether the music is monophonic or polyphonic

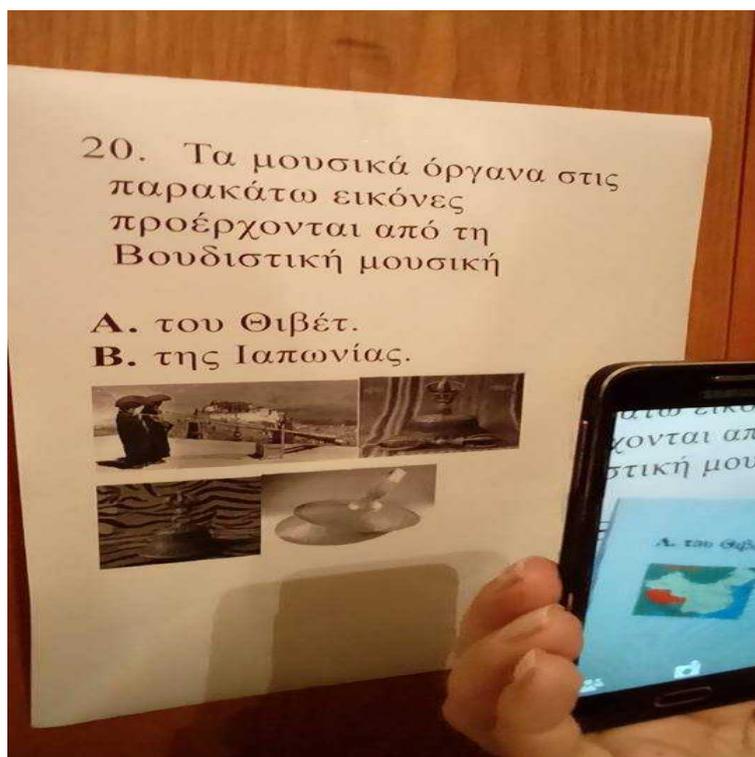


Image 3: An answer to question 20 of the final survey, which focused on the musical instruments used in the different holy musics

3.5 Data collection

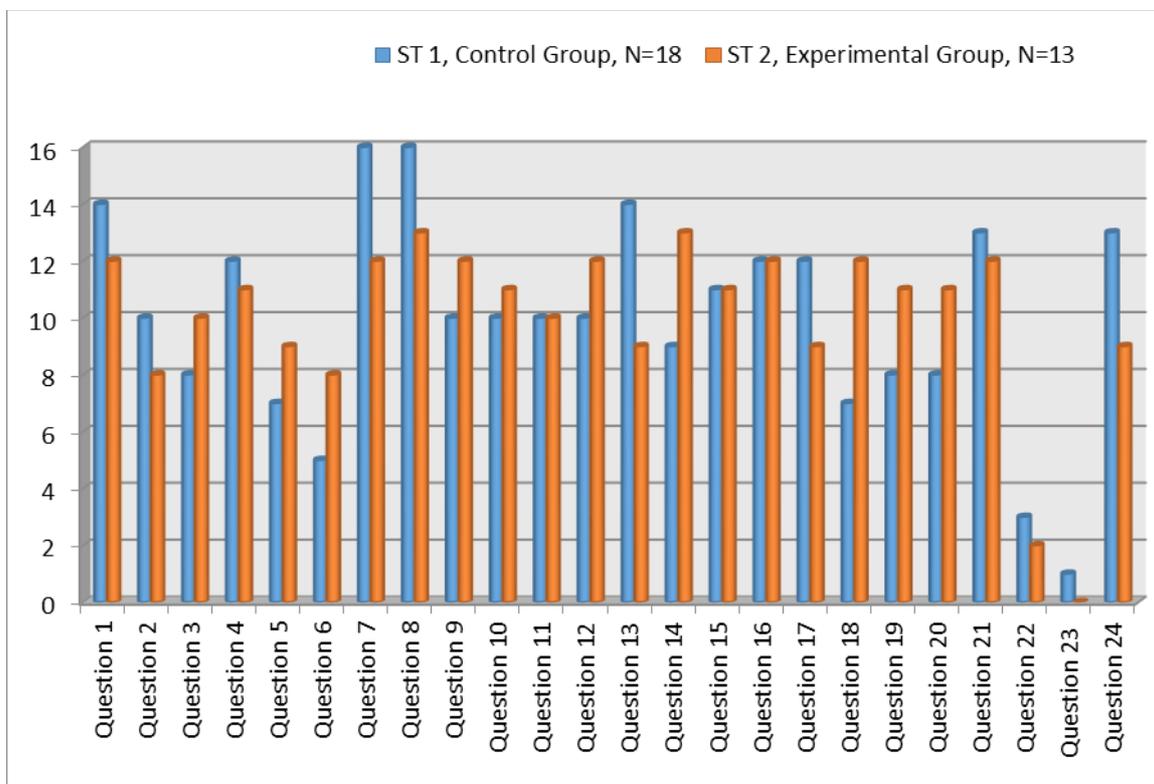
This qualitative study included a final survey of closed questions (multiple choice or binary questions), which investigated the depth of learning across the whole syllabus, which the students were taught: 12 questions about the specific religions and 12 questions about their holy musics. Qualitative data were collected through 3 further survey questions (one ranking question and two open-ended questions), which in combination with brief semi-structured interviews with each student, aimed to investigate the students' perception regarding the level of innovation and appeal of this cycle of teaching sessions. The interview allowed further follow-up questions to be asked, while the students of the experimental group also commented on the ART which were used. Overall 31 surveys were completed, as three students were ill during the survey collection.

4 Presentation and analysis of findings

4.1 Findings and discussion

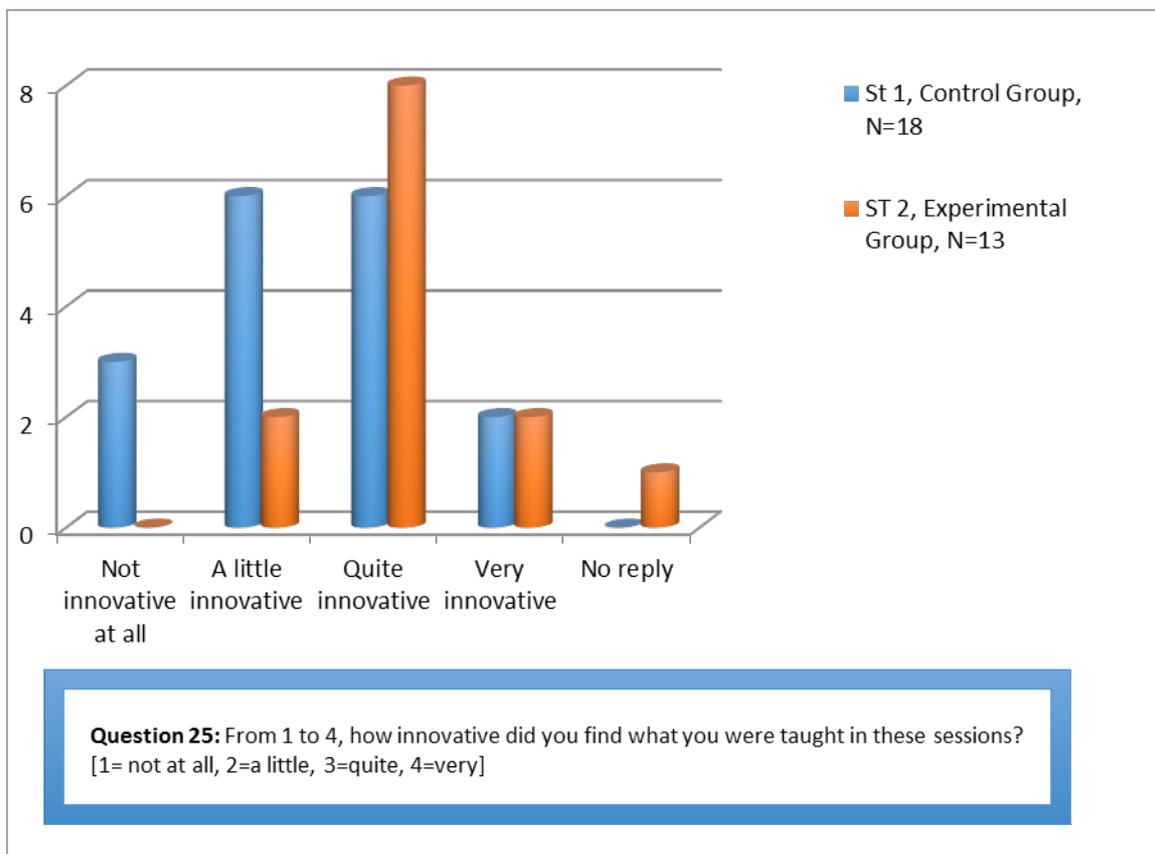
In each of the following graphs (1, 2, 3 and 4) the control group is indicated in blue colour (ST 1, N=18) and the experimental group in orange (ST 2, N=13). In order for the results to be comparable, all calculations took place through a process of reduction, as 18>13. Statistical analysis was conducted on the data collected through the initial 24 closed questions.

The number of correct answers per question (1-24) for both groups is presented in the following graph (1). It is evident that the experimental group expresses a significant advantage compared to the control group, regarding the number of correct answers given. Namely, 19 questions were answered correctly by the experimental group, 2 questions were answered correctly by the control group (question 13 and 23), and 3 questions were answered correctly equally by both groups (questions 17, 22 and 24). It is very interesting to note that questions 22, 23 and 24, which differentiate the results, are listening questions, to which most of the 31 students responded incorrectly, confusing the excerpt of Buddhist holy music with that of Hinduist holy music.



Graph 1: The number of correct answers per question 1-24, for both groups

The answers by both groups to question 25 are presented in the following graph (2). 23% of the control group replied that they do not find “anything innovative” about the sessions, while no student in the experimental team expressed this. 31% of the control group either replied that they found the sessions to be “a little bit innovative” and “quite innovative”, while 15% of the experimental group answered “a little bit innovative” and 61% “quite innovative”. Finally, twice as many students from the experimental group answered that they were taught something “very innovative” (15% and 7.7% respectively).



Graph 2: Answers to question 25, by both groups

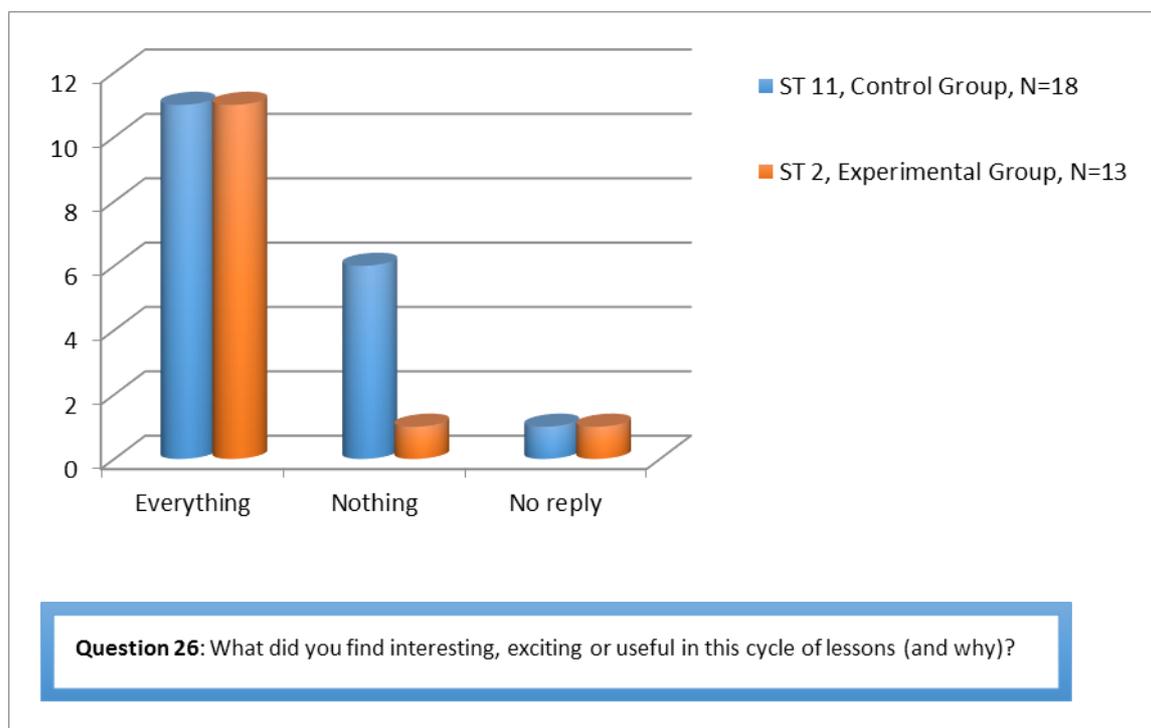
The answers to question 26 by both groups are presented in the following graph (3), which are discussed below alongside the interview data. However, the data collected through the survey may be seen as more reliable, since the survey was anonymous, encouraging honest replies from the students (Cohen, Manion, L & Morisson 2011, p. 219). The answer “all the content taught was interesting” was given by 61.5% of the control group students and 85% by the experimental group, while the option “I was not interested in anything” was given 31% and 7.7% respectively. Thematic analysis of the interview data, as well as the researcher’s field notes, adds a qualitative aspect and further supports these findings,

The students of both groups who found the sessions interesting, exciting or useful (10 and 11 students, respectively) explained why:

- “because I learned things I did not know, such as about the religions and cultures of other countries”
- “because I learned things that I can use in conversations”
- “because they will help us/be needed during our lives”
- “because I will not have the opportunity to learn such things in the future”
- “because I learned to distinguish the musics of other religions, which are different to the music of my religion”
- “the most exciting and interesting of all were the questionnaires/surveys/the temple architecture/the musics of other religions, because I had not heard them before/Christianity and Buddhism”.

Specifically, the students of the experimental group commented as following, on the ART, which was used, and particularly on the design software used:

- “I liked it very much/I feel very lucky/it was very impressive”
- “it was good software/innovative/very smart/the smartest software I know”
- “it was less tiring/it helped me answer the questions easier/the correct answer popped up in colour/we worked in a way through which I did not forget what we had gone through”
- “when they were combined with the interactive blackboard, I could see more clearly/I could see things bigger/I could hear the music excerpts more loudly”
- “I really liked the interactive games”
- “I have never used such applications in another class/with another teacher”



Graph 3: Answers to question 26, by both groups

The answers to question 27 by both groups are presented in the following graph (4), and are discussed below alongside the interview data. 61.5% of both groups said that “they found nothing uninteresting”, while 23% of the control group and 7.7% of the experimental group said they “found everything uninteresting”. 7.7% of both groups did not provide an answer, while 7.7% of the control group and 0% of the experimental group said that they found “some elements uninteresting”. The same trend was suggested through the interview data, according to which the number of students who found nothing uninteresting was 7 and 11 respectively, and those who found it “all uninteresting” were 3 and 1 respectively.

To the additional question “why did you not find anything uninteresting” the students replied:

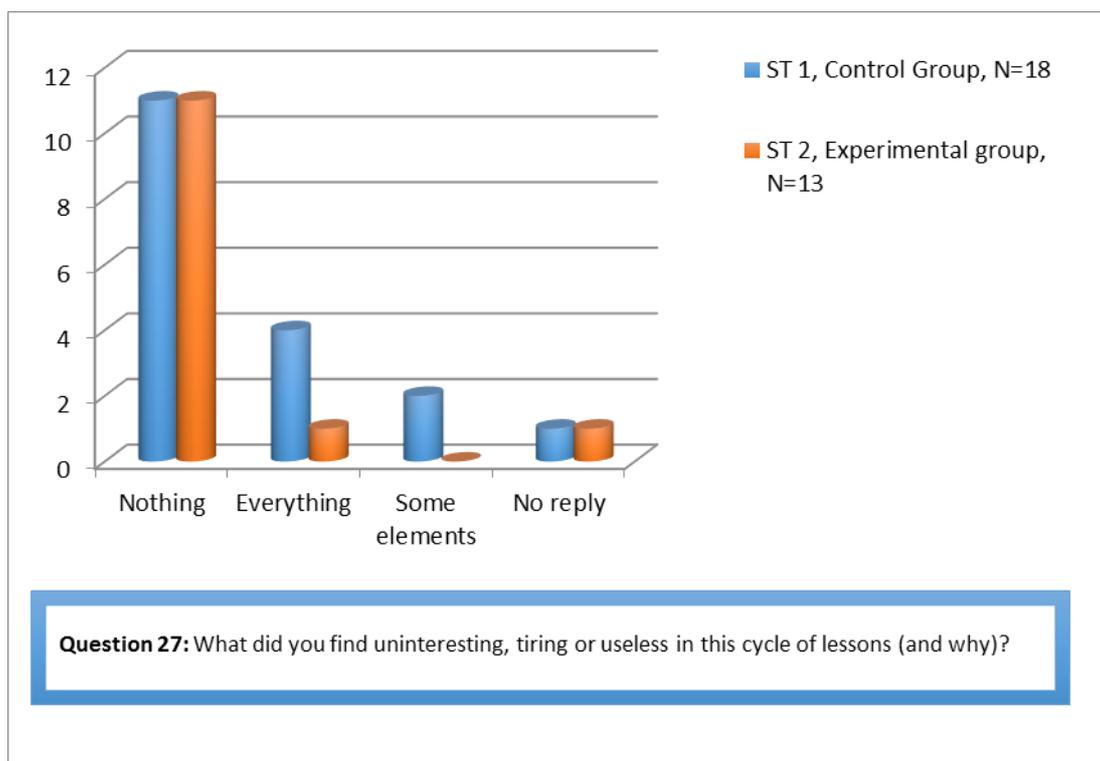
- “because I need to learn these/I will use them in the future”
- “because I was drawn in/they were innovative/I expected it to be worse, but it proved to be good”
- “because I was interested, apart from the information regarding Christian Orthodox dogma which I already knew”

To the additional question “why did you find everything uninteresting”, the answers were:

- “because all the lessons were equally boring/I did not want to learn these things/I did not like them
- “because we were taught the same last year”
- “because there was too much writing”

To the additional question “why did you find some elements uninteresting” the answers were:

- “I did not find anything uninteresting, tiring or pointless, but I did not like it that much”
- “some things were boring and others not”
- “from what we were taught, I did not like the music listening exercises”
- “I found the holy music of Buddhism funny”



Graph 4: Answers to question 27, by both groups

4.2 Reliability and credibility of the research

The reliability and credibility of research is based upon the trust and truth of the collected data. Given that qualitative research focuses on small samples, it is characterised by restricted generalisability and comparability, and is influenced by the personal opinions and perceptions of the researcher, his communication skills, and specific techniques which were used aiming to increase the reliability of the produced results. The first technique was the researcher's extended engagement with the research environment, obtaining the participants' trust. The second technique was the triangulation of methods and data sources, the mixed-method survey, the semi-structured interview and the researcher's notetaking and observation, in combination with the findings of relevant research in international literature. The third technique was the preservation of elements, such as the questionnaires and the researcher's diary of notes, in order to allow the possibility of the study's external reassessment. The final technique was the contribution of the participants, in order to control and assess the researcher's understanding and observation of their answers. The ethical research guidelines were fully adhered to throughout this research, focusing on guidance regarding student participation (informed voluntary consent, parental consent, briefing of teachers and head teacher, permission by the supervisory Professor of this research), as defined by the Greek Ministry of Education, Research and Religion (official approval of research, reference number: F15/488/67814/D1/21.04.2016).

4.3 Outcomes and suggestions for further research

The objective of this research was to ascertain whether teaching based on ART, and specifically the AR software *Aurasma*, can engage the students' interest and strengthen the process of learning. The overwhelming difference in the number of correct answers given by the students of the experimental group, in comparison to the control group, for the initial 24 survey questions, demonstrates the positive effect of ART on the learning of children. The analysis of data from the last survey questions and the interviews suggests that the use of educational materials appropriately designed for the *Aurasma* AR software provides a unique learning experience for the children, in accordance to the few relevant references in international literature.

In the overwhelming majority of cases discussed in relevant literature, as in this research, AR is used by educators to provide students predesigned educational experiences. This may lead to a situation in which AR supports the development of low-level cognitive skills, such as the understanding and application of knowledge, without, however, encouraging higher-level, complex cognitive skills, such as analysis, critical assessment and creativity. An alternative suggestion,

aiming towards the development of these skills, is for the students themselves to become designers through the use of AR, in order to develop higher-level thinking (Bower et al. 2014, p. 7).

In the literature review by Dunleavy & Dede (2014) it is highlighted that, due to the exploratory nature of these technologies,

AR is in many ways the solution looking for a problem, [...] an instructional approach looking for the context where it will be the most effective tool among the collection to strategies available to educators (2014, p. 26).

The majority of studies which are discussed in the work of Dunleavy & Dede (2014) use AR in order to multiply and guide the dynamic and complex nature of solving collective problems within a real natural environment. While the challenge of facilitating collective empirical questions within and outside the school classroom may be the most significant educational challenge, which AR has solved, further research is needed into how this approach can contribute towards the solution of further, long-lasting educational problems, discussing at the same time the inevitable limitations within this expanding ecology of education.

Conducting similar quantitative research at this point would not be possible, since it would require a large number of teachers to be training on the topics of religion, music and technologies. However, this qualitative research conducted may be the precursor of a future quantitative study, at a time which would allow the systematic examination of new complex educational phenomena and their implications. According to Tsiolis

Qualitative research, as a core scientific activity, can be the predecessor of quantitative research, with the objective of highlighting innovative and unexpected aspects, mainly regarding the exploration of social areas or life forms, which are unknown to sociological theory and research. In this way it can contribute to the expression of hypotheses (in the stage of discovery), to be followed by the main 'scientific' phase of research, the process of assessing these hypotheses through the use of quantitative methods (the stage of confirmation) (2011, p. 60, 61).

Furthermore, it is seen as necessary for AR technologies to be included in future curricula, adopted and used by schools.

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***Jewish, Christian and Islamic* in the English Wikipedia**

Emad Mohamed

Abstract

In order to study how Judaism, Christianity, and Islam are represented in Wikipedia, I use corpus linguistics tools to extract the adjective noun collocates of the adjectives *Jewish*, *Christian*, and *Islamic* from the 2013 English Wikipedia in order to find out their semantic prosody. I then rank the positive and negative noun collocates using the logdice scores in order to find whether there is a statistically significant difference between them. In the case of negative nouns, an ANOVA test found a statistically significant difference. Pair-wise comparisons suggest that Islamic is more negative than either Christian or Jewish while there is no statistically significant difference between Jewish and Christian. On the positive side, there is no statistically significant difference between the adjectives. Intra-adjectival comparisons suggest that there is no statistically significant difference between Islamic's positive and negative collocates while both Christian and Jewish are more positive than negative.

Keywords

Islam, Christianity, Judaism, Corpus Linguistics, Semantic Prosody

1 Introduction

Wikipedia is probably the largest book of facts available, and it may be the main source of information for millions of web users. It is one of the largest reference websites as it attracts 470 million unique visitors every month (<https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wikipedia:About>). Wikipedia is continually growing and changing, and many articles get updated regularly, but “[o]lder articles tend to be more comprehensive and balanced; newer articles may contain misinformation and/or unencyclopedic content.”

The English Wikipedia is the largest of Wikipedias with over 4 million pages of content. The English edition differs from many others in that it is global since English acts as the de facto lingua franca of the world and many non-native speakers of English use and edit the encyclopedia on a regular basis. Discovering how a certain thing is described in Wikipedia may give us an idea about

how that thing is perceived globally. In this paper, I attempt to discover how the three Abrahamic religions (Judaism, Christianity, and Islam) are represented in the English Wikipedia through an examination of their attributive adjectives and the nouns they habitually modify.

This study aims to examine the positive and negative lexical associations of the three adjectives (*Jewish*, *Christian*, and *Islamic*) in the English Wikipedia. The paper seeks to answer two questions:

1. Which negative/positive nouns do these adjectives tend to modify? and
2. Is there a statistically significant difference between the semantic prosodies of these adjectives?

The answers to these questions may be useful, not only for linguistics purposes, but also for the study of religion and politics, but before providing answers, I will first briefly define *semantic prosody*.

1.1 What is Semantic Prosody?

Sinclair (1991:74) noticed that the verb SET IN has a tendency to have as its subject nouns that are not “conventionally desirable or attractive”. The most common subjects of SET IN were *rot*, *decay*, *malaise*, *despair*, *ill-will*, *decadence*, and *impoverishment*. Louw, who first coined the term, defines *semantic prosody* as a “consistent aura of meaning with which a form is imbued by its collocates” (Louw, 1993: 157).

The main function of SP is to express the speaker/writer evaluations, which Stubbs (1996: 176) classifies into negative, positive and neutral semantic prosody. McEnery and Xiao (2006: 83) note that “[s]emantic prosodies are typically negative, with relatively few of them bearing an affectively positive meaning.” Collocation and SP are very closely related. It may be, as Partington (2004) notes, that humans have more need for conveying bad news than good ones. Partington (2004) examined the verbs of the HAPPEN family and found that they mostly co-occur with bad news since it is usually bad news that is newsworthy. This human tendency may not be limited to news or to verbs.

Lou (ibid.:164) seems to see semantic prosody as a diachronic process as he states that “prosodies are undoubtedly the product of a long period of refinement through historical change”. This focus on diachronicity is more expressed in Bublitz (1996:11): “we know from lexical semantics that constantly using a word in the same kind of context can eventually lead to a shift in its meaning: the word adopts semantic features from an adjacent item”, or as Hoey (2005:8) states:

As a word is acquired through encounters with it in speech or writing, it becomes cumulatively loaded with contexts and co-texts in which it is encountered, and our knowledge of it includes the fact that it co-occurs with certain other words in certain kinds of context. The same applies to word sequences built out of these words; these too become loaded with the contexts and co-texts in which they occur.

Semantic prosody and collocates thus go hand in hand. In the words of Xiao and McEnery (2006:84):

On the one hand, the item does not appear to have an affective meaning until it is in the context of its typical collocates. On the other hand, if a word has typical collocates with an affective meaning, it may take on that affective meaning even when used with atypical collocates. As the Chinese saying goes, ‘he who stays near vermilion gets stained red, and he who stays near ink gets stained black’—one takes on the colour of one’s company—the consequence of a word frequently keeping ‘bad company’ is that the use of the word alone may become enough to indicate something unfavourable.

Adopting the suggestion that a word may be stained by its company, and that this stain may stick even when the word is no longer accompanied, I investigate the collocational patterns of three adjectives. The adjectives *Jewish*, *Christian*, and *Islamic* may not be positive or negative in isolation, but they may combine with nouns that label them as such. They are adjectives that may have a neutral, negative or positive meaning potentials that are activated when they modify certain nouns. For example, *Jewish philanthropist* ascribes philanthropy to Jewishness while *Jewish criminal* does otherwise. This is in line with the suggestion that “*You shall know a word by the company it keeps*” (Firth, 1957:11). Things are not usually clearcut. While *Jewish criminal* is kind of obvious, what about *Jewish prisoner*? I do not consider this to be a negative collocate since this may be in the context of World War II, and prisoner by itself, unlike criminal, does not seem to pass a value judgment on the person it denotes. A less clear case is that of *inmate*.

Semantic prosody is related to evaluation, or judgment by the speaker. Because the verb SET IN is usually used with negative subjects, a speaker who says “*the cold weather set in*” is more likely to be expressing a personal attitude than the one who utters “*the cold weather started*” (Stewart, 2010: 22). This may be true when you have alternatives, but sometimes, when there is no other way of saying it, the same verb that naturally conveys an attitude may just be used with negative subjects or objects with no attitudinal strings attached (ibid:22-3)

There have been studies that used collocates to explore how Muslims are represented in the media. Baker et al. (2013) examined a 143 million word corpus of British newspapers from 1998 to 2009 to find out how the word *Muslim* was represented. They found that the categories ‘ethnic/national identity, characterizing/differentiating attributes, conflict, culture, religion, and

group/organizations' were referenced with the conflict category being especially lexically rich. Baker et al's paper did not focus on the negative or positive associations but it found that the nouns *extremist*, *fanatic*, and *terrorist* rank 10th, 18th, and 23rd on the collocate list of *Muslim*. Sadar (2014) used Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) to study the image of veiled Muslim women in the British press between 2001 and 2014. Her study is, however, non-corpus-based. None of these two studies is especially concerned with semantic prosody. I am not aware of any corpus-based study of *Christian* or *Jewish*. No one seems to have compared Jewish, Christian and Islamic, and no one seems to have studied collocational patterns and their associated semantic prosodies in Wikipedia, which I try to do here.

The rest of this paper goes as follows: in section 2 I introduce the corpus and the methodology, in section 3 I present the results discuss some ramifications, and in section 4 I conclude the paper and suggest further research. At the end of the article is an appendix of the top collocates of *Jewish*, *Christian* and *Islamic*.

2 Data and Methods

Figure 1 summarizes the data and methods used in this paper.

English Wikipedia 2013 Text Dump
Part of Speech Tagging (Stanford Tagger)
Dependency Parsing (MaltParser)
Lemmatization (NLTK Wordnet Lemmatizer)
Dependency Ngram Extraction
Ngram Scoring using Logdice
Extract Negative and Positive Collocates
Check for Differences Using ANOVA

Figure 1: A summary of the data and methods

We use the Wikipedia 2013 text dump available from (<http://kopiwiki.dsd.sztaki.hu/>). To make things easier, we extract only those paragraphs that contain the words (*Jewish, Judaic, Christian, Islamic, Muslim*). This resulted in 759344 paragraphs and 53698038 words (not counting punctuation). The corpus was then processed through a pipeline of part of speech tagging, dependency parsing and lemmatization.

2.1 Part of speech tagging

For POS tagging, I used the Stanford tagger (Toutanova et al, 2003). I chose the Stanford tagger due to its very high accuracy (97.24% on the WSJ corpus). Given the sentence in (a), the Stanford tagger produces the sentence with grammatical tags assigned to the words (b). The tagger's role is then that of disambiguation since a word like *drive* could both be a noun and a verb. The tagger output is used for both lemmatization and dependency parsing.

a. Melissa drives a white car.

b. *Melissa* *_NNP* *drives* *_VBZ* *a* *_DET* *white* *_JJ* *car* *_NN* *._*

In the context of this study, and generally, both *Muslim* and *Christian* are ambiguous between nouns and adjectives, and I am interested only in their roles as attributive adjectives. Their adjectiveness is taken care of by the POS tagger while the dependency parser detects the attributive part.

2.2 Dependency parsing

In this study, I use dependency parsing to extract dependency bigrams. Dependency parsing models syntactic relations in sentences as binary relations between lexical items. For example, in the sentence *Melissa drives a white car.*, we can see a number of relationships: (a) *drives* governs *Melissa* and assigns it the role of *nominal subject* (*nsubj*), (b) *drives* governs *car* and assigns it the role of *direct object* (*dobj*), (c) *car* governs *white* and assigns it the role of *adjectival modifier* (*amod*), and governs *a* and assigns it the role of *determiner* (*det*).

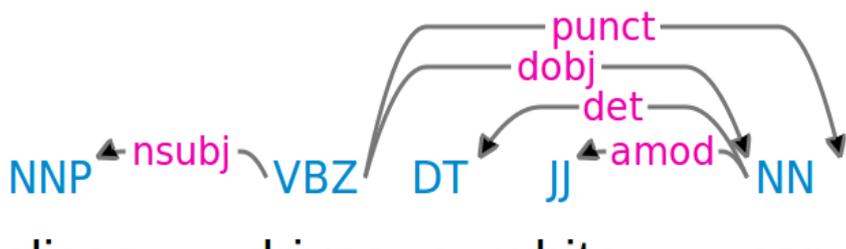


Figure 2: A dependency graph of the sentence *Melissa drives a white car.*

Each one of these relations is a dependency bigram, and in a large enough text, we can use these dependency bigrams to obtain a picture of the object of investigation. In this study, I use dependency bigrams to profile the three adjectives *Jewish*, *Christian*, and *Islamic* in the Wikipedia corpus. If “a word is known by the company it keeps”, then heads and dependents are not merely neighbours, they are neighbors with close ties. I used the dependency parser MaltParser (Nivre, 2009) for extracting the dependency relations from the corpus. While the Stanford Parser can be used for the same purpose, MaltParser is much faster, which enabled me to finish parsing the relatively big corpus on an ordinary laptop in good time.

I focus on syntagmatic relations, rather than mere neighborhood, because these allow me to know what roles are played by our nouns of interest. Within the domain of lexicography, Hanks (2013: 93-5) states that in order to know the meaning of a noun, “[o]ne must ask questions of two rank levels: (1) how the noun normally goes with modifiers within a phrase, and (2) how it normally functions as the subject, object, or prepositional object within a clause (what clause role does it normally take?).” (Original emphasis). While my main focus here is on adjectives, adjectives modify nouns which can, in turn, be modified by other adjectives, establishing a network that may prove useful for studying words’ semantic prosody.

The dependency parser output has 64509430 dependency bigrams including 3930762 relations in which an adjective modifies a noun. The pattern *Christian_JJ + Noun* occurs 134650 times, *Jewish_JJ + Noun* occurs 205969 times, *Judaic + Noun* occurs 1314 times, *Islamic_JJ + Noun* occurs 80663 times and *Muslim_JJ + Noun* occurs 95929 times.

2.3 Lemmatization

Lemmatization normalizes the word forms as it converts the verb *drives*, *drive*, *driving* and *driven* to the base form *drive*, thus enabling us to know that there is an object relation between *drive* and *car* regardless of the form of the verb or the form of the noun (car or cars). In this study, lemmatization is performed by the NLTK Wordnet-based lemmatizer (Bird et al, 2009). All the collocates used in this study are lemmatized collocates. The bigram *Christian community* covers both Christian *community* and Christian *communities*.

2.4 Ranking the collocates

The collocates are ranked by the logdice score (Rychlý, 2008). The logdice score has the following features :

- Theoretical maximum is 14, in case when all occurrences of X co-occur with Y and all occurrences of Y co-occur with X. Usually the value is less than 10.
- Value 0 means there is less than 1 co-occurrence of XY per 16,000 X or 16,000 Y. We can say that negative values mean there is no statistical significance of XY collocation.
- Comparing two scores, plus 1 point means twice as often collocation, plus 7 points means roughly 100 times frequent collocation.
- The score does not depend on the total size of a corpus. The score combine relative frequencies of XY in relation to X and Y.

2.5 Extracting Negative and Positive Collocates

I limit my analysis to the top 200 collocates of each adjective. I adopt the following process:

1. **Treat *Islamic* and *Muslim* as the same and one adjective.** The same hold true for *Judaic* and *Jewish*. This does not mean that the adjectives mean exactly the same thing. In fact, *Islamic* is different from *Muslim* in some of its associations and so is the case for *Jewish* and *Judaic*. I do so for reasons of convenience.
2. **Extract the top 200 noun collocates of each adjective.** This results in the total of 600 nouns. The number is arbitrary and does not carry any significance. The nouns chosen are those that govern the adjective in a dependency graph.
3. **Extract the positive and negative nouns from the set of collocate nouns.** This is possibly the most subjective step in the process. I assign to the positive category those nouns that I feel are negative, and to the positive category those nouns that I feel are positive. One further complication is that I am not a native speaker of English, and my judgment may be blurred by my native tongue, or by a misunderstanding of cultural norms. I do, however, believe that my judgment will be generally correct, occasional errors and misjudgments notwithstanding.
4. **Compare the ranks in the three adjectives.** Using the logdice scores, compare the adjectives' scores on the nouns. If a certain noun is missing, assign it a logdice score of -3. This slightly less than the lowest recorded logdice in the 600 nouns. In order to determine

whether there is a statistically significant difference between the scores of the collocates among these adjectives, we use the One-way Analysis of Variance test.

3 Results and Discussion

3.1 Answer to Question 1:

3.1.1. *Negative Nouns and Scores*

community people family population law encyclopedia history descent cemetery state woman immigrant study tradition refugee society culture life museum settlement identity parent organization school origin quarter leader child treasure holiday ancestry question heritage group education faith immigration music editor student congregation literature scholar player philosophy mother settler religion resident writer background merchant synagogue view article movement week monotheism philosopher thought men prayer text review girl mysticism boy diaspora nation home ghetto practice actor source citizen scholarship news numismatics presence father historian revolt book root world inhabitant man victim newspaper calendar homeland prisoner lobby bibliography ethic center conspiracy name camp christian neighborhood artist category musician topic surname custom institution member survivor property physician character lore scientist experience soldier worker war activist person minority ethnicity service art youth belief ethnocentrism sect leadership acceptance dictionary scripture theology resistance value emigration author composer doctor mathematician authority influence banker publication subject lawyer friend organisation force year sage business perspective poet unit studies priest isra'iliyat christum athlete rabbi ritual needlework graeco-roman positivity liturgy tribe morbidity disquiet colony theme photoman denomination elective observance iconography pornographer section figure site nefesh language brigade specificity proselytization fog kashrut veneer village stricture control website tradition

The top 200 collocates of Jewish in descending order according to their logdice score

church denomination faith music band school missionary group community theology belief view format organization martyr tradition station art saint leader chart name democracy doctrine value life album education ministry literature college radio writer theologian artist teaching movement sect perspective family mission world population nation rock history woman scientist worship minister religion cross theme festival symbol writing ethic service hymn song party author culture scholar principle force site organisation institution country charity apologist university kingdom monk thought congregation state philosophy king musician burial text source era democrat influence society priest practice period apologetics holiday bishop singer program mysticism origin basilica people soldier article minority eschatology network child identity industry slave study message pastor metal spirituality programming convert book clergy

iconography label scripture evangelist man conference film right background living character monastery symbolism point work market fundamentalism post philosopher concept worldview thinker circle emperor prayer girl figure element mythology magazine virtue context interpretation subject meditation believer scene gospel camp idea activity pilgrim settlement politician ruler student love website cemetery environment morality village socialism preacher parent heresy classic ethos order aid root body home fundamentalist teacher response terrorism prince militia fellowship activist building center worker place monasticism household time unity show one demonology

The top 200 collocates of Christian in descending order according to their logdice score

republic community law world league scholar revolution population study woman conquest country jurisprudence state calendar art culture tradition architecture society philosophy ruler army leader general terrorism fundamentalism prophet conference family civilization history minority faith student force school science center nation militant extremism dynasty view group cleric empire banking emirate rule education front extremist court teaching theology terrorist period movement organization caliphate association mosque thought troop council maghreb invasion men government soldier practice clan girl majority principle jurist influence historian literature saint text invader name belief refugee value regime youth scientist land fundamentalist party institution trader calligraphy cemetery era people term bank immigrant philosopher sect inhabitant dress economics learning guild month system mob source university concept convert medicine religion tribe man kingdom village quarter scholarship perspective control merchant holiday feminism doctrine finance area politician brother writer ideology centre editor knowledge astronomy prayer pilgrim identity code theologian charity prisoner resident rebel citizen ethic power household revival astronomer mysticism city rajput guidance presence festival site academy territory music insurgency style boy activist marriage authority edition mathematics shrine civilian scripture eschatology town governor book conqueror democracy website parent resistance thinker expansion monument fascism topic fighter context sultanate rebellion warrior intellectual attack member background heritage

The top 200 collocates of Islamic in descending order according to their logdice score

Table 1: the top 200 collocates of each adjective

The top 200 collocate noun lemmas for each adjective are listed in Table 1. I have classified 27 of these collocated nouns as negative: *apologetics, apologist, attack, conqueror, conquest, conspiracy, ethnocentrism, extremism, extremist, fascism, fundamentalism, fundamentalist, heresy, insurgency, invader, invasion, lobby, militant, militia, mob, rebel, regime, stricture, terrorism, terrorist, and war*. The criterion for classifying a noun as negative is that if it associates with one of our religious adjectives, it could pass a negative value on the nature and/or adherents of the religion in question. For example, ***Muslim prisoner*** does not pass a negative value judgment on Muslims or Islam while *Muslim criminal* may.

