Religiosity in the Digital Era and the Challenges of Hoaxes, *Post-Truth* and Radicalism on Social Media

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Abstract:

In the era of globalization and advances in information technology, social media plays a key role in shaping the dynamics of people's daily lives. This phenomenon not only affects social and economic aspects but also penetrates the diverse dimensions of religious life. This article examines the impact of social media on people's religiosity, specifically in context *post-truth* and hoaxes. There is a trend where urban people prefer to get religious understanding from ustaz/clerics on social media rather than from traditional religious authorities. Freedom of expression on social media, without an adequate selection process and credibility, creates a diversity of interpretations that can confuse the public. The rise of hoaxes and information *post-truths* on social media poses a serious challenge to quality religious understanding and traditional religious authority. This article highlights the potential for religious disintegration and radicalism as a result of hoax information and *post-truth* on social media. Through a qualitative approach and case studies, this research explores the transformation of religious paradigms, freedom of expression, and the diversity of interpretations that occur on social media. This article suggests efforts to verify information and increase media literacy as a solution to overcome the negative impact of social media on people's religiosity.

Keywords: freedom of expression; hoaxes; media literacy; post-truth; religiosity; social media.

INTRODUCTION

In the era of globalization and the development of internet-based information technology, social media has become an integral part of people's daily lives (Anwar et al., 2019; Forlenza, 2022). This phenomenon not only affects social and economic aspects but also penetrates religious life. Instagram, Facebook, WhatsApp, Twitter and YouTube have become the main platforms where people interact and get information, including in a religious context (Kusuma & Rahman, 2018). In this context, there is a significant problem that needs to be researched, namely the impact of social media on people's religiosity. In big cities, there is a trend where people prefer to get religious understanding from scholars known through social media rather than from authoritative scholars in their fields (Ayubi & Alif, 2021; Sabiruddin, 2019; Setia & Dilawati, 2021). This raises questions about the impact of this shift in preferences on the quality of religious understanding and spiritual authority. This problem is

increasingly complicated by the rise of hoaxes and information *post-truth* on social media, which can construct religious understanding without a clear basis.

Several studies have provided diverse views regarding the relationship between social media and people's religiosity in the digital era. Saumantri (2023) in his research uses Jean Baudrillard's postmodernism paradigm to analyze the phenomenon *hyper* religiosity in the digital era, highlighting the concept of simulation and signs that influence religious practices in cyberspace. Aziz (2018) examined the religiosity of urban communities by considering the role of technology and information media, showing an increase in religious ness *attachment* which has an impact on religious practices and diverse identities in a consumerist society. Tanamal (2022) focuses on the religiosity of millennial students, exploring their understanding of applying morals and ethics in the digital era, with this research showing the influence of social media, the level of religiosity, and the application of morals and ethics.

However, these three studies still provide a limited picture of the negative impact of social media on religiosity, especially related to *post-truth,* hoaxes and radicalism. This research tries to fill this gap by examining in more depth how this phenomenon influences people's religious understanding. Apart from that, this research also seeks to provide new insight into the potential for disintegration and radicalism that can arise as a result of hoax information and *post-truth* on social media.

This research aims to explore and analyze the impact of social media on people's religiosity, especially in context *post-truth* and hoaxes. This research also aims to provide a foundation for a deeper understanding of the complexities of interactions between social media and religious life. Therefore, this research contributes to our understanding of religious dynamics in the digital era. It is hoped that this research can provide a new perspective that considers critical aspects in understanding diversity through social media, so that people can be wiser and more critical in consuming religious information spread in cyberspace.

METHOD

This research uses a qualitative approach with a case study research design (Yin, 1994). Data collection was carried out through in-depth interviews with purposively selected participants, including those who have varying levels of religious activity on social media (Hennink et al., 2020). In addition, content analysis was carried out on posts, comments and religious material spread across various social media platforms such as Instagram, Facebook, YouTube and Twitter (Klaassen & Peter, 2015). The aim of using this qualitative method is to understand in more depth people's experiences and perceptions regarding the impact of social media on their religiosity (Kovačević et al., 2021). In-depth interviews provide an opportunity to explore individuals' thoughts and feelings regarding religious issues, while content analysis supports in identifying patterns and trends in religious expression in digital spaces. Next, the collected data was analyzed thematically to identify common patterns and differences in the way people express their religion through social media (Setia & Rahman, 2023). Meanwhile, the case study approach was chosen because it allows in-depth investigation of the specific and casuistic context of the impact of social media on people's religiosity.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Transformation of Religious Paradigms in the Digital Era

In the increasingly developing digital era, a significant trend has emerged where people tend to turn to getting religious information through social media, replacing traditional authoritative sources such as ulama who have authority in the religious field. This phenomenon must be connected to changes in communication paradigms and increasingly rapid access to information.

