Technology and Religion: Information Seeking Behaviour of Online Religious Information Among Malays

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Abstract: Prior to the digital era of 21st century, the religious sources for many were consistent with Malay-Islam traditional authority such as the local ulama or recognized institution. This paper seeks to understand and describe the online religious content and behaviour of Malaysian Muslims in searching of online religious information. Data collected through interviews of 10 individuals from Generation X and Y purposely selected with different religious and ideological background. Usability such as the type of the information need, frequency of usage, dependency, channels and applications used were analyzed. Their searching procedural such as criteria of the information and the information source, information selection, information avoidance, information exchange and information overload handling were analyzed too. Respondents were asked on their motivation remaining with the traditional sources or against it. The findings show that the current behaviour of religious seeking information has drifted away from its traditional sources among Malaysian Muslims. This study may serve as a useful source of information on how Internet influencing an aspect of religious behaviour and to explore the potential impact of future identity and thought of Muslim Malaysia.

Key words: Internet • Religious Source • Religious Authority • Malay Thoughts • Islam Malaysia

INTRODUCTION

When the Malaysian Supreme Court ruled that the word ‘Allah’ only belong to Muslim in October 2013, the Internet rife with comments opposing it. A fatwa relating to this issue preceded this injunction was well-known by all-first in 2008 and relived many times including recently during last 13th General Election. There are therefore two types of authority related to this issue namely law and religion [1].

Traditionally, both authorities, especially religion were not openly challenged. The recent development shows that now, both Muslims and non-Muslims are not deterred questioning against religious authorities. The comments are considered non-mainstream and the interactions on such postings show that their arguments are being read and accepted.

We have strong reasons to believe that this behaviour became more manifested in our society with the coming of the Internet mediation that provides space for individual expression or for disseminating suppressive non-mainstream ideas. With nearly 70% of broadband penetrations among Malaysians and 20 hours per week spending time online[2], Internet has now become the major source for finding information generally for today’s generation.

Studies show that Internet has unarguably affected people in countless ways (Jaeger et. al., 2010) but how about their behaviour on finding religious knowledge and production which activities are considered sanctioned? What kind of religious information [3] can they find online? And if the religious sources and their discourses are changing, can that affect their religious thoughts too?.

Religious Sources Pre-Internet: Islam was and still very much an important aspect of the Malay community where religion plays a crucial part in their thoughts, identity and culture (Naquib 1990, Hussin 2000). In pre-modern Malay society where literacy was not yet widespread, the major source or perhaps the only source for religious knowledge
was the local ulama. They were also considered as the religious authority whereby their religious opinions were sought after by the community (Nagata 1984, Azyumardi 2000). Ulama production was usually through ‘pondok’ institution and the knowledge transmission method were limited to ‘telaah kitab’ (open book) and ‘hafalan’ (memorization) with no argumentations expected (Gullick 1989, Roff 2009).

With the spread of democratic ideas, the introduction of modern education, the establishment of modern institution and the formation of modern state, local ulama have begun to find their competitors (Machasin 2010). Among other actors that have played as the source of religious knowledge and authority in the modern Malay Muslim community are the formal Ulama from governmental religious institutions, tarekat leaders, dakwah preachers and independent individuals [4].

Various channels have been used for disseminating and sharing religious information such as printing and electronic media. Interpretations however usually follow the mainstream (arus perdana) schools of Ahli Sunnah in the matter belief (aqidah) specifically the Asha ‘arism and Shafi ‘ite in jurisprudence or fikah (Shamsul Bahri, 2007). Diagram below depicts the religious sources of traditional and modern Malay community as seen by the author.

Because of difficulties and control over media, education and physical gathering - either from the state or community - religious ideas which are outside mainstream or considered non-orthodox were not easily marketed and penetrated into the Malay society. For centuries, changes in religious ideas were mostly isolated events. Changes when happened usually resulting conflicts and for most of the time the mainstream representatives who appeared to be triumphant[4]. In early 1900s, we see this conflict among Kaum Tua and Kaum Muda and in 1980s an emergence of Anti-Hadith group. Malay Muslim community in many of past cases such as these appeared to choose a conservative approach towards religious ideology.

