



RELIGIOUS MODERATION, EXPERT, SOCIAL MEDIA CONTENT NEWBIE?: RELIGIOUS EXTENSION OFFICERS IN SOCIAL MEDIA

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Abstract

Keywords:

countering
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media engagement

About sixty-seven thousand religious extension officers (Penyuluh Agama), representing six religions in the state service, are on the frontline of the massive campaign of religious moderation organized by the Ministry of Religious Affairs. They are the sole body with religious competence dealing with the increasing religious conservatism, radicalism, and extremism. The study observed Penyuluh's digital performance and agency in social media. It describes the complexity of their position within the challenge of religious extremism, the execution of a religious moderation campaign, and social media engagement. Data collection utilizes mixed methods, while the analysis employs netnographic and descriptive-inductive methods. The findings demonstrate the digital divide context, the tendency of Penyuluh to reproduce the structure, hence limiting their agency, limited digital mastery and digital literacy of many of Penyuluh, fragmented institutional information system, and the vulnerability of instant messenger engagement that is prone to epistemic bubble and echo chamber effects.

	Abstrak
Kata kunci: menangkal ekstremisme agama; Penyuluh Agama; moderasi beragama; aktivitas sosial media	Kurang lebih terdapat enam puluh tujuh ribu Penyuluh Agama dari enam agama yang dilayani negara, menjadi garda terdepan kampanye masif moderasi beragama yang dikoordinasi oleh Kementerian Agama. Penyuluh adalah satu-satunya agen negara dengan jumlah signifikan yang memiliki kompetensi agama dalam menghadapi meningkatnya konservatisme, radikalisme dan ekstremisme agama. Kajian ini meneliti unjuk kerja dan agensi Penyuluh Agama di media sosial, memaparkan dinamika dan kerumitan posisi mereka dalam menangkal ekstremisme agama dan dalam menjalankan peran penting kampanye moderasi agama, sekaligus keaktifan memanfaatkan media sosial. Pengumpulan data menggunakan metode campuran, serta analisa melalui netnografi dan metode deskriptif-induktif. Temuan penelitian ini menunjukkan masih nyatanya kondisi kesenjangan digital (<i>digital divide</i>), kecenderungan Penyuluh mereproduksi struktur sehingga agensi mereka lemah, keterbatasan kapasitas memanfaatkan teknologi digital dan literasi digital, sistem informasi pendukung yang masih terfragmentasi, dan rentannya teknologi populer <i>Instant Messenger</i> seperti WhatsApp menjadi ruang <i>epistemic bubble</i> dan <i>echo chamber</i> . Kondisi terakhir ini memberi peluang pada dominasi wacana tunggal oleh aktor-aktor dominan.

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INTRODUCTION

Background Of The Study

In October 2021, Mohammad Nuruzzaman, exceptional staff to the Minister of Religion (*Menteri Agama*), stated that around 30% of the fifty thousand Islamic Religious Extension Officers (*Penyuluh Agama Islam*)¹ were exposed to religious radicalism (Aju, 2021). If this number is accurate, the 4,500 Religious Extension Officers (from now on, *Penyuluhs*) under the auspice of the Ministry of Religious Affairs (from now on, MoRA) exposed to radicalism also implicate a large number for the State Civil

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Apparatus (from now on, ASN). However, Nuruzzaman immediately clarified the misleading information during an interview on a television program widely broadcasted on YouTube. With representatives from the Indonesian Ulama Council (MUI), Prof. Utang Ranuwijaya, Chair of the MUI for Studies, Research and Development, joining the discussion, the discourse of radicalism developed out of proportion, including public debate on the meaning of "radicalism," which according to Ranuwijaya is more accurately called "religious extremism." Nuruzzaman clarified his statement by stating, "The 30% of affected *Penyuluhs* now are being assessed (*dipetakan*)," he said. The assessment includes mapping performance, religious competence, and national vision (*wawasan kebangsaan*), including the ability to mediate intra-religious and inter-religious conflicts by sampling the *Penyuluhs* in eight provinces (Official iNews, 2021).

Aside from Nuruzzaman's clarification, in a broader setting, an anti-terrorism agency official in Indonesia mentioned that the ASN is indeed vulnerable to exposure to religious extremism. (Harahap, 2019; Budi, 2022).

Furthermore, Ranuwijaya indicates that the fundamental challenge in these dynamics is the frequent use of the terms "religious radicalism," "religious extremism," and, in a broader context, "religious fundamentalism." Government officials often use these terms in public discussions and everyday language. Inconsiderate use of these terms and expressions can create confusion and stereotyping, produce a transference effect on the affected parties, and have careless connotations for particular socio-religious groups.

In 2019, state-sponsored campaigns for religious moderation, led by MoRA, were implemented to promote assertive nationalism, moderate religiosity, enhanced tolerance and harmony among religions, and respect for local wisdom within society. The campaign is grounded in assertive nationalism, which entails the acceptance of the 1945 Constitution and its provisions as fundamental to nation-building and social interaction (Tim Penyusun Kementerian Agama Republik Indonesia, 2019).

In the context of religious moderation, extremism is seen as a loss of balance, with both left and right extremes. The right-wing factions are characterized by their

"ultra-conservative" beliefs. In contrast, the leftists tended to be religiously "liberal" (Tim Penyusun Kementerian Agama Republik Indonesia, 2019). Despite the noble objective, several criticisms describe this program as an overreaction to increasing religious radicalism and conservatism and a form of bureaucratization of the program. One of the criticisms alluded to the fact that this massive campaign is problematic in accentuating the state's position in defining religiosity and religious lives. Secondly, it marginalizes religious variations apart from mainstream religious expressions. Thirdly, there needs to be more clarity between the ideal and noble objectives and their implementations (Bagir & Sormin, 2022).

Penyuluhs, the sole state apparatus with religious competence and arms of MoRA, carries the burden of this state-sponsored "religious moderation" campaign. The challenge was furthered when the technological imperative, manifested primarily in social media and application services such as e-PA, affected *Penyuluhs*'s performance. The former was endorsed as an emergent social space for *Penyuluhs* to enhance their scope of service to the public, and the latter was mandatory administratively.

Social media, mainly through the mobile ecosystem, has been formative in creating subjectivity, agency, and individual liberties for social actors. (Jayaram & Shah, 2021). Even though it is a reality that the rhetoric of speed, accessibility, and technological mastery is still a pressing issue in the case of some segments of *Penyuluhs*, the following discussion ensued. One of the celebrations but also challenges is the hyper-personalized nature and privacy afforded through mobile technology that limits state surveillance and, within the hoaxivism, i.e., hoaxes and falsehood as the effects of digital logic limit fact-checking. (Epafras, Djalang, & Kaunang, 2018). Several studies have discussed, furthermore, a strong correlation between the use of social media and the growth of religious extremism. (Nuraniyah, 2017; CONVEY Indonesia, 2018; Schmidt, 2018). Engaged with social media with different degrees of immersion, and the "false" indication of *Penyuluh*'s exposure to religious "radicalism" signals that they are not immune to expediency.