According to Marshall McLuhan (1967), a communication theorist, presenting the concept that *"medium is the message,"* which emphasizes that communication media not only convey messages, but also shape the way people view the world. In this context, social media is not just an information channel, but rather shapes people's views on religion. Meanwhile, Noelle-Neumann (1993) expressed the need for active involvement in voicing views. Social media provides a platform that allows individuals to participate, express their views, and feel more involved in the process of conveying religious information.

Furthermore, aspects of information accessibility and affordability are important points. According to Tversky dan Kahneman (1974), the theory of information availability states that people tend to choose information sources that are easily accessible. Social media, with its rapid and widespread accessibility, creates confidence that information obtained through these platforms is relevant and reliable. Therefore, in

the digital era, the concept of authority in religion is transforming, this is in line with the study of authority by Max Weber (2014). Authority no longer only comes from tradition or hierarchy, but can emerge from mass recognition and support. Social media provides a stage where individuals can become their religious authorities.

As a result, social media has become a space for the free exchange of ideas and views. As a modern form of agora, social media facilitates the exchange of information, debate of views, and search for religious understanding. This provides an in-depth understanding of why social media is people's main choice in meeting their religious needs.

> I see that social media has brought big changes in the way people access religious information. In the past, people mostly listened to the advice of ulama or religious figures directly. However, now many people get information through *platform* such as Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram. This change is quite significant. Previously, authority in religion was more concentrated in ulama and traditional figures. However, now, I see many individuals passing off as religious authorities via social media. These people may not have a formal background in religious knowledge, but due to their popularity and mass support on social media, they are considered spiritual leaders by sections of society. "I also saw many people actively participating in religious discussions, giving opinions, and even spreading their religious understanding. (Dadang Kuswana, Religious Figure, Interview, December 12, 2023).

The results of the interviews show that religious figures acknowledge the paradigm shift in obtaining religious information through social media. It can be seen that religious authority no longer only comes from clerics and traditional figures, but also emerges from individuals who are popular on social media. Religious figures also stated that social media provides a platform for every individual to actively participate in voicing religious views. This is in line with Noelle-Neumann (Noelle-Neumann, 1993) concept of active involvement in voicing views. Social media not only provides information, but also facilitates active community involvement in religious discussions.

In the context of information availability, religious figures highlight the accessibility and speed of information through social media, which creates the belief that information is obtained through *platform* are relevant and reliable. Therefore, the interview reflects significant changes in religious dynamics in the digital era, where social media has become not only a channel for information but also shapes religious views and authority.

This finding also confirms research conducted by Burhani et al., (2020) who introduced the term *New Santri* as a term for researchers of Islamic religious knowledge via the internet and social media. This Islamic boarding school phenomenon also challenges traditional religious authorities, especially kiai, Islamic boarding schools and other religious schools. Presence *New Santri* This is an escalation of a series of events in Indonesian history, especially after the reformation opened up the taps for freedom of opinion and association (Saat & Burhani, 2020) In other words, Huda calls him a 'cinematic santri' whose development is extraordinary in Indonesia. Currently, according to Huda, many Islamic students are using cinematics to build new forms of traditional Islamic authority mediated through virtual culture. However, he added, they must still refer to the text, and the central discursive method. The role of Islamic boarding school students in this cinematic is at the same time opposing their predecessors or traditionalist constructions that have long been institutionalized. The ability of students to manage audio-visuals is a shift in the attitude of new students (Saat & Burhani, 2020).

Freedom of Expression and Diversity of Interpretation on Social Media

The phenomenon of freedom of expression in spreading religious content on social media is a problem that affects the quality and diversity of religious information. Freedom of expression on social media is often not balanced with an adequate selection process and credibility, so that religious sources can only appear with adequate supervision and validation (Taufiq et al., 2022). As a concrete example, some individuals on social media can easily convey religious interpretations and views without involving in-depth knowledge or sufficient expertise. They may have a large number of followers, but the diversity of religious interpretations that emerge from various sources can create confusion among the public. For example, someone who needs more religious expertise can freely express views that are not in accordance with the teachings of a particular religion.

In addition, religious content that does not go through a selection process can encourage the emergence of various interpretations and understandings whose truth needs to be tested. This can result in people accepting religious information without carefully checking it, giving rise to a religious understanding that is subjective and has the potential to deviate from the values of actual religious teachings. The lack of selection and lack of credibility in religious content on social media can also open up opportunities for parties who want to spread radical teachings or extreme views. When religious sources do not go through a strict selection process, the information conveyed can be biased and unbalanced, forming very diverse understandings among the public.

