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Intersection of Traditional Religious Authority and New Authority in the Digital Space of Indonesia

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Abstrak

Hadirnya media baru seperti media sosial, telah memberikan ruang kepada komunitas atau kelompok agama untuk menciptakan narasi-narasi keagamaan atau wacana keagamaan dalam ruang digital. Agama direpresentasikan dengan cara yang lebih kekinian, dan didukung seperangkat teknologi informasi yang semakin canggih, dikemas, direproduksi dengan gaya yang lebih modern. Wacana keagamaan dalam ruang digital kemudian menjadikan otoritas keagamaan menjadi cair dan kompleks, tidak lagi kaku dan hanya dipegang oleh lembaga keagamaan saja. Kondisi ini kemudian melahirkan apa yang disebut sebagai otoritas online. Otoritas online dalam studi awal tentang otoritas keagamaan digital (online) oleh beberapa sarjana dianggap akan menggeser eksistensi maupun legitimasi dari otoritas tradisional yang telah lebih lama eksis. Otoritas tradisional dianggap tidak dapat menyesuaikan dengan praktik digital. Melalui pendekatan studi pustaka, tulisan ini menyimpulkan bahwa otoritas tradisional dan online bukan sesuatu yang terpisah, otoritas tradisional dapat masuk dan eksis pada wilayah online dengan kemasan, gaya, dan inovasi yang selaras dengan praktik digital. Otoritas tradisional dengan legitimasinya yang kuat mampu tampil dalam wilayah online, dikemas ulang, direpresentasikan kembali dengan cara-cara atau gaya-gaya online yang seusai dengan gaya modern dan kekinian.

Kata Kunci: Otoritas Keagamaan Tradisional, Otoritas Online, Media Digital.

Abstract

The emergence of new media, such as social media, has provided a space for religious communities or groups to create religious narratives or religious discourses in the digital realm. Religion is represented in a more contemporary manner, supported by advanced information technologies, packaged, and reproduced in a more modern style. Religious discourse in the digital space has thus made religious authority fluid and complex, no longer rigid and solely held by religious institutions. This condition has given rise to what is known as online authority. Online authority, in the early studies of digital religious authority, is considered by several scholars to potentially shift the existence and legitimacy of traditional authorities that have been in existence for a longer period. Traditional authority is deemed unable to adapt to digital practices. Through a literature review approach, this paper concludes that traditional and online authority are not separate entities; traditional authority can enter and exist in the online domain with packaging, styles, and innovations that align with digital practices. Traditional authority, with its strong legitimacy, is capable of presenting itself in the online domain, being repackaged and represented in ways or styles that are in line with contemporary and modern trends.

Keywords: Traditional Religious Authority, Online Authority, Digital Media.

Introduction

The presence of the internet has had an impact on social practices that have become increasingly complex and diverse. Social spaces on the internet have become fluid and blurry, where social practices are not only interactions but also communities and movements that seek mutual existence. The social practices on the internet are referred to by Castells (2004) as the Network Society. The Network Society is synonymous with an era in which speed and flexibility are its main characteristics.

This condition indicates that the internet is not something separate from humans; it coexists with humans but in a different dimension. According to Castells (2004), the internet has its own complexity and dynamism. Previously, the technological paradigm was static and oriented towards industrialism, but with the development of technology and information, the technological paradigm has shifted into the more complex paradigm of informationalism. The paradigm of informationalism emphasizes the digital aspect (the internet) in digital communication practices. Thus, digitization is a manifestation of the informationalism paradigm, characterized by speed, flexibility, easy access to information, and other aspects.

The advent of the internet has also led to the emergence of new media, specifically in this context, social media or digital media. The presence of social media as a digital space has become another dimension of social reality,

where every aspect of social practice strives to be digitized. Digitization occurs not only in general aspects such as communication methods, interactions, and personal branding, but it also extends to realms that are often transcendental (religious expression) or spiritual. Certainly, when dealing with transcendental or spiritual matters, the complexity increases.

