



## From Feeling Threatened to Conservative Turn: Challenges toward Promoting Moderate Islam through New Media

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**Abstract :** *This research tries to capture the challenges faced by IBTimes.ID, a new media platform. IBTimes.ID was chosen as a research object because it represents a new media platform that has a non-structural affiliation with Muhammadiyah, the largest modernist Islamic organization in Indonesia that has a da'wah mission. To limit the scope of the research, the author only focuses on the issue of peace between Sunni and Shia which is campaigned by IBTimes.. This type of research is qualitative research using a virtual ethnographic research methodology. Research data will be collected from two sources: (1) content produced by IBTimes.ID, (2) data taken from virtual observations. The data that has been collected is then validated again through triangulation techniques. Author uses the feeling threatened theory popularized by Mujiburrahman as an analytical knife to understand the causes of challenges to the virtual campaign carried by IBTimes.ID. This research concludes that the challenges faced by IBTimes.ID in virtual space are caused by the audience's fear when they see the Sunni-Shia peace campaign by IBTimes.ID which is considered to be able to erode the level of faith and piety. This fear is then expressed in the form of conservative turn, hatred, and insults.*

**Keywords:** Conservative Turn; Feeling Threatened; IBTimes.ID; New Media

### INTRODUCTION

The fall of Suharto's New Order regime in 1998 really marked a change in the face of Islam in Indonesia. In the 1970s to 1980s, Indonesian Islam was known as "Islam with a Smiling Face" which meant that Islam in Indonesia was friendly and tolerant. After the fall of the New Order, the face of Islam in Indonesia was increasingly "gloomy" reflecting a rigid,

conservative, and intolerant understanding of Islam. There is an opinion that the face of moderate Islam can only survive under the authoritarian and violent New Order government with Islamic fundamentalist groups. And when the New Order fell, the real face of Islam was only just showing its true form (Bruinessan, 2013).

The emergence of the trend of conservatism and Islamic fundamentalism in Indonesia is termed by Martin van Bruinessan in 2013 as the

“Conservative Turn”. Gradually, this kind of model of Islamic understanding dimmed the domination of moderate Islamicism that had existed for a long time before the fall of the New Order regime.

This impact was felt directly by the two large organizations which since their inception before Indonesian independence until now, have focused on cultivating the idea of moderate, friendly, and tolerant Islam; Nahdlatul Ulama and Muhammadiyah. For example, in Muhammadiyah, during the 2005 Muktamar, Muhammadiyah leaders who were considered "liberal" were expelled from the Muhammadiyah Central Leadership structure (Bruinessan, 2013).

Apart from already undermining Islamic organizations which have a large mass base, Islamic fundamentalists and conservatives are increasingly raising their voices when everyone is familiar with the use of digital media which has become a new forum for contesting discourse and gathering as much mass as possible.

This was all proven when Islamic fundamentalists succeeded in rallying large numbers of people in a demonstration, demanding that the Indonesian government imprison Basuki Tjahaya Purnama (Ahok), Governor of Jakarta 2014-2017, on charges of blasphemy against the Koran (Akmaliah,

2020). Nahdlatul Ulama and Muhammadiyah have officially advised their citizens not to participate in this agenda. Even so, there were still many members from Muhammadiyah and Nahdlatul Ulama who took part in the demonstration to prosecute Ahok (Ahmad Najib Burhani, 2018).

Seeing the fact that the success of gathering a mass of prosecutors for Ahok was driven by a large number of fundamentalist Muslim groups who only capitalized on appeals through digital media, Nahdlatul Ulama and Muhammadiyah began to realize themselves. The Islamic moderation campaign through social media has begun to be promoted to stem the notion of religious conservatism. The initiative to campaign for moderate Islam through digital media can be said to be the effect of a feeling of being threatened by the presence of a certain understanding that can have an impact (Mujiburrahman, 2006a).

If that is the case, then it is not an exaggeration. Because the media has become a place for new discourse contestation. New media provides a broad platform for expression and collaboration among media users. In fact, one's participation through new media that is accessed digitally, can be transformed into real actions in real life (Merlyna Lim, 2015). As has been exemplified earlier, namely the successful mobilization of Muslims to imprison Ahok because he is considered to have insulted Qur'an.

