Transformation and Duality of Religious Authority in The Digital Era

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Keywords:	ABSTRACT
religious authority, social media, fragmentation, post-truth, digital branding.	This study examines the shift in religious authority amidst the dominance of social media and the post-truth era. Religious authority, which was once singular and static, now faces the challenges of democratization and fragmentation. Using descriptive qualitative methods and theoretical perspectives ranging from Marshall McLuhan to Bryan S. Turner, this study analyzes the interaction between technology and tradition. The results show that social media has transformed religious authority into a competitive actor in the public arena through digital indicators such as followers, likes, and shares. This phenomenon has triggered the emergence of "Celebrity *Ustadz*" who often displace traditional ulama due to their expertise in managing algorithms and emotional narratives. In the post-truth era, objective facts tend to be defeated by personal sentiment, forcing authority holders to choose between the depth of knowledge or the relevance of digital aesthetics. In conclusion, social media creates a new ecosystem that redefines religious authority as a "brand" in a highly competitive digital identity market.
Kata Kunci:	**ABSTRAK**
otoritas keagamaan, media sosial, fragmentasi, pasca-kebenaran, digital branding.	*Penelitian ini mengkaji pergeseran otoritas keagamaan di tengah dominasi media sosial dan era post-truth. Otoritas keagamaan yang dulunya bersifat tunggal dan statis kini menghadapi tantangan demokratisasi serta fragmentasi. Menggunakan metode kualitatif deskriptif dan perspektif teori dari Marshall McLuhan hingga Bryan S. Turner, studi ini menganalisis interaksi antara teknologi dan tradisi.Hasil penelitian menunjukkan bahwa media sosial telah mengubah otoritas keagamaan menjadi aktor kompetitif di arena publik melalui indikator digital seperti followers, likes, dan shares. Fenomena ini memicu munculnya "Ustadz Selebriti" yang sering kali menggeser posisi ulama tradisional karena kemahiran mereka dalam mengelola algoritma dan narasi emosional.Di era post-truth, fakta objektif cenderung kalah oleh sentimen pribadi, memaksa pemegang otoritas untuk memilih antara kedalaman ilmu atau relevansi estetika digital. Kesimpulannya, media sosial menciptakan ekosistem baru yang mendefinisikan ulang otoritas keagamaan sebagai sebuah "merek" (brand) dalam pasar identitas digital yang sangat kompetitif.*

INTRODUCTION

The role of religious authority itself has a history of being understood as the guardian of the integrity of teachings, the determinant of moral norms, and the source of spiritual legitimacy for society. Religious authority here refers to clerics, pastors, or fatwa councils, who play a central role in shaping the collective and individual identity of the community through interaction or communication.(Turner, 2007) The one-way communication that often occurs in shaping this collective identity usually takes the form of rituals such as religious studies, pulpits, and so on. In modern global media, the ability to claim religious authority has been democratized, meaning that anyone can assume the role of *Imam*. This demonstrates that the role of media or technology in claiming religious authority is impartial , and everyone can consider themselves a cleric or imam.

Religious authority, in general, can be defined as a collectively recognized source of power or legitimacy to teach, lead, and uphold the beliefs of a teaching (religion). Religious authority itself emerges through several combinations, including Sacred Tradition, Structural, Personal, and Knowledge. Authority constructed by sacred tradition originates from a divine teaching or sacred text that is considered absolute and eternal. Meanwhile, structural authority is official recognition by an established and hierarchical religious institution. Personal authority itself arises from a person's quality in leadership and is considered capable and believed to be special by his followers. Religious authority itself also has various forms, namely personal authority (religious figures), institutional authority (organizations), and textual authority (sacred texts). (Cooke & Lawrence, 2005)

Mass media is also inseparable from discussions on the role of religious authority in framing issues as a tool in the mechanism of disseminating religious authority itself. Knowledge based on oral transmission and memory, on the one hand, and print-based knowledge, on the other, are associated with traditional forms of authority and certain pedagogical technologies that produce a disciplined self. Both traditional and digital media greatly enable religious authorities to disseminate messages to a wider audience, especially social media (Instagram, TikTok, X, Facebook), which have diverse audiences. Social media can also legitimize and strengthen their authority position in the public eye. Especially in the current era, social media sometimes becomes the public's primary

reference point for contemporary issues. This occurs because social media offers complex perspectives and creates new spaces for authorities to engage directly (Mcluhan, 1995:135).

