

Commodification of Social Media: Digitization of Religion as a Contemporary Da'wah Media

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Article History:

Submission: 13th January 2024

Revised: 17th May 2024

Accepted: 28th May 2024

Published: 30th June 2024

Keyword: Social Media; Digitization of Religion; Da'wah Media

Abstract

The fast-paced development of technology has made it a necessity in society. Without exception, social media, especially for Generation Z always depends on a variety of social media. This development extends to the religious world, namely making some social media as contemporary da'wah media. In the period of time, the shift of da'wah in electronic media occurred in the 2000s, namely through radio, television, and other media. This research uses the netnography method, which looks at the consumptive culture based on cyberspace or online. In this research search, a variety of social media are popular among Generation Z, such as Instagram, TikTok, and YouTube. The content of Instagram @halimahalaydrus, for example, can be seen as the account only presents religious sentences and images that relate to today's society. This also happens in TikTok, bringing up pieces of videos about contemporary da'wah such as that performed by Gus Iqdam in account @Gus Iqdam Official. Some of these views show da'wah in a contemporary way by utilizing popular social media.

Introduction

Talking about the development of technology and social media is evidence of entering the contemporary era. This has changed the way people interact, communicate, and gather information. Even today, devices such as smartphones, computers, tablets, and other, devices have become part of people's daily lives (Indrawan 2020). If you take the term conveyed by Manuel Castell and quoted in Minan Jauhari's writing, it is included in the phenomenon of network society (Jauhari 2020). This creates a new space for self-expression, exchange of ideas, and social engagement without geographical boundaries.

Social media, such as Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, TikTok, and other platforms, have brought about changes in the way people communicate with each other (Junawan & Laugu 2020). This growing variety of social media creates rapid communication, moment sharing, and real-time interaction (Iwan 2016). In addition, social media also has a significant role in disseminating news and information, shaping public opinion, and mobilizing social movements (Kencana et al 2021). However, negative impacts are also worth noting, such as the spread of fake news, social media addiction, and threats to individual privacy (Efranda 2020; Marwan & Ahyad 2016). The spread of fake news or hoaxes is widespread in the variety of social media that we consume daily, borrowing the term conveyed by Nadirsyah Hosen, which is to filter before being spread (Hosen 2019; Sabiruddin 2019). Therefore, it is important for people to develop the digital literacy and critical skills needed to interact with technology wisely.

Social media in the current era is seen as a medium that can convey da'wah messages to the general public with a wide scope and is easily accessible to various groups (Ariyanto 2023: 328). The challenge of religious literacy is becoming increasingly relevant in this digital age. Technology and social media not only affect the way people communicate and obtain information, but also have a significant impact on religious understanding and practice. One of the main challenges in religious literacy is the spread of inaccurate and potentially harmful information through online platforms (Hosen, 2019).



Religious literacy challenges are also related to the use of social media as a tool to spread radicalism and religious extremism. Groups and individuals with extreme views can utilize these platforms to teach harmful ideologies and threaten global security (Zuhdi 2023).

Research that explains the role of the media as a supporter in the world of religion has been carried out by many previous researchers. In relation to this research, presenting some research that has been done in order to explain the position of the research to be carried out. First, the research was conducted by Mabror and Moh Azwar Hairul in 2022, focusing on the strengthening and development of pesantren da'wah material. This research uses literature review. The result obtained is to strive for the pesantren environment to be able to transform da'wah to digital (Mabror & Hairul 2022). Although in general, many have begun to transform da'wah to the digital world.

The study of Islamic boarding schools has penetrated the digital world with one of the YouTube platforms. The hope is that with the entry into the digital world, it can become a guide in religion in the wider community. In particular, it is not only a medium for proselytizing, but also an information space for alumni of Islamic boarding schools (Ariyanto 2023). As for similar research, utilizing social media as a medium for preaching entitled Islamic Da'wah and Media Utilization in the Digital Age (Da'wah Studies in the Use of WhatsApp), this research was conducted by Ahmad Zuhdi, Eliati, and Fauzi (Zuhdi 2023). The results shown in this study are the rapid development of social media, utilizing the WhatsApp application media in preaching and spreading religious literacy. WhatsApp is considered to provide information quickly, because it is used daily by the community.