Seeing this fact, in order to stem the maneuvers of conservative Muslims in launching their da'wah in cyberspace, moderate Muslims are also trying to provide "resistance" by spreading moderate Islamic ideas in the digital

space. From the Nahdlatul Ulama circle, their young people created several websites such as *Islami.co*, *Alif.Id*, *Bincang Syariah*, and *NU Online* to make their mission successful (Akmaliah, 2022).

In the early days of pioneering, they had to fight with all their might to keep up with Islamic discourses which at that time were controlled by conservative Islamic websites. The existence of a shift in religious authority due to the massive conservative turn accompanied by advances in digital and information technology has become one of the obstacles faced by young Nahdlatul Ulama members in promoting the idea of moderate Islam.

Likewise, Muhammadiyah is doing the same thing in stemming the flow of religious conservatism in the digital space. Muhammadiyah also experiences obstacles in promoting moderate Islamic ideas through digital space. One of Muhammadiyah's affiliated websites that encounters these challenges and obstacles is IBTimes.ID, an online media portal that focuses on campaigning for the idea of moderate Islam.

Efforts to campaign for the idea of moderate Islam, in the Indonesian context, have always encountered challenges and obstacles. For example, in the field of education, the challenge to spread moderate Islamic understanding lies in the curriculum and teachers. In several Islamic schools, there is a

heated debate or discussion when determining the Islamic curriculum model to be taught, whether to follow a conservative Islamic style or offer a moderate understanding. It doesn't stop there, even though the curriculum has been made in such a way, if the teacher who teaches certain subjects comes from a different background, the results that are issued are also automatically different (Zuhdi, 2018).

Knowing that Indonesia is experiencing a conservative turn and there will be many challenges to be faced when spreading the idea of religious moderation through new media, the author wants to examine the challenges faced by IBTimes.ID, an online media affiliated with Muhammadiyah, when spreading its religious moderation content. The researcher wants to focus on the object of research on IBTimes.ID's efforts to moderate and reconcile conflicts and tensions between Sunnis and Shia in Indonesia. This research seeks to answer questions about: (1) What obstacles did IBTimes.ID experience when conducting a moderate Islam campaign? (2) How can feeling threatened that led to conservative turn become the big challenges for campaign of religious moderation by IBTimes.ID?

The author here wants to prove that the feeling threatened that led to conservative turn, apart from being visible in real life, can also be found in cyberspace and can influence the promotion of the idea of religious moderation.

Previous research on IBTimes.ID has been carried out by several researchers. For example, research that focuses on discussing how IBTimes.ID promotes the idea of Islamic moderation

in the digital space as was done by (Aprilyawati, 2022; Satriyo, 2022; Zun Uswatun Hasanah, 2022).

Related research on IBTimes.ID was also carried out, this time emphasizing more on aspects of editorial kitchen management and strategies for managing websites and social media as carried out by (Gita Filosa Rukmono, 2019). However, research that focuses on discussing the challenges faced by IBTimes.ID in spreading the idea of moderation in the digital space, especially those related to certain specific issues, is still not found. In this research, the researcher will complete that empty space.

## RESEARCH METHODS

Looking at some of the challenges and obstacles encountered when spreading the idea of moderate Islam, this research would like to focus its discussion on the challenges faced by the IBTimes.ID website in promoting moderate Islam. This study uses *the feeling threatened* theoretical framework initiated by Mujiburrahman (Mujiburrahman, 2006b).

This theory arose when Indonesian Muslims during President Soeharto's leadership had fear and suspicion of the christianization agenda carried out by Christians and were suspected of receiving support from the government. *The feeling threatened* theoretical framework in this study is used to analyze

netizens' sentiment & hatred directed at IBTimes.ID content on social media platforms.

This research is categorized as qualitative research which means for exploring and understanding the meaning of individuals or groups ascribe to a social procedure; collecting data in the participants setting; analyzing the data inductively, building from particulars to general themes; and making interpretations of the meaning data.

The final written report has a flexible writing structure. Qualitative researches are divided into five types; phenomenological research, grounded theory, ethnography, case study, and narrative research.<sup>1</sup> This research uses one of ethnography research types; *virtual ethnography*.

