# Seizing Public Digital Dominance;
# The Phenomenon of Mainstream Islamic Media Digital Battle

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| Article Info | Abstract |
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| | *The authority of digital public discourse indirectly impacts one's religious point of view, the phenomenon of digital religion has caused mainstream Islamic websites to strive for the dominance of the public digital mass. This paper will examine the phenomenon of competition among mainstream Islamic websites and mainstream non-affiliated websites in seizing public digital dominance. Data Reportal on Digital Indonesia 2023 put Indonesia as the largest internet users in the world, with a population of around 277,7 million with a total active internet user of 212,9 million, internet penetration stood at 77,0 percent. Indonesia also home to 167,0 million social media users equating to 60,4 percent of the total population. Total of 352,8 million cellular mobile connections were active in Indonesia, this figure equivalent to 128,0 percent of the total population. The paper elaborates the prevalent competition between Islamic media using a phenomenological approach based on digital data and a variety of digital analysis tools. This study demonstrates how the intensity of contestation persists and has subsequently created digital communities with divergent religious viewpoints that have subconsciously created social segmentation that strengthens group exclusivism.*<br><br>Keywords: Religion, Digital Da'wah, Identity, Islam Media, Social Religiosity.<br><br> |

## Introduction

Digital technology's rapid advancement has penetrated all spheres of social life, having a profound impact on Indonesia's workplace atmosphere, economics, culture, and sense of identity. With a population predominately made up of younger

generations, Indonesia is presently undergoing a demographic boom period characterized by the quick expansion of the urban middle class. With a population of roughly 265.4 million and 132.7 million active internet users as of the end of January 2018, Hootsuit Indonesia Digital Landscape ranked Indonesia as the fourth-largest Internet user in the world. Around 130 million people are currently active users of social media. The most widely used social media networks include YouTube, Facebook, WhatsApp, Instagram, and Line.

When looking at active internet users in Indonesia by age group, the 18- to 24-year-olds account for about 17% of all users, or about 45 million people. The 25- to 34-year-olds account for about 12% of all users, or about 39 million people, and the 35- to 44-year-olds account for about 15 million people. The information provided at least allows us to draw the conclusion that 33% of Indonesian society's active internet users are between the ages of 18 and 44. Data Reportal on Digital Indonesia 2023 put Indonesia as the largest internet users in the world, with a population of around 277,7 million with a total active internet user of 212,9 million, internet penetration stood at 77,0 percent. Indonesia also home to 167,0 million social media users equating to 60,4 percent of the total population. Total of 352,8 million cellular mobile

connections were active in Indonesia, this figure equivalent to 128,0 percent of the total population.

Based on the facts, it should come as no surprise that if a topic becomes popular among Indonesian internet users, it will become a global trending topic and take over the internet's dominant themes This phenomenon has made Indonesia a potential target for the digital market, especially when combined with the rapid pace of technological development and supported infrastructure. The goal is to make the entire Indonesian territory well-connected digitally to open as many opportunities in all areas as possible.

The Indonesian government, on the other hand, continues to be quite concerned about the issue of the digital divide. But, the rise of several urban villages and the potential diversity of their local resources, which were previously unknown to many people, are a result of how digital connectivity has facilitated their growth. This is only one illustration of the many conveniences that digital technology has made possible and that was before unthinkable. The ability of every internet user to fully benefit from the blessing of digital connectivity, however, is closely related to the speed at which information is developing. Unfortunately, the digital talent gap among Indonesian internet users

continues to be an issue that cannot be understated. This and the subsequent subtheme of the article's focus on digital literacy understanding are closely related.

The crucial question is: Why does the advancement of digital technology raise the issue of the strengthening of social identity sentiment? In a piece titled "Against Identity Politics" that was previously published by Foreign Affairs Magazine, [1] Francis Fukuyama asserts that even though when identity is actually discussed, it becomes clear that no one has a fixed identity and that no one can choose who they were born to, the way that this sense of identity may be utilized to both unite and divide a society. However, one benefit of the development of the digital community is the eradication of racial, ethnic, and other physical distinctions as well as social borders. However, as the use of digital technology contributes to the formation of distinct forms of individual and group identity, the existence of a digital community could also pose a threat to the stability of any physical society's peace and order.