	Jewish	Christian	Islamic
attack	2.6837	2.0087	4.8622
conqueror	-2.5996	0.369	5.0115
conquest	-0.6958	2.4841	8.5427
conspiracy	5.5848	0.8229	1.0361
ethnocentrism	5.2361	-0.3636	-3.0
extremism	-1.0184	1.8484	7.1134
extremist	2.5995	2.0308	6.9631
fascism	-1.0138	1.2182	4.9175
fundamentalism	3.713	5.0097	7.6058
fundamentalist	1.3983	4.6287	6.1949
insurgency	0.7135	-3.0	5.186
invader	-1.6038	0.3624	6.3211
invasion	1.4335	-0.4769	6.6416
lobby	5.6875	3.276	1.0626
militant	3.1413	2.4175	7.1135
militia	3.3847	4.5616	4.6599
mob	2.1464	3.0331	5.8065
rebel	3.7948	1.724	5.3542
regime	-0.6593	-1.0454	6.2386
stricture	4.7796	-1.9416	-1.2156
terrorism	3.6654	4.5698	7.7024
terrorist	3.1072	2.7146	6.7726
war	5.3437	1.4158	3.6251

Table 2: Negative nouns and their logdice scores:. A value of -3 means this noun does not co-occur with the adjective in our corpus.

I will discuss the top 2 negative nouns for each adjective:

Jewish Lobby and Jewish Conspiracy

Jewish lobby is the most salient negative collocation in which *Jewish* modifies a noun. While lobbying is a natural political activity, the association between *Jewish* and *lobby* indicates that Jews are a political entity rather than a religious group. The Wikipedia article on the term states that the term “[w]hile at times self-described, usage of the term is viewed as inaccurate, and, particularly when used to allege disproportionate Jewish influence, it can be perceived as pejorative or may constitute antisemitism”. Both *Islamic* and *Christian* have *lobby* as their head noun, albeit with

ranks far down the list. *Islamic lobby* occupies the 1812th rank on the *Islmaic* collocate list while *Christian lobby* has a rank of 397 on the Christian Adj-Noun collocate list.

When we consider the word *lobby* itself, its top adjectival modifiers are: *apolitical*, *pro-israel*, *excessive*, *behind-the-curtain*, *Australian*, *middle-east*, *fruitless*, *intense*, *anti-Polish*, *intensive*, *makian*, *powerful*, *shameless*, *Zionist*, *anti-Israel*, *all-powerful*, *pro-life*, *congressional*, *infamous*, and *jewish*. While *Jewish* is at rank 20, the second most salient adjective is *pro-Israel*. There are also the *Zionist lobby*, and the *anti-Israeli lobby*, which despite being in the opposite direction, is still strongly related. We can also notice that in the top twenty collocates of *lobby* there are negative adjectives: *excessive*, *behind-the-curtain*, *fruitless*, *shameless*, and *infamous*, which is a good indication that the overall prosody of *lobby* is negative.

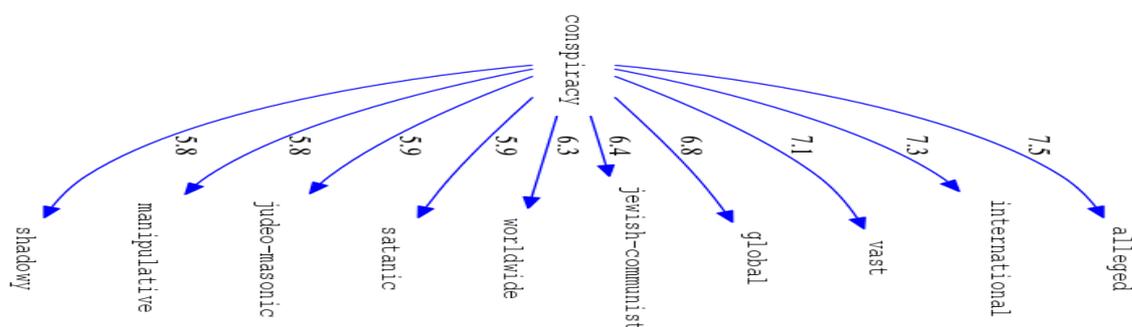


Figure 3: The top 10 collocates of conspiracy

Jewish conspiracy may refer to any conspiracy theory involving the Jews, for example the *blood libel* and *well poisoning*. In fact, in our corpus, many of the top collocates of conspiracy are Jewish: *alleged*, *international*, *vast*, *global*, *jewish-communist*, *worldwide*, *satanic*, *judeo-masonic*, *manipulative*, *shadowy*, *clerical*, *deliberate*, *seeditious*, *jewish*, *masonic*, *jewish-masonic*, *hateful*, *anti-christian*, *zionist*, and *right-wing*. While the word *conspiracy* is in by itself a word of negative prosody, we can see that *Jewish conspiracy* is usually accompanied by another element: either *masonic* or *communist*. The Jewish-Communist connection denotes the anti-Jewish theory of a “secret collusion between the Jews and socialists to rule the world” (Mendes, 2014:250). de Poli (2014) explains that while the Judeo-Masonic conspiracy theory started in Europe, it is currently more common in Latin America, Asia (esp. Japan) and the Middle East. The following are example sentences in which Jewish conspiracy is used:

In a May 2011 article Dankof protested the British government attempting to shut down Press TV, blaming it on “media outlets and correspondents with provable connections to the American **Jewish lobby**; Israeli intelligence; and Neo-Conservatives thirsting for a War of Civilizations with Iran specifically, and the Islamic world generally.”

Although contemporary relations between Israel and Armenia are normally good, some anti-Jewish sentiments are still present th at may be due to several reasons such as: Israel’s alliance with, and ongoing sale of weapons to, Azerbaijan; the fact that a number of the Ottoman empire’s Young Turk instigators of the Armenian Genocide were Jewish or crypto-Jewish and the claim by some pseudo-historians that the genocide was actually part of a Zionist / Masonic plot; the continuing refusal of Israel’s leaders to acknowledge the Armenian Genocide; and the prior active support given by **Jewish lobby** groups in America to Turkey’s position of denying the Armenian Genocide.

Articles in many official Arab government newspapers claim that The Protocols of the Elders of Zion reflects facts, and thus points to an international **Jewish conspiracy** to take over the world.

In *Mein Kampf*, Hitler used the main thesis of “the Jewish peril”, which speaks of an alleged **Jewish conspiracy** to gain world leadership.

Some white supremacist groups, such as the South African Boeremag, conflate elements of Christianity and Odinism. The World Church of the Creator (now called the Creativity Movement) is atheistic and denounces the Christian religion and other deistic religions. Aside from this, its ideology is similar to many Christian Identity groups, in their belief that there is a **Jewish conspiracy** in control of governments, the banking industry and the media. Matthew F. Hale, founder of the World Church of the Creator has published articles stating that all races other than white are “mud races”, which the religion teaches.

Islamic Terrorism and Islamic Fundamentalism

The top collocates for *Islamic* are *terrorism* and *fundamentalism*. They both portray Islam as a military religion whose followers do not accept others. Terrorism also occurs with Jewish (with a rank of 392), and Christian (rank = 185).

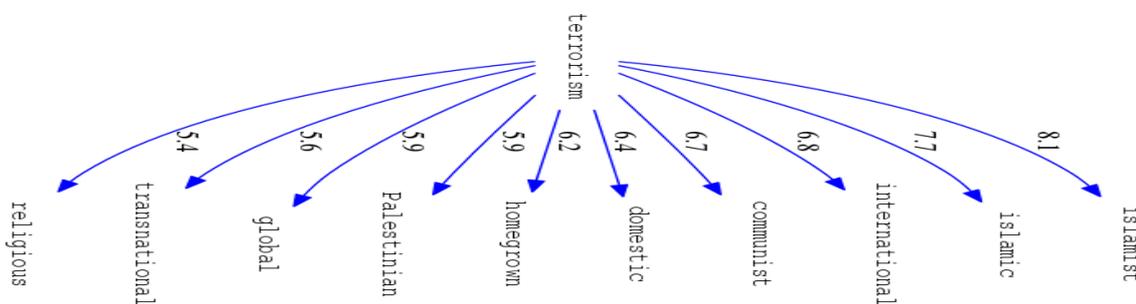


Figure 4: the top 10 collocates of terrorism

The picture of fundamentalism is similar to that of terrorism. The top collocates for fundamentalism are: *grass-root*, **islamic**, *militant*, **religious**, **christian**, *violent*, **mormon**, *radical*, *extreme*, *widespread*, *fundamentalist*, *secular*, **islamist**, **protestant**, *american*, *secret*, **Saudi-inspired**, **premillenarian**, *conservapedia-style*, *coming*, and **bible-belt**. The word clearly has a religious flavor, and is more related to Islam and Christianity than to Judaism, which has no related terms in the top 20 collocates of *fundamentalism*. Here are some sentences:

The Shia and Sunni religious conflicts since the 7th century created an opening for radical ideologists, such as Ali Shariati (1933–77), to merge social revolution with **Islamic fundamentalism**, as exemplified by Iran in the 1970s.

Since 2001, the government of Indonesia has co-operated with the U.S. in cracking down on **Islamic fundamentalism** and terrorist groups.

In January 2008, Liberal MP Sophie Mirabella launched an attack on Fraser, after a speech he gave at Melbourne University on “the Bush Administration (reversing) 60 years of progress in establishing a law-based international system”, claiming errors and “either intellectual sloppiness or deliberate dishonesty”, and that he tacitly supports **Islamic fundamentalism**, should have no influence on foreign policy, and that his stance on the war on terror has left him open to caricature as a “frothing-at-the-mouth leftie”.

Morris told The Sunday Times that the film, will seek to do for **Islamic terrorism** what Dad’s Army, the classic BBC comedy, did for the Nazis by showing them as “scary but also ridiculous”.

However, allowing Coalition forces to be based in the country proved to be one of the issues that has led to an increase in **Islamic terrorism** in Saudi Arabia, as well as Islamic terrorist attacks in Western countries by Saudi nationals, the 9/11 attacks in New York being the most prominent example.

On the issues pertaining to the constant political turmoil in the Middle East, Hanson emphasises the lack of individual and political freedom in many Middle Eastern nations as a major factor retarding economic, technological and cultural progress. He further relates the root cause of radical **Islamic terrorism** to insecurities and a need to regain honour and reputation.

Islamic terrorism became a problem in the Arab world in the 1970s to 1980s. While the Muslim Brotherhood had been active in Egypt since 1928, their militant actions were limited to assassination attempts on political leaders.

Christian Fundamentalism and Christian Terrorism

The top 2 negative nouns associated with *Christian* are *fundamentalism* and *terrorism*, but they rank much lower for Christianity than they do for Islam. A comment on the discussion page may explain why terrorism is more likely to collocate with Islamic than Christian:

Maybe so, but for better or worse Islamic terrorism is a topic that has been viewed by many as a phenomenon worth considering as part of a larger whole. I am not convinced that the concept of Christian terrorism is so widely recognized. (Indrian 21:46, Dec 18, 2004 (UTC))

Maybe *Christian terrorism* is not recognized as a term in the context of English Wikipedia. Whether it is recognized by other Wikipedias is an empirical question worth investigating. A factor that may be at play is the (religious) beliefs commonly held by a Wikipedia contributors. One would expect the Arabic Wikipedia to generally hold different views from the Hebrew one, but with the lack of contributor background, the answers to these questions may be difficult to find.

This focus on Islam and terrorism shows when we consider the top adjectives modifying terrorism: *Talibani*, *Islamist*, *Islamic*, *international*, *communist*, *domestic*, *homegrown*, *anti-abortion*, *Palestinian*, *global*, *transnational*, *religious*, *state-sponsored*, *nationalist*, *zionist*, *so-called*, *radical*, *religiously-motivated*, *christian*, and *taboo*. Religion has a strong presence in describing terrorism, and Islam seems to have the strongest association as the top three adjective are directly associated with it. Another adjective (Palestinian) may also be related. While Judaism and Christianity are also on the list, they appear on the bottom, and in the case of *Judaism*, a related term, *Zionism*, is more often used than the literal Jewish adjective.

The short novel, “If This Goes On—”, describes a rebellion against an American theocracy and thus served as the vehicle for Heinlein to criticise the authoritarian potential of Protestant Christian fundamentalism.

Liddle, a member of the Church of England, condemned the rise of evangelicalism and Christian fundamentalism in Britain, especially the anti-Darwinian influence of such beliefs in faith schools; and criticised the social teaching and cultural influence of this strand of Christianity.

This push towards diversity has however thrown segments of Singapore’s population into identity crises. It has resulted in the growth of a minority though vociferous Christian fundamentalism that adopts the discourses of the religious right wing in the United States.

During the 1982 Lebanon War, while Sharon was Defense Minister, the Sabra and Shatila massacre occurred between 16 September and 18. Between 800 and 3,500 Palestinian civilians in the Sabra and Shatila refugee camps were killed by the Phalanges—Lebanese Maronite Christian militias.

In 1982, after an attack on a senior Israeli diplomat by Lebanese based Palestinian militants in Lebanon, Israel invaded Lebanon in a much larger scale in coordination with the Lebanese Christian militias, reaching Beirut and eventually resulting in ousting of the PLO headquarters in June that year.

Responding to the klephts' attacks, the Ottomans recruited the ablest amongst these groups, contracting Christian militias, known as "armatoloi" (αρματολοί), to secure endangered areas, especially mountain passes.

Analyses of his motivations have noted that he did not only display Christian terrorist inclinations, but also had non-religious, right-wing beliefs. Mark Juergensmeyer and John Mark Reynolds have stated that the events were Christian terrorism, whereas Brad Hirschfield has rejected the Christian terrorist label.

3.1.2. Positive Nouns Modified by the Adjectives

I have so far only discussed negative prosody, but there are positive words too. One reason positive prosody may not be as important as negative prosody is that positivity is only ephemeral while negativity is more permanent. I cannot think of a way terrorism can be turned into a positive word, no matter how you modify it. A collocate like *sweet terrorism* will not make terrorism sweet. Nor does something like *lovely invasion* make sense, although one wonders whether *benevolent dictators* makes sense. On the other hand, positive words can easily be transformed into negative ones. The words we use as positive below are no exception: *purposeful aid*, *ugly architecture*, *horrendous art*, *bad charity*, *bloody civilization*, *fake democracy*, and so on. I will try to examine these positive lemmas nonetheless.

By positive words I mean those nouns that, when modified by an adjective of the set *Jewish*, *Christian*, *Muslim*, give the adjective a positive flavor. Just like *Muslim criminal* stains *Muslim* with a negative impression, *Muslim art* can induce some admiration. The 200 top collocates of each adjective produced the following list of positive nouns, which table 3 presents along with their association scores:

	Jewish	Christian	Islamic
aid	1.1857	4.6565	4.238
architecture	1.7658	4.2685	7.918
art	5.2797	7.3122	8.0439
charity	4.2079	5.8403	5.3803
civilization	4.3982	3.773	7.4602
culture	7.7277	5.9626	7.9451
democracy	0.3691	7.1328	4.9902
ethic	5.6705	6.1309	5.3356
heritage	6.9398	4.0453	4.8455

literature	6.6418	6.8892	6.3711
love	-0.3519	4.7904	-1.6514
martyr	2.4432	7.3615	2.4094
medicine	-0.0299	-3.0	5.6926
morality	-0.2831	4.739	3.7961
music	6.796	8.4306	5.2114
philosopher	6.1686	5.0035	5.9023
philosophy	6.4728	5.6663	7.8814
positivity	4.942	-3.0	-3.0
revival	2.2277	3.4587	5.2878
sage	5.0225	-3.0	2.0731
scholar	6.6245	5.9611	8.9037
scholarship	5.8996	3.1332	5.5901
science	4.2471	4.441	7.1693
scientist	5.3622	6.2558	6.2003
spirituality	2.977	5.2531	3.2036
thought	6.1506	5.7316	6.7233
value	5.1811	7.0864	6.2593
virtue	-0.2917	4.92	2.9778

Table 3: Positive nouns and their logdice scores

Islamic seems to score higher on positive nouns of knowledge as it scores higher than the other two (*Jewish* and *Christian*) on *architecture*, *art*, *civilization*, *culture*, *medicine*, *philosophy*, *revival*, *scholar*, and *science*. All these nouns indicate human effort and achievement. All these may be mainly related to the Islamic golden age. *Jewish* seems to score higher on *culture*, *heritage*, *philosopher*, *positivity*, *sage* and *thought*, which may all be subsumed under *Jewish Thought*. The similarity between how *Jewish* and *Islamic* are positively portrayed can be hardly overestimated as both can be seen in the light of thought and culture. *Christian* seems to score higher on *aid*, *charity*, *democracy*, *ethics*, *literature*, *love*, *martyr*, *morality*, *music*, *scientist*, *spirituality*, *value*, and *virtue*. *Christian* is thus portrayed more as a faith/spirituality adjective than a culture one, i.e. when *Christian* is used, it is used more in the religious sense, unlike *Jewish* and *Islamic* which are more used in the culture sense.

3.2 Answer to Question 2: *Is there a statistically significant difference between the semantic prosodies of these adjectives?*

3.2.1. *Negative Collocates*

There are 23 negative collocates whose scores we measure in *Jewish*, *Christian*, and *Islamic*. The mean score for *Jewish* is 2.21 with a standard deviation of 2.5. The mean score for *Christian* is 1.64 with a standard deviation of 2.12. *Islamic* has a larger mean value than either *Christian* or *Jewish* with a mean score of 4.98 and a standard deviation of 2.9. A box-plot graph depicting the three adjectives is in Figure 5.

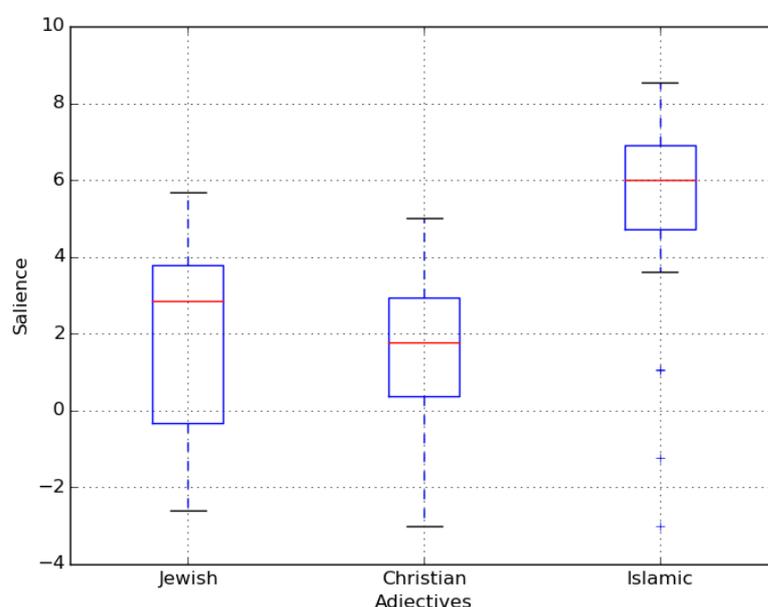


Figure 5: *Negative noun logdice scores*

There was a statistically significant difference between the three adjective groups as determined by one-way ANOVA ($F(2,66) = 11.439, p < 0.0001$). In light of this difference, I will use post-hoc tests to determine which pairs are significantly different from each other. For this purpose, I will run the independent t-test and will accept significance at $p \leq 0.05$. To adjust for the three groups, I will apply the Bonferroni correction and accept as significant p values < 0.01667 . Table 4 summarizes the results of the pair-wise comparisons:

Pair	Means	t-value	p-value
Jewish vs. Christian	2.21 vs. 1.64	0.84	0.408
Jewish vs. Islamic	2.21 vs. 4.98	-3.46	0.0012
Islamic vs. Christian	4.98 vs. 1.64	4.45	< 000001

Table 4: *independent t test results for the adjective pairs*

The t-test shows no significant difference between the scores for *Jewish* ($M=2.21$, $SD=2.51$) and *Christian* ($M=1.64$, $SD=2.12$); $t(44)=0.84$, $p = 0.41$. These results suggest that *Jewish* and *Christian* have no difference in their negative semantic prosodies. When we compare *Jewish* and *Islamic* ($M=4.98$, $SD=2.91$), the t-test shows a significant difference; $t(44) = -3.46$, $p = 0.0012$. This suggests that *Islamic* has a more negative semantic prosody than *Jewish*. When we compare *Islamic* vs. *Christian*, the t-test shows a significant difference; $t(44) = 4.45$, $p < 000001$. This suggests that *Islamic* has a more negative prosody than *Christian*. The overall comparison suggests that *Islamic* is the adjective with the most negative semantic prosody while *Christian* and *Jewish* are similarly lower in their negative associations.

3.2.2. Positive Collocates

There are 28 positive noun collocates. The mean score on these nouns for *Jewish* is 4.1 with a standard deviation of 2.6, *Christian* has a mean of 4.51 and a standard deviation of 3.26 while *Islamic* has a mean of 5.1 and a standard deviation of 2.9. There was no statistically significant difference between the three adjective groups as determined by one-way ANOVA ($F(2,81) = 0.856$, $p = 0.4286$). This suggests that the three adjectives have more or less the same level of positive semantic prosody. Figure 6 presents the mean scores.

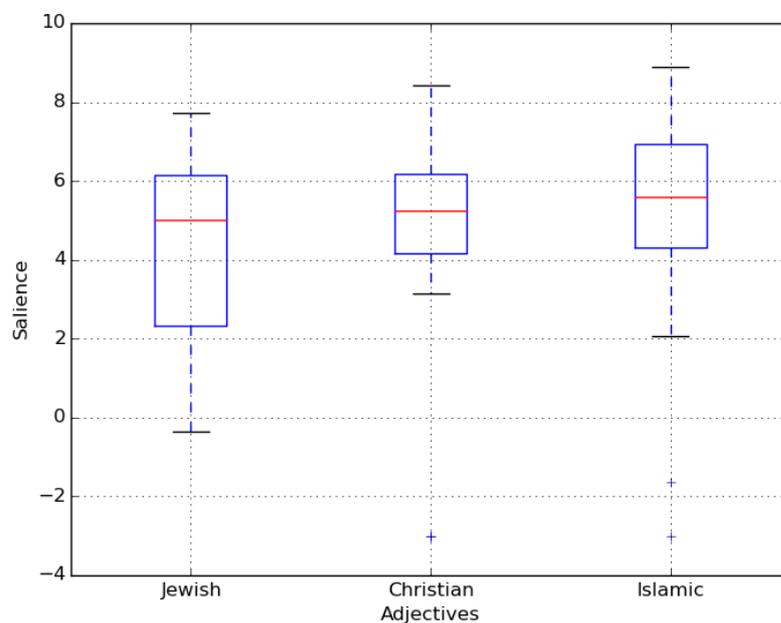


Figure 6: Positive prosody

3.3 Intra-adjectival Differences

The purpose of this section is to compare, not *Jewish* vs. *Christian* vs. *Islamic*, but the scores of each of these on the positive and negative scales. In other words, we ask the question whether the negative associations of *Islamic*, for example, have a higher mean than its positive associations. The rationale behind this question is that we have examined positive and negative lexical associations independently of each other for each adjective, but for a reader, it may be the balance of these that ultimately form her perception of the adjective in question. We use the t-test for the comparison:

Jewish Positive vs. Jewish Negative

The t-test shows a significant difference between *Jewish_positive* (M=4.1, SD=2.57) and *Jewish_negative* (M=2.21, SD= 2.5); $t(49) = 2.599638$, $p = 0.0123967$. This suggests that there is a significant difference between the means of the positive and negative values with positive values being higher than negative ones. We thus conclude that Jewish is more positive than negative. All things being equal, the reader of Wikipedia will probably conclude that Jewish is a positive adjective.

Christian Positive vs. Christian Negative

The t-test shows a significant difference between *Christian_positive* (M=4.6, SD=2.98) and *Christian_negative* (M=1.64, SD= 2.12); $t(49) = 4.1633630$, $p = 0.0001$. This suggests that there is a significant difference between the means of the positive and negative values with positive values being higher than negative ones. We thus conclude that Christian is more positive than negative. All things being equal, the reader of Wikipedia will probably conclude that Jewish is a positive adjective.

Islamic Positive vs. Islamic Negative

The t-test shows no significant difference between *Islamic_positive* (M=5.112786, SD=2.74) and *Islamic_negative* (M=4.978943, SD= 2.91); $t(49) = 0.1676099$, $p = 0.868$. This suggests that there is no significant difference between the means of the positive and negative values. We thus conclude that Islamic is ambivalent between positive and negative. All things being equal, the reader of Wikipedia will probably have difficulty determining whether Islamic is a positive or negative adjective.

4 Conclusion

I have so far presented my analysis of how the attributive adjectives *Jewish*, *Christian* and *Islamic* can be shaped by the negative and positive nouns they modify in the English Wikipedia. Religion is a sensitive issue, and I cannot claim to be neutral or impartial. I am a Muslim, and this may have affected my choices and analyses. Moreover, I am not a native speaker of English, and this may also have had some effect. These are not the only issues with these analysis thoughts

One issue is that comparing scores and ranks may be simplistic. All I have done is claim that X is more negative than Y because X associates with more negative words at higher ranks. This does not take into effect the degree of negativeness/positiveness of the modified nouns. While we may all agree that both *fundamentalism* and *extremism* are bad, we may not find it easy to agree which one is more negative. We may still agree that terrorism is worse than both, but how negative is it? If terrorism happened to be the only negative noun modified by an adjective, and it occupied a high rank, would it be more negative than extremism and fundamentalism combined? What if it had a lower rank against the two high ranking fundamentalism and extremism. This problem may not be easy to solve. Perhaps a corpus, or an ontology, of words and their degrees of negativeness may contribute to the solution.

Another problem is with the positive word list. It seems to me that it is easier to determine that a word is negative than to decide that it is positive. While intuitions may not be a good thing in corpus linguistics work, especially when they come from a nonnative speaker, but from a more universal perspective one can doubt that *art* is positive. It is true that *Islamic art* may be positive, but there is no rule against using it in a negative statement. One can say *ugly Islamic art*, or *feigned Christian love*.

These two issues aside, I have found that in Wikipedia *Islamic* is probably more negative than either *Christian* or *Jewish*, and if negativity is determined by the ranks and numbers of negative vs. positive nouns an adjective associates with, then it may not be too wrong if I claimed that both *Jewish* and *Christian* are positive words while *Islamic* has more negative semantic prosody.

Perhaps, as a sequel to this article, one should also examine the Arabic and Hebrew Wikipedias for the same issue, a project that may prove difficult since these two languages lack the computational tools readily available for English.

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Pilgrim or Tourist?

Modelling Two Types of Travel Bloggers

Tom van Nuenen & Suzanne van der Beek

Abstract

The typological distinction between pilgrims and tourists has often been drawn in tourism studies. This article aims at complementing this debate by applying computational techniques to analyse discourses in a corpus of blogs from the Dutch travel blog repository of *waarbenjij.nu*. The hypothesis is that pilgrims and tourists share notable similarities in their identity narratives. Several unsupervised computational methods are leveraged to analyse the corpora; they provide a cue for further interpretation, which relies on a directed close reading of indicated keywords. The analysis shows that pilgrims, instead of writing about sacred topics, focus on the same practical topics that tourists are invested in. Conversely, tourists show a notable sensibility to a range of highly valued, set apart experiences. The paper ends with the proposal for a new continuum to understand the distinction between pilgrims and tourists, based on the difference between condensed diversity and extended engagement.

Keywords

pilgrim, tourist, identity, computational methods, topic modelling

1 Introduction

The pilgrim and tourist constitute one of the most persistent dichotomies in tourism studies (cf. Walter & Reader 1992, Badone & Roseman 2004, Margry 2008). In its most polemical sense, the mass tourist is a mindless pleasure-seeking anti-hero, following the tight scripts and insured packages that mass tourism provides. Such a tourist is part of a flock, herd, or drove (Fussell 1979, 33; Boorstin 1987), and is sometimes connected to other colourful metaphors such as lemmings (Lodge 1991, 5), invasions (Palin 1992, 102), or barbarians (Mitford 1959). By contrast, pilgrims

are classified as religious soul-searchers, part of a liminal sociability (Turner and Turner 1978) whose travel scripts and scenarios are based upon the sacred.

From early on, the dichotomy has met with critique. It has been suggested that the ontological structure of pilgrimage is comparable to that of the modern-day tourist. Both MacCannell (1976) and Graburn (1977) outlined how both pilgrims and tourists seek knowledge and transformation of the self through an extraordinary journey.¹ Following the Turners' famous statement that 'a tourist is half a pilgrim, if a pilgrim is half a tourist' (1987), many other writers have explored the similarities of these two types of travellers. (Walter and Reader 1993; Moore 1980; Pfaffenburger 1983; Lett 1983; Eade 1992; Post 2013; Collins-Kreiner 2009; Vukonic 2002; Rinschede 1992; Nolan and Nolan 1992; Bauman 1996; Santos 2002; Knox & Hamman 2014; Post & van der Beek 2016). Perhaps the most influential contribution was made by the volume *Intersecting Journeys* edited by Ellen Badone and Sharon R. Roseman, in which a collection of contributions explored the realisation that 'rigid dichotomies between pilgrimage and tourism, and pilgrims and tourists, no longer seem tenable in the shifting world of postmodern travel.'

In spite of these nuances, the dichotomy certainly has not collapsed. To an extent, the tourist/pilgrim dyad still serves as an important epistemological tool: offsetting pilgrims against tourists is often used to focus on the specificities of either group (Post 2013). Indeed, in recent years the twosome has again been deployed in order to argue that the overlapping elements of tourists and pilgrims should not result in undermining the difference between the two figures altogether. Dutch anthropologist Peter Jan Margry has objected to the vague usage of the term "pilgrimage", in particular when referring to journeys as "secular pilgrimages". He argues that the convergence of sacred and profane forms of travel does not result in a merging of the two (Margry 2008, 30). In response to a 'playful exploration' of the term by Knox and Hannam (2013), Margry argues that the term pilgrimage is in danger of becoming a non-specific, non-academic concept: 'Why call it pilgrimage if such behaviour cannot be accounted for as pilgrimage? Is it simply the lure of an intriguing word replete with expressive connotations, or is it an exercise in presenting superficial analogies, without demonstrating basic commonalities?' (Margry 2013, 243).

Before accepting that pilgrimage and tourism are theoretically conflated – or as Margry warns, inflated – we should consider the discourses of the travellers themselves. Both pilgrim and tourist discourses are produced in great numbers by amateur travel writers, increasingly in an online environment. These narratives may help us to better understand the distinctions and similarities between both forms of experience. According to BlogPulse and Technorati, the number of blogs in 2004 was 3 million and increased to 164 million in 2011. In 2008, the topic of travel was reported to

1 This idea of the journey as possibility for transformation has been critiqued by Edward Bruner, who argued that the transformative potential for travellers is highly limited, while the changes that tourism create at the destination site is often overlooked.

be the ninth most important one, representing 28% of all blogs (Bosangit, Dulnuan, and Mena 2012). These texts have a very real influence on the manner in which people understand and talk about travel.² Therefore, the present article proposes to introduce a new outlook on the debate about the pilgrim/tourist dichotomy (which has already spread across anthropology, religious studies, leisure studies, and philosophy) by adopting a macro-perspective to this multiplicity of online produced pilgrim and tourist narratives. By applying computational stylistic techniques, which are new to this debate, the paper discusses the differences in discourse practised by pilgrims to Santiago de Compostela and tourists in New York City, on the Dutch travel blog repository of waarbenjij.nu.

Methodologically, the paper provides a hybrid reading, combining macroanalysis with close reading, in order to 1) find patterns that can indicate genre distinction, and 2) analyse themes within the hypothesised genres. This is done by applying several methods (topic modelling, document-term matrices, POS-tagging) to the corpora of bloggers. Via this combined method of distant and close reading in analysing a large corpus of online generated travel narratives, a contribution is made to the understanding of the typological classification of pilgrims and tourists. The paper ends with the proposal of a new continuum based on textual elements, to classify pilgrim and tourist narratives.

2 Capturing pilgrim and tourist blogs

The computational gathering and analysis of large corpora of texts has been undertaken by corpus linguists for some time now (Baker 2007, 1). The practice temporarily de-emphasises individual occurrences of features or words in favour of a focus on the larger system or corpus and its aggregate patterns and trends. As Matthew Jockers (2013) has rightfully emphasised, this allows us to support or challenge existing theories and assumptions, while calling our attention to general patterns and missed trends in order to better understand the context in which individual texts, words, or features arise. In the process of distant reading, as opposed to close reading, the reality of the text undergoes a process of deliberate reduction and abstraction, and the distance in distant reading is considered not an obstacle but a specific form of knowledge (Moretti 2005, 1). Yet it remains important to remember, as Ramsay (2011) has noted, that the type of analysis that is prevalent in literary studies, i.e. literary-critical interpretation, is also an insistently subjective manner of engagement. Computational results can be used to provoke such a directed reading, and that is precisely what this paper aims to do.

2 According to a 2013 Technorati report, blogs are the third most influential digital resource when making overall purchases, behind retail websites and brand websites. (Technorati Media. 2013. "Digital Influence Report." Accessed August 14 2014. See <http://technorati.com/wp-content/uploads/2013/06/tm2013DIR3.pdf>.)

The texts discussed in the present study are taken from the popular Dutch travelogue “waarbenjij.nu”. Founded in 2003, this blog now offers over 2.9 million travel stories (the vast majority of which are in Dutch). The corpus was built by scraping the website from the front end, i.e. entering a word in the search bar as the main filter. Texts featuring the term “pelgrim” (“pilgrim”) were selected to comprise the corpus of pilgrim narratives. As the Camino to Santiago de Compostela is the predominantly popular pilgrimage for Dutch travellers, this method proved to offer a fairly clean corpus of Camino narratives.³ There are, of course, other types of pilgrims than Camino pilgrims, but the Camino is not only the most popular pilgrimage, it has also reinvented itself over the last twenty to thirty years as a typical product of its time. It is the preeminent pilgrimage that allows for, and encourages, (religious) diversity and a focus on self-exploration. (Oviedo, De Courcier, and Farias; Harman, 128-45; Van Uden and Pieper, 205-19) ‘Every pilgrim creates their own Camino’, is its slogan for a reason.

The corpus of tourist narratives was assembled out of texts featuring the phrase “New York”.⁴ This search resulted in a very diverse corpus of tourist narratives, some of them written by people who only came over for two or three days, others travellers who journeyed through the whole of North America, again others young people who spend a couple of weeks or even months in New York City as exchange students or interns. Of course, tourism as a whole includes many different kinds of travellers; the backgrounds of the people taking pictures on the Brooklyn Bridge or in Central Park are wildly varying. This diversity of New York City tourists mirrors the diversity in pilgrims found on the Camino, who travel to Santiago with a variety of backgrounds, expectations, modes of transportation, and amount of time to spend. Further, instead of choosing a form of tourism that resembles pilgrimage strongly (e.g. backpacking through Southeast Asia), the search term “New York” was chosen to ensure that the corpora would consist of texts about journeys that are structurally dissimilar. The goal was to capture an important difference between pilgrims and tourists in the conception of one’s destination: while the pilgrim focuses attention on the journey, the tourist sees this physical trek to the place of interest primarily as a necessity, and starts her/his experience only when s/he has arrived. The experience of New York City starts when one arrives at the destination, while the pilgrimage ends at that point. This insight will here be highlighted, rather than played down.

A first realisation that came from this first explorative stage is that pilgrims are much more comfortable with their role as pilgrim than tourists are with their role as tourist. By using the word “pilgrim” as a search term, we have arguably not missed out on a great deal of narratives, as

3 In the Netherlands, modern pilgrimage is often understood within the demarcations of the popular Camino. The pilgrimage to Santiago de Compostela has seen numbers of official Dutch pilgrims rise from 690 pilgrims in 1985 to 3.501 (total: 262.459) in 2015.

4 The term “New York” was entered instead of “New York City”, as tourists usually use the first to refer to the second (to the extent that the search term “New York City” resulted in significantly fewer search results).

pilgrims repeatedly overuse the term: it is often used where it is not necessary. For example, pilgrims will write ‘I met two other pilgrims who...’ (when they might write ‘I met two people/women/Germans who...’), constantly underlining their identity as pilgrims. By contrast, a search for the term “tourist” produced a set of narratives that consisted of diverse writings by people who commented on ‘playing the tourist for a day’ or commenting upon the behaviour of other travellers. One would be hard-pressed to find tourists writing that they ‘met two other tourists today’. Tourists are much less eager to identify themselves as such than pilgrims are.⁵

The next step of the macroanalysis involved topic modelling.⁶ Topic modelling tools automatically extract topics from texts, taking a single text or corpus and searching for patterns in the use of words, attempting to inject semantic meaning into vocabulary. A topic, to the program, is a list of words that occur in statistically meaningful ways. Topic modelling is unsupervised--that is, the program running the analysis does not know anything about the meaning of the words in a text. Instead, it is assumed that any piece of text is composed by an author by selecting words from possible baskets of words (the number of which is determined by the user) where each basket corresponds to a topic or discourse.⁷ From this assumption it follows that one could mathematically decompose a text into the probable baskets from whence the words came. The tool goes through this process over and over again until it settles on the most likely distribution of words into baskets, resulting in the titular topics. There are many different topic modelling programs available; in this paper we use the well-known package of MALLET (McCallum 2002). The topic models it produces provide us with probabilistic data sortations, which we argue are indicative of certain discursive gravitational points and latent structures behind our collection of texts. We can then contextualize these structures with theories from tourism and pilgrimage studies.⁸

5 It has been argued before that tourists are bothered by the presence of other tourists, while pilgrims welcome the presence with other pilgrims (Coleman and Cran 2004; Urry 2011; Redfoot 1984; Week 2012). Furthermore, pilgrims are traditionally understood as highly reflexive travellers because of the religious significance, deep histories, and routinized itineraries (Badone and Roseman 2004, 11).

6 Several theorists have written accounts of topic modelling for humanities scholars without a mathematical background. See for example Jockers, Matthew L. 2011. “The LDA Buffet is Now Open; or, Latent Dirichlet Allocation for English Majors.” September 29. <http://www.matthewjockers.net/2011/09/29/the-lda-buffet-is-now-open-or-latent-dirichlet-allocation-for-english-majors/> or Underwood, Ted. 2012. “Topic Modeling made Just Simple Enough.” April 7. <http://tedunderwood.com/2012/04/07/topic-modeling-made-just-simple-enough/>.

7 As Ted Underwood notes, “the notion that documents are produced by discourses rather than authors is alien to common sense, but not alien to literary theory.” Underwood, Ted. 2012. “Topic Modeling Made Just Simple Enough.” April 7. <http://tedunderwood.com/2012/04/07/topic-modeling-made-just-simple-enough/>.

8 MALLET has proven useful in other research too. The *Mining the Dispatch* project of the University of Richmond, for instance, uses MALLET to explore ‘the dramatic and often traumatic changes as well as the sometimes surprising continuities in the social and political life of Civil War Richmond.’ See: Nelson, Robert K. “Mining the Dispatch” Accessed July 8 2015. <http://dsl.richmond.edu/dispatch/pages/intro>. Another example can be found in the work of historian Cameron Blevins, who uses MALLET to ‘recognize and conceptualize the recurrent themes’ in Martha Ballard’s diary. See: Blevins, Cameron. 2010. “Topic Modeling Martha Ballard’s Diary.” April 1. <http://www.cameronblevins.org/posts/topic-modeling-martha-ballards-diary/>.

