Reconceptualising the Elements of Islamic Propagation: Religious Response and Adaptation to New Media

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Abstract: This paper aims to examine the fundamental concepts of *da'wah* in response to new media culture. Using a qualitative research for conceptual design, this study has found that the proliferation of cyber religious proselytizing leads the elements of *da'wah* have become ever-widening concepts. The concept of *da'i,* for instance, has experienced the reconceptualisation that not only refers to person who conveys Islamic teachings through religious sermon (*khutbah*), but also denotes to a creative content provider for *da'wah* purposes in the internet. Additionally, the power of preaching in the new media lies in the quality of message, that is, good, comprehensive and argumentative. Similarly, redefinition of the concepts *ma'du,* feedback, and other *da'wah* elements occur as response to digital media culture.

Keywords: Reconceptualisation, digital *da'wah*, cyber culture, elements of *da'wah*.

Abstrak: Artikel ini mengkaji konsep-konsep dasar dakwah sebagai respon atas maraknya dakwah berbasis siber sekaligus sebagai bentuk adaptasi pada budaya "media baru". Dengan menggunakan penelitian kualitatif untuk desain konseptual, studi ini menemukan bahwa praktik dakwah berbasis media *online* telah mendorong terjadinya perluasan makna unsur-unsur dakwah. Misalnya, konsep *da'i*, mengalami rekonseptualisasi, yang tidak sekedar merujuk pada penceramah, namun juga merujuk pada penyedia konten kreatif dakwah di internet. Selain itu, pesan dakwah juga bersandar pada kekuatan nilai pesan yakni, pesan yang baik, komprehensif, dan argumentatif. Redefinisi konsep *ma'du*, umpan balik, dan elemen dakwah juga terjadi sebagai respon terhadap budaya media digital.

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Introduction

The discourse on the meeting of religion and media is increasingly being found its relevance to the development of new media (Heidi A. Campbell, 2010). This is because new media presents a different form compared to old media in the sense that the new media opens up space for people to express themself. Currently, this freedom touches the space of religious proselytising (*da'wah*). Indeed, many Islamic preachers are very active in using new media platforms as *da'wah* medium to reach a wider audience (Kerstin Radde-Antweiler, 2008).

However, the nature of new media that offers freedom and openness is considered creating new problem with regard to preserving the absolute Islamic values (Abdul Karim Zaedan, 2002, p.3) as Islam as a divine religion has certain tradition that regards the chain of narrations (*sanad*) is very essential. Some experts of *da'wah* study such as al-Bayanuni (1996), Abdul Karim Zaedan (2000), and Yusuf al-Qaradhawi (1995) locate the Islamic morality as the first discussion in their books. They refer to the verses of the Qur'an which always associate the word "da'wah" with goodness, the way of Allah, or the religion of Allah. In this regard, the Islamic moral values contradict to virtual reality which emphasizes freedom and openness. Talking about *da'wah* and virtual space, Hamid Mowlana (2007) asserted that there are five principles of Islamic communication, namely *al-tawhid, amar makruf, nahyi munkar, ummah,* and *amanah*. These five principles explicitly describe the very high morals of Islam. To him, any activity carried out in the media must refer to these values in order to differentiate with other activities that not refer to Islamic values.

Correspondingly, the presence of new media causes a new face in the world of Islamic preaching, that is, the elements involved in the Islamic propagation have to deal with this new reality. The openness and freedom that are offered by new media have generated the audience of *da'wah (mad'u)* is more active than the preachers *(da'i).* The sender of *da'wah* message only acts as a lighter; meanwhile the messages become endless public discourse. In this regard, Fazlur Rahman (2011) has called this contemporary situation as the death of

the preachers *(matinya sang da'i)*. Accordingly, seems that the elements of *da'wah* related issues need to be reconceptualised and revised.

This study attempted to describe how the reconceptualisation of the elements of *da'wah* should be conducted in order to fit with religious preaching in new media landscape. In other words, this paper examines the science of *da'wah (ulum al-da'wah)* which is expected to produce a new formulation of Islamic *da'wah* in the midst of digital era.

