

Religious Narratives and Diversity on Social Media: Analyzing the Digital Role in Strengthening Pluralism

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ABSTRACT

The rapid development of social media has significantly altered the way society engages with religious narratives, influencing perceptions of pluralism and moderate Islam. This study aims to examine the role of social media in shaping diversity narratives, with a particular focus on the Twitter account @AlissaWahid. Employing a content analysis approach, this research evaluates the messages disseminated through this account's posts and their impact on public discourse regarding religious tolerance. The findings indicate that social media serves as an influential platform for fostering inclusivity, spreading messages of religious moderation, and countering radical narratives. Through the strategic use of inclusive language, visual content, and interactive engagement, the dissemination of diversity narratives becomes more effective and accessible to digital audiences. Furthermore, this study highlights the necessity of active participation from religious leaders, scholars, and civil society organizations to reinforce moderate Islamic discourse in online spaces. Strengthening these collaborative efforts is crucial to ensuring that social media continues to function as a medium for promoting harmony, pluralism, and religious coexistence in Indonesia.

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Introduction

Religious diversity in Indonesia is an undeniable social reality. As a nation with a highly heterogeneous population, Indonesia faces challenges in maintaining harmony amidst cultural and religious plurality (Rachmanto, 2017). The country's diversity is continuously tested by various challenges, including the rise of exclusivist narratives that often pit religion against nationalism (Zuhdi, 2014). Therefore, strategic efforts are required to preserve diversity and ensure that religious and cultural differences do not become sources of conflict but rather serve as unifying forces for the nation (Susilowati & Masrurroh, 2018).

Social media has emerged as one of the primary platforms for shaping public opinion on religion and diversity. Unlike conventional media, social media provides a broader space for individuals and groups to disseminate certain narratives without institutional filters (Kietzman et al., 2011). This phenomenon has led to the emergence of various narratives, including those that strengthen diversity as well as those that propagate intolerance (Rusfian & Nurhajati, 2015). Thus, understanding how social media is utilized in shaping opinions related to diversity is a crucial aspect of academic research (Campbell & Connely, 2015).

In the Indonesian context, the use of social media by radical groups to spread narratives of intolerance has been on the rise. Previous studies indicate that radical groups frequently use platforms such as Twitter to construct exclusive discourses and reject pluralism (Mubit, 2016). One of the Quranic verses often cited as justification by radical groups is Surah Al-Baqarah verse 120, which is narrowly interpreted to legitimize intolerant attitudes toward other groups (Hidayat & Gaus, 1998). However, several moderate Muslim figures, such as Alissa Wahid, utilize social media to counter these narratives by offering a more inclusive Islamic perspective (Kaiciid.org, 2017).

The Twitter account @AlissaWahid serves as an example of how social media can be used as a counter-narrative tool against radical teachings. This account actively promotes peaceful Islam that respects diversity while also fostering discussions on the importance of preserving pluralism (Akurat.co, 2019). The narratives disseminated by this account emphasize the values of *rahmatan lil alamin*, which reject religious exclusivism and support social harmony (Islami.co, 2016). This illustrates that social media can be an effective tool in shaping a more inclusive religious understanding within society (Masudi, 2013).

On the other hand, various studies have shown that social media plays a dual role in the dissemination of religious discourse. In addition to serving as a medium for spreading positive information, social media has also become a fertile ground for the growth of religious-based radicalism (Asrori, 2015). A study conducted by the Indonesian State Intelligence Agency (BIN) in 2017 found that 39 percent of university students had

been exposed to radical ideologies through social media (CNN Indonesia, 2018). This data highlights the significant influence of social media in shaping religious understanding among younger generations (Widyaningsih, 2017).

On a global scale, the phenomenon of using social media as a tool for disseminating religious ideologies is not unique to Indonesia. Studies in Malaysia indicate that social media has become a primary channel for the transformation of Islamic preaching (Umar & Samsudin, 2010). Meanwhile, research on the Haredi Jewish community in Israel has also shown that social media can be used to reinforce religious identity within a multicultural society (Bunt, 2009). Thus, the patterns of social media usage in constructing religious discourse exhibit similarities across different countries with varying social conditions (Cheong et al., 2012).

