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Jilid	13	ISSN 1985-6822	2021M
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Media Qualities and Preferences in Da'wah among Muslim Converts in Borneo

Kualiti dan Keutamaan Media dalam Dakwah dalam Kalangan Mualaf di Borneo

SALINAYANTI SALIM

ABSTRACT

In line with the growth of technology, media respectively has certain qualities that attract the audience or user to preferably utilise one platform over the other. This study aims to investigate media qualities that influenced the preferences of Muslim converts in da'wah in Borneo, specifically in Sabah, Sarawak and Brunei. The media involved were of traditional media such as television, radio, book and newspaper, and of social media such as Facebook, YouTube, website and blog. The qualitative research methodology was employed and a semi-structured interview was applied to collect the data from the informant. There were 27 Muslim converts who participated in this study as informants. The data obtained from the interview was tabulated using thematic approach, which later analysed using descriptive and interpretive phenomenology approach. The results revealed that Sabah informants were more focused on technical and interactive features of media for variety of information related to da'wah, thus they preferred social media, including older informants. Meanwhile Sarawak and Brunei informants were more focused on the reliability of the da'wah content in media, thus they mostly preferred traditional media, including young informants in both states. This is an interesting finding because youth were generally known to favour more up-to-date media, such as social media, as platforms for obtaining information. Finally, the informants' responses in the interviews also implied that convenience was a significant quality in their preferences, yet each had different definition of the word 'convenience', depending on their motives and media use in receiving da'wah.

Keywords: *Da'wah, quality, preference, Muslim convert, media*

ABSTRAK

Selaras dengan perkembangan teknologi, media masing-masing mempunyai kualiti tertentu yang menarik penonton atau pengguna untuk menggunakan satu platform berbanding yang lain. Kajian ini menyelidik kualiti media mengenai penyebaran dakwah yang mempengaruhi kegemaran mualaf di Borneo, khususnya Sabah, Sarawak dan Brunei. Media yang terlibat adalah media tradisional seperti

televisyen, radio, buku dan surat khabar, manakala media sosial seperti Facebook, YouTube, laman sesawang dan blog. Metodologi penyelidikan kualitatif digunakan dan temu bual separa berstruktur diterapkan untuk mengumpulkan data dari informan. Terdapat 27 orang mualaf yang mengambil bahagian dalam kajian ini sebagai informan. Data yang diperoleh dari temu bual tersebut dikategorikan menggunakan pendekatan tematik, yang kemudian dianalisis menggunakan pendekatan deskriptif dan interpretif fenomenologi. Hasil kajian menunjukkan bahawa informan Sabah lebih tertumpu pada ciri teknikal dan interaktif media untuk pelbagai maklumat yang berkaitan dengan dakwah, oleh itu mereka lebih suka media sosial, termasuk informan yang lebih berumur. Sementara itu informan Sarawak dan Brunei lebih tertumpu pada kebolehpercayaan kandungan dakwah di media, oleh itu mereka lebih suka media tradisional, termasuk informan muda yang lebih muda. Ini adalah penemuan yang menarik kerana anak muda pada umumnya diketahui lebih menyukai media terkini, seperti media sosial, sebagai platform untuk mendapatkan maklumat. Selain itu, tanggapan para informan dalam temu bual juga menunjukkan bahawa kemudahan adalah kualiti yang signifikan dalam pilihan mereka, namun masing-masing mempunyai definisi yang berbeza dari kata 'keselesaan', bergantung pada motif dan penggunaan media mereka dalam menerima dakwah.

Keywords: *Dakwah, kualiti, kegemaran, mualaf, media.*

Received: 21 November 2020
Accepted: 29 November 2021

Revised: 23 September 2021
Published: 30 December 2021

INTRODUCTION

It has been long established that media offer various information to people in their daily consumption. The mediatisation process also increases the reliance of institutions on the power of media to reach a large number of people in short time. Among the institutions that are becoming more and more dependent on media is religion. The emergence of new media often signifies changes in the relationship between media and religion. Media have also paid great attention to people converting to new religion or in other words, religious conversion. Religious conversion is “a process of religious change that takes place in a dynamic field of people, events, ideologies, institutions and orientations” (Rambo, 1993), while Muslim convert is defined as a person changing his or her past religion and adopting Islam as the new religious identity. Muslim converts decided to embrace Islam for various motivations such as marriage (Suraya et al., 2011), psychological inner peace and influence of other previously converted Muslims (Asiyah az-Zahra, 2014).