Therefore, new media has played a role in representing spirituality and religiosity with modern and sophisticated styles. According to Hasan (2009), the increase in religious awareness (Islam) and religious expressions in public spaces have impacted the process of Islamization in various sectors of the public sphere. The characteristic of religiosity is not only limited to mosques or religious study forums, but it is packaged and represented in more advanced and modern ways, thereby reaching a wider Muslim audience.

The rapid growth of internet access and the widespread use of social media platforms among Indonesian society have allowed Muslim communities to express their religiosity openly (Amin Abdullah, 2020). Islamic movements have emerged and are packaged in more contemporary ways, presenting creative preachers and offering various innovations and segmented preaching that can be chosen according to personal preference or compatibility. Indirectly, social media platforms provide an opportunity for new preachers to spread the teachings of Islam according to their interpretations. On the other hand, does the emergence of these new preachers threaten the authority of traditional institutions or established religious bodies of the state? (Saat & Burhani, 2020).

Islam does not have leaders, or imams except when leading prayers or those who are accustomed to managing mosques. A religious leader in Islam is someone who has achieved significant recognition and support. Usually, religious leaders in Islam tend to evolve and be involved in disputes regarding their authority. These religious leaders play a crucial role in the dynamics of community life, and their responses are awaited in every issue concerning the community, often referred to as fatwas. In the classical sense, (Nico J.G. Kaptein, 2004) defines it in two parts. First, questions directed to a religious scholar. Second, questions about specific topics addressed to one or more individuals who have been given authority based on the Islamic legal perspective. The topics discussed are not only related to ritual matters but also touch on social, political, and the use of new technologies (Nico J.G. Kaptein, 2004).

Fatwas themselves have existed since the colonial era in Indonesia. During that time, fatwas were not exclusively held by specific groups, but they could also be issued by individuals who had authority. At that time, fatwas were used to voice Indonesia's struggle for independence against colonization. Subsequently, fatwas became a form of authority closely related to the relationship between Indonesian Islam and Middle Eastern Islam (Ansari, 2014).

Religious authority in Islam can be defined as a "point of reference" and identity within a specific religious tradition that develops as knowledge, religion, belief, and symbolic structures represented in ritual experiences and religious communities (Azra, Dijk, & Kaptein, 2010). However, with the advent of new media, the religious aspect has undergone changes, including a shift in religious authority and the pattern of relationships between followers and religious figures or leaders who serve as role models in everyday life. Previously, religious authority was predominantly held by ulama, mursyid, religious teachers, ustadz, the government through the Ministry of Religious Affairs, and non-governmental organizations (Jajat Burhanuddin, 2003); (Zulkifli, 2013) such as NU and Muhammadiyah.

However, the presence of new media has led to a shift in religious authority. Now, anyone can easily access knowledge and information based on their needs. Individuals who seek answers to a question no longer have to directly consult with ulama, as religious fatwas are not solely owned by conventional ulama; they can easily find them through the media. Thus, this article aims to provide an overview of the shifting and intersecting traditional authorities and the emergence of new authorities due to the development of new media in the lives of Muslim communities in Indonesia

Religious Authorities: Online and Traditional

The issue of religious authority is not simple, both in terms of terminology and its implementation in religious life. Moreover, determining the sole owner of religious authority is difficult. Especially now, with everything being based on new media, society is increasingly dispersed, both socially and intellectually, making it almost impossible to determine who owns religious authority and what its limitations are. In the past, during the sultanate era, religious authority was held by ulama who were part of Islamic educational institutions such as dayah, surau, and pesantren. Additionally, it was present in religious organizations or Islamic organizations with their

various forms and ideological tendencies, whether radical, moderate, or liberal. Islamic organizations have strong authority in providing guidance to their members, often leading to differences of opinion with the government. In the field of fiqh, these organizations have their own fatwa institutions that are not mutually binding and can even have significant differences in matters of ijtihad (Azra et al., 2010).