Against those backdrops, how can we understand *Penyuluh*'s role and activities in this dynamic? The present research pursues beyond the singularity between *Penyuluhs*' mandate and the efficacy of their line of duty. In the context of persistent digital friction, religious polarization, and "truncated pluralism" (Menchik, 2014) in the Indonesian political landscape, the study is a way to understand *Penyuluhs*' location.

Research Gap

There are mature discussions of the link between agency/agent and structure/institution. The most influential among them are theories put forward by Giddens and Bourdieu.

Giddens argued that institutions (social structures) and individual/agency actions are mutually constitutive and maintain interdependency in what he called the "duality of structure" (Giddens, 1984). While a structure frames individual performance more than a restrictive force, an institution shapes and enables individual action. He asserted the strategic position of agency to interpret and navigate the structure through choice-making and similar, which might transform or reinforce it. The interplay between the two allows an individual to change the social structure, and the structure provides a ground for the individual's future actions. Giddens called it "structuration," in which an individual routinized within the "institutional time." (Giddens, 1984).

Bourdieu expresses similar concerns and attention to Giddens. He proposed powerful concepts of habitus, fields, and capital to explain social practice on the level of individual social actors. (Bourdieu, 1984). However, a more relevant concept for the present concern is his notion of "field" since it provided a platform for overcoming the dichotomy of agency and structure and because social media is a social field that performs agency and manifestation of structuration. The ultimate proposal of Bourdieu's "field" is:

"May be defined as a network, or a configuration, of objective relations between positions. These positions are objectively defined in their existence and in the determinations they impose upon their occupants, agents or institutions by their present and potential situation (situs) in the structure of the distribution of species of power (or capital) whose possession commands access to the specific profits that are at stake in

the field, as well as by their objective relation to other positions (domination, subordination, homology, etc.)." (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992).

In short, a field is a social configuration that allows for exchanging social capital and meaning, a theater of dynamic interaction among positions, agencies, and institutions. At the same time, it is prone to internal struggle.

Fligstein & McAdam (2012) praised Giddens and Bourdieu's fundamental contribution to understanding the relationship between agency and structure and how structure frames the role of actor/agency in reproducing structure in social life, along with exercising its autonomous action. Nevertheless, those considered abstract and less informed by empirical observation. For instance, those could not be sufficiently helpful in understanding,

"how actors enact structure in the first place and the role they play in sustaining or changing these structures over time" (Fligstein & McAdam, 2012).

The specificity of social process and social skills in which actors obtain to engage with their structure or deal with other actors, for Fligstein and McAdam, are the areas less explored by the two scholars and others. Moreover, for them, Bourdieu focuses more on individual actors and is less interested in the collectivity of agency, particularly in producing collective action within and external to a structure/institution (Fligstein & McAdam, 2012).

Following the concern set by Fligstein and McAdam, the present undertaking focuses on the links between *Penyuluhs'* agency, both individual and collective, and MoRA as the immediate structure and taking social media as a field of action. Furthermore, it explored social media as a social space for *Penyuluhs*. It learned from their experiences and activities to understand it as a social constructive technological space (Poschmann, 2024) through which *Penyuluhs* lived and produced meaning. The meaning of production is seen as primarily arbitrary and determined by their understanding as part of MoRA and mastery of technological artifacts (Poschmann, 2024).

First, we need to understand the location of *Penyuluh*'s agency within the MoRA infrastructure. The Decree of the Minister for State Apparatus Empowerment and Bureaucratic Reform (Menteri Pendayagunaan Aparatur Negara dan Reformasi Birokrasi, MenPANRB) defines a *Penyuluh* as "a civil servant assigned full duties, responsibilities, authority, and rights to carry out religious and development guidance or counseling to the community through religious language" (Kemen PANRB, 1999). Apart from civil servants (from now on, PNS) *Penyuluhs*, there are non-PNS *Penyuluhs* or honorary *Penyuluhs*, most of whom also work as religious clergy (Kemen PANRB, 1999). The government is working to improve the status of non-PNS *Penyuluhs*, with the possibility of upgrading the present status to the Government Employees with a Work Agreement (*Pegawai Pemerintah dengan Perjanjian Kerja/PPPK*) (Kemen PANRB, 2022).

According to the official *Penyuluh* website (e-PA), as of August 6, 2023, 67.511 *Penyuluhs* and 62.397 non-PNS *Penyuluhs* are spread across all provinces. This large number posed a significant challenge for the government to ensure continuity, integrity, and balance between *Penyuluhs*' personal religious preferences and their position as front-liners of government programs.

At the same time, *Penyuluhs* also bear multiple burdens, including being educators, communicators, instructors, and motivators (Ditjen Bimas Islam, 2022), as well as "frontline soldiers," "glue" for Indonesian unity, "early warning" agents against horizontal conflict, and "religious moderation agents." (Ditjen Bimas Islam, 2022; Humas Kemenag Banda Aceh, 2022; Kemenag Klaten, 2019). As stated by Presidential Instruction No. 9/2015, *Penyuluhs*' task, particularly Public Information *Penyuluh* (from now on, PIP, *Penyuluh Informasi Publik*) among others, is to spread out and compile singular narratives (*narasi tunggal*) and other information regarding government policies and programs to the public (Instruksi Presiden No 9 Year 2015, 2015). These conditions have shaped and influenced the *Penyuluhs*' self-perceptions and role(s) (Kustini & Koeswinarno, 2015).

The shift and momentum of the religious landscape in Post-Reformation Indonesia, branded as the "conservative turn," particularly among the Muslim society,

testified to the increasing religious conservatism in response to globalization that challenged religious identity and traditional values. (Bruinessen, 2013). The manifestations include heightened identity politics, inter-communal conflict, and declining what was called "moderate Islam," creating a vacuum filled by conservatism.

Presently, the challenge for *Penyuluhs* is not only the development of cosmopolitan ideologies—often framed in literature and political rhetoric as "transnational ideologies" – but also the increasing network of distributed knowledge and fragmented authority of religion and state authority. The dissemination of authority has caused the 'porous' reproduction of knowledge produced by any institution. This condition provides an opportunity and space for "leakage" or "infiltration" of other discourses into the production and reproduction of institutional knowledge. Currently, power relations and knowledge production are no longer hierarchical with hierarchical lines of command but dispersed into individual levels who can attain religious expertise and develop their spirituality heterarchical, multiple subscriptions of various religious authorities. (Epafras, 2016). Digital technology seemingly incentivizes such conditions.

Those circumstances preconditioned the present undertaking. First, there are discrepancies and variances within *Penyuluh's* agency, created from the above social complexity, concerning their structural position as an operator of the government's policy and their personal religious preference.

