

Religious Framing of New Media Technology: Islamic Salafi Movement in Indonesia and Its Communal Narratives of the Internet

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Keywords: Salafism, Salafi groups, Indonesia, the internet, communal narratives, religious legitimacy

Abstract: Many studies focus their analysis on the nature and characteristics of the internet to answer the question about why Islamic groups and movements harness the internet as a new important resource. Using this medium perspective, they believe that the internet adoption by Islamic groups and movements is closely related to what the medium can and will do in the ways it differs from old media. This article, however, suggests that the answer should be found on the users in that how and why Islamic groups and movements harness this new media technology. Using this user-centred perspective and focusing on Islamic Salafi groups in Indonesia, it analyses how the proponents of Islamic Salafi movement in Indonesia defined and interpreted the adopted internet as a new resource in a communal discourse inspired and supported with references to religious texts. It argues that as they required a theological legitimacy in order to engage fully with the internet as a new chosen resource, Salafi factions legitimised and heralded the internet as a new resource of collective action through narratives informed and guided by Islamic texts and Salafi world views.

1 INTRODUCTION

Most observers generally turn to the specific nature and characteristics of the internet to answer the question about why Islamic groups and movements embrace the internet as a useful and acceptable resource. Focussing on what this medium can and will do, they suggest that Islamic movements and groups use the internet because, among other factors, it is faster, cheaper, and has wider outreach than 'old' media technologies such as print and TV broadcast to achieve their organizational, social and religious goals [1]–[17].

This article suggests, however, that significant answers to the key question of internet adoption by Islamic groups and movements are to be found by looking at the users, and what they can or cannot do with the internet. This user-centred perspective believes that the harnessing of the internet is influenced by user-related issues including the extent to which users give legitimacy to the adopted digital technology. To do this, this article focuses its analysis on how the proponents of Islamic Salafi movement in Indonesia defined and interpreted the adopted internet as a new resource in a communal

discourse inspired and supported with references to religious texts. It argues that as they required a theological legitimacy in order to engage fully with the internet as a new chosen resource, Salafi factions legitimised and heralded the internet as a new resource of collective action through narratives informed and guided by Islamic texts and Salafi world views.

Information required for this study was obtained through online investigation that involved crawling websites (Garrido, 2003) for samples of Indonesian Salafi websites using search engines and collecting materials from the selected Salafi websites for themes, topics and tones related to the research questions. In addition, this study is based on in-depth interviews with a number of the proponents of the Salafi movement in some cities in Indonesia.

Analysis involved textual analysis of the collected data to uncover the agency of Salafists in the relationship between religion and the internet technology, and the Salafi discourses of the internet. In this study, text comprises the Salafi websites in the form of web articles and postings- and interview transcripts.

2 SALAFI COMMUNAL NARRATIVES OF THE ADOPTED INTERNET

As it developed in the era of the revolution of information and communication technology, the Salafi movement embraced the internet as a new, important resource. The proponents of Salafism in Indonesia have embraced the internet and integrated it as a new acceptable resource into their socio-religious practices. Each Salafi faction mobilizes the internet to present and articulate its own version of Salafism, and analyse the contemporary state of Muslim societies.

They use various internet applications including websites, weblogs, emailing lists, internet forums, and online business. Their presence in cyberspace is seen in hundreds of these applications written in Indonesian, operated by Salafi individuals or organizations, accessed and followed by Salafi adherents and activists.

The Indonesian Salafists required a theological legitimacy in order to engage fully with the internet as a new chosen resource. For this purpose, they turned to their religious tradition to give a sacred legitimacy for their embrace of the internet. The Salafi factions, therefore, framed this new media technology in a set of particular narratives in order to integrate it into their world view and socio-religious practices. In doing so, they used a set of resources of ideology, beliefs, tradition and history as a “cultural toolkit” (Benford, 2000) to create a communal discourse on the internet to justify their embrace of this technology and validate their particular engagement with it. This involved a process of defining meaning so that internet use or non-use could be integrated into the Salafi factions’ needs and purposes.