Furthermore, due to the emergence of new media, there has been a proliferation of Islamic websites managed by Islamic institutions and individuals, all offering different implementations of Islam. Each portal presents opinions, fatwas, articles, and programs to meet the needs and address the issues of the community. There are even question-and-answer services available that can be accessed anytime. These new media platforms facilitate the rapid dissemination of Islamic messages. This has given rise to new authorities as moderators of online groups, considered legitimate spiritual authorities by members of the religious community in the online sphere.

When discussing online authority, which emerged due to the internet and the existence of digital preaching, it can be seen in the viral preachers who are popular among young millennials in urban communities. Preaching is packaged in a contemporary manner, adapting to the audience's style. Its presence has sparked debates and opposition among scholars regarding the existence of online authority. According to (Fakhruroji, 2015), the emergence of new media in the context of the mediatization of religion will have an impact on a shift in authority because the presence of a religious figure as a person has been replaced by the content created by a religious figure packaged in communication media such as Google, Instagram, Twitter, and WhatsApp.

The online authority has indeed displaced the existence of traditional authority. Jinan believes that religious authority has shifted from its previous traditional form to the online realm, where digital spaces dominate (Mutohharun Jinan, 2012). These two perspectives seem to be influenced by previous studies on online authority, which tend to view its emergence skeptically. Turner, as mentioned, is skeptical about the rise of online authority as he believes it will displace traditional authority (Turner, 2007). On one hand, online authority is seen as lacking stability in interpreting religious matters, as anyone can assume the role of a religious figure, even without a religious background.

Furthermore, in the study of online authority, (Kolodziejska & Arat, 2016) classified the studies on online authority and provided an overview in the introductory chapter of their article about online authority and traditional authority. They attempted to establish a classification of authority studies, citing (Turner, 2007) skeptical view on the emergence of online authority as it is perceived to displace traditional authority. On one hand, online authority is seen as lacking stability in interpreting religious matters, as anyone can assume the role of a religious figure, even without a religious background. However, (H. A. Campbell, 2013) takes a different perspective and tends to view the emergence of online religiosity more positively. According to (H. A. Campbell, 2013), the presence of online religious patterns complements existing religious practices, allowing individuals to build new communities that can reach a wider audience.

Therefore, the advent of online authority challenges traditional authority to be more creative in the realm of digital religion. (Kolodziejska & Arat, 2016) come to the same conclusion as other scholars who write about online and traditional authority, which is a positive view of the emergence of online authority, emphasizing the interconnectedness and complementarity of online and traditional authority. According to (Pauline Hope Cheong, 2014), early studies on the context of religious authority and the development of information technology such as the internet and social media tended to perceive them as separate entities. In this context, the presence of digital information media was seen as disruptive and threatening to the existence of traditional religious institutions or authorities. In these early studies, traditional authority was considered incapable of appearing and existing in the digital (online) domain.

Additionally (H. Campbell, 2007) highlights that prior to the emergence of technology (the internet), traditional authority held power in legitimizing religious beliefs within society. However, with the advent of technology (the internet), tension arose, and religious scholars expressed concerns that the internet and new media would replace the long-standing traditional authority. Nevertheless, paradoxically, with the presence of technology (the internet and new media), traditional authority, which already existed, could thrive in the digital platform to renew its legitimacy.

Furthermore, in further exploring the study of online authority, various aspects are observed regarding the position of religious authority on the internet or online authority. In an article by (Cheong, 2021), several

aspects related to online authority are discussed. The first aspect is the logic of disjuncture and displacement. The logic of disjuncture perceives the internet and new media as eradicating traditional authority. This perspective considers the emergence of online authority as disrupting the validity of traditional religious authority. On the other hand, the logic of displacement suggests that traditional authority will be replaced by online authority because online authority is seen as more fluid, and anyone can assume the role of a religious figure (ustadz). (Turner, 2007) also mentions that the emergence of new media can have damaging effects on traditional forms of authority. In this context, religious practices can already be conducted online through the process of digitalization.