Presenting previous research makes a difference to the research to be carried out and knows the position of this research. This research will discuss the development and transformation of social media itself in the realm of religious activities. In particular, it does not only show religious activities of preaching, but some media that provide information such as moderation or religious harmony to the stage of providing tourism information specifically religious tourism. Media and communication today work together very comprehensively. Renewable technologies are increasingly widespread and accessible to the public, thus forming a modern communication network. The emergence of new media places the traditionally passive society into an active one by playing an active role in the media in a participatory and collaborative manner (Kristiyono 2022). Interaction in the media affects the way people think, feel, and behave to form new patterns and cultures in communication.

The expression of identity that appears in an interaction is based on the process of social construction of cultural meanings that are prioritized. Identity is identified, and placed in a position that is in accordance with social construction. Manuel Castells distinguishes forms of identity into three forms. First, identity is created by institutions or society to rationalize domination. Second, identity becomes a form of collective resistance as resistance to oppression. Third, identity that is on a cultural basis to redefine the position of identity in the social structure (Susanti 2017). The formation of new structures in society with multidimensional social change. Castells explains the basis of the new structure into four paradigms. First, the existence of new technologies that play a role in spreading renewable technology as part of living information. Second, the process of global integration is understood as part of technology because it contains organizational and institutional system components. Third, the existence of cultural manifestations that dominate into a general frame of reference in symbolization. Fourth, the existence of countries that are no longer sovereign arises from the consequences of global economic networks, communications, and information that are shared together (Ardiani 2022). The term used by Castells to describe this new structure is called the "knowledge society" or

"information society" which is used to describe the performance of a digital society that relies on information and knowledge, in generating, processing, and distributing information accumulated in networks (Rachman & Susan 2021).

Castells has many views regarding the development of the information society, one of which is the concept of network society informationalism. The presence of the network allows the flow of communication that runs on its own without the need for dimensions that have dissolved institutionalized centralized power (Sugihartati 2014). Information is widespread in the media and can be accessed by everyone by prioritizing the role of information technology. The development of thinking about the informational society refers to the basic characteristics of information technology, namely, information that develops is not part of the economic raw materials produced, but as a means of disseminating information by promoting information processing capabilities along with network logic that allows flexibility for individuals, organizations, institutions, and new forms created as part of a system (Prasetyo & Irwansyah 2020). Therefore, the existence of a network society is able to bring together individuals, groups, organizations, and communities with various interests in a network that is accessed together (Fariadi 2023).

The communication formed by a group of people on the internet results in a personal relationship to channel similar thoughts and interests. The increasingly widespread views in the era of networked societies give rise to a strong awareness of existing policies. The issues raised are not just general issues limited to the state or institutional identity, but have focused on shared values and identity more comprehensively. Castells provides a comprehensive understanding of the two entities through the ideas of space of flows and timeless time. Space is defined as a fixity that is not obtained but has clear boundaries, with the existence of international networks, information that is centralized in various regions can be integrated. Meanwhile, information technology has melted time, which was originally limited to marking an event, into control over repetition and power over nature (Anggara & Pratama 2019).

Advances in information technology do not recognize the limits of space and time (cybernetic organism). The ability of a community to produce value and authority over the powerful opens up a commodification of the network society to change structures and threaten social stability to create a new reality that naturally occurs in digital media (Labas & Yasmine 2017). This situation has led to a "flood of information" in the various narratives of information that exist in the digital space. The development of society is dominated by the development of information technology, which changes the pattern of interaction and the way of responding to social reality (Maharani 2020). A networked society supported by information technology requires a method to measure information related to social and personal constructs. The involvement of personal emotions in the operation of the network creates pressure towards digitization. A person needs appropriate limits to the vast information that passes through the media. Privacy literacy is one of the efforts to overcome privacy threats in communication media to increase understanding of how information can be accessed and used by others in the network, as well as ways to protect privacy with awareness and increase sensitivity to privacy violations (Putra & Hidayatullah 2020).