A vital part of any type of computational corpus linguistics is formed by preprocessing, as this determines which documents and words are taken into account in the analysis.⁹ Topic modelling can be put to use in this regard, allowing insight into prevalent noise in the corpus. Notable topics in the first topic model for both corpora indicated noise in the corpus, with words such as “the”, “and”, “to”, “for”, “this”, “it”, which obviously pertains to English narratives, and a topic with words such as “park”, “auto”, “bus”, “dieren” (“park”, “car”, “bus”, “animals”), indicating that the corpus was contaminated by Dutch travellers to other holy sites (mainly Buddhist temples in Malaysia) and visits to South Africa’s “Pilgrim’s Rest”. After clean-up, the corpus contained 2.674.051 words in the pilgrim travel blogs and 2.535.353 words in the tourist travel blogs, distributed over 6.943 blogs.

3 Analysing topic models of travelogues

Structurally, we can immediately note some differences between the subcorpora. Firstly, the number of unique words in the tourist corpus is 74.068, which is 80% of the variety in the pilgrim corpus (91.767 words). Pilgrim blogs tend to be longer as well: the average number of words per blog post in the pilgrim corpus is 1.256, while the average of the tourist blogs is 501 words. These differences hint at discursive differences in the corpora: pilgrims deal with their journeys in a more elaborate manner.

Further, the topic model we created consisted largely of words that had no great meaning outside of their context, e.g. “een”, “te”, “je”, “als” (“an”, “too”, “you”, “if”). The texts can be more purposefully analysed when not all types of words are incorporated in the analysis. In order to discard the words that attribute little to an understanding of the thematic difference between the corpora, we chose to categorize the words in our texts on the basis of their grammatical function. This allowed us to iterate over specific word categories in order to see if the differences are persistent.¹⁰ Such grammatical filtering can be done by using a Part-of-Speech (POS) tagger, which determines the grammatical function of all words in the corpus. For the present paper we used *TreeTagger*, a probabilistic tagging method that is about 95% accurate in tagging grammatical functions (Schmid 1994), and is widely used by researchers due to its easy availability (Alegria, Leturia & Sharoff 2009, 29). *TreeTagger* contains a POS tagging script for Dutch words, which was

9 .Jockers, Matthew L. 2013. ““Secret” Recipe for Topic Modeling Themes.” April 12. <http://www.matthewjockers.net/2013/04/12/secret-recipe-for-topic-modeling-themes/>.

10 Another popular solution for this problem is the introduction of a stop list: a manually composed list of words that should not be incorporated in the analysis. On this list, one could include any kind of words that is deemed irrelevant for the query. This stop list would therefore be at the same time highly subjective and radically incomplete. We decided that it would not suit the needs for the present analyses.

used to tag our corpus. By applying this technique, we were able to analyse the corpora based only on one specific part of speech. We analysed our corpora based upon the usage of nouns, which are argued to be especially suitable for capturing thematic trends (Jockers 2013, 131).

Next, split the corpora in small chunks of (about) 500 words each. This allows us to preserve context that would otherwise be discarded: we allow the model to discover themes that occur only in specific places within blogs and not just across entire blogs. Using the original text files, varying greatly in size, would mean that the small amount of themes introduced in short texts would be granted the same amount of significance as the much larger amount of themes logically introduced in longer texts (after all, our topic model weighs the prevalent topics in each document against the others). To ensure that themes are valued more equally, the notion of personal authorship thus had to be neglected, in order to maintain the variety of narrative themes. Of course, this overemphasizes the themes of certain authors over those of others, but the size of the corpus was deemed large enough to answer for this shortcoming. Jockers has argued that 500-1000 word chunks are most helpful when modelling novels¹¹, and we have chosen to stay on the low end of the spectrum, using chunks of 500 words each for most data processing purposes. The topic model that we created from this information was visualized in a stacked bar chart.¹²

#	weight	emphasis	top 30 words per topic (cleaned)
0	1.15857	both	dag mensen uur tijd dagen s keer goed boetje stad jaar weg huis moment avond auto bus nacht week nederland hotel man aantal soort zon kamer was avonds weken foto
1	0.11581	pilgrim	santiago pelgrim weg tocht camino pelgrims johan route leven compostela kathedraal kerk reis km n pelgrimstocht god april spanje jacobus loop st rugzak maar rome plaats t doel compostella jaar
2	0.16716	pilgrim	km camino pelgrims santiago pelgrim uur herberg refugio dag route albergo weg spanje la kathedraal tocht del stad bed san n burgos dorp koffie meter foto dorpie leon kerk fiets
3	0.40301	pilgrim	uur kilometer weg koffie kerk pad loop bed water zon dorp rugzak man route kamer staat km ontbijt brood hotel vrouw wijn tafel pelgrims n eten schoenen stuk caf voeten
4	0.25886	tourist	new york park central uur dag times manhattan s hotel stad metro building uitzicht state empire city hostel museum island the bus zero vrijheidsbeeld bridge street brooklyn tijd mensen th
5	0.12156	tourist	to the you for and vegas that are all with it las will have but do canyon this as hotel up see like not make can your strip very what
6	0.14008	pilgrim	km camping route dag st uur mei pelgrim la gite weg fiets tent tocht kilometer pelgrims jani gr jacques d frans frankrijk etappe kilim ko stempel franse koffie santiago stad
7	0.07304	pilgrim	kilometer luc dorp jaar refugio nacht fiets jaren k ron december oktober november geld prijs bar ezels portugal afrika land dorpie zuid porto hoofdstad vader stadje thee schapen tent restaurant
8	0.18338	tourist	new york uur week vliegtuig vlucht boetje tijd fotos ff goed camp nederland t berichtje weken amerika vliegveldt echt schiphol koffers bed school dagen zin kamer meiden site weekend huis
9	0.17011	tourist	week school weekend new weken kerst huis nederland les vrijdag werk sneeuwv stage thanksgiving familie campus december donderdag zaterdag vrienden feestje film studenten wedstrijd maand zondag club lessen januari jaar

Figure 1: Topic model

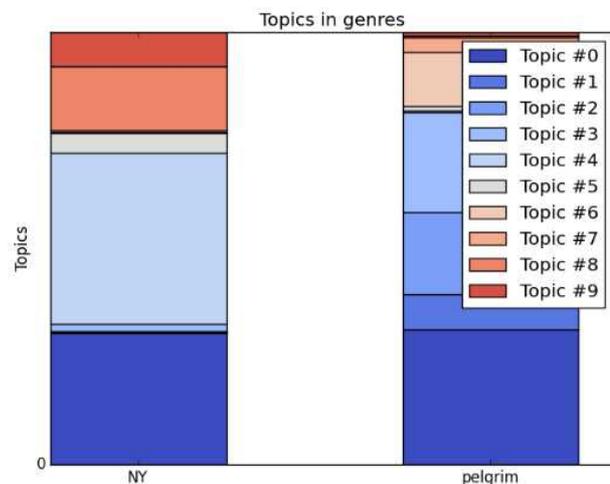


Figure 2: Topic weights

11 Jockers, Matthew L. 2013. “‘Secret’ Recipe for Topic Modeling Themes.” April 12.

<http://www.matthewjockers.net/2013/04/12/secret-recipe-for-topic-modeling-themes/>.

12 The idea underlying the stacked bar chart is that each text has some proportion of its words associated with each topic. Because the model assumes that every word is associated with some topic, these proportions must add up to one. For example, in a three topic model, text number 1 might have 50% of its words associated with topic 1, 25% with topic 2, and 25% with topic 3. The stacked bar chart represents each document as a bar broken into colored segments matching the associated proportions of each topic.

The topic model produced 10 topics, alongside the relative importance or “weight” of each topic, represented by the Dirichlet parameter. These topics can mostly be labelled as pertaining to either the pilgrim or the tourist discourse (see the “emphasis” column in Figure 2). In order to get a thorough view of the two types of travellers under discussion here, these topics and the words in them can be made sense of via two different ways: by exploring their differences and by exploring their similarities. Topics 2 and 4 can be clearly identified as pertaining to respectively the pilgrim and the tourist discourse, as they incorporate some notably different but parallel words that refer to both types of travellers. These two topics represent the two most significant group of themes and include some interesting parallel terms that lend themselves very well for a more contextualized reading. Then, there is one topic that includes the terms found in both corpora, topic 0. After we explore the different terms used in topic 2 and 4, we will focus on the words found in topic 0, in order to understand the terms that are prevalent in both corpora. It is reasonable to argue that these words, while concurrent, are employed differently by our two traveller types. The second step in our analysis will therefore be a close reading of these similarities found in topic 0.

Before we continue with our analysis, it seems important to address an elephant in the room. One interesting theme conspicuous by its absence in the list of topics generated, pertains to the traditional difference in the degree of (religious) spirituality in both corpora. We might have expected pilgrims to use a significant amount of their words on the themes that traditionally characterize a serious pilgrim: reflection on God, the meaning of spirituality, or the exploration of the self. However, these themes are largely absent. Nouns referring to the more spiritual dimension of a pilgrim’s journey are close to marginal: Santiago (3.112x), “camino” (2.911x), “kerk” (“church”, 2.160x) kathedraal (“cathedral”, 1.391x). Words like God (298x), Jacobus (346x), religie (“religion”, 26x) or spiritualiteit (“spirituality”, 26x) seem similarly minor. This theme, which is traditionally seen as one of the main points of distinction between the two traveller types, does not seem to play an important role in the typology. (Munster & Niesten 2013; Collins-Kreiner 2010; Cohen 1979; Margry 2008)

third church that has stood sometimes towering over the lake’ or ‘Along the way we drove under the remnants of a collapsed church’. In these instances, they are a part of the overall impressions of the Camino, a dot on the horizon as the pilgrim continues on the way. For pilgrims, the landscape can be an important element of the journey (Frey 1998, 87-136), and it has since long been the object of study in the field of human geography. (Bajc, Coleman, and Eade 2007; Stoddard and Morinis 1997; Collins-Kreiner 2010) These studies have pointed out that pilgrims become ‘highly mindful of themselves and the surrounding environment’. (Scriven 2012, 256) As they slowly walk along the road, the scenery is their constant companion and plays an important role in their daily experience. (‘It was a beautiful walk, another sunny day along a canal and nature reserve’.) A beautiful environment can lift a pilgrim’s spirits like nothing else can.

We find a similar framing of other words in the topic, like “stad” or “kathedraal” (‘The arrival in Le Puy was very beautiful, you looked over the city and you saw the cathedral high on a mountain’, or: ‘Again, a stamp just as in epine just before Chalons, where suddenly a special cathedral appeared on the horizon.’), or even “Santiago”:

This is a suburb of Santiago de Compostela. On the border between the two places we stopped at the sign of Santiago de Compostela to take pictures. And then we went onward. Now we’re in Santiago de Compostela. After some kilometres we reached a hill and we saw the Cathedral in the distance.

A presence of churches in the scenery almost always contributes to a favourable conception of the landscape, while a lack of churches is usually combined with landscapes involving industrial or other urban surroundings. Landscape on the Camino is not seen as a distraction, but rather as contribution to the sacred pilgrim experience.

Another way in which churches are framed in pilgrim narratives is to pay attention to the religious tradition of the buildings, to understand them as architectural manifestations of the sacred nature of the Camino. In many of these instances, churches simultaneously become places of action; spatial invitations for sacred contemplation or rituals. Pilgrims do not merely look at them or pass by them, but also appropriate these churches by performing rituals within their walls. (‘In Los Arcos we visited a beautiful church, Mary and I have been saying prayers with a group of Austrian elderly people’, or: ‘I understood that God for him implied a homecoming, every time when he entered a church. He then could move forward in two directions in his life, but in the church he learned what the right direction was’.)

In these examples, we can see how churches are not so much interesting for their architectural or historical value, but rather appreciated as opportunities to explore and *engage* with

the sacred potentialities of the pilgrimage.¹⁵ Entering a church is not the same as entering other buildings. This notion of the centrality of space in the direction of a sacred gaze is one that has gained dominance in the debate in religious studies during the last twenty to thirty years, known as the ‘spatial turn’. (Knott 2010) Famous in this debate is Jonathan Z. Smith’s statement that ‘[s]acrality is, above all, a category of emplacement.’ (1992, 104) Smith argues that a sacred site such as a temple ‘serves as a focusing lens, establishing the possibility of significance by directing attention, by requiring the perception of difference. Within the temple, the ordinary (which to any outside eye or ear remains wholly ordinary) becomes significant, becomes “sacred,” simply by being there.’ (Smith 1992, 104) Many pilgrims describe the encounter with churches in terms of this spatial shift in evaluation. It is especially noticeable in relation to social aspects, describing a sense of comradeship or even love within their walls:

I also went to the pilgrim mass there. Afterwards all pilgrims were called to the front and the priest raised his arms and a pilgrim prayer was called for. The church was filled with all sorts of pilgrims of all ages and nationalities. It moves you, when your group receives this kind of attention. A beautiful moment.

These experiences are also mentioned with regard to other words that occur in topic 2, for example “kathedraal”: ‘Then I went to the cathedral to stabbing the candle with the light I was carrying symbolically from Lourdes’.

Museums, like churches, have the potential to inspire a sense of awe and even spiritual reverence, due to their insistence upon cultural and historical depth and the celebration of aesthetic contemplation. John Falk pointed out that ‘[t]he museum can offer something akin to a reverential experience and a place of “peace and fantasy” where the visitor can escape the mundane, work-a-day world.’ (Falk 2013, 46) In his work on the contemporary museum visitor, Falk argues that visitors cherish museums as places where physical and intellectual treasures are publicly accessible:

Upon entering a museum, the visitor, in large part because of the expectation that great and important things are contained there, finds it awe-inspiring. [...] Museums are places where people can see and learn about things outside of their everyday lives - precious and unusual things; things of great historical, cultural or scientific import; things that inspire reverence. (Falk 2013, 189-90)

15 It is somewhat surprising that pilgrims hardly ever remark upon the particular historical or cultural significance of these churches. Much has been written about the special architectural style that characterizes the churches along the Camino as a result of the specific political and cultural dynamics that has formed the North of Spain (Priego & Azcárate; Fernie; Mullins).

Yet, in the tourist narratives in our corpus, we have found very few expressions of these kinds of sentiments regarding museums. Mostly, museums are spoken of as almost mandatory stops for visitors of New York City. They are often talked about as one of the many familiar items on the to-do-list of tourists. ('The agreement went as follows: ascending the Empire State Building, visiting the Museum of Modern Art (MoMA), Times Square at night, a dinner and then to the hotel,' or: 'Soon we will go to the Guggenheim museum. Yesterday and the day before we went to the Empire State building, the Brooklyn Bridge last, the Museum of Natural History seen (so BIG!!!!), Macy's (big disappointment) and saw Central Park and much more,' or: 'The next few days the program is filled with the Guggenheim Museum, the Empire State Building, a stand-up comedy show, maybe a musical, a few districts and possibly some shopping.')

Hardly ever do tourists spend a lot of words on their museum visits. There are no explanations concerning what they have seen there, nor how they experienced it, the other visitors they met, or the knowledge they gained. These museums serve as classical "truth markers", which function to cement the bond of tourist and attraction 'by elevating the information possessed by the tourist to privileged status' (MacCannell 1976, 138). They attest to the validity of the New York City trip, and are such well-known semiotic markers that there is no need to further elaborate on them. In other words, they seem primarily part of the tourist's desire to authenticate such sights and inscribe themselves in the semiotic field of New York City. Through this inscription they become part of the field, which in its ubiquity within Western culture is not something that can be "consumed" in the classic sense. The tourist disposition, in this sense, is a more modest one than theories of commodification usually allow for.

As one might deduce from the citations given above, other words that occur in topic 4 ("park", "central", "times", "state", "empire", "bridge") are used similarly. Occasionally, visitors will give a short glimpse of their appreciation of the place and their experience there, such as: 'Then a bit of culture (well done right, Bear) in the Museum Of Modern Art (MOMA)', or: 'The Metropolitan and the Museum of Modern Art are highly recommended.' Other geographical words that we find in topic 4 can also fulfil this function:

We went to Columbia University, Harlem, Central Park, Staten Island, and actually too many places to mention. We also went to CBGB's, the temple of the hardcore music according to Joep . . . Actually, the walk across the Brooklyn Bridge at dusk was my favourite part. All the lights of the skyscrapers, and the red sky behind it, really great.

In these instances, tourists emphasize the cultural significance of the museums they have visited, which might be understood as a sign of a genuine impression that the experience has had on them, and/or as a way to consolidate the social capital of travel towards the people reading the blog. This

last position is reinforced by the stance of expertise that they take after visiting a sight (as in the last example), in which sites are recommended to others without explaining why. This discourse mirrors the rapid succession of impressions (and inscriptions) inherent to tourism.

At this point, a first comparison between pilgrim and tourist narratives springs clearly to mind. In the writings of both types of travellers, the interaction with significant places and opportunities for cultural and historic sightseeing is key. Pilgrims use these as landmarks in a potentially meaningful environment or opportunities for lingering experiences, while tourists value them as non-specific cultural highlights to be encountered during a visit to the city. We can thus see a significant difference in the understanding of sights and sites in pilgrim and tourist discourses. While pilgrims are appropriating the sights they see by incorporating them into their own, personal story, tourists do not have to explain visiting the archetypical NYC sites. The reasons for doing so are constructed externally; the role of the tourist is not so much one of appropriation but one of inscription into the experiential “package deal” of New York City.

Several other pointers in the topics underscore this difference between tourists and pilgrims: the latter, for instance, usually talks of the experience in light of the teleological journey, while the tourist insists upon the cultural and experiential extravagance of the isolated experience itself. Throughout the pilgrim blogs, “Santiago” is used as a teleological point of reference that exists in the future tense (‘Later in Santiago’, ‘Two weeks until Santiago’, etc.). “New York”, by contrast, is often framed as a unique place of excitement that is being experienced in the present time (‘Here in New York’, ‘I’m taking part in the nightlife of New York’, ‘Walking through NEW YORK, too weird’, ‘Jesus, New York is so big!!!! It’s crazy!!!’). There is a strong sense of awe in these tourists’ exclamations, a near disbelief of their ability to inscribe themselves into the city of New York, the mediatized city *par excellence* which they have known through imagery for so long. The high amount of lexical units such as capitalised words and exclamation marks further underscore this fervour. Such signifiers, which Crystal (2006, 255) has called Netspeak, exist in between spoken and written language. Pilgrims, conversely, seem less prone to use such exclamatory signifiers.

Other pointers found in topics 2 and 4 pertain to the notion of transportation. Both tourists and pilgrims combine the topic of significant sites with words relating to the process of getting there; for pilgrims these include: “km,” “route,” “weg” (“road”), “meter,” and for tourists: “metro,” “bus.” When pilgrims use these words, they are often framed by ideas of continuity: every kilometre travelled is a contribution towards the overall project of walking to the pilgrim’s destination. (‘By now I’ve arrived 38 km from Leon, so tomorrow I pass the 600 km mark from Lourdes.’) Tourists, however, seem to look upon travel as a necessary evil (‘Around 22:30, we are totally fed up and we look for a subway that brings us back to our hotel around 23:30.’), although some tourists describe a (small) sense of excitement in using such a ‘New York-type’ of

transportation as the metro ('We toured around with the metro and stuff, in the metro (underground) there was a group of 10 people that started breakdancing!, they were crazy good :D').

The framing of the accommodation elucidates the same discrepancy between the ongoingness of the pilgrim's travel narrative and the tourist's discontinuous succession of experiences. Pilgrims, for instance, frame "herberg" ("hostel") as continuations of the Camino experience. They form the decor for a whole set of pilgrim adventures:

It's festive, cosy and homely. Along with a handful of pilgrims we sit in the kitchen, talk, drink wine, while cooking and eating. It's delicious. I enjoy with my hands, feet, my head and everything else I have. When I lay my weary head on the kitchen table, I'm being massaged. It is miraculous. A bed with sheets, blankets, towels and much more in a hotel can't match a bare albergue jammed with wet and happy pilgrims.

Tourists, on the other hand, understand "hotel" as the end of an adventure ('After that we walked around and arrived at our hotel again', 'We have walked around for a bit, drank a beer, and went back to the hotel'). Nothing happens at a hotel, except for a good night's rest that ensures the tourist will be ready for the next day of sightseeing. In contrast to "herberg," the word has a similar connotation in pilgrim narratives: those pilgrims that prefer the hotel over the albergue praise the cleanliness, solitude and opportunities for intense rest ('I'm having a day off in a hotel, two lovely nights in a bed and washing some stuff'). Furthermore, pilgrims often comment upon hotels as places for 'so-called pilgrims', pilgrims who do not dare to completely commit to the Camino and seek to enjoy the luxuries they know from their daily lives, rather than experience the whole Camino by sharing a table and a sleeping hall with other pilgrims. (Frey 1998, 94-100)

By exploring the different approaches to parallel themes in their narratives, we have come to understand pilgrims as travellers that experience their journey as an ongoing flow towards a dot on the horizon, while tourists appreciate theirs as a series of extraordinary, discontinuous highlights.

5 Exploring differences in a compiled topic

One of the topics introduced above stands out by befitting both corpora in approximately the same degree. In topic 0 we find a set of words that play a large role in both the pilgrim and the tourist corpus; "dag" [day], "mensen" [people], "uur" [hour], etc. are all words that we have found on the top of the most used words in both type of traveller blogs. The word cloud of this topic looks as follows:



Figure 5. Word cloud of topic 0

The words gathered in topic 0 occur in both the tourist and the pilgrim corpus. In this topic we find many words that refer to the practical side of traveling. A quick look at the total word counts shows that these are by far the most frequent words in both corpora. In pilgrim narratives, the most used nouns are “dag” [“day”] (7.517x), “uur” [“hour”] (7.380x), “km” (6.020x), followed by “weg” [“road”] (4.712x) and “route” (3.533x). Not only do these results point towards the pilgrim’s tendency to focus upon practicalities in their narratives, the denotations of distance, such as “km”, “meter”, and “route” are all indexical of a reflexive attitude when it comes to the temporal and physical linearity of their trek. Tourists, too, use mostly words that refer to the practical aspects of their journey. After “New” (17.752x) and “York” (16.380x)--by far the most frequently used words for obvious reasons--, the nouns most used in tourist narratives are “uur” (“hour”, 7.157x), “dag” (“day”, 6.952x), “mensen” (“people”, 4.576x), and “tijd” (“time”, 4.537x). Most notably, the words “uur” and “dag” appear both in the joined topic 0 and in both the distinctive topics 2 and 4. When we consider these words within their original context, we might, again, get a clearer understanding of the meaning pilgrims and tourists attribute to these frequently used words.

The word “dag” (“day”) is used in different ways by travellers. Both pilgrims and tourists often use the word in a diary-style fashion: when the day is at a close they reflect upon the way they have spent it. The following quotations might, for that matter, have been taken from either pilgrim or a tourist narratives: ‘Today began as a sunny day again (tourist narrative)’, ‘In the local hotel I can stay overnight, it was a beautiful walk, another sunny day besides a canal and nature reservation (pilgrim narrative)’, ‘It was a super energizing but also very tiring day (tourist narrative)’.

There are, however, also some significant differences between the framing of “dag” in both corpora. Pilgrims tend to connect the word to a definite experience of repetitiveness: ‘een dag uit het leven van een pelgrim’ (‘a day out of the life of a pilgrim’ Frey 1998, 226). They often remark that it might not be interesting to relate the day in too much detail, as such exposition would result in exactly the same story as the day before, and the day before that, and the day before that.¹⁶ (‘Yet

16 Pilgrims are also fond of numbering the day described, perhaps as way to not lose count amongst the monotony of the pilgrim life, or as a way to underline the teleological nature of their journey (‘only 12 more days to go’).

another day with only asphalt,' or: 'Beautiful sunny weather, all day long'.) This points to a tension between the contents of pilgrim blogging and the blog format itself; waarbenjij.nu is set up to accommodate repeated entries.¹⁷ Many bloggers on the platform, it turns out, write daily about their journey, and the hesitance explicated by pilgrims to share their daily routines is related to this necessity endemic to the blogging format to regularly create content. Yet the repetition, boring as it might appear to write or read about, also points towards one of the most valued attributes of the pilgrimage to Santiago. It forces the pilgrim into a state of stress-free, uncomplicated, non-hasty surrender.

Tourists, on the other hand, seem much less passive in the shaping of their days, nor do they value repetition or an uncomplicated day spent quietly. Rather, tourist narratives, as one might expect, are filled with plans and reports of all the opportunities that have been taken advantage of:

The day afterwards we walked the park route; in the evening we were in bed around 22:00 ... The next day we walked the skyscraper route and looked at the Chrysler building and the day after we have seen the skyline from the Empire State Building (=highest building of NY). Besides that we have spent 1 day shopping in Jersey Garden, we have visited the zoo, the botanic garden of Brooklyn and have been to the cinema twice (Bewitched and Mr. and Ms. Smith)

Tourists see every day they spend in New York City as precious, representing a set of possibilities that is, sadly, limited. Consequently, every day must be used and appreciated to the fullest. ('Next day we had to get up early, because everything had to be seen in one day of course!', 'In New York there're too few days'.) There are clear expressions of urgency in these vignettes, signified by the enumeration of experiences and the repeated metrified use of time. The excerpt above answers to the stereotypical image of the tourist as a hastily operating creature, but especially if we compare it to the pilgrim narrative, we can recognise an active and pointed disposition with regards to how time, which might be spent in many ways in such a large city, is chosen to be spent.

As we can see, the pilgrim's use of "dag" points towards the way in which a pilgrim looks upon that concept: as a cycle to be repeated after a measured amount of time. Within that time span, certain tasks need to be fulfilled: walk, eat, sleep, repeat, until the pilgrimage is completed. For the tourist, the notion of "day" functions almost as a threat, as the regrettable promise that at one point, the excitement must end. This functional difference of temporality can also be distinguished in other time-related words that appear in both corpora, "tijd" ("time") and "uur" ("hour"). Especially that first term is put to use very differently by our two traveller types. Pilgrims often mention taking

17 We might partly attribute this to structural procedural components on the waarbenjij.nu platform, too: for instance, the website includes a window with "recent travel stories" in the sidebar of all blog entries, including the dates of these stories. The platform thereby emphasises a form of chronology in which regular content creation is visually emphasised.

their time to wander. ('We're taking the time for this Spanish country,' 'When you walk alone (which I usually do), you think a lot--there's plenty of time for self-reflection,' 'Had a lot of time to think... was walking alone again for the whole day'.) This temporal experience is often cited as an important motivation for undertaking the pilgrimage to Santiago. The Australian cultural analyst Paul Genoni showed that 'it is the desire to live more intensely in the present, the now' (2011, 10) that can constitute one of the main objectives of pilgrims. Yet in their elongated and repetitive experiences of time, what constitutes Genoni's "now" becomes somewhat hard to answer. The series of punctual present moments as tourists explain it surely seems just as "intense". Living intensely in the present surely does not seem a feat of the pilgrim narrative alone. Further, beyond the "now", pilgrims apply the notion of time in a historical sense, thinking of and envisioning earlier times as they pass by certain areas. ('You can imagine how it must have been in those days with carts and people', or 'The villages and cities are often real gems where time has stood still.')

This interest in the past is an effect of the ritual framing of the journey, which places the modern pilgrim into a historical tradition and connects contemporary pilgrims with their predecessors. It has been argued that this nostalgic linking of the past and the contemporary pilgrim constitutes an important difference between the pilgrim and the tourist.¹⁸

Finally, pilgrims talk about time as part of their daily itinerary, having to arrive at a certain gite or albergue. ('We were nicely on time in Bercianos del Real Camino.')

Tourists, in the meantime, seem to be rapidly going about their day, experiencing time primarily as a pressure: they often indicate having little time at the places they visit, and even to write their stories. ('Today we are going to a museum (National History museum) and we also want to walk across Brooklyn Bridge but I don't think we still have time for that because must leave at 4 from the hostel to the airport. Ah well we shall see.' 'Damn, time is going fast.' 'We still have 3 weeks to go, but it seems we don't have enough time.' 'But hey, I'm not going to waste my time behind the internet, pictures and other stories you'll get to hear when I'm back home!')

Tourists have limited time at their disposal and show a highly reflexive attitude towards that notion, which results in a high commitment during the days at their disposal. This awareness of the passing of time (cf. Dann 1999; Van Nuenen 2015) is a recurrent theme in tourist writings. What is important to add in this context is that, due to the limited time to spend in New York City, the journey gains a level of significance that determines the extraordinary nature of it a large degree.

In the discussion on the dichotomy between these two types, we often find that this difference is interpreted as a difference in commitment and therefore depth: the tourist only skims the city,

18 Genoni illustrates this argument with a citation from pilgrim writer Conrad Rudolph: 'It is the deep and sustained integration of this dynamic of past and present along the pilgrimage routes that accounts for why the pilgrimage is not a vacation or tour but a journey, not a succession or postcard-worthy sites but a progression of time and space in which both the implicit denial and the embracing of time and space inherent in the acceptance of history operate' (Conrad Rudolph, cited in Genoni 2011,166).

while the pilgrim takes time and effort to engage deeply with the environment. However, from the analysis above, it becomes clear that tourists are impressed and moved by their experiences. Their intentions, emically speaking, are not so much shallow, but rather *condensed*: they wish to experience as much as possible in a very limited amount of time, and position themselves to be impressed by the multitude of possibilities the city offers. While the Camino offers pilgrims in-depth engagement with the journey through repetitiveness, New York City offers tourists a myriad of different highlights. Rather than understanding this difference between pilgrims and tourists in terms of depth or in religious terminology, we might try to understand the character of the relation to the trip.

6 Conclusion

In the analysis we noted a shared interest with regards to sightseeing opportunities by both pilgrim and tourist. The differences in which these opportunities are approached and integrated in the narrative of the journey indicate differences between the traveller types.

For pilgrims, itinerant encounters are for a large part explicated as spontaneous, like a church that appears on the horizon or a city discerned on the top of a mountain. Pilgrims explain these encounters as part of the overall landscape, appearing within the specific context of their personal journey. Yet, while this element of surprise is key, the experience as it is uttered is also a sustained one: pilgrims might walk an entire afternoon towards a church that they see looming from the top of a nearby hill. Their forms of engagement with their surroundings, in other words, are *embedded* in the larger conceptual scheme that they draw up about their personal story and the goal at hand. Conversely, the places visited by tourists are less embedded and their experience of these places is more discontinuous. A tourist chooses to visit several sites a day and hastens from one to the other. At the same time, these tourist experiences are more actively planned and few things are left to coincidence. When one goes to NYC as a tourist, one knows what to expect – and that is precisely why the trip is valuable.

Interestingly, both pilgrims and tourists adopt a receiving attitude during their journey. Pilgrim narratives can be characterised by a sense of *Gelassenheit*, an existential sensibility to happenstance that has previously been connected to traveling instead of touring.¹⁹ This attitude

19 This sense of freedom from the behest of time has often been connected to the discourse of adventure as opposed to that of tourism (cf. Simmel 1971; Redfoot 1984; Week 2012). Art critic László Földényi has written about the writings of famous Dutch travel author (and pilgrim) Cees Nooteboom: “the man who allows things that happen to him without wanting to intervene prematurely, is truly set free ... becoming aware of the deeper cohesion that binds people.” (1997, 113).

should not be confused for passivity: the significant places pilgrims happen upon are seen as opportunities for action and engagement. Pilgrims do not only look upon churches or cathedrals or walk past them, but often also stress their own personal experiences and ideas related to these places--thereby discursively appropriating the place, claiming it for themselves. For pilgrims, this form of spatial appropriation is often connected to the historical tradition of the places they encounter, the realisation that many predecessors have stood there, and now becoming part of that tradition. This should not be seen as (only) a humble or lowly attitude, though: pilgrims are continually connecting places to their personal worlds.

In tourist narratives, the notion of surrender is much less peaceful; it stems from the realisation that with a limited amount of time to spend in New York City, not every opportunity of the city can be seized. Therefore, the tourist typically gratifies her/himself by visiting only the most important or iconic places. Unlike pilgrims, tourists do not seek for a personal appropriation of the places they visit; they do not claim their own space within the walls of the MoMa, or between the lights of Time Square. Rather, they seek to inscribe themselves in the semiotic field of New York City, to trace and consume the images they already know – but not to make them their own.²⁰

A focus on both time and space is reminiscent of what Jerome Bruner (1986) has called the narrative understanding of thoughts and experiences, which concerns itself with storied wants, needs, and intentions, and seeks to locate these stories in time and space. Pilgrims share a focus on prolonged, continuous movement, which entails daily repetition while *exploring* both the environment and its sacred dimensions. This is related to the other dominant feat of the pilgrim: a position of *engagement* as an active, creative disposition, involving personal self-deployment and the appropriation of visited places and histories. By contrast, tourists show a high awareness of temporariness; their movement through time is one of immediacy and *instancy*. Their sightseeing can be characterized as a highly organized, fragmented, disconnected series of highlights. Meanwhile, they are *inscribing* themselves in culturally framed, iconic places.

As the idea of a strict dichotomy between tourists and pilgrims has not proven very useful over the years, the debate on the tourist and the pilgrim seems to have specialised itself in creating continuums in order to understand the relation between the two types of travellers (cf. Mulder 1995; Münsters & Niesten 2013; Collins-Kreiner 2010; MacCannel 1973; Morinis 1992; Cohen 1979; LeSueur 2015). While such essentialist frameworks cannot fully accommodate the breadth of both the discursive outings of pilgrims and tourists (especially in an age of superdiversity in which

20 “Capturing” a sight with a photograph, in that sense, is not the sense of appropriation we are referring to; taking a photo may result in owning the commoditized sight, but it lacks the connection to the personal narrative that the pilgrim tends to make. A good example might be the photo taken by pilgrims when they reach the cathedral in Santiago, which seems to fulfil the same role as a typical tourist picture but has significantly more personal baggage connected to it (it is not just proof of having been there, but of the entire challenging journey towards it).

translocal flows of people have resulted in unprecedentedly complex and ‘unscriptable’ social formations; see e.g. Vertovec 2007; Blommaert 2013), a continuum of characteristics arguably can help in reorienting to the pilgrim/tourist distinction, while elucidating the ‘scripts’ of identity²¹ as they function in the procedures and narratives on these blogging platforms. Therefore, we propose the following diagram based on our conclusions – a bottom-up derived heuristic tool that can be put to use for future analysis of pilgrim and tourist travel blogs:

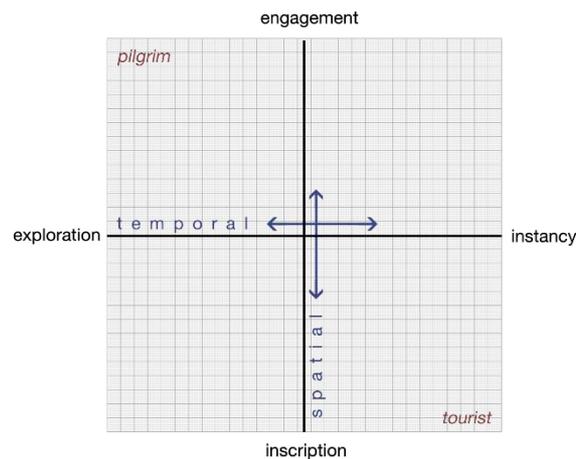


Figure 6. Characteristics of pilgrim and tourist narratives

As the diagram shows, the overarching, resonating components of pilgrim and tourist narratives might be distinguished by two experiential axes. Horizontally, the differentiation is facilitated by a temporal line – in that the distinction between the two types is based on an uttered experience of time. Vertically, the contrast has to do with the kinds of discursive appropriation of travelled space. This is a perspective of difference between tourists and pilgrims not in terms of their emic goals but in terms of their uttered discourse on an online travel writing platform, and it shows that the vectors of engagement that appear within those ecologies do not necessarily answer to the understanding of these traveller types within more conventional forms of travel writing. Further, both types of narratives need to be contextualised as responses to a computational ecology within which they are written and read.

By going beyond the recognition of detailed, superficial manifestations of both types of travellers, we have attempted to explore the distinction on the basis of two fundamental experiential categories: those of space and time. These two categories are not new to the debate, and have been

21 With ‘scripts’ we mean to imply both the human-computational assembly of procedures and discourses as they come to rise online (waarbenjij.nu has a specific layout, for instance) that co-produce social patterns, as well as a histrionic, Goffmanian dimension: the internet allows people to ‘play’ as tourists and pilgrims as much as fully relating to or internalising these roles.

applied to both the pilgrim and the tourist experience before (cf. Dann 1999, Rickly-Boyd 2009). What this diagram contributes to the debate is a suggested relation between them and an opportunity for applying them in the recognition of the pilgrim and tourist identity.

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Morality and Religion as factors in Age Rating Computer and Video Games: ESRA, the Iranian Games Age Rating System

Stefan Piasecki, Setareh Malekpour

Abstract

ESRA, the Entertainment Software Rating Association, is the name of Iran's computer games age rating system introduced in 2008 by its video game association IRCG. This new rating system is based on what this country deems as social, psychological and religious norms and values and is the only games age rating system in the Middle East. It is now by far the most developed age rating system in the Muslim world that is based on the Islamic laws.

But based on what criteria is this system working – compared with other systems like USK or IARC? What procedure games go through before being classified and labeled? What have been the effects of the Islamic rules on the rating of the video games? What are the merits and demerits of this relatively new system?

Keywords

Video Games, Religion, Islam, Age Rating, IARC, ESRA, USK, Youth Protection

1 Introduction

There are ongoing controversies over whether the content of video games can affect or change the behavior of the players or not. Each year attempts are made to clarify and scientifically prove the effect of video games. Scientific researches are carried out and hypotheses are formed and yet there is no uniform opinion regarding this subject (Piasecki 2017, pp. 335), as a random selection of book titles easily shows, not to mention the multitude of studies (for a review of research on computer games see Tobias / Fletcher / Yun Dai / Wind 2011, pp. 183). This could be partly due to the fact that video games haven't been around long enough for researchers to carry long-term studies spanning years or even decades observing individuals who played games in different stages of their

lives (for such an attempt on television, reviewing individual lives over a period of 30 years see Robertson / Mcanally / Hancox 2013) and also due to the fact that the video game industry is rapidly developing and introducing not only advancements in graphics but also in the range of contents the games cover and the complexity of their plots, giving rise to new areas of study for those eager to find a definite answer to end the video game controversies.

Nevertheless appearance of harmful contents in video games nowadays, is inevitable. But what “harmful” means differs nation to nation and varies based on who is playing the game. While the use of alcohol and drugs or the display of offensive sex scenes would be considered harmful in Islamic countries, in Germany the same goes for swastikas and other Nazi symbols, which then again would not pose any problem in most other parts of the world. Harmful content becomes a significant topic when games are played by children, teenagers and young people who are highly susceptible to media and need protection for a proper development of their character into adulthood:

We may be asking the wrong questions and making the wrong assumptions. For example, instead of looking for a simple, direct relationship between video game violence and violent behavior in all children, we should be asking how we might identify those children who are at greatest risk for being influenced by these games. (Kutner / Olson 2008, p. 18)

Media youth protection and age rating systems try to strike a balance between suitable and non-suitable content that might impose damage in juveniles and children. Although some topics are regarded harmful in almost all systems (such as sexual harassment or intense violence) others vary nation to nation based on their unique norms and cultural, religious and social values. This is where youth protection comes into action designing schemes to facilitate youth’s development. This duty falls on different departments and organizations in different countries but its existence in any nation is undeniable and recognized by authorities worldwide, even though large parts of the world like the middle-east and the African countries are still not covered with a proper rating system. One of the duties of any designated organization is youth protection against harmful content of video games which is mainly achieved by age rating them, thus restricting access to certain age groups.

Age rating of video games protects the sensitive age groups against what is deemed ‘harmful’ content. Interestingly enough, in every culture of the world these efforts aim at children and juveniles, never at adults – with the exception of the Iranian system that, in its very first installment (in 2008), also considered up to 25 year olds.

This article will lay out key figures of the Iranian games market and describe the rules and regulations of the rating system of Iran’s Entertainment Software Rating Association (ESRA), founded in 2008. These will be put into perspective with Germany’s USK (“Unterhaltungssoftware Selbstkontrolle”, established in 1994) and the recently established international IARC system

(International Age Rating Coalition, 2013), which is especially suitable for online content. ESRA considered other models such as USK's for the development of theirs (ESRA Booklet, p.1).