As information is distributed, exchanged, and rotated in a bubble algorithm governed by artificial intelligent technology (AIT), which serves as an echo reflection of one's individual digital interactions and digital track, there is a growing identity sentiment based on the various subcultures within the digital community. As a result, the existing outstanding literature may differ from each community. It causes people to lose their tolerance, especially with those who hold opposing viewpoints, and it also makes it difficult for them to contemplate deeply enough to acknowledge their mistakes and accept critiques. Because everyone is an expert at their keyboard, this state undermines the value of centuries-old knowledge and leads to the death of expertise. [2]

Therefore, in the case of Indonesia, the developing sense of identity is also demonstrated in the battle between various cybermedia for the attention of the online public there. Each community has benefited from connection by being able to create cross-platform communities, social alliances, and social associations. These efforts have allowed them to capture public opinion based on shared sentiment, which has a positive impact on identity sentiment on both a group and individual level. This phenomenon also

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[1]Fukuyama, Fransis, *Againts Identity Politics, The New Tribalism and the Crisis of Democracy,* at https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/americas/2018-08-14/against-identity-politics-tribalism-francis-fukuyama

[2] Nichols Tom, *The Death of Expertise, the Campaign against Established Knowledge and Why it Matters* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2017), 105.

became one of the forces behind the rising religiosity of many Indonesians, especially among the urban Muslim community, and it gave rise to the 'Hijrah' movement and many other well-known words. (Noor, 2015; Rheingold, 1993; Saleh, 2011).

Growing religious digital content is occupying the digital public sphere, where people's passion for learning religion is well facilitated. Through a digital device, one can choose which sites or clerics to learn from, without having to bother going to a cleric or religious leader to study religion in more detail. This is due to the growing Islamic populism along with the massive demand for digital religious resources that are easily accessible and digital friendly. [3]

When the people's strong religious aspirations were unaccompanied by the wisdom of peaceful religion's teachings, this gave rise to a new phenomenon. The shallowness of the discourse gained from Islamic websites that foster exclusivity even tends to foster extreme understanding, rather than encouraging someone to uphold religious ethics more and more, instead traps them in an exclusive religious mindset. However, the willingness of individuals to "study" online, as well as which model sites are frequently accessed, provides a very

significant contribution in the formation of one's religious mindset. Indonesia's high number of internet users certainly provides ample room for Islamic websites to expand in popularity, regardless of what mission these Islamic sites put forward.

*Literature Review*

Obviously, the growing sentiment of religious identity driven by the complexity and the diversity of Islamic sites has helped to build social barriers which often measured on the outward symbols which are associated as a sign of someone's religiosity. The persistence of visible religious symbols that have been continually fulfilling the public domain, has indirectly fostering toward social segmentation of religious diversity, further encouraging the growing religious exclusiveness where at a certain point could drive someone to become radical in his religious expression.

Furthermore, according to Joanna Pliner[4] (Plinner.J 2013) provides several indicators when someone experiences a process of radicalization, from these indicators, Pliner groups in several sub categories as follows: (1) self-identification, (2) dichotomous views of OUR versus THEM about society, (3) social interaction, (4) personality, and (5) association. Of the

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[3] Jurriens, Edwin. (edt), 2017. Digital Indonesia, Connectivity and Divergence. Singapore:ISEAS

[4] Plinner, J., September, 2013. Observable Indicators of Possible Radicalization, Paris: ISCA.

five indicators, there are some striking things that often happen to someone often seen from physical appearance, whether it's from an unusual style of dress, disconnecting from the community that someone has been hanging out with, verbal expressions against the government, expressing despair and dealing with conservative group.

Meanwhile, Islamic sites can be categorized as radical when indicates as follows; often expressing hatred towards other parties, expressing intolerance towards other parties, opposing the legal system / order, containing elements of violence, doctrine of *takfirism* and *thoghutism*, considers tolerance of diversity as a form of deviation. So, this paper aims to look deeper into the popularity of mainstream Islamic organizations' websites among internet users by comparing their popularity with non-affiliated or contemporary Islamic websites and the challenges of mainstream Islamic websites in seizing the popularity of public space.

Research summary on the potential of radicalism / extremism from cyberspace mentioned that various previous research results in Indonesia indicate the rise of violent radicalism in educational institutions (Based on press released by Setara Foundation, 2015; Wahid Institute, 2016; Maarif Institute, 2015), and on social media (Alvara Research Center, 2017). However, Rand Corporation in 2014 confirmed that website-based media played a large role in the process of radicalization and violent extremists. Field evidence confirms that social media increases the chances of people or groups of people becoming radicalized, as the influence of outreach and engagement, through the dissemination of information, communication, and propaganda of extreme beliefs. This research concludes that, of the websites of Islamic organizations that are popular among internet users are the websites of Islamic non-affiliated organizations.[5]

The findings of this study indicate that in general attitude and Millennial youth Muslim behavior can be categorized as moderate, however at the same time the trend of conservatism is also strengthening. Trend of conservatism creates its own challenges for the emergence of attitude and intolerant behavior. But the most dominant marker of Muslim youth today is as it is found in this study was experiencing a phenomenon called with hybridation of identity. What is meant by identity hybridization here is the existence of religious identity because of

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[5] Executive Summary, Hasil Penelitian '*Radikalisme di Website and Media Sosial*, Pusat Studi Budaya dan Perubahan Sosial, Universtas Muhammadiyah Surakarta, September-November 2017.