This is also in line with the discussion about people's needs in learning religion. The presence of technology makes it easier for people to find and learn religion. Various social media that are trending today such as tiktok, youtube instagram and other plafftrms, have their respective markets and their utilization. These activities can also be categorized in the digitalization of religion, the new face of religion in the digital world or social media.

Talking about contemporary problems, social media that has become a daily consumption and even necessity is transformed into religious information. Such as da'wah that enters the digital world and can be played back, or pieces of verses that are easily understood by the community. According to researchers, this can be an interesting and contemporary research by presenting the digital world in this study. Taking the term in the book *Interfaith Studies* that there are two options in digitalization, namely Digitalization – Religion and Religion – Digital (Bagir 2023). This is a concern for researchers presenting the discussion of Religion and Media, not only in physical form such as newspapers but more in online form.

Research Method

As a determination of the limitations in this article is to discuss how the commodification of social media is utilized as a contemporary da'wah media. The research method that will be used is qualitative research (Moleong 2018) with the form of netnography study. Ethnography and netnography are research methods adopted from anthropology. Both methods basically emphasize the importance of the researcher's involvement with the subjects (people under study) to gain an understanding of a particular social or cultural environment (Bakry 2017; Stepanus 2020). This study will examine the variety of social media that is popular among the public with a focus on several accounts on Youtube, Instagram and Tiktok as a limitation of social media with a context on religious activities. In presenting its findings using direct quotes from posts, comments, and images in media captures on the accounts studied @halimahalaydrus and @Gus Iqdam Official.

Digitization of Religion

The use of technology in religious contexts has become an increasingly relevant topic in today's digital age. With the advancement of information and communication technologies, many aspects of life, including religious practices, are undergoing significant transformations. In this analysis, we will explore whether technology can replace conventional religious experiences, taking into account various perspectives and findings from existing literature. It is important to understand that technology can increase people's enthusiasm in religious activities showing that the use of technology in designing religious activities can make them more interesting and meaningful (Suswandy & Thursina 2023). Technology can enrich the learning experience and increase student motivation (Damayanti & Nuzuli 2023). In a religious context, this means that technology can be used to create a more interactive and engaging experience for religious believers, thereby increasing their participation in religious activities. However, while technology can enhance religious experiences, there is an argument that conventional religious experiences cannot be completely replaced by technology. The integration of technology in education, including religious education, should be done carefully so as not to reduce the quality of the learning experience (Aulia 2023). This suggests that while technology can be a useful tool, deep religious experiences often require human interaction that cannot be fully replicated by technology.

The use of technology in religious contexts can also create new challenges. The practice of commodifying religion through digital applications can change the way people interact with religious values (Husnuddlon 2022). This suggests that while technology can expand accessibility and participation in religious activities, it can also alter the meaning and value of such practices. In this sense, technology can serve as a bridge, but also as a barrier to authentic religious experiences.

The digitization of religion is a rapidly growing phenomenon in this modern era (Faridhatun Nikmah 2019). This concept encompasses the application of information and communication technology (ICT) in religious contexts, ranging from the use of social media to spread religious teachings, specialized applications for worship activities, to the utilization of artificial intelligence (AI) in the interpretation of sacred texts. From a theoretical perspective, the digitization of religion can be understood through the lens of postsecularism and technology. First, postsecularism views that religion is not only private, but also has a role in the public sphere. The digitization of religion expands this space through online platforms, where religious believers can interact, share experiences and discuss their beliefs. Social media becomes a place where religious narratives can spread quickly, enabling the creation of virtual communities that build faith-based solidarity in different parts of the world (Jauhari 2020; Naufal 2021).

Second, technology also allows for the democratization of access to religious knowledge. Apps and websites provide religious resources that can be accessed by anyone, opening doors for individuals who previously may not have had access to religious information (Halim 2015). This can be seen as a form of inclusivity, where the digitization of religion reduces knowledge disparities and allows more people to engage in religious practices. However, along with its positive potential, the digitization of religion also raises ethical questions and theological challenges. The rise of digital religions and virtual religious figures raises questions about religious authority and theological uncertainty (Qudsy 2019). How can religious authority be maintained in a decentralized digital environment? Can the use of technology replace conventional religious experiences?