This phenomenon specifically gave birth to a trend of the emergence of social ustaz, celebrity ustaz, and even love ustaz on social media (Afifi, 2013). The media, as an attractive arena, is an attraction for many prospective preachers who are vying to become ustaz, tempted by the promise of material benefits and popularity that they can gain. Automatically, the profession of ustaz must follow the applicable market rules, so it is often considered equivalent to the profession of an artist on television. Despite this, these television ustaz have succeeded in attracting the majority of people who have long been alienated from madrasah and Islamic boarding school institutions. This society, in general, has longed for the moral presence of religion in the midst of a society that has experienced modernization. According to Kuntowijoyo (Kuntowijoyo, 1994), this phenomenon is called "Islam without mosques", where religious knowledge is not born from mosques, madrasas or Islamic boarding schools, but is obtained from schools, mass media and online media.

In dealing with this phenomenon, Ab Kadir dkk., (2023) proposed four indicators in evaluating the reliability of Islamic information on social media, namely the source of writing, accuracy, authority and authenticity of the information. This underlines the importance of referring to valid information sources and content, such as the Koran and hadith, in evaluating the authenticity of Islamic information posts on social media. Meanwhile, Mahmud et al., (2012) created seven criteria for evaluating Islamic content on websites, namely trust, legitimacy, objectivity, authority, reliability, relevance and credibility. These criteria are very important in forming positive perceptions of users of Islam-based websites (Mahmud et al., 2012, p. 6). Therefore, understanding that freedom of expression on social media, while providing space for diversity of views, also requires responsibility in conveying religious information. In this context, Wan-Chik, (2015) proposed that the selection, validation and credibility processes must be carried out by everyone so that the religious information received is in accordance with the values of actual religious teachings.

Another thing that can be done according to scholars is increasing media literacy, especially in understanding religious content (Erawati et al., 2023; Ozturk, 2020). Media literacy in question includes understanding trusted sources of information, supporting official or verified religious accounts, and verifying facts before spreading religious information.

Post-Truth, Hoaxes and Religious Radicality

Hoaxes and post-truth can influence the problem of religiosity on social media. Hoax is a term used to refer to fake information or news that is spread with the aim of misleading or deceiving the public (Silverman, 2015). Hoaxes can be fake news, manipulative images, false claims, or incorrect information that is spread with a specific purpose, such as causing panic, influencing public opinion, or creating uncertainty (Boose, 2003). Hoaxes have several characteristics that distinguish them from legitimate information, especially hoaxes tend to be based on something other than verifiable facts or evidence. The information presented in hoaxes is often made up or debated without a strong basis. Apart from that, hoaxes are generally spread with a specific purpose, such as political, economic goals, or to create instability in society (Kaminska, 2017).

With advances in technology and social media, hoaxes can spread quickly and widely. Social media makes it easy to spread false information, which can be easily shared and accepted by many people in a short time. Hoaxes are also often designed to exploit emotions, such as fear, anger or suspicion (Juditha, 2019). Information that is surprising or controversial is more likely to attract attention and thus spread more easily among the public. Another characteristic of hoaxes is the need for a verification process before being spread. Hoaxes usually do not go through a strict verification process, and the people who spread them may not check the veracity of the information because they benefit from the message conveyed (Meyer, 2018). The consequences of spreading hoaxes can be very detrimental to the individual, group or institution that is the target of the false information. The impact can include loss of reputation, financial loss, or even significant negative social impact.

Temporary *post-truth* is a term that refers to a situation or condition where emotional factors, personal views and subjective opinions are more influential than objective facts or truth in forming public opinion or making decisions (Kelkar, 2019). In context *post-truth*, truth or facts can be ignored or adapted to suit a particular narrative or view to achieve a particular goal. This term is often related to developments in social media and contemporary politics (Salgado, 2018).

Post-truth, as a complex phenomenon, it can be described through several aspects that form its characteristics. First of all, the dominance of emotions and subjective opinions emerges as a central element in *post-truth,* where someone's personal views and feelings often marginalize objective facts or evidence. Social media plays a key role in the dynamic *post-truth. Platform-platform* this allows information to spread quickly without adequate verification, facilitating the spread of fake news or inaccurate information. The virality effect and speed of spread on social media contribute to a major influence on public opinion (Lewandowsky, 2020). Polarization of public opinion is another characteristic of *post-truth* (Widiyanto, 2019). The very different views between parties cause facts that do not match their views to be ignored or considered irrelevant. This leads to a fragmented society and it takes work to reach collective agreements.