The virtual ethnographic research is a method used as an effort to investigate the use of the internet which has meaning for the social life of the community. At this level, interactive media is understood as both culture itself and a cultural artefact (Prajarto, 2018). IBTimes.ID is here positioned as *new media*, which according to Eickelman<sup>1</sup>, is a new forum for contesting discourse in cyberspace that allows someone to erode and shift established authorities, including religious authority.

Doing ethnography on the internet involves a willingness to learn how-to live-in cyberspace and how to account for activities there over time. This was done to show that identifying patterns of behavior is an important feature of an ethnography, and patterns of life and social relations must be

learned through gradual, prolonged direct contact with members of a social group (Rheingold, 2000a, 2000b). Researchers will follow these three stages in this virtual ethnographic research:

***Choosing and entering virtual communities.***

To identify the behavior of a virtual community as an object of research, author must choose and enter an established & well-organized virtual community. Generally, there is a gatekeeper role as a barrier, like virtual community admin, group moderator, or community enforcer.

Author here chooses three virtual communities that will be used as research objects, including 2 Facebook groups (Warga Muhamadiyah & Islam Berkemajuan; Ar-Ruju' ila Al-Qur'an wa Sunnah) & 1 Instagram account (@ibtimes.id)

***Conducting Negotiation to enter virtual communities.***

After making observations in community selection, researchers can enter the community by obtaining permission from the admin of the community.

***Making contact and beginning observation.***

Virtual ethnographer (author) should implement participant observation where author/researcher is required to gain first-hand experience in

online culture. Participant observation is a key feature of research in networked, electronic and Internet societies (Horn, 1998; Rheingold, 2000a; Turkle, 2011). Author/researcher will observe, analyze, and record all activities that occur in the two Facebook groups and the Instagram account @ibtimes.id to gain a thorough understanding of the behavior being studied.

The data collection technique used by author has two types; *first*, data that comes from content produced by IBTimes.ID in the form of articles and infographics. *Second*, data obtained from observational data in virtual communities. Meanwhile, in analyzing the data, the author uses 4 stages: *first*, analyzing the media space. The author positions himself as an observer. The author describes from a technological point of view how medium devices on the internet apply and the rules on social media.

*Second*, document analysis. Author sees content as a text and the meaning contained in it is produced and disseminated via the internet. The text does not only represent the opinions of users on the internet but also shows ideology, social background, political views, and cultural uniqueness, to represent the identity of the community. The text also proves the context, situation, or exchange of values in the community.

*Third*, the analysis of media objects. Author looks at the activities and interactions of users and between users. Research data comes from text and context on social media. Author focuses on responses from texts posted on social media in the form of views,

likes, comments, and even subscriptions. *Fourth*, experience analysis. Author can connect the reality that occurs in the virtual world with the reality that exists in the real world. According to Hine (2015) what happens on the internet is not much different from what happens in the real world of everyday life, such as depicting time, place, and people's behavior by transforming on the internet (Nasrullah, 2107).

After data analysis, data triangulation (data validity) is conducted. Data validation can be done by confirming the data by using source triangulation (active members in virtual communities) to ensure the truth of the researcher's observations.

## RESEARCH RESULTS and DISCUSSION

### **IBTimes.ID: The Struggles to Spread the Idea of Moderate Islam Through New Media**

To stem the currents of conservatism and fundamentalism that are increasingly showing their maneuvers within Muhammadiyah, Muhammadiyah youths took the initiative to create an independent online media channel called IBTimes.ID (Akmaliah, 2020). The background to creating this fully online media channel is the fact that digital technology is developing rapidly and is easily accessible to all audiences, from the upper, middle and lower

classes. The potential for moderate Islamic campaigns through online is considered to be more effective, efficient and right on target. IBTimes.ID uses the website as its main medium, and utilizes social media such as Instagram, Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, and TikTok as supporting media for spreading their ideas (Gita Filosa Rukmono, 2019).

One of the triggers for the establishment of IBTimes.ID in 2019 was the fact that Muhammadiyah, one of the largest Islamic organizations in Indonesia, was still far behind in terms of management and strategies for Islamic *da'wah* through online media. Several websites affiliated with Muhammadiyah are less popular than websites affiliated with fundamentalist, conservative, and Islamic movements, including Era Muslim, Islamic Portal, VOA-Islam, and Thariqana (Thoyibi & Khisbiyah, 2018).

This fact is a hard slap for Muhammadiyah, considering that this organization carries the jargon of Modern Islam and progressive Islam which always innovates so that it can continue to keep up with the times, but has lost badly in the realm of digital *da'wah* which is the medium of *da'wah* today (Zun Uswatun Hasanah, 2022).

IBTimes.ID since its inception has established itself as a media that focuses on campaigning for Islamic moderation. This is reflected in the vision he has carried since its inception. Apart from being concerned about the decline of Muhammadiyah in the digital realm, IBTimes.ID was also established due to the fact that there is still a lot of Islamic content that contains unhealthy

narratives such as hoaxes, slanders, hate speech, division, hatred, and intolerance (Satriyo, 2022).

The message of Islamic moderation produced by IBTimes.ID in its contents cannot be separated from the spirit of moderation and Progressive Islam promoted by Muhammadiyah. IBTimes.ID provides Islamic content that does not attack any group, provides alternative choices and new interpretations of Islamic terms (such as: *khilafah*, *Islam kaffah*, *jihad*, etc.), and contextualizes them in the Indonesian realm (Aprilyawati, 2022).

### The Challenges Faced by IBTimes.ID

One of the challenges faced by IBTimes.ID in campaigning for its Islamic moderation narratives in cyberspace is negative comments coming from readers of IBTimes.ID articles. This is a natural thing where cyberspace is a new media that can be accessed by everyone and is free to contest there. In fact, through this new media, people can disarm established authorities, including religious authorities, and create new ones (Dale F. Eickelman, 2003).

Here, IBTimes.ID is placed as an Islamic media authority which has various online infrastructures to disseminate its ideas. Meanwhile, negative comments that attack the narrative echoed by IBTimes.ID are

positioned as an attempt to dilute an authority that has a specific agenda.

To see netizens' responses to content produced by IBTimes.ID, the author will focus on two Facebook groups (Muhammadiyah Citizens Facebook Group & Progressive Islam Facebook Group: Ar-Ruju' ila Al-Qur'an wa) and IBTimes.ID's official Instagram, which is used to distribute IBTimes.ID content. The author focuses his observations on IBTimes.ID content that spreads any spirit and struggles to moderate relationship between Sunni and Shia.

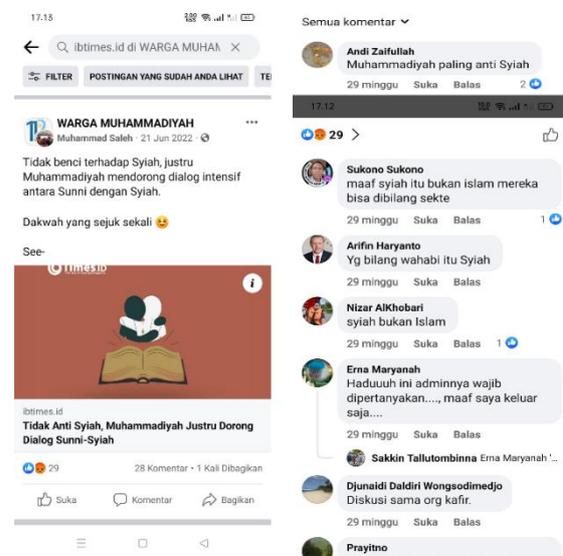


Figure 1: Netizens' comments on Facebook Group

In the first picture, it is clear that there is a netizen who says Muhammadiyah is an anti-Shia organization. There are also those who comment that Shia is not part of Islam. The article explains that the conflict between Sunni and Shia is a legacy of the past which should not be perpetuated to this day. In the article it is written that dialogue between Sunnis and Shiites is held as often as possible to create peace and erode horizontal conflicts between

Muslims. Furthermore, the article explains that building harmony with people of other religions is easier to implement than establishing harmony with fellow religions of different views, such as these Sunnis and Shiites (Yusuf Rohmat Yanuri, 2021).