In a decentralized digital age, religious authorities face significant challenges and opportunities. The digital environment, characterized by wide access to information and the ability of individuals to participate in public discussions, has changed the way religious authorities interact with society. Research shows that religious authorities, including clerics and religious leaders, have begun to utilize social media and other digital platforms to convey their religious messages, which in turn strengthens their influence among their followers (Lubis 2021; Rachmadhani 2021). However, with the emergence of diverse religious narratives and interpretations in the digital space, the challenge of maintaining such authority is increasingly complex.

One way religious authority can be defended in a digital environment is by adopting a religious moderation approach. In this context, religious moderation serves as a strategy to articulate an inclusive and tolerant religious narrative, which is particularly important amidst the rise of conflict and identity polarization in cyberspace (Hefni 2020; Messakh & Messakh 2023). Research shows that religious moderation can help reduce the potential for conflict that often arises from extreme interpretations of religious teachings (Hefni, 2020). As such, religious authorities need to play an active role in promoting the values of moderation and tolerance on digital platforms.

In addition, religious authorities must also adapt to developments in digital technology, including the use of new media. Research shows that new media not only changes the way religious messages are delivered, but also reinforces the traditional authority of religious leaders (Kiptiyah 2017). For example, many clerics and preachers have utilized platforms such as Instagram and YouTube to deliver their lectures and da'wah, allowing them to reach a wider audience (Kiptiyah 2017). Thus, the utilization of new media can be an effective tool to strengthen religious authority in the digital context.

On the other hand, the decentralization of information in the digital world also brings its own challenges for religious authorities. The fragmentation of information and the emergence of alternative voices can reduce the influence of traditional authorities

(Saputra & Fadhli 2020). In this case, it is important for religious authorities to build religious literacy among the community, so that they can be more critical in filtering the information received (Ilyas & Maknun 2023). Religious education based on the values of tolerance and interfaith cooperation can also contribute to strengthening religious authority in the digital era (Messakh & Messakh 2023).

Furthermore, religious authorities need to develop effective communication strategies to reach younger generations who are more familiar with digital technology. Research shows that millennials have a different perspective on authority and tradition. (Yusuf, 2021). Therefore, a more interactive and dialogical approach in delivering religious messages can help bridge the gap between religious authorities and the younger generation (Maftuchah 2017). By creating open spaces for dialogue, religious authorities can maintain their relevance amidst rapid social change.

In a broader context, the relationship between the state and religion also plays an important role in maintaining religious authority. Research shows that cooperation between religious institutions and the government can strengthen the position of religious authority in society (Febriansyah Ramadhan 2023). Through this collaboration, religious authorities can contribute to social development and more inclusive public policies, which in turn can increase people's trust in them. In the context of technological theory, the digitization of religion can be understood as an extension of the concept of "mediation" introduced by Marshall McLuhan (Rustandi 2022). Technologies, such as social media, serve as intermediaries in religious experiences and shape the way we interact with religious beliefs and practices. McLuhan proposed the idea that "the medium is the message," meaning that the characteristics of technology itself have a significant impact on how we understand religion.

Overall, the digitization of religion presents a complex dynamic between religious traditions and technological developments. While it opens the door for greater connectivity and inclusivity, the digitization of religion also raises critical questions about authority, religious identity, and changes in religious experience. In the face of this digital age, societies need to reflect on its theological and ethical implications to guide technological developments to remain in line with fundamental religious values. This is in line with the study of @halimahalaydrus and @Gus Iqdam Official media, by penetrating into social media that is being loved and becoming a habit of getting information. Digital da'wah carried out by @halimahalaydrus focuses on Instagram by reaching people who often use Instagram. The presentation of the current text or caption displayed is distinctive in order to learn religion. On the other hand, Ustadzah Halimah Alaydrus sometimes holds recitations to meet with her congregation.

