

# **Ulama and Terrorism In Media: Phenomenology Research about the Perceptions of Ulama to Terrorism News in Indonesia Mass Media**

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## **ABSTRACT**

This study aimed to explore the perceptions of ulama (Islamic scholars) regarding terrorism news in the Indonesian mass media. Employing a qualitative approach and descriptive method, data were collected through interviews with 25 ulama located in Jakarta, West Java, Central Java, North Sumatra, Padang, and West Kalimantan. The findings of this study revealed three significant perceptions among the ulama participants regarding the media coverage of terrorism in Indonesia. Firstly, they identified an unfair association between Islam and terrorism in the media coverage, expressing disagreement and concern over this portrayal. They emphasized that acts of terrorism should not be equated with the teachings of Islam. Secondly, the ulama perceived political, ideological, and economic motives behind the coverage of terrorism, suspecting specific agendas by Western or American entities. They also believed that economic interests influenced the media's emphasis on sensational aspects to attract viewers and generate advertising revenue. Thirdly, the ulama perceived negative repercussions for Islam due to the coverage of terrorism, including the potential tarnishing of Islam's image and the exacerbation of Islamophobic sentiments. This study provides additional insights and confirms previous research on the coverage of terrorism and Islam.

## **KEYWORD**

Ulama;terrorism;media;Indonesia;media;perceptions;news

## **Introduction**

Since the 9/11 attacks, news coverage of terrorism has been consistently present in both national and international media for over two decades. In Indonesia, news about terrorism began to flood the media following the 2002 Bali Bombings, followed by the Marriott bombing in 2003, Bali Bombings II in 2005, and the bombing and shooting incidents on Thamrin Street in Jakarta in 2016. In the past five years, there has been a shift in the pattern of terrorism, with many attacks targeting police offices. The most recent incident occurred on December 7, 2022, with a bombing on Astana Anyar Street in Bandung.

News coverage of terrorism often becomes the headline in various media outlets,

including print, electronic, and online platforms. For instance, the bombing incident on Astana Anyar Street in Bandung remained a headline for several days on online news portals. Unfortunately, coverage of terrorism tends to deviate from the spirit of objectivity that should be upheld by the media. There is a tendency to associate terrorism with Arabs and Islam in general. In the case of terrorism news coverage in Indonesia, this tendency is particularly evident in reports produced by Western or Western-affiliated media outlets (Mahony, 2010; Powell, 2011; Kumar, 2021). The biased reporting of Western media regarding Islam and terrorism cannot be separated from the context of global geopolitical interests (Kumar, 2021; Tusshu, 1997), which has deep roots in the Western orientalist perspective of Islam (Said, 2008). As Daya Tusshu observed more than 25 years ago, “The mainstream western media projects Islam as inimical to civilized values. The demonizing of Islam fits in well with the western geo-political interest in arms and oil today” (Tusshu, 1997, p. 264). “War on terror” was a political agenda pushed by America in the post 9/11 attack. In this sense, the news media has played a vital role in constructing the narrative of the ongoing “war on terror” as an unfolding and constantly evolving story. Consequently, this portrayal has projected the “war on terror” as the most significant threat in our collective imagination (Halliday, 2010). In fact, the concept of the “war on terror” has become associated with Islam (Freedman & Thusu, 2011, p. 2).

This model of news reporting has persisted and intensified since the 9/11 attacks. Khan et al. (2012, p. 5) concluded that the negative portrayal of Muslims in Western media is globalized, and if allowed to continue, it may lead to a clash of civilizations with dire consequences for human civilization. Similarly, Powell (2018) observed that this approach to news reporting has become a normal perspective adopted by (Western) media outlets when reporting on Islam. The result is fear and negative stigma towards Muslim communities, which impacts policies and actions associated with Islamophobia (Kumar, 2021).