Little (international) literature exists so far about ESRA and sparse information is to be found online. Therefore, to conduct a proper research, personal meetings were made with representatives of ESRA itself, the Iranian games association IRCG, and the German system USK. Such meetings took place on July, 26th 2016 in Tehran, alongside Gamescom in Cologne on August, 18th 2016 and in Berlin at USK on August, 31st 2016. ESRA and USK helped by providing documents and giving help and advice. Additional questions were discussed with Reza Ahmadi the General Manager of Esra, Mehrdad Ashtiani the Head of International Affairs at IRCG and Felix Falk the General Manager of USK. Background material was provided by the aforementioned and also Christine Schulz and Marek Brunner at USK as well as Seyyed Mohamed Ali Seyyed Hosseini of DIREC, IRCGs Digital Games Research Center and Maryam Ahmadi of IRCG.

1.1 The Iranian Scope

Iran's ESRA mentions the following as the benefits of designing a national age rating system in their basic rating guidelines that resulted from their initial research in the fields of psychology, religion and sociology. These guidelines come in 9 volumes (see below):

1. Family's concern will be alleviated in finding the suitable game for their children
2. The regulatory and administrative organizations will be able to identify the unlabeled games and carry out the subsequent penalties
3. The publishers and distributors will be aware of the negative effects of harmful games, therefore they will stop to produce and distribute them
4. The national producers will be able to produce and target games for certain age groups, enabling them to make up for the scarcity of games for certain age groups in the market
5. Facilitating and developing the distribution of national games in other countries with similar cultures, norms and values (ESRA Guidelines, Vol 1, p. 99).

In their second volume they also mention that after having studied and compared different existing age rating systems in the world such as ESRB, USK, PEGI and CERO they realized that the biggest problem of using these systems is the cultural difference between Iran and other countries. Even though in comparison with other systems CERO's oriental culture is closer to Iran, still the religious

difference and the different norms make CERO an inappropriate rating system for this country (ESRA Guidelines, Vol 2, p. 104).

This concern of Iran led to the development of a system in line with the social and religious norms of this country while considering what could be psychologically, socially or religiously detrimental to the development of young persons.

In their aforementioned research, condensed in 9 volumes of rules and regulations, ESRA has reviewed the Islamic thoughts and has considered its viewpoint just as equally as it has that of the psychology and sociology. Indeed what makes ESRA unique is its regard for the Islamic viewpoint in rating of the games. Such a system could and can be used by other Islamic countries as well.

This concern about the unique norms and values isn't confined to Iran only. Germany's USK too follows a strict and nationally developed system, stemming from the much older traditions of movie and television age rating. Following the provisions of the law relating to the protection of young persons plus the General Policy Statement of USK (2011), the Guidance Criteria and other additional criteria, USK classifies games based on their specific designed age groups.

2 The Iranian Games Market

Video games are not only a cultural phenomenon; they also form a dominant market that is gaining a rapidly growing share amongst leisure industries. Annual revenue estimates of computer and video games and peripherals have reached a total of 270 million US\$ in 2016 for Iran (Newzoo, April 2016) after it being 185 million US\$ in 2015, letting the country climb up the ladder from ranking position no. 38 to 32 recently in Newzoo's "Top 100 Country by Game Revenue" list.

For comparison, Germany currently ranks no. 5 with total estimated revenue of 4 billion US\$. The uplift of the UN sanctions on Iran in January 2016 cannot explain the solid development of Iran's games market alone. More convincing is the fact that Iran has a rapidly growing population of about 80 million people with 49 million being under 35 years of age (CIA 2015).

Both the Iranian educational system and economic development appear stable compared to many other countries in the region. Despite political conflicts and military activity in certain regions, Iran has not had to directly face a war in more than 25 years. Despite the unemployment rates being high (11,7%, World bank Overview on Iran, April 2016), especially those of Iranians under 29 years of age (21.9% men / 40.1% women, according to World bank, Iran Economic Monitor, March 2016, 12), and a social system that according to western standards appears underdeveloped, at first glance these figures do not differ much from youth unemployment rates of

25% and higher in Portugal (32%), Spain (48,3%) or Greece (49,8%) (all figures: Eurostat), not to mention the vast amount of “hidden unemployment” in Germany itself, barely kept under the surface of refined statistical tricks.

Iranians use the internet (IRCG Facts Book 2016, 4), about 91% of them own mobile phones and of these, 38% use smartphones capable of performing modern games (ibid., 5). This renders numbers plausible that 23 million Iranians can be seen as gamers being 21 years old in average. 37% of the Iranian gamers are female (ibid., pp. 7). In fact according to a study conducted in 2015 by Iran’s Digital Games Research Center DIREC (2016), a spin-off company of Iran Computer Games Foundation IRCG, there is an average of 1 gamer in each household (DIREC 2015, 5).

Just as in other countries, gamers are young. 29% count as “young” and 33% as “teen” (ibid., 7). 25% even are marked as “child” (DIREC 2016, 4).

Such numbers, again put into relation with Iran’s relatively young population, demonstrate the significance of games as a means of leisure activity in this country. Iran is the only Islamic country that has established such a system that today also serves as a model for other countries like Malaysia which has not yet introduced such a system but uses ESRA’s rating when needed, according to ESRA president Reza Ahmadi (interview July 26th IRCG HQ).

Unlike for example USK, ESRA was not able to find orientation in other existing national age rating systems. Germany’s USK was able to benefit from experiences of German movie and television age rating boards and decisions (FSK and FSF). There is, however, no such system for motion imagery in Iran.

Cultural and societal issues in Iran are often connected to activities of the Ministry of Culture and Islamic Guidance (وزارت فرهنگ و ارشاد اسلامی). Here new movie scripts for example have to be submitted for verification and acceptance. The Iran Computer & Video Games Foundation created a new system unlike any other age rating tradition in Iran. Of course, also just like in other countries, still game players and parents alike criticize ESRA for the inappropriateness of their decisions: parents find ratings too weak, players too harsh (interview August 18th Gamescom). This makes it plausible that any age rating model be based on concrete guidelines.

Meanwhile, the Iranian government drafted a National Plan for Computer Games in Iran to substantially develop this young industry and to support jobs and innovative products alike giving the medium and the industry itself a meaning of national relevance (IRCG Facts Book 2016, 11).

But based on what criteria is ESRA working? What procedure games go through before finally being authorized and labelled? What have been the effects of the Islamic rules on the rating of the video games? What are the merits and demerits of this relatively new system?

3 Age Rating – Basic Information on established systems

One of the most significant factors affecting the social and psychological development of the 21st century's individual, especially the youth, is the audio-visual media. Each year massive volumes of games and leisure entertainment products enter the market providing an unlimited number of choices for the target audience. The role of age rating systems came to attention when parents realized that through these media their children were exposed to material they had previously so attentively tried to keep their children away from. For more than 20 years games age rating was more or less dominated by national classifications in various countries. Discourses about the ban of single games dominated the 1980s until in the early 1990s national age rating systems such as USK in Germany (1994) and ELSPA in England (1994, later PEGI) were established. A more recent example of such establishments would be IARC (2013), the latest attempt to establish global standards for computer and video games age rating systems that is also suitable for Apps which are sold worldwide and could hardly be rated by local / national standards alone. Nations in the west came up with organizations and systems therefore, to assess the content of each production of this media to classify or rate them based on their suitability for the audience. PEGI, USK and IARC were brainchildren of western cultures, while little development was seen in the Muslim world – or so it seems.

3.1 USK

3.1.1 *Legal background*

Germany consists of 16 federal states. Each of these states bears its own legislative system with a full set of laws. Following a principle of subsidiarity, federal states hold a responsibility for certain tasks. Foreign policy or defense for example, are matters concerning all of the single states and are therefore organized by the federal republic as a whole while education, security (police) and also in this case the Protection of Young Persons as long as any forms of media are concerned, are a matter of each federal state alone (JMStV 2003). This system is able to respect certain regional conventions, tastes, cultural differences and traditions, but to prevent a multitude of parallel legal states when issues are addressed that reach beyond the control of each federal state a common authority is needed to both care for the interests of the single federal states and also to secure a common legislative system.

Art. 5 of the German Constitution guarantees the freedom of speech and the ban of censorship, which in practice means that no content can be controlled or banned before it was published. The German system of self- and co-regulation is legally based on the Jugendschutzgesetz (JuSchG – Protection of Young Persons Act 2016) and applies to movies and games that are sold on

physical media (see also Hilgert / Sümmerrmann 2015, 544). Movies and games distributed online (“Telemedien”) are regulated by the Jugendmedienstaatsvertrag (JMStV – Interstate Treaty on the Protection of Minors in the Media; *ibid.*), a treaty between the single federal states. With this treaty a regulated self-regulation is maintained within a legal framework. A distinction is being made between online and offline media. Cinema, DVDs or videos etc. as well as computer games physically sold in shops are considered to be offline media, while television and online content is understood as online media. While offline media is handled by the “Jugendschutzgesetz”, online media is regulated in accordance with the “Jugendmedienstaatsvertrag”. But, as Hilgert and Sümmerrmann argue, §12 JMStV only applies to content available online that is “comparable” to content available offline – for example downloadable versions of games that can physically be bought in shops (*ibid.*). Nevertheless platforms that offer media content online still have the responsibility to protect their customers of content that may be harmful.

The term “regulated self-regulation” indicates that, although minors are protected by self-regulation organized by an institution that takes fees from games publishers, there still is another level of regulation implied, in the case of offline games the “Vertreter der Obersten Landesjugendschutzbehörden” (Supreme Youth Protection Authorities of the Federal States) and for online content the “Kommission für Jugendmedienschutz” (KJM – Commission for the Protection of Minors in the Media). KJM and Supremes Authorities of the federal state may intervene against decisions if necessary.

Any decision regarding offline content can be either appealed against by members of the rating commission, the submitting companies or each federal state through the Highest Authorities.

3.1.2 USK's organizational structure

The structure of USK is defined and explained best in Art. 1 (1) of USKs General Policy Statement (2011 – USK GPS from now on): German games industry acts in a self-regulatory manner in conducting a voluntary classification of computer and video games, this organization takes place at USK. Age categorization and also the age rating symbols are maintained in the responsibility of the Supreme Youth Protection Authorities of the Federal States. USK itself prepares and organizes the classification process and advises providers of content and also acts as a voice in the opinion forming process in respect of computer games and the German Youth Media Protection (Art. 2 (4) USK GPS). USK as the representative of the German games industry and the Permanent Representatives of the Supreme Youth Protection Authorities of the Federal States act as the regulated self-regulatory system laid out above.

The decision making Classification Committee consists of members with a special knowledge, good judgement and experiences in dealing with children and young people, developmental psychology and media effects research (Art. 2 (2) USK GPS).

3.1.2.1 Hierarchies and structure of USK

German games age rating at USK is maintained by different groups of experts who play and judge games, prepare material for decisions regarding an age rating classification and also pursue the classification itself.

Advisory Council:

USK's advisory council, according to Art. 3 (1) USK GPS, appoints youth protection experts and game testers and also members of Appeals and Appellate Committees. It also is responsible for "specialist advice to the USK in respect of the socio-political acceptance and transparency of its activities" (Art. 3 (1) 7. USK GPS). Seats in the Council are, as of Art. 3 (2) USK GPS, reserved for two representatives of the computer games industry, two representatives of the Supreme Youth Protection Authorities of the Federal States, one Representative of the Supreme Federal Youth Protection Authorities, two representatives of independent providers of children's and young people's social services, a representative of the Department for Media Harmful to Young Persons, two representatives of churches and other religious communities and last but not least, one media education representative, a youth protection expert representative, a legal expert and one representative of the Commission for the Protection of Minors in the Media (KJM).

The members of this Advisory Council are appointed by the Supreme Youth Protection Authorities of the Federal States (Art 3. (3) USK GPS).

Permanent Representatives:

Computer games associations as organized within the USK plus the Supreme Youth Protection Authorities of the Federal States appoint Permanent Representatives of the Supreme Youth Protection Authorities. These are involved "*in all issues relating to youth protection and for the purpose of classification and age rating of image media*" (Art. 4 USK GPS).

Youth protection experts:

Advisory Council appoints Youth Protection Experts for the work in the Classification Committee. The nomination is made by both the members of USK and the Supreme Youth Protection

Authorities of the Federal States. According to Art. 5 (3) USK GPS, experts “*should be experienced in dealing with children and young people and should have comprehensive media competence*”, they must be capable of giving age recommendations “*on the basis of specialist knowledge and good judgement*” (ibid.). They must not be employed by any commercial company within the games industry.

Game testers:

Game testers are being proposed to the Advisory Council by the management of the USK according to Art. 6 (2) USK GPS. Their job is to assess the games and present them to the classification committee and to extract and “*present all contents relevant to youth protection without themselves making an evaluation*” (Art. 6 (1) USK GPS).

The USK teaches its testers the correct way to present a game. This requires special skills, a precise knowledge of the global games culture, of the development of digital technology, of games production and of child protection. For this reason, USK games testers are amongst the best qualified experts within this branch in Germany. They operate in a similar manner to expert witnesses in court and remain available to the Committee until such time as members are able to arrive at a justified decision. Testers are provided with the training they need to fulfil this demanding task during a probationary period at the USK before being appointed by the Advisory Council. (USK Classification Procedure)

What is the exact role of a game tester in Germany’s games age rating procedures?

The game tester is a vital part of the German Age System. We got 3 female and 5 male testers between 19 and 33 years old playing through and presenting over 500 games per year – all the titles from the normal rating procedure and some games for AddOn- procedures. (USK by Email, Sept. 14th 2016)

Classification Committees:

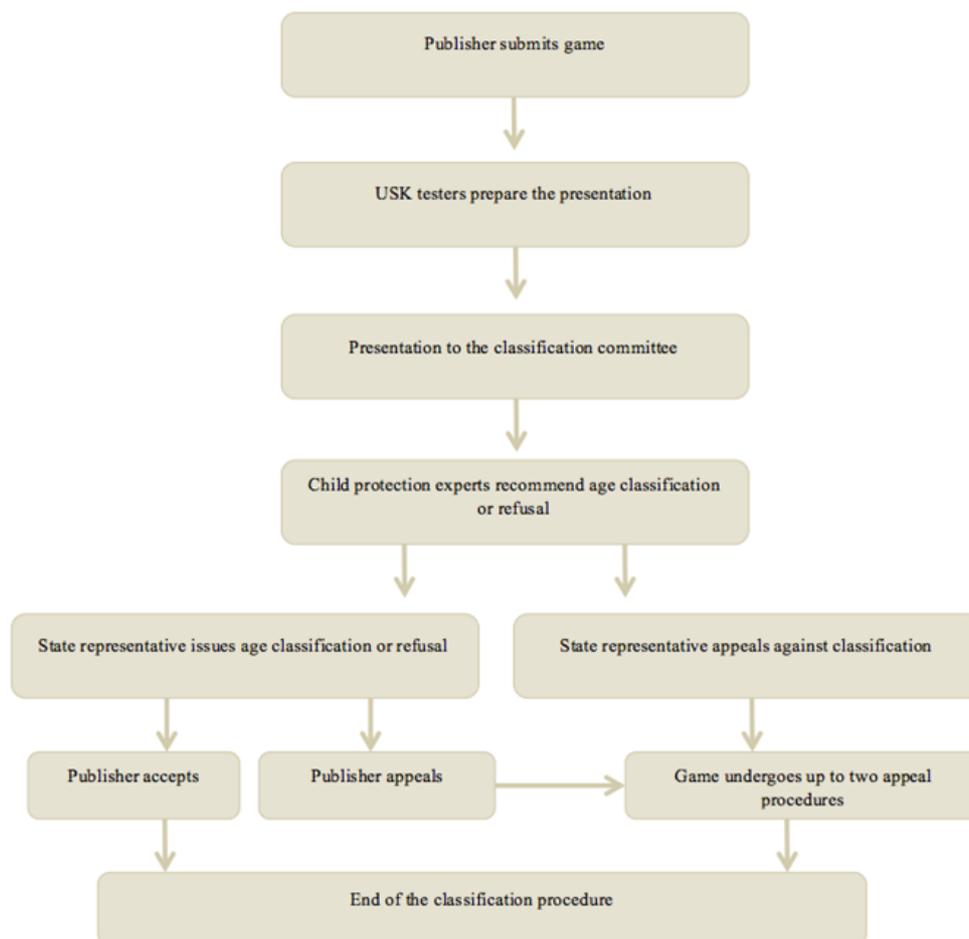
Age rating decisions are made by the Classification Committee at USK which consists of four youth protection experts and the Permanent Representative, chairing the committee. It is using material prepared by the game testers. In case the rating decision is met by an appeal, a new commission with four youth protection experts who did not previously vote in the standard procedure gathers to formulate a new decision. The Permanent Representative has, although being present, no voting rights.

In case of an appeal procedure (as further defined in Art. 14 USK GPS), according to Art. 7 (4) USK GPS, a “second appeal” with an extended Classification Committee is formed to make a decision, consisting of a chairperson of the Appellate Committee, “four members appointed by the Supreme Youth Protection Authorities of the Federal States” (Art. 7 (4) 2. USK GPS) and two youth protection experts formerly not having been involved with the case. The chairperson is appointed by the Advisory Council and “may not have been involved in the examination case thus far” (ibid.).

3.1.3 Games rating at USK: classification procedure

At the root of the rating process stands the idea that impairments of children and young persons must be prevented. According to Art. 19 (2) 1. USK GPS, such impairments are “understood to refer to inhibitions, disturbances or damage”. The overall effect of a game is to be considered here. It must not overexcite imagination or inhibit character or moral (and religious) and mental development or cause disorientation in social ethical terms (Art. 19 (2) 3. USK GPS).

Figure 1:



Classification procedure at USK

Rating a game starts with submission of the game with the proper documentation to USK. The process is subject to charges (Art. 10 USK GPS). The non-public (and confidential (Art. 12 USK GPS) examination procedure “comprises presentation, consultation and adoption of a resolution (Art. 10 (3)). A representative of USK announces all data and information and circumstances necessary for the classification, a game tester shows the game or content of the game.

They play through the game, try to grab as many side missions as they can and then write an excerpt about the game (with points like Storyline, characters, gameplay, Audio, Video, Atmosphere, Youth protection). They then choose which parts of the game they are going to present live, so while preparing the presentation they have to think about a nutshell-level – the perfect chapter(level/episode where every gaming aspect is seen and can be noticed by the experts.

The game presentation will start with the experts reading the tester paper, then the tester will start with the tutorial, intro, first level; they insist on the testers that they play lows and searching, pretending not to know the ways to go, pretending seeing it for the first time. When a gamer has to come back to the tutorial after 30 hours of The Witcher, Batman or Final Fantasy they would just flyby, but since they present the game to a crowd not knowing this game it is necessary to reduce the pace. “Play bad, stumble, die, like a first timer would” they tell them.

After the start of the presentation where the HUD, Story and some core gameplay elements are shown and explained we are off to the core of the presentation – the nutshell level. Now they play for real.

This is where the experts get most of the information since they watched the start of the game and are now ready to get the full package.

The presentation often end with the last boss, a sudden twist or some surprising gameplay elements found in just one special level. This is to show off more of the scope of the game. After that the discussion about the game starts. The tester is always present to correct minor details if the experts got them wrong – when you compress a 30hrs game into a 3hrs presentation there are always losses. (USK by Email, Sept. 14th 2016)

Subject of rating are materials that “*are intended for publication in the Federal Republic of Germany*” (Art. 11 USK GPS). The object of classification must beyond any doubt be a game version that is intended for publication. After publishing the object of classification, a copy of the sales version is to be sent to USK (Art. 11 (4) USK GPS).

Members of the classification committee and the Permanent Representative may decide about the following classification decisions and appropriate symbols (USK Alterskennzeichen):

- Approved without age restriction
- Approved for children aged 6 and above
- Approved for children aged 12 and above
- Approved for children aged 16 and above
- Not approved for young persons aged under 18



Figure 2: Age rating symbols of USK

If a nuisance of young people is to be feared, the committee can choose to

- Not issue an age rating symbol

In case of doubt an “official expert opinion from the Department for Media Harmful to Young Persons (BPjM) for the purpose of excluding any possible damage effect for young people” (Art. 10 (7) USK GPS), can be requested.

Certain types of games or categories of content cannot be classified at all, such as games having contents inflicting with German Criminal Code, which glorify war, feature humans being exposed to serious physical or mental suffering or injure human dignity (Art. 19 (3) 3. USK GPS). Also games that feature realistic, cruel or horrific portrayals of violence in a way that the game is in overall being dominated by it (Art. 19 (3) 4. USK GPS), or those that present children in unnatural, sexually emphasized postures (Art. 19 (3) 5. USK GPS) and games that in general must be feared as they may cause serious endangerment to the “development of children and young people or their progress to becoming an autonomous and integrated member of society” (Art 19. (3) 6. USK GPS).

USK guarantees to conduct a classification within 15 working days at a max (Art. 10 (9) USK GPS) and to notify applicants immediately after the conclusion was made.

Transparency and documentation is deemed as of high importance and so are decisions that are based on a wide spectrum of opinions and experiences of the members of the rating committees.

The criteria for the classification decisions and the decisions themselves need to be transparent and well documented. The game as a whole will be rated and classification “*may not take place on the basis of personal taste or opinion*” (Art. 2 (4) USK GPS).

The criteria are in constant change, at least every two years they get supervised by the Advisory Council.

According to Art. 21 (2) USK GPS, the classification decisions reached by the committees are adopted by the Permanent Representatives as decisions made by the Supreme Youth Protection Authorities of the Federal States and therefore become applicable for Germany as a whole.

3.1.4 Outlook: USK in the online age

In early 2015 USK joined the new IARC system, a rating system to provide guidance for apps and online games which otherwise would become available without any further observation and thus bypass national rating systems (see below). IARC is meant to more and more replace traditional national / regional rating systems.

3.2 ESRA

3.2.1 Legal background

ESRA, the Entertainment Software Rating Association, was established by Iran’s National Foundation of Computer Games (IRCG) and launched its rating system in 2009 (IRCG Facts Book 2016, 145, but according to ESRA Booklet rating started in 2008 (ESRA Booklet, 7) – other sources state it was 2007¹) under Iran’s Ministry of Culture and Islamic Guidance’s supervision as a self-regulatory organization run by Reza Ahmadi as the current president.

IRCG is one of Iran’s Ministry of Culture and Islamic Guidance affiliated organizations. The Ministry of Culture and Islamic Guidance is responsible for observing and regulating art and culture activities to make sure they are based on the Islamic rules and within the confines of the country’s norms. IRCG is a non-governmental, non-for-profit art and culture organization with an independent legal personality located in Tehran.

The organizational structure is as follows:

- a) Board of trustees (9 members)
- b) Board of directors (5 members)

1 https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Entertainment_Software_Rating_Association, 7.10.2016

- c) Chief executive officer
- d) Inspector

The minister of the Ministry of Culture and Islamic Guidance is a member and chairman of the board of trustees. The chief executive officer is chosen by recommendation of the members of the board of directors and from among its members followed by the approval of the board of trustees for 3 years.

Funds and the assets of the foundation are provided by:

- Financial help from government and organizations
- Movable and immovable properties, cash finances and gifts
- Income provided by investments and services and the contracts made with natural or legal persons.²

There are 12 employees in ESRA: three gamers, four analysts, one narrator, one senior analyst, two people for mobile games ratings, and one manager.

Nine experts are present for the final session of ratings (games classification council) who are cultural managers, psychologists, sociologists, and religion (Islam) experts.

The following figure illustrates ESRA's organizational structure:

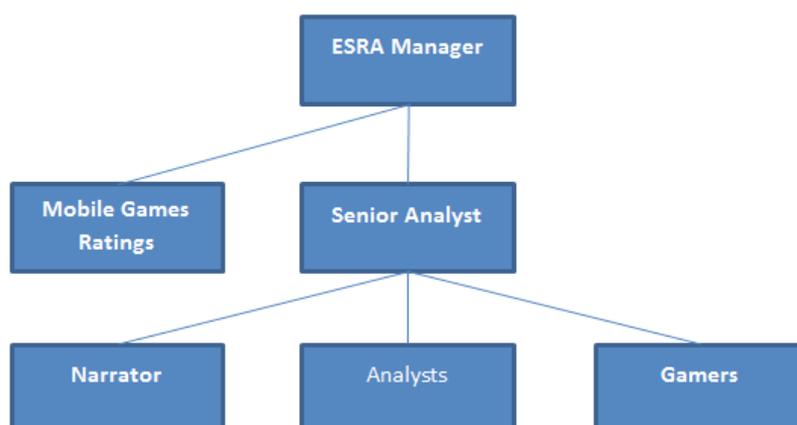


Figure 3: ESRA's Organizational Structure

2 Original information available in Persian: <http://www.ircg.ir/fa/page/1>, 25.9.2016

3.2.2 Changes and phases: The evolution of ESRA

ESRA as an organization to rate game content according to the age of game players, was planted into an environment without any such experiences. Just like other age rating systems in various parts of the world, ESRA had to find its way and gain respect and acknowledgments from gamers, society and authorities alike.

The different kinds of rating and changes in its structure can be divided into three phases:

3.2.2.1 Working out the basic guidelines: Vol. 1-9

The First Phase of ESRA was what can be called the “Research phase”. In summary the following steps were taken:

1. Studying and analyzing computer game rating organizations in other countries
2. Considering the contents in those organizations and their usages
3. Extracting the game contents
4. Planning and defining the contents in 8 main branches
5. Determining the age groups and presenting the distinguishing points of each
6. Considering the level and kind of relation between each content and the age groups
7. Designing and defining the computer game age rating (ESRA Booklet, p. 6)

In the research phase, the contents of video games were analyzed and 187 harmful types of contents under 8 main categories were extracted.

- Violence
- Fear
- Discrimination
- Vulgar language
- Gambling
- Alcoholic drinks and drugs and tobacco
- Sexual themes
- Violation of values

The results of this phase were recorded in 9 volumes which serve as the guidelines for any ESRA rating procedure and provide a solid foundation for designing the rating system based on Iran's social and religious norms and values. In these volumes ESRA has reviewed the identified types of content from three different points of views: psychological, Islamic and sociological – whose findings and studies directly affect the design of a proper age rating system. These are the brief overviews of these 9 volumes (ESRA Guidelines) including the headlines of the main chapters (there are hundreds of sub-chapters which go into incredible detail):

Volume 1

The first volume is dedicated to leisure time and the related theories and then games and the related theories. The function of games is reviewed and video games and their classification into different genres are defined in detail.

This volume is divided into 6 chapters:

- Introduction
- Leisure time
- Games
- Recreation and games in Islam
- Computer games
- Computer games and age rating.

It is in this volume that the importance of a national age rating system is demonstrated.

Volume 2

This volume first examines the researches done on computer games and their effects, then reviews other age rating systems in the world and concludes in emphasizing the importance of conducting a national rating system.

The chapters in this volume are:

1. Introduction
2. Researches regarding computer games

3. ESRB
4. PEGI
5. CERO
6. OFLC Australia
7. OFLC New Zealand
8. USK
9. DJCTQ
10. GRB
11. Outdated systems
12. Banned games in different countries
13. Problems of using the existing age rating systems

One important thing that is mentioned in this volume is that the most important reason why none of these systems can be used for age rating the games in Iran is the cultural difference between Iran and the other countries and the fact that what one country does not see as a harmful content is reviewed based on Iran's norms and values as harmful. Therefore designing a system based on Iran's values carried out by those fully familiar with these values, is considered to be of an utmost importance.

Volume 3

This volume reviews the important age groups and their characteristics and common traits based on 3 different perspectives: psychological, religious and sociological.

The chapters are:

1. Introduction
2. Age from the viewpoint of Islam
3. Age from the viewpoint of sociology
4. Age from the viewpoint of psychology
5. Conclusion

In the concluding chapter, six different age groups, 3-7, 7-12, 12-15, 15-18, 18-25, 25 and above, are reviewed based on the mentioned fields.

Note: back in 2008 the average age of marriage in Iran was 25+. ESRA trying to authenticate some games and avoid banning, because some of the games had sexual clothing contents or extreme violence in them, offered 25+ in order to make those games publishable. Back then, games could not be edited in clothing using the edition technology but since this tool is now used extensively to fix the sexual clothing in games ESRA omitted the 25+ rating.

All 25+ games were banned after the omission of the 25+ group but based on publisher requests for re-rating, some of them were re-rated. (some of 25+ games could be rated even 3+ or even 7+ after the editions were applied). In summary, some of those games are still banned while others were re-rated.

Volume 4

This volume reviews the harmful contents in video games in detail.

The harmful criteria is extracted and divided under 8 main categories as shown above.

The chapters are:

1. Introduction
2. Form (how natural or cartoonish content looks) and content (real, fictional etc.)
3. Key words
4. Rating criteria (the 8 categories)

Among notable factors considered are whether the scenes are natural looking or cartoonish and whether they are related to the protagonist or not.

Volumes 5 and 6

These two volumes are dedicated to Islamic viewpoint on the harmful criteria.

Volume 5 is divided to 2 sections. Section one is covered in volume 5 and section two in volume 6.

The chapters in volume 5 are:

1. Introduction
2. Violence
3. Fear
4. Discrimination
5. Vulgar language
6. Gambling and betting
7. Sexual theme
8. The chapters in volume 6 are:
9. Alcoholic drinks, drugs and tobacco
10. Violation of values
11. The final table of age classification

In chapter 3 of the volume 6 each harmful content is given a rating based on the Islamic law, for instance in the category of fear, “display of killing wild animals” has received 7+.

Note: these individual ratings were done as initial studies and are now used only as guidelines; they do not independently determine the rating of a game.

Volume 7

This volume is dedicated to a sociological viewpoint on the harmful content.

The chapters are:

1. Introduction
2. Research theory
3. Research model
4. Content factors
5. Contents in age groups
6. Conclusion

In this volume, the harmful contents are rated based on only sociological viewpoint so for instance in the category of fear, “display of killing wild animals” has received 12+. A detailed explanation for each rating is also provided afterward.

Volume 8

This volume is dedicated to psychological viewpoint on the harmful content.

The chapters are:

1. Introduction
2. Research method
3. Findings of the first stage
4. Findings of the second stage
5. Conclusion

In this volume we see the harmful contents being rated based on only psychological viewpoints (see Shariat et al. 2009) so for instance in the category of fear, “display of killing wild animals” has received 7+.

Note: as it is explained in this volume Delphi method is used to determine the ratings of the contents based on the psychological perspective. Delphi method is a “collaborative estimating or forecasting technique that combines independent analysis with maximum use of feedback, for building consensus among experts who interact anonymously. The topic under discussion is circulated (in a series of rounds) among participating experts who comment on it and modify the opinion(s) reached up to that point ... and so on until some degree of mutual agreement is reached. Also called delphi forecasting.”³

Findings of the first stage and Findings of the second stage in this volume illustrate the results of the two rounds of the Delphi method.

3 <http://www.businessdictionary.com/definition/delphi-method.html>, 1.10.2016

Volume 9

The last volume explains the rating process and also the content descriptors and the final rating of harmful contents which were rated in the previous volumes based on different viewpoints.

The chapters are:

1. Introduction
2. Methodology
3. Final age group
4. Classification of the criteria
5. Rating process

In this volume a table such as the following is provided for the extracted harmful contents and the final age group is assigned:

Content :	Display of killing wild animals	
Viewpoint	Age group	Final age group
Islamic	7+	12+
Sociological	12+	
Psychological	7+	

Table 1: Views on harmful content (ESRA Guidelines, Volume 9, 21)

3.2.2.2 Start of the rating process: age classifications

After the research phase, the Second Phase of ESRA was Implementation. When they started rating games based on the age groups they had settled on:



Figure 4: Age rating symbols of ESRA (intl. version)

- +3: 3 years old and above
- +7: 7 years old and above
- +12: 12 years old and above
- +15: 15 years old and above
- +18: 18 years old and above (IRCG Facts Book, 145)

Note: 25+ was another group that was used for rating the games but it was removed in 2009.

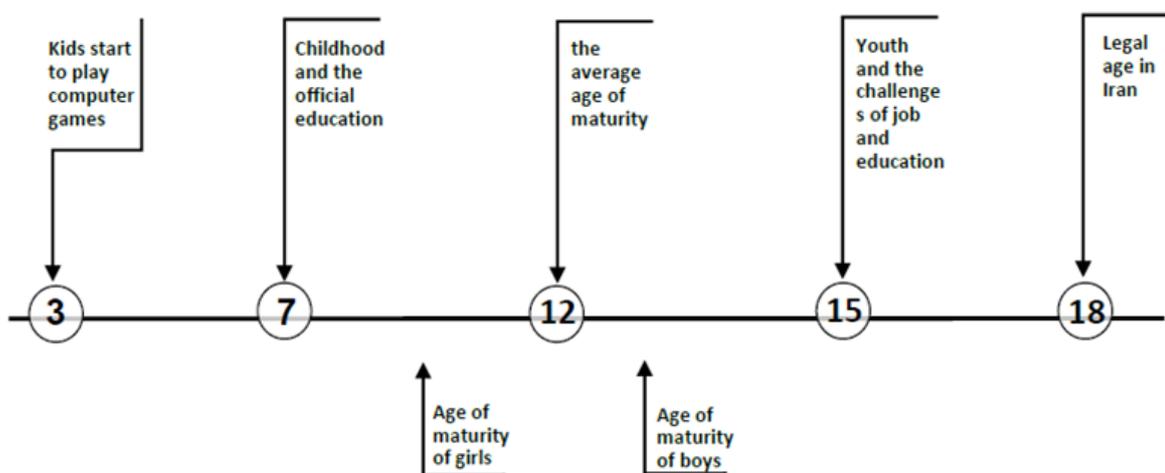


Figure 5: This diagram of individual development is based on physical anatomy and movement ability, mental development, emotions, and social development (ESRA Booklet, 7)

3.2.2.3 Experiences, results and evolution

ESRA having used this system for three years faced problems like deficiencies in definitions, overlaps and inflexibilities (ESRA Booklet, 8) in their rating and went through the Third Phase (the second phase of research). After carrying out more research including holding discussions with various experts and specialists they provided a new proposal which along with other changes to make the system more flexible also reduced the number of main contents to just 7:

- Violence
- Tobacco and drugs
- Sexual stimuli
- Fear
- Religious values violation

- Violation of social norms
- Hopelessness

In this phase 400 videos with harmful contents which were extracted from video games, along with a questionnaire were sent to psychologists, sociologists and educational scientists. After having watched the videos and filling the forms they were sent to ESRA and then to Parand Specialized Center for Human Enhancement to be analyzed in two ways of descriptive and inferential statistics.

ESRA has been working with the new system up until today going through minor changes and updating the staff members and experts whenever necessary.

3.2.3 Dealing with harmful content

In its first years of establishment, ESRA carried out substantial researches to provide a solid foundation for the rating of the games, the result of which is recorded in 9 volumes each dedicated to a specific topic. By using sociological, psychological and Islamic approaches during the research phase ESRA studied and analyzed different aspects of games and game rating. 3 of the 9 volumes are dedicated to the viewpoint of these distinct fields of knowledge about the harmful content extracted by the analysts and each extracted content (187 entries under 8 main categories – see 3.2.2.1 – ESRA Booklet, 6) being rated individually by these fields.

Volume 5 and 6 reviews the Islamic point of view regarding the harmful contents. In these volumes however no direct connection is made between these rulings and the rating of the contents.

۴-۱۲. استفاده مواد مخدر غیرمرتبط با قهرمان داستان
منظور از این مورد، نمایش دادن استعمال هرگونه مواد مخدرو یا آموزش چگونگی
استعمال آن می‌باشد. در این مورد استعمال توسط قهرمان داستان انجام نمی‌گیرد.



Figure 6: Use of drugs unrelated to the protagonist (ESRA Guidelines, Volume 4, 80)

Volume 7 covers the sociology point of view on the harmful content and rates them accordingly. This volume studies AGIL paradigm, a social scheme developed by Talcott Parsons (1902-1979) which is briefly explained amongst other things in this volume. Special attention is given to the four minimum conditions necessary for survival of any society: adaptation, goal attainment, integration, latency. 65 pages of this volume therefore, explain the scientific background for the rating of the sociology department. Then, tables containing the harmful contents are provided where contents are rated individually and some explanation regarding the rating is again provided. For instance:

Fear	
12+	Display of torture tools
With regards to the explanations in the related tables, this content can be put under the 12+ category following this assumption that the childhood is passed and those above 12+ are able (in normal situations) to understand the border between reality and imagination and control their fear.	

Table 2: Torture tools (ESRA Guidelines, Volume 7, 92)

Volume 8 is about the psychological approach and the rating of the contents based on this approach. First the research method is explained thoroughly then ratings are provided although no more explanation is provided in the tables anymore. To carry out the ratings Delphi method is used to be able to benefit from different opinions of people with different specialties. Eight psychologists with different specialties helped to carry out this research (ESRA Guidelines, Volume 8, 4).

Since each harmful content is rated individually by these sociological, psychological and Islamic viewpoints and since despite the existence of similarity in the ratings there are instances where the ratings of these 3 fields differ with one another, a scientific method was required to come to a final rating based on these 3 different approaches. In volume 9 explanations regarding different methods of finalizing a rating such as “*Mode and median*” is explained and their advantages and disadvantages are reviewed (the findings of which is beyond the scope of this article). In the end however despite the fact that the weighted arithmetic mean is suggested to be the best and most reliable method the “*Maximum method*” is chosen since assigning different weights to different contents was a very time consuming process and required expert opinions and experience in age rating and the effects of the harmful content (ESRA Guidelines, Volume 9, 25). Maximum method selects the data with the highest amount. For instance hugging (between opposite sexes and putting ones head on their shoulder or chest) is rated 25+ based on the Islamic view, 18+ based on the sociological view and 15+ based on the psychological view. Now the final age group will be 25+ based on the maximum method. However it is also mentioned (ibid.) that maximum method is a very safe and conservative method that covers all the possible harmful effects and doesn't have the disadvantages of the other systems but using this method results in higher age categories and

reduces the trusts of the people in the ratings, therefore this method cannot fulfill the wishes of ESRA permanently but for the time being since the day ESRA can provide the necessary tools to use the weighted mean method, maximum method is the safest option (ibid.). Again it should be stressed that while the guidelines mention a 25+ rating, the maximum rating at the moment is 18+.

The advantage of the weighted mean method is that it is able to consider the importance of each approach in rating of different harmful content. For instance in matters related to fear the importance of the psychological viewpoint is higher than the other two just as the Islamic view is in sexual matters or sociology in violation of values.

Since each field (sociology, psychology and Islam) have rated the harmful contents individually one can see which have banned what.

a) Sociology has banned nothing. (without considering the 25+ ratings)

b) Psychology point of view has banned the followings (without considering the 25+ ratings):

1. Real Gambling (ESRA Guidelines, Volume 8, 165)
2. Rape (ibid., 169)
3. Child abuse (ibid.)
4. Urophilia (ibid.)
5. Corpophilia (ibid.)
6. Necrophilia (ibid.)
7. Sacrilege of the Prophet (ibid.)

c) Islamic Point of view has banned the followings (without considering the 25+ ratings):

1. Real gambling (ESRA Guidelines, Volume 6, 306)
2. showing tools or devices that are related to sexual relationships (ibid., 312)
3. display of a situation or a space that is related to sexual relationships (ibid.)
4. embracing (ibid.)
5. sexual tone of speech (ibid.)
6. using sexual metaphors (ibid.)
7. touching or caressing non erogenous zones (ibid.)
8. walking provocatively (ibid.)