However, social media often gives rise to new religious authorities, also labeled as influencers and content creators. These religious authorities are nicknamed "*Ustadz*" (Islamic scholars). Celebrities " and become popular on social media. This challenge arises in social media, fragmenting traditional authorities due to their lack of expertise in their fields. These traditional authorities must also compete with these "new authorities" to regain public attention and trust.(Mcluhan, 1995:136) Social media also has a two-way relationship: authority influences the media, or the media shapes authority. Social media has transformed religious authorities, which were initially singular and static, into competitive actors in the public arena. This challenge for religious authorities tests their ability to adapt to the modern era while maintaining the integrity of their teachings.

METHODS

This research method uses qualitative research, producing data in the form of descriptive words. This research also goes through a flexible process, therefore the title, theoretical framework, and even all research instruments can be changed during data collection in the field. This research also seeks to uncover problematic or unclear phenomena. This descriptive qualitative research seeks to understand the phenomenon or object being studied in more depth. In this study, the researcher must collect as much data as possible by analyzing the answers and continuing with further questions until obtaining credible data before identifying and organizing the findings in a structured manner. In this case, the researcher used Miles and Huberman's qualitative data analysis techniques. (Miles, 2020) The researcher also involved rechecking the data sources to test reliability and ensure there was no significant bias. (Foucault, 1972) Therefore, the main focus of this research is an in-depth understanding of the meaning, perception, and context of the situation being studied.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Authority Influences Social Media

Religious authorities themselves have various specific ways of influencing the media. Religious authorities often try to influence the media or even require social media to filter content through efforts such as regulation, narrative, and direct participation. The fields of religious studies and the sociology of religion have long rethought and shifted their orientation from essentialist , functionalist , and structuralist theories to a more subtle and nuanced view that what matters in religion is what is produced by practice, not what is intended by tradition and institutions. (Hoover) The influence of religious authorities through policies and regulations actively lobbying the government or broadcasting regulators to create policies or laws that regulate sensitive content or violate religious norms, such as pornography or violent scenes. Cooperation with digital platforms has also not escaped the attention of religious authorities in removing accounts or content that is religiously extremist and disinformation that damages the image.

The role of religious authorities on social media also positions themselves as primary and exclusive sources of information on religious issues. This is evident in the numerous accounts of religious authorities interacting directly with each other, providing commentary and clarification on fatwas and socio-religious issues. Clarification here . prefer counter narratives against hoaxes, negative issues, or misinterpretations that have boomed on social media. Artists' ability to avoid the harsh blows of new technology in any era and to fend off such violence with full awareness has long existed. (McLuhan, 1962.) Religious authorities have also succeeded in occupying content creators because of their intense direct engagement with audiences and often presenting a moderate, tolerant, and relevant image of religion, allowing them to utilize social media to shape their identity in the "new space" desired in society.

Social Media Shapes Religious Authority.

When religious authority influences social media in contemporary interaction mechanisms, what is interesting here is how social media shapes that authority itself. Social media also cannot escape from shaping, legitimizing, and even creating new

religious authorities. The media sphere, with its diverse commodities, practices, resources, capacities, and facilities, increasingly produces religion, generates new religious meanings and sensibilities, and can become a context that increasingly determines what is considered religion and the possibility of thinking in the context of religion, spirituality, and things that might occupy spaces of life that were previously occupied by religion and spirituality.

This is because social media has a wide reach and social media has standards that are considered relevant, credible, and authoritative in the public eye. The mechanism for social media to label platforms and provide attention is through Gatekeeping (Filtering). For example, TikTok and Instagram automatically confirm the legitimacy of "actors" through public confirmation. Social media algorithms shape these "actors" through public visibility, based on the social media algorithm itself, such as the number of followers , likes , and shares (engagement metrics).

