
Digital preaching activism: A critical perspective of the public relations

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Abstract

This article positions the "Muslimah Media Center" (MMC) as the Islamic digital preaching activities. This religious community media identifies itself as an Islamic platform with a commitment to propagating Islamic values. It actively presents content analyzing various Islamic issues and often campaigns for Islam as a practical and effective solution to every problem. The portrayal of religious reality presented in the digital space plays a significant role in shaping the image of Islam in the virtual world. Hence, there is a need for an investigation into digital preaching activism that shapes the image of Islam, employing a Critical Public Relations (PR) perspective. The objective is to provide a critical and explorative explanation to understand how Islamic performance is showcased through the Muslimah Media Center. This study uses virtual ethnography as its method, as the data collected is sourced from digital traces and artifacts. Consequently, it can be concluded that the image of Islam generated by this digital preaching activism not only reinforces religious beliefs but also disseminates certain ideologies that are assumed to be in contrast with other religious ideologies.

Keywords: *Islamic image, preaching activism, Agora electronics, public relation*

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Introduction

This study is based on the religious phenomenon that occurs in the virtual space, particularly the preaching activities through various online religious community media platforms, which take place freely. Not all digital preaching activism entirely advocates the message of "*amar makruf nahi munkar*" (enjoining good and forbidding wrong), as the primary goal of preaching. However, some digital preaching tend to be exclusive, and some of their preaching messages even give rise to new issues. This is because the messages displayed not only contain provocative content but are also influenced by specific religious ideological interests. As a result, the image of Islam formed by this digital preaching activism does not always depict it as a gentle, friendly, and tolerant religion. Instead, the image of Islam appears exclusive. For this reason, this study aims to examine digital preaching activism presented in the Muslimah Media Center (MMC) using a Critical Public Relation perspective. Considering the current diversity in Indonesia, which is gradually expanding and coloring new spaces due to the development of communication technology, these new spaces have an impact on the dynamics and changes that occur.

This change is mentioned by Herbert Marshall McLuhan as the "Global village," referring to the current phenomenon of globalization, where humans are electronically interconnected, leading to the weakening of national boundaries. It showcases a new spectrum of society that goes beyond geographical, economic, political, and cultural boundaries, emphasizing the flow of information within communication networks (McLuhan, 1969). Wattimena refers to the new space formed by communication technology as the "agora electronic," a cyberspace environment for expressing anything related to social and political aspirations (Sugihartati, 2014).

Undoubtedly, this new space becomes an avenue for freely expressing religious beliefs, including the expression of preaching through digital media. To fulfil the goals of preaching, cyber media is required as a means of conveying religious messages to widely audience. In practice, this new media is not merely positioned as a medium for preaching but also as a new environment created in the digital space. Consequently, the content within this digital preaching media contains messages of specific ideological inclinations. For instance, the Muslimah Media Centre, although it presents themselves as an Islamic media focused on women, families, and the younger generation, it also promotes the understanding of the caliphate (*khilafah*). This even extends to open campaigns advocating the caliphate as a solution to national issues. However, this campaign model may not always receive positive support from the Muslim community in Indonesia, instead of the ideology considered as a threat to national unity (Bagus et al., 2018).

Previous studies have pointed out that discussions regarding the caliphate and national politics in cyberspace are often characterized by endless debates on religious issues, such as the understanding of the caliphate as an Islamic doctrine or historical fact, arguments about the evidence supporting the caliphate, its implementation in Indonesia, and other political and religious issues. These debates persist indefinitely and often contain sentiments indicating varying views and ideologies within religious communities (Minan, 2022).

This article aims to understand the image of Islam that arises from digital preaching activism in the Muslimah Media Centre using a Critical Public Relations (PR) perspective. The study acknowledges that the newly created digital environment significantly influences preaching activism, leading to diverse issues. The freedom within this new space provides various religious communities with opportunities to express their ideologies freely.

Consequently, the perception of religion portrayed by the Muslimah Media Centre can be observed through freely uploaded texts and narratives. It should be understood that the image of Islam formed by digital preaching media plays a significant role in shaping the performance and perception of Islam as a religion, and whether it serves purely for the purpose of Islamic preaching or other ideological motives becomes an academic question in this study.