9. wearing make up on the face or other parts of the body in a way that would arouse sexual attention (ibid.)
10. sexual conversation (ibid.)
11. display of sexual matter using body parts (ibid.) (Such as holding the genitals with hands or using tongue and hands to convey sexual meanings) (ESRA Guidelines, Volume4, 89)
12. male and female dancing together (ibid.)
13. Display of a scene with a character being sexually aroused (ibid., 313)
14. Dancing provocatively (ibid.)
15. Natural display of half-naked women (ibid.)
16. Wearing lace (ibid.)
17. Natural display of wearing just underwear (ibid.)
18. Cartoonish display of wearing just underwear (ibid.)
19. Display of a shadow of a body that is naked (ibid.)
20. Kissing lips (ibid.)
21. Display of the genitals (ibid.)
22. Display of a shadow of a sexual relationship between same and opposite genders (ibid.)
23. Display of a scene related to the character doing masturbation (ibid.)
24. Just hearing the voice of a character reaching orgasm (ibid.)
25. Touching erogenous zones below the clothes from under or above the clothes in a way that the erogenous zones won't be seen (ibid.)
26. Display of a naked body (ibid.)
27. Display of a naked body (in any way) showing genitals (ibid.)
28. Display of genitals (ibid.)
29. Sex (ibid.)
30. Sexual relationship (ibid.)
31. Rape (ibid.)
32. Child abuse (ibid., 314)
33. Urophilia (ibid.)
34. Corpophilia (ibid.)
35. Urinating on each other (ibid.)

36. Necrophilia (ibid.)

37. Zoophilia (ibid.)

38. Homosexuality (ibid.)

Note: in matters with sexual themes the Islamic view has provided two different tables that rate the same contents with two different perspectives. One rating is for when there is no fear of these sexual contents putting the gamers at risk of doing them or provoking them to do sinful activities, and the other perspective is when such fear is imminent. The difference this has made in the rating of the contents is that with the first perspective in mind those contents have been banned (the mentioned banned contents above are taken from the first perspective), but some of these contents have been rated in light of the second perspective (although the ratings are mostly 25+ which is now omitted by ESRA, this means that these contents that received 25+ are banned when considered as independent entities and must be edited in the game or else the game would not be rated by ESRA).

It might seem that the Islamic viewpoint has had the easiest job rating since whatever that has been forbidden to do in Islam one assumes has been banned in games. But it might not be quite the case. – the following observation is regarding the time there was a 25+, these days since ESRA has removed 25+ there are more contents that are banned if no editions are made to them. This means in the past unreal gambling was rated 25+ but now this content cannot be shown in games and needs to be edited out of it.

Under the main category of gambling (prior to the third phase) there are 3 entries: existence of gambling in games, unreal gambling and real gambling.



Figure 7: “Unreal Gambling” (ESRA Guidelines, Volume 4, 74)

In volume 4 definitions of these 3 are provided:

Existence of gambling: is a display of an image or a scene in the game that includes gambling by those other than the player, such as display of gambling done by others or narrating a story about gambling by someone else (ESRA Guidelines, Volume4, 73).

Unreal gambling: it means gambling does happen during the game by the player but not gambling on real money (ibid., 74).

Real gambling: it means the gambling that happens during the game and the player is a part of it for real money. Like games in which credit cards are used (ibid.).

Now, gambling according to Islamic rules is forbidden. The exceptions are: if a game has become a part of the norm and is not known as a gambling game anymore and/or if there is no real money involved (unreal gambling) (ESRA Guidelines, Volume 4, 98).

There is a difference in gambling and betting:

- Gambling is downright forbidden.
- There are lots of hadiths and narrations about gambling or buying and selling its tools or even teaching it being forbidden.
- In order to win in a gamble one must hate the opponent.
- In real gambling money is lost without having gained anything. And this money has been lost for nothing: “And *eat* up not one another’s property unjustly” Quran Sura 2 / Chapter al-Baqarah, verse 188
- Instruments of gambling include what is played with to win or lose in the norm of the society (ESRA Guidelines, Volume 4, 98).

When looking at the rating of these three entries only one is banned and that is the Real Gambling. Existence of gambling has received 12+ and unreal gambling 7+ by the Islamic experts. What might be interesting to mention is that these two last entries of gambling have received a lower age group by the Islamic scholars than the psychologists and the experts:

Content :	Existence of Gambling	
Viewpoint	Age group	Final age group
Islamic	12+	18+
Sociological	15+	
Psychological	18+	

Table 3: Views on the Existence of Gambling (ESRA Guidelines, Volume 9, 53)

Content :	Unreal Gambling	
Viewpoint	Age group	Final age group
Islamic	7+	18+
Sociological	18+	
Psychological	18+	

Table 4: Views on Unreal Gambling (ibid.)

Content :	Real Gambling	
Viewpoint	Age group	Final age group
Islamic	banned	banned
Sociological	25+	
Psychological	banned	

Table 5: Views on Real Gambling (ibid.)

۴-۳. وجود مشروبات الکلی مرتبط با قهرمان داستان

منظور از این مورد، نمایش دادن هر گونه مشروبات الکلی، مراکز فروش یا نوشیدن مشروبات الکلی، حالت مستی و یا هر چیزی که دلالت بر مشروبات الکلی داشته باشد، است. در این مورد این مواد یا حالات مربوط به قهرمان داستان، که شخصیت پیروز و محبوب بازی است، می‌باشد. به عنوان مثال در خانه یا وسایل شخصی قهرمان داستان مشروبات الکلی وجود دارد.



Figure 8: “Existence of alcohol” (ESRA Guidelines, Volume 4, 76)

Among the activities considered forbidden in Islam are drinking and the use of drugs. Drinking is downright forbidden in Islam and there are several qur’anic verses supporting this⁴:

“Say: My Lord forbiddeth only indecencies, such of them as are apparent and such as are within, and sin and wrongful oppression, and that ye associate with Allah that for which no warrant hath been revealed, and that ye tell concerning Allah that which ye know not”

Surah 7, al-A’raf (The Elevated Places) verse no. 33 (ESRA Guidelines, Volume 6, 168)

“O ye who believe! Draw not near unto prayer when ye are drunken, till ye know that which ye utter, ...”

Surah 4, an-Nisa’ (Women) verse no. 43 (ibid.)

“They question thee about strong drink and games of chance. Say: In both is great sin and (some) utility for men; but the sin of them is greater than their usefulness ...”

Surah 2, al-Baqarah (The Cow) verse no. 219 (ibid.)

4 As translated by Mohammed Marmaduke Pickthall (1938): The Meaning of the Glorious Quran. Online: <http://www.sacred-texts.com/isl/pick/index.htm>, 12.10.2016

“O ye who believe! Strong drink and games of chance and idols and divining arrows are only an infamy of Satan’s handiwork. Leave it aside in order that ye may succeed.”

Surah 5, al-Ma’idah (The Food) verse no. 90 (ibid.)

And many hadiths and sayings from Imams and the prophets support this as well (ibid., 169).

Another example is the use of drugs which is again forbidden in Islam based on various sayings (ibid., 175).

However none of the twenty entries under the main category of alcohol, drugs and tobacco has been rated “banned” by the Islamic experts. *The use* of alcohol or drugs by the protagonist or others have received the highest rating 25+ by the Islamic experts and 18+ by the sociologist and 25+ by the psychologists when they were used by the protagonist and 15+ when they were used by others (ibid., 307).

But the question is why isn’t existence or use of alcohol or drugs in games banned since in Islamic teachings it is?

Note: 25+ is now omitted from ESRA rating system, as it was explained earlier (see 3.2.2.1 above – Note to Vol. 3). Meaning all of those contents are now banned unless they are edited to somehow make the banned contents representable.

3.2.4 Cultural modifications of “banned contents”

Since quite a number of contents are banned from Islamic or psychological points of view and since many of these contents are evident in games demanded by the Iranian market or the Iranian youth, it is necessary to make some alterations to make rating (and publication) of such games possible at all. These changes are so subtle and professionally done that most players do not even notice them and in most cases one would have a hard time trying to figure out the changes. In fact it is a necessary requirement by ESRA that alterations, which are made to make games legally publishable in Iran’s market, be in such a way that the gamers do not notice them and unless they are of such high quality ESRA refuses to accept the changes and sends them back for refinement. It is only after these problematic scenes are removed that a game goes under the rating procedure. According to ESRA presence of nudity in a game does not elevate the age group; it leads to the complete ban of the game. Therefore these “cultural modifications” are done as a preliminary step to make games ready to be age rated. In other words, ESRA rate the game on conditions: if the game and those scenes are edited, it will be authorized.

If a game seems not likely to be publishable on the Iranian market a delicate process is about to be initiated.

First of all it must be reminded that Iran has not signed international copyright agreements. Therefore, most of the international games are released with no proper agreements with the original developer or publisher.

Publishers of such (pirated) games have less trouble with developers who are possibly unwilling to do any changes, but also have no access to the games architecture – under normal circumstances. The “Iranian solution” is to basically hack any game that needs to come out but is not yet considered suitable for the players.

Here textures become altered or even complete characters removed and narration changed in order to reflect these changes. The result is of a surprising quality; even the gameplay is not affected.



Figure 9: Covering body parts... (Iran Games Industry Booklet 2016, 19)

As it can be seen, naked / uncovered parts of the hips, shoulders or chests are hidden by altered textures.



Figure 10: ... with new textures (*ibid.*, 20)

Among the changes done are also those that are related to belief systems or norms of the Iranians. For instance a scene with the characters prostrating to idols might be edited by removing those idol entities resp. the character not kneeling down before it (since according to Islamic law it is forbidden to prostrate for anything or anyone other than God).



Figure 11: No prostration to unholy beings

An important scene in the unedited (left) and the edited Persian version (right) of Dark Souls III can be seen above: No prostrating to any unholy beings (ESRA educational video, Dark Souls III 2.mp4). The character remains standing and is not kneeling down.

On the other hand this procedure is not legal outside Iran, and while it shows the technical skills of Iranian developers being able to not only remove something but to add changes and still keep up the game play and a plausible storyline, it's also a disturbing experience to see intellectual property of others being treated this way. These creative changes could be seen as artistic performance or also as a waste of resources, since the combination of the original game developers' abilities with abilities of the creative Iranian hackers could set free a number of positive impulses everybody would benefit from. ESRA points out that despite their interest to work with original developers and publishers, due to political reasons within the last years it was not possible to request modification for Islamic countries (comment by Morteza Bigdeli, ESRA, Oct. 10th, 2016). Next to this however, it is to be assumed that the uncertainty caused by the absence of any intellectual property rights in Iran may play an even greater role. Applying changes for local markets is expensive, and if there is no assurance as to how many companies will finally distribute the game and whether loyalty payments exist or not, the interest to do so remains very low at best.

3.2.5 ESRA's rating process

How are games classified and rated in ESRA?

To age rate games ESRA takes the following 6 steps:

1. Publisher submits the game to ESRA for rating

Publishing companies are supposed to send the games they want to distribute in Iran to ESRA for age rating. These companies send their request for rating plus two copies of the game to ESRA.

2. Registering the request of the publisher and collecting primary information of the game

In this stage the request of the publisher for age rating and the primary information of the game (assigning a unique code to the game, full name of the game, genre, platforms of the game, the international release date, producer and the international publisher of the game, other ratings of the game by other rating systems in the world and the date of the publisher's request) is registered in the data bank of ESRA.

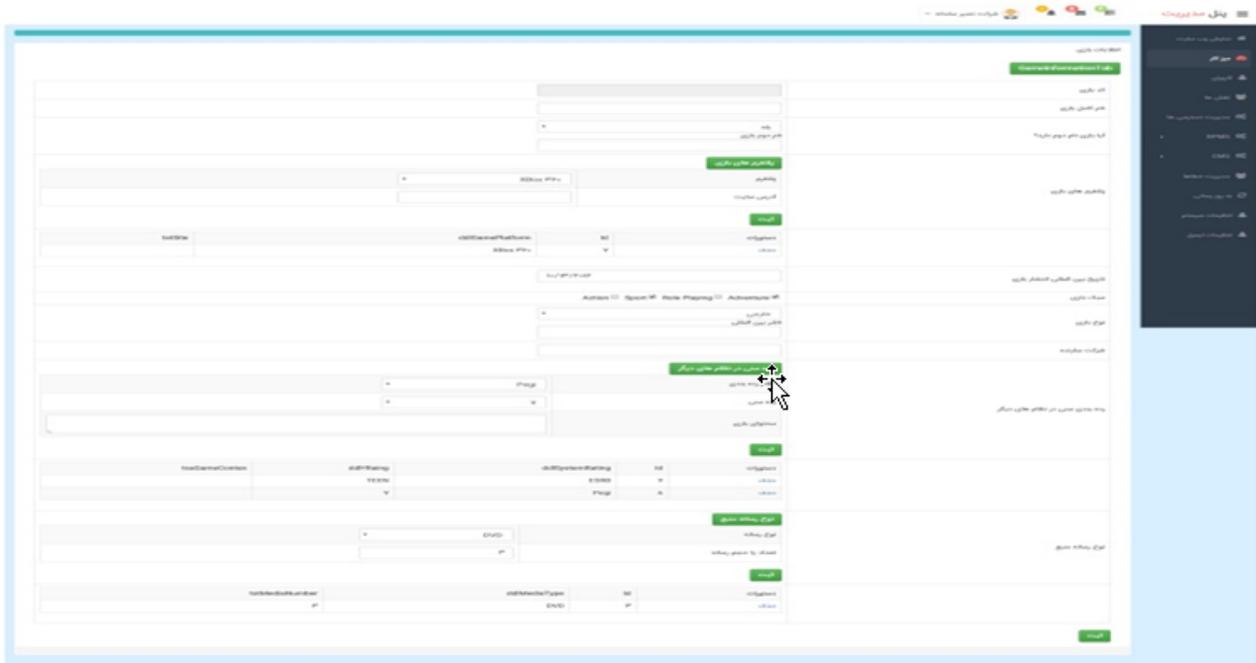


Figure 12: All details and aspects relevant to a game are entered into ESRA's database

3. Sending the game to the video production department and sending the complete specifications of the game to the narrator

In this stage the game sent by the publishers is sent to the video production department where the gamers play the game from the beginning to end recording everything they do. After having done this, gamers answer questions prepared for them in ESRA software (question such as: how long it took to play the game, the overall story of the game, the missions inside the game, the tools and weapons that are used in the game and also recording the harmful criteria that the gamer sees in the game (from the gamer's point of view).)

While the game is being played by the gamers, the narrator extracts the complete story of the game and also uses texts produced by the gamer. The game's story plus all of its details are recorded by the narrator in ESRA's data bank.

4. Sending the provided video of the game plus its story to the content analysts department

Analysts read the information provided by the narrator to get familiar with the story and the atmosphere of the game.

In this stage the analysts who are fully familiar with the harmful contents in games (the content explained by psychologists, sociologists and religious experts in the ESRA research) watch

the game from beginning to end and extract all the harmful content in form of pictures and videos of 2 to 3 minutes and record them all in ESRA's data bank.

The table below is a part of a report by the analysts which is done after watching the video of the game.

Table - Some parts of analyst report for Fallout 4

File No	Type	Time	Main Content	Sub Content 1	Sub Content 2	Other Contents
69	.jpg	5:29:00	Alcoholic Drinks	Existence	Ware	
70	.jpg	5:29:15	Sexual	Explicit	Model, Clothing	
71	.mpg	5:30:30	Fear	Accident	Monster	Horror voice, Killing
72	.jpg	5:44:10	Social Abnormality	Language	weak	
73	.jpg	5:46:07	Social Abnormality	Language	weak	
74	.jpg	5:47:13	Alcohol Drinks	Existence	Ware	
75	.jpg	5:48:00	Fear	Environment	Dead Bodies	
76	.jpg	5:48:05	Sexual	Explicit	Character Clothing, Intense	
77	.mpg	5:49:25	Violence	Killing	Intense, with Blood	
78	.mpg	5:57:00	Violence	Killing	Intense, with Blood	
79	.jpg	6:01:52	Drugs	Existence	Words	
80	.jpg	6:02:32	Fear	Environment	Dead Bodies	
81	.jpg	6:05:30	Alcoholic Drinks	Existence	Ware	
82	.jpg	6:05:35	Smokes	Existence	Ware	
83	.mpg	6:05:30	Violence	Killing	Intense, with Blood	
84	.jpg	6:06:06	Alcoholic Drinks	Existence	Ware	
85	.jpg	6:06:08	Alcoholic Drinks	Existence	Ware	
86	.jpg	6:08:08	Sexual	Explicit	Character Clothing, Weak	
87	.jpg	6:09:30	Fear	Environment	Blood	
88	.mpg	6:12:15	Fear	Accident	Monster	
89	.jpg	6:19:05	Fear	Accident	Monster	
90	.mpg	6:27:10	Fear	Accident	Monster	
91	.mpg	6:29:00	Fear	Accident	Monster	
92	.mpg	6:30:50	Fear	Accident	Monster	
93	.jpg	6:43:50	Violence	Battle	No Blood, Weak	
94	.jpg	6:44:30	Consider	Symbol		
95	.jpg	6:50:10	Fear	Accident	Monster	
96	.jpg	6:52:22	Alcoholic Drinks	Existence	Ware	
97	.jpg	6:55:29	Alcoholic Drinks	Existence	Ware	
98	.jpg	6:55:37	Alcoholic Drinks	Existence	Ware	
99	.jpg	6:57:07	Social Abnormality	Language	Intense	

Figure 13: A part of a very detailed list of all problematic scenes in Fallout 4

The analysts record the time taken to analyze the game and since they have watched the game and are fully aware of the harmful contents of the game, record their suggested age category in ESRA's data bank.

5. Determining the final age category for the requested game

In this stage all the gathered information regarding the game is analyzed and reevaluated in a session with the ESRA manager, the manager of the analyzing department, the expert who analyzed the game and the gamer who played the game. Then after checking all the harmful content of the game, the manager of ESRA based on the content of the game and adjusting them to the comments of the physiological, sociological and Islamic religious experts determines the appropriate age group for the game.

6. Approving ESRA’s assigned age group by members of the games classification council

Members of the classification council, including cultural managers of the country and a representative of the Ministry of Culture and Islamic Guidance, watch parts of the game together and the manager of ESRA provides them with some explanations regarding it after the announcement of the appropriate age group assigned by ESRA. The members of the council then can announce either their approval or in rare cases their disapproval. In the case of disapproval the game is either banned or is sent for further editing

(ESRA Games Rating Process document (Persian), p. 6-7):

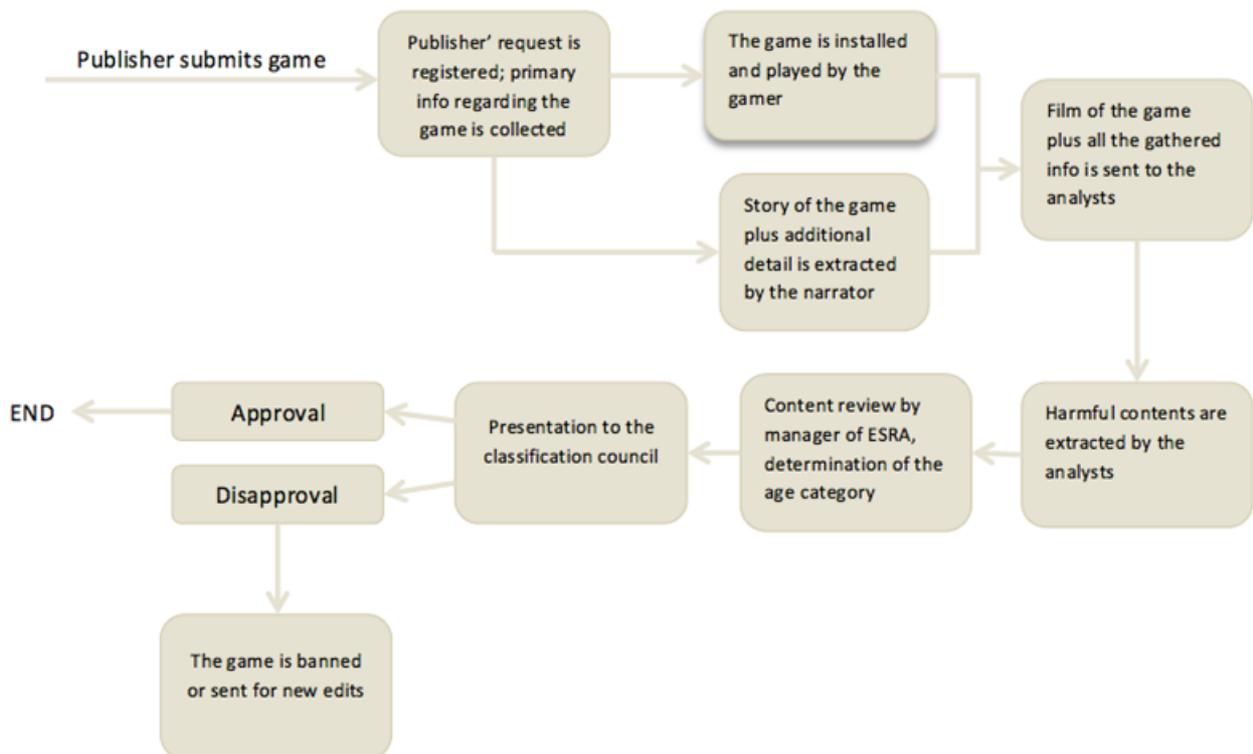


Figure 14: The age rating classification procedure at ESRA

However, it is important to note that these ratings are *post-edit* ratings since international productions will first be reviewed, then edited by cutting out or altering offending texts, artwork or other elements before they finally get rated (see examples below at 5.1).

3.2.5.1 *The analysis perspective*

In order to determine the proper rating, ESRA analyzes the game from 4 perspectives (ESRA Booklet, p. 12):

1. Player-based perspective

One of the most significant factors in rating is considering the emotions and the excitement that the player experiences during a game. This perspective is much related to the genre of the game.

2. Analyzer-based perspective

Extracting and categorizing the most evident harmful contents in games (killing, consuming drugs and alcohol, using vulgar words, displaying the sexual scenes, fearful accidents, etc.) and also the quality and quantity of the contents are the most significant factors in rating games.

3. Narrator-based perspective

Extracting and reviewing story of the games to search for the meaning of symbols and hidden concepts in them and finding the relation between the game story with the previous versions and the basis of the games which could be books and movies, are the things to be done based on the narrator perspective.

4. Observer-based perspective

Observing the incidents and outcomes regarding the game such as the reviews it has received, its cultural and social effects, the legal proceedings against it, sale statistics and the rating of other rating organizations in the world are the complement of the other three perspectives to evaluate the exact and correct rating of the game.

3.2.5.2 Game Reports

In order for the families to be able to make wise choices in selecting the right games for their children, ESRA also provides a report on each game. The most important parts of these reports are the following (ESRA Games Rating Process document (Persian), 10):

- The genre and the plot of the story for families to get familiar with the atmosphere of the game
- The harmful contents in the game for families' awareness
- The required skill for playing the game

The following is a part of the report of fallout 4 (ibid., 11):

 سازمان ESRA در راستای افزایش آگاهی خانوادگی‌های ایرانی در خصوص بازی‌هایی که برای فرزندان خود انتخاب می‌کنند گزارشی از بازی را برای آنها ارائه می‌دهند که مهمترین قسمتهای این گزارش شامل:

- نوع گیم پلی و داستان کلی از بازی جهت آشنایی خانواده‌ها با فضای بازی
- مشخص کردن محتوای آسیب‌رسان بازی جهت آگاهی خانواده‌ها از این محتواها
- مشخص کردن مقدار مهارت مورد نیاز برای انجام بازی

گزارش زیر نمونه از گزارش یک بازی می‌باشد که توسط سازمان ESRA تهیه شده است.

نام بازی: Fallout 4

PC	پلتفرم	اطلاعات بازی
Bethesda Game Studios	شرکت سازنده	
Nov/10/2015	تاریخ انتشار	
درآیندی	نوع سبوس	
84/100	امتیاز منتقدین	
18+	رده سنی اسرا	

مبارزه‌های خشن برای بقا، تلاش برای ادغام زندگی در دنیای بیخبران زده

Figure 15: A part of the final written report of a game...

Different from the internal reports, which are more technical, the final consumer reports will focus on the game itself, the story and the gameplay.

مبارزه‌های خشن برای بقا، تلاش برای ادامه زندگی در دنیای بی‌رحمان زده

در ادامه سری بازی های *Fallout 4*، *Fallout 4* به بازار آمد. *Fallout 4* یک بازی تک نفره (Single Player) و اکشن - نقش آفرینی (Action - RPG) است. داستان این بازی ۲۱۰ سال پس از یک جنگ اتمی در سال ۲۲۸۷ آغاز می‌شود. بازیکن که در شهر نیمه مخروبه بوستون کار خود را آغاز می‌کند باید به دنبال فرزند گم شده خود بگردد. این بازی طایفه‌های فرعی متعدد و جذابی است که حتی داستان اصلی را نیز تحت الشعاع قرار می‌دهند. در طول بازی، بازیکن در سرزمینی با فضای جنگ زده و مخروبه با انسان‌ها و موجودات عجیب الخلقه ای روبرو می‌شود و باید آنها را نلود کند. بازیکن این قابلیت را دارد که تقریباً تمام وسایلی که در محیط می‌یابد را قبضه کند و با استفاده از آنها سلاح‌های خود را ارتقا دهد. همچنین، این توانایی را دارد که با استفاده از وسایل خود سرینه بسازد و با سلفه خود آن را طراحی کند. در طول بازی، بازیکن می‌تواند برای خود هم‌راهی انتخاب کند که در طول بازی و جنگ‌هایی که انجام می‌دهد، او را همراهی کند. در این بازی می‌توان از زلوه دید لول شخص و سوم شخص استفاده کرد. *Fallout 4* تنها به مبارزه و جستجو خلاصه نمی‌شود و بازیکن می‌تواند با کاراکترهای دیگر بازی نیز ارتباط برقرار کند. هیچ داستانی *Fallout 4* صداگذاری و کنترل بازی، بویژه در هنگام مبارزه، بسیار دقیق کار شده اما گرافیک بازی در بسیاری از موارد کمتر از حد انتظار است. هوش مصنوعی استفاده شده در بازی پیوستگی و عملکرد لازم را ندارد و طراحی سرینه نیز به زمان و دقت بالایی دارد که در اکثر موارد بسیار خسته کننده می‌شود. تصمیماتی که بازیکن در طول بازی اتخاذ می‌کند، تأثیر مستقیم بر روند بازی دارند و این آزادی به او داده شده تا مسیر داستان را به دلخواه خود تعیین کند.

لازم است پدر و مادرها بدانند که *Fallout 4* یک بازی بسیار خشن و با تمایز فرولان خون است. در طول بازی، بازیکن هم با موجودات عجیب الخلقه هم با موجوداتی با شمایلی انسان و هم با انسان‌هایی روبرو می‌شود که باید آنها را از بین ببرد. در *Fallout 4* بازیکن می‌تواند از انواع بسیار زیادی از سلاح استفاده کند و آنها را ارتقا دهد. اجساد افرادی که بازیکن نلود می‌کند در محیط باقی می‌ماند و از بین نمی‌روند. البته باید به این نکته اشاره کرد که هدف اصلی کاراکتر در این بازی یافتن فرزندش است اما تصمیم گیری درباره عملکرد و نحوه

Figure 16: ... that will later be put online as a reference for parents, teachers and gamers alike

The reports that are meant to be made publicly accessible will refer to any rated, thus edited version. They will also mention featured instances of violence, fear, social abnormality or disappointment, but not, as USK's reports, focus on problematic content and dangers for users in unrated versions.

Note: these reports aren't yet available. The ESRA website will be online soon for this part, and these reports will be public for the families and other interested parties.

3.2.6 ESRA in the online age

While physical games are rated with a higher rate of attention and require the final rating to be accepted by the game classification council, online games and apps that will be released not in shops but only in online places like cafe bazaar, are dealt with differently in that here these games will not be fully played through and, although a report is being created, no final decision by the council is necessary.

With apps it is only one expert who plays the game, no other gamers need to play it and apps also get rated after they were released – a major difference to the international IARC system (see

below). ESRA is not relying on an online questionnaire developers can use like IARC because developers may not be entirely familiar with contents or could tend to rate a game according to their own attitudes. Such apps still get played by an ESRA expert and subsequently become rated. Repetitive games will be played until the game patterns become visible while more complex games like RPGs and adventures will be played fully (comment by Morteza Bigdeli, Oct. 10th 2016). Still apps receive a lesser degree of attention, also due to the relative shallowness of most game apps. They do provide fun and also show violence, blood / gore and nudity amongst others. But where modern PC games come on Blu-Ray's with up to 50GB of data, blown up to huge screens and monitors, game apps consist of 500MB or much less in most cases. This means that the amount of potentially harming characters, levels, enemies, situations and events could be much lower. This is not rendering game apps to be unproblematic, but makes it understandable why game apps and physical gaming products can be treated differently.

Therefore, unlike USK, ESRA up to now did not join IARC or any other online classification system (reasons see below) but simply altered their rating behavior according to the nature of the type of game.



Figure 17: Display of ESRA's age rating symbol for the app "Arm shooting skill" on Cafe Bazaar (App Store)

3.3 IARC

Existing systems like USK or ESRA rate any game on an individual basis making the efforts portrayed so far. This means that any game needs to be sent to the testers (gamers in ESRA) which then review the game, prepare documents, excerpts from the game, videos and so on and aid the rating commissions. During the past decades this method was worthwhile, forthcoming games were previously announced and advertised, making it possible to actually prepare the public and pave the way for the final launch of a product.

In times of the internet this has become difficult. Hundreds, if not thousands of apps and games and tools, some even with game elements, get released per day on various platforms and

through different channels worldwide. People of all ages can purchase and download almost any content – anywhere and from everywhere.

It seems unlikely that any national age rating system could review and grade every such app – if developers would inform them at all.

These challenges were identified and addressed by several independent rating agencies and in 2013 IARC, the “International Age Rating Coalition” was founded (IARC Webpage). It features a novel approach in that it allows developers to evaluate their games themselves, using an online portal that guides developers through a process to correctly identify problematic content in their games.

IARC is a non-profit organization, registered according to US law. All of its members (currently PEGI, USK, ClassInd, the Australian age rating board, ESRB) have equal rights. At the moment IARC is led by the ESRB with USK as the deputy. IARC is located at ESRB’s facilities in New York. The funding is used to cover central costs or to support testing / rating measures in various countries.

3.3.1 The rating process

Registered developers, who for instance want to upload their content to an online store like Google Play, need to go through a content rating process there. The portal confronts developers with various questions and provides videos and tutorials as helping measures. For example, if a developer is unsure about the level of violence in his game, he can watch videos with violent content and estimate what applies to his or her game most. The questionnaire provided by IARC can only be accessed by registered developers who are about to upload a game.

The process starts with the selection of the category the application would fit in. The categories are:

- Reference, News, or Educational (information and news applications)
- Social Networking Forums and UGC Sharing (helps users to share content)
- Consumer Store or Commercial Streaming Service (selling physical goods)
- Game (game applications)
- Entertainment (apps with an entertainment approach like magazines, sex tips etc.)
- Utility, Productivity, Communication, or other (tools, productivity apps etc.)

Once confirmed that the application is indeed a game the rating process starts by leading the developer through a predefined set of questions assorted in the following categories:

- Violence
- Fear
- Sexuality
- Gambling
- Language
- Controlled Substance
- Crude Humor
- Miscellaneous

First the system asks basic questions as to whether for example any form of violence appears in the game. These can be answered either with “Yes” or “No”. The denial opens no further dialogue, while choosing “Yes” in the Violence section opens a number of sub-questions, again divided into two main categories “Violence against Humans” and “Violence against Non-Humans”. Here the rating system asks for example if the game is set in a childlike, fantastical or realistic setting and whether the developer would describe the portrayal of violence as unrealistic or realistic. Other entries ask for the level of blood / gore that is associated with this violence or if “innocent or defenseless characters can be seriously injured or killed” or if the player may become rewarded or “otherwise stimulated to use the most aggressive, cruel or bloody violent acts available”.

If the developer is unsure about which of the preset answers to choose he can open an informational pop-up window by clicking on “Learn more”, a link placed next to most of the questions. This pop-up window then features additional information sometimes including videos.

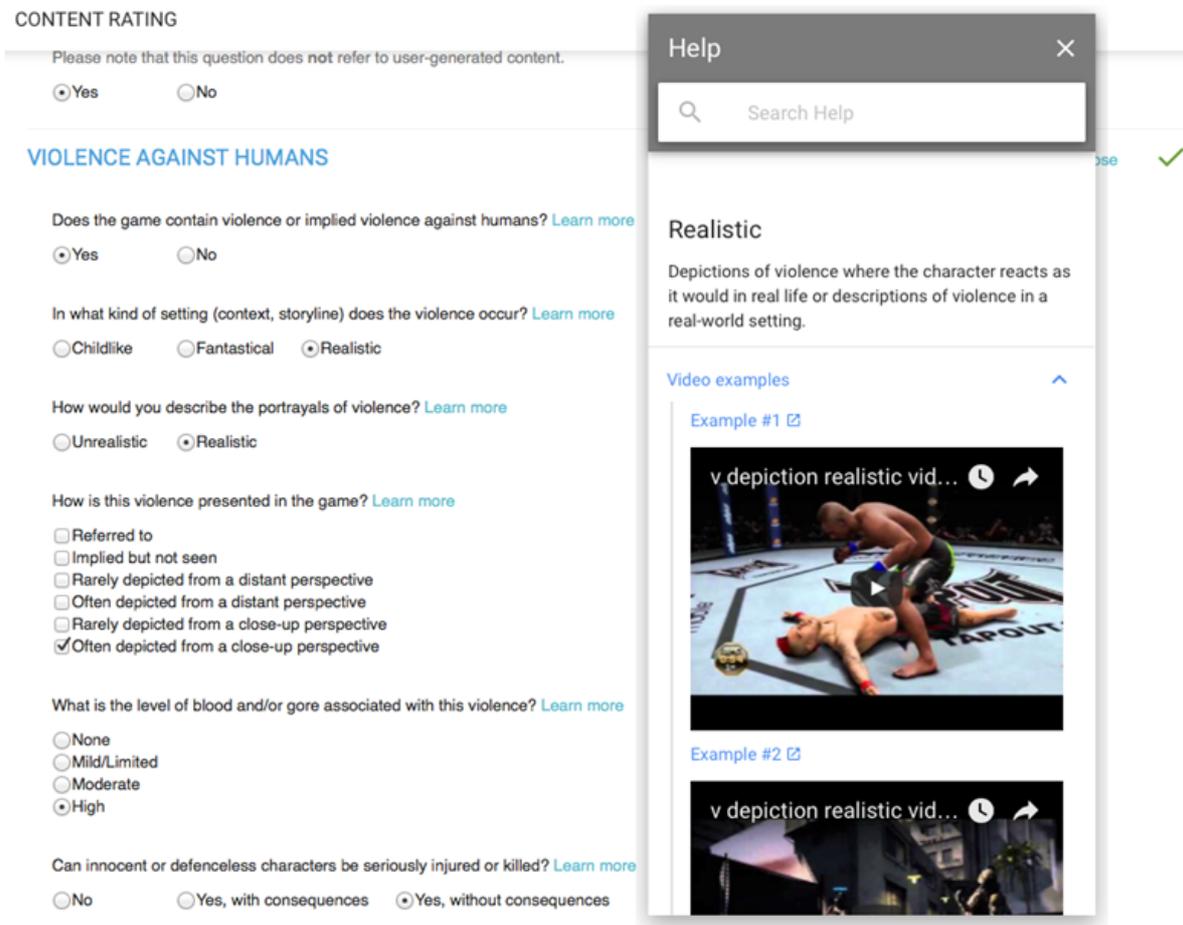


Figure 18: IARC's age rating questionnaire as displayed in Google's Developer Console

Similar questions apply to “Violence against Non-Humans”. Notable changes here are questions regarding real-world-animals or whether these animals behave or respond like humans. Also, there is a question about “innocent characters”. IARC has made sure of providing varieties in videos – they show what each category means and give examples. This shows a good attention to detail.

“Fear” asks about the frequency of the display of scary or horrifying elements and of course whether pictures or sounds could be likely to scare somebody.

“Sexuality” opens a multitude of sub-questions about inferences of or references to sexuality, sexual activities itself and again regarding the frequency of and duration of scenes with visual sexual content. Here the developer is also asked whether he or she would consider the content to be suggestive or if characters younger than 18 are shown, if frontal nudity is being depicted (or certain body parts like breasts) and if any provocative outfits are shown and in which frequency. Again, the setting is deemed to be important, whether it is natural or scientific.

“Gambling” means gambling that is carried out in casinos or may inspire to gamble by teaching how to play cards.

“Language” wants to know if any language used in the game may potentially be received as offensive or if there is any discriminatory language used against races, religions, sexes.

“Controlled Substance” asks about references to the use of drugs, alcohol or tobacco, whether illegal use is shown or propagated or if frequent use is being glorified.

“Crude Humour” requests information regarding the use and audio-visual display of bodily functions such as belching, vomiting and other acts of human defecation.

“Miscellaneous” is more oriented towards user interactivity in that this section wants to know whether any user-provided personal information and / or physical location is being shared with others, if symbols related to racist propaganda get shown, if the game contains any detailed descriptions “of techniques that could be used in criminal offences” and finally whether the game “advocates committing acts of terrorism”.

Finally, developers can save all their entries and then see a new button appearing “Calculate rating”. Then the portal computes the appropriate age rating symbol according to the legal situation in various countries.

A summary of the developer’s entries and finally the results of the calculated rating according to various regions of the world including the appropriate symbol and the descriptors leading to this regional rating is shown.

CALCULATED RATING [Learn more](#)

Rating System	Rating Category	Descriptors
Australian Classification Board (ACB) Australia		Your app has been refused classification by this rating authority. This may impact your ability to distribute your app to some territories.
Classificação Indicativa (ClassInd) Brazil	 Rated 18+	Extreme violence Explicit sex Drugs
Entertainment Software Rating Board (ESRB) North America	 Adults only 18+	Sexual violence Blood and gore Strong sexual content Nudity Use of drugs and alcohol Strong language Crude humour
Pan-European Game Information (PEGI) Europe	 PEGI 18	Extreme violence Sex Sexual violence Drugs Strong language Gambling Criminal technique instructions
Unterhaltungssoftware Selbstkontrolle (USK) Germany	 USK, Ages 18+	Sexual violence Explicit violence Sex/eroticism Drug use Alcohol use Tobacco use Shock and/or horror content Explicit language
IARC Generic Rest of world	 Rated for 18+	Extreme violence Sex Sexual violence Drugs Strong language Gambling Criminal technique instructions
Google Play South Korea A game unsuitable for minors younger than 18 may be removed from Google Play in Korea unless pre-rated by GRAC. Please see here for more detail.	 Rated for 17+	Extreme violence Sex Sexual violence Drugs Strong language Gambling Criminal technique instructions

Interactive elements: Users interact, Shares info, Shares location, Digital purchases

Figure 19: Final result page of IARC's calculation process

Then, the created age rating category will subsequently be added to any game content that is uploaded to app stores like Google Play or Firefox Marketplace, which means that users not only can read the content description and download the game, but can also see the age rating that was given to this game title.

Also, certain regional factors such as games unsuitable for minors younger than 18 in South Korea, get mentioned. Here reference is given for developers to find useful information regarding the pre-rating procedure in Korea regarding the “Game Industry Promotion Act”.