Furthermore, the relationship between media and terrorism news is not solely ideological but also pragmatic, where terrorism and media benefit from each other. Terrorists benefit from their actions being featured in news headlines, as it amplifies the impact of their acts of terror. On the other hand, media outlets capitalize on the dramatic aspects of these terrorist acts to attract public attention, thereby increasing their ratings and advertising revenue. Iqbal’s study (2014) demonstrated this tendency, indicating that commercial (non-public) media outlets particularly exploit the economic benefits of terrorism-related actions due to their heavy reliance on advertising revenue.

Within the “Hierarchy of Influences” model proposed by Shoemaker and Reese (1996), we can situate the media’s coverage of terrorism news. This model highlights on the various pressures that shape news content, spanning five layers of influence at different levels, from micro to macro. In the case of reporting on terrorism, the ideology and geopolitical context that impact media coverage can be attributed to the macro level of influence. Additionally, the media’s economic motives can be understood as operating at the meso level (organizational). Further analysis can delve into the first level, which involves the journalists responsible for covering the news.

## **Media and Terrorism**

The relationship between media and terrorism can be understood from both media and terrorist perspectives. In a way, they can work ‘mutually’ for their own benefits. Media is not merely an external entity passively delivering news about terrorist incidents to global audiences. Rather, they are increasingly acknowledged as active agents who play a role in shaping the perception and understanding of these events (Freedman & Thussu, 2011). It is also the case in the context of news on terrorism which often being associated with Islam (Halliday, 2010; Freedman & Thussu, 2011).

Nacos (2016) notion of “mass-mediated terrorism” also captures the central role of media in the propaganda strategies of terrorists. It emphasizes the role of mass media and media gatekeepers in promoting violent acts. Nacos also locates the media in the triangle of political communication (Nacos, 2016, p.32). The framework highlights the media’s position as the central conduit between public officials, the general public, and terrorists. Terrorists, in this framework, seek media coverage to gain attention and promote their political agendas. A terrorist organization may ‘only’ kill one or two persons in an attack. Yet this act can be terrorizing millions other people in targeted countries. A terror attack is not meaningful in the attack itself but rather in the message that embodied on that attack. A terror is conducted to communicate something to a country (e.g. the US) or groups of people (e.g. the West) that they are in danger; to activate ‘the deepest emotion in the human brain: the fear of death’ (Castells, 2010). Terror, in other words, is ‘an act of communication’ (Schmid, 1982: 14). As communication action, terror needs to get media coverage so that the desired message can be distributed widely. To get this coverage, terrorists design their terror as symbolic and as dramatic as they can so that it becomes ‘media spectacles of terror’ that that catch wide media attention (Kellner, 2003: 43).

Schmid’s concept of terror as act of communication provides an important point to understand the relation between terrorism and media. A terror will not be terrorizing if it is not communicated thorough certain channels. How to get media attention, therefore, is being part of the terrorist tactic. In this regard, Manuel Castells proposes a concept of ‘media politic’ to give a more comprehensive understanding about how terrorists use media as part of their strategy (Castells, 2010). According to Castells, terrorists use media politic not only to terrorize their targeted communities or countries. It also aims to influence the ‘mind’ of potential supporters (Castells, 2010: 139).

Although the tendency to discredit Islam in terrorism news is more prevalent in Western media (Halliday, 2010; Freedman & Thussu, 2011; Powell, 2012, 2018), ironically, this pattern also occurs in Muslim-majority countries, including Indonesia. In their study on the discourse of Islamophobia in Indonesian media, Amalia and Harris (2019) found that mass media in Indonesia is trapped in the Islamophobia discourse introduced by the West. Research conducted on two of the largest online news sites in Indonesia, namely tribunews.com and detik.com, indicated that both media outlets continuously perpetuate Islamophobia through their news texts (Amalia & Harris, 2019). This Islamophobia discourse is particularly evident in news reports on terrorist cases on the tribunews.com website. Similar bias also appears in the reporting of major media outlets such as KOMPAS when covering suicide-related news (Rahmawati, 2020). Thus, this is not solely a Western pattern of news reporting (Iqbal, 2015; Wijaya, 2016).