Algorithms also play a role in shaping religious authority, influencing public perception and determining the type of authority they possess, such as moderate clerics, charismatic clerics , or controversial clerics. Social media tends to truncate and simplify messages, so that with this format, "actors" whose messages are easily digested and dramatic will demand personality to gain authority and trust, regardless of the depth of their knowledge . We often encounter social media algorithms through their recommendation systems and automatically create new authority. Influencers or content creators can transform into "religious teachers" for millions or thousands of their followers because they carry their viral algorithms , displacing the position of clerics who have studied in formal institutions for years.

Social media has created a significant role in the social space, where social media serves as a new, competitive "marketplace" for authorities seeking attention and legitimacy, allowing for theoretical analysis. When traditional forms of authority are challenged, these inflationary claims push Islam toward a fundamentalist view of law that is inconsistent with customary regulations and provisions. (Turner B. S., 2008) Traditional forms of authority compete directly within the same feed . These authorities

strive for attention, economy) so that it is measured by Likes , Views , Share (Engagement Metrics) and authorities that are not visually appealing will be ignored.

Social media itself indirectly creates a central focus in discussions of social control and discipline. Digital representations, which create visual commodities, represent the body of religious authority itself. This authority is required to maintain a convincing and aesthetic appearance when constructing a social media profile to build a positive digital image. This is not only about depth of knowledge but also about adapting to the social media era.

Beyond social control and discipline, Turner also discusses scarcity in the context of human needs, including resources, security, and meaning. It can be argued that when looking at the "market" of religious authority on social media, the image is modified, making scarcity transition from knowledge to concern, so that authority controls each individual social media user. When discussing Turner's current social media landscape, religious authority has transformed from a transcendental or fundamental source into a brand in the identity market.

McLuhan himself argued that technology has changed the way people live, as he stated that in the print era, the world felt organized, with information coming from a single source, such as newspapers and magazines. This made people more individualistic and more rational and logical. However, in the current digital era, social media has indirectly created a "Global Village" where information no longer comes from a single source, allowing people to access information from anywhere. (McLuhan, 1962.) Because people in the digital era can all be their own authority and gather online, it's as if they've returned to living in groups like tribes.

McLuhan's "The Medium Is Massage " are abundant , so that the medium is what constructs human action and scale. As we know, religious authority was always fundamental , but with the presence of print media, they stood on the foundation of the printing press itself and followed the flow of institutional hierarchy. However, social media changed the flow of that order again, as McLuhan assumed that technology is not only a means of delivering messages but also creates a new environment that changes the way society views authority. (McLuhan, 1962.)

Democratization and Fragmentation of Authority

  The Sociology of Media and Religion study adheres to the concepts of Democratization and Fragmentation of Authority in an analysis of the two sides of the internet's impact. The intended democratization concerns equal access to religious data sources, which is occurring in the current era. In the classical era, before the advent of social media, religious knowledge was exclusive and only accessible to those educated in institutions, whether schools or religious institutions such as Islamic boarding schools. In the current era, individuals can access unlimited scriptures, texts, interpretations, and fatwas through social media. Social media also provides complete freedom of expression, ultimately providing a platform for individual and marginalized voices to express their opinions on religion without the need for validation from central institutions. Social media also speaks to the concept that people are no longer passive listeners but also have a role in asking questions, criticizing, and even providing their interpretations in the comments section or posts . (Eickelman, 2003)

  Democratization can also be understood in the context of the shift of power from institutions to individuals. In traditional systems, religious authority was established through the construction of a clear scientific lineage and the recognition of universities or religious organizations. This democratization then transformed this former authority into performative legitimacy. It can be interpreted as meaning that anyone with good communication skills, an understanding of how algorithms work, and amassed popularity can be deemed "worthy" to replace the formal structure of diplomas.