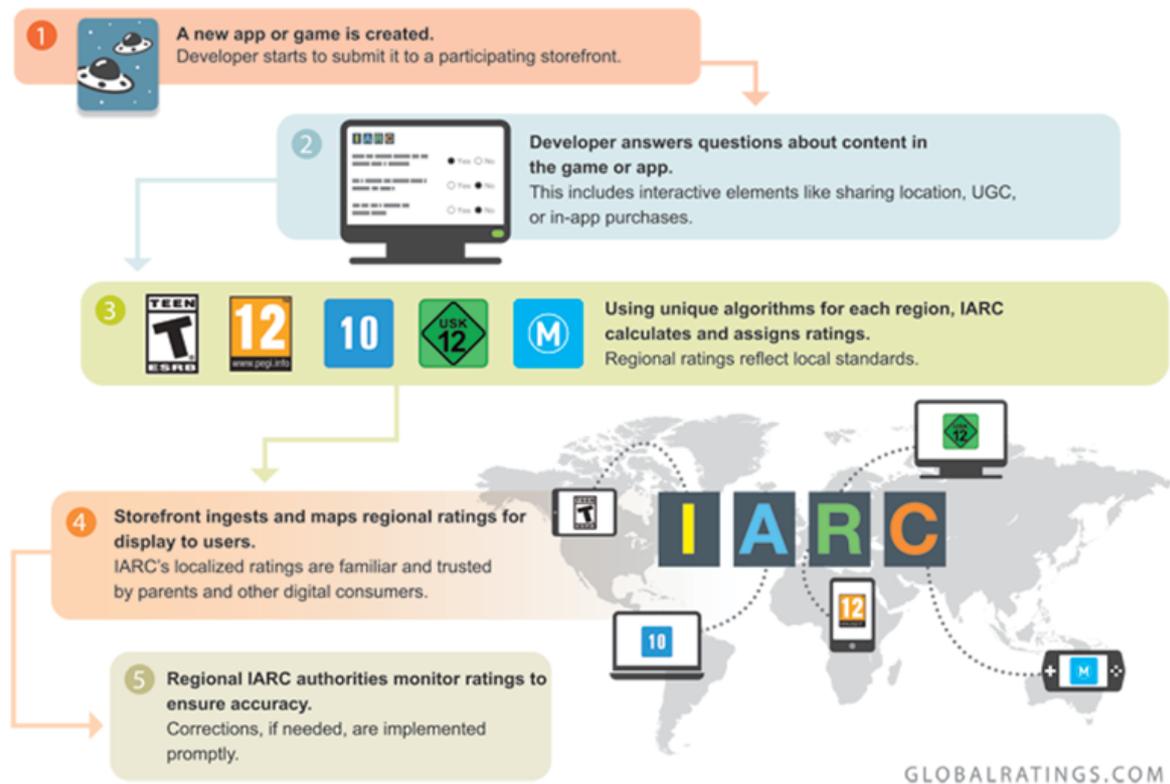


Figure 20: IARC's age rating process⁵

3.3.2 Evaluation of IARC's online rating system

Developers from all over the world, coming from different social, societal and cultural traditions work with one system to rate their games for a launch in many different territories all over the world – how realistic is it that each individual rating complies to the standards that were set for boxed and physical games?

Due to the multitude of questions, the overall rating tends to be realistic and developers take it seriously (Falk 2015, 79), also users can complain against a provided rating symbol and developers have little interest in customers complaining about their content. In rare cases existing rating agencies like USK could change the rating and notify the developer or finally change the rating without any further notification in case a developers refuses to accept the external decision (ibid., 78). According to USK, a 12 month testing period was conducted in 2013 which showed that results from online rating were comparable to offline rating procedures. In Australia and Brasil IARC has reached legal status as a measure usable for youth protection.

⁵ <https://www.globalratings.com/how-iarc-works.aspx>, 18.9.2016

Since for example in Germany the current system is legally grounded and experts from various fields rate individual games, it seems a bit like giving away security letting developers grade their own productions. Distribution channels in Germany have to obey USKs ratings. On the other hand, the sheer massive amount of games constantly released does indeed render a direct control almost impossible. In a legal survey German lawyers have evaluated the legitimacy of the IARC system in relation to German youth protection laws and have come to the conclusion that although the IARC rating is not the result of an age rating process according to §14 JuSchG (Hilgert / Sümmermann 2015, 546), survey of age rating decisions of IARC and USK show that the results of self-classifying questionnaires prepared by developers are indeed comparable with commission based decisions of USK. A “matrix commission” at USK and other national IARC-partners surveys the ongoing classification processes and discusses the impact of decisions leading to certain ratings also for other games and apps (Falk 2015, p. 78).

In addition to first the self-regulatory questionnaire and second the matrix commission the “Rating Authority Working Group” is the final group on an international level that discusses possible developments and necessary changes with a wider international scope and possible impact on national systems. This lets Hilgert and Sümmermann come to the conclusion that in the end, and because the German authorities and youth protection laws are involved with the design and control of the IARC system and can also suggest corrections to the system through USK, content providers can finally trust in the age rating symbols provided by IARC (Hilgert / Sümmermann 2015, 547).

Having all this in mind, IARC’ rating system appears to be swift and easily usable while at the same time being legally grounded although it might seem a bit lightweight at first sight. Furthermore, traditional systems used by ESRA or USK seem not to be able to deal with modern forms of development and distribution of games in the long run – IARC therefore is not meant to replace these, but to evolve the basics of traditional youth protection efforts into the virtual space (Falk 2015, 81).

Several national age rating boards are already cooperating with IARC: the Australian Classification Board of Australia, Classificacao Indicative of Brasil, the Entertainment Software Rating Board of North America, Europe’s Pan European Game Information (PEGI) and Germany’s Unterhaltungssoftware Selbstkontrolle (USK).

Microsoft’s Windows Store, Google Play, Nintendo’s eShop and Firefox Marketplace are cooperating business partners and use IARC in their distribution channels (IARC Webpage). Since they are, from a legal point of view as Hilgert and Sümmermann point out, neither host providers nor content providers, which means they cannot claim distance to the content nor ownership, and yet they have a serious degree of influence on the display of content and appearance of apps (see

also 3.1.1), they can be deemed responsible as publishers of those contents (Hilgert / Sümmermann 2015, 544).

Using filters and childcare settings of operating systems accessing the age-rating classification in online-shops and browsers, parents can restrict access of kids to both contents online in app stores and those on the computer. This can be seen as a major advantage against other and traditional age rating systems that mainly worked during the process of buying a game but lost much of its power after a game left the environment of a shop (ibid., 548).

4 Main differences between “western” and ESRA’s approaches – A Comparison of Selected Game reviews by ESRA and USK

Given the differences of USK’s and ESRA’s rating systems, how would both compete when it comes to comparing an individual game?

For comparison Bethesda Softwork’s “Fallout 4”, Warner Bros. Entertainment’s “Batman: Arkham City” and Koei Tecmo Europe Ltd.’s “Romance of the Three Kingdoms XIII” were chosen. The final rating reports of these games were requested from USK and ESRA and compared based on their legal backgrounds and guidelines.

Note: The screenshots here show only a part of the report’s final results. The reports themselves are longer and more detailed. Also the following titles were authorized to be rated by ESRA in their original form, without any changes or modifications in the content (as claimed by Reza Ahmadi, General Manager of ESRA).

4.1 Fallout 4

Fallout 4 is the latest installment in a series of famous role-playing games that started way back in 1990, originally technically being based on the classic franchise “The Bard’s Tale”, published by Electronic Arts in 1985.

The Fallout series tells the story of mankind after a nuclear catastrophe, clearly a subject of interest for any nation and culture today.

Game ratings and user reviews internationally, were outstanding. Now, how well did such an anticipated title, in a German and Iranian rating process?

Both USK and ESRA rated the game “18” – not suitable for children and juveniles under the age of 18.

USK's rating:

JUGENDENTSCHEID classification ruling	
Name des Titels / name of the product	
Fallout 4	
Altersfreigabe entsprechend Jugendschutzbestimmungen / age rating	
keine Jugendfreigabe gemäß § 14 JuSchG	
Antragsteller / applicant	
ZeniMax Germany GmbH	
Registriernummer / number of registration	40263/15
technisches System / technical platform	PC
Sprache der Software / language of the software	englisch
Prüfdatum / date of examination	26.08.2015
Auflagen, Anmerkungen / conditions, note	

Figure 21: USK report on Fallout 4

The report of the decision USK created to justify its rating spreads over six pages. Page 1 is a summary of the game's specifications and the final rating. It features the game title, the name of the distribution company, a registration no., the platform and system language and the date of examination.

Pages 2-3 describe the game, its content and the tasks the player has to carry out. Also the graphics, sounds and the atmosphere of the game are described here.

Page 4, 5 and the upper quarter of page 6 contain the reasons for the decision. USK explains that although the player is able and entitled to kill, this is always a matter of defending himself against others in order to survive. The game is not glorifying killing – the main aim of the game is to survive and sustain long enough in order to successfully build up a new peaceful society. Violence dominates less than half of the game's playing time which is set into a deserted landscape.

Violence is shown in multiple ways – body parts can be torn apart but USK believes that the visualization is not overly realistic. Killing sequences become repetitive throughout the game. This does not make them attractive enough for players who are looking for such drastic imagery. No

element of the game lets players think that violence is harmless or justified in general. Reflection of violence and killings in dialogues see special mentioning.

The game confronts the player with moral implications about violence, therefore players are able to enter a distant view on what they do and see.

Fallout 4 in the eyes of USK does not justify violence or killing as a proper means of finding justice or raising social status. Since communication, interaction with the game’s population and negotiations are important parts of the gameplay, aggressive play alone won’t help players to succeed – unjust violence even gets penalized by the game.

Game levels and actions have no connection to the real world situations juveniles have to deal with. This too helps to lower the fear that the degree of violence shown may have inviting effects.

In their final conclusion USK states that Fallout 4 is a complex game that offers many other strategies than just violence or fighting. Nevertheless the game’s setting and visual appearance are not suitable for kids and juveniles under the age of 18.

ESRA’s rating:

Game Title: Fall out 4

Game Information	Platform	PC
	Developer(s)	Bethesda Game Studios
	Release Date	Nov/10/2015
	Source	Edited
	<u>Metacritic</u>	84/100
	ESRA age	+18

Aggregated scores from analyst and gamer:

Required ability for gaming	○●●●●
Fear	○●●●●
Violence	●●●●●
Social Abnormality	○●●●●
Smoking	○●●●●
Disappointments and Hopelessness	○●●●●

Figure 22: ESRA’s report on Fallout 4

ESRA enters any game relevant information into its data base. Taking only a list of scenes and situations recorded from Fallout 4 compiles a comprehensive list of 9 pages. The list starts, just like the review of USK, with basic game information including the assigned rating by ESRA.

Then follows a set of scores from game analysts and gamers that is meant to serve as an orientation for families. Between 1-5 status points can be given for

- Required ability for gaming
- Fear
- Violence
- Social Abnormality
- Smoking
- Disappointments and Hopelessness

Then follows a table; called the “Full Report”. Here each problematic scene or sequence identified by the analysts gets mentioned with the appropriate time codes leading to the exact spot in the recorded sequence.

Events get described in 5 categories: Main content, Sub Content 1, Sub Content 2, Intensity and “Other Contents or Explanation”.

The descriptions also put attention on details of the game’s technical structure. The choice of dresses and clothes the player can choose from for his character in the main menu is considered to be “Explicit” due to the nature of some of the barely covering rags, the mentioning of the word “Sex” as an indicator for gender in the main menu receives mentioning, but the reviewer added a note that here the gender of the characters to be selected is meant.

Unlike USK that only focused on gameplay aspects, ESRA mentions visual violence, blood and explicit clothing (in any part of the game, be it in a picture on a cover of a magazine or the clothes of one of the main characters). Language, fear and drinking alcohol are other factors that are observed and described briefly.

The list makes the strong focus on sexuality obvious – words, clothing, actions etc. are deemed to have sexual background and are considered as such. It is apparent that ESRA’s gamers and analysts must take a lot of time to first record the gameplay and then closely inspect the recording plus exactly describing what they see. The time codes to mark the location of the content range up to 24.11.19 (hours / minutes / seconds) – which means more than a day of playing and recording one game!

4.2 Batman: Arkham City

This installment of the Batman-franchise is an Action-Adventure that puts Batman in fights against Hugo Strange, a mad scientist and also his arch-enemy “The Joker”.

USK’s rating:

JUGENDENTSCHEID classification ruling	
Name des Titels / name of the product	Batman Arkham City
Altersfreigabe entsprechend Jugendschutzbestimmungen / age rating	Freigegeben ab 16 Jahren gemäß § 14 JuSchG
Antragsteller / applicant	Warner Bros. Entertainment
Registriernummer / number of registration	31197/11
technisches System / technical platform	Sony-Playstation 3
Sprache der Software / language of the software	englisch
Prüfdatum / date of examination	04.08.2011
Auflagen, Anmerkungen / conditions, note	

Figure 23: USK’s report on Batman: Arkham City

Players will be confronted with fierce fights, smashed bones and face kicks in the game and will also see skeletons and humans being burned beyond recognition. Psychopathic adversaries and dark settings may create a fearful atmosphere, but USK’s age rating commission came to the conclusion that players from the age of 16 on are used to the comic scenario and are aware of the game’s resemblance to fictional characters and settings from the comic books of the same name.

Here USK’s report shows the strength of rating commissions. Since the game requires cognitive skills and strategies and because there is no blood and the player cannot kill somebody, a minority of voters in the commission was of the opinion that the game could also be played by 12 year olds. Since the majority was of a different opinion the final rating became 16.

ESRA's rating:

Game Title: Batman: Arkham City

Game Information	Platform	PC
	Developer(s)	October 18, 2011
	Release Date	Nov/10/2015
	Source	Edited
	<u>Metacritic</u>	91/100
	ESRA age	+18

Aggregated scores from analyst and gamer:

Required ability for gaming	●●●●○
Fear	○○○○●
Violence	●●●●○
Social Abnormality	○○○○●
Smoking	○○○○●
Disappointments and Hopelessness	○○○○●

Figure 24: ESRA's report on Batman: Arkham City

The testers of ESRA created a list of problematic content and noted scenes which show gambling or the use of sexual / explicit clothing and language. The list of problematic content mentioned religious references and the display and use of alcoholic drinks. The final result of the rating process is 18+.

4.3 Romance of the Three Kingdoms XIII

This game is a military strategy game that is set in ancient China. Players move units and troops from a bird's-eye-perspective and can zoom in and out of the battlefield.

USK's rating:

JUGENDSCHEID classification ruling	
Name des Titels / name of the product	
Romance Of The Three Kingdoms XIII	
Altersfreigabe entsprechend Jugendschutzbestimmungen / age rating	
Freigegeben ab 12 Jahren gemäß § 14 JuSchG	
Antragsteller / applicant	
KOEI TECMO EUROPE LTD	
Registriernummer / number of registration	41278/16
technisches System / technical platform	Sony-Playstation 4
Sprache der Software / language of the software	englisch/japanisch
Prüfdatum / date of examination	21.04.2016
Auflagen, Anmerkungen / conditions, note	

Figure 25: USK's report on Romance of the Three Kingdoms XIII

The rating commission found this game to be a very complex strategic simulation that also incorporates economical decisions since cities need to be build and maintained, resources need to be secured to support the armies and even diplomatic communication needs to be carried out. Nevertheless the main focus is on war and how to become the strongest and most successful warlord in the game.

The rating commission does not see the danger of the glorification of war. The setting in ancient China is too distant to modern game players. Also, since it is no action game but a strategic simulation, players need time to think about their strategies very much like in classic Chess.

Therefore they decided for a rating of 12.

ESRA’s rating:

Game Information	Platform	PC
	Developer(s)	Koei
	Release Date	July 8, 2016
	Source	Edited
	<u>Metacritic</u>	
	ESRA age	+12

Aggregated scores from analyst and gamer:

Required ability for gaming	●●●●●
Fear	○○○○●
Violence	○○○○●
Social Abnormality	●●●●●
Smoking	○○○○○
Disappointments and Hopelessness	○○○○●

Figure 26: ESRA’s report on Romance of the Three Kingdoms XIII

ESRA rates various scenes as problematic- scenes where the use of alcohol is being displayed or sexually explicit clothing is shown. In fact, contents being sexually stimulating and the use of alcohol dominate the list of incidents. Only the starting sequences (and again one destructive scene at 06:02:01) of the game seem to have caught the analysts’ attention as there they recognized violence in combats and visible destruction (according to Morteza Bigdeli they were too repetitive and seemed the same, comment Oct. 10th, 2016). The overall rating is 12.

4.4 Summary

It is hardly possible to fully work out the differences and similarities of USK’s and ESRA’s rating systems. The ratings surveyed so far are surprisingly often similar in the results, not in the rating

process. While Violence and the glorification of it is *the* topic for USK, sexual content as well as drugs (alcohol etc.) is for ESRA. When it comes to content that could be deemed as sexually stimulating ESRA has a tendency to go for the highest rating possible. If such content will be edited, “ESRA goes with violence and glory as the priority” (comment Morteza Bigdeli, Oct. 10th, 2016). The commission reports of USK on the other hand, show not only the result but also make it possible to follow the arguments of the commission and even make the differences in opinions amongst the testers visible. This lets USK’s method appear to be a breathing system, being able to react to subtle content and changes in the opinions and likes of the public while ESRA is following a rather static system that needs to max out a rating symbol once certain content was identified (something that also applies to IARC).

5 Conclusion

Again it needs to be stressed that rating physical games (on CD-ROM for example) and game apps are different processes, in Germany and Iran both are conducted similarly: by dedicated rating commissions in Germany for physical games and through IARC for virtual goods / downloadable game content / game apps, and in Iran by analysts who extract contents and then decide on a rating in a meeting with ESRA’s manager – the decision of whom should pass the approval of the game classification council. In Iran, game apps are treated differently in that they receive less attention and are not fully played through, other than that the procedure is identical to the one carried out on physical games.

In general it is surprising how close the ESRA and IARC systems are to each other. Both work based on preset categories that any game that is to be rated will be related and compared to. Both define and describe areas of problematic content that a game is then matched with. Similar to USK the final rating will not be calculated by ESRA but decided upon in an internal discussion.

The categories of evaluation are also similar, though much more detailed in ESRA’s system due to the cultural necessities of an Islamic country, its rules and catalog of forbidden practices and conventions at the heart of the legislative.

All systems have their own benefits and flaws though. While at USK each game gets prepared and rated by human specialists and the rating procedure is being carried out by commissions resulting in a written report that is then sent to the developer or publishing company, the rating process at IARC follows preset rules and seems to be the least flexible among the other two while ESRA tries to combine both worlds as the analysts do make individual decisions as to what rating would be suitable and then their decision is again reviewed and discussed in a session

with the ESRA manager, the manager of the analyzing department, the expert who analyzed the game and the gamer who played the game. So there is flexibility in ESRA too but what makes ESRA more rigid is the strong emphasis on the Islamic rulings which are not debatable, therefore the existence of certain content automatically calls for a certain rating. In case of ESRA the rules are stricter and there is more to consider when rating games and this alone makes the rating process a more sensitive one and at times editing necessary. Since a commission discusses possible ratings at USK, ratings can individually adapt to content as well as cultural or political factors that may grant a rating of 18 but through the commission’s discretion may receive a lower rating. On the other hand, USK’s strengths make it a slow system, too slow for today’s rapidly expanding software markets.

Further similarities and differences could be identified by doing a large scale survey and putting more game ratings from various sources into contrast, which goes beyond the boundaries of this article.

IARC is the least flexible age rating system in terms of decisions. If rules need to be changed this first is a matter of the national boards and finally one of the “Rating Authority Working Group”. IARC’s questionnaire, as detailed, innovative and easy to understand as it is, can only feature a limited number of possible answers. Also, in the background of the technical depths of the system it’s obviously a small number of “do’s” and “don’ts” that heavily influences a rating, similar to the “*maximum method*” carried out by ESRA (see 3.2.3) – the following example shows this:

QUESTIONNAIRE SUMMARY

MISCELLANEOUS

- Contains Nazi symbols, references or propaganda

CALCULATED RATING [Learn more](#)

Rating System	Rating Category	Descriptors
Australian Classification Board (ACB) Australia	General	General
Classificação Indicativa (ClassInd) Brazil	All ages	
Entertainment Software Rating Board (ESRB) North America	Everyone	
Pan-European Game Information (PEGI) Europe	PEGI 3	
Unterhaltungssoftware Selbstkontrolle (USK) Germany	USK: Ages 18+	
IARC Generic Rest of world	Rated for 3+	
Google Play South Korea	Rated for 3+	

Figure 27: Showing the “maximum method” in IARC’s system

Here all the questions were answered with a “no”; this sample game includes no violence, no drugs, no offending language, no sex and no other sensitive content except propaganda or political symbols of the Nazi era in Germany. While other parts of the world would have little or no problems with this game, in Germany it would be only available for adults according to the rating of IARC. It must be assumed that a human commission at USK would take other factors into account and that it may assign a different rating depending on whether a game uses propaganda material or symbols for the means of propaganda or if it’s a simulation or serious game true to historic events down to the details.

IARC says that developers and customers have the ability to react and complain against ratings that seem to be wrong in their eyes. In reality this must be put into question. With regard to the multitude of games being released every day it is most unlikely that any problematic content or wrongly received age rating symbol may be recognized. Also apps are easier to access for children and most of the time since the apps are downloaded by the player itself the parents will not have a chance to even know what games their children are playing so how can they be aware of the bad contents and whether the rating is right or not to complain about it so that IARC can change the rating? Also, physical games are played on PC or consoles which have huge screens in comparison to mobile devices, which makes the monitoring easier for parents. For these reasons it might be even more important to have a more proper game app rating. Although another question is how much children even care about such ratings when downloading apps and wouldn’t an 18+ rating seem more interesting to younger children? Since in buying apps there is no way of knowing the age of the player, the apps are open to download for all (this is in itself a topic worth of discussion although such discussion is beyond the scope of this article).

Here, the man driven procedure at ESRA has the advantage that although it is bound to fixed rules and categories which are based on Islamic scriptures, still it is humans who survey each game and do a rating. In that, first gamers and narrators watch and extract game contents that is then matched with ESRA’s guidelines by the analyst who prepares the rating which is finally discussed with ESRA’s manager. The democratic disadvantage is that it is finally ESRA’s manager who accepts or rejects a decision. There is no rating being based on individual votes like USK’s (and their rating commissions and the imminent debate on pro’s and con’s).

Two other flaws are apparent: Due to the strict Islamic rules human reviewers at ESRA may seem to be more careful than they might have to be – but this is a rather western perspective. According to an Islamic point of view they are simply objecting and deciding the way they are supposed to so. Secondly, it is hardly imaginable how ESRA can keep up this system while at the same time also maintain a degree of quality in their decisions, given the ever expanding flood of games being developed and released. A problem USK was faced with and therefore helped to set up IARC.

IARC and ESRA both follow preset structures. But ESRA follows a more detailed restrictive structure since the harmful contents according to ESRA are more, and more vitally important to the culture into which the games are to be released, so for instance there is only one gambling option in IARC but ESRA has defined 3 different types of gambling and one type, which is the real gambling, is banned, making the release of a game difficult if the gambling content cannot be edited and if it is a dominant part of the game! If a scene can be changed or removed then the game will be rated. Also ESRA and Iran cannot risk it to not have played the games fully themselves because if there is a nudity scene it is way out of the norms of Iran and not acceptable at all.

How transparent is the system? and would external reactions be considered? ESRA says that their system was set up because parents wanted guidance. ESRA provides this guidance and as all human decisions it might be wrong at times, but there is no appeal process to report this. Since games are rated by ESRA prior to their release, ESRA is in fact negotiating with developers. But it is not known whether and how possible post release reactions are or can be considered. ESRA says that no customer, parents, developers or publisher ever complained about their ratings (comment by Morteza Bigdeli, Oct 10th, 2016). This can be a sign of acceptance. On the other hand, if a customer wants a lower rating would he complain about the degree of violence, use of drugs or sex in a game in an Islamic country? If just the sexual tone of language leads to a high age rating, would developers or players really complain against a rating that was received as unjustified?

Germany's USK and Iran's ESRA system were both established to rate physical games first and are now facing the necessity to evolve due to the online and streaming possibilities of the future that let methods of traditional distribution appear as matters of the past. In the future games will less and less be purchased on physical media in traditional stores. The future of digital content distribution lies online. The question might be justified if age rating does make any sense in the online era at all – since apps are open to download by the gamers regardless of their age even without the knowledge of their parents. Then again it must be underlined that age rating is not only a measure to make certain content available to certain age groups. It also marks areas of public do's and don'ts and thus has a meaning beyond the display of any age rating symbols alone. App stores and online platforms that make use of the IARC system also provide a security functionality for parents who can adjust the settings of their operating system in a way that without their permission no inappropriate content can be downloaded. Otherwise, somebody who is downloading inappropriate content *knows* that he is doing so. Next to this a working age rating system is also a sign of a legislative that cares and shows responsibility.

While USK has already set sails to ride the digital waves of age rating, Iran is still cruising alone short off the harbour, despite the fact that Iran's government set a "national Plan for Computer Games" in power, drafted by the countries High Council for Cyberspace and endorsed by President Rohani in 2015 (IRCG Facts Book 2016, 11).

Iran's ESRA efforts are up to now met with skepticism and resistance by leading members of international age rating communities like IARC (Interview at USK, Aug. 31st 2016). A common argument is that ESRA is being based on moral and religious rules and aspects which are supposed to be difficult to make compatible to a secular global (western) system. This point seems to be of limited plausibility however. Since both IARC and ESRA are based on preset rules it seems to be easy from a technical point of view to embed ESRA into this system. It just appears that probably most of the games will appear to be banned in / for Iran based on these preset rules if nobody is able to make a judgement in person. Also, the system would need to reflect on edited versions (for the Iranian market) and non-edited versions. And it seems to also be a quite complex task to convert all of ESRA's rating principles into a format compatible to IARC and still keep it maintainable for both the technicians at IARC and also the developers. But this seems to be a discussion not more complex than others IARC has led with various national groups so far.

So far these were always theoretical questions since IARC was not able to work with ESRA due to political reasons (comment by Morteza Bigdeli, Oct. 10th, 2016). IARC is connected to ESRB, the North-American age rating system, located at their offices in New York. Then again ESRB immediately refused to be in contact with ESRA just when ESRA was established (Caiolli 2008) by stating it has no links or anything to ESRA in a press release. It is uncertain whether it is correct that, as the press release indicated, ESRA had asserted established links to ESRB which didn't exist or if other reasons played a role. Nevertheless, ESRA still isn't linked to any other national or international age rating system.

So should there be a "Western" and an "Islamic" age rating system acting next to each other on a global scale? Both addressing similar or in large the same populations and rate the same games? From an intercultural and global point of view having two systems establishing their own age rating agencies cannot be considered to be a desirable solution. Especially not since IARC's introductory video on the front page of their website states that the ability of this system to adapt to many regional cultural preferences is considered to be one of their main assets.

Alas, at a closer look nevertheless it is hard to see how the only age rating system both in the Middle East and also in the Islamic world can be kept out in the long run – and why it should be. 81 million Iranians form an interesting market, but due to the non-existence of any copyrights, business opportunities are wary at best. Once Iran enters international copyright agreements, ESRA will receive an even higher meaning as official game exports will soon start to flood the country.

Western age rating systems might be secular, but their roots are surely not. What people in the west understand of violence or moral decisions stems from Christian Holy Scriptures just as the whole tradition of public life does. And, as a side-note, conservative Christians and Evangelicals could possibly find themselves in much better company with ESRA's guidelines than with IARC's!

Adding an Islamic age rating system to IARC may make adaptations necessary – on both sides. But the efforts and communication processes fueled by this attempt appear to be worthwhile.

It is difficult to see and accept that 1.1 billion Muslims worldwide should not have their say or Muslim parents not be able to make a choice on games based on what they understand and expect of youth protection. From a political point of view it should be recognized and acknowledged that Iran, a country that knows no age rating for movies, did a bold step forward to establish an independent rating system for games and online content. Starting negotiations can be a learning process for all sides.

Last but not least, which suggestions seem to be appropriate to make ESRA more flexible and transparent to the Iranian public according to the needs and desires of the strong online society Iran has become?

Parents and any other interested parties should be able to make an enquiry to ESRA about certain games or content witnessed online or offline. This can be organized through ESRA's website or by filing a request through any online portals just like IARC is offering this possibility. In fact, ESRA claims to have added such an option to its website which will be online soon (comment by Morteza Bigdeli, Oct. 10th, 2016).

A discussion forum on ESRA's website, preferably in different languages (English is planned according to Morteza Bigdeli, Oct. 10th, 2016), could both give individuals the opportunity to discuss age rating related questions and also add new impulses and provide useful hints and info to ESRA.

An appeal procedure for the public or for game companies could also add interesting input to the process and would make the system more "breathing" and reflect public discourses.

Finally, a "parent's advisory" board could be set up with interested parents or even juveniles and kids to be able to meet and observe and influence certain age rating processes.

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- August 18th, Gamescom Cologne: Mehrdad Ashtiani, Hasan Karimi Ghodoosi (CEO IRCG)
- August 31st, USK HQ Berlin: Felix Falk (CEO USK)

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“And the Word Became Network”: An Analysis of the Circulation of the “Catholic” in Online Communicational Networks

Moisés Sbardelotto

Abstract

Within the process of mediatization, the Catholic Church and society in general produce new modes of communication on the internet, in which there is a widespread network of relationships between symbols, beliefs, and practices linked to Catholicism, i.e., the “Catholic.” From this context, this paper analyzes the organization of the mediatic circulation of the “Catholic” in socio-digital platforms as Facebook. The theoretical reflection articulates studies on mediatization of religion, especially from the Latin-American perspective, and online communicational networks. The empirical analysis involves a multiple case study on Facebook, with focused semi-structured interviews with professionals of the Catholic communication in the Vatican and in Brazil, in three different levels: a Vatican institutionality (page *Rádio Vaticano – Programa Brasileiro*, the first presence of an office of the Holy See on Facebook); a socio-institutionality (page *Jovens Conectados*, a youth project promoted by the National Conference of Bishops of Brazil); and a peripheral minority (page *Diversidade Católica*, a Brazilian Catholic gay network). In conclusion, it identifies a social process of reconstruction of Catholic meanings, that emerges from a socially shared symbolic-religious know-how and power-of-doing, going beyond the action of the institutional Church or media corporations.

Keywords

mediatization of religion, socio-digital networks, Facebook, Catholicism

1 Introduction

The social practices in the online environment, permeated by media logic, complexify the religious phenomenon today. New modalities of perception and expression of the “sacred” are formed in new social environments. Increasingly, the religious phenomenon shifts to media public spaces, such as socio-digital platforms, as Facebook, Twitter, Instagram. The “sacred” begins to circulate, flow, move in the intricacies of the internet by means of an action not only of the ecclesial or the industrial-media “production” pole, but also by a communicational action of numerous connected inter-agents, understood as an agent that interacts with another agent, be it a person, a technology, a discourse, a symbol etc.

Today, while the “mainstream media” is losing the monopoly of the agency of social symbolic meanings in general, religious institutions go through a similar process in relation to the religious meanings on the “sacred.” This occurs thanks to the emergence of new media agents – individuals, groups, and other institutions – which now begin to promote more complex modalities of signification of the *socius* and of the *sacrus* on the web, in a public, heterogeneous, and connected manner.

In this paper, this process is specifically analyzed from the communicational interface of the networked Brazilian Catholicism. Such interest is due, firstly, to the socio-historical and cultural relevance of the Catholic Church in Brazil. In quantitative terms, the most recent data available indicate a historic reduction in the number of Catholics in Brazil: in 1872, 99.7% of the population was Catholic; by comparison, in 2000, they were 73.6%. However, today, the Catholic Church has a religious majority of the Brazilian population (64.6%)¹.

Beyond the statistics, it is important to “distinguish the evidence of the Catholic numbers and the tradition and the presence of Catholicism as a *cultural reference in Brazil*,” because, despite the decline of the Catholic population, “one cannot say that Catholicism ceased to appear as *one of the structuring religious references of [Brazilian] nationality and national culture*” (Steil & Toniol 2013, p. 224, emphasis added). In this context, assuming the communicational processes of religion in societies in mediatization as the research axis of this paper, I am interested here in some media logic and dynamics that trigger such a referral of this religious expression in the Brazilian national culture, especially in a time of digital networks.

In societies increasing in mediatization, the communicational flow of meanings, particularly on the Internet, cannot be stopped or delimited by any structures. On the Internet, the ecclesiastical institution and society in general *talk about Catholicism*, reworking, re-signifying, and updating it

1 More recent data accordingly to the Census 2010 of the Brazilian Institute of Geography and Statistics (IBGE): <<http://migre.me/ddYsQ>>, viewed 11 September 2016.

to new social inter-agents and to an even greater public, in a complex web of meanings. Society talks about and does something with Catholicism, apart from the religious offer by the Church or the mainstream media. In their interrelations, such actions trigger a process of communicational circulation.

Although the Catholic Church seek to make a “good and holy” use of the internet – for example, with the entry of Pope Benedict XVI on Twitter or of Francis on Instagram (see Sbardelotto 2013; 2016b) – the flow of meanings on what is “to be Catholic,” and the Catholic knowledge and practices find gaps and leaks in the process of communicational circulation, going far beyond (or below) the ecclesiastical interests. Through various communicational actions, society mediatically reconstructs the meanings on Catholicism.

In this context, it is possible to talk about the emergence and circulation of the “Catholic,” i.e., a diverse and diffuse network of relationships between symbols, beliefs, and practices linked to the Catholic religious experience, the historical tradition of Catholicism and/or the Catholic Church institution, mediatically constructed by society, making possible the communication on such beliefs and practices among social inter-agents. That is, the “Catholic” would be, at the same time, a product of interaction and communication between networked social agents, and, on the other hand, without it, would not be possible this process of interaction and communication.

Thus, if we can understand the “Catholic” as a symbolic “network” related to Catholicism, we can glimpse a triple connection that deserves analysis: a network (internet) of networks (socio-digital platforms like Facebook) in which circulate a network of constructs on Catholicism (the “Catholic”). All these processes feed and embody the communicational circulation on the Internet, through a process that I call here as *reconnection*.

In this article, firstly, I theoretically deepen the horizon of the mediatization of religion in contemporary societies, in a context of practices of reconnection, understood as a socio-symbolic process of networked interaction. Then, I articulate some significant cases of this religious communicational process in three different levels of the circulation of the “Catholic” on Facebook: a Vatican institutional level (the page *Rádio Vaticano – Programa Brasileiro*); a Brazilian socio-institutional level (the page *Jovens Conectados*); and also a non-institutional dispersion level of circulation of the “Catholic,” composed of the communicational actions of a minority and peripheral group of Brazilian Catholicism (the page *Diversidade Católica*). I present their relevance in the Brazilian socio-religious context and also describe and analyze the reconnections operated by different inter-agents in their posts on Facebook². To confront my inferences with the opinion of the

2 This paper is a small part of my doctoral thesis (Sbardelotto, 2016a). The analysis involved a multiple case study, combined with gestures of lurking and semi-structured interviews done with responsible of the Catholic communication on the Vatican and Brazil, in four different levels of analysis: 1) a Catholic supra-institutional level (the *@Pontifex_pt* account on Twitter); 2) a Vatican institutional level (*Rádio Vaticano – Programa Brasileiro* page

inter-agents involved in these processes, I also made semi-structured interviews with those responsible for each of these pages, in the Vatican and in Brazil.

Finally, I conclude that, in the process of mediatization of religion, new modalities of perception and expression of religious beliefs and practices begin to arise in the digital environment, thanks to the publicization of religious elements and the accessibility to such elements by numerous inter-agents, everywhere and at any time. Based on its own systems of meaning, local communicational religious practices on the web can reinvent religion itself, through a circulatory processes.

2 Mediatization of religion, a metamediatic process

With the emergence of a new social *ambience*, driven by digital technologies, the Catholic Church is being compelled to modify its own communicational structures and internal or external systems of construction of meaning. Religion has been historically linked to social communicational processes – from the discourse in a public square, books, electronic media, and so on. With technological advancements and the emergence of new social practices of symbolization of the world, religious institutions feel the necessity to reshape their symbolic structures to new mediatic processualities, rebuilding and re-signifying traditional religious practices in accordance with the protocols of each new mediation.

The concept of mediatization points to this process, being conceived as the “hermeneutic key to the comprehension and interpretation of reality,” since “society perceives and is perceived from the media phenomenon, now extended beyond the traditional technological devices” (Gomes 2008, p. 21, author’s trans.). As a broad social phenomenon, religion is permeated by these protocols. According to Verón (2012), mediatization is a historical process, the materialization and exteriorization of cognitive processes, which involves several historical configurations in the production of signs. It is therefore “one of the fundamental dimensions of the (...) evolution of human societies” (ibid., p. 9-11, author’s trans.).

If however mediatization can be understood as a historically emergent phenomenon, it should be noted that this long process encounters “saturation points,” bifurcations in which the historical curve suffers significant shifts, especially in the last years of the 20th century, in modern and highly

on Facebook); 3) a Brazilian socio-institutional level (*Jovens Conectados* page on Facebook); and 4) a Brazilian peripheral minority level (*Diversidade Católica* page on Facebook). The focus of exam was the networked circulation of the “Catholic,” to investigate the emergence of what I call *connectial dispositif*, i.e., a complex of interrelationships between techno-symbolic processes (interfaces), socio-technical processes (protocols), and socio-symbolic processes (reconnections) present in networked religious practices.

industrialized societies. In the contemporary context, there are numerous connected social agents that communicatively manifest their skills on various areas of the social, including the religious. With technological advancements, the social appropriation of technology, and the new correlated socio-symbolic processes, it is possible to see more and more “an *acceleration* and *diversification* of ways by which society interacts with society” (Braga 2012, p. 35. author’s trans.). Verón (2012) also indicates a contemporary “mutation in the conditions of the access of individual actors in the mediatic discursivity, producing unprecedented transformations in the conditions of circulation” (p. 14, author’s trans.).

This mutation is not just a result of the mediatic institutionalization in terms of “culture industry,” nor the development of large “media corporations.” It is a jump or even a social break with an “institutionalizing” model of media, emerging from new social uses, practices and appropriations, demanding the revision, on the one hand, of the idea that the “professionalism” is located only in the ambit of media corporations and, on the other, the revision of the idea that social practices are restricted to actions of “audiences,” “users” or “consumption.”

It is in this context that the word “media” and the concept of “mediatization” acquire their meanings. We are living today a “media turn,” marked by a “‘historically unique degree’ of integration of the technological and the socio-cultural” (Friesen & Hug 2009, p. 65). In this process, the conditions of the possibility of human interaction, social communication, and societal organization become conditioned (but not necessarily *determined*) by mediatic logic, dynamic and practices. That is why mediatization can be understood as socio-techno-symbolic actions, interactions and retroactions that lead to a “reconfiguration of a communicational ecology (or a mediatic *bios*)” (Gomes 2008, p. 30, author’s trans.). Mediatization involves the communicational mediations of culture, including the religious phenomenon, beyond the mere social or technological mediations of the business media organizations.

Mediatization, as in the case of the ecclesial appropriation of new media and the new religious practices emerging from this process, points to the complexity of flows and meaning circuits in a socio-communicational phenomenon that must be understood “as miscegenation [*mestiçagem*] rather than overcoming – continuities in discontinuity, conciliations between rhythms that exclude themselves” (Martín-Barbero 2008, p. 262, author’s trans.). Through the synergy of the contemporary communicational processes and the digital technologies, we can see a new social configuration: “If mediatic communication (its rationale, devices, and processes) is in constant evolution, then by appropriating it, religion also follows this trend and is compelled to become something different than it traditionally was” (Sbardelotto 2014, p. 83).

Mediatization, in short, is the genesis of a *social medium* (experiences, uses, practices), that generate and are generated by a *mediatic medium* (symbols, discourses, technologies), in an

increasing complexity. Therefore, it is relevant to understand what happens when a historical institution as the Catholic Church, its practices and symbols begin to permeate and be permeated by different circuits of meaning, as the socio-digital networks, unleashing an emergent process of circulation of the “Catholic” through the contemporary *socius*.