Terrorists commit acts of violence and other forms of terror with the objective of gaining support from society, instilling fear in government institutions, and raising funds from their supporters (Sukmono & Junaedi, 2018). In order to effectively combat terrorism, Nunung Prajarto (2004) argues for cohesive cooperation between the government and media workers.

While news about terrorism continues to be a prominent topic in the media, its coverage often sparks debate within newsrooms (Soekarno., 2011). This debate revolves around the issues of truth and objectivity in the information presented. The accuracy of information during the news coverage process plays a crucial role in presenting a comprehensive and unbiased story. Additionally, the study highlights the dilemma faced by journalists when covering terrorism and the evolving patterns of framing in reporting on terrorism within the mass media (Sukarno, 2011).

Many studies on media and terrorism, both in the West and in Indonesia, focus on text analysis and attempt to construct the meaning of the texts using discourse analysis or framing techniques (Adila, 2011; Iqbal, 2015; Powell, 2011, 2018; Iqbal, 2014; Rahmawati, 2020, Wijaya, 2016). However, there is still a limited studies that examine the responses or perceptions of the Muslim community, especially from religious scholars, regarding these news reports. Religious scholars, or ulama, possess expertise in the field of Islamic religious knowledge, and their perspectives can be considered representative of Muslim communities. Realizing this gap, this study aims to answer the question of how Indonesian ulama perceive mass media coverage of terrorism.

### **Media and terrorism: perspective of ulama**

As outlined above, studies on media and terrorism can be broadly categorized into two major groups. The first group focuses on the construction of media messages, employing methods such as discourse analysis or framing analysis. The second group examines the impact of media coverage on public perceptions of terrorism and its relationship with religion. Unfortunately, there is a scarcity of studies that investigate the responses or perspectives of the Muslim community towards such news coverage. This highlights the urgency to closely examine how the Muslim community, represented by the ulama (religious scholars), perceive these media narratives.

To define the ulama, this research draws upon a comprehensive definition put forth by Ismah (2016, p. 493).

The word ulama is derived from the Arabic word ‘alima-ya’lamu meaning “to know”. Ulama is the plural form of ‘alim, from isim fa’il (the subject form in Arabic) meaning “someone who knows” or “someone who has knowledge”. In Indonesia both ‘alim and ‘ulama are commonly used in reference to a single person. To refer to a number of ulama the word ‘alim is added to the word ‘ulama to form the phrase alim ulama. The word ulama originally meant one who had general knowledge of a particular field (Ismah, 2016, p. 493).

In the daily lives of the Muslim community, the terms “ulama” and “ustadz” are sometimes used interchangeably, both referring to individuals who possess knowledge in the field of religious studies. However, the terms “ulama” and “ustadz” actually encompass a wide spectrum. For instance, there are ulama whose religious lectures are attended by tens of

thousands of people, while others may have a much smaller following. In this regard, all types of ulama are relevant to study because even ulama who work at the community level or serve as teachers in elementary schools can have views that reflect broader segments of society.

This study is guided by social action theory, phenomenology, and symbolic interaction theory to capture the detailed perspectives of the ulama. These theories help explain the subjective reality of the ulamas' behaviors. It is important to note that the role of theory in this research is only guiding, not testing a specific theory. Therefore, the research follows an emic approach, moving from facts, information, or events, rather than starting from theory and deriving data and information.

The social action theory, initiated by Max Weber, provides insights into understanding the perception or opinion of the ulama. According to Weber, social action encompasses all human behaviors when individuals assign subjective meanings to their actions (Mulyana, 2010). This emphasizes that the behavior of neutral scholars is driven by subjective meanings.

Alfred Schutz's phenomenological theory is a variant of social action theory as it falls within its scope (Mulyana, 2010). Like the social action theory, phenomenology is also interested in subjective meaning. Therefore, the application of phenomenological analysis is suitable for studying the perceptions of the ulama regarding terrorism news in the Indonesian media, as it aims to reconstruct the lived world of human experiences based on their own perspectives.