"Crossing" affiliation and religious orientation based on dynamics and interaction socio-political-religion that they experience with their social environment. This phenomenon of identity hybridization is also interpreted as a form of birth a new identity due to a mixture of culture, traditions, values, and principles held by young Muslims due to the process of intensive interaction between a person and a group of people with the context and traditions that surround them.

Since youth are among those whose very active in digital space, this paper will qualitatively give in depth elaboration on the contestation of mainstream moderate Islamic websites in seizing public digital domain.

## Methodology

This paper will elaborate using a qualitative descriptive technique, focusing on features of the distinctive phenomena of the natural process of the object under investigation rather than just the study's findings. Thus, it will be used as an entry for the inductive analysis process that follows the process of gathering data on the traffic performance of visitors to Islamic websites that are affiliated with mainstream Muslim civil organizations and non-mainstream organizations, as well as free Islamic sites that are not affiliated with any group, based on Similar Web analysis for three months.

This paper's primary materials largely rely on media research, social media analysis, and management interviews from moderate Islamic websites. In addition, this article discusses trending news stories and how various Islamic media organizations react. From there, it is examined how the media's discourse, when combined with high visitor traffic and popularity, may affect Indonesians' religious beliefs.

Deductive inferences are made based on the aforementioned data collection process, along with a thorough analysis of the pattern of how these Islamic websites are gaining popularity in the online public sphere and recommendations for how to keep or improve these websites' rankings so that they can continue to appeal to Indonesian internet users.

## The Phenomena of Digital Religion

In the mid 1990s, when the cyber world began to penetrate in society, the term digital religion has been mentioned by many academics. Terminology of *digital religion* or *cyber religion* is a term used to describe how religion is in touch with Media Information Technology (MIT). How important religion is indicates when the religious spiritual rituals of a particular community have been brought to life in cyberspace. Of course, this radical change in the development of digital technology has had an impact on one's religious culture, as digitally people start find a way so that religion can be felt its existence in digital culture. Thus, not surprising that the term 'digital religion' is used to define the evolutionary process of online religious practices. [6]

The contestation for digital public space in the Indonesian context is not

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[6]Campbell. Heidi. A (edt). *Digital Religion, Understanding Religious Practice in New Media Worlds,* Routledge, 2013, pg 5-17.

without reason. This strengthening of religious identity is because Indonesia is a country with the largest Muslim population in the world, of which almost 87 percent of its citizens are Muslims. Furthermore, ideological contestation, religious-based ideology will be more easily spread efficiently and cheaper with internet technology, all of this is related to the large number of internet users in Indonesia, where more than 51 percent of the total population is a large digital market, both on the ideological markets, political and economic markets. Plus how the majority of internet users are Y-Z generation, namely those in the age range of 17-35 years.[7]

Therefore, what is happening now is digital public contestation and whoever succeeds in dominating digital public space can easily dominate the young generation market. This contest has raised hundreds or even thousands of digital websites, of which only a few hundred have been verified, the rest are still big question marks, from data released by the Ministry of Communication and Information some time ago mentioned that there were approximately 43,000 online news platforms, no more than 100s which was verified by the Indonesian Press Council, while the Indonesian public interest reading survey was in the 60th level of 61 countries surveyed.[8] On the other hand the fast growing internet users apparently unequal with the reading interest if Indonesian people in general. The Central Connecticut State University (CCSU)

reported that Indonesian people has low level reading interest. Indonesia literacy rate put Indonesia at level 60 out of 61 total studied[9] which generally the level of literacy rate in Southeast Asia region reached 98,8%.[10]

This means that the rise of online media is not comparable to the reading interest of Indonesian people in general, so it is not surprising that approximately 63% are not able to distinguish between journalism and hoax information, while 53% are unable to identify whether the news received is news that originated from the media whether it is credible or not. So it is not surprising that there are many websites that do not prioritize media ethics and the accompanying rules, because what matters is how to occupy digital public space and change the way of logical thinking.