Sentiment comments from netizens who think that Shia is not Islam and Muhammadiyah is anti-Shia from commentators (Sukono Sukono and Nizar Alkhobari) can be seen as their attempt to maintain the purity of their faith. They are feeling threatened that if a Sunni Muslim recognizes Shia as Islam, it could affect the level of his faith so that he does not become a complete Muslim. So for the sake of it all, they emphasize the line between Sunni and Shia in the form of comments they upload on Facebook.



**Figure 2:** Netizens' comments on Facebook Group

The comments in Figure 2 are more or less the same as the comments in Figure 1. In the

article, the author says that there is no fundamental difference between Sunni and Shia in terms of the main points and branches of religious reference. However, it is only the interpretation that makes Sunni and Shia have differences (Anggun Nugroho Saputro, 2021).

However, because it is already popular and widely known that Shia deviates from Islam, the person who commented cannot accept any other alternative explanation other than what he already understands because it is embedded in mainstream understandings of Shia.

The commentator (Ahmad Hidayat) said that Shia have a different creed than Sunnis, pray only once a day, believe in their imams more than believe in the Prophet Muhammad, and insult some of the Prophet's companions such as Abu Bakr, Umar bin Khattab, and Uthman bin Affan, by because of this, the commentator disagrees if there are peace and tolerance efforts towards Shii followers because, according to the commentator, they deviate from the true creed according to the Qur'an and Sunnah. From this, we can see that he is feeling threatened of the existing Shia ideology because it will harm other Sunni Moslems's creed (*aqida*).



Figure 2: IBTimes.ID's post on Instagram and Netizens's Comments

Instagram content uploaded by IBTimes.ID on 22 October 2022 discusses the relationship between Muhammadiyah and Shia. This content is about educating netizens that Muhammadiyah does not have ideological ties with Shia. It is written there that there is no need for Muhammadiyah members to worry about studying in Iran, which incidentally is a country with a majority Shia population, because they don't have to follow suit to become Shiites.

But even so, there are still comments from netizens who make fun of Shia because they think Shiites make fun of the companions of the Prophet Muhammad and think that the Koran is fake. Comments from netizens that are not in accordance with the context of the main discussion that is out of the focus indicates that resistance to Shiaism and considering Shia as a deviant group is still high. Such high sentiment will result in rejection of various ways to provide alternative understanding and

interpretation of an issue, especially those involving religious issues.

One of the commentators on the Instagram post, Abu Nusaibah, more or less made comments that had the same pattern. He questioned the theological attitude chosen by the Shia people and then he used it as an excuse not to want to make peace with the Shia people for any reason.

### **From Feeling Threatened to Conservative Turn: The Challenges of IBTimes.ID on Religious Moderation Campaign**

As previously explained, the symptoms of a conservative turn in Indonesia appeared after the collapse of the New Order and became even more pronounced in the early 2000s (Bruinessan, 2013).

The symptom of a conservative turn causes adherents of religions to have a rigid, fundamentalist, and anti-tolerance understanding because they reject any new interpretations (Jubba et al., 2021). As a result, this phenomenon is getting worse when everyone can access digital media and make it a new media for contesting discourse. In this new media, a person is free to say whatever he likes.

In the new media discourse, a person is free to say anything, including the freedom to express his hatred for something he deems deviant (Lim, 2017).

From the presentation of the previous discussion, it can be seen that the negative comments on IBTimes.ID content which tries to promote peace between Sunnis and Shiites are caused by feeling threatened of reducing one's faith and piety due to acknowledging Shia's deviance. From the discussion above, we know can understand that conservative turn always comes after someone feeling threatened by the other's presence, in this case in the presence of Shia.

There is the obvious reason why Sunni are really feeling threatened by the presence of Shia, particularly in the context of Indonesia. It is because the existence of Shia in Indonesia is certainly not free from friction, violence, and conflict with Sunni (as the majority group in Indonesia). The rapid development of Shi'ism and it is felt to be different ideologically, theologically, the concept of *Imamat*, and creed (*aqidah*) from the Sunni group.