## **Research Methods**

The research method used in this study is a descriptive method with a qualitative approach. Creswell defines qualitative research as an inquiry process of understanding based on distinct methodological traditions of inquiry that explore social or human problems. The researcher aims to build a complex, holistic picture by analyzing words, reports, details, and the perspectives of informants, conducting the study in natural settings (Creswell, 2007). In this study, the qualitative approach is used to study Indonesian "ulama" in their own environment.

Creswell further argues that data collection techniques in qualitative studies can include observation (ranging from nonparticipant to participant), interviews (ranging from semistructured to open-ended), documents (ranging from private to public), and audiovisual materials (such as photographs, compact discs, and videotapes). Interviews are a data collection technique that can be conducted in a structured or unstructured manner, face-to-face or via telephone (Sugiono, 2018).

In this study, unstructured interviews were used to explore the views, thoughts, and intentions of the "ulama" regarding news on terrorism. The use of unstructured interviews allowed flexibility in the composition and wording of each question, adapting to the needs and conditions during the interview, including the socio-cultural characteristics of the informants. Although the interviews were conducted informally, interview guidelines were still used.

Regarding the selection of informants, Arikunto stated that purposive sampling should be guided by certain criteria. The sampling should be based on specific characteristics or traits that represent the main characteristics of the population. The subjects chosen as samples should possess the most characteristics found in the population (key subjects), and the determination of population characteristics should be conducted carefully in the preliminary study (Suharsimi, 2013).

Informants in this study were selected purposively. Several criteria applied in selecting the informants include; (1) informants are those who have background in Islamic education formally (university) or informally (traditional boarding school or pesantren); (2) work in Islamic teaching formally (university, school, or boarding school) or informally (preacher, local religious figures). In addition, the informants were selected from different Islamic Organization (Ormas Islam) which include Nahdlatul Ulama (the biggest Islamic Organization in the country), Muhammadiyah, Persatuan Islam (Persis), and Indonesia Ulema Council or Majelis Ulama Indonesia (MUI).

Based on the aforementioned criteria, the researcher selected 25 informants for interviews, all of whom have backgrounds in Islamic education. The informants hold positions such as the head of pesantren, lecturer at Islamic universities, and teacher at Islamic schools. Additionally, they represent various Islamic organizations. In order to protect the informants' privacy, in quoting the interviewees this paper will only use initials name (pseudonym).

## **Result**

Based on interviews conducted with the informants, this study found three critical perceptions among the interviewed ulama regarding the coverage of terrorism in the mass media in Indonesia. Firstly, they perceived an unfair association between Islam and terrorism in the coverage by the mass media. In this regard, they disagreed and expressed regret over the association between Islam and terrorism often portrayed in the mass media. While they acknowledged that some terrorists were identified as Muslims, they believed that their actions did not reflect the teachings of Islam and therefore should not be equated with Islam. Secondly, the interviewed ulama also perceived political/ideological and economic motives behind the coverage of terrorism. They were particularly suspicious of the West or America, perceiving them to have specific agendas in these news reports. Additionally, they believed that the media's coverage of terrorism was often driven by economic motives. These ulama perceived that these media outlets emphasized the dramatic aspects of terrorist incidents to attract audience attention and, consequently, generate advertising revenue. Thirdly, the interviewed ulama held the perception that the coverage of terrorism, especially when associated with Islamic teachings, had negative repercussions for Islam. They believed that such news reports could tarnish the image of Islam both nationally and globally. Furthermore, they asserted that these reports could fuel Islamophobic sentiments toward Muslims.

### *The problem of association of Islam and Terrorism*

Based on interviews with informants, this study reveals a perception among the ulama regarding a major issue in media coverage of terrorism that is the tendency to generalize and associate terrorism with Islamic teachings. Contrary to this perception, the informants assert that Islam, along with other religions, does not endorse violence. However, they acknowledge that this generalization is partly influenced by the fact that a significant number of individuals involved in acts of terror, particularly in Indonesia, are identified as Muslims.