About the indication of the state's concern regarding ASN's vulnerability to a particular form of ideology, in this case, *Penyuluhs* could not escape from the main challenges of the present era, which the digital technology, especially the presence of social media and internet which are moving towards Web 3.0 technology. Recently, the public and state have been concerned with the increasing use of artificial intelligence (AI), which is indicated to have an impact on the way religiosity is expressed and might vulnerable religiously marginalized communities. (Epafras, 2022). Inevitably, the pandemic has become a game changer, forcing all parties, including *Penyuluhs*, to explore digital technology even more in all their activities.

The core transformation brought about by digital technology is the growing instrumentalization and mediation of human experience. Technology's impact has increasingly become profound, embedded, and immersive in human life. This contrasts significantly with previous eras when technological paradigms were viewed primarily through an instrumentalist lens. A significant convergence has taken place between the online and offline realms, which, while distinguishable, remains inseparable to some degree. The concepts of temporality, social relationships, community, and humanity are evolving due to technological mediation, influenced by factors such as access, efficiency, and optimal performance (Epafras, 2023). The materialization of digital technology in gadgets and digital services is shaping the condition of communicative abundance with an abundance of tools, services, and communication technology. It makes society increasingly digitized (Keane, 2013). The impact of this dependence is varied; one example is the characteristic of the FOMO phenomenon, fear of missing out, which is a psychological anxiety about losing opportunities to exist in the online realm.

In a more specific context, the digital social space in Indonesia is characterized by increasing friction and polarization. Friction has become an inherent reality in the digital world due to massive public participation from various parties expressing their aspirations and agendas. Friction, however, can be perceived as two sides of a coin; it has the potential to be positive as friction can increase interaction, but it is also a symptom and manifestation of contestation and clashes between actors (Shah & Zhong, 2021). It increases tension and escalates into a digital conflict (Sudibyo, 2021) and polarization. According to the Edelman Trust Barometer (2023), Four factors drive polarization: 1) economic anxieties, 2) institutional imbalance, especially in countries experiencing declining levels of trust, 3) mass-class divide, and 4) the battle for truth. The latter, the battle for truth, has been inflicted in Indonesia's digital landscape since 2017 when religion became a determining factor in politics. This condition persists to a certain degree today as Indonesia is passing the 2024 elections.

Increasing massive public participation in digital spaces creates what Epafras et al. call a "monitorial society" characterized by the members of society; notably, netizens

displayed an intense curiosity about other peoples' affairs, appealing to the government for their individual and group interests, and controlling the discourse of civility, religion, and other people's beliefs (Epafras, 2018; Epafras, Kaunang, & Asri, 2019). The above characters are reflected in *Penyuluhs'* frame of internet activities. When it comes to social media activities, in such instrumentalized and mediated interaction, how can we be sure the singularity of national vision is faithfully held?

This document presents a report on research undertaken by the Inter-Religious Studies (IRS) Study Program research team of the Postgraduate School of Universitas Gadjah Mada, headed by Leonard Chrysostomos Epafras. Data were collected from March to July 2023 and finalized by the end of October 2023.

This research outlines the following question and sub-questions: how do *Penyuluhs* of the Ministry of Religious Affairs (from now on MoRA) perform on social media? To what extent do *Penyuluhs* employ social media to exercise their mandate to communicate state development in religious language and contextualize messages of religious moderation? What are the challenges *Penyuluhs* faces? How do *Penyuluhs* position themselves as agencies with their religious aspirations and align their role and personal aspirations with the demands of the duty, especially in the context of offline and online religious polarization?

Rationale Of The Study

Penyuluhs, or religious extension officers, first appeared in 1985 through Minister of Religious Affairs Decision No. 791/1985. Those were a transformation from the role of honorary religious teachers (*guru agama honorer*). Their position was substantiated through Presidential Decree No. 87/1999, as part of the functional civil servant, which focuses on spiritual and moral care in the society within the respected religious traditions. They are effectively at the forefront of the state's face when dealing with religious affairs in society. On the other hand, *Penyuluhs* manifested societal participation in national development (Sebayang, 2017).

The Minister of the Empowerment of the State Apparatus Decision No. 54/1999 profiled *Penyuluhs* into two task categories: the exclusive task, which focuses their

service on their religious communities, and the inclusive task, which includes the role of *Penyuluh Pembangunan* (extension officer for national development), which serves the larger society (Sebayang, 2017).

Penyuluh is a civil state apparatus (*aparatus sipil negara*, ASN), consisted of civil servant (*pegawai negeri sipil*, PNS) and non-civil servant (non-PNS). Non-PNS *Penyuluhs* are recruited from local religious authorities and other people proficient in religious affairs. The government compensates them for their service with limited monthly financial support and other means (Kementerian Agama, 2015). Civil servant candidates undergo competence training before joining the rank-and-file government position. *Prajabatan* (lit. pre-positioning) training ensures civil servants become persons with integrity. The content includes *wawasan kebangsaan* (national vision), social and cultural understanding, and religious moderation.

Penyuluhs, as the material subject of the research, is a threshold to understanding the larger dynamic and complexity of the multiple currents of religious aspirations in the post-pandemic and the preparatory period of the 2024 general election. A more elaborated objective is that *Penyuluhs'* digital experience and performance might help us understand the meaning of being the mouthpiece of the government's religious aspiration, notably through carrying out the state-sponsored religious moderation campaign and their self-efficacy on their personal and religious aspirations. The study might expect double talk, digital friction, the cadence of presumed polarization, and religious tolerance on social media platforms. Their cases may be a classical sociological site of the dynamic between agency and structure.

Literature Review

Several studies preceded the discussion of *Penyuluhs'* agency. Some focused on *Penyuluhs'* performance, and others dealt with its digital activities. Kustini and Koeswinarno revealed *Penyuluhs's* challenges in adopting new methods and technology. The study shows gaps in *Penyuluhs'* knowledge and skills that have prevented them from quickly adopting new technology (Kustini & Koeswinarno, 2015). Focusing on PNS *Penyuluhs*, this challenge the study observed is that regardless of the

perceived importance of *Penyuluhs* in addressing religious issues in society, their performance is "stagnated" and indicates "apathy." Most needed help contextualizing and updating themselves in responding to the social changes. The root cause, among others, is that a civil servant is bound by structural performance, which restricts their public maneuvers, financial incentives, and limited professional upgrading programs. (Kustini & Koeswinarno, 2015). Regarding technological exposure, most of them maintained traditional methods of face-to-face interaction with the members of religious communities, hence being unable to catch up with the public enthusiasm for social media (Kustini & Koeswinarno, 2015).

A study conducted by Mukzizatin provides a more positive depiction by showing the increased competence of *Penyuluhs*, including in technology adoption. The study found an improved understanding of the diversity and multiculturalism of *Penyuluhs* in Jakarta (Mukzizatin, 2020). It also revealed the perceived correlation between inter-communal friction, the ineffectiveness of *Penyuluhs* providing religious counseling, and the limited State's provisions and protections toward citizens' religious rights (Mukzizatin, 2020). Reflecting the findings, the study endorses a more extensive government involvement, i.e., MoRA, through expanded training activities, operational support, and financial support, particularly for *Penyuluhs* in 3T regions (*Tertinggal, Terdepan dan Terluar*, i.e., Disadvantaged, Outermost, and Frontier areas), and programmatic and thematic campaigns on national resilience.