Historically, tolerance toward diversity has been an integral part of Islamic tradition. Muslim leaders in the past, such as those during the Umayyad and Abbasid Caliphates, implemented policies that allowed Christian and Jewish communities to freely practice their faith (Sirry, 2003). This tolerance was also reinforced by various Quranic verses, such as Surah Al-Hujurat verse 13, which emphasizes the importance of mutual understanding and respect for differences (at-Thabari, 2000). However, over time, more exclusive religious interpretations have emerged, often rejecting diversity as part of Islamic values (Frans Magnis-Suseno, 2007).

In this regard, the concept of *Islam Nusantara*, developed by Nahdlatul Ulama (NU), serves as a model for affirming an Islam that is accommodating to local cultures and diversity (Detik.com, 2015). *Islam Nusantara* emphasizes that Islam should adapt to cultural values without losing its religious essence (Zahro, 2004). This ideology is based on NU's core principles: *tawasuth* (moderation), *tasamuh* (tolerance), *tawazun* (balance), and *ta'adul* (justice), which serve as pillars for maintaining social harmony in Indonesia (Zainul Milal Bizawie, 2016).

With advancements in communication technology, there is an increasing need to understand how social media can be utilized as an instrument for constructing diversity narratives. This study aims to analyze how the Twitter account @AlissaWahid disseminates messages of pluralism and how the public responds to these narratives (Paul et al., 2018). By employing content analysis, this research will explore various emerging narrative patterns and their impact on public opinion (Salman, 2017).

By understanding the dynamics of religious narratives on social media, this study is expected to contribute to the development of more inclusive media policies. Additionally, this research aims to provide insights for academics and communication practitioners on strategies that can be implemented to promote pluralism through social media (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2012). The findings of this study are also expected to serve as

a reference for governments and civil society organizations in designing more effective counter-radicalism programs in the digital era (Obar & Wildman, 2015).

Methods

This study employs a qualitative approach using content analysis to examine the posts from the Twitter account @AlissaWahid related to issues of pluralism and religious tolerance. Content analysis was chosen as it allows researchers to explore digital communication patterns that emerge in religious discourse on social media (Esin et al., 2014). The data used in this research were collected from @AlissaWahid's posts over a specific period deemed relevant to the study's theme. Additionally, this study refers to narrative theory, which emphasizes that messages conveyed through media possess a structured meaning that can influence audiences (Mahmudi et al., 2013).

Data collection was conducted through documentation and observation of posts published by the @AlissaWahid Twitter account. The collected data were then categorized based on key themes, such as messages of diversity, counter-narratives against radicalism, and calls for unity (Keraf, 2010). Following data classification, an in-depth analysis was performed to understand how the conveyed narratives shape public opinion regarding the relationship between religion and pluralism. In analyzing the data, this study also considers a sociological approach to social media, viewing digital platforms as public spaces where different discourses compete for legitimacy (Salman, 2017).

Result and Discussion

1. Religious Narratives on Social Media and Their Impact on Pluralism

Social media has become a space for various religious narratives that significantly impact pluralism in Indonesia. In this digital era, different groups with ideological interests utilize social media to disseminate their views on religion and diversity (Kietzman et al., 2011). Some groups use digital platforms to spread inclusive messages that promote tolerance, while others exploit them to propagate exclusivist and intolerant narratives (Rusfian & Nurhajati, 2015). Consequently, social media serves as an arena where various religious discourses interact and influence one another (Campbell & Connely, 2015).

This study finds that the Twitter account @AlissaWahid consistently promotes religious narratives that support pluralism and tolerance. This account actively encourages society to appreciate differences and reject all forms of intolerance that could potentially divide the nation (Islami.co, 2016). The posts frequently highlight the importance of understanding Islam as a *rahmatan lil alamin* religion, which values diversity as part of divine will (Kaiciid.org, 2017). This demonstrates that social media can be leveraged as a tool to foster a more inclusive religious understanding in society (Masudi, 2013).

On the other hand, radical groups also use social media to disseminate intolerant teachings. They frequently construct narratives that oppose religious pluralism and nationalism, often citing specific Quranic verses in a selective manner to support their claims (Mubit, 2016). One commonly misused verse is Surah Al-Baqarah verse 120, which is narrowly interpreted to reject interfaith dialogue (Hidayat & Gaus, 1998). However, this interpretation has been criticized by various scholars and academics who emphasize the importance of understanding the verse within its broader context (at-Thabari, 2000).