Thinking on mediatization, however, is not just realize how religions today are “mediated” by contemporary media. The process of mediatization of religion is much more complex than the religious mediation of media, or the media mediation of religion. In the new context of social interaction, there is the arising of renewed religiosities and emerging meanings of “sacred” and “sacredness” in which the media “can at the same time be a *source* of religion and spirituality, an *indicator* of religious and spiritual change, and *articulated into* religious and spiritual trends – *changing religion* through those interactions and also *being changed* by that relationship” (Hoover 2008, p.4).

In this shift, the mediatization of religion extends the cultural semantics of religion, decentralizing religious institutions and mining their proposals of theological-doctrinal control, opening the “religious” to the multiple constructions of social meaning in media processes, which, in turn, do not exist beforehand, but are constituted from local religious practices. Mediatization, in short, catalyzes the publicization of religion, which cannot be understood anymore only as a fixed institution or doctrine. It also has to do with socially embodied practices and experiences of individuals, collectives, and institutions in public, open places, in constant interaction and connection.

3 Reconnections: “connecting connections” in societies in mediatization

In socio-digital platforms like Facebook, there are numerous institutional Catholic accounts and pages, both in the Vatican and the Brazilian level. This process is not neutral, nor automatic: for its occurrence, the Church in general needs to rethink and update its internal and external communication processes to the digital environment, in a process of digital mediatization of religion.

On the other hand, it is possible to note the existence of numerous cases of environments created by lay-amateurs, referring to Catholic issues, i.e. unofficial, not institutional, alternative presences dealing with the “Catholic.” Non-institutional Catholic groups and individuals reinforce such processes through their public presences on such platforms, articulated around Catholicism (as numerous pages identified as Catholic: “*Catholic Music*,” “*Catholic Church Catechism*,” “*I am Catholic and I am happy*” etc.). In them, from a specific point of view of the Catholic world, the

users appropriate media-religious elements, publicly reconstructing and redefining the meaning of Catholicism.

Today, virtually all aspects of religious life – historically marked by initiatory rituals reserved for the chosen few – are exposed to the experience of any individual. Especially with the internet, “it is the common man, without any corporate visibility, who gives to the ambience of communication and general information the status of a new existential sphere” (Sodré 2014, p. 116). Digital mediatization, thus, allows us to put ourselves “immediately in a situation of creation” (Flichy 2010, p. 21, author’s trans.), thanks to a greater access and ease of use of digital technologies, “marked by the behavior of individual autonomy and ‘conectivization’ [*mise en connection*]” (ibid., p. 15, author’s trans.), which enable the development of new communicational religious practices.

From this contemporary processes of mediatization of religion, an autonomous figure emerges today, a hybridization between the “layperson” and the “expert authority,” generating social meanings from its discursive and digital symbolic practice, what I call the “lay-amateur,” one who “stands midway between the ordinary man and the professional, between the profane and the virtuous, between the ignorant and the wise, between the citizen and the politician” (Flichy 2010, p.11, author’s trans.). The lay-amateurs would find themselves today “in the heart of the communication dispositive” (ibid., p. 7, author’s trans.).

While not having the media or ecclesiastical institutionality in their defense and precisely for not having (or not wanting to have) a know-how recognized by authority, being able to act “on his/her own,” the amateur’s “word” becomes ubiquitous. In the religious case, it is not only an “amateur,” but also often a “layperson,” i.e. someone not invested by religious officialdom nor by the media-corporate institutionality – or, if invested with such powers, someone who acts in the web purposefully devoid of such qualifications, without the need to publicly display his/her know-how recognized by the authority: a “lay-amateur.” If we take the literal meaning of amateur (one who practices an activity for pleasure and not by profession, who “loves” something too much), leaving aside the bias of the “lack” of experience or knowledge, and articulate it with the ecclesial definition of “lay” – that is, “all the faithful except those in holy orders and those in the state of religious life specially approved by the Church” that “carry out for their own part the mission of the whole Christian people in the Church and in the world”³ – the concept of “lay-amateur” helps us to understand the emerging actions in online communicational networks.

Therefore, the digital mediatization of religion brings out precisely the “microbial” actions of these agents, which are not historically new, but socially emerge thanks to the Internet. It involves

3 Dogmatic Constitution on the Church *Lumen gentium*, n. 31.

networked, diverse, and heterogeneous communicational actions by lay-amateurs (individuals or groups), carried out within the Brazilian Catholicism spectrum.

In communicational environments without any explicit link with religious expressions, such as Facebook, the various inter-agents find ways to publicly and autonomously symbolize the “sacred,” reconciling their inner depth with the world around them, through texts, images, and videos. On the Internet, there is the occurrence of a religious experimentation via communication, which is characterized by public social manifestations on the “religious,” outlining a specific religious practice of societies in mediatization.

In this sense, I believe that it is necessary to focus in a specific observation of the *communicational process* in the religious networked phenomena, recognizing that a “careful analysis of communicative networks is a necessary precondition for the understanding of social networks” (Hepp 2013, p. 92). Otherwise, the risk would be reifying the concept of “network,” as if it were something “out there,” observable to the naked eye. However, I do not want to analyze here the “networks that I see,” but “see in network” the communication phenomena of the circulation of the “Catholic” on the Internet. It is not an effort to circumscribe already existing (social or digital) “networks,” but to perceive the (communicational) “networking” between the various inter-agents.

So here, I propose to work with the concept of *online communicational networks*, precisely understood as *matrices of communicability in socio-digital interconnections*, i.e. the cross communication processes that are established from digital connections, through which the circulation of the “Catholic” is possible. The focus, therefore, is in the eminently communicational gestures in platforms opened to the socio-digital action, visible and accessible on Facebook, more than the matrices of sociality of a network (“social” networks) or their matrices of technicality or informationality (“digital” networks).

In this sense, on the interface with the traditional religiosities and religious practices, the circulation of the “Catholic” in online communicational networks expresses a socio-symbolic construction, that is, the communicational action on symbols and discourses mediated by technological and social protocols. Here we find the explicitation of what Morin (1999) calls computing. It is an “organizer/producer complex of cognitive character” (p. 51, author’s trans.), which can be conceived more simply as the “treatment of symbols” (p. 50, author’s trans.). It is not only the operations of an “artificial machine” (which are also present in socio-digital platforms), but mostly the “intelligent activities of the human spirit” (ibid., p. 51, , author’s trans.). In the communication actions here in analysis, however, I argue that the construction of meaning about the “Catholic” is given as a *third-order computation*, following the Morinian concept, i.e., the computation (the construction of meaning by the agent) of a computation (the recognition of other

social meanings) of a computation (the construction of meaning by other various social agents in connection).

The “Catholic” as a social macro-construct, therefore, involves numerous local actions of *reconnection*, which allow the perception and also the expression of meanings, and the interaction between inter-agents: i.e. *socio-symbolic processes of networked interaction*. Reconnection, thus, involves communicational actions of construction of meaning in socio-digital platforms, that depend on the “connection” and on the “computation” *stricto sensu* of a computer and a human computant.

In the religious context, reconnections reveal the social experimentation on the “Catholic” in the processes of communicational circulation, in which it is possible to act upon something already given (by the Catholic tradition, doctrine, institution etc.) and *invent* something new (*in + venire*) through networked communicational practices, that are articulated and complexify the traditional practices of social construction of Catholicism. Thus, social interactions in online communicational networks operate mainly by reconnections: with the socio-religious knowledge, with the networks, with the others, in which there is the manifestation of the experimentation and socio-symbolic invention of the “Catholic” in communicational circulatory processes.

Reconnection, nevertheless, also go beyond those actions, by means of a “connection of connections” and a “computation of computations”, generating a much more complex “connection” and “computation” than something merely human and/or technological: precisely, the *social and symbolic processes* in online communicational networks, not only its informational/computational elements. Reconnections, hence, are “ultra-connections,” “new connections”, because they emerge in a complex way in the conjuncture of a unique interaction in a specific context, beyond what is already given in social, technological, and symbolic terms.

Through reconnections, therefore, online communicational networks emerge as not mere *digital* networks, because they also involve complex socio-symbolic actions; nor as mere *social* networks, because they also involved complex techno-symbolic actions. The communicational “movement” emerges from the logic of relationship between such networks, i.e. in the interaction between platforms, circuits, and inter-agents, dynamizing the circulatory flow (Fig. 1).

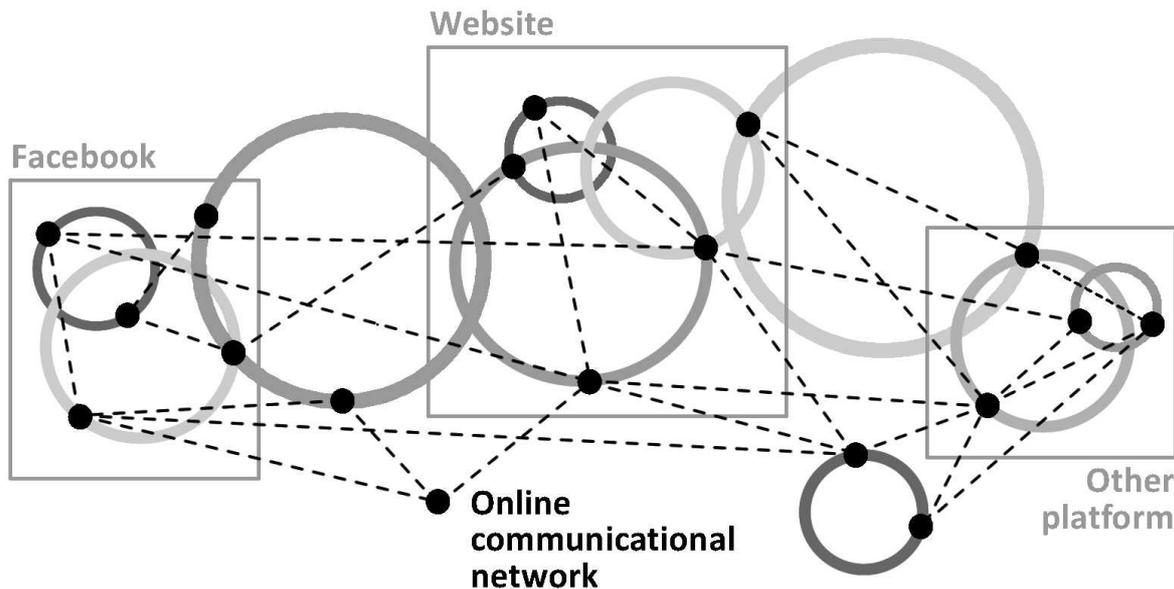


Figure 1 – Diagram of the online communicational networks. Source: Sbardelotto 2016.

As the image above shows, the socio-digital platforms are more clearly defined as interaction environments (squares) marked by their interfaces and specific protocols. The circuits (circles) identify and define specific spaces of circulation, as the comment field on Facebook, or the plugins that connect the platform with a website. The inter-agents (dots) in an online communicational network, on the other hand, are plural and heterogeneous, contextually identifiable from interactions (pages as a whole, specific users, groups within the platform, a technology, or even a specific post as a communication “product” that “interacts” with others etc). Its “position” is also momentary, changeable and unstable, depending on very specific local contexts of interaction, whose movement is constant. Such network of inter-agents is communicatively emergent, beginning before any identifiable “point”, and also continuing later, being one of the key processes of the organization of the circulatory flow in the online environment, among specific circuits and platforms.

From this context, I can now describe and analyze the reconnections operated in the pages that compose the cases of this article.

4 Vatican institutional level: the “Rádio Vaticano – Programa Brasileiro” case

Considering the Catholic institutional level from its central point of view, that is, the Holy See, the page *Rádio Vaticano – Programa Brasileiro* (RVPB)⁴ on Facebook emerges both in historical terms and in terms of communicational self-analysis of the Catholic Church. The Vatican Radio is the radio station of the Holy See, with its headquarters in Vatican City, being one of the leading communication agencies of the Catholic Church. In 1958, the Brazilian Program was born, bringing together many media professionals to “take to the Brazilian people and the Portuguese-speaking listeners around the world the voice and the teachings of the Holy Father, the Magisterium of the Church and the news of the Church in the world.”⁵

Regarding the Internet, the Vatican Radio, in its Brazilian Portuguese version, is officially present in an institutional website⁶. In it, they constantly publish various news and information about Catholicism. However, within the site, there is no possibility of participation by the user (a space for comments, for example). It is an official institutional environment in which only approved content is available to the reader.

On the other hand, however, the Brazilian program is also present on Facebook⁷, where the interaction with users becomes much more explicit and evident. Here it is possible to find the relevance of this presence. In my interview with former secretary of the Pontifical Council for Social Communications (PCSC), archbishop Paul Tighe says that the Brazilian program is promoting “a *truly significant* presence of the Vatican on Facebook:”

If I were to say what is probably the most successful social media initiative among the various ones [the Holy See, would be] the Portuguese Facebook page [of the Vatican Radio], because they are very quick, they take the material and immediately put it up there. [...] And it's a constant learning. (pers. comm., 5 June 2015)

In his turn, Thaddeus Jones, coordinator of the *News.va* project of the Holy See and English language official of the PCSC, recognizes that the Brazilian program “did a great job, really, using Facebook. *They were the pioneers*, in my view, of the Vatican media, in the level to develop Facebook” (pers. comm., 3 July 2015, author’s trans., emphasis added) in the Catholic Church context.

4 <<https://www.facebook.com/radiovaticanobrasil/>>.

5 <<http://br.radiovaticana.va/>>, viewed 11 September 2016.

6 Idem.

7 <<https://www.facebook.com/radiovaticanobrasil/>>, viewed 11 September 2016.

This pioneerism dates back to March 6, 2012, when the first post on the RVPB Facebook page was published, several months before the launch of all @Pontifex accounts. In an interview for this research, Rafael Belincanta, journalist responsible for updating the social media of the Brazilian program of the Vatican Radio, said the first post took place shortly after the 80th birthday of the radio: “We were the pioneers on Facebook [between the organisms of the Holy See], when Brazilians were already arriving in droves on Facebook.” At that time, according to Belincanta, the Brazilian staff of the radio asked, “Why do we not do our own page on Facebook?”:

Then, we put [the issue] here for everyone [of the newsroom]. Everyone thought it was a good idea. We proposed it to the program directors. They wanted to stop it at first, but finally authorized it. They had an entire concern with the content, what we would speak about and, if people negatively commented on, how we would react to negative comments etc. That is, at the beginning, there was some resistance from the program directors, but then they saw that everything was going well. And then new programs [of the international Vatican Radio] started opening their Facebook pages”. (pers. comm., 9 June 2015, author’s trans.)

It is possible to realize, therefore, the internal concern and difficulties of the organization to deal with an environment in which there is no control over the public construction of meanings, which caused “some resistance” of the superiors of the radio. However, the actual construction of the page on Facebook becomes a circulatory element inside the Vatican, leading other organisms to establish their presence on the platform and also outside of it, with an increased access by society in general.

Until September 2016, the Facebook page had over 520,000 “likes” and an average of more than 2 million global visits per week, surpassing the number of views of the institutional website of the radio. It is the Facebook page, in a way, that gives “communicational life” to the institutional website, creating a much more relevant circulatory flow to its content. The main element of its interface is the cover photo of the page (Fig. 2).



Figure 2 – Cover photo of the RVPB’s Facebook page. Source: <<https://www.facebook.com/radiovaticanobrasil>>

The image depicts Pope Francis with his arm extended in a gesture of blessing and greeting, with the flag of Brazil and the dome of St. Peter's Basilica in the background. This image indicates a construction of meaning on one of the main elements of global Catholicism, i.e. the pope's own figure. For the inter-agents, the cover photo clearly demarcates a communicational environment related to the Catholic Church. In turn, the Pope's gesture, at the same time of blessing and greeting, with a slight smile on his face, set up a kind of "welcoming" to the reader, a construction of a "personalized," affective, sacred contact with the Pope and Catholicism. However, this is a pope with some particular characteristics, which reveals certain nuances of a creative appropriation by those responsible for the page. This becomes more evident with the use of Brazil's flag in the background. With it, the image delineates a specificity of the RVPB page: its link with Brazilian culture. The page promises not an approach on Catholicism from a general point of view, but from a Brazilian one, with the cultural marks and the communicational matrices of this socio-historical specificity. In front of the flag, the dome of St. Peter's Basilica in the Vatican stands out. Thus, the page points to another important element, its connection with the headquarters of the Catholic Church, "mixed" with the Brazilianness displayed with the flag. The Vatican symbol seems to indicate its "interdependence" with the Brazilian symbol in the communicative actions of the page: Brazil becomes the axis of reading and interpretation of Vatican life. All these elements and its overall composition seek to indicate to the reader the communicational specificities of the page, putting into circulation, in a symbolic manner, in a single element (the cover photo), everything the page wants to be and to do in its communicational proposal.

On the other hand, the RVPB page on Facebook allows to glimpse that the meaning is constructed in relations between the inter-agents and the technological and symbolic mediations, that is, through what I call reconnection. In this process, the construction of meaning by the inter-agents have a subjective source which is constructed through inter-subjective actions, enabled and organized by a system of social and symbolic connections on (an beyond) Facebook technicalities.

A post that illustrates this idea was published on 19 October 2015 and dealt with the case of a religious Brazilian Catholic woman that, in a meeting in the Vatican, stood out for being the only one who did not was wearing the nun's habit⁸. In the interview, she argues that, without the habit, "is easier to approach young people in the concrete reality where they are."⁹ In the comments field on Facebook, many readers praised the religious woman and the post of the radio. However, several other inter-agents exposed their annoyance in relation to the post, questioning the own catholicity of the RVPB page, as in the dialogues below:

8 <<https://www.facebook.com/radiovaticanobrasil/posts/846638692110846>>, viewed 11 September 2016.

9 <<http://goo.gl/RPCvJ0>>, viewed 11 September 2016.

Francisco F. – I totally disagree! How can we explain the young, men, women and children who flock to the Pope? He uses cassock! The official vestment does not deviate people!!! [19 October 2015 12:53, author's trans.]

Rian M. – Ridiculous argument. The habit never deviates the religious person from the people; on the contrary, it approaches! [...] [19 October 2015 at 13:19, author's trans.]

Instituto Bento XVI – I do not believe that this is a Catholic page. [19 October 2015 at 14:51, author's trans.]

| **José S.** – It is unfortunate! [19 October 2015 at 16:04, author's trans.]

| **Caroliny A.** – This type of argument is increasingly common! What a pity! [19 October 2015 at 18:41, author's trans.]

The “unbelief” of some inter-agents was emphasized by others, through “likes” and responses to other comments, calling into question not only the communicational action, but the very Catholic officialdom of the page due to the questioning of the importance of the habit. From this, other inter-agents began to oppose the posting, generating reconnections through a kind of subversion of the communicational process, requiring a “re-action” on the part of the page: the very removal of the post:

Paulo A. B. – I AM TOTALLY AGAINST [the page] AND BELIEVE THAT THE VATICAN RADIO SHOULD DELETE THIS POST. RIDICULOUS. [19 October 2015 at 17:38, author's trans.]

Mário R. – Remove this post, on behalf of the Church! [20 October 2015 at 0:22, author's trans.]

Finally, in no time the page responded to the criticism or removed the post. It is interesting, however, that ordinary users grant themselves the public right to criticize a communicational action of a Vatican organism, standing above this hierarchy, speaking “on behalf of the Church.” Thus, a social power assumption arises around Catholic sayings and doings, made possible by an emerging autonomization in communicational processes in the digital environment: the agent feels able to confront the Vatican organism, taking a position contrary to it, which, by the way, requires a public symbolic involvement of the subject to face the institution.

Thus, publicly, by means of reconnections, the agents – lay people – put into debate and in circulation a central issue to Catholicism, as the limits and possibilities of the Catholic clergy. It begins to raise a theo-political practice of ordinary users, who acquire a public space to expose his/her voice and his/her own theology, although conditioned by the interface and the protocols of

Facebook and the Vatican page. This found a possible different theological field and new practices of meaning about Catholicism.

5 Brazilian socio-institutional level: the “Jovens Conectados” case

In Brazil, one of the main projects of the Catholic Church developed especially for the digital environment is called *Jovens Conectados* (“Connected Young”)¹⁰, launched in December 2010, as an official communication organism of the Episcopal Pastoral Commission for Youth (CEPJ), of the National Conference of Catholic Bishops of Brazil (CNBB).

The history of the development of this project and its current goals permit to observe, respectively, the interrelationship between the challenges of the mission of the Catholic Church in contemporary Brazilian society; the autonomization of young Catholics (the “socio-institutionality” of the project); and the limits and possibilities posed by the process of digital mediatization.

According to Felipe Rodrigues, current general coordinator of *Jovens Conectados*, interviewed for this research, the project

was born within the Church and then was incorporated [by the ecclesiastical institution], if we can say so. [...] So, today, within the CNBB, when they say, “Well, we need to talk with the youth,” [the staff involved is] the Commission for Youth and, naturally, the website, the ‘portal’ and all the social networks [of the *Jovens Conectados* project]”. (pers. comm., 20 December 2015, author’s trans., emphasis added)

Therefore, the birth of the project involves, at the same time, a “bottom-up” process, which emerges from the role of young Catholics and their communicational empowerment, and, on the other hand, a “top-down” process, in which the institution “incorporates” the project in its official institutionality, linking it to the main body of the Catholic Church in Brazil (the CNBB).

Over the time, in addition to the website, *Jovens Conectados* was extending its presence to the main socio-digital platforms, always marked by the idea that young Catholics, from the most different ecclesial expressions (ministries, movements, congregations, new communities, organizations etc.), could publicize their activities, “creating thus – as stated by their website – a large *network of collaboration*, where news and information can reach many other realities.”¹¹ Thus, the already existing ecclesial networks could find, in the digital environment, other forms of

10 <<https://www.facebook.com/jovensconectados/>>.

11 <<http://goo.gl/LSfyf5>>, viewed 11 September 2016.

collaboration with a new possibility of range (“reach many other realities”) made possible by socio-digital processes.

Out of all the various platforms where they are present, the *Jovens Conectados* Facebook page¹² emerges as the most relevant one, in communicational terms (not only in comparison with the other presences of the project), having more than 470,000 “likes” until September 2016. Founded in January 2012, the Facebook page is one of the first official Brazilian Catholic presences on that platform, created a few months even before the creation of the RVPB Facebook page.

In the *Jovens Conectados* Facebook page, it is possible to see that the Catholic Church in Brazil found a way to interact with the youth, in a process in which the construction of meanings is not controlled by the institution, but in which the Catholic “sacred” is re-signified by all the agents, through texts, images, videos, and comments on Catholicism that circulate on the page. In this public symbolic experimentation, it is possible to glimpse a specific religious practice of societies in mediatization. While connecting the inter-agents, Facebook also provides them the ability to construct online communicational networks in which their interactions on the religious phenomenon occur, through reconnections.

On October 6, 2015¹³, a post brought excerpts of the homily of Pope Francis on the Mass celebrated that Sunday in St. Peter’s Basilica. The papal speech referred to the “union of love between man and woman”, an “indissoluble” union, whose goal “is not just live together forever, but love each other forever.” A picture accompanied the post, showing the Pope blessing a newlywed couple. The comment section on Facebook was converted by the inter-agents into an environment for declarations of love between several persons, as in the case of “Vanessa”, one of the first ones to leave a comment. She wrote: “I will love you forevermore Alex B.”¹⁴ marking her companion, following the protocol of the platform.

However, some users have shifted the direction of the initial post and also this emerging interactional modality in the comment section, operating a re-signification of the post. The user “Luiza,” for example, wrote: “I am divorced and I am happy,”¹⁵ publicly deconstructing, thus, whatever the page and the inter-agents were doing in terms of construction of meaning on the papal homily. Her marital love was not “forever,” but, even so, she claimed to be happy.

Her comment, in the interactional context created around that post, involved, therefore, the public recognition of an almost “sin” in the Catholic environment (the divorce), which manifested itself in the opposite and subversive direction in relation to the emerging declarations of “eternal love” among other users. This manifestation, therefore, shows an emerging power-of-saying, which

12 <<https://www.facebook.com/jovensconectados>>, viewed 11 September 2016.

13 <<https://goo.gl/HUzUkB>>, viewed 11 September 2016.

14 <<https://goo.gl/aufRzh>>, viewed 11 September 2016.

15 <<https://goo.gl/FRGuWi>>, viewed 11 September 2016.

reveals socio-symbolic skills around Catholicism, that arise with the autonomization favored by digital mediatization. This process even surpasses the fear of possible recrimination by those responsible for the page, by the Church institution or by other Catholic users.

6 Brazilian Catholic peripheral minority: “Diversidade Católica” case

Beyond the institutional aspects of Catholicism – which, as I could present until here, is reconstructed in the reconnections of various inter-agents – the digital mediatization coverage also involves a process of communicational autonomization. In the case of religion, this leads to new religious configurations, in which common subjects “take the word,” in a social and public manner, re-signifying religious meanings in general. That is, the Internet, for its ease of access and of use, and for the expansion of the reach and the scope of social interactions, gives the power of a “public word” to those who had no access to the traditional media and ecclesiastical apparatus.

Given the current socio-cultural and especially the ecclesial context, it is possible to highlight cases in which such actions publicly explicit the conflicts within Catholicism. One of the most controversial issues in contemporary Catholicism is precisely the gay issue and gender identity. In the global Catholic context, a new “ecclesial subject” is emerging, one that requires his/her space and recognition in the Church: the homosexual person. This subject gained even more strength with the election of Pope Francis, whom, at the beginning of his pontificate, at an in-flight press conference returning from Brazil in 2013, said the famous phrase: “If a person is gay and seeks God and has good will, who am I to judge?”¹⁶ the first time in history that the word “gay” was pronounced by a pontiff.

In the Brazilian ecclesial context, this reality also becomes even stronger, although between tensions and mistrusts. One of the main journals of Catholic theological and pastoral reflection in Brazil, *Vida Pastoral*, raised the issue of homoaffectivity and the Christian faith in its edition of December 2014, causing a great debate. In it, Luis Correa Lima, a Catholic priest and theologian, said:

An important sign of the times is the visualization of the homosexual population. [...] The gays are part of society and, while visualizing themselves, they aspire to full citizenship, with the same rights and duties of others. [...] There are many gays in the church. [...] There is no doubt that this reality is part of the existential peripheries appointed by the Pope. (Lima 2014, p. 29-30, author’s trans., emphasis added)

16 <<http://goo.gl/O65hEH>>, viewed 11 September 2016.

In this reflection, the limits, needs, and possibilities of working on this issue in the Catholic context become clear. It is “an important sign of the times,” as Lima says, i.e. an emerging socio-cultural reality that provokes and invites the Church to see that fact from a transcendent perspective, from its own mission as a Christian ecclesial community. This “sign” must be “visualized” in the culture, *communicated* – with all that that implies.

The communicational action of the *Diversidade Católica* group is part of this context of affirmation and search of recognition from the Catholic gay people. The group was born in 2006, in Rio de Janeiro, presenting itself as “a group of lay Catholics who understands it is possible to live two seemingly antagonistic identities: being Catholic and being gay, in a wide sense of the term, including all sexual diversity (LGBT).”¹⁷ The group also reiterates its fidelity to the Church (“We are inalienable members of the Roman Catholic Apostolic Church”).¹⁸ It is therefore a case of autonomization and publicization of a specific “socio-ecclesial subject” (the openly gay Catholic), who manifests his/her communicational skills as a “lay-amateur.”

In an interview for this research, psychologist Cristiana Serra, member of the group since 2008, offers more details about the group’s origin:

Diversidade was born on the Internet. In 2006, a group of people, some gay, some not [...], all closely linked to Catholicism, began to talk about how to reconcile these two identities [gay and Catholic]. And they decided to organize a material, and so a website was created. [...] And it’s funny because, from the site [...] people began to ask for help, ask questions and ask for guidance. So the demand for in-person meetings arose from the divulgation of the site [...] So a little network began to emerge there, creating the website”. (pers. comm., 16 October 2015, author’s trans., emphasis added)

Thus, the reconciliation of the two identities, Catholic and gay, by the group, is permeated by the possibilities of the socio-digital culture, through the creation of a website,¹⁹ which favored a “demand” in terms of help, orientation, and meetings. The “little [offline] network” generated the online network, with a greater range. What subsisted in a latent mode within the Catholic Church found a communicational “escape point,” an opening in the “ecclesial closet,” thanks to a symbolic action in the digital environment.

It is, therefore, an emergent “peripheral minority” in the contemporary ecclesial context. Its “minority,” however, goes beyond the quantitative inferiority of its members (whether in digital terms, with its 4,700 “likes” on the Facebook page²⁰, for example, whether in socio-ecclesial terms,

17 <http://www.diversidadecatolica.com.br/quem_somos.php>, viewed 11 September 2016.

18 <https://www.facebook.com/diversidadecatolica/info/?tab=page_info>, viewed 11 September 2016.

19 <<http://www.diversidadecatolica.com.br>>, viewed 11 September 2016.

20 <<https://www.facebook.com/diversidadecatolica/>>.

compared with a Catholic “majority”), and involves the struggle to have an active voice in the ecclesial context, to “be heard” by the Church as a whole, as gay people in the Catholic context who still have no access to a “full voice” in the main spaces of the life of the Church. Gay people can be seen as a minority, in this sense, because they constitute “a place where the flow of transformation an [Catholic] identity or a [ecclesial] power relationship is encouraged,” promoting “a group positioning within a conflictual dynamics” (Sodré 2005, p. 12) around gender issues.

By proposing a dissident discourse, according to certain social readings, or even heretical, according to some Catholic readings, the group is located in both the ecclesial border, and in the social frontier. It points to what Pope Francis himself calls “existential peripheries.” For the pontiff,

Usually we move ourselves into spaces that somehow we control. This is the center. But, as we leave the center, we discover more things. And when we look at the center from these new things we discovered, from these new positions, from that periphery, we see that the reality is different. [...] We see reality better from the periphery than from the center. (Francis 2015, author’s trans.)

In the Church context, homosexual people, as in the case of *Diversidade Católica*, are not in the “center,” because, in the Catholic culture in general, they are still seen as “sinful,” “anomalous,” “pathologically deviant,” despite all the progress of ecclesial reflection, far from an supposed Christian ideal. As periphery, *Diversidade Católica* is part of a set of “cultural systems that are characterized by being less regulated (less described) by the dominant ‘nucleus’” of the ecclesiastical institution (Ibrus 2015, p. 236, author’s trans.). Therefore, the group operates in a relatively autonomously manner within the Church, as a Catholic vanguard or subculture, with a certain independence of the ecclesiastical structures of power.

The communicational scope and range of the group, despite its “peripheral minority,” gained a catalyzation and an exponentiation with the creation of the Facebook page, according to Serra: “Facebook certainly became a huge channel of contact. Very big, very big. There are many messages per day. [...] A lot of people came to the group via Facebook. [...] In fact, I would venture to say that Facebook today is our main channel of communication” (pers. comm., 16 October 2015, author’s trans., emphasis added).

This communicational process found its climax in the process of divulgation, organization and evaluation of the 1st National LGBT Catholics Meeting, held in Rio de Janeiro on 26 July 2014. The meeting was sponsored by *Diversidade Católica*, along with several other Brazilian Catholic gay groups, as a time of sharing and exchange of experiences between Brazilian LGBT Catholics about “who they are, how they live their religious identity, how they feel the community to which

they belong, and how their action occur on the various organized lay groups.”²¹ According to Serra, “a lot of people arrived at the Meeting by the Internet, by the event page on Facebook. As a platform, the level of interaction is impressive. [...] Without Facebook, the National Meeting would not have happened (pers. comm., 16 October 2015, author’s trans.).

During the period of the National Meeting, the page created a specific “event” on Facebook, placing as its cover photo a detail of the poster of the event (Fig. 3).



Figure 3 – Cover photo of the page of the 1st National LGBT Catholics Meeting on Facebook. Source: <<https://www.facebook.com/events/733498820049932/>>.

Noteworthy is the title of the meeting (“Your faith has saved you”), which refers to a phrase of the Gospel, spoken by Jesus to a woman cured of a hemorrhage (Mark 5, 25-34; Luke 8, 43-48) which serves as the theme of the meeting. The central element of the image – linked to this phrase – is the pink sheep, a strong symbolism both in Catholicism, as in the culture in general. In the New Testament, Jesus identifies himself as the “good shepherd” and the “gate for the sheep” (John 10, 7-18). As for common sense, the symbol of the “black sheep” is used to negatively identify a person who is different from the others, that is outside of the “normal” standards set by society. Here, however, the sheep is pink, a color traditionally used as a social critique of the gender standards. This symbolic construction links various symbolic meanings of the sheep: as the person who follows Jesus, as a “different” person, as a social criticism related to the gender issue.

In these cases, the graphic-visual skills of the group emerges as a visible knowledge of the languages involved in such symbolic constructions, which allow to realize that the action of the lay-amateur does not presuppose communicational ignorance or “amateurism,” in a pejorative sense, but rather a non-institutional identification with some media corporations or the ecclesiastical

21 <<https://goo.gl/gLB3Nf>>, viewed 11 September 2016.

institution, allowing them such autonomy and freedom for re-signifying religious practices and symbols.

As a result of the National Meeting, beyond the publication of a manifesto²², a National Network of Catholic LGBT groups was also articulated, composed LGBT Catholic groups present at the Meeting, bringing together various groups of Brazilian LGBT Catholics. Such a network, in its very articulation, defined an official Facebook page as its “headquarters”.²³

The National Meeting and the social and ecclesial tension that it caused,²⁴ therefore, point to the process of circulation of the “Catholic” on the web, involving numerous inter-relations between the group and the other inter-agents: an offline network of people and Catholic gay groups that activate online communicational networks on Facebook around the event, that, as the main result, gives rise to the “institutionalization” of a national network of gay Catholics and the establishment of an online communicational network on Facebook. We thus have a triple network that pervades the online communicational networks in which *Diversidade Católica* is present: homoaffectivity, Catholicism and digital culture.

The users in general also begin to recognize the competence and experience of the administrators of the *Diversidade Católica* page on Facebook as “experts” (or even as “authorities”) in its proposal, not only by visiting the page, but also by “likening” it, and, especially, by entering into dialogue with those responsible in the comments of each post.

Diversidade Católica page on Facebook, thus, points to the transformational processes of Catholicism in the contemporary cultural melting pot, and demands a shift of the point of view of the observer to perceive the circulation of the “Catholic” and the construction of Catholicism itself also from alternative, peripheral, minority communicational actions, and not only from the central point of view of the institution on the homosexual issue. That is, in the context of digital mediatization of Catholicism, the *Diversidade Católica* page is a “symbolic dispositive with an ethical-political intentionality within the counter-hegemonic struggle” (Sodré 2005, p. 12) of the Catholic symbolic universe.

22 <<https://goo.gl/FO6kO4>>.

23 <<https://www.facebook.com/redenacionalcatolicoslgbt>>, viewed 11 September 2016.

24 The event had a considerable media impact in the Brazilian media, for example in some of the most important newspapers from Brazil: *O Estado de S. Paulo* (<<http://goo.gl/eZq4jW>>), *O Globo* (<<http://goo.gl/dJUInM>>) e *O Povo* (<<http://goo.gl/CxpaFe>>), among others; viewed 11 September 2016

7 Conclusions

In the circulatory flow in online communicational networks, it is possible to see that the poles of production and reception do not disappear, but it is no longer possible to settle them in a specific social subject, whether the media corporations or the Church itself. In societies in mediatization, the communicational processes have equipped potentially all the persons with the consciousness and the reflective resources with which they can construct meaning on the world and give sense to the broader culture.

Thus, in the process of mediatization of religion, new modalities of perception and expression of religious beliefs and practices begin to arise in the digital environment, thanks to the publicization of religious elements and the accessibility to such elements by numerous inter-agents, everywhere and at any time. Based on its own systems of meaning, local communicational practices of Catholicism on the web can reinvent Catholicism itself, through circulatory processes.

The inter-agents in general now have a “direct” access to the most different levels of the ecclesiastical institution, via socio-digital platforms. In these interactions, though strongly mediated by the interfaces and the protocols of the platforms, there is a recontextualisation of what is published by the institution to other media or social environments. In the deployment of online communicational networks, ordinary users can feed a broad theological and ecclesial debate. The process of circulation, thus, is catalyzed, by means of approximations and tensions regarding to the meanings constructed on Catholicism. Acting in a collective cosmos of meanings about the “Catholic” and internalizing it, networked individuals subjectively appropriate this reservoir and this historical matrix of meanings, and reconstruct them in a collective and public manner. The ecclesial institution itself, while entering the networked flow of meanings, is re-signified and “re-institutionalized” by the communicational actions of society.

In this complex articulation between networked socialization, digital technicisation and socio-religious symbolization, a context of reinvention of religious practices emerges. Religious experience is transformed by the networked interaction among users, revealing not only a plurality of religious meanings about Catholicism, but also the possibility of its public reconstruction, in a break of scale, scope and speed in relation to the socio-historical processes of constitution of Catholicism.

If social action on religion modifies its existence, such a process is therefore exponentiated when permeated by the media scope and speed. The circulation of the “Catholic” on the web leads to its own *reconstruction*, as an invention/production of something “new” (construction) or as an experimentation/transformation of something already existing (deconstruction). The “Catholic” is continuously instated and re-signified in the online interactions, either by the institution itself, as by

individuals. The networked communicational processes on Catholicism establish not only the “Catholic” as a discourse, but also new systems of religious perception and expression.

In these cases, a know-how traditionally reserved to clerics about Catholicism is now “decentralized,” in a process in which community ties are constituted and supported through the networked communicational action. Then, there is the disappearance of an *a priori* control by the clergy and by the institution in theological-doctrinal Catholic terms, which further reinforces the *social selection* of the elements that compose the “Catholic.” Thus, it is possible to see a political-ecclesial practice of those who I call lay-amateur, who develop critical observation circuits of Catholicism itself and of constitution of another Catholic point of view, from where they can expose their voice and their own theology, which, without such a circuit, could continue invisibilized.

In networked media processes, the “faithful,” the “laypersons” are not just mere “hearers of the Word,” but also possible “producers of a word” about faith, which is communicated on the web, ceasing to be a “personal word” to become a “social word”, while entering the flow of communicational circulation. Hence, there is the emergence of a communicational democratization of religious expertise and a multiplication of the contact zones between the Church and society. Faithful, not faithful or unfaithful inter-agents build the recognition of their credibility within the religious sphere, seeking to deepen or reverse the actual practices of the ecclesiastical institution, and to transform what is negatively perceived as a “fact” in the Catholic space. Society re-signifies the socio-digital platforms as an alternative space for religious active, creative and inventive agents such as minorities and peripheral groups in the Catholic Church.

What it is possible to perceive in online communicational networks is precisely the erasing of the boundaries between religious experts and lay-amateurs on the internet, that is, forms of participation and contribution of users in the digital world. In such cases, there is the manifestation of a communicational power of the inter-agents, through a lay empowerment. This “mediatically emancipated lay” reaches an “ordinary expertise” through daily experience and practice. The networked “Catholic” passes thus by a bottom-up reinvention – a process operated not by the church hierarchy, nor by the media corporations, but by connected social bases, which propagate their religious inventions to wider networks by gestures of communicational cooperation.

Thus, the “Word becomes network,” and the sacred circulates and flows through the intricacies of the internet, by an endless actions of construction of meaning by numerous networked inter-agents. Such social discourses about the “Catholic” embody a democratic and secularizing action of society on Catholic beliefs and practices. As a result, it is possible to say that, in the religious practices on the web, the possibility of the lay-amateurs to publicly say the “Catholic” is also a properly *theo-political action* of publicization, visibilization, recognition and legitimation of ecclesial minorities or of peripheral Catholic beliefs and practices. And it is a *theo-political action*

on two levels: firstly, by inscribing the social perception of the “Catholic” in a broader and more public media space than the traditional religious practice or formal theological reflection, involving society in general; secondly, by enabling the construction of processes that are not yet fully established in the relations between society and religion, nor are they fully, institutionally recognize.