These findings indirectly confirmed the gap (digital divide), which still needs to be fully resolved. This research also shows similar results, especially the presence of PIP in 3T regions, such as the province of East Nusa Tenggara.

Regarding the term "radicalism," Fauzi and Wikanda's research discussed a strategic threat through their observations of Nganjuk and Medan *Penyuluhs* (Fauzi, 2018; Wikanda, 2022). Fauzi (2018) observed that the relatively peaceful Nganjuk and Medan areas were disturbed by "transnational" and "radical" religious movements such as "Salafi-Wahabis," "deviant" religious groups, and terrorist suspects. While they did not specifically explore the media's role in opening the engagement with a variety of religious ideologies, which exposed the locals to the "transnational" religious discourse,

Fauzi (2018) and Wikanda (2022) emphasized the importance of *Penyuluhs*, in this regard Islamic *Penyuluhs*, engaging with media and communicative performance.

In comparison, a study by Burhanuddin & Khumaini (2021) focused on religious moderation in responding to hate speech on social media. They are positive religious moderation campaigns that might effectively address hate speech and any digital ills in social media but endorse more deliberative actions among the religious preachers to engage those issues. Both suggested the establishment of a digital library for clarification of any religious issues, establishing middle-way (*wasathiyah*) social media discussion groups, preachers' social media engagement, dialogical forum, programmatic wasathiyah-based education, and youth engagement.

Other research by Wibowo, Avianto, & Hermawan (2021) observed the impact of social media training for *Penyuluhs* as a new way of preaching. The findings of this research are closely reflected in the study by Pratyaksa & Putri (2020) and Triyana & Ratmini (2020), which is related to the use of digital technology by "digital native" *Penyuluhs*. However, the study focuses on the method of reaching out to young people rather than *Penyuluh's* own experience on social media as the main objective of the present research (Pratyaksa & Putri, 2020; Triyana & Ratmini, 2020).

Epafras (2019) provides a framework for *Penyuluhs* to embrace internet technology and social media to deliver religious messages to a broader audience in the spirit of justice, respect for differences, multiculturalism, and peaceful cooperation. However, this framework does not yet touch on the dimensions of *Penyuluh's* experience on social media.

Novelty Of The Study

Previous studies and observations have discussed the relationship between *Penyuluhs* and social media and the general use of social media. They focus on their structure, challenges, competencies, and the efficacy of technological usage. The discussions, however, rarely specifically look at the *Penyuluhs* agency as the present study focuses on.

Purposes of The Study

Apart from the above studies, the present engagement examines the agency of *Penyuluhs* as they stand at a pivotal point between their personal and religious aspirations and their vocation as *Penyuluhs*, responsible as communicative agents to the broader community. The agency in question is the subjectivity displayed on social media.

METHODS

This research applied field observation, social media observation, literature review, interviews, and focus group discussions (FGD) as methods for collecting data. Informants consist of 28 *Penyuluhs*, *Widya Iswara* (WI/trainers), and officials of the Regional Office of the Ministry of Religion in three cities, alphabetically: Bandung, Denpasar, and Kupang. The duration of the research and observations was eight months, from March to October 2023. The three cities are selected based on religious demographics: Kupang, representing East Nusa Tenggara, predominantly Protestant and Catholic; Denpasar, in the context of Balinese Hinduism; and Bandung, with Islamic discourse and strong cosmopolitanism.

The age range of informants is 27 to 60 years, divided between twelve women and sixteen men. Thirteen are non-PNS *Penyuluhs*, and one has been upgraded to the Government's Employees with Work Agreements (*Pegawai Pemerintah dengan Perjanjian Kerja*, PPPK). The *Penyuluhs* who gained the PPPK status also hold the position of PIP for the city of Kupang, who trained under the Ministry of Communication and Information (*Kemenkominfo*) based on Presidential Instruction (Inpres) No. 9/2015. All religions acknowledged by the state are represented except Confucianism, which could not attend the FGD in Bandung.

The research team applied virtual observations during the data collection process. This means observations of discussions and comments on social media, including activities in digital narratives, such as stories, blogs, vlogs, and YouTube. Another method of remote interactions utilizes messaging services such as WhatsApp, LINE, Facebook Messenger, and other digital means. This research will also use Netnographic methods to collect data, especially digital traces, participation/

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interaction, and immersive engagement (Kozinets, 2015; Eriyanto, 2021). Data analysis utilizes mixed methods, such as netnographic (Kozinets, 2010, 2011, 2015; Eriyanto, 2021) and descriptive-inductive methods. The analysis follows stages of coding, noting, and abstracting.

More detailed stages of collecting and analyzing research data are as follows: firstly, **in-depth interviews** were conducted via a hybrid communication method, combining virtual and on-site interviews. The *Penyuluhs* were selected after the initial observation stage. This chosen method is intended to grasp *Penyuluhs*' subjective experiences and in-depth knowledge regarding their social media activities, duties, how they perceive religious moderation, and other relevant topics. The **focus group discussions** (FGDs) aimed to collect information and share *Penyuluhs*' experiences. FGD was conducted with a larger number of participants.

This research project is an opportunity to learn, critically assess, and apply broader theoretical insights. A **literature review** helps researchers understand the issue's primary problem and the bigger picture. The literature review also aims to ensure the research's meaningful contribution to knowledge production, especially research that intersects religious studies and other scientific disciplines. Furthermore, **social media observations** were directed by taking samples of *Penyuluh* agencies in social media by observing several popular platforms, including Facebook, Instagram, and YouTube. In this stage, the research team observed the subject's digital activities, such as activeness in posting information on social media, activeness in online forums, and activities of sharing images and videos on social media.

The conclusions will include analysis data following partial netnographic procedures, which are out due to scope and time limitations. Data analysis will follow stages of: 1) coding and recording, 2) abstracting, 3) checking and improving, 4) generalization, and 5) theorizing. The final stage is the generalization stage, based on findings transforming findings into recommendations and creating modules.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The Decree of the MoRA of the Republic of Indonesia No. 426/2017 states that *Penyuluhs* are the "frontline" in realizing harmony among religious communities. The term "frontline" indicates the importance of *Penyuluhs*' role in establishing harmony and peace between religious communities. This encourages *Penyuluhs* to adapt to society's situation, including today's massive development of digital technology. This development requires them to transform communication patterns and methods with the community.

The research analysis focused on four issues: the condition of *Penyuluh*'s engagement with social media, the effect of digital divides, the challenges of disinformation and other digital ills, and the dynamic of *Penyuluh*'s agency within the structure of MoRA, including the digital system implementation.

Social Media Engagements

Digital communication technology (in this case, social media) provides a new alternative to delivering messages to the public more quickly and effectively (Baruah, 2012). All *Penyuluh* informants interviewed agreed on this. A *Penyuluh* in Kupang epitomized,

"It is through social media that our work effectively reaches out to children and adults."

This testimony implies that social media effectively delivers messages to all generations because almost everyone nowadays has a device with social media applications (Taylor, 2015). For one Islamic *Penyuluh*:

"Social media has an important role in conveying information. Therefore, every *Penyuluh* must be literate in IT [information technology]."

This opinion reflects that the use of social media in delivering information has a significant role. Using social media to convey messages quickly and cheaply with an attractive and varied performance is a way to attract people's interest and attention to the messages sent (Goodyear & Armour, 2019).

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The importance of social media's role in delivering messages to the public found its justification during the COVID-19 Pandemic. When there was an appeal from the government regarding implementing social distancing to prevent virus transmission, most of the communication switched to digital communication media, including the *Penyuluhs*. One Hindu *Penyuluh* in Bali said:

"I just realized the importance of social media during the COVID-19 Pandemic. When we could not meet face-to-face with the community, we had to use social media to conduct counseling activities, and everything continued to run smoothly."

Referring to the importance of the role of social media in the task of Islamic *Penyuluhs*, the Directorate General of Islamic Public Guidance (*Dirjen Bimas Islam*) of the MoRA once issued a circular regarding the "Campaign for Making Digital Posters / Flyers of Islamic Religious Guidance & Counseling by Islamic *Penyuluhs*." This circulation appeals to Islamic *Penyuluhs* to optimize the use of social media in religious guidance and counseling for the community. This appeal received a good response from the *Penyuluhs*, and they began to utilize social media actively. One of the Islamic *Penyuluhs* in Bali said:

"My Instagram account (IG) conveys flyers, posters, and general themes about religion. I attended social media training from the Kemenkominfo to learn new things related to creating content and graphic design."

Digital Divides

However, not all *Penyuluhs* can use social media optimally. They still face several obstacles. In the experience of *Penyuluhs* who live in Central and Eastern Indonesia, such as Kupang, technical issues such as the quality of internet signals are still an obstacle they often face. A Hindu *Penyuluh* in Kupang explained:

"There are still many people who live in areas with no signal, or the signal quality is challenging, which is an obstacle in communicating through digital media."

As mentioned in the previous section, the reality of the digital divide is still evident. In contrast to other regions, for example, Islamic *Penyuluhs* in Central Java are one step ahead of their colleagues. They have organized the moderanesia.com portal as

a forum for communication between *Penyuluhs* and the public. This condition might confirm the digital divide. According to the Indonesian Internet Service Providers Association (APJII) in its Q2 2020 report, 56.4% of internet penetration is still in Java. Sumatra is 22.1%, and the rest is shared with other islands (APJII, 2020). Hence, the digital divides or "zone of silence" manifest and continue to challenge the development divide between Western Indonesia, Java-Sumatra, and the rest of the country.

In addition to technical issues, the capacity of *Penyuluhs* to manage social media content is one of the findings of this study. *Penyuluhs* have the desire to be active on social media, but they need help managing creative and engaging content, which often discourages them. A Catholic *Penyuluh* said:

"I want to be active on social media, but my social media is not active due to a lack of skills and not mastering the techniques."

Similarly, a Hindu *Penyuluh* in Denpasar expressed hope that the MoRA, the Kemenkominfo, or other parties could organize technical training related to social media management.

Beyond these, the internal factors play an essential role. The study of Kustini and Koeswinarno above demonstrated the "stagnated" and "apathy" of PNS *Penyuluhs*' performance because of, among others, limited financial incentives and professional upgrading programs (Kustini & Koeswinarno, 2015). Our findings concur with this observation. Four issues stand: For non-PNS *Penyuluhs*, the honorarium is low to help them mobilize their digital performance. They received IDR 1 million monthly, which was claimed after submitting their regular report. Secondly, reportage is burdensome, which, according to our informers in an FGD, is vulnerable to information manipulation. Thirdly, as mentioned above, there is limited upgrading training. Finally, the popularity of micro-preachers and prominent local religious authorities can create "insecurity" among *Penyuluhs*. Further explanation is followed up in the following discussions.

The Challenge Of Disinformation And Other Digital Ills

Penyuluhs' activism on social media deserves more attention because they must actively disseminate messages and information to the community through digital communication media. One of the main challenges is the problem of inaccurate information and the spread of hoaxes about religion. Social media is often a source of false news that needs to be adequately verified, creating confusion among the public. *Penyuluhs* face the daunting task of filtering and conveying the correct information and ensuring that religious messages are not misinterpreted or infiltrated with false narratives.

The *Penyuluhs* saw the threat of online religious radicalization as something that needs to be watched out for. For them, social media is easily used by those who seek to radicalize or spread religious extremism. This phenomenon is a concern for community harmony and societal security in Indonesia. *Penyuluhs* are required to combat online radicalism actively and promote messages of tolerance, harmony, and peace in social media.

To overcome these challenges, they consider it necessary to have an in-depth understanding of social media utilization, good communication skills, and sensitivity to the Indonesian social and cultural context. In addition, they expect cooperation with relevant parties such as the government, religious organizations, and communities to overcome more complex challenges and create a safe and positive digital environment to spread the message of religious moderation. By addressing these challenges wisely and proactively, religious educators' use of social media can effectively spread religious messages that build and enlighten society.

While there were initiatives of *Penyuluhs* to combat radicalism, particularly among themselves, as conducted by an Islamic *Penyuluh* in Denpasar against her colleague in East Java on a WhatsApp platform, in general, the efficacy of their initiatives is down-and-out. They could not compete with the stronger voices of traditional religious authorities and popular micro-preachers on social media. *Penyuluhs*, we observed, required further capacity-building to respond to the upcoming image-based and deepfake disinformation, which required different levels

of fact-checking capability (Garimella & Eckles, 2020). In general, they seldom, if not uninformed, with the presence of "turnback hoax" services such as those provided by Mafindo, a prominent fact-checker body in Indonesia (Lumakto & Syamsudin, 2020). Both divisive views of what would be content considered a "hoax" and limited capacity to handle disinformation (Epafras et al., 2018).

As suggested by Postill & Epafras (2018), such a condition could be understood in two ways, i.e., fields of practice, which are autonomous from the state, corporate, and often from religious elites. Fields of action (collective actions), in which lively, ephemeral, mercurial, and fluid boundaries of social space formation are formed. The field of action is prominent in the context of viral communication. In this field of practice, we testify to the growing prominence of micro-preachers such as *micro-ustaz*, pastogram (pastor in Instagram), celebrity-ustadz (*ustaz selebriti*), biksu, priest, and *pastor gaul*, from the traditional religious establishment to the new self-styling preacher with powerful public communication skills.