Careful observation however may suggest some social changes that can be linked to these conflicts. Among them are the connection with other countries-Islamic or not–which exposed them to other ideas; the improvement of educational system among population; easier access to information sources or materials; new channels to disseminate ideas; and more convenient ways for social gathering.

**Internet as Major Information Sources and Its Potential Outcome:** Many surveys support that Internet now has become major sources for information (Tascott, 2009) and that is including religious information (Hoover, 2004) especially among Generation X (born in 1960’s and 70’s) and Y (born in 1980’s and 90’s). But Internet has majorly changed the religio us knowledge seeking method among public. Traditionally, there were many barriers to gain religious knowledge which Internet has effectively removed. Among them are the physical space (e.g. meeting at learning centre or public mosque), learning costs (e.g. trip to the learning centre or purchasing a book), skills and tools to gain the knowledge (e.g. library skills and search engine) and archival (e.g. place to store materials and their expiry). There is also no centralized control on information release and flow making non-orthodox and minority idea easily being disseminated, unlike during the pre-Internet era.

Internet has also change the religious discourse in many dynamic ways. Removal of space and time barrier enables discussions and knowledge seeking anywhere at any time. Knowledge production and generation are easier
now through sharing and interaction. Virtual gathering of like-minded individuals may encourage the formation of online groups which in turn produces and generates more new knowledge especially through commenting and self-concluding.

This dynamic discourse, with the help of ‘web personalization’ (Pariser, 2012) may accelerate the aggregation of new knowledge by encouraging what described as ‘group think’ and therefore may naturally form new line of thoughts among the members and perhaps advancing new group identity. This relationship and dependency can be illustrated by figure below.

**Research Design:** No research done, as far as we are concerned, on religious information behaviour among Malaysian Malay so far. Rita (2011) and Roslina (2009) focussed much on the searching tools and terminology usage among users. The research subjects also were not specific to Malaysians and Malays. This research has been designed to cover the standard aspects of Information Behaviour as presented by Case (2002) with emphasize on the aspects of acceptability, accessibility and usability.

Ten Malay individuals were interviewed face to face between the ages of 20-40 years old. Their personal, family, religious, educational and professional backgrounds were asked to see if these demographical factors influence their seeking behaviour. We queried them on the time spent seeking for religious information, their information need, motivation for searching, the channels that they are using, their favourite sites, their dependency and their satisfaction on Internet as religious sources. We will also find the steps and procedures used by the participants when they look for information, methodology they use to verify or filter the information, or criteria they use to avoid sites. Web personalization has a negative impact (Pariser, 2011) and this will also be queried.

But we are anticipating. Before we look on users’ information behaviour, it is good if we can have some idea on what is available online for users to look for. For this, we will be using purposive sampling method looking at sites containing religious information. We will look at two angles. Firstly we will look at what type of sites and channels used e.g. blogs, news, portal and social media.

Secondly, we look at different religious ideas being put online, giving priority those that are published by locals. The findings may also help us to have some idea on the current status of religious information on the cyber world.

**Religious Content in Internet:** Observation shows that online religious content among Malaysians are highly active, in confirmation with previous studies of the trend among other global netizens (Burnt, 2009). A recent searching with Google Search using combination words...
of ‘Islam’ and ‘Blogs’ resulted in more than 42 million sites and if we filter only pages published from Malaysia, the result is still staggering 12 million (even though some of the results might be out of the definition scope or contains duplication). Local ulama and individuals show active trend in contributing and sharing religious content in the cyber arena, either through blogs and postings. Religious issue also regularly invite active reaction such as ‘likes’, comments and further sharing among Social Media users.

Almost all popular channels are being used: portal, blogs and social media such as Facebook, Twitter and video sharing YouTube. Facebook proves to be the most popular that other published channels will be linked to it. Examples of this are JAKIM’s, Prof. Dr. Muhaya’s and Dr. Mohd. Asri Zainul Abidin’s pages. The first example is administered by a formal Islamic organization, the second is by an independent individual who are not trained in Islamic study but a popular Islamic motivator figure nonetheless and the third is by a group of an Islamic public figure’s fan.