However, in the subsequent aspects of the paradigm of online authority development, there is a tendency to view online authority as continuity and complementary. Unlike the first aspect, which tends to perceive that the internet and the development of online authority will replace or eliminate traditional authority, the continuity and complementary perspective suggests that the internet and the emergence of online authority do not disrupt traditional authority. Instead, the internet and new media become platforms for traditional authority to be reconfigured and reframed into online practices (Pauline Hope Cheong, 2014).

Therefore, the study of online authority becomes highly complex, with diverse paradigms and perspectives depending on how we approach it. For (H. Campbell, 2007), as mentioned earlier, online authority presents a paradox. On one hand, it is believed to displace traditional authority, but on the other hand, it acts as a bridge to renew the legitimacy of traditional authority. Additionally (Pauline Hope Cheong, 2014) explains the logic of online authority, categorizing it into several aspects as mentioned above. In essence, early studies on online authority suggest that it would replace traditional authority. However, subsequent studies argue that online and traditional authority actually work together, with traditional authority adapting its paradigm according to the logic of online authority.

Aligned with (Pauline Hope Cheong, 2014) concept of continuity, (H. A. Campbell, 2010) in another article discussing online authority and the use of blogs, provides an analysis based on his findings. He suggests that the internet has become a platform for traditional authority to assert their religious identity and represent themselves online. In this context, the internet is seen more as a realm for establishing religious authority rather

than as a challenge to traditional authority. As a result, online authority has undergone a complex paradigm shift, giving rise to various debates among scholars. The complexity of these debates regarding online authority ultimately triggers discussions and perspectives within the study of authority in both traditional and online contexts. The development of studies on authority has become paradoxical in nature. Therefore, the study of authority needs to be comprehensive, tracing back to the historical studies on authority.

Online Authority in Indonesia

Discussions about Islamic authority in Indonesia can be seen in various forms, namely individuals (scholars, teachers, and preachers); Islamic educational institutions; Islamic community organizations (NU, Muhammadiyah, and MUI); and the government (Ministry of Religious Affairs). But what about online authority in Indonesia and its relationship with traditional authority? MUI clearly holds stronger formal authority, as it operates under the state's umbrella. Meanwhile, NU and Muhammadiyah serve as cultural authorities or religious organizations. However, with the emergence or existence of new preachers who tend to have a strong presence on social media, as well as preaching accounts with hundreds of thousands to millions of followers, will they culturally shift MUI, Muhammadiyah, and NU, which have established and solidified authority?

Recent studies on authority and perspectives on the relationship between traditional authority and online authority have become a very fluid area. Looking at the phenomena occurring, especially in Indonesia, traditional authority cannot be considered less existent in the digital or online realm. Preachers and traditional religious institutions are being transformed in the digital context, adopting digital language styles and narratives that can reach various groups of people, making religious authority no longer exclusive but rather highly fluid. Some digital users are no longer limited by their social identities. Individuals with backgrounds in NU may follow religious figures and preachers from Muhammadiyah, and vice versa. Similarly, those with backgrounds in Muhammadiyah may follow preachers from NU or others. Therefore (Hjarvard & Lövheim, 2012) states that digital identity is formed based on one's own desires (personality).

From (Pauline Hope Cheong, 2014) and (H. A. Campbell, 2010) perspectives, the presence of new preachers on social media platforms such as Instagram or YouTube does not necessarily displace traditional authority. On

the contrary, traditional authority offers its paradigm options through social media (digital), such as Gus Baha, Gus Mus, Buya Yahya, and other religious figures. Some of these religious figures offer online study methods for classical Islamic texts, known as "kajian kitab kuning" or studying yellow books. This type of study is typically found in the traditional pesantren model, with sorogan teaching style. From the perspectives of (Pauline Hope Cheong, 2014) and (H. A. Campbell, 2010), the presence of online authority and new preachers on social media does not automatically displace traditional authority. Rather, traditional authority is repackaged to adapt to online practices and attempts to renew its legitimacy.