The activities carried out by Gus Iqdam, in general, conduct regular recitations which are held every Monday night and Thursday Night. However, it penetrated into the media, this was due to the increasing number of worshipers who attended the recitation. formed a media team called Sabilu Taubah Media. This presents Gus Iqdam's routine recitation entering the digital world, namely Youtube. Observations obtained by researchers on YouTube @Gus Iqdam Official proved to be booming, up to hundreds of thousands of viewers watching. Presence in the digital world, this is an alternative in delivering da'wah or messages to worshipers who do not have time to attend. Another case of @halimahalaydrus's post is that not a few of his followers repost captions or posts as material for reflection in a contemporary style. So that the presence of Religion in the digital world makes it easier for followers or worshipers to learn a variety of good things and self – reflection, as well as the delivery of da'wah which is easily disseminated.

Da'wah in Social Media

Online technology has changed many things and overhauled the standardized and established offline order, including in religious matters such as worship, preaching, reciting the Al-Qur'an, and others (Qudsy 2019; Qudsy & Muzakky 2021). Even during the covid-19 pandemic, it presents a variety of online activities, namely virtual Friday prayers in congregation (Qudsy et al. 2023). Another thing that has been mentioned is that there are preaching activities carried out on social media. Da'wah through social media has become a significant phenomenon in modern society, utilizing digital platforms to spread religious messages quickly and widely (Kholis 2021). This phenomenon emerged in response to the development of information and communication technologies that allow religious individuals and groups to reach a larger audience. One concrete example of da'wah through social media is the dissemination of lectures, religious studies, and daily life advice by scholars and preachers through platforms such as YouTube, Instagram, TikTok, and others (Budiantoro 2018).

In the context of proselytization, the use of social media, and digital applications has become a new way to disseminate religious information. The commodification of religious symbols in advertisements can influence the way people understand and interact with religious values (Ramadhan et al. 2021). This shows that while technology can expand the reach of proselytization, it can also change the way people understand and live their religion. Furthermore, the use of technology in religious education can also increase the effectiveness of learning. Technology can be used to improve the quality of education, including religious education (Setyawan & Nugroho 2021). This suggests that technology can serve as a tool to enhance the learning experience, but it must be balanced with an approach that maintains religious values.

In this context, it is important to consider that technology is not necessarily a substitute for conventional religious experiences, but rather a tool that can enrich and enhance them. With the right approach, technology can be used to create more inclusive and engaging religious experiences, without compromising the core values underlying religious practices. However, challenges remain in integrating technology into religious practice. Online proselytizing practices on social media can create new challenges in terms of the authority and authenticity of religious information. (Kulsum et al., 2021). This shows that while technology can expand accessibility, it can also create confusion and disinformation in religious contexts.

In proselytizing through social media, multimedia content such as videos, images and writings can be used to convey religious messages in an interesting and informative manner. For example, a preacher can create short video lectures that discuss religious values or provide practical advice in daily life. The use of images or infographics can also provide a quick and clear understanding of religious concepts. In addition, social media allows for two-way interaction between the preacher and the audience. Through commenting and direct messaging features, the audience can interact, ask questions or share experiences with the preacher. This creates a dynamic dialog space and strengthens the bond between the preacher and his followers.

The success of da'wah through social media is also reflected in the significant number of followers that preachers can accumulate. An example is the Instagram account of a preacher who has millions of followers, creating a huge impact in spreading religious messages such as Halimah Alaydrus (Pridiastuti 2022). This phenomenon also shows that social media can be an effective tool to connect scholars with the younger generation who are more connected to technology.