Beyond social media as a field of action, the more significant shift is, as observed by Merlyna Lim, the socio-political landscape, which embraced religious issues as part of political engagement, became more "market-driven" (Lim, 2024). People are "selling brand, not ideas, nor policies" (Lim & Carleton University, 2018). In this intense (dis)information overload, *Penyuluh's* social responsibility came to the high noon of digital challenges.

Another highlighted issue is the *Penyuluhs'* social-political relations, as reflected in their social media posts. Our assessment of the social media posts aims to understand the *Penyuluhs'* agency in dealing with emerging socio-political issues. Bandung was chosen as a case study because it is one of the cities with a low Interfaith Harmony index (Setara Institute, 2022). The heterogeneity of Bandung is reflected in the range of *Penyuluhs* who attended the FGD for this research, namely those representing Islam, Protestantism, Catholicism, Hinduism, and Buddhism. At the same time, the Konghucu *Penyuluhs* could not participate.

Structure and Agency

The earlier part discussed the theoretical framework as the basis for understanding *Penyuluhs'* engagement as a social actor and MoRA's engagement as a structural manifestation. The present research demonstrated how MoRA, as the roof over Penghayats' social action, maintained the stability of Penghayats' agentic, and most of the time, Penghayats embodied such endorsed agentic at the price of the limited efficacy of their duty in social media. However, there are a handful of Penghayats as skilled social actors who defend their privilege at the cost of being charged as "exposed" to religious radicalism, particularly to "*kilafah*" normativity.

It revealed limited navigation of *Penyuluhs'* agentic in inventing themselves within the structure of MoRA. It can be claimed that the lack of mediation, as the role of influencers in social media took a prominent position, limits the insertion of their agency as *Penyuluhs*. So far, the observation of those who stood prominently, through critical evaluation of government policy or the daily religious lives of Indonesians, prone to charges as "dissident" or even religiously "radical," as the case of a Sukabumi's Islamic *Penyuluh*, discussed below.

The collectivity of *Penyuluhs* is primarily framed by the structural conditioning of institutional assignments manifested in the decree (*Surat Keputusan*), placement, reporting system, and others. The larger umbrella of social imposition through the "state" is oftentimes understood in a local context as the internal dynamic of the regional office of MoRA.

This seemingly "airtight" control indeed appeared in the porosity of a handful of *Penyuluhs*. An example is a Christian *Penyuluh* from Kupang informed one of the research team members about a social commotion in the region in 2010; the group's leader of *Penyuluh* restricted the information by summing up "*semua terkendali*" ([the commotion] is under control), avoiding the researcher digging up further.

A Catholic official of the regional office of MoRA in Bali asked for an interview and responded by saying in a Whatsapp message, "If only for chitchatting is fine, but to dig further of information [about the *Penyuluh*'s activities in the province] as the basis for research, it requires legality." He appealed for an Assignment Letter from the

researcher's institution addressed to the Chief of the Regional Office of MoRA. The Letter was sent, but the response never came. The interviews in this province are done only through personal connections. A different story is in East Nusa Tenggara where the provincial office of MoRA granted permission to conduct FGD, interviews, and online surveys.

In the FGD, several issues related to the duties of *Penyuluhs* in social media were conveyed, including 1) awareness of the lack of utilization of social media in carrying out the Main Tasks and Functions (*Tupoksi*) of the *Penyuluhs*; 2) the lack of digital literacy of the *Penyuluhs* in Bandung; and 3) digital literacy training facilities which are considered far from sufficient.

Penyuluhs admitted that the pandemic forced them to master digital technology to carry out their duties. However, they realize that the limited use of social media is based on the limited digital literacy among the *Penyuluhs*. In addition, the age range of the target group, which is mostly the senior generation, limits the choice of using social media. The senior generation is only familiar with communication services such as WhatsApp and has no subscription to other platforms. The lack of digital literacy also impacts the *Penyuluhs*' low outreach power.

Digital literacy refers to the "skills and capabilities that individuals require to participate in a digitally-enabled society" (Yue, Nekmat, & Beta, 2019, p. 101). It emphasizes the paradigmatic power to deal with (digital) information over technical skills and requires the social competencies "to evaluate, analyze, and synthesize it" (Yue et al., 2019). To contextualize it, the Ministry of Communication and Information (Kemenkominfo) set the standard for digital literacy on four pillars: first, **digital skills**, i.e., the capacity of an individual to understand and use hardware and software for daily usage. Second is **digital ethics**, i.e., an individual's capacity to realize, adapt, rationalize, consider, and manage digital ethics (netiquette). Third is **digital safety**, i.e., a user's capacity to recognize, create patterns, implement, analyze, consider, and improve data protection and digital security for daily usage. And fourth is **digital culture**, i.e., an individual capacity to read, decipher, examine, analyze, and establish the vision (*wawasan kebangsaan*) of the state foundation of Pancasila and the national

spirit of Bhinneka Tunggal Ika through the information and communication technologies (ICT) (Katadata Insight Center & Kemenkominfo, 2023).

Kemenkominfo annually surveyed Indonesians regarding religious literacy by scoring those pillars into the national digital literacy index. The 2022 survey reported an increase in the nationwide index score from 3.49 (2021) to 3.54 (Katadata Insight Center & Kemenkominfo, 2023). Of the three sites of FGDs, Bandung, Denpasar, and Kupang, only Bandung is within the 15 highest provincial scores, i.e., 3.60 (West Java), in the seventh position. At the same time, Bali (for Denpasar) and East Nusa Tenggara (for Kupang) are lower than 3.54. Interestingly, in the former year, scoring (2021), East Nusa Tenggara was seventh, precisely in the same position as West Java in 2022.

Indexing and scoring gave a general impression of the average Indonesian's digital exposure and usage; they do not always give an accurate picture of specific experiences, as *Penyuluhs'* performance demonstrated. As FGDs revealed, the challenges of the digital divide, such as network coverage, age, and other technological readiness in many places, are accurate.

A separate interview with three WIs in Bandung and Denpasar disclosed the uneven digital literacy among *Penyuluhs* and the limited programmatic training provided by fourteen Religious Education and Training Centers or training centers (*Balai Diklat Keagamaan*/BDK). Roughly two hundred *Penyuluhs* are trained in BDK annually against thousands of others who cannot be included. Bandung's BDK since 2018, according to a WI, trained six batches of *Penyuluhs*, or 1.200 *Penyuluhs*, in West Java and elsewhere. BDK in Bandung of West Java is considered among the most advanced training centers compared to other BDKs in terms of human resources and supporting facilities, which means their outreach is probably lower than Bandung's. Hence, from this calculation, it takes another four years to reach the entire *Penyuluhs*, which is only for one training cycle. From the structure, the challenge of religious literacy persisted, and individual self-improvement was expected.