Nuradli et al. (2016) dictated the main challenge faced by the Muslim converts during post conversion was lack of time in attending physical Islamic classes. Thus, for the purpose of intellectual curiosity, Muslim

converts would resort to more convenient sources such as media to answer the questions about Islam. Stout (2012) mentioned that media have allowed the audience to experience spiritual connection at any time and place, not limited to worshipping at religious institutions such as churches, temples and mosques. Nevertheless, seeking information or explanation about Islam through media has its risk as a lot of contents in the media are more fixated on disseminating misunderstanding related to Islam, or worse, depicting Muslims especially in Muslim minority countries as national threat (Younis & Hassan, 2017). The conversion to Islam is a steadily growing phenomenon in Malaysia, in fact the states of Sabah and Sarawak according to Zulkefli et al. (2015), has the most Muslim converts compared to the peninsula states, with 37% of registered Muslim converts from 1990 to 2004.

Conversion to Islam in Borneo is utterly unique because Islam is embraced by various ethnicities such as Kadazan Dusun, Bajau, Murut in Sabah, and Iban, Bidayuh, Melanau in Sarawak. It is similar to their neighbouring country, Brunei which is the home to many indigenous ethnicities namely Dusun, Kedayan and Iban. In fact, the 'melting pot' culture in Sabah and Sarawak implies that religion is not a practical indicator of ethnic identities, or of demographic formation that categorised the people in Peninsula based on economic functions (Sabihah Osman, 1985). Different to Sabah and Brunei where Islam is the dominant religion adhered by the majority, Sarawak residents largely belong to Christian denomination groups. There are various factors leading Muslim converts in to choose Islam and prior to officiating the change in religion, they commonly used media such as watching Islamic-related television programmes, reading Islamic books and newspaper columns or browsing the internet as further reference in logical reasoning to strengthen their decision to become Muslims.

Fortunately for Malaysia and Brunei, of the countries constituting Islam as the official religion, local media, namely traditional media take not only 'kinder views' of Islam, but each platform is in a positive competition with each other, producing Islamic-related contents as an act of spreading the right message of Islam. TV Al-Hijrah and Radio Ikim.fm for instance, are two famous Islamic media stations introduced by the Malaysian government, solely for the reason of spreading *da'wah*, while Brunei is surely proud of Nur Islam and Quran Recitation radio stations (Salinayanti, 2020). The prevalent *da'wah* through media has evidently drawn the Muslim converts' attention to Islam especially through the *adzan* or call of prayer, broadcasted five times a day on television and radio (Yee, Elias & Abd. Ghani, 2019). In a study by Azarudin, Azman & Wahairi (2018), a Muslim convert acknowledged the effectiveness of television in airing Islamic-related dramas that indirectly influenced him to convert to Islam. Malaysian

television as claimed by Haidir, Mustari & Fauziah (2016), commonly inserts religious values even in programmes are not about religion. On the other hand, the internet is also accepted as another yet more modern search tool to obtain assurances or information about Islam, as discovered among Mexican Muslim converts by Aurora Mondragon Meza (2020). A case in point, the acceptance of *da'wah* through media was quite low among indigenous activists due to the senior ages, but a few of them confessed that they used Facebook and WhatsApp to educate both non-Muslims and Muslim converts among indigenous people in Selangor (Zulkefli et al., 2018), while Facebook seems to defy time by continuing to be a favourite platform for *da'wah* (Hureri, Mohd Nor & Tahir, 2020).

Admittedly, there are prevalent media research focusing on the ubiquity of Islamic media and Islamic media texts in Malaysia. However, unlike Malaysian Peninsular, Sabah and Sarawak have received less attention from scholars and even lesser attention given to the areas of religion and media. In the attempt to contribute to academic research in Borneo and the field of religious conversion and media, this study adopted the famous uses a gratification theory as the framework to examine the media qualities which contribute to the Muslim converts' preferences in *da'wah* in Borneo, specifically Sabah, Sarawak and Brunei.

LITERATURE REVIEW

To begin with, qualities of media in this study are grounded in the advantages or 'perks' enjoyed by the audience or user in using the platforms for religious sustenance after converting to Islam. The characteristics of the media qualities depend heavily on the audience's or user's usage intention which includes content types, reliability, accessibility, as well as interactivity. Traditional media in this study refer to the conventional means existed before the arrival of the internet are still used in the present days, for mass communication such as television, radio, magazines and newspaper. Meanwhile, social media are defined as the 'new' media and are "web-based services that allow individuals to construct a public or semi-public profile within a bounded system (Islam, 2019).

A lot of scholars believe there is a connection between religion and media, even though not all of them approve the relationship between the two. This is because religion is viewed as the creation of God, whereas media are the creations of human which oppose the core values of religious beliefs (Stout & Buddenbaum, 1996). Mukarom, Rosyidi & Muzzammil (2020) suