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Veröffentlichungsversion / Published Version

Zeitschriftenartikel / journal article

Empfohlene Zitierung / Suggested Citation:

Duile, T. (2021). Social Media in Research on a Marginalized Identity: The Case of Atheism in Indonesia. *ASEAS - Austrian Journal of South-East Asian Studies*, 14(1), 121-128. <https://doi.org/10.14764/10.ASEAS-0049>

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Social Media in Research on a Marginalized Identity: The Case of Atheism in Indonesia

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► Duile, T. (2021). Social media in research on a marginalized identity: The case of atheism in Indonesia. *Austrian Journal of South-East Asian Studies*, 14(1), 121-128.

Social media have played a major role as a place where one can meet and socialize with like-minded people, and this is especially important for marginalized groups. Atheists depict such a group in Indonesia where public expressions of atheism are punishable. Whereas social media often plays an important role in finding like-minded people, it is also potentially dangerous to reject religion on social media. In this research workshop, I argue that insights into the ways in which atheists use and engage in social media groups are crucial if one wants to know more about atheist ways of life in Indonesia. However, atheist groups are subject to internal fragmentation, as atheism in Indonesia is highly diverse, and, as a researcher, one can find oneself caught up in these internal struggles. Finally, I argue that social media research is an important addition to offline research, since it enables the researcher, especially when dealing with sensitive issues and identities, to directly enter and critically engage with the premises in which such identities are constituted and developed.

Keywords: Atheism; Indonesia; Online Participant Observation; Social Media

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INTRODUCTION

Countless studies on identity and belonging in Southeast Asia deal with religion, as religious diversity is one of the crucial features of the area. Especially when a religious community has the status of a minority within a country in which religion plays a crucial role in general, researchers are used to consider and analyze it as an anchor of identity. Against this backdrop, atheism constitutes an interesting case. Atheism as an identity is especially important in countries where religion plays a crucial role in both politics and society, precisely because atheism is perceived as problematic by large parts of the population. Whereas in secular countries, atheism usually does not depict *the* departing point of one's identity, this is rather the case in religious societies where atheists have to deal with discrimination and prejudices.

Though the topic of atheism in religious societies in Asia has been neglected for a long time, there have been some publications on this issue in recent years (e.g., Al Hariri et al., 2019; Binder, 2020; Quack, 2012;), and even some regarding Southeast Asia specifically (Schäfer, 2016; Blechschmidt, 2018). These studies are

important contributions, as they enable us to observe these societies from a new, that is, explicitly non-religious, yet nonetheless emic, perspective. My research on atheism in Indonesia, where it is de-facto mandatory for citizens to subscribe to one of the officially acknowledged religions, contributes to this effort.

In 2015, I began my research on non-believers in Indonesia. My aim was – and still is, as this is designed to be a long-term project – to understand how atheist identities develop in an overwhelmingly religious society and how atheist subjects establish their ways of life within a country based upon the concept of a divine entity (*Ketuhanan Yang Maha Esa*) as the *Staatsfundamentalnorm* (Sinn, 2014, p. 231). Since 2005 especially, Indonesian society has generally become more religious and Islam has played an increasingly important role in politics (Bruinessen, 2013), which often leads to precarious circumstances for atheists, both in political/juridical and social terms.

When it comes to identity formation and political as well as social organizing of marginalized identities, social media have emerged as a crucial arena and tool. That holds true for many groups such as political dissidents in authoritarian states, LGBTIQ people in hostile social and political environments, or ethnic minority groups. The role of social media has been conceptualized as a powerful and empowering tool from the very beginning. Meanwhile, however, the view is more sophisticated. The role of social media as a tool for surveillance, state-sponsored troll armies, endemic problems of hate speech, and right-wing mobilization has changed our perception of social media as an empowering tool for minorities. Against this backdrop, from the very beginning of my research, I considered social media groups to be important as they give new opportunities to communicate more safely with like-minded people. However, there is also the risk of provoking hostile responses from religious people if the content critical of religion is spread to them (Hasani, 2016, pp. 197-198; Schäfer, 2016, pp. 255-258).

In this short essay, I explain my engagement with atheists in social media groups and argue why such engagement is crucial, especially when dealing with identities that are at odds with mainstream society. I also discuss how social media groups are subject to internal fragmentation and researchers can find themselves entangled within internal struggles when carrying out online participant observation. My example considers the case when my interlocutors actively responded to my activities and took their views on a publication into their social media groups. Finally, I relate this experience to insights into how atheist identities are expressed and negotiated in social media.

ENGAGING WITH ATHEISTS IN SOCIAL MEDIA

Social media became an important tool, especially during the first stage of the research when I was looking for interlocutors I wanted to interview. Social media, most of all Facebook, are home to several groups for atheists, agnostics, and free-thinkers in Indonesia. Some groups are open to the public, for instance the Facebook group *Anda Bertanya Atheis Menjawab* (lit., You Ask, Atheists Answer) which was set up as a tool to establish conversations between atheists and believers (Valbiant, 2020). The aim is to demonstrate that non-believers are, contrary to state propaganda, not

‘dangerous communists without morals’, but ordinary citizens one can have meaningful discussions with. On the other hand, there are groups exclusively for atheists. These groups are more difficult to find, and, due to potential threats and in order to protect the identity of the members, these groups are not open. Membership usually requires filling out a form where users, for instance, have to explain their reasons for joining the group. Schäfer (2016) emphasizes that atheist online groups aim to present atheism positively in public. This is certainly true for groups designed as open discussion groups, but most atheist groups on social media have no such aim; they are exclusively by atheists and for atheists. Other smaller social media groups derive from offline-meetings, and these are the most intimate, private groups since all members know each other in person. Atheist online groups are, so far, not subject to persecution by state authorities as long as they do not enter a larger public sphere where expression of atheism might be valued as a threat to religion. After a period of coming together as atheists and engaging in discussions with like-minded people in social media between 2008 and 2016, many non-believers refrained from further engagement in social media, and generally atheist online groups developed towards rather private groups. Atheist online groups, thus, do not represent a coherent atheist community; rather, different groups – both on- and offline communities – have emerged, sometimes loosely connected but sometimes at odds with each other.

In an interview conducted with a member of the Department of Religious Affairs in 2016, it turned out that the Ministry was aware of the existence of atheist groups – on- and offline – but it was not bothered by the fact that atheists meet, as long as they did not reach out to the public (Duile, 2018, p. 167). But it is not only the state with its laws that poses a potential threat (see Hasani, 2016, pp. 200-202): Vigilant religious extremists or even relatives might attack people for their atheist expressions. Due to these circumstances, I was careful in my research. My engagement raised some ethical questions about which information I got from atheists that I could also use for my research. On the one hand, participant observation within these groups helped me a lot in understanding the phenomenon of atheism in Indonesia, and it, therefore, had to be taken into account in my ethnography. On the other hand, I knew that the topic is sensitive, and peoples’ identities had to be protected. In addition to the usual anonymization in my offline research, I refrained from taking any screenshots, and never mentioned what a specific person shared in a closed social media group. While I came to the conclusion that social media groups in general are important for non-believers, I did not mention the names of atheist groups if they were closed to the public. For my research, I was only interested in the general topics discussed in online groups as they showed what atheists considered important.

Becoming a Researcher and Becoming a Member

In social media groups designed for discussion between nonbelievers, I managed to find atheists who were willing to share their experiences and thoughts with me. Online groups became one entrance to my field research. One group was especially well known among non-believers and agnostics in Indonesia. In 2015, it had some 1,700 members, but the number of people actively participating in discussions was around a few dozen. For some of the atheists I met between 2015 and 2019, this group

was important as it made the somehow diffuse fact that they are not alone in their disbelief more concrete, and it, thus, helped them to cope with social stress resulting from their position as outsiders in the religious society of Indonesia. The majority of my interlocutors later left the group or refrained from regular engagement in online groups. Their reasons were manifold. Among others, an internal divide developed between 2016 and 2018, when some influential members argued for ‘purification’: Only active members should be tolerated, and members should be “real atheists” (*benar-benar ateis*), as a former member of the group said to me. Furthermore, some of the people who had been kicked out of the group told me that it was due to ideological issues. According to them, especially leftist atheists and non-believers who engaged in religious communities, were not perceived as ‘real atheists’ anymore. The group became more exclusive, and some members accused others of sharing content from the group with outsiders. Some argued that the group should be closed to the public completely, even though the existence of the group was hardly a secret. There was even an article on Wikipedia about it and several newspapers had mentioned it.