Previous Studies on Media and Religion

Studies on media and religion have been carried out by many previous researchers. Stewart Hoover (2006) in "*Religion in the Media Age*" sees that the media has become a form of modernization of religion even though it is also full of political and economic interests. He examined the contact between Christianity and the media. This is in line with the study of Brenda E. Brasher (2001) who specifically wrote a book entitled "*Give Me That Online Religion.*" He concluded that online religion is an important phenomenon. By examining one million religious websites containing religious information, he argued that online religion can be a feature of religious humanism that will always remain relevant to future generations. Meanwhile, in "*Believing in the Net,*" K. Parna (2010) examined implicit religion through technology. He argued that today's media technology has a religious meaning, is religiously oriented. This means religion and media technology cannot be contradicted.

Concerning the implementation of religion online, Lerne L. Dawson and Doglas E. Cowan (2004) wrote a book entitled "*Religion Online: Finding Faith on the Net.*" He saw that religions can be found online. He distinguished between online religion and religion online. The first refers to online religious practice activities, while the second refers to religious services such as religious information displayed by religious congregations through media. Heidi A. Campbell (2010) in "*When Religion meets New Media*" sees a comparison between the three religions of Islam, Judaism, and Christianity in interacting with new media. He concluded that each religion has its online community and

tries to translate their religious texts into new media, and generally their interpretation refers to the religious leaders they refer to. This issue is also explained by Christopher Helland (2015) in the article "Virtual Religion: A Case Study of Virtual Tibet" which concluded that online religious activities have an impact on the community, authority, and religious identity.

Besides, Cheong (2012) in *Religion 2.0? Relational and Hybridizing Pathways in Religion, Social Media and Culture* observes that the thematic review of studies of religious authority and communication technology shows how early studies of internet research tended to reflect dislocation and support a "disconnect logic", in which digital media is understood in principle to interfere with religious authority which is becoming challenges to the strength of traditional institutions and leaders in controlling and interpreting religious symbols. In the different article, Cheong (2017) sees that the relationship between media and religion is not only important, but also vital. For him, mediated communication creates and reproduces spiritual reality and collectivity, and coordinates religious authority. In this way, new mediation based on old communication practices serves as a source of life for the evolving nature of religious authority and forms of spiritual organization. He suggested further studies to identify various practices of online religious communication so that it would produce a richer understanding of digital religion, especially as a phenomenon that has spread globally.

Recently Baraybar-Fernández, A., Martín, and Rubira-García (2020) in "Religion and Social Media: Communication Strategies by the Spanish Episcopal Conference" studied the communication strategy implemented in the Spanish Episcopal Conference, namely the Conferencia Episcopal Española (CEE), which was carried out through social media. Their conclusion is that the Catholic community is very enthusiastic about using social media to show their commitment to the Church. Through social media they form a common space to share and celebrate their vision of the world.

The previous studies described above illustrate how various religious information and experiences are broadcasted through new

media. Little is known about the discussion of *da'wah* activities within new media culture, particularly about *da'wah* elements are contested in the virtual media space.

New Media and the Presence of Cyber *Da'wah*

The new media is marked by the advancement of the Internet which is likely to change society (Mark Poster, 1995). It also quickly decreases the popularity of TV and radio broadcasting, and therefore, regulation of the form of digital media was the only remaining policy challenge (Steemers, 2001). The virtual world provides a fake meeting place expanding the social world, creating new knowledge opportunities, and providing a place to share views widely (Soukup, 2006, pp. 421-440). This is in line with Pierre Levy (1997) who views the worldwide web is an open, flexible, and dynamic information environment allowing people to develop new knowledge orientations, and also engage in a democratic world with more interactive and community-based sharing and empowerment. Some more information regarding new media can be found from the work of Howard Rheingold (1995); Nicolas Negroponte (1995); Sherry Turkle (1995); Nicola Green and Leslie Haddon (2009); Natalia Fenton (2010); or most recently from Anna Everett and John T. Caldwell (2013).

The cyber media has characteristics distinguishing it from the traditional media. Mahmoud and Auter (2009) designed an online communication model called the computer-based communication (CMC) Interactivity Model. Four important elements in CMC interactions, namely (1) users act as senders and receivers, (2) medium, namely the need for the existence of media or channels to facilitate the interaction process amongst users; (3) messages in the form of exchange of messages between users through the media used; (4) communication settings, namely flexible communication environment and time according to the wishes of the participants, considering that online communication is real-time.

The character of new media that opens up space for freedom is touching media morality. Branston and Stafford (2010, p. 244) see new media messages tend to be unarticulated. The new media is not

like the old media that is easier to control. David Holmes (2005) characterizes new media with the power of interactivity providing space for freedom for individuals. One of the new media that is most familiar with society today is social media. Today's social media platforms have become relevant communication channels with interactive participation. It allow for what Manuel Castells (2009,p. 25) calls "mass self-communication" more than a decade ago, which increases the autonomy of the subject by converting it to sender and receive messages. As it is understood that through social media prioritizing interactivity, people are free to express, share and or comment on messages, not infrequently even social media is used to spread hoaxes and hate speech. Branston and Stafford (2012,p 244) write,

> "… the sense of public and private is being eroded, with Facebook and other sites allowing verbal abuse, bullying and stupid comments in a way that is not permitted on a property 'public place. There is also concern about the global spread of discourse on pornography."

Social media platforms are technological tools that provide an open space for social interaction in the form of an exchange of ideas, information and knowledge between people and organizations, and institutions and their audiences. Social media is a vehicle for social and cultural transformation because of its ability to produce something collectively or individually (Valentini 2015, p. 172; Gershon 2016, pp. 196-97).

From the above discourses, it can be stated that new media is an open, flexible and free space. Interaction between communication actors is the most likely thing to happen in cyberspace. Specifically, new media allows negative actions that are difficult to control. The media negativism cannot be separated from the nature of the new media which does offer freedom to every individual. It is because the control of the media by each individual gives birth to new capitalists in the realm of cyberspace. Every person with his abilities becomes uncontrolled in capitalizing any information circulating in the world for his benefit.

With regard to, the meeting of the new media with the Islamic preaching *(da'wah)* has a complex impact, especially with regard to Islamic morals. Drawing on some experts' of cyber media studies, this paper seeks to evaluate some conceptual framework of *da'wah* in the cyber space. The concept of digital online proposed by Campbell and Vitullo (2017) strongly supports the idea of virtual *da'wah* or new media preaching. According to Campbell and Vitullo, "digital religion" is a concept that analyzes the way online religious phenomena are articulated and constructed in different cultures. The concept of digital religion is very relevant to virtual *da'wah*. For instance, the initial experience of the emergence of digital platforms that facilitate the voice and leadership of Muslim women that was previously silenced (Gray, 2019).

Campbell's conception (2010, 2017) about preaching in the media is also useful to explain how *da'wah* in new media can be carried out. According to him, there are three aspects to study religious online, namely community, religious authority, and media texts. Users in new media will do something related to religion either as senders or receivers based on the community and religious authority they refer to. When referring to the character of new media, those who are involved in the *da'wah* process are users who are free and open to express their religious opinions and thoughts. Campbell (2010) explains that online religion occurs due to the expressions of users who have different community backgrounds.

This concept naturally changes the orientation of the preaching that has been developing so far which only focuses on conventional form. This traditional understanding can be found from Arabic *da'wah* books, such as the works of Bayanuni (1996), Abdul Karim Zaedan (2000), al-Qaradhawi (1992), Ahmad Ghulusy (1987: 9), and Muhammad Yasri (2003), which see *da'wah* as work or speech to influence humans to follow Islam, or Sayyid Quthub (tt: 187) who only orientates *da'wah* as an effort of believers to realize the Islamic system (teachings) in the reality of life or the efforts of believers to strengthen God's system in human life, both in the level of the

individual *(fardiyyah)*, family *(usrah)*, society *(mujtama')* and the ummah *(ummah)*.

This paper is a qualitative research for conceptual design attempted to evaluate conceptual model concerning the elements of *da'wah* in the midst of the emerging trend of cyber based-*da'wah*. The data was collected through documents, namely the examination of primary literatures of the science of *da'wah*, namely the book written by Abdul Karim Zaedan, *Ushul Da'wah* (2002) and al-Bayanuni, *al-Madkhal Ila Ilm al-Da'wah* (1996) in relation to cyber based-*da'wah* characterized by openness and freedom. These two books were chosen as they have been regarded as authoritative references for the science of *da'wah*.