In this Catholic polysemy, between contradictions and complementarities, the inter-agent encounters the possibility of nurturing and constructing a communicational-religious system from its religious construction. Among the alleged homogeneity of Brazilian Catholicism, there is the emergence of its pluralism in the communicational metamorphosis of practices and beliefs that are reinvented in relation to what is dominant, traditional and conventional in the Catholic socio-cultural context.

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Algorithmic Absolution: The Case of Catholic Confessional Apps

Sasha A.Q. Scott

Abstract

This article explores the Catholic ritual of confession as practiced through the use of mobile apps. Confession is a surprisingly persistent social form and in this article I begin by contextualising the relationship between society, confession and technology before presenting a case study of Catholic confessional apps that covers their design, marketing, and user feedback from review forums. This throws up a series of important questions about how we understand religious authenticity and authority in practices of faith that have a computational agent taking moral deviations as ‘data input’. How should we conceptualise these applications when an algorithm imparts absolution, when penance is assigned by computational code? Observing that most people do not question the automation of the confessional ritual and that users feel their use of confessional apps as entirely legitimate forms of religious practice, I argue that questions of authenticity are secondary to those of authority. In the traditional Sacrament of Penance a priest, acting in persona Christi as the minister of Christ’s mercy and drawing upon canonical law, recites the Rites of Penance, thereby performing the transition from the state of ‘penitent’ to ‘absolved’. The replacement of a priest with the silent logics of algorithmic automation has profound implications for the authoritative power of confession as a transformative ritual.

Keywords

Online ritual, mobile apps, confession, algorithm, authority, authenticity, digital religion, ethics

1 Introduction

When *Confession: A Roman Catholic App* was first launched in 2011 it elicited a mixture of sarcasm and sneering from the press, with the New York Times' Maureen Down penning a Lords Prayer for the digital age (Our Father, who art in pixels...) and concluding that 'nothing is sacred anymore, not even the sacred'. Marketed as an 'aid for every penitent...[through] a personalised examination of conscience', the user of 'Confession' sets up a password protected account and proceeds to list their sins in accordance with the ten commandments. The user is invited to confess and declare contrition, whereafter the screen shows the receipt of absolution and displays with a prayer for further reflection. Despite being widely derided as inauthentic (see Sacasas 2011 for a review of media coverage), the app nevertheless remains popular across a growing number of platforms. Similar applications have proliferated with the same structural format: progressive stages of sorrow, confession, absolution and penance followed in the traditional rites. Combined, they have been downloaded hundreds of thousands of times. *Confession: A Roman Catholic App* even carries an imprimatur from Bishop Kevin Rhoades of Fort Wayne-South Bend, a first of its kind. In stark contrast to the mainstream press there has been a huge amount of support for them through online Christian communities (see Mattingley 2011, Rey 2014). Additionally, these apps sit within a larger body of confessional platforms whereby users admit to moral deviations with varying degrees of publicity and anonymity.

This article is concerned with understanding how the use of confessional Apps constitutes part of an increasingly diverse range of religious practices that often fall outside traditional thinking. In terms of the confessional, I want to talk about how the rituals performed with these apps are felt to be authentic (if they are), and how we should conceptualise them when an algorithm imparts absolution, when penance is assigned by computational code. The subject of mobile applications is still very new, and it is only now that studies are beginning to appear. At the heart of any computational artefact is an algorithm: a set of mathematical procedures for transforming input data into output data. It sounds innocuous, yet algorithms are a key governing logic in society with 'the power to enable and assign meaningfulness' (Langlois 2013). In his prescient article on the social implications of algorithms Tarleton Gillespie begins to unpack the complex dimensions of algorithmic relevance, arguing that we need to pay 'close attention to where and in what ways the introduction of algorithms into human knowledge practices may have political ramifications' (2013, p168). Whilst theorists like David Berry (2011) and Ted Shripas (2015) have begun to explore the phenomenology of algorithms, there is much work to be done on in terms of case studies and contextual accounts. Totaro and Ninno (2014) go as far as arguing that the algorithm is an essential 'interpretive key' of modernity. The case of confessional apps has a particular veracity because of the significance of the human agent the algorithm is replacing: the Catholic priest.

The question of confessional apps reveals a series of wider issues about the relationship between religion, digital media and culture as reflected in a rich and growing body of literature (Campbell 2005, 2012, Connelly 2012, Lundby 2012, Helland 2013). Religious practices have been shown as relevant and authentic across a number of social media platforms, from Twitter (Cheong 2012b), Facebook (Abrahms et al 2013, Miller et al 2013), Second Life (Grieve 2011) and YouTube (Hirschkind 2012, Warner 2013, Scott 2015, 2016). My approach is at times contrary to Hjarvard's (2008) influential paper on the mediatisation of religion, which argues that religion is being 'subsumed' by the logics of media in terms of regulation, symbolic content and individual practice. Instead I argue that these are not substitutions but adaptations and renegotiations: of traditions, authenticity, authority and meaning. Confession – like all ritual – is dependent on the perception of authenticity, and if users report these practices as authentic then that should, quite simply, be enough. In this article I make the case for moving beyond questioning the *legitimacy* of digital religion and instead explore the implications of having a computational agent at the centre of personal religious practice.

I begin by reviewing the role of confession in society, and why it has such resonance in wider debates between technology and religion. Confession is a surprisingly persistent form, and remains part of our media landscape. I then turn to the particulars of the formal confessional apps, looking at how they function and what form they take. My thinking moves between two parallel trajectories. The first is concerned with human perception: how is the app (and by proxy the algorithm) understood by users? How, if at all, does computational agency factor into how the app is used, how it is perceived, and how it is incorporated into everyday religious practice by users. I draw upon user discussions on review sites to see how users self-report their experience of the app. I observe that for most the computational is not even considered an issue: it is very rarely questioned and most users only talk negatively when discussing technical problems (as opposed to ethical ones). The second line of thinking considers how we should conceptualise the algorithm in terms of the role it plays in this most intriguing of contexts.

2 Confession: A short social history

Confession has played an important role in the history of all societies and major religions in some form or another. In Buddhism, the monastic confession of wrongdoings to elders is mandatory, and the sutras of the Pali Canon recount Buddha himself hearing confessions of the Bhikkhus. In Judaism the Ashamnu confession makes up part of the daily supplications in which sins are confessed communally and in the plural ("We have incurred guilt, we have betrayed...");

confession for sins against a fellow man involves confession to the victim as a requirement before forgiveness can be received from God. In Islam, seeking forgiveness from God (Istighfar) is an essential aspect of everyday worship, invoked through the repetition of the Arabic *astaghfirullah* ('I seek forgiveness from Allah'). Confession is in all the Christian traditions, in various forms. Indeed, the Lord's Prayer, common to all branches of the faith, was taught by Jesus to the Disciples according to the New Testament (Gospel of Mathew 6:5-13, Gospel of Luke 11:1-4), and contains the request for the forgiveness of sins. Yet no religious confession is so rich as the Roman Catholic tradition. Known as penance or reconciliation, confession is seen as an essential and fundamental part of the Catholic faith and is understood as performing a reconciliation of the soul with the grace of God. The Catholic Church refers to James 5:16, "confess your sins to one another" and to Jesus addressing the Apostles thus: "Whose sins you forgive are forgiven them, and whose sins you retain are retained" (John 20:23) when explaining the biblical basis for the sacrament. Catholic confession has moved between the private and public confessional throughout history. In mediaeval Catholicism, sins were confessed openly as something 'done' during service, rather than a private communication with God alone. It was only after the counter-reformation that the sacrament of penance moved from the social to the personal and became the private conversation between priest and confessor as we generally know it today. But the confession of sin, whether in front of a priest or congregation (in the loosest term), has always involved a complex yet vital bridge between a real and an imagined audience. A priest constitutes the smallest of all possible audiences, but they serve as conduit to the whole church, a heavenly public, and to God himself.

The Reverend Robert Barron (2011) argues – somewhat hopefully – that when lacking a proper *ecclesiastical* outlet for dealing with sin we will search in desperation for alternatives. It is certainly true that we see alternative forms of confession throughout society, but I believe this reflects a more basic social role for confession than any lack of religious institutional options. Instead, I would suggest the rather more prosaic answer lies somewhere between an individual motivation for acceptance, acknowledgement and validation, and our public desire for the voyeuristic consumption of the 'authentic' (Wilson 2007). Media researchers are now familiar with the phenomenon of self-disclosure, exposure and the blurring of private and public affairs in the mass media. Bill Clinton's confession to 'intimate relations' with Monika Lewinski followed the formula of a classical degradation ritual and was a natural precursor to talk shows such as Oprah, Jerry Springer and Jeremy Kyle whereby we witness the ritualistic admission of sins before an audience. The closely related shows of Judge Judy, Judge Faith and others additionally include participants being administered some form of punishment for their indiscretions. On the same continuum we find the talent shows of American Idol and The X Factor in which the admonishment of poor or inadequate behaviour is an integral aspect of our entertainment, whilst reality TV has long incorporated the video diary as a key narrative tool that valorises the confessional 'journey' of

contestants (Biressi and Nunn 2012). In common is the provision of a public platform in which to articulate one's sins for *judgement*. These phenomena all betray a search for absolution through the inclusion into some kind of 'moral community', however loose or ill defined. As Michel Foucault explains:

We have singularly become a confessing society. The confession has spread its effects far and wide... One confesses ones crimes, one's sins one's thoughts and desires, ones illnesses and troubles; ...One confesses in public and in private, to one's parents, one's educators, one's doctor, to those one loves; one admits to oneself in pleasure and in pain...Western man has become a confessing animal. (1978, p. 59)

Parallel to the confessional format of talk shows and reality television, digital technology has given rise to new forms of anonymous confession. The site Postsecret invites the public to send in a secret that 'is true and has never been heard' (PostSecret 2016), has now been running for 12 years and has a cult like following with hundreds of thousands of submissions from across the world. The YouTube confessional is an established phenomenon whereby video diaries contain the disclosure of intimate secrets. Twitter has given rise to many enduring confessional hashtags such as #confession, #Iwishiwas and #wheniwas13, and in many ways blogs are the original online confessional, as argued by Brock (2013). And as web access is increasingly made through mobile devices and less via a search engine or internet browser there has been a proliferation of confessional apps, such as Secret, YikYak, Whisper and Let's Confess. Whilst by no means all of our digital modes of communication are confessional it does seem that they flourish in the new media economy. As Poletti (2011) explains through her analysis of PostSecret, it is the simple possession of a secret that connects us. By acknowledging and sharing in the *status* of having a secret – i.e. a transgression, a sin – we place ourselves as complicit in an emotional fantasy of reciprocity and belonging. Most of these platforms contain a 'community' aspect: secrets are for sharing, otherwise the catharsis of externalising them is absent. The YouTube confessional is directed to and consumed by a vast and unimaginable audience; PostSecret is visited by hundreds of thousands of visitors each month; Twitter hashtags are the essence of connecting to a discursive body and define inclusion; secular confessional apps publicise, socialise and commodify your discretions by making them into entertainment for others. So whilst a meaningful sense of 'forgiveness' or 'absolution' as traditionally understood is lost, these platforms provide a cathartic release of guilt that is replaced with feelings of belonging, acceptance, and community (Toy 2015).

Importantly, all these different confessional forms – traditional or modern, religious or secular, public or private – maintain an authority figure. They are often symbolic and/or ceremonial, playing the role 'on behalf of' those who they represent: God, the public, the judiciary etc. But they are there, and they are central to the functioning legitimacy of the ritual and any absolution that may

follow. We must therefore conclude *a confession must be witnessed*. As Marshall (1998) observes, confession undeniably demands an audience. It is not necessary to entirely reconcile the Sacrament of Penance, Jerry Springer and #confession, but it is important to acknowledge they occupy the same conceptual space. Responses to our sins are either crafted through years of knowledge of scripture or the whimsical offerings of a social network. Yet they all contain a symbolic human agent acting in judgement of sin. As we will now discuss, Catholic confessional apps substitute this human agent with computer code, and I argue that this makes them a fundamentally different phenomenon, particularly in respect of moral authority.

3 Catholic Confessional Apps: Mapping the field

The most famous of these apps is *Confession: A Roman Catholic App*. It was developed by Little iApps and released for iPhone, iPad and later Android devices in 2011; *The Confession App* was developed by Web4U, and claims to prepare you ‘in a gentle and comforting way for the Catholic Sacrament of Confession’; *Reconciled With God: Catholic Confession* follows the same formula. Developed by Sunil Thomas it suggests that preparing well is the secret to confession. *Mea Culpa*, *iConfess – Confession Handbook and Guide*, *ConfessionAL* and *ConfessIt* all fall into the same category. All these apps follow the same basic structure with variations in details and architecture. In order to map the field we carried out a thematic analysis on the descriptions used by developers and on the review comments left by users on Google Play and the iTunes store, accessed between the 5/11/15 and the 12/11/16 for all the apps listed above, aggregating the comments across different apps. This methodological decision was made because we were not concerned with the differences between each app, but rather the perception and everyday practice of confessional apps as a genre. Not all the apps had review comments across both stores, but in total the dataset consisted of 311 comments across all the platforms. Between them these apps have well over a quarter of a million downloads.



Figure 1: Catholic Confession App logos. Left to right: *Confession: A Roman Catholic App*, *iConfess*, *Mea Culpa*, *ConfessIt*, *The Confession App*.

3.1 Marketing

It is important to acknowledge that these apps are not sold or marketed to replace the sacrament of confession. They are sold as aids, as trackers, as helpful guides that are interwoven with tradition and, where possible, institutional authority. *Mea Culpa* declares unambiguously “It is NOT a suitable replacement for the sacrament of confession. You CAN NOT use it to confess via the internet or over the phone.” (AppCrawler 2015), and *Confession* says it is “an aid for every penitent” (Little I Apps 2011). As Cheong and Ess (2012) point out, this highlights how this type of technology seeks to compliment and amplify traditional religious practices rather than replace. We are also told they can be used for the general examination of conscience, and do not only need to be part of the strict ritual of Sacrament of Penance. *The Confession App* suggests it can be used ‘by anyone of any group’ (Web4u, 2015), but it is highly unlikely that it would have any appeal to those outside the Catholic faith.

3.2 Design

In terms of design and user experience they all follow the same basic format of three stages: The first is an examination of conscience. This entails cataloguing sins in a thorough way. Most apps work on a simple Ten Commandments format, with each commandment leading to a sub-menu in which potential sins related to the commandments are listed and can be activated with finger-tap. The lists are extensive but not exhaustive, and most have the option of adding additional sins that either fall out of the rubric listed or have personal significance. The second aspect consists of a step-by-step guide of what to do inside the confessional. They list instructions and highlight script to be spoken aloud. This aspect is informed by the first: the script will be tailored to the list of sins you have catalogued in preparation, so there is no moving between screens or menus. This moves through the Act of Contrition and into Absolution. The last stage includes a space in which to record any acts of penance given by the priest. Beyond this broad structure the apps have a variety of other features. *iConfess* has an extensive collection of readings on confession, *ConfessionAL* includes a Biblical word game called ‘Heavenly Hangman’, which as strange as it seems is exactly what it describes. *Confession* has a library of prayers, both for Contrition and more traditional ones such as the Apostles’ Creed, Hail Mary and The Lords Prayer. *The Confession App* has fewer ‘extra’ features but contains an extensive guide to confession and how to use the app, including the menus ‘A brief history of confession’ and ‘do I need a priest?’ It is a reminder that these are still commercial products and each must compete in an increasingly crowded marketplace.

3.3 User feedback

Users report the apps almost universally in a positive light. The reviews reflect the diverse and highly personalised ways in which people incorporate the apps into the practice of their faith. This genre of apps is largely used as a memory aid, bringing focus and clarity to the ritual. As a result users report a reduction in anxiety that is often associated with the fear of forgetting one's sins whilst in the confessional with a priest, as Daniel Williams (2015) explains: "Now I'm focused on my confession more and less on saying things incorrectly". Users also report satisfaction at keeping an accurate, cumulative record of sins. A common theme in the reviews is the broad appeal that these apps have. They are declared as useful for new converts to the faith and those that have been active Catholics for many years; to the young because of their familiarity with the technology and to the old for a new form of engagement with faith; for the lapsed Catholic it is a very accessible way to re-connect with Confession and for the regular participant it is an easy tool to incorporate into the everyday. Where negative feedback is left it usually concerns technical issues such as the app being unstable, losing records or being incompatible with certain operating systems. Users often suggest improvements but these tend to be framed constructively. The most common suggestion is the inclusion of more reference text such as the Beatitudes or the Seven Deadly Sins. Occasional users comment that they do not feel entirely at ease using the phone in the confessional itself, but still reporting positive feedback from simply examining the conscience as part of everyday routine.

What is quite striking is when the developers are singled out for specific praise, which is observed quite regularly. Robert Sunderlin (2014) comments "Praise be to God the father almighty, his son our Lord, and the Holy spirit, that there are those who are using their technological talents to participate in grace"; Anne M (2015) exclaims "God Bless the developers of this app". The apps clearly have a great emotional importance to these users. In addition, it reflects an ease with which the technology is adopted. An explicit thanks to the developers shows they are aware of the conceptual location of these tools: they are not categorised alongside sacred texts but rather as *tools with which to practice faith*, as exemplified in comments by Sarah Farrier (2013) "A very gently and comforting piece of technology, you can use it on the go in your busy life".

Rachel Wagner (2013) has produced a six-class taxonomy of religious apps: *Prayer, Ritual, Sacred Text, Religious Social Media, Self-Expression* and *Focusing/Meditation*. As with so much religious practice, it is difficult to separate the wide range of observed behaviour concerning confessional apps into distinct singular classes. All the confessional apps qualify as ritual, yet they also refer to sacred texts throughout, they involve prayer, and they serve as focusing and meditative tools, as reported in the user feedback. So whilst it is certainly helpful to review the field, this type of taxonomy might serve to oversimplify the more interesting questions we could be asking. I am reminded of Christine Hine's (2015) important ethnographic work on internet and technology use

that she terms the E³ Internet: embedded, embodied, and everyday. The way in which people use these applications cannot be separated out as neatly as we might hope for the purpose of study. We must take a much more nuanced approach if we are to understand how they function in the practice of faith. These apps are not just technological constructs; they are shaped by the needs and desires of individual users.

4 Authenticity and Authority

Authenticity is a nebulous subject, but it has been the focus of much debate concerning media and religion (Hill-Smith 2009, Heidebrink et al 2011, Lundby 2011). In the context of religious practice, authenticity has two meanings that we must account for here: first, authenticity is a category through which to judge whether or not certain ‘objects’ are a legitimate part of a religious system. These can be symbols, beliefs, locations, rituals, etc. Secondly, it is a category with which to judge the participants in religious activity (Radde-Antweiler 2013). In other words, is the *system* authentic, and is the *experience* authentic? The second of these questions is relatively simple to address. The data is clear; users report an authentic experience over and over again. As with any ritual, the prescriptive validity stems from participation itself. The efficacy of ritual is found in its ability to energise the participants, produce an emotional energy, and increase focus on the shared action or object (confession), thereby intensifying the connection of the participants on the wider symbolic significance. The idea that this much be done synchronously and whilst copresent (as argued by Collins, 2004) is not only out-dated considering the latest thinking on technology and ritual, but does not even hold up when interrogated in terms of traditional ritual. In Hindu worship the presence of others is largely unimportant for daily rituals (Gupta 2002, quoted in Scheifinger 2012, p 121). In respect of Confession, the wider catholic community does not need to be present for sacrament; it is just the individual and the priest. But the ritual is deemed authentic because the wider catholic community knows intimately the intention and the content of the ritual, and this is why it has such enduring significance.

Authenticity is also bestowed upon these apps through the wider Catholic community. As mentioned, *Confession* was developed in consultation with two Catholic priests, Fr. Thomas Weinandy, OFM, the Exec. Director of the Secretariate for Doctrine and Pastoral Practices for the USCCB and Fr. Dan Scheidt, pastor of Queen of Peace Catholic Church in Mishawaka, Indiana, an official at the US conference of Bishops. In addition, Bishop Kevin C. Rhoades of the Diocese of Fort Wayne gave the app an official blessing, and bestowing the app with an imprimatur, making it the first of its kind. An imprimatur is itself a mark of authenticity, being an official declaration that

the text is free from moral or doctrinal error. This follows the agenda set out in Pope Benedict XVI's message in the 2010 World Communications Address in which he called upon the Catholic church to embrace digital technologies:

Using new communication technologies, priests can introduce people to the life of the Church and help our contemporaries to discover the face of Christ. They will best achieve this aim if they learn, from the time of their formation, how to use these technologies in a competent and appropriate way, shaped by sound theological insights and reflecting a strong priestly spirituality grounded in constant dialogue with the Lord.

On its first launch, the app appeared to gain support from the Vatican through Frederico Lombardi, director of the Holy Sea press office. However, due to some controversy in the media he later qualified his position, stating “It is essential to understand well the sacrament of penitence requires the personal dialogue between the penitent and the confessor and the absolution by the confessor... This cannot in any way be replaced by a technology application... One cannot talk in any way about a ‘confession via iPhone’,” (quoted in Mesia and Gilgoff 2011). However, this is exactly what users are reporting themselves as doing. It would seem that the legitimacy bestowed by official endorsement is important in user adoption of these platforms, but has less impact of how they then use them in their own personalised practices. Users create their own authentication strategies; they have different ways of explaining, justifying, and integrating the app into daily life and worship. Each must find their own way to navigate the sometimes brutal juxtaposition between technology and the ancient rituals of confession, in a process Heidebrink (2007) calls “individual rituality”. It is important to remember that whilst confession may require an uncomfortable engagement with one’s faults, it is essentially a healing process which when completed leaves the confessor absolved of sin and the threat of punishment removed. Authenticity is also linked to legitimate and consistent manifestations of sacred symbols. As such, users are not shy in reporting misquotes, errors and typos, and with an indignant gusto. This is because such indiscretion is a pollution of the sacred, and reflects how highly they are considered.

So it seems that questions of authenticity based simply on technology are problematic because they are grounded in out-dated notions. Discussions of the merits of the *real* vs. the *virtual* now sound positively arcane. Turkle’s (1995) argument that the virtual is ‘mere simulation’ simply does not hold true. Users report meaningful results, both practical and emotional. Even Heidi Campbell’s seminal essay on ‘Spiritualising the Internet’ (2005) needs realigning in this context: these are not ‘places’ we ‘go’ online. They do not have an *http://* or *www* prefix. They are embedded in our mobile devices, developed to be personal aids for personal practices. They do not engender ‘community’ in the very literal (and rather narrow) sense that social media does. Instead, ‘connection’ to a community is abstract and conceptual. It is a ‘felt’ inclusion in a community of

thought, belief and morality that is important, in contrast to the performative accumulation of ‘likes’ or ‘retweets’ driving the affective cycle of immediacy and visibility on the most popular social platforms. As Campbell argues, religious users of technology are guided by a different set of choices to secular users. It is less about desires and needs, and rather spiritual meanings and values that take precedence. We must be careful not to overgeneralise, but it is an important point. What we can take from this is that authenticity will be perceived through a different set of criteria. For the religious user, authenticity is simply what they understand to be a part of their own religious practice. Whether or not they consider the mediation of ritual to be qualitatively different if this mediation is performed through a computational agent (rather than a fixed text or even a priest) is a matter for themselves.

Religious authority is in many ways as nebulous an idea as that of authenticity. In his classic definition, Weber (1947) suggests authority arises from sacred traditions, appointment to office, or through divine or supernatural powers. Campbell (2007) identifies four layers of religious authority: hierarchy, structure, ideology and texts. What is really unarguable is that authority is performative, discursive and highly contextual (Cheong 2012a). Authority, much like authenticity, must be understood as vested, constructed and multidimensional. Technology is realigning relations in all aspects of the social world, and religion is no different. The ability of networks to undermine traditional hierarchical power structures is well known and uncontroversial. Turner (2007, p118) has stated that technology and associated cultures “undermine traditional forms of authority because they expand connected modes of communication”. This is certainly true, but the case of confessional apps suggests that it is not the entire equation because we can account for a certain amount of authority coming from the implicit and explicit endorsement by church figures as discussed above. As such, the church certainly appears to have found a way of expanding authority and influence through these platforms. What is certain is that this is an *expansion* of religious practices, and as such there are now new agents to account for in questions of authority. Just as web forum moderators are now in positions of authority to influence and even police discussions of faith, apps have an algorithmic agent that influences the sacrament of confession. The 1983 Code of Canon Law states: ‘A priest alone is the minister of the sacrament of penance’ but this does not hold true when we look at the practices being reported by users of these apps. It is therefore the question of authority that requires us to turn our attention to the silent role of algorithmic agency.

5 Locating the algorithmic

As we have discussed, confession is concerned with an internal examination of conscience and is therefore an *inherently moralistic ritual*. In the following section I want to discuss the significance of this if we remove, replace or combine the human actor (priest). It is my belief that in doing so we are in fact assigning a moral agency to the algorithmic component of these apps. There has recently been some very important work in trying to interrogate the role that algorithmic agents have in contemporary life that combines fields of philosophy, science and technology studies, and sociology. Tarleton Gillespie has argued for an account of what he terms 'social relevance algorithms' (2014, p171); David Berry has written a thesis on 'The Philosophy of Software' (2012); and Mathew Fuller makes the argument that we need to capture the 'conditions of possibility' that software establishes (2008, p1). What makes thinkers like Fuller, Gillespie and Berry so important is a consideration of software/algorithms/code respectively as material agents embedded in everyday life. We cannot understand the algorithmic divorced of the nature by which it is encountered. Computer code engenders a 'structure of feelings' by way of its integration into everyday life. David Berry gives us the term 'software avidities', adopted from biochemistry, to capture the intangible accumulative features of qualitative feelings and experiences brought about through or via software (2011, p6). The ontology of an algorithm is defined by its context, and it is this that I will try and unpack now.

Generally, networked software encourages a world predicated on personalisation and feedback mechanisms that bind human and non-human agents into new aggregates. This type of software is part of the growth in quantification and instant gratification that ubiquitous connectivity brings. There is now an immediacy to our social worlds that is having a material impact on our spiritual worlds, and it appears odd that questions of faith, penance, sin and morality would necessarily benefit from quantification, acceleration, and automation. These are, by very definition, aspects of the human condition that benefit from personal contemplation. When it concerns matters of faith, we cannot therefore see these systems as neutral. Every computer, smartphone, app and piece of software mediates our relationship with the world and therefore our relationships too. Rituals of faith are about setting apart: time, space etc. for conscious engagement with the sacred (Helland 2013). This process is at once the description and constitution of the sacred, and by its very definition sits in contrast with the profane and mundane. So in many ways the issue is not the artefact. The issue lies in the uncritical adoption of these platforms, and the ease with which these technologies have been domesticated into our everyday lives. As Silverstone (1994) observed, technology literally enter our homes (and increasingly become embedded in the human body, little more than a few threads of cotton from our skin at all times) and in doing so become imbued with additional meanings. A 'double articulation' occurs; as tools for conveying meaning and as

meaningful things in their own right. Mobile applications like *Confession* or *Mea Culpa* are experienced through a sleek graphic User Interface (GUI), projected through the crisp screens of our smartphones in little more than a reflexive click or swipe. We no longer have to ‘go to’ participate. By simply ‘being’ we are also ‘doing’. This may be useful for managing the household bills or responding to emails, but should our spiritual practices be so conjoined with the everyday?

Confession explains that it is a “Custom examination of Conscience based upon age, sex, and vocation (single, married, priest, or religious)” (little iApps 2016). Due to matters of intellectual copy write it is far from clear exactly how the algorithm might tailor the ritual to individual users. However, we can observe how personalisation manifests through the list of potential sins available for the penitent to choose. Figures 2 and 3 show comparative returns for the user profiles of 16 year old female and a 42 year old male on *Confession*, and there is a striking difference. Similarly, a child will not have a detailed list of sins relating to the Ten Commandments but instead sins are split simply between ‘responsibilities to other’ and ‘responsibilities to God’.

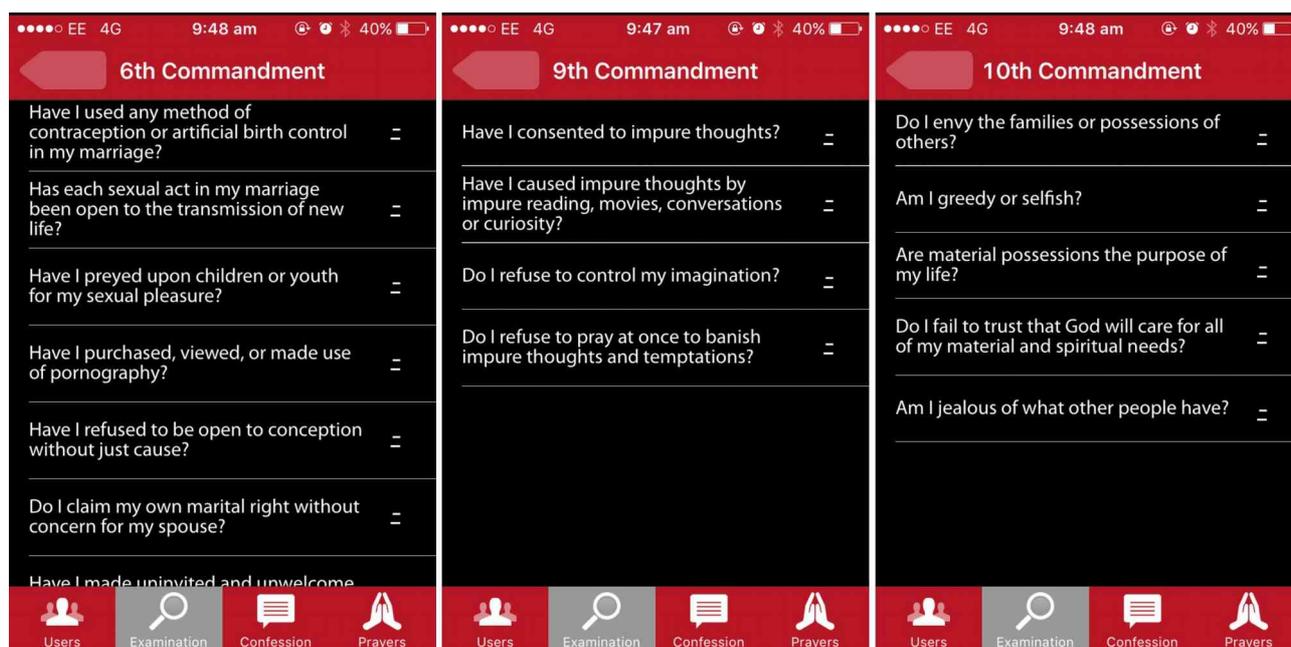


Figure 2: Potential sins generated by *Confession* for the profile of a 42 year old married male

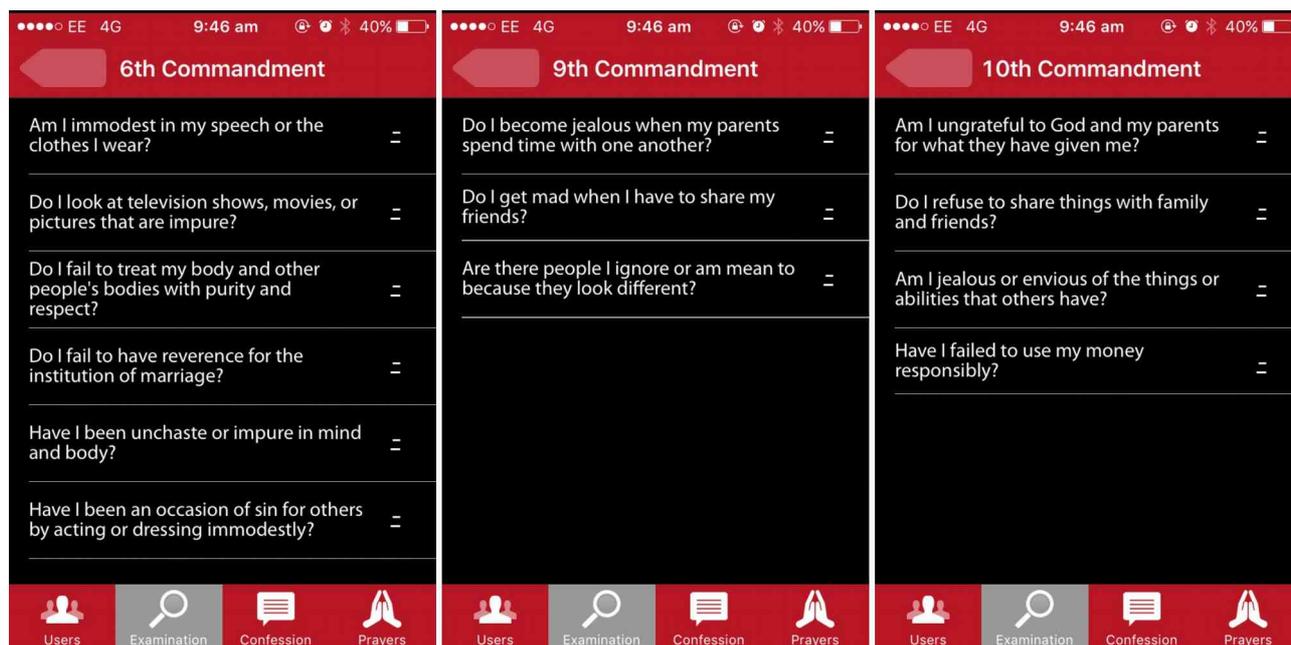


Figure 3: Potential sins generated by Confession for the profile of a 16 year old single female.

We must remember that code is developed to order, and there is general understanding that ethical decisions should be left by designers for users (Kraemer, van Overveld & Peterson, 2011). The code writers for *Confession* would very likely never have entered into the philosophical consideration of their tasks – who would when undertaking 'just another job' at work? Most would not be aware of the final product they were working on. Microsoft Office 2013 contains approximately 45 million lines of code; Google Chrome between 5-7 million; the software in a pacemaker approximately 80,000 (MacCandless 2015) The average iPhone app contains just 40,000 lines of code and is therefore a much simpler object, but still that is an incredible amount of information which is almost impossible for one developer to consider for all its potential and abstract implications. There is never a 'right' or 'wrong' way to write code. Much like the practice of medicine – seen as a hard science but fundamentally an interpretive practice with no single answer to most problems – every programmer will tackle a development task in a slightly different way. How an algorithm is designed to process data has profound implications for the way it behaves as a social agent. For example, if the first question a filtering mechanism asks the dataset concerns age, gender or race, this can have serious ramifications for everything that follows, defining inclusion, relevance and prominence and accessibility. We are all complicit in assuming we live in world of algorithmic objectivity and impartiality, but this is a comforting construct subconsciously deployed as a defence mechanism, and allows us to defer engagement with the difficult questions. Think for example on the case of automated cars: faced with the choice of driving into a crowd of

pedestrians to save the owner's life from an imminent collision, who decides? Is it a choice in 'user settings'; a design level decision inaccessible to the end user; or do we let the algorithm decide the merits of each case as it instantaneously assesses the situation? These are not innocuous questions.

Platforms such as *Confession* are tested by developers for usability, but the individual application is driven by the data input of the user. Consider the observation by Lev Manovich that "together, data structures and algorithms are the two halves of the ontology of the world according to a computer" (1999, 84). Hardware and software are essentially meaningless machines until they have data to process. We must stop and reflect on this in the computational sense: our input is a unique and fluid dataset that is slowly being entered into the computer for it to process. It is a body of data being put through a set of computational procedures, and the only practical different to a static dataset is that information is processed incrementally. The data input here has two categories: first, what we consider 'traditional' demographic data, entered into the app when setting up a user profile. So age, gender, race, marital status, geographic location etc. The second class of data is a sub-set of what Richard Rogers terms the 'post-demographic' (data of the digital realm: our actions, preferences, emotions, connections, etc.). In the confessional apps, this data is constituted by the moral deviations of the user: our individual and evolving catalogue of sins, recorded in perpetuity, and reduced to a series of zeros and ones. An algorithm, at its most basic, functions as *data-question-process-return*. If the input data is neutral, we can assume the return will be neutral. If the input data is moral, *by definition* the process return will have moral implications. Take Kranzberg's first law of technology (1986) 'Technology is neither good nor is it bad; nor is it neutral'.

This is *vital* when we consider religious apps that return a set of instructions or advice. If an algorithm is telling you to do something that concerns matters of faith and morality, we must be able to ask how and why it is producing that particular set of instructions: is it a generic return? Is it selected from a list of pre-sets? Is it random or is it tailored? During the ritual of confession we presume the priest (we maintain the illusion at least) will be drawing upon a lifetime's worth of seminary training, his rich personal knowledge of scripture, the teachings of his own denomination and the application of his own moral reckoning. What similar resource for the algorithm driving *Mea Culpa*? Does *Confession* search scripture for relevant teachings on the topic of a particular sin? Does *Confession* run on a learning algorithm that will build its knowledge of different transgressions over time? Does *Confession* remember our previous sins and decide on an appropriate penance accordingly? Is absolution based on context and relativity, or is it a 'one size fits all' return mechanism? If two users confess the same sin, do they receive the same advise? If the two users commit the same sin yet communicate it in different ways (i.e. as an additional sin not selected from a drop-down menu) do they get the same response? In short, *how clever* is the algorithm driving results? How relevant is the individual user to the response produced by the algorithm? As Kraemer et al. (2011) explain, these questions reflect the basic 'value judgments' that

algorithms are constantly making. As such, no matter how uncomfortable it may be, the design principles of an algorithm thereby contain an implicit or explicit ethical dimension.

In theological terms a priest acts *in persona Christi* – in the person of Christ – during the Sacrament of Penance. The priest receives from the church the power of judgement over the penitent, as a direct bridge between man and God. This is Van Gennep's *transitional phase* of liminal space, representing nothing less than the power to reassign meaning (1960[1906]). It constitutes “an actual passing through the threshold that marks the boundary between two phases” (Szakolczai, 2009): the sinner transformed into the absolved; he that is separated from God by his sin becomes he who is reconciled with God through the removal of sin. No matter how they are marketed, people are using these apps in a way that replaces the priest with a computer programme, and assigns the transitive authority of ritual to a binary processing algorithm.

6 Conclusion

Having performed sacrament using *The Confession App*, there appears on screen a button titled ‘Erase My Sins’. Once pushed, the user is rewarded with the notification ‘Your sins have been erased’. It is a seductively simple route to absolution but through the lens of objective reasoning it is difficult to conclude it has any genuine significance. Yet users repeatedly and consistently report the meaningful, positive and affirming experience of exactly such behaviour. I have focused on Catholic confessional apps in this article, but a quick browse of iTunes or the GooglePlay stores is all it takes to see religious apps designed for all and any aspect of faith and ritual. These apps are adopted and embedded in the everyday with an unquestioning ease by users. As such, it is a particular form of cultural capital to be able to engage and reflect upon these algorithmic agents as material forces informing experiences of faith. As software has evolved and GUIs become ever more seductively designed, customisable, intuitive, and quick, the computational structures withdraw from view, both literally and figuratively. No more clunky toolbars, sub-menus and option screens, so we forget that they run on internal ‘tools’; no more ‘loading’ icons, so we do not have to engage with the fact we are waiting for a system to process data input and a set of command functions to be enacted. Yet the algorithm is there nonetheless, informing the structure, form and content of the confessional. I have argued here that since users report authentic experience through the use of these apps we must take them to be so and instead questions of authority should take precedence. The replacement of the priest with an automated tool has a myriad of implications for how we understand religious authority in the ritual of confession. I contend that because these algorithms are processing data derived from the personal moral deviations of the user, the return

they produce contains an inherently moral component. Whilst these specific applications are – computationally speaking – relatively basic, they represent a much wider trend in which algorithms are now located in the moral and ethical dimensions of everyday life.

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Biography

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