My engagement with that online group and some of their members became insightful for my research, but it also demonstrated how a researcher could become part of a group’s internal struggles. One of my starting points was an atheist Facebook group. In 2015, I explained my research to the administrator and asked if I could approach atheists through the Facebook group. After the administrator declared that he had no objections, I posted a text in which I explained my research and that I was looking for interlocutors. Within only a few days, I got dozens of e-mails and messages, and later met many of these non-believers also in person. In 2017, in a contribution to a popular scientific online-magazine (Duile, 2017), I wrote about ideological divides that arose within online (though not exclusively online) groups. While many atheist interlocutors responded that I had made a good point, the piece also received some criticism from other atheists, who argued that the way I categorized atheists was inaccurate. Indeed, they persuaded me that the divisions within the atheist community are more complex. Their critique and the following discussions helped me to rethink my categories of atheists (for a preliminary refinement, see Duile, 2020) as I had conceived of them in the early stages of my research. From this point of view, ongoing discussions with non-believers about my findings helped a lot, as critical atheists expressed their objections to my findings openly.

Fragmentation and Positioning

In 2018, I talked to a journalist who then published a piece in the *Jakarta Post* (Pearl, 2018). The only part of the article mentioning my name was about atheists’ strategies for being discreet and avoiding expressing atheism in public. A few weeks later, a vocal member of an online atheist group asked me whether I had talked about atheism with a journalist. I affirmed. I did not believe that I had talked about anything discrete or potentially endangering. However, similar to those members who had gotten into arguments with more influential parts of the group, I was removed from the group as well. Later, I found out that some had accused me of sharing information from within the group, although I had not talked with the journalist about specific social media groups. According to some informants, I was expelled because some

group members considered me too close to members who were expelled from the group. This happened even though I tried to occupy neutral positions within arguments and discussions. However, participant observation in such discussion groups – both on- and offline – requires engagement, and, within ideological splits, can lead to situations where a researcher does not appear neutral in the eyes of some members. The alternative would be to be a ‘silent reader’, but some atheist friends invited me to join the discussions. I was also confident that I could learn much more about atheist life if I engaged into sometimes quite controversial discussions with them. After considering the alternative approach of being just a silent reader, I found it less ethical. Joining discussions meant openly contributing. This engagement, however, was, and is, potentially dangerous when ideological conflicts occur, as it threatens the neutral position I, as do many researchers, wished to occupy.

Feeling safe in online space is a subjective issue; I reconsidered my participation in that group after some of the members did not feel safe as a result. After all, I understood that this group was not designed for use by researchers. Just like ethnographers in villages, we are only guests in social media groups. For my research, the consequences of no longer being a member of this particular online group were very limited. Interlocutors whom I had initially engaged within the online group still met with me in person. Relationships with atheists who were expelled from the group, in some cases, became stronger after they found out that I was excluded as well. This effect was, however, only temporary, as the ‘cleaning’ of the group became less an issue over time when atheists found alternative groups both on- and offline.

Lessons and Observations

What lessons can one learn from this experience? On the one hand, engagement in and with social media groups is crucial when dealing with identities or issues that are regarded as sensitive in the societies in which we are doing research. Online groups are a means to get in touch with interlocutors in the first place and provide first insights into which topics matter for the interlocutors. This approach has also been helpful in research on other identities that are perceived as controversial by mainstream society in Indonesia, for instance, research on LGBTIQ (Ridwan & Wu, 2018, p. 123). However, the researcher’s (ethical) position in online groups is not different from offline research, and by engaging in a social media group one can quickly become a contributing part of that group. Whereas such status is desired in participant observation, it makes it difficult to appear as neutral when internal fractions occur. Although my approach of introducing myself, declaring my aims and background, and sharing my publication earned the trust of many atheists in these groups, some remained skeptical about my presence as a researcher. Just like offline settings, social media groups have their own social dynamics, and developing a sense of them requires constant (participant) observation and engagement with all factions within a group.