EI, a head of Pesantren in Bandung who also a lecturer at a state Islamic University, said that,

Yeah, it's just a coincidence that those who are caught or indicated as perpetrators of terrorism happen to be Muslims, so some people might think that Islam teaches terrorism. But in reality, every religion, including Islam, does not promote chaos and violence. Islam teaches kindness, not anger.

Similarly, RS, the head of Ulama Council in West Java said that,

It is true that such news coverage about Islam and terrorism is often reported in Indonesia, especially when individuals involved in terrorist activities are apprehended. So, it is understandable that terrorism is frequently associated with Islam. Basically, Islam and all religions do not teach the teachings or actions of terrorists. However, it is important not to misunderstand that all Muslims are terrorists.

Based on the informants' statements above, it can be seen that the informants do not deny that some acts of terrorism are indeed carried out by individuals who identify themselves as Muslims. Another informant, HF, stated that it is possible that they are part of radical groups that do exist in Indonesia.

In addition, the informants also state that media reports linking terrorism to a specific religion, particularly Islam, are not accurate. They see terrorism as a personal disposition, where individuals involved in acts of terrorism who happen to be Muslims are only a small isolated group. These individuals, with their radical behavior, perceive themselves as different from others who do not share similar views, and they seek to eliminate these differences through acts of terrorism. However, it should be noted that this view is only held by a small minority.

Individuals who practice Islam and are involved in acts of terrorism are actually individuals who lack adequate literacy education, have limited exposure to reliable sources of knowledge, and have a distorted understanding of interpreting religious teachings. These factors contribute to the occurrence of terrorism.

Therefore, the informants disagree with media reports associating terrorism with Islam because it involves only a small group of individuals, and it is caused by a lack of literacy, limited exposure to reliable sources of knowledge, and a misunderstanding of religious teachings.

These are typical opinion from some informants. An informant name FF, for example, said,

Actually, the media coverage linking terrorism to a specific religion, specifically Islam in this case, is not quite accurate. Terrorism is a personal disposition. An individual who happens to be a Muslim and a terrorist is just an isolated case. These individuals, with their radical behavior, perceive those who don't share their views as different, and they want to eliminate those differences through acts of terrorism. If you ask for my opinion on media coverage linking terrorism to Islam, I disagree because it involves only a small group of individuals. Those Muslims who become terrorists are individuals with poor literacy, limited exposure, and a misunderstanding of certain sources, and that's what causes terrorism to occur.

RF, another informant, said

Usually, the media tends to exaggerate in their reporting. For example, if there is an incident involving a terrorist in a boarding school, the news headline would say "all related institutions."

However, in reality, it's only a few individuals involved, not the entire institution. This kind of reporting can be detrimental to the Muslim community.

Both informants contended the tendency of media to over generalize the relation between Islam and terrorism. FF argued that terrorism is a personal disposition and individuals who happen to be Muslim and engage in such acts represent isolated cases. These individuals exhibit radical behavior and seek to eliminate perceived differences through terrorism. Factors such as poor literacy, limited exposure, and a misunderstanding of certain sources were identified as contributors to the occurrence of terrorism among some Muslims. According to the informant, media coverage that links terrorism solely to Islam overlooks the diverse range of factors involved and fails to recognize the peaceful teachings of the religion.

Furthermore, RS emphasized the media's tendency to exaggerate in reporting on terrorism. He illustrated this point by highlighting instances where news headlines wrongly generalize incidents involving terrorists to encompass entire institutions. This exaggeration, in turn, can be detrimental to the Muslim community, fostering stigmatization and fear. The informant stressed the need for more accurate and responsible reporting that avoids sweeping generalizations and acknowledges the diverse nature of terrorism.

Overall, the informants' perspectives challenge the simplistic narratives and underscore the significance of a nuanced understanding. The research findings suggest the importance of recognizing that terrorism stems from individual radicalization and is not representative of the teachings of Islam or any other religion. Moreover, responsible journalism that avoids exaggeration and generalization is crucial in mitigating the negative impact on the Muslim community and promoting a more accurate portrayal of terrorism in the media.