Non-mainstream and non-traditional ideas are available too and very active. During the recent issues of Imami Shi’ites, local newspaper highlighted a number of sites propagating its ideology. None of them are available now. YouTube channel of ‘Seruan Al Yamani’ seems to be the only one still in existence at the point of this writing.

Liberal ideologies (who identify themselves as liberals or their ideas are considered non-traditional by the mainstream public) are also being published by both organizations and individuals. Examples of the first are Sister in Islam and Islamic Renaissance Front. Example of the second is Marina Mahathir. All of them have both websites and Facebook pages. In our local landscape, the liberalists are those who show their support or at least sympathy towards secularism, humanism, religious pluralism and LGTB (Lesbians, Gays, Transsexuals and Bisexuals). All these ideas are considered non-mainstream and have difficulty spreading them to the publics before [5].

These findings demonstrate that both traditionalist and non-traditionalists actively used Internet to propagate their ideas and activities. Since early 1900’s, both ulama and independent individuals have no problem adopting new media for their Islamic messages (Mohd. Yusof, 2006). The trend still continues in fact is now accelerating as Internet allows any regular individuals to publish their ideas even anonymously. The trend also shows the widespread of Internet usage as religious sources and how religion is still dominating Malays’ thoughts that its discussion seems inescapable even when commenting on the recent gas price hike [6].

Religious Information Seeking Behaviour - The Trend:
We now move to users’ behaviour in seeking information online. All of our participants have no problem accessing broadband while most of them have 24 hour access with fairly good Internet skills. Most of them spend 30 minutes to two hours per day for religious knowledge out of their four to eight hours access time. Among our respondents, most of them do not participate in religious activities such as creating, interacting and sharing. They describe themselves as none expert and not credible enough to post religious content, therefore avoiding spreading wrong messages. Few opt to participate with the intention of dakwah.

Their religious backgrounds are diverse. Four of them are graduates from Islamic stream school while three of them only from a religiously strong family background. Either of this combination seems to influence our respondents in religious matter. When asked about mazhab, all of them identify themselves as belong to Shafi’ite schools but none of them know about their school of aqidah other than Ahli Sunnah.

When looking for information, most of them go online to solve a problem, rather than looking for new information. All of them use-in order of popularity- Search Engine namely Google, blogs, YouTube and Facebook. When searching via Google, they will select the sites based on the following criteria: site’s author preferably well-known religious figure and local publishers. One way to identify local websites is its language. The respondents believe certain figures and local websites are preferred because they would be likely to represent the same mazhab adopted by Malays.

The respondents describe their authority as religious figures. Only one respondent who identifies himself as liberalist does not accept any authority. Most respondents do not accept sources which can be link politically with other political parties they associate themselves to. For example, PAS supporters do not accept figures and organization which they think linked to governments. Many of them do not accept liberalist and Shi’ite sites, but very well aware of the existence of such sites.

All of the respondents have a vague idea or none at all in Islamic methodology in the area of Quran, hadith, aqidah and fikah. As a result, the only ways to verify
their information are by depending on their authorities and their ‘guts’ (which arguably the knowledge they gained during growing up). Some of them opt to read few sources (which presented to them after Google search) and then compare which solutions they think the best-which of course based on their ‘guts’.

All of them agreed that they depending much on Internet as sources for religious information out of convenience and satisfied with it. When asked regarding web personalization, most of them do not aware of it. Half of the respondents think that personalization is bad and we should also aware other people’s opinions.

Religious Sources: Traditional or Changing? One of the serious problems with our respondents is their poor knowledge in Islamic methodology. They have no skills in verifying hadith authenticity for example making them vulnerable to what Professor Syed Naquib described as ‘knowledge error’ (Mohamad Fauzan, 2009). This is the reason why many of them depending on a religious figure as much as traditional community heavily relied on the local ulama. In a way, this trend is a continuity from our past practice. One of the reasons for this must be that our contemporary Islamic education does not provide sufficient skills on Islamic methodology.