In this regard, there are several steps conducted in analyzing data as follows: first step is reading the books of Abdul Karim Zaedan and al-Bayanuni to capture their conceptions of *da'wah* elements, especially with regard to *da'i, mawdhu, wasilah, mad'u*, and *athar*. Second step is compiling the main points emphasized in the two primary books. Then the final stage was analysing a virtual space analysis regarding the elements of *da'wah*. Subsequently, the analyzed data though reading the primarily literature is discussed with the notion of openness and freedom which are the main characteristics of new media in order to gain a new model of *da'wah* elements.

Redefinition of the *Da'wah* Elements
Reconceptualising Da'i

In the context of the virtual world, religious preachers are no longer held by established Muslim scholars who are considered having substantial and technical competencies of *da'wah*, but it can be done by those who are able to control the media (Campbell, 2010). In the online landscape, the sacredness of religious preachers is also no longer become

main consideration for religious authority. The emergence of new preachers who do not have substantial competence in the field of Islamic teachings might become one of the characteristics of religious preaching in new media environment.

This condition is relevant to what Allah Swt., says is the Qur'an (QS. Al-Nahl: 125) that allows everyone to invite to the path of Allah with wisdom and fair exhortation In this sense, calling unto the right part of Allah Swt is not burdened on certain people but to every Muslim. Inviting to goodness is not only done with verbal *tabligh* but also through goodly model (*uswatun hasanah)* (Zaedan, 2002; Sohirin, 2008). However, some *da'wah* study experts require *da'i* to have both substantive and methodological competencies through which the messages of *da'wah* can be received effectively (Aziz, 2019). Nevertheless, new media has shifted the definition of the *da'i* . In this case, the preacher plays the role of facilitator and the lighter of public discourse only. Its messages are no longer the only thing determining changes in public life. Many preachers appear in passive preachers in the form of audio and video records, creative designs, caricatures, and graphic info, which are uploaded in an online media wherein people *(mad'u)* can access it directly by themselves (Gary R. Bunt, 2004, p. 124). In this regard, hat is the meaning of preaching in *al-hikmah* ways in. Creating creative *da'wah* content in online media is considered as part of wisdom values in preaching approach that is associated with Q.S. al-Nahl: 125. In short, the preacher is not only person who convey Islamic teachings through religious sermon *(khutbah)*, but also a creative content provider for *da'wah* purposes in the internet.

Defining the Message of Da'wah in Digital Space

Da'wah material is an important aspect that must be considered in the realm of new media. Referring to Campbell (2010), the material for preaching which later became known as "media texts" came from the influence of the community and religious authorities behind the media users who were preachers. *Da'wah* messages in the new world are different from those in the old media. In the old media, *da'wah* messages still dominate public discourse and even become a place

where the public must refer to. But in the new media, religious messages have turned into ordinary communication messages that can be transferred, and interpreted from all kinds of points of view. To some extent, religions in cyberspace can be material that is open to dialogue by other religions (Brasher, 2001, p. 6).

In the context of new media, *da'wah* messages are no longer in the form of monotonous oral *da'wah* messages, but they can be published and translated into creative content, images, audio, video, memes, posters, graphic info, and others. But the problem is the *da'wah* messages rarely directly refer to primary sources extracted from the *al-Qur'an* and *al-Sunnah.* Mostly it comes from second and even third sources. In this case, content creators only rely on their creative ideas, but they do not have an adequate scientific base concerning the material they create.

Correspondingly, *da'wah* message has turned into a communication message that is the preacher is no longer able to totally control it. In this regard, according to Qaradhawi (1995) when the preacher cannot control the *da'wah*, so the power of preaching lies in good, comprehensive, and argumentative messages. Fortunately, many Islamic scholars (*ustadz)* such as Abdul Somad, Adi Hidayat, Gus Bahauddin, and Khalid Basalamah mostly provide strong and scientific arguments while preaching. In short, the scientific *da'wah* material determines the success of preaching in today's virtual world.