#### *Ideological and economic biases*

The informants suggested that the media's inaccuracy in reporting on the issue of Islam and terrorism could be influenced by ideological and economic factors. The ideological factors include the presence of a "Western agenda" aimed at discrediting Islam, which is perceived to be influenced by the ideologies of media owners who are often seen as biased against Islam. However, the informants also mentioned that the coverage of terrorism could be related to economic motives, as media outlets prioritize sensationalism to boost ratings and attract advertisers.

IS, who is a vice rector of a private Islamic University believes that the news on terrorism on the media has ideological motive. He said,

The coverage of terrorism in mainstream media cannot be denied to have its ideological underpinnings because we know who stands behind the media, as owners have their own inclinations, preferences, and biases.

Another informant named AG said,

If viewed in a broader context, terrorism is actually a global phenomenon, and we know that in this global world, Western countries are not fond of the presence of Islam. They are not happy with the unity of the Muslim community, while Islamic countries that stand together have tremendous economic potential in the Middle East, and perhaps also in Indonesia.



Similarly, AS, a senior teacher at an Islamic School said,

The Western media always tends to portray terrorism as solely associated with Islam, and this is part of their political agenda to create a negative global stigma. However, sometimes it can be proven that terrorism occurs due to a group within Islam, such as the case of the World Trade Center attacks, even though it was one of America's own scenarios.

IS, emphasized the ideological underpinnings of terrorism coverage in mainstream media. He argued that media ownership plays a significant role in shaping narratives due to the inclinations, preferences, and biases of owners. According to this viewpoint, media outlets may be influenced by these factors, leading to potential distortion or manipulation of terrorism-related news. The informant suggested that the ownership of media organizations should uphold principles of impartiality and independence to ensure unbiased reporting.

AG, meanwhile, offered a broader global perspective on news about terrorism. He highlighted the perception that Western countries are not supportive of the presence of Islam and are uncomfortable with the unity of the Muslim community. Additionally, the informant suggests that Western nations may have economic interests in the Middle East and Indonesia, where Islamic countries possess significant economic potential. According to this perspective, Western attitudes toward Islam and terrorism may be influenced by geopolitical and economic considerations.

Furthermore, AS argued that the media tends to associate terrorism primarily with Islam, suggesting that this association is part of a broader political agenda. The informant claimed that this portrayal aims to create a negative global stigma surrounding Islam. However, he also acknowledged instances where acts of terrorism have been perpetrated by groups within the Islamic faith, citing the World Trade Center attacks as an example, even though the informant suggests that it was one of America's own scenarios.

Furthermore, based on interviews, some ulamas also perceived that the news coverage that associated Terrorism and Islam are also influence by the economic motives of the media.

In this regards HF said that,

Specifically for terrorism involving Muslims, it is often given significant headlines in order to attract readers to purchase or consume the mass media. Essentially, this is driven by the fact that journalists are connected to the world of mass media, which is closely tied to economic considerations. There is a need to increase ratings, especially in the realm of television, and boosting viewership for news related to such incidents serves that purpose.

MM, another informan, said

According to the misguided slogan in media, which is "bad news is good news," the media has succumbed to capitalism, materialism, and hedonism, thereby sacrificing objectivity for the sake of ethical, prophetic, and humanistic values.

The interviews with the informants provide significant insights into the perception of ulama regarding media's coverage of terrorism involving individuals who identify as Muslims. HF suggested that media outlets prioritize sensationalism by giving extensive coverage to such incidents, with the aim of attracting readership and increasing sales. This approach reflects the

intertwining relationship between journalism and the economic aspects of the mass media industry. The pursuit of higher ratings and viewership, as mentioned by MM, reinforces the notion that media outlets are driven by commercial interests.