Mohd. Nor (2008) reference to the skills of Usul or Principle of Tafsir and Hadith which he links to contemporary online application is very beneficial as a guideline to verify online information[7]. Being critical, instead of relying to a personal figure, is crucial. We believe that Malays have to be critical towards every religious content filling up the cyber world and users actively seeking them, we believe that Islamic thoughts among Malays will be diversify greatly and no longer remain traditionalists in nature. Web personalization may further advance this situation by polarizing groups of different minded. The leaders and community in this case have to decide whether they want to remain conservative or accept the pluralist nature of society.

Even though at this moment we rely on political position to supress non-mainstream ideas, the ability of Internet to spread idea and form new group identity cannot be deny. Both formal political and religious leaders are now susceptible to criticism. Their solutions are not readily accepted and followed. The claim that the digital era has lost both faith in objective truths and trust in traditional sites of authority (Tredinnick, 2008) seems to be applied to religious information too. Because suppression through politics tends to result negative reactions and conflicts, different approaches must be used. The best way of changing society is still through education and in this context, on proper Islamic and scientifically proven methodologies.

CONCLUSION

Internet has indisputably the sources for many to look for religious information. The young generation of Malays are very adaptable to Internet technology and actively use them for religious activities. Ideas disseminated online consist of both mainstream and non-mainstreams. Their interests are not limited to the so called traditionalist methods. Formal religious institutions, ulama and independent individuals-trained in Islamic studies or not-contributed much to the religious output online. Even though users depending much on online religious knowledge, they are not equipped with sufficient skill to filter and verify their information.

Future Malays seem to have a diversity of religious thoughts with the flooding of different religious expression freely in today’s netizens. Traditional authorities-such as law or religion-as we discussed above have shown a weakening sign of relevancy in our modern society. Censoring Internet however is not a viable option. Internet content, as argued by scholars, representing the thoughts of the society itself. We have to address this change by handling these conflicts wisely, not generating new conflicts. In a world where people are overloaded with information and the information value has become questionable, education and critical mind might be the best self-defence there is.

For further studies, we suggest a quantitative approach on information seeking behaviour among the Malaysian Muslims to see the trend and also factors related to the trend. This data we believe will be good for policy makers and educationists in guiding our generations exploring vast religious information online. The input of mind today determines the person of tomorrow.
The issue of using the word ‘Allah’ by non-Muslim especially in non-Muslim publications seem to be a specific Malaysian issue, as in Malay, the word refers to the name or a proper noun of Islamic God. For the related fatwa, refer to the JAKIM website. A good summary and chronology of the issue can be found in a blog http://kartikel.com/news/45069/kronologi-isu-kalimah-allah-dari-mana-ia-bermula.


‘Religious information’ here is not only refers to classical definition of religious knowledge (or ilmu agama). In this paper, we refer this to an online content relating to religion, religious issue, or any other issues linked by the audience to religion. Also included is when the publishers/writers of the content commenting on religious issue or any other issues that they linked to religion. Religion here is specific to Malay religion i.e. Islam.

List of actors here is of course not exhausted and discussion among them can be found on writings regarding religious authority of Indonesia (Van Dijk, 2010) but comparable to Malaysia, formal religious institution (Roff, 2009) and dakwah phenomena (Nagata, 1989). General discussion on religious thought history in the Malay World can be found in Riddell (2003).

For introduction of liberal ideas in Nusantara, refer Ugi Suharto (2012). Mazlan Ibrahim et al. (2013) discussed on their Quranic interpretation activities and mentioned about their online publication. For analysis of Malaysian liberalism and the four themes mentioned above regarding their movements, refer Indriaty Ismail et. al. (2009).

For example of comment on this issue when a religious figures stated that the oil price hike is the ‘will of God’, refer http://www.themalaymailonline.com/opinion/zurairiar/article/in-defence-of-fathul-bari).

In his book, Mohd. Nor attempts to apply the classical method of Usul to contemporary usage which the author found very useful and relevant. Examples are ‘nasikh-mansukh’ or abrogation principle in Usul Tafsir to verify of information update, or rijal al-hadith (men of hadith) in Usul Hadith to identify information sources and its authenticity.