The emergence of a crisis of confidence in traditional institutions is a real impact *post-truth.* Trust in the media, government, research institutions, including religious institutions can be eroded, because people tend to choose information that is in accordance with their personal beliefs (Widiyanto, 2019). In a political context, manipulation of information is a major concern. *Post-truth* often seen in political attempts to win public support through unverifiable statements or claims. This creates a narrative that supports a particular political agenda. Impact *post-truth* on public decision making is the final important point. Political decisions, public opinion, and policy are often influenced more by emotional narratives than rational analysis based on facts (Kelkar, 2019).

Both hoaxes and *post-truth* both present themselves through emotions, sensations and provocations that attract public attention. Suppose religious issues are wrapped up in practice post-truth. In that case, it will be very dangerous for socio-religious life which has had many negative impacts on religious harmony and even gave birth to radicalism.

Figure 1. Examples of Religious Hoaxes

Source: Jawapos.com (2020).

One example of a hoax phenomenon is a video that went viral showing New Zealanders crying against the background of the call to prayer. A widespread narrative explains that 150 New Zealand youth and women converted to Islam in the midst of the Covid-19 pandemic. However, after investigation, it turned out that the video was recorded on March 22 2019, not during the Covid-19 pandemic. In the 2 minute 10 second video, it initially shows the scene of the New Zealand Prime Minister, Jacinda Kate Laurell Ardern, saying the words *"We are one"*. Then, the camera's focus turned to hundreds of female residents wearing headscarves, although some of them were wearing rather revealing clothes (Ginanjar, 2020).

The video uploaded by Andi's account shows a session where hundreds of people gathered in the mosque yard. However, similar footage was apparently uploaded by the YouTube channel One News PH on March 22 2019, with a title stating that human shields were formed around the mosque to protect Muslims who were praying. In fact, the video is a recording of a commemoration one week after the shooting of Al Noor Mosque worshipers in Christchurch, New Zealand. Thus, the narrative stating that New Zealanders embraced Islam in the midst of the Covid-19 pandemic is not accurate and is a hoax (Ginanjar, 2020).

Another example is the incident of 'religious blasphemy' by Basuki Tjahaja Purnama (Ahok) in 2017, although the North Jakarta District Court named him as a suspect, many parties said that Ahok was the victim of a hoax and *post-truth* which Buni Yani disseminated. The proof is that the criminal charges against Buni Yani are proof that hoaxes surround the case. It is clear that the impact of this incident divided community groups and led to hate speech towards SARA (Juditha, 2018). The next example is the hoax case of the conversion of Muslims in Ciranjang, Cianjur, West Java by missionaries launched by Christians (Indriani, 2022). However, upon closer inspection, these cases will trigger hatred and anger among Muslims and lead to horizontal conflicts between religious communities. Next, in the context of radicalism, it is often found that terrorists use social media to recruit and spread propaganda, infiltrate ideology, and even invite participation in their group's activities. Dian Yulia Novi, a suspect in a pot bomb at the Presidential Palace in 2016, admitted that she had been exposed to radical teachings through the social media Facebook for a year (Zamzami, 2018). Therefore, of all the existing cases, it is a hoax and *post-truth* which succeeded in spreading hatred, fear, anxiety, and constructing the public mind so that they distrust certain parties who are considered enemies, and gave birth to religious radicalism.

According to Ulya (2018), the phenomenon of religious radicality is a culture that can be formed through social change, including social media. The process of increasing radical behavior can be formed through content/information read and shared on social media. This is increasingly supported by strength *post-truth* which configures society's religiosity according to the interests of one particular group. Suppose religious information leads to facts that are made up based on the understanding of one particular group. In that case, it will create excessive fanaticism towards religious understanding without respect for differences in beliefs.

As a result, the assumption that other groups or religions are wrong, my group is right, and my ideology is right even above the state ideology is born because the construction of religious messages is wrapped in *post-truth*. *Post-truth* capable of manipulating public sentiment and identity through the dissemination of inaccurate or distorted information. In the context of religious radicalism, this can stimulate feelings of fear, hatred and distrust towards certain groups or religions. Forming an exclusive group identity and generating a sense of superiority could be the impact.

'Instant' Living Culture, Changes in Religious Paradigms, and Challenges

It cannot be denied that Indonesian people, especially the millennial and Z generations, tend to prefer everything instant (Nurhalim, 2022; Peramesti & Kusmana, 2018). This generation often pursues success in a fast way, including in terms of gaining knowledge, wealth, popularity and power. The critical and deep mindset is often abandoned, and replaced by a drive to get results quickly. This culture of chasing instant success is reflected in many aspects of daily life. Starting from the urge to get information quickly via the internet, the desire to achieve achievements without a long process, to the hope of achieving popularity and wealth through social media in a short time (Pirie & Worcester, 1998).