A. A Double-Edged Sword

The Salafi communal discourse on the internet is strongly characterized by the metaphor of a double-edged sword to determine the applicability of the internet as a new resource. The Yemeni Salafi faction stressed that the internet is like a sword, which can be useful or harmful and has good and bad effects; it can be used for good or evil, by good or bad people, in accordance with their purposes. The internet is useful and good as long as it is used

for goodness and religious interests such as for Salafi propagation (da’wah) purposes.

The Salafi factions presented the internet as an acceptable new resource through the narrative of *halāl* (religiously permitted) internet. Yet, they also framed it to be a potentially unacceptable technology through the narrative of *harām* (religiously forbidden) internet by highlighting the internet’s ‘dangerous’ aspects in which its use could be in conflict with Salafi teachings and way of life. These two kinds of internet narratives play an important role in the Salafists’ engagement with the new medium because they guide the Salafi actors and adherents on how to talk, perceive, and use or not use it for the purpose of the Salafi movement. In practice, these narratives aim to direct a religiously justified pattern of use in the Salafists’ mobilization of the new resource.

B. Halal Internet

The Salafi factions developed the narratives of *halāl* internet with the aim of justifying this new medium as a new acceptable resource. This was illustrated by their perception of the importance of internet for contemporary Muslim societies. They believed that technological modernization should be welcomed by maximizing its benefits and avoiding its harmful effects in the light of religious values and purposes. Although it had no precedence in the era of Prophet Muhammad and his companions, information technology like the internet could be used for religious interests and purposes.

According to Haraki Salafists, embracing the internet was necessary to keep abreast with the development of the “outer world” and contemporary issues (Musa, 2010). They argued that this new media technology has offered more advantages and possibilities than old media. The internet provides flexibility and portability so people with access to this new media can acquire a wide range of information about Salafism in efficient and cheap ways.

Internet as Facility

The dominant narrative of the *halal* internet the Salafi factions developed was that the internet is a facility. The Salafists regarded the internet as a facility, which is believed to be inherently neutral and value-free so that it can be used for any purposes, good or bad. As an instrument, the internet can be utilised as long as its usage and effects are

not in breach of Islamic values and teachings as understood by Salafists.

According to Haraki Salafi faction, the internet is a useful facility for religious purposes, particularly as a modern means of propagation (da'wah) of Salafi ideology to a wider audience. They perceived that the internet is a part of worldly affairs which can be used in light of Islamic norms and values (Hadi, 2010).

The Yemeni Salafists also regarded the internet as a new resource for gaining learning materials and references including books and articles on Salafism, to which the Salafi leaders consult for teaching and sermon materials. They referred to the websites created by, or dedicated to, the 'ulamā' of Salafism in the Middle East. These websites are highly appreciated as important resources from which they are able to download articles, fatwa and books written by Salafi 'ulamā' for da'wah purposes. The internet, then, has equipped Salafi preachers with necessary knowledge and skills for propagating Salafism (Safii, 2010).

Internet as a value-free tool

Another common Salafi narrative of halāl internet is the idea the internet is a neutral or value-free tool. This deals with the issues about values associated with this new media technology. This included the issue that the internet was invented and developed by non-Muslims in the West, particularly those in the United States of America, whose values and way of life are different from those of Muslims. Regarding this issue, the Salafi factions believed that there is no problem with the use of products made by non-Muslims provided the products are considered religiously lawful.

For them, the internet is just like other technologies invented by non-Muslims such as cars or mobile phones. As explained above, the internet is then considered a tool, which is value-free and can be used by everyone, including the Salafists for their social-religious needs and purposes. What really concerned the Salafists was how to take advantage of the internet for pursuing their movement's goals and avoid the aspects of the internet that are harmful to morality and Islam such as pornography and un-Islamic content.

In this context, most proponents of both Haraki Salafism and Yemeni Salafism categorized the internet as part of mu'amalah, an Islamic teaching

on interaction and transaction among human beings. Based on this teaching, they argued that human interaction and transaction is not only religiously permitted among Muslims, but also between Muslims and non-Muslims. Hence, they emphasised that Muslims are allowed to have mu'amalah with disbelievers such as doing business with them and using their products considered lawful according to Islamic teachings. According to these Salafists, it is true that the internet was created by disbelievers, but it does not mean Muslims are prevented from using the technology because it constitutes a part of worldly matters and human interaction in which Muslim can participate under the guidance of Islamic values (Arafat, 2010) and (Satrio, 2010).