Although the majority of *Penyuluhs* in Bandung have Instagram, YouTube, and Facebook accounts, and the MoRA recommends that they create daily content ("one day one content" campaign), they realize that the lack of attractive content, whether

posters or videos, is one of the reasons for their low communication outreach. They also shared another challenge. Digitization, including digitizing daily reports to the Ministerial report system, takes a long time due to the number of applications that must be filled out. According to the *Penyuluhs*, digitization makes reporting easier because it can be done in photos. Still, on the other hand, it becomes a burden because of the multiple reporting forms.

This challenge is deepened because the single digital reporting system must still be prepared. The MoRA Pusaka Super App is waiting to be fully integrated. MoRA Regulation No. 1/2023 is the basis for building a One Data system to overcome the fragmentation of information systems. While already in place, each Bimas provides its digital service, Si-EPA for Muslim *Penyuluhs*, E-Pakris for the Christians, and Sip2KAT for the Catholics, while others still use Microsoft Excel. This reality shows the multi-layered digital divide, not only regional, as indicated earlier, but also age, capacity, and structural gaps generated by an integrated reporting system still need to be implemented.

Another dynamic and challenge faced by *Penyuluhs* is the publication of content. *Penyuluhs'* content usually includes information, instructions, or religious celebrations. The limited content is a consequence of the single narrative imposed by the MoRA. As a result, in practice, the social media content of *Penyuluhs* is only an extended message of the MoRA without sufficient maneuvering space for personal aspirations. This condition was confirmed to a *Penyuluhs* in Bandung by informing several rules that must be faithfully followed, including: 1) the instructor's posts are only in the form of government programs from a religious point of view; 2) verifying negative issues so that they do not spread widely; 3) there are restrictions given by the Broadcasting Office of the Ministry, including the selection of words expected not to offend various parties; and 4) restrictions on supporting for certain politicians. Such rules were formalized in Presidential Instruction (Inpres) No. 9/201 regarding the cooperation between the Ministry of Communication and Informatics (Kemenkiminfo) and MoRA. It stated that *Penyuluhs*, in this regard PIP, "spreading a single narrative ... regarding government's policies and programs." Regarding the religious moderation campaign,

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the head of the Southeast Sulawesi MoRA regional office, Jamaluddin, emphasized that *Penyuluhs* must be "watched out" and "constantly coached" (Fatmawati, 2022). Such control and surveillance set the boundary for *Penyuluhs* to perform their agency publicly, such as on social media.

Further discussion on content restrictions - one example is the advice not to comment on recent controversies in West Java, such as the Al-Zaytun polemic that has been buzzing since the beginning of 2023. A more intrinsic condition is the limitation of the *Penyuluhs*' agency. In this context, *Penyuluhs*' right to freedom of speech as a citizen clashes with their capacity as a façade of the state to the community. The restriction of their socio-political views is carried out indirectly through restrictions on the ideas of *Penyuluhs*, which are then reflected in their performance of social media posts.

From the team's observation, several common types of *Penyuluhs* posts included: 1) content about lectures or quotes from scriptures, 2) information from the Ministry, and 3) personal posts like photos of daily activities, photos with friends and family, or business posts. Of the informants observed, there was no socio-political friction in their posts. The three types generally describe the *Penyuluhs*' social media posts. There are indications of multiple accounts, but from the observed informants, no views that contradict the rules and restrictions emphasized by the MoRA were found.

Apart from the general type, a case occurred in 2020 when a *Penyuluh* working in Sukabumi presented himself as a supporter of one of the Islamic organizations, namely Hizbut Tahrir, that had the government disbanded. The Sukabumi regional office of the MoRA reprimanded and disciplined the *Penyuluh*, advising him to remove posts deemed to contain "extremism."

In 2023, the case was considered closed with the agreement that the *Penyuluh* should follow the MoRA rules regarding social media content. However, our observation found that the *Penyuluh* had multiple accounts (two other accounts) that still displayed Hizbut Tahrir affiliation. A Bandung-based *Penyuluh* in the FGD stated that the case in Sukabumi was an anomaly and rare but received tremendous and widespread attention among the MoRA's officials. This condition has led to a generic view of the emergence of extremism among *Penyuluhs*, which is, in reality,

insignificant. A similar case also occurred in East Java when a *Penyuluh* attacked President Jokowi personally based on his religious views.

The above facts may not only be these two but are present in an inflammatory state as a condition of porosity of knowledge production in a structure, as suggested by the theory at the beginning of this article. The more complex the structure, the more difficult it is to maintain the integrity of knowledge production, and there is a tendency to produce regulations to bind the elements within it.

In 2023, the MoRA emphasized that *Penyuluhs* should not be involved in politics, referring to the 2024 political year. This suggestion has been noted on various occasions and aims to minimize political friction among *Penyuluhs*. However, despite the government's recommendation, the information provided by the *Penyuluhs* in the Bandung FGD revealed important data that social or political friction exists, but it has yet to surface. This friction occurs in WhatsApp groups (WAG) and closed communication engagements. One *Penyuluh* stated:

"In WA groups, people tend to be more willing to express their views openly, which sometimes leads to friction."

This confirms that the closed communication spaces of Instant Messenger, such as WhatsApp, Telegram, and others, can create epistemic bubbles and echo chamber conditions when the discussion discourse only strengthens beliefs and ideological positions. In another scenario, the space is controlled by dominant actors who lead to a single view (Nguyen, 2018). In the context of *Penyuluhs*, discussions in closed communication spaces are dominated by a handful who master or debate an issue about religious moderation, the form of the caliphate state, or other issues.

The above findings are intertwined with the Joint Decree of the MoRA and the Head of the Civil Service Agency, encouraging *Penyuluhs* "to conduct information technology-based guidance or counseling to target groups of the general public ... in the form of social media." But on the other hand, these activities are tightly framed. In anticipating the dynamics of the 2024 General Election (*Pemilu*), the Government emphasized the prohibition of ASN being involved in campaign activities, one of which is "the prohibition of posting, commenting, sharing, liking, and

joining/following in winning groups/accounts, as well as posting on social media or other media that the public can access, photos with election participants, success teams, and so on" (Kementerian Pendayagunaan Aparatur Negara dan Reformasi Birokrasi, Kementerian Dalam Negeri, Kepala Badan Kepegawaian Negara, Ketua Komisi Aparatur Sipil Negara, & Ketua Badan Pengawas Pemilihan Umum, 2022). Confrontations are common, especially regarding support for specific candidates.

Referring to the above discussion, friction among *Penyuluhs* is common and sometimes leads to arguments. When this friction occurs, the coordinator of the *Penyuluhs*' working group (*Pokjalah*) is tasked with mediating and taking action if views contain problematic religious ideas. This form indicates that agency (related to social and political views) is maintained but is present in limited discussion spaces. In contrast, within the scope of public discussions, a *Penyuluh* tends to play a role limited to its *Tupoksi* and does not assert its agency as venturous.