Da'wah Channels

As previously explained, in the literatures of *da'wah* science, channels are rarely discussed. *Da'wah* channel is very important in the Islamic propagation. Channels are specifically referred to "media." Media is further defined not only as an intermediary of Islamic messages, but it is also about the culture of a society. In the case of new media, Campbell (2010) sees two important objects, namely the technical aspects of new media and the non-technical aspects in the form of interactive space provided by new media which forms a new culture of communication. Therefore, Hoover (2006, p. 84) sees that media shape life and religious identities. Media describes a civilization

and the future of religion as well (Brasher, 2001). Today, the value wars also take place in the media. In the context of values and culture, new media as *da'wah* channel changes the way of people learn Islam.

Lately, preachers who use new media channels as media usually tend to be liked by the general public. The existence of this channel is in line with the spirit of Islam as a religion of *rahmatan lil alamin*. Media made the *da'wah* of Islam able to cross space and time without limitations. Pennington and Hilary E. Kahn (2018) view the voice of Muslims through the media has the aim that all sides of Islam and the lives of Muslims can be openly accessed by the public world to counteract negative perceptions about Islam.

In Indonesian context, YouTube channels and social media for *da'wah* have developed by Muslim preachers and certain *da'wah* organizations. Unfortunately, such new media channels have not been optimized as an open space for the publication of traditions, culture, and Muslims' life experience, but are only for religious sermons medium.

Recipient of Da'wah Message (Mad'u)

Recipients of *da'wah* messages *(mad'u)* in the context of new media are called active recipients. In the position of *mad'u* as media users, the influence of the community greatly affects acceptance (Campbell, 2010). The recipients of *da'wah* in new media can be categorized into two parts, namely 1) those who receive *da'wah* because of spiritual needs; and 2) those make *da'wah* messages as material discourse.

Recipients of *da'wah* messages in new media are netizens or virtual communities. The virtual room providing space for freedom and high interactivity is allowing the recipient to provide a direct feedback to the sender of the message. Message recipients are no longer dominated by messages. They can even reject messages conveyed to them.

The criteria for receiving the online messages can be explained by the concept of active reception. The concept was emphasized by Lee Thayer (1968) and Ravault (1980). For them, recipients are no longer

victims but actively provide meaning, according to their preferences, interests, goals, and cultural background. According to Bakti (2013), democratic societies cannot stand upright if they are shackled by a top-down communication system that does not respect the individual potential of society. Therefore, several other writers such as Lewis (2001), Jenkins (2000), Berker and Brooks (1998), and Hills (2002) see that the activeness of fans and viewers of media has deviated far from the meaning desired by the maker of meaning. This is in line with Branston and Stafford who view (2010: 154) that a person identifies himself as an active reader, an audience who is free to control the television remote, rather than simply being a passive reader who is only a victim of deception and brainwashing by the media. The dominance of the preacher over the recipient has been lost in this approach.

The Effects of Da'wah

The changes in Islam are not determined by others, but by oneself. In Islam, the concept of change is known as *al-taghyir*. This concept can be seen from QS al-Ra'd: 11 and *QS al-Anfal*: 53. These two verses show that people have the potential to change as long as they want to optimize the potential that is within themself.

The change is center on the individual. The activeness of the recipient in interpreting a message will determine a change. Bakti (2004, p.72) attempted to associate this concept and argued that communication occurs when there is something both inside and outside allowing someone to give meaning. This means that change is no longer determined by the preachers. Once a person receives a da'wah message, he alone determines whether the message can change him or not. In Islam itself, several verses such as *QS. al-A'la*, 9-10, *QS. al-Ghasyiyah,* 21-23 show that people will change themselves according to the message of *da'wah* if they are driven by *khashyah* (fear) of Allah. The offered freedoms by new media provide open space for everyone to assess and negotiate with every message that appears.

The *da'wah* effect then developed into something different from the previous tradition. If previously the effect of da'wah was a change

in the mind, attitude, and behavior of the recipient of the *da'wah*, then the effect of *da'wah* in the virtual space context is the formation of a new discussion space to study the message conveyed by the preacher, which then after a long filtering and negotiation process carried out by the recipient himself, then changes behavior ensues. So a change in attitude occurs in a graded process, in which da'wah messages coming from the preacher, then captured by the recipient and then he can choose to reject and accept it.