Furthermore, the Salafi factions did not perceive internet use as against tashabbuh, a doctrine that Muslims are forbidden to imitate and follow particular ways of life of non-Muslims. According to Haraki Salafists, the internet is a matter of worldly affairs, not a matter of aqīdah (fundamental creed) in which Muslims are forbidden to imitate other religions' beliefs and traditions. This argument reinforced the notion that the internet is neutral and value-free regardless of the fact that it was created and produced by non-Muslims. Again, Muslims are allowed to use the technology for their own purposes and needs in ways that are permitted by the Islamic teachings (Hadi, 2010).

C. Haram Internet

Although they recognized the usefulness of the internet as a resource of Salafi propagation, the Salafi factions also developed narratives of religiously forbidden (harām) internet. In these narratives, they framed the internet as a danger to the purity of Islam and a threat toward Muslims' morality. They particularly referred to what they considered un-Islamic use and content of this media technology. The forms of harām internet, they identified, include immoral content such as pornography, ideas regarded as destructive to Islamic faith, and harsh criticism and 'attack' from those regarded as the enemies of Salafism.

Internet as Threat

The common Salafi narrative of harām internet was that the internet is a dangerous medium in that users can use it to spread ideologies that have the potential to destroy Islam and Muslims such as those of Jaringan Islam Liberal (the Liberal Islam

Network), which attack Salafism through web content that vilifies the ‘true’ Salafi ideology, and engages in ma’shiyat (forbidden things according to Islamic values) (Safii, 2010).

It should be noted that in spite of their recognition of the internet’s advantages, the Salafi factions did not regard the internet as a new resource that could replace traditional means of religious learning. They believed that majlis ta’lim (venues including a mosque where face-to-face religious learning is conducted) and other face-to-face religious gatherings are still the most important media for transferring and gaining religious knowledge. According to Yemeni Salafists, majlis ta’lim remains advantageous in that it provides religious knowledge seekers with spiritual benefits which the internet is unable to give its users. For example, by attending a majlis ta’lim, one will have opportunities to have silaturahmi (maintaining “family bonds” among Muslims), one of the highly rewarded virtues in Islam. The internet, therefore, is regarded as complementary to the traditional media of religious learning and mission.

D. Religious Legitimacy of the Adopted Internet

To fully understand the above Salafi framing of the internet, it is necessary to consider Salafi tradition of religious texts by investigating particular ideological beliefs that underlie their narratives of the internet. Our interviews revealed that the Salafi factions went beyond the idea of the internet simply as a useful tool; their narratives imply a religious mandate for the use of the internet. To understand more precisely the nature of this religious legitimacy requires an investigation of the Salafi religious beliefs that provide the Salafists with a theological foundation for their engagement with internet. In this context, uncovering dalīl (evidence) from the Qur’an, hadith (the Prophet Muhammad’s sayings and practices) and other Islamic resources that allow Muslims to use the technology, particularly internet, becomes indispensable.

Internet Use as Non-Worship Act

The Salafi factions affirmed that there are no Qur’anic or hadith texts that explicitly or specifically talk about the use of media technologies including the internet. Yet, they turned to some Islamic principles, which were derived from the Qur’an, hadith and ushūl al-fiqh (the principles of Islamic jurisprudence), believed to give religious legitimacy to their engagement with the internet. First of all,

both Haraki Salafists and Yemeni Salafists based their decision to mobilize the internet as a resource on a principle that God has created everything on the earth for human beings so that everybody is allowed to use and take benefit from them in accordance with divine law.

This, they said, includes technologies like the internet. To support this, the Haraki Salafi leaders quoted a Qur’anic verse: “It is He Who has created for you all that is in the earth” (Al-Baqarah: 29) and a hadith that says: “You know best your own worldly affairs (antum a’lam bi umūri dunyākum)” (Badrudin, 2010) and (Abdullah, 2010).