This phenomenon indicates that social media is not merely a communication tool but also an ideological battleground. The narratives that develop within digital platforms can significantly influence public perceptions of religion and pluralism (Cheong et al., 2012). Therefore, it is essential for moderate religious figures to actively disseminate counter-narratives that can balance religious discourse and prevent domination by exclusivist groups (Umar & Samsudin, 2010).

Furthermore, social media enables individuals and groups to establish digital communities based on shared values. In this context, the @AlissaWahid account serves as an example of how digital communities can thrive based on the values of pluralism and tolerance (Akurat.co, 2019). Through interactions on social media, users can engage in discussions and share experiences on how to maintain religious harmony (Paul et al., 2018).

The narratives disseminated by this account are not limited to textual content but also incorporate visual elements such as images and infographics that reinforce the messages being conveyed (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2012). This strategy has proven effective in increasing audience engagement and expanding the reach of the messages (Obar & Wildman, 2015). Thus, the use of social media in shaping inclusive religious narratives is not solely dependent on message content but also on how it is presented (Salman, 2017).

Based on these findings, it can be concluded that social media has enormous potential in shaping public understanding of religion and pluralism. However, this potential must be balanced with efforts to monitor and control the dissemination of narratives that may lead to intolerance and radicalism (Widyaningsih, 2017). Therefore, active involvement from various stakeholders, including the government, academics, and civil society, is essential to ensure that social media remains a space that supports diversity and tolerance.

2. Counter-Narratives Against Radicalism on Social Media

In recent years, social media has become a primary tool for the dissemination of radical and exclusivist ideologies (Asrori, 2015). Radical groups utilize these platforms to attract sympathizers and recruit new members, particularly among young individuals who are still in the process of identity formation (Widyaningsih, 2017). Consequently, counter-

narratives have become a crucial strategy in efforts to counteract radical ideologies that are proliferating in the digital world (Zulkifle Ghani, 2010).

The Twitter account @AlissaWahid is one of the key actors in spreading counter-narratives against radicalism. This account actively refutes radical group claims through an argumentative approach rooted in moderate Islamic principles (Kaiciid.org, 2017). Its posts frequently cite Quranic verses that emphasize moderation and respect for differences (Islami.co, 2016).

Counter-radicalism narratives disseminated through social media must be able to match the appeal of radical narratives. Research has shown that radical groups often use emotionally charged approaches that captivate audiences, particularly young people (Machasin, in Abegebriel & Abeveiro, 2003). Therefore, when constructing counter-narratives, the approach used must align with the thought patterns and preferences of the target audience (Rahmat, 2010).

An effective counter-narrative strategy must consider both visual and linguistic aspects. Several studies indicate that using infographics, short videos, and memes can enhance the effectiveness of counter-radicalism campaigns (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2012). Additionally, the choice of non-judgmental language can help expand the message's reach and reduce resistance from the target audience (Salman, 2017).

This approach is also supported by various moderate Islamic organizations, such as Nahdlatul Ulama (NU) and Muhammadiyah, which actively disseminate messages of diversity through social media (Detik.com, 2015). This collective effort is crucial in ensuring that counter-narratives are not just individual initiatives but also receive legitimacy from religious institutions with broad societal influence (Zahro, 2004).

Based on this analysis, it can be concluded that counter-narratives against radicalism on social media must be systematically developed and targeted with precision. Strengthening these narratives in the digital space can contribute to fostering a more tolerant society that values diversity.

3. The Role of Social Media in Promoting Moderate Islam and Diversity

Social media has become a primary tool for disseminating messages of moderate Islam and the values of pluralism. With its broad reach and interactive nature, social media enables religious leaders, academics, and the public to share ideas about a more inclusive Islam that respects diversity (Kietzman et al., 2011). Several studies indicate that social media can be an effective means of spreading a moderate religious understanding, particularly amid increasing challenges from radical groups (Rusfian & Nurhajati, 2015).

In the Indonesian context, the Twitter account @AlissaWahid has played a significant role in promoting moderate Islam through posts emphasizing the importance of tolerance and unity in diversity. The posts from this account often cite Islamic teachings

that stress mutual respect and reject religious exclusivism (Islami.co, 2016). This strategy effectively attracts a broader audience and reinforces the understanding that Islam is not at odds with the principles of pluralism (Kaiciid.org, 2017).