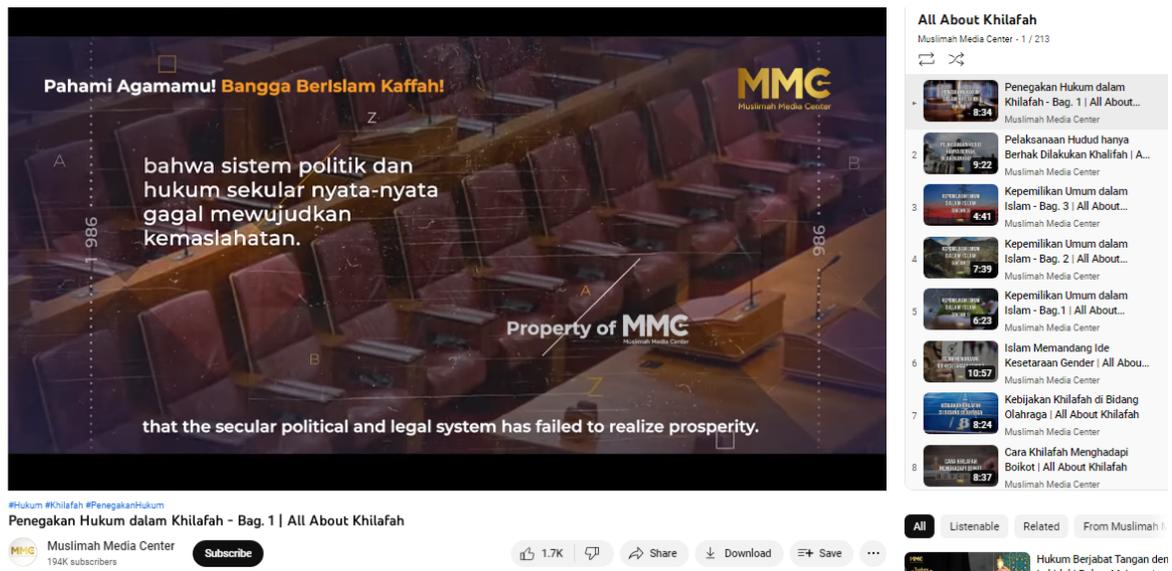
Therefore, the study employs the virtual ethnography approach as an appropriate method to provide critical and explorative explanations regarding the image of Islam expressed in the agora electronic, representing a public image based on religious beliefs from a Critical Public Relation (PR) perspective. This approach aims to address methodological concerns in the social sciences, especially concerning emerging phenomena derived from social and religious activities in the virtual space (Nasrullah, 2014). The study believes that it will shed light on the critical and exploratory examination of the image of Islam within the agora electronic as a public image based on religious beliefs from the perspective of Critical Public Relation (PR).

Muslimah Media Centre as media of digital preaching activism

Muslimah Media Centre is one of the preaching community media which actively delivers religious values uploaded into several social media platforms, such as Facebook, Instagram, and YouTube. To run this media smoothly, it enhances good networking in a virtual space or agora electronic, which is to deliver aspiration massively (Sugihartati, 2004). Muslimah Media Centre claims that it is Islamic media which commits to sharing their analysis of social issues and religious growth, either locally or internationally. Moreover, the uploaded content on this account promotes Islam as a practical solution to solve the nation's problems.

As media, the content provokes religious followers to believe and obey Allah SWT in accordance with the creed and sharia as well as Islamic morality. Nevertheless, not all media are able to preserve this commitment. Instead, many digital preaching media contain personal purposes in their contents. To illustrate, many digital preaching media express Islamic fights in their contents and select certain issues relating to their purposes. Presumably, this concept draws an Islamic structure that covers the nation's problems, such as inequality gender, and family problems. Besides, it points out a caliphate understanding to invite audience awareness of Islamic laws.