  Democratization also liberalizes religious knowledge. Social media, for example, aggregates vast amounts of knowledge that lacks reliable sources, allowing users to easily and competently understand the context of knowledge based on search engines. Rather than seeking knowledge through religious fatwa institutions or religious figures, individuals today largely utilize search engines and even comment sections to gain knowledge. The presence of social media provides a new, egalitarian digital public space that will potentially impact knowledge. (Eickelman, 2003)

  The fragmentation of religious authority in the development of social media has fragmented a single authority into smaller, competing pieces. This fragmentation of

religious authority is indirectly a direct consequence of uncontrolled democratization. It can be described as the collapse of large institutions that monopolize truth, giving rise to numerous figures such as " *Ustadz*" (Islamic scholars). Celebrities whose popularity surpasses traditional authority itself. Today's society is faced with a free market in fatwas. Individuals can choose religious views based on what they like best and what aligns with their personal ideology. Fragmentation has also led to the emergence of small groups with their own authority, often clashing, leading to widespread social fragmentation. (Turner, 2007)

Democratization and fragmentation are not simply a matter of sorting through the fragments into a choice, but can also become a single standard of truth. Indirectly, truth is often won by actors who have greater control over the algorithms within the social media arena itself. Analyses of Turner's and McLuhan's theories both address the duality of authority. In the post-modern era, Truth is a battlefield, a condition where objective facts will lose out to the influence of emotions and personal beliefs. The classical tradition of truth always adheres to the lineage or sanad of religious authority, when the post-modern era truth will cross over into an assumption of one's own ideology or feelings towards religious authority which is not necessarily true.

This era not only presents significant challenges but also changes people's mindsets. They will place more trust in religious authorities that evoke personal emotions than in scientific explanations and objective facts. This challenge makes viral social media content far more moving and acceptable than rigid official fatwas. Social media also has algorithms that, when individuals like selected content, will continuously present similar content. Ultimately, they will assume that their group is the only truth (fragmentation).

Implications of Social Media for the Shifting Culture of Religious Authority.

The broader implications of social media for the culture of religious authority are undergoing a transformation unprecedented in previous eras. Social media has not only provided a new communication tool but also created a new ecosystem and redefined the very nature of religious authority. Religious traditions, which for centuries have been characterized as hierarchical and singular, are now confronted by social media algorithms

that follow their own logic . Social media acts as a "cold medium" that encourages mass participation by exposing the absurdity of truth and returning to tribal patterns of values, identities, and social ties in a digital society.(Turner, 2007)

Society tends to fragment into digital tribes that prioritize group issues over universal truths. Interestingly, Anderson also touched on the implications of social media as an imagined community . Communities . (Anderson, 1983) New religious identities are built not through physical gatherings, for example in places of worship, but through the consumption of visual narratives and symbols spread in the digital world. Users of social media have an impact on the quality of authority itself, according to Eickelman, a phenomenon where religious knowledge becomes open and accessible to anyone without going through formal institutions. This has led to the emergence of "New Religious Authorities" who lack traditional backgrounds and good skills in using social media. This phenomenon is indirectly confirmed by Turner, with the assumption that new media creates a competitive market. (Turner B. S., 2008)

CONCLUSION

Religious authorities are currently undergoing a fundamental shift from traditional hierarchical structures to a democratic yet fragmented digital ecosystem. The rise of social media has transformed the mechanisms of religious legitimacy, where public recognition is no longer based solely on the depth of formal knowledge or institutions, but rather on mastery of algorithms, visual performance, and emotional interaction in the public sphere. Consequently, a "free market for fatwas" and instant preachers have emerged, forcing the boundaries between scientific truth and content popularity.

The purpose of this study is to illustrate how religious authorities adapt to the dualism between maintaining the integrity of sacred teachings and the demands of egalitarian social media logic. This study emphasizes the importance of traditional religious figures possessing digital skills to maintain their relevance in the post-truth era. By understanding these dynamics, religious authorities are expected to remain a credible source of meaning amidst the frenetic flow of information without sacrificing the depth of the substance of religious teachings.

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