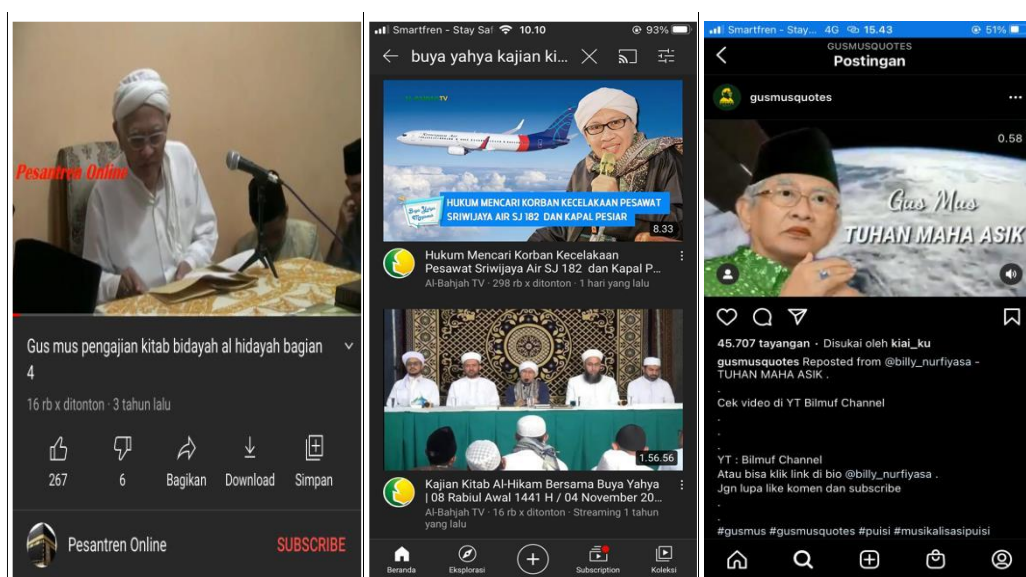


Figure: Online religious study by scholars (ulama)

The style of online preaching is then tailored to the audience, which can reach a larger number of listeners, as seen in the packaging of Buya Yahya's preaching on the YouTube channel Al-Bahjah TV. Although the context is studying classical Islamic texts ("ngaji kitab kuning"), the packaging on YouTube is presented with contemporary narratives, correlated with current issues, captivating titles, and thumbnails that are more appealing and accessible to various groups or segments. Lectures by Gus Baha and Gus Mus are also repackaged through Instagram with shorter durations, trendy titles, visually appealing elements, calming backgrounds and music, and themes that are then correlated with current issues. Instagram, as a digital platform associated with young people (millennials), is not only filled with religious content from young millennial preachers but also traditional

preachers from traditional pesantren who adapt their style and packaging to online practices. (Pauline Hope Cheong, 2014) mentions that religious narratives and spiritual practices in the digital era are creatively and innovatively packaged in a shorter format.

The author then questions the authority of traditional institutions and their existence in the digital realm. Early studies on online authority suggested that traditional authority would be displaced and diminished due to the emergence of digital media. However, when considering the current context and existence of traditional authority, such as the phenomenon of online study of Islamic texts and the presence of traditional preachers from pesantren, such as Gus Baha, Gus Nadir, Buya Yahya, and others on digital platforms like YouTube and Instagram, will traditional authority that enters the digital domain actually be more prominent than online authority? This is because traditional authority is deemed to have strong religious legitimacy in the offline realm, allowing it to enter, adapt, and renew itself in the digital context.