These findings align with the misguided media adage that “bad news is good news,” perpetuating the notion that negative and sensational stories attract greater attention and engagement. Furthermore, the informants highlight how media has fallen into the trap of capitalism, materialism, and hedonism, leading to a departure from ethical, prophetic, and humanistic values.

The research findings indicate a concern of ulama about the trend where media outlets prioritize profit and audience engagement over the responsible and objective reporting of terrorism. This shift towards sensationalism and commercial interests has potentially led to an imbalance in the portrayal of terrorism, with a disproportionate focus on incidents involving individuals who identify as Muslims.

### *Negative Impact on Islam and Muslim Community*

Based on interview, the interviewed ulama perceived that news on Islam and terrorism have negative impact to Islam and Muslim communities in Indonesia and globally. The informants’ perspectives reveal the wide-ranging consequences of associating terrorism with Islam. These narratives not only distort the true teachings of the religion but also harm the global reputation of Islam and its adherents.

BD, a senior lecturer at public Islamic university said that, “The news tarnishes the good name of Islam as a religion of mercy for all (*rahmatan lil’alaamin*)”. In similar vein, MM, a member of Nahdlatul Ulama said that the news coverage that associate terrorism with Islam will damage the image of Islam. He said,

It damages the image of Islam, which is full of love, compassion, and tranquility, making it appear as a religion of anger, warfare, hatred, revenge, and a religion that justifies shedding the blood of those considered enemies of Islam.

RR, a young Ulama from Persatuan Islam who is also a lecturer at a state Islamic university said,

Such news clearly discredits Islam and Muslims, thereby impacting the global perception of Islam. As a result, the level of Islamophobia rises and creates stigmatization worldwide.

The perspectives of the three informants suggest the negative and even damaging impact of news coverage associating terrorism with Islam. BD expressed concern that such coverage diminishes the reputation of Islam, a religion known as a “*rahmatan lil’alamin*” or a mercy to all creation. The association between terrorism and Islam contradicts the fundamental principles of the religion, undermining its positive image and discrediting its followers.

MM, meanwhile, highlighted the damaging effects of this association on the perception of Islam. By depicting Islam as a religion of anger, war, and vengeance, the media presents a distorted image that overlooks Islam’s core values of love, kindness, and tranquility. This misrepresentation perpetuates stereotypes and misconceptions, hindering interfaith understanding and cooperation.

Another informan, RR focused on the global impact of terrorism-related news coverage.

By discrediting Islam and its followers, these narratives contribute to the rise of Islamophobia, leading to prejudice and discrimination against Muslims worldwide. The stigmatization and negative stereotypes hinder social integration, pose challenges to religious freedom, and exacerbate societal divisions.

## **Discussion**

This study uncovered significant perceptions among Indonesian ulama regarding the mass media coverage of terrorism in Indonesia. These perceptions intertwine to provide a comprehensive understanding of their concerns. The ulama expressed their disagreement and regret over the unfair association between Islam and terrorism in the media coverage. While acknowledging that some terrorists identify as Muslims, they firmly believed that these individuals' actions do not reflect the teachings of Islam. Consequently, they emphasized the need to avoid equating Islam with terrorism.

Furthermore, the ulama perceived political/ideological and economic motives behind the coverage of terrorism. They expressed suspicion, particularly towards “the West” or America, perceiving specific agendas shaping these news reports. Additionally, they believed that economic motives influenced media outlets to emphasize the dramatic aspects of terrorist incidents, aiming to capture audience attention and generate advertising revenue. In relation to Islam, the ulama expressed concerns about the negative repercussions of associating terrorism with Islamic teachings in media coverage. They believed that such reports could tarnish the image of Islam both nationally and globally, potentially fueling Islamophobic sentiments towards Muslims.

These integrated points reflect the ulama's views on the media's role in perpetuating unfair associations, highlighting their concerns about political, economic, and religious implications resulting from the coverage of terrorism in the mass media. Their concerns about terrorism coverage in the media echo studies conducted over the past two decades that have also observed an imbalance in reporting on terrorism and Islam.