This study examines the uploaded content on digital preaching media in Muslimah Media Centre which illustrates certain religious ideologies. For instance, the content about *Penegakan Hukum dalam Khilafah – Bag 1 | All About Khilafah* elaborates that a caliphate is the only one that is able to do *hudud* (ownership); Islam considers equality gender; political policy on sports; caliphate's ways facing a boycott; and so on.



Picture. 1
Muslimah Media Centre video and the playlists

The message contains an understanding of the caliphate, so it can be followed by people who watch the video to fulfill Islamic laws. Besides, the video narrative explains that a caliphate is an obligation derived from God, and it also invites audiences to unite. Previous years ago, KH Yasin Muthohar stated that a caliphate is a way to unite Muslims around the world, which was related to Islamic history throughout the years.

“.....Khilafah islamiyah merupakan penjaga negeri bagi kaum muslim, tanpa khilafah maka kita melihat darah-darah kaum muslimin dapat ditumpahkan begitu mudah, begitu murah. Penindasan terhadap kaum muslimin terjadi dibanyak tempat, seperti dialami saudara-saudara kita di rohingya, di suryah, di palestina, di Uighur dan berbagai negeri kaum muslimin, dan terus menerus ditindas. Kaum muslimin tidak terjaga, Hartanya tidak terjaga, darahnya tidak terjaga, nyawa mereka tidak terjaga, negeri mereka tidak terjaga, karena tidak ada penjaga negeri kaum muslimin yang disebutkan oleh nabi SAW bahwa pemimpin itu adalah perisai, dimana rakyat kaum muslimin, akan diperangi dibalik imam, dibelakang imam, yang akan dijaga dengan keberadaan imam itu.” (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1vIJUdaX4RU&list=PLBSN1jBkbl7xyYB9_1MaCNsbK_jum6CeG2&index=14)

"The Islamic caliphate is the guardian of the Muslim community; without it, we witness the easy and cheap shedding of Muslim blood. Oppression against Muslims occurs in many places, as experienced by our brothers and sisters in Rohingya, Syria, Palestine, Uighur, and various other Muslim lands, where they are continuously oppressed. Muslims are left unprotected— their wealth, their blood, their lives, and their countries are vulnerable—because there is no guardian of the Muslim community, as mentioned by the Prophet Muhammad (SAW), that leaders are like shields, and the Muslim community will be fought for behind their leader, protected by the presence of that leader."

This type of content allows people to have a diverse perspective and it is easily becoming misleading information. Therefore, it attracts people who have a different perspective leading to confusion. This phenomenon emerges in the comments in which people show their confusion. It shows that the content divides into two groups of people, either pros or contradicts. In order to avoid this situation, Muslimah Media Centre should face other religious communities which contradict their values, especially nationalists. Regarding the data, there are many videos that contradict with two-major religious communities in Indonesia, such as Nahdlatul Ulama and Muhammadiyah.

With regard in this digital preaching media, Aziz (2019) examined that a caliphate concept has been debatable throughout the years. In this debate, a group of people conceived that *al-Kulafa' al-Rasyidun* had been believed and practiced. At that time, the possibility of a caliphate reign existed that ruled nation-states. However, it cannot be implied in this era because most people consider it *utopian* and nostalgic.

This study examines how digital preaching activism shown in digital communities causes several effects, and it represents Islamic performance in the digital sphere. Advanced technology today is not only about media or a device but also a new environment for religious activities. According to Jeff Zaleski, cyberspace is a virtual reality that allows people to connect with others on the internet network (Fakhruroji, 2017). Whilst diversity and spirituality seem to change and create a new environment replacing social life. Therefore, the development of information and technology is conceived as an opportunity to obscure fundamental values relating to religiosity and spirituality (Piliang, 2011).

However, religious problems caused by digital preaching activism cannot be separated from image and imagology. According to Jean Francois Lyotard and Jean Baudrillard, imagology is an “image” in terms of pop-culture (Piliang, 2011). In other words, discourse, knowledge, and communication, especially preaching a caliphate, can be represented in a part of the ideology process which is run by the number of people who believe in a caliphate concept to deliver an image through the internet. Therefore, it becomes a reference and drives public perception following this social media account.