Picture 1. Halimah Alaydrus's Instagram Account

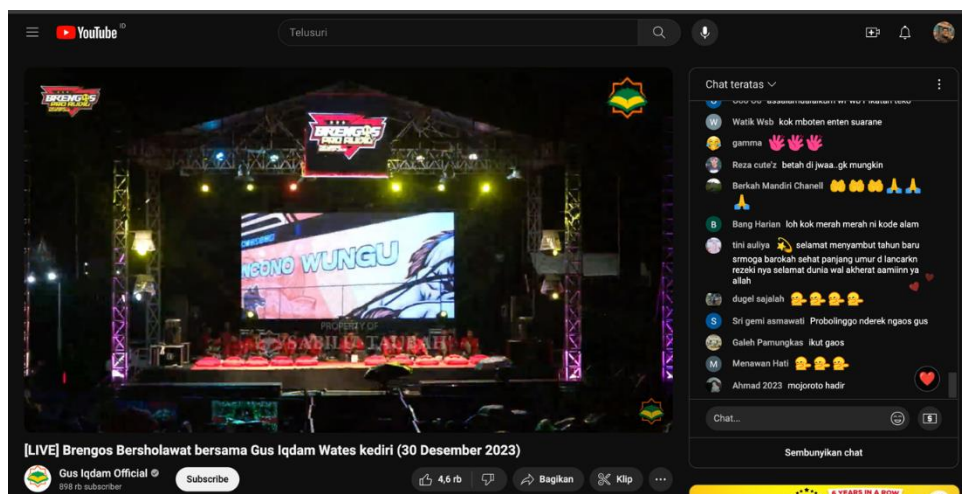


Source: Instagram.com

In this study, we take one of the social media, namely Instagram as a sampling, namely the contemporary da'wah account carried out by Halimah Alaydrus (@halimahalaydrus). Tracing the account has followers of up to 2 million accounts, when viewed by followers in general, many are loved by young people or generation Z. However, in social media managed by Halimah Alaydrus, the account is managed by Halimah Alaydrus. However, the social media managed by Halimah Alaydrus is unique, this is because she has never appeared in public (Pridiastuti 2022).

Although proselytizing through social media has a positive impact in reaching a wider audience, there are also challenges related to information accuracy, controversy, and the potential for misuse of social media to spread radical messages. Therefore, there is a need for awareness and caution in using social media as a proselytizing tool, as well as the need for quality control in delivering religious messages in accordance with the values of tolerance, peace and social welfare.

Picture 2. Live Streaming, "Pengajian Gus Iqdam"



Source: Gus Iqdam Official Youtube

In addition to explaining on Instagram, Youtube is still a popular media that is widely consumed by the general public by reaching all elements of society (Nafi'a 2021). One example is the recitation from Gus Iqdam, which has recently become popular among

Generation Z. His lectures adorn social media pages with his distinctive words that make young people increasingly want to hear his advice. In fact, currently tens of thousands of worshipers are always present at the recitation program at his house (Subakti 2023). Judging from the two pictures above, that the digital world specifically conveys religious values to be a movement that should be done in the current era. Even in the form of website platforms that are opinions and online essays that are scattered. In general, people can express or write on social media. But keep in mind that what has been stated above does not always provide positive value, it is not uncommon to find cases that are negative or lead to radicalism.

In conclusion, the use of technology in religious contexts has the potential to enhance religious experiences, but cannot completely replace conventional experiences. Technology can serve as a tool to enrich religious practices, but it still requires an approach that maintains the core values and essence of spiritual experiences. Therefore, it is important to continue to explore and evaluate how technology can be effectively used in religious contexts, taking into account the challenges and opportunities that exist.

Conclusion

Asghar Ali Engineer is a reformer, writer, activist, Muslim thinker and also a feminist. Born in a time of exploitation using religion as a front, Asghar immersed in a wide range of religious literature from various sources, both Islamic and western, both traditional and modern. He was the one who was influenced by Karl Marx's thoughts. As a feminist figure she was known for the concept of gender equality that championed women's rights that tended to remain contained in a patriarchy.

Gender equality means an acknowledgment of equal dignity between the sexes. It is important to recognize that men and women have equal rights in various areas, such as social, economic, and political, as well as both should have equal responsibilities, including freedom. The engineer referred to the Qur'an to show that it explicitly acknowledges that people should be treated fairly, regardless of gender, and should accept the consequences for their actions in the same way, whether it's male or female. Asghar Ali Engineer thinking about gender equality harmony with the intent of Islamic doctrine itself and in accordance with the social reality that must be realized. It is only in a different sense of interpretation, so that some of that bequeathes the patriarchate, even misogynistic.

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