One of the primary challenges in promoting moderate Islam through social media is the presence of misinformation and disinformation, which extremist groups often exploit to spread exclusive narratives. These groups frequently manipulate religious texts to support their agendas, which are contrary to the values of diversity (Mubit, 2016). Therefore, it is crucial for accounts advocating for moderate Islam to actively clarify misinformation and provide a more comprehensive perspective on Islamic teachings (Hidayat & Gaus, 1998).

Furthermore, research suggests that moderate Islam promoted through social media can serve as an effective tool for fostering solidarity among communities of different religious and cultural backgrounds (Masudi, 2013). In its various posts, @AlissaWahid highlights how Islam can act as a social adhesive that strengthens national unity rather than a source of division (Akurat.co, 2019). This demonstrates that social media can serve as a space for different groups to engage in discussions and share perspectives that support diversity (Paul et al., 2018).

The approach used in promoting moderate Islam through social media must also consider communication strategies that align with audience characteristics. Studies indicate that Millennials and Generation Z are more engaged with visual content and personal narratives than with long, academic texts (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2012). Therefore, accounts advocating for moderate Islam need to adopt appealing communication formats, such as infographics, short videos, and memes that can be easily understood and shared by audiences (Obar & Wildman, 2015).

Additionally, the involvement of religious communities and organizations in moderate Islam campaigns on social media plays a significant role. Nahdlatul Ulama (NU) and Muhammadiyah, for instance, have actively used various digital platforms to spread messages of diversity and counter radical ideologies (Detik.com, 2015). Support from these religious institutions strengthens the legitimacy of the messages and increases public trust in the development of moderate Islamic narratives (Zahro, 2004).

The case study of @AlissaWahid demonstrates that effective communication strategies can enhance the impact of moderate Islam campaigns on social media. By utilizing inclusive language, engaging visual content, and an approach rooted in authentic Islamic values, the account has successfully built a digital community that supports pluralism and tolerance (Salman, 2017). Consequently, promoting moderate Islam through social media can be a strategic step in strengthening social cohesion and preventing the spread of radical ideologies in Indonesia.

Based on this analysis, it can be concluded that social media holds significant potential in disseminating moderate Islamic teachings that promote pluralism and tolerance. However, these efforts must be systematic and sustained to effectively compete with exclusive narratives spread by extremist groups (Widyaningsih, 2017). With active involvement from various stakeholders, including academics, religious leaders, and government institutions, social media can serve as an effective tool for fostering an inclusive religious understanding and strengthening social harmony in Indonesia.

Conclusion

This study highlights the significant role of social media in shaping religious narratives and pluralism in Indonesia. With its interactive and wide-reaching nature, social media serves as a crucial tool for disseminating messages of tolerance and constructing counter-narratives against radical teachings. The findings indicate that the Twitter account @AlissaWahid exemplifies how social media can be effectively utilized to promote moderate Islam and counter religious exclusivism, which poses a threat to diversity.

The results reveal that narratives developed on social media have both positive and negative implications for public perceptions of religion and pluralism. While radical groups exploit digital platforms to propagate exclusivist and intolerant ideologies, moderate Islamic actors leverage social media to reinforce pluralistic values and advocate for social harmony. Consequently, social media is not merely a communication tool but also an ideological battleground where competing discourses shape societal understandings of religion.

The effectiveness of communication strategies in fostering pluralistic narratives is highly dependent on approaches that align with the characteristics of digital audiences. The use of inclusive language, engaging visual elements, and active community participation in message dissemination are critical factors that enhance the impact of moderate Islamic campaigns. Furthermore, synergy among individuals, academics, religious leaders, and civil society organizations in constructing counter-narratives against radicalism plays a crucial role in safeguarding Indonesia's diversity.

Therefore, systematic and sustained efforts to utilize social media for promoting moderate Islam must continue to be developed. Governments and religious institutions are encouraged to collaborate with society in formulating more effective communication strategies to combat digital radicalism. With the active involvement of multiple stakeholders, social media can be further strengthened as a powerful instrument in fostering a harmonious, inclusive society that upholds the values of pluralism and religious tolerance.

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