Millennials and Generation Z are often exposed to instant culture accelerated by modern technology. The existence of applications that provide everything in seconds, from information to entertainment, strengthens their desire to achieve everything quickly (Waliyuddin, 2019). In this context, a critical and deep mindset, accompanied by an attitude of rationality, caution and politeness, is not always a priority. On the other hand, the drive for quick results may often trump those values. Although not all members of this

generation are like this, this trend still reflects a cultural shift that needs to be considered when discussing people's behavior, especially in the modern era influenced by technology and social media.

This culture of instant living does not stand alone, there are other factors, namely global political dynamics which prioritize emotions; the influence of postmodern reasoning which believes that reality depends on understanding, experience and interests, and the development of digital technology (Auslander, 2022). All of this influences the proliferation of information that is not necessarily true, which is formed on the basis of opinions or personal beliefs that touch consciousness and feelings. This includes religious information designed in that *post-truth* era (Sands, 1995). Raymond E. Miles and Charles C. Snow (1984), discovered why humans behave instantaneously, namely: first, the existence of artifacts (tools) as a convenience in creating a reality or knowledge. Second, the loss of sacredness in the process of creating reality or knowledge.

In the era *post-truth*, where emotional factors, subjective opinions, and speed of access to information are the main focus, religious tendencies have also experienced a significant shift. The process of gaining sacred religious understanding and based on tradition and traditional religious authority tends to be eroded by the ease and speed of access to information in the digital era (Saat & Burhani, 2020). Nowadays, individuals have instant access to various sources of religious understanding through various digital platforms. Starting from religious studies on YouTube, spiritual lectures on Instagram, to Al-Qur'an learning applications, everything can be accessed easily. Therefore, the religious learning process becomes faster, without involving longer and more sacred traditional processes.

As a result, religion is often interpreted as something that can be achieved easily without going through an in-depth process. The importance of acquiring knowledge in sanad (with valid and verified methods) and institutional religious traditions are becoming increasingly marginalized. This has led to the perception that formal and traditional processes in understanding religion are no longer relevant or are even seen as outdated. As a result, institutionalized religion, traditional concepts that have high authority, such as Islamic boarding schools or formal religious institutions, are starting to lose their appeal. More individuals tend to choose to gain religious understanding independently, without involving these institutions.

This condition creates a paradox where technological sophistication, which should be able to broaden and deepen religious understanding, instead becomes a tool for instant and sometimes shallow understanding. Meanwhile, traditional values that rely on processes and experiences in the institutionalization of religion continue to face challenges in maintaining their relevance amidst this current of cultural change.

> Advances in technology and social media have opened wide doors in the spread of religious teachings. Instant access via digital platforms such as YouTube and Instagram allows religious messages to spread quickly. However, it should be remembered that this speed carries the risk of losing traditional values that come from the process and experience of institutionalized religion. "A balance between ease of access and depth of religious understanding is very important to avoid instant thinking patterns that have the potential to damage the substance of religious teachings themselves. (Rizaldy S. Wiwaha, ustaz, Interview, 14 December 2023).

However, on the other hand, social media has given birth to a new perspective on religion which simplifies the need for religious information and makes the process of spreading religious da'wah easier. Through social media, the piety of religious communities is being conveyed more quickly, resulting in the creation of new trends such as the hijab, to new social religious movements (*hijrah*, almsgiving, and the like). However, this also needs to be addressed wisely because the opportunities for practices to promote untruth in the name of religion are also very high, including radicalism and the practice of hoaxes and *post-truth*.

CONCLUSION

This article concludes that the impact of social media on people's religiosity in the digital era is mainly caused by concepts of *post-truth*, hoaxes and radicalism on social media. This article finds that there is a transformation of religious paradigms, freedom of expression, and diversity of interpretations that occurs on social media. People's religious understanding, especially in big cities in Indonesia, is influenced by a shift in preferences for getting religious information from *ustaz*/clerics who are known through social media. Hoax and information phenomena

post-truth on social media creates serious challenges to quality religious understanding and traditional religious authority. The influence of social media is not only reflected in increases *religious attachment*, but also shows the potential for religious disintegration and radicalism. In the dynamics of information and communication in the digital era, the negative impact of social media on people's religiosity needs to be a serious concern. Efforts to independently verify information and media literacy on social media need to be encouraged as a solution to anticipate the spread of hoaxes and *post-truth* on social media

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