It is interesting that the main concern for the Salafi factions was not what dalīl (evidence) allows Muslims to use the internet for, but rather what dalīl forbids Muslims from using it. When there are no religious texts that forbid certain issues, it is permissible for Muslims to engage with them in light of universal Islamic values and principles.

In this sense, the Salafi factions referred to the principles of Islamic jurisprudence to support the permissibility of internet use for their religious purposes. The Haraki Salafists supported their arguments by making reference to al-aṣl fi al-ashyā’ al-ibāhah illa mā warada ‘an al-tashrī tahrīmuh, a principle that everything related to acts of non-worship is permissible except those things that Islamic law clearly prohibits them. Based on this principle, a Haraki Salafi leader argued that the use of the internet is permitted because it is a non-ritual activity against which there has been no religious prohibition provided it is used according to Islamic values (Hadi, 2010).

The Yemeni Salafists did the same, quoting another principle of Islamic jurisprudence lil wasāil hukm al-maqāsid, which means the ruling of instruments is subject to what they are intended to be and the intention of their users. They explained that the internet is a waṣīlah (instrument) that is basically halāl, religiously permitted to be used by Muslims provided it is to do good things according to Islamic teachings. Yet, it can be harām, religiously forbidden, if it is used for doing things that breach religious values and ethical norms such as for viewing pornography.

Internet as God’s Gift

Furthermore, to provide religious legitimacy to their internet use, the Salafi factions went beyond

the idea of the internet as waṣīlah (instrument); they even took the view that the internet is a gift from God (ni'mah). This implies a religious mandate to use the internet for good according to Islamic values and for religious missions.

The above Salafi narratives of the internet suggest that while the internet is a global information and communication medium, it operates within the confine of local and particular values and ethics shared by its users. Through their narratives of the internet, the Salafi factions developed “a prescriptive discourse” (Campbell, 2010) on the technology, framing it as a valuable tool that supports their ideology, core values and practices. In such communal discourse, though they disagree on some issues the Salafi factions shared the same narratives of the internet.

Notwithstanding some variations over when the internet can be a religiously and morally forbidden medium, the Salafi factions have largely shared positive ideas about the internet as a new resource for propagating Salafism (da'wah salafiyah).

3 CONCLUSION

This article has shown that the Salafi embrace of the internet is closely and explicitly linked with the Salafi religious world view and ideology. To embrace the internet fully as a new resource, the Salafi factions needed more than an organisational justification.

As religious text-based and oriented factions, the Salafists sought to claim theocratic legitimacy for their internet use through a communal discourse of the internet with strong references to religious texts. This provided the proponents of the Salafi factions with a framework of how to perceive and utilize the internet, and more importantly a religious legitimacy for their adoption and mobilization of the new medium as an acceptable new resource for promoting Salafi ideology.

These narratives demonstrate that religious ideology plays a key role in Salafi factions' adoption of the internet. Religious values and tradition provide a theological foundation for the Salafists' responses to the introduction of the internet into their socio-religious practices. Since religious texts play a central role in formulating their ideology and guiding their practice, the Salafists depend heavily on the Qur'anic texts, hadith, and the Salafi 'ulama

in giving legitimacy to the internet use. Not only do the Salafists impute neutrality to the internet, but they also regard it as God's gift, legitimising their mobilization of the medium for their religious needs and purposes. At this point, we see a spiritually-rich engagement with the internet technology, which distinguishes religious users like the Salafists from non-religious ones, such as a football club or a corporation, for example.

The Salafi framing of the internet suggests that the Salafi factions are not passive receivers or blind rejecters of the internet. Their engagement with the internet involves processes of negotiation with opportunities opened by the internet in light of Salafi ideology and beliefs. Given such specific motivations, the Salafi factions are involved in a technological practice in which they attempt to religiously shape the meaning and purpose of the internet. But, this article still has a question that needs an answer: How have the Salafi factions actually mobilized the internet as a new resource? Perhaps, further studies are needed in order to provide answers to this important issue.

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