Feedback of Da'wah: Voice of Ma'du and Da'i Authority

Feedback is an element of *da'wah* that is missing from all the primary *da'wah* books mentioned above. New media opens up space for feedback from recipients. Feedback is related to the desire of the recipient of *da'wah* message to explore, clarify, criticize, or even reject the message conveyed by the preacher. Feedback related to *mad'u* authority. *Mad'u's* authority comes from the ability to see messages as something that is not in line with the trend, or because it already has other, more authoritative references (Campbell, 2010; Cheong: 2016). From here, *da'i* loses the power of authority to force or herd *mad'u* according to what he wants (Rahman, 2011). The desire to voice or voice something like Gray's (2019) conclusion is characteristic of this feedback.

The feedback element is admittedly seen as an element that is somewhat opposite to the orientation of the preaching elements that exist so far, especially with regard to religious authority (Christopher Helland, 2015). But the development of this element is important for several reasons as follows:

1. Feedback will test the resilience of a *da'wah* activity and return the preaching to its pure orientation. Whether the *da'wah* activity is carried out with certain interests or solely because of Allah is a question that can be answered through feedback. Islamic preachers who act for Allah will certainly never stop to deliver messages even though they are challenged or rejected.

2. Feedback is a vehicle for testing the preaching material delivered. *Da'wah* material prepared carefully will always be argumentative to

the feedback from the recipient of the da'wah. These days, the appearance of impromptu preachers is a very serious *da'wah* problem. People easily convey and forward to others every article spread on the internet or in WhatsApp groups they read. Feedback requires that da'wah material be prepared scientifically and argumentatively.

3. Feedback builds literacy and society criticism as *mad'u*. *Da'wah* that opens up feedback from the recipient will automatically strengthen the religious literacy of the society. People who have strong religious literacy will not be easily swallowed up by hoaxes and join the disseminated religious information.

4. Feedback produces an ideal *da'wah* building in which *da'wah* is carried out contextually with the reality happening in society. Contextual *da'wah* can be built from the feedback given by society, because feedback usually departs from the awkwardness experienced by society itself.

Thus, the *da'wah* authority in the virtual space cannot be said to have shifted religious authority (Cheong, 2012), but instead develops a new model of authority, which tends to be multi-pronged with conditions, 1) *da'wah* or the implementation of *da'wah* must be accounted for; 2) contextual with the tendency of society. These two things can be easily proven, how a person who is not responsible for what he says will automatically be left behind by the congregation of preaching. Accountability relates to the consistency of the preacher's attitude with everything he delivers, and the most important thing is scientific accountability of the *da'wah* message. Likewise with contextual preaching, a person who does not preach contextually in accordance with the reality happening in society will not attract people's attention. Preachers who are able to have these two things can be said to be authoritative.

Conclusion

The presence of internet has tremendous effects to social and religious lives, including *da'wah* activities. The existance of digital

media as medium for daily communication and information encourages religious propagation activists to adapt this emerging trend of life. Many Islamic organisations and individual of *da'wah* activists have creates *da'wah* sites through several social media platforms in response to the emergence of new media.

Corespondingly, *da'wah* movement has experienced cultural adaption and changes in relation to cyber culture in the sense that the way people communicate and convey the message, the way people learn Islamic teachings, and the various media they use are different from its traditional counterparts. Thus, this current situation seems requires reconceptualisastion and reformulation of several elements of *da'wah* that suit to the character of the new media.

Based on analysis data above, the proliferation of cyber based-*da'wah* leads the elements of *da'wah* such as *da'i, mad'u, message, feedback*, and effect of *da'wah* have become ever-widening concepts. In this regard, the preacher is not only person who convey Islamic teachings through religious sermon (*khutbah*), but also a creative content provider for *da'wah* purposes in the internet. Additionally, the power of preaching in the new media lies in good, comprehensive, and argumentative messages. Similarly, redefinition of the concepts *ma'du, feedback*, and other *da'wah* elements occur as response to digital media.

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