On the other hand, the website content is certainly inseparable from the ideological content that is constantly being built to occupy digital public space; therefore, the digital content of website is very likely to represent the ideology carried by the media to meet the interests of various parties. From this, of course, it can be concluded that the mass media can be used as an instrument to influence public opinion, through the creation of various stories and supporting data presented by the media, then transformed into hard news that becomes the focus of the media spotlight. In fact, very often the supporting data to be imaginary fiction from news writers themselves, this

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[7] Hootsuite, *Report of Digital 2019 Indonesia*, January 2019, 15–6

[8] https://www.kominfo.go.id/content/detail/12345/menkominfo-baru-100-portal-berita-online-terverifikasi/0/berita_satker

[9] John W. Miller, *World's Most Literate Nations Ranked* (Central Connecticut State University in New Britain, March 9, 2016), accessed May 10, 2019, webcapp.ccsu.edu/?news=1767&data.

[10] The UNESCO Institute for Statistics, *Literacy Rates Continue to Rise from One Generation to the Next*, September 2017, 11.

way disinformation and face news getting popular. From a press release dated May 1, 2019, Ministry of Information and Communication has identified 486 (Kementrian Komunikasi dan Informatika Republik Indonesia 2019)hoaxes during April 2019, bringing the total hoax since August 2018 to 1,731. [11] Viral news in the cyberspace timeline, indirectly has built truth confidence among digital public audience and considering that every news and information from the digital media as real and truth.

This phenomenon has also later subsequently changed the pattern of religious learning in Indonesian society, which previously religious studies were offline forums in public mosques or prayer rooms (mushalla), now shifted to online studies, so anyone with an internet connection will be able to access religious studies from anywhere and anytime without having to be physically present in the *majlis*. This phenomenon in religious studies shifted into new channel and new form of online interaction, where a person could access religious studies without having physically presented.

Questions about religion can be presented quickly concisely and naturally in the language of the general public in simple way and easily understood. On some websites we can find how various kinds of religious content can be accessed easily, with the help of search engines like Google and so on, this digital search engine will guide searches on Islamic websites based on the richness content and website popularity. Thus from the search engine, it will lead to

the popular Islamic website that will appear on the first page targeted by a search engine for certain keywords.

The content richness of an Islamic website is certainly a challenge for website managers, because the richness of web content cannot be built quickly, but it requires a long process and regular content updates to increase popularity in search engines. Therefore getting popularity of websites is become the goal of any website managers and to compete in increasing traffic for visitors, it it very common for website managers to get caught up on trending issue from social media and mainstream media in general. Very often getting caught up on trending topic deflects the direction of Islamic websites from positive content to content that actually plunges certain websites into utterances of hatred, exclusive, so as to alienate the substance of friendly Islamic teachings. Obviously from this kind of websites and with its popularity will shape the mindset of general public's which further could have an impact on the disruption of social cohesion in a society.

Meanwhile, the weak digital literacy in our society also contributes to the emergence of incredible websites and only relies on the trending issue as an effort to capture the popularity of visitors. Because practically, when we search some theme related to Islam, subsequently will lead us into the most popular website presented in the first row in popular search engine.

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[11] Siaran Pers Kominfo tentang identifikasi hoax selama April-Agustus 2018 https://kominfo.go.id/content/detail/18420/siaran-pers-no-95hmkominfo052019-tentang-kominfo- identifikasi-486-hoaks-selama-april-2019-total-hoaks-sejak-agustus-2018-sebanyak-1731/0/siaran_pers

**Result and Discussion**

This discussion will closely look at the digital traffic performance on three mainstream sites on three Islamic Mainstream moderate websites, namely NU Online, Alif.id and Islami.co, from Similar web data, as well as the traffic performance on 20 of Islamic sites.

Table 1.
Data Similar web April – June 2019[12]
(Similar Web n.d.) and data Media Sosial Populer[13]

| Web site | Monthly Visit | Total Visit | Average Visit Duration | Social Media Followers |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| NU Online | 11,51 M | 34,54 M | 00.01.38 | Facebook : 1,737,197 Twitter : 419,1 K Instagram : 575 K |
| Islami dotco | 5,789 M | 17,36 M | 00.01.24 | Facebook : 39,663 Twitter : 47,1 K Instagram : 20,8 K |
| Alif.id | 769,071 M | 2,307 M | 00.02.25 | Facebook : 8,933 Twitter : 9,370 Instagram : 3,585 |
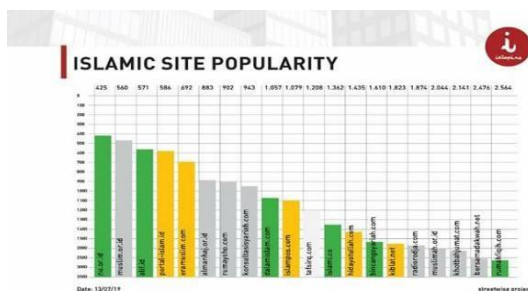