This study suggested that Ulama in Indonesia raise questions about the portrayal of terrorism cases involving Muslims. They recognize that this issue is related to the nature of the media, which tends to emphasize dramatic and sensational news, particularly when it comes to terrorism (Iqbal, 2015 Kellner, 2004).

News is not merely a construction of reality but is also influenced by the ideology and interests of the media itself. News in the mass media should serve the purpose of providing real benefits to the community, rather than solely serving the interests of the mass media and their owners while neglecting the expectations and demands of society (Musfialdy, 2019). Kamaruddin Hasan (2014) made a similar statement, highlighting the difficulty for the Indonesian mass media industry to detach itself from the grip of politics and the economy. The contemporary mass media, politically and economically, have created hegemony, monopoly, advanced capitalism, and conglomeration, forming a new dominant group that can manipulate the public sphere to spread political ideas more freely (Hasan, 2014).

These findings also indicate that the ulama are politically and economically aware that the media is often used as a vehicle to promote certain political agendas. Putting in the hierarchichy of influences moel, the agendas operate at the macro level of media influence

(Shoemaker and Reese, 1996). The informants even discussed the historical context of the conflict between Islam and the West, which is considered one of the factors contributing to the unfair coverage of terrorism. The political and ideological interests behind terrorism reporting have been extensively discussed by scholars, at least since the publication of Edward Said's (ed.) *Covering Islam* (2008[1997]) and Thussu (1997). While Said et al. (2008[197]) view this issue as rooted in the orientalist paradigm of Western civilization, Thussu (1997), Thussu & Freedman (2011), and several post-9/11 thinkers see it in the context of the post-Cold War era and the competition for natural and economic resources. This pattern has particularly strengthened with the global agenda of the "war on terror" first launched by the US government after the 9/11 attacks. The narrative constructed by America about terrorism, propagated by its supportive media outlets, has directly or indirectly contributed to the association between Islam and terrorism (Freedman & Thussu, 2011; Halliday, 2010).

This study also found that the ulama believe that the detrimental portrayal of Islam in terrorism reporting is influenced by the profit motives of the media. The economic motives of the media are manifested in sensationalized reporting (Kellner, 2004; Kumar, 2021). What is disheartening is that such reporting also benefits terrorist groups whose mission is to spread fear among society. Consequently, they are able to communicate terror to the public (Schmid, 1982) and operate as "media politic" (Castells, 2010) and "mass-mediated terrorism" (Nacos, 2016).

The ideological, political, and economic factors have resulted in unbalanced and even unfair coverage of terrorism and Islam. This study found that the negative impact of media coverage on Islam and terrorism manifests at both the discursive and practical levels. At the discursive level, such coverage has contributed to a negative image of Islam as it is frequently associated with terrorism (Khan et.al., 2012). Furthermore, this negative image has also contributed to the formation of negative stereotypes and Islamophobia from the Western perspective towards Muslims (Amalia & Harris, 2019; Halliday, 2010; Amalia & Harris, 2019; Kumar, 2021).

## **Conclusion**

This study has both complemented and confirmed previous studies that have discussed the coverage of terrorism and Islam, which generally apply framing analysis methods. By gathering data through interviews with ulama (Islamic scholars) in Indonesia, this study has demonstrated that the constructions of terrorism and Islam in the media, as documented in several studies, are also perceived with similar conclusions by the interviewed ulama. Overall, they show concerns regarding the association between terrorism and Islamic teachings. They argue that this association is influenced by the political and ideological agendas of the West, particularly the United States. They also do not deny that the media's coverage model is influenced by economic interests, driven by advertising goals. The ulama also perceive that such media coverage is highly detrimental to Islam and the Muslim community. Due to the portrayal of terrorism associated with Islam, the image of Islam becomes tarnished, leading to negative stereotypes and even anti-Muslim sentiment or Islamophobia.

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No. potential conflict of interest was reported by the author (s)

## Notes on contributor

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