Another observation I made was that the notion of privacy changed over time. In the beginning, the group sought to attract as many members as possible, but eventually it became increasingly exclusive. Inactive members as well as members whose atheism became a subject of doubt (as they, for instance, engaged with religious groups) were expelled. This indicates a certain fragility in the concept of private

versus public. The online group was conceptualized as a group exclusively for atheists from the very beginning, but later, loyalties, ideologies, and personal connections became increasingly important. The online environment ultimately became more intimate for those who were still accepted.

Sometimes members in atheist social media groups shared content making fun of radical believers. Occasionally, there were discussions in which non-believers contrasted science with religion. For some atheists, science is an important reference for their atheist identity. This is particularly true for those atheists whom I have called *santri* atheists. Just as the Muslim *santri* (the term was originally introduced by Geertz to refer to pious Muslims in Java), the *santri* atheists usually interact with other atheists and develop a coherent atheist identity (an identity usually contrasted against religion) that they express within their community, both on- and offline (Duile, 2020, p. 11). Especially the *santri* atheists are more concerned with private groups where they are exclusively among each other. Being in such private groups can give a sense of safety, and it may also be a tool for coping with a society deeply at odds with atheism and a strategy to affirm atheist identity.

From my engagement with atheist social media groups, I have come to the (provisional) conclusion that atheist ways of life are not so much about constantly expressing their difference from mainstream religious society, but rather about finding like-minded individuals, which gives them a sense of belonging. This belonging is not only evoked through atheism in contrast to mainstream religious society, but by creating on- and offline groups in which people can discuss everyday topics, from political to culinary issues. The latter aspect often gains importance when atheists engage in smaller groups. The fact that the people in these groups are non-believers is not always made explicit. It is rather the underlying assumption that all members are atheists that creates a social bond, and it gets less important the more intimate a group is. In this sense, online atheist groups are not sites of subversive conspiracies, but mimic other social media groups not based upon controversial identities, with occasional hints of their difference, for instance, when inviting others to join dinner at a '*haram* restaurant' or ironically calling influential atheists 'prophet' (*nabi*). One group even organized a secret Santa at a gathering where participants gave each other gifts such as atheist books or 'unchristian' items such as sex toys. Humor is a strong indicator of group intimacy.

CONCLUSION

Social media matters for atheists, as the (perceived) anonymity helps them to get in touch with like-minded people. However, I do not want to overestimate the role social media has for them: The majority of my interlocutors only joined these groups for a limited amount of time and eventually shifted to offline relations with like-minded atheists, which were, however, often accompanied by smaller WhatsApp groups. In many cases, Facebook groups are often the first social media groups new de-converts engage with and, later, they move to rather smaller and private groups on other platforms. Other atheists never felt the desire to engage in online groups. Most importantly, online groups are not sites of atheist activism. They do not reach out to the public and, as I have demonstrated above, they even tend to become closed social

spaces as a response to both external threats and internal fragmentation. External threats can derive from organized, vigilant Muslims or, as in the case of Alexander Aan, an angry mob (Kovacs, 2012, p. 4), but also from state institutions that might conclude that atheist postings or comments disrupt social order. Internal fragmentation might be caused by different political ideologies or simply by distinct social habitus. Some interlocutors have chosen to declare their atheism publicly, but they did so as individuals. The tendency of atheist online groups to develop towards rather closed and private groups makes it unlikely that social media are used as a means to promote atheism publicly in Indonesia.

For my research, my engagement with atheists on social media showed that a large part of this fragmented community seeks rather private spaces, both on- and offline, and fragmentation within the community is a means to constitute smaller sub-communities that are more private in their nature. Within this process, it is not surprising that concerns over privacy have gained importance over the last years. For the further research process, my experiences have demonstrated that it is much easier to focus on open groups or entirely switch to 'traditional' methods of offline research. Finally, it is important to consider why one wants to take social media into account and to strictly limit the information processed in the research to that goal. In my case, it is sufficient to refer to social media groups only when giving insights into broader issues and topics to be discussed. Concrete discussions could be used to illuminate the cases in point, but due to concerns over privacy, it is sometimes better to refrain from using online discussions as ethnographic material in publications at all.



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