Therefore, Indonesian Ulema Council (MUI) will not remain silent in facing the rapid development of Shia which is considered to threaten and tarnish Sunni Islam as the majority group in Indonesia. Indonesia. So then, based on the fatwa of the MUI Indonesian Ulema Council at the National Assembly Meeting in March 1984, stated that the basis for differences in views on *hadith*, *Imamah*, *Mut'ah* marriage and schools of fiqh which then MUI issued a fatwa that Shiites in Indonesia must be wary of, because they deviate of religious values, most of whom in Indonesia adhere to the Sunni ideology.

The MUI fatwa is a powerful weapon to nourish and perpetuate religious conflict in Indonesia and that is why most of Sunni Indonesia feeling threatened when someone or any media try to reconcile of moderate conflicts between Sunni and Shia (Widyadara, 2015).

When a person is feeling threatened, he tends to use a defense mechanism (Kouchaki, 2015). People will always stick to what they believe is right and will feel threatened if what they believe is wrong, including in religious matters. Rejection and negative comments to someone or the media who want to moderate the relationship between Sunni and Shia is a form of defense mechanism that is done by someone to maintain their belief.

This is the challenge of IBTimes.ID in disseminating content about religious moderation. This defense mechanism effort was then transformed into a conservative turn with all its characteristics having a rigid, fundamentalist, and anti-tolerance understanding.

Martin Van Bruinessan, said that there are three symptoms that arise as a result of this conservative turn trend. Firstly, the growth of conservative religious understandings, secondly, supporters of moderate Islam change their agenda to a political agenda, and thirdly, the weakening of the Islamic

moderation campaign (Martin Van Bruinessan, 2011).

The first and third symptoms expressed by Martin van Bruinessan can be found in the comments addressed to IBTimes.ID content. *First*, about the growing understanding of religious conservatism. This is commonly observed in comments that do not recognize Shia as part of Islam. Even though the article has clearly stated that Sunni and Shia have the same source of religious teachings.

In their comments, they rejected all attempts at moderations, meetings, mediations, and peace between Sunnis and Shiites because they were considered a betrayal of the faith and could erode the levels of faith. In scholarly discourse, religious conservatism means the understanding and practice of conservative teachings of religion, such as holding strictly to the scriptures or to teachings, orthodoxy, and traditions that are considered the most correct.

*Second*, all forms of hatred and negative comments posted by netizens can be categorized as efforts to weaken the Islamic moderation campaign. If analyzed using *uses & gratification theory* (Elihu Katz & Jay G. Blumler, n.d.) efforts to write negative comments as mentioned before can be considered as an effort to gratify and influence readers so they don't read content promoting moderate Islam created by IBTimes.ID.

One negative comment written in a comment section on any media platforms can influence other like-minded people to write similar hateful comments. This tendency to have opinions and gather with people who

have the same thoughts and opinions, in the context of new media, is called algorithmic enclaves (Benedict Anderson, 1991). If there are more and more enclaves, then this can accommodate many forces and can create new movements that are intensified through social media.

Movements formed from the unity and mixture of several enclaves, according to Hannah Arendt, are called tribal nationalism (Hannah Arendt, 1973). New movements motivated by the same conservatism sentiment will certainly influence the moderate Islamic campaigns carried out by IBTimes.ID.

## CONCLUSION

Through the theory of *feeling threatened*, as an analytical knife from this research, the author concludes that the fear experienced by the audience when they found the campaign or narrative of Sunni & Shia peace by IBTimes.ID was the main cause in triggering a conservative turn which manifested itself in expressions of hatred and insults to the creator of the content. From the analysis carried out, conservative attitudes tend to reject the peace campaign because they think that with this attitude, they can maintain their level of faith and maintain the sanctity of their Islamic religious teachings by not recognizing Shia as part of Islam.

Negative comments posted by netizens on IBTimes.ID content can be categorized for two purposes:

1. comments that attempt to present a conservative and rigid face of understanding that attempt to refute all the notions of Islamic moderation promoted by IBTimes.ID.
2. *Second*, several negative comments that are mutually exchanged have the potential to create a new movement that will hinder and challenge the Islamic moderation campaign being attempted by IBTimes.ID.

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