According to Bunt (2003), stated advanced technology and information can help people to do their work easily and lead them to confusion because they hardly differentiate whether it is reality or virtual reality. Two years later, he examined that phenomena in the religious world were expressed in the digital sphere (Blunt, 2005), so the religious environment virtually represents a new measurement of diversity in terms of the Islamic spectrum. Today, we can see many religious activities occurring on the internet.

Regarding the concept of preaching, the fundamental idea of this concept relates to the process, transmission, effort, method, purpose, and device. Preaching activities will always change throughout the years considering the social and cultural context. According to Syukriadi Sambas, preaching is a transmission process that transforms and internalizes religious values through media and methods to pursue the purpose. Preaching is a long process that delivers the purpose of preaching and measures aspects, such as media, methods, and messages relating to the audiences (Fakhruroji, 2017)/

In other words, digital preaching media that is represented by Muslimah Media Centre is a part of religious activities. Although Muslimah Media Centre allows people to react, this study considers it as a part of media that is able to deliver and express their values. However, this study conceives that preaching should deliver faith and favor to pursue Islamic values

fundamentally, so media should invite audiences to obey God as well as the beliefs and morals that most Muslims believe in (Glulusy, 1987).

Creating Islamic image through the digital preaching activism

Creating an Islamic image can be organized by digital preaching activism. Muslimah Media Centre represents Islam as a part of religion on the internet through digital preaching activism in its content. Practically, religious messages are delivered in their content representing communicative media. In this case, preaching becomes a crucial part of showing Islamic performance that always attends in the middle of society. In addition, Islam is represented in their existence through preaching and pointing out religious values as well as a caliphate. Moreover, this value is believed to be mandatory teaching.

Religious understanding is shown massively through this media community that is leading a new perspective or image to society. Moreover, the occurrence image relates to a caliphate concept that is not suitable for Indonesia. The reaction of people about the content indicates that not all people agree with a caliphate concept. Although the content of Muslimah Media Centre is interesting to its followers, major Muslim communities consider that the content tends to be a separative movement because it contradicts the national identity.

On the one side, Muslimah Media Centre indicates that the primary reason for this preaching community relates to establishing an Islamic nation. On the other side, many Islamic communities focus on the fundamental values of Islam and relate to national integrity. Fakhruroji (2017), explained that virtual community is a phenomenon that represents users using an avatar to expose their alter ego which later creates more than one dimension.

Muslimah Media Centre is not only making a preaching media but also contributing certain religious ideologies massively. This activity plays an essential role to make up the Islamic image. Bunt (2005) claimed that particular issues relating to Islam involve belief systems. In other words, a religious process that is expressed in virtual reality influences religious shifting in Indonesia.

Regarding the phenomenon, a new image of Islam will be considered as chaos by people who do not aware of this situation. According to Geertz (1982), he examined religion in Indonesia exposing open-mindedness, syncretism, tolerance, inclusion, and adaptation. However, Muslimah Media Centre's content indicates that religious shifting will happen, so it is able to be a new concept of radical, exclusive, and intolerant towards other religions. Whilst this shifting is able to be viewed as a conservative turn that happens because of a narrow perspective in which it should be considered as openness and non-violent (Saidi, 2017).

Muslimah Media Centre's content openly indicates certain ideology that it should not be shown in their content to prevent misleading information about Muslim community in Indonesia. The content is also conveying a caliphate concept and tends to extend their perspective massively. Nasrullah (2014) claimed that the content on social media should be communicative among the audience because it is not only about physical activity but also creating a social life.

Religious understanding on the channel of Muslimah Media Centre that points out a caliphate is debatable among Muslims in Indonesia. It influences public opinion which is able to establish a new perspective to receive a caliphate concept. The primary purpose of this sort of content indicates that it refers to establishing unity among Muslims, so it can be a framework of Darul Islam relating to Islam community (Faiz, 2003).

Digital preaching activism in critical public relation perspective

This study utilizes a critical public relation perspective to unveil Islamic image which is represented by Muslimah Media Centre in their social media. The social media produces preaching activism in its content and presents the Islamic image. In the process, there are certain ideology, effects, and control that have the power to influence audiences. Regarding these reasons, this study aims to use a critical perspective to examine this preaching activism in their social media. At least, focusing on making up the Islamic image is essential in virtual reality.