Social media reflects social fields in the Bourdieuan sense, which is the arena of various activities and meaning-making, from value production to the formation of social status (Bourdieu, 1998). However, claiming the agency might also reproduce the structure, as Bourdieu argued. This insight gave *Penyuluhs* an ample model of the dynamic of agency - as a *Penyuluh*, citizen, netizen, and religious actor - and the structure, in this regard, MoRA, through the string of "structural" manifestations, such as regulations, carrier tracks, and salary structures. It reproduces and enforces the structure, indeed as the stipulation of the law, and because the structure is the main arena of *Penyuluhs*. The observation concluded that social media afforded the duality of structure and agency. This means that digital technology allows for the individuation of *Penyuluhs*, primarily through their presence on social media, while simultaneously replicating their structural manifestations.

As analyzed earlier, *Penyuluhs*' social media presence is immediately framed within collective actions in which lively, ephemeral, mercurial, and fluid boundaries are often trapped in a viral communication context. The plausible structure upholding viral reality centers on controversial issues, topics, and statements (Postill & Epafras,

2018). In such circumstances, *Penyuluhs'* digital existence is within the tension of being autonomous from the state and reproducer of structure.

CONCLUSIONS AND SUGGESTIONS

Conclusions

One of the team's interview informants, an official of the High Prosecutor's Office (*Kejaksaan Tinggi*) in one of the provinces visited, expressed skepticism about the *Penyuluhs'* capacity to carry out their duties on social media. If, in the context of daily life, it is also tricky for *Penyuluhs* to compete with clerics, preachers, and traditional religious figures, the same is true in the digital realm. In the battle of religious discourse, they have lost the prestige of influencers, content creators, and buzzers who dominate this social space.

From the interview notes, FGDs, and social media observations presented in the previous section, it can be said that *Penyuluhs'* religious moderation knowledge is at the level of a master's. Still, the social media content is novice (*Moderasi Beragama Suhu, Ngonten Agama Cupu*)!

Some conclusions can be drawn as follows: The digital divide is layered, not only from regional factors, but the age and capacity of the *Penyuluhs* also influence. *Penyuluhs* are closely tied to the structure and reproduce it through efforts to be loyal to their line of duty (Bourdieu, 1998). *Penyuluhs* have limited agency, so their presence on social media and the efficacy of their communication are also limited. This condition also alienates different voices, which, in the two cases above of deviant *Penyuluhs*, are framed in the discourse of "exposed to radicalism or religious extremism."

Regarding digital media used in the daily tasks of the *Penyuluhs*, we see that the MoRA digital system in supporting their activities still needs to be more cohesive and move beyond parochial initiatives by Bimas. MoRA Regulation No. 1/2023 is the basis for building One Data to overcome the fragmentation of information systems. In addition, Instant Messenger service applications such as WhatsApp, Telegram, and others can become epistemic bubble spaces and echo chambers when dominated by certain actors with a single narrative. In this kind of space, the agency of some

Penyuluhs is more prominent and has the opportunity to be in a gray area in terms of its continuity with the voice of the government.

A significant concern requiring addressing is the deficiency in digital literacy among *Penyuluhs* and their reluctance to express themselves more assertively on social media. The signal from the High Prosecutor's Office indicates that numerous *Penyuluhs* in Indonesia, despite their considerable responsibilities, have failed to emerge as impactful agents of change and custodians of Indonesian unity.

Suggestions

Considering the above notes, the research team will consider several ways to strengthen *Penyuluhs*' position in the following discussion.

First, encourages *Penyuluhs* to become information arbiters in the conflicting, frictional, and polarized social media engagements. Epafras et al. (2019) and Epafras, Kaunang, Tarigan, & Rafsanjani (2023) mentioned that *Penyuluhs* could become *information arbiters* in conflictual, frictional, and polarized social media discourse by criticizing the conflicting parties, thus creating a more balanced alternative discourse.

Second, respecting *Penyuluhs*' religious aspirations and critical thinking has maintained social integrity. The real challenge lies in closed communication niches such as WhatsApp and Telegram groups, thus requiring *Penyuluhs* to be ready to moderate these social spaces. For this reason, their agency needs to be respected and strengthened. They are not only state civil apparatus but also citizens with social concerns and personal and religious aspirations. *Penyuluhs* need to be given space for freedom of thought, action, creativity, and critical reasoning while aligning themselves with the vision and vocation of *Penyuluhs* as agents of social cohesion.

Third, incentivizing *Penyuluhs* for their creativity and personal enhancements. Better incentives that are not only sometimes material but also opportunities and chances for those who show creativity in social media content are needed.

Forth, acceleration of One Data integrated digital system to overcome the inter-departmental fragmentation. A fundamental challenge to the services provided to the community is the segregation of activities based on Bimas and Pusbimdik, reflected in

information systems that are still scattered and fragmented. For this reason, there is a need for closer cooperation across Bimas and Pusbimdik, as well as the ultimate realization of utilizing the Pusaka SuperApp so that the emerging initiatives are more cohesive without losing the uniqueness of each religion. Interfaith-based training (across Bimas and Pusbimdik) and joint activities could reflect more cohesive initiatives.

Fifth, massive digital literacy training for *Penyuluhs*. The training centers (BDK) needed to manage more massive digital literacy training and cross-Bimas/Pusbimdik. The method and delivery should be more adapted to the dynamics of social media, more engaging, contemporary, and enriched with practice to strengthen the confidence of the *Penyuluh*.

Sixth, empowering Public Information *Penyuluhs* (PIPs) as tutors for fellow *Penyuluhs*. Until now, there are around 300 PIPs spread throughout Indonesia. Given the qualifications of more skilled PIPs, they can partner in developing social media for community services (Hendriani & Kusumadewi, 2022).

Seventh, encouraging cooperation and cooperation with third parties. Given the number of *Penyuluhs*, which is sixty-seven thousand, it is necessary to cooperate with third parties to develop their capacity. Third parties have non-structural flexibility, updated information, knowledge, and techniques for utilizing social media. They can help offer new social imaginations so that *Penyuluhs* develops independent insights and critical reasoning.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The authors of this article declare no conflict of interest.

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¹ In this article, *Penyuluh/Penyuluhs* will be refer to a job that stated in the title as Religious Extension Officers. *Penyuluh/Penyuluhs* is a person who is authorized by the government to provide religious guidance to the community (translated from Indonesian Big Dictionary/KBBI <https://kbbi.kemdikbud.go.id/entri/penyuluh%20agama>). In the context of the Ministry of Religion of the Republic of Indonesia, *Penyuluh/Penyuluhs* is a functional position regulated by the Coordinating State Minister for Supervision of Development and Utilization of State Apparatus (Menteri Negara Koordinator Bidang Pengawasan Pembangunan dan Pendayagunaan Aparatur Negara) Number 54/KEP/MK.WASPAN/9/1999. *Penyuluh/Penyuluhs* are tasked with providing education about religion to the wider community and being an extension of the government in resolving religious problems in society (Asmawiyah, 2022; Mulyono, 2014), one of which is to protect society from radicalism and terrorism in the name of religion.