Religious Authority in the Digital Space and Its Challenges

Traditional religious preachers are often considered far behind the new (online) religious authorities when it comes to occupying the digital space. They are seen as slow in responding to the advancements of the online media revolution, which weakens their influence within the religious landscape in Indonesia. However, this assumption is not entirely true. Despite being slower than new religious actors in utilizing social media as a platform for their preaching, they are now actively participating in the world of social media, leading to a contestation of discourses in the online public sphere. This becomes a stage for determining who is the most dominant and influential in spreading the truth.

McWilliam has highlighted the competition for public space as a new challenge for both traditional and online religious authorities (Tierney & Lincoln, 1997). Additionally, the emergence of new movements within the reformist groups has opened up a space for competition among religious authorities that were previously dominated by traditional cultural groups (Alatas, 2021). However, traditional authorities have taken steps by leveraging established religious institutions such as pesantren, kiai (Islamic scholars), or ulama, and religious activists actively utilizing digital media to disseminate their ideas.

Studies related to the use of social media by pesantren communities have shown how social media is utilized to disseminate their religious ideas. For example, in (Halim, 2018) research titled "Young Islamic Preachers on Facebook: Pesantren As'adiyah and its Engagement with Social Media," a pesantren called As'adiyah in South Sulawesi, often associated with conservatism, has embraced the use of social media. With the introduction and utilization of digital technology, many members of the As'adiyah community have leveraged social media to maintain and strengthen their networks and enhance their religious reputation.

On the other hand, studies on the impact of the emergence of new media on religious authority, especially traditional authority, have resulted in both consequences and contradictions, weakening and strengthening it. For example, in a study conducted by (Ahmadi, 2019), he explains how Islamic sacred texts on social media have become references for Muslims to follow trends. He believes that the presence of new media has indirectly shifted the authority of scholars as references in understanding sacred texts, including hadiths.

Another interesting study focuses on the interaction and interdependence between the formation of traditional religious authority through offline practices and the online Islamic learning practices mediated through the internet. This can be seen in the study of online religious studies by (Qudsy & Muzakky, 2021), which illustrates how Quranic studies can be conducted virtually in the era of new media. The use of the hashtag #gusbaha, derived from a study delivered by an expert in the Quran, KH. Bahauddin Nursalim, plays a significant role in facilitating online access to the understanding of the Quran.

Thus, the development of digital media not only weakens and erodes traditional religious authority but also reinforces and reaffirms it. The use of digital media by both traditional and online religious authorities carries implications that often contradict and create tensions. The weakening caused by the utilization of new media by new preachers is found alongside the massive use of new media by various social religious forces.

Conclusion

The development of information technology or the digital era has impacted not only digitalization processes, making interaction easier and

more complex, but also spiritual practices that have undergone digitalization. Religious discourse is now represented in more contemporary, sophisticated, innovative, and concise ways. Religious discourse is no longer limited to sacred places or places of worship, such as mosques, prayer rooms, or madrasas, but it has entered and developed in digital spaces, giving rise to new preachers, millennial preachers with a more modern style and distinct characteristics.

Therefore, digital media also plays a role in giving birth to what is called new religious authority or can also be referred to as online authority. Studies on online authority have sparked many debates among scholars, and the study of authority has become highly complex. Moreover, studies on online authority are paradoxical. On one hand, online authority is believed to erode the existence of traditional authority, but on the other hand, traditional authority can renew its legitimacy in the online (digital) realm through online methods and practices.

The paradox in the context of online authority occurred in the early period of studying online authority or digital authority. Initially, these studies viewed online authority and traditional authority as separate paradigms, meaning that online authority and traditional authority existed in separate spaces, and online authority was expected to overshadow the existence of traditional authority because traditional authority was deemed incapable of competing in the digital realm.

However, further studies on online authority highlight that traditional authority and online authority are not separate entities. Traditional authority can enter and exist in the online domain with packaging, style, and innovation that aligns with digital practices. Traditional authority, with its strong legitimacy, can appear in the online sphere, repackaged and represented using online methods or styles that resonate with modern and contemporary trends.

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