Both ideology and purpose, which are represented in the messages and narratives, attempt to deliver a concept of the caliphate. Therefore, religious relationships on their social media are examined to search for communication media as religious media, and it is also unveiled how the caliphate concept is spread massively towards the audiences. To prove the concept of the caliphate that is delivered in their social media derives from their contents, so it can be understood as a critical and explorative perspective that relates to the political spectrum, socio-cultural, and preaching process.

In regard to their profile, Islamic laws are pointed out in all contents, and they claim themselves as Islamic fight media to reveal facts and realities among the society. In addition, they depict the community media as a medium for opinion fights and ideological fights in their account media description. Muslimah Media Centre claims that they are Islamic media that commits to delivering facts, and they share knowledge about analytical topics depending on certain issues among the society, either internationally or locally.

These ideological purposes that want to be achieved are stated in their description account to stand out their position as a medium for delivering opinion and ideology. In other words, they are ready to fight for their purposes if other communities want to contradict their values on social media comments. Moreover, they decide to commit to sharing analysis about the national problems, and they claim that Islam will be a practical solution.

To strengthen their position, they provide material preaching divided into several parts on their social media. They believe that a caliphate is understood in many ways, so they want to share that a caliphate concept is going to stand out in the future, so people should be ready for spreading justice. This knowledge is represented in their community media to illustrate specifically government structure in Islamic ways. These concepts are delivered in each content that is available on the YouTube account.

From a critical perspective, continuing preaching activity about a caliphate is considered an activity process to obtain support from the audiences, and they want to fight for their opinion about a caliphate concept. Therefore, gaining power and influence is important, so they want to reach society's perspectives although it is debatable among the society. They conceive that spreading the narrative of a caliphate concept leads people to have awareness of religious belief to receive the concept as Islamic teaching.

Preaching activities that are delivered through their social media are about religious activity, which drives the audiences to a good path which is Islamic awareness. However, these practices should consider ethical aspects, whether it is good for society or leading to chaos in society. Therefore, their messages are responded by neglectful arguments among society because most people conceive that Islamic values do not contradict nationality. This debate is also considered as an understanding of public relation activity which seemingly should be driven to public awareness and participation (Kriyantono, 2017).

I believe that religion in virtual reality should represent a face of Islam that is polite, tolerant, constructive, and acceptable. Instead of pursuing these images, Muslimah Media Centre tends to represent a medium for opinion fights, especially in a caliphate concept. Seemingly, this method of preaching relates to the deconstruction of emerging chaos in society, and it is terrifying.

The image of Islam should produce togetherness and well-being instead of scaring. Rather, several reactions to Muslimah Media Centre's content indicate utopia. They drive people's minds that Islam is in chaos because of poverty, incapability, and consumption. These are shown on YouTube. Some studies stated religious elegance is always demonstrated in a good way that bridges the dark ages to enlightenment throughout decades (Ravet, 2007; Hudjolly, 2011).

In other words, preaching activity as a religious relationship should demonstrate religious messages in a good way to obtain a positive perspective. Continuously, this relationship allows people to understand Islam values. However, spreading a caliphate concept lead people to chaos because it deconstructs people's minds. In addition, a caliphate concept does not relate to the nation's values. Therefore, the existence of Muslimah Media Centre should be considered to reduce a negative effect on society.

Conclusion

Digital preaching activity in Muslimah Media Centre channel is a part of religious expression that allows people to rethink the Islamic image on the internet. Instead of virtual reality being a part of human reality, considering the effect of the content should be important aspect. In fact, this media is not only talking about inequality gender, family, and the nation's problems but also spreading a caliphate concept. Although a caliphate is conceived as a part of the Islamic journey, it is not suitable to be implied in Indonesia because of the difference in the political spectrum. To prevent a negative effect, Muslimah Media Centre should rethink its concept of preaching activities on social media to avoid misleading information. I recommend that this study should be considered by Muslims in Indonesia.

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