The aforementioned data relates to websites connected to major Islamic groups, however if we examine the popularity of Islamic websites based on 20 websites, we can see some significant notes as follows. Firstly, the competition for online popularity among Islamic websites has had a significant impact on the development of a public digital attitude that is dominated by youth.

Secondly, a website that has succeeded in becoming popular with an average monthly visitorship of more than 11 million users, websites linked with major mass organizations have largely been able to change the popularity of non-affiliated websites. Third, even if affiliate websites have taken over as the most popular Islamic websites, the risk of visitor declines still exists, especially if frequent content updates are not made. Fourth, making the social media staff as effective as possible for every content update as part of the digital campaign. Fifth, the success of the website is also influenced by the selection of contextual content and storyline that is simple for regular people to understand.

A mainstream moderate Islamic website should prevail in the online public sphere for a number of interrelated reasons: First, there is the issue of a lack of digital literacy in our society, making it difficult for the general public to differentiate between information and misinformation. As a result, people often believe whatsoever is currently popular on social media. Second, the majority of ordinary individuals just read the content they find on social media and reluctantly verify it. This occurred because it was unable to distinguish between reliable and unreliable web pages. Third, another significant aspect of our society is the dependence of the general populace on search engines. As a result, what appears on the first page of a search is determined by the

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[12] Similar Web, Data accessed on July 2019

[13] Social Media Audience accessed data on 24th August 2019.

popularity of the website, which is directly related to its consistency in managing regular content updates as well as social media updates. Additionally, the "Hijra" trend, which is becoming increasingly popular among urban Muslim society, has largely moved the culture of religious studies from offline forums to digitally friendly forums. This has consequences for the issue of authority and authenticity, as some well-known religious figures occasionally are not credible enough to qualify as ulama.

Additionally, the unfinished laws governing electronic communication have created an ambiguous space where they can be abused or even manipulated by certain groups. As a result, freedom of speech has turned the internet into a platform for the spread of exclusive ideologies that undermine the true meaning of Islam as a peaceful religion.

According to Islamic Site Popularity, websites affiliated with moderate mainstream Islamic organizations have become trendsetters in dominating the digital public masses, but dominance struggles persist, as only 6 Islamic websites affiliated with Mainstream Islamic organizations dominate the 20 most popular Islamic media, while the rest are dominated by Islamic media that are not affiliated with mainstream Islamic organization media. As a result, this corresponds with how the exclusive religious perspective continues to have a considerable influence on the religious perspective of Indonesia's Islamic digital community.

## Conclusion

The above discussion provides some important discourse in the change of the da'wah approach from conventional approach towards the digitization of da'wah. There are several important points from this discussion, among others:

The potential for increasing digital audiences in Indonesia, the studies of digital culture of religion become important discourse in understanding the inclination towards the passion of Indonesian religious diversity.

The world view of a single truth that has an impact on the rejection of differences is still widely influence by our society, and it is widely spread through digital channels which give so raise into exclusive and closed mindset in certain groups, and it could impact on the potential for social friction, which if left unchecked would certainly easily cause into horizontal conflicts.

The importance to build common interest, to build an inclusive digital public and respects diversity, by strengthening digital da'wa approaches based on religious moderatism by promoting the fraternity of humanity.

Digital literacy must be the main agenda in educating the public, so that the digital gap does not widen because of the inability of the community to identify which media resources are credible and which are not. This then requires joint education about basic knowledge related to the ethics of journalism to the general public, which is expected as preventive effort in preventing the spread of false news, as well as fortifying the public to be careful in spreading or receiving information.

This public digital space contest will continue to exist, especially to strengthen the religious sentiment of Indonesian people who are also interconnected with political interests, and this will always appear in the presidential election cycle as an effort to capture constituents of the political mass.

Then multiply moderate websites that are expected to increase the content of Islamic moderation in meeting the digital public space which requires expansion and cooperation between managers of moderate Islamic websites to cooperate with each other in managing more professional websites.

Ultimately, the writing is undoubtedly far from ideal; additional research is required to clarify this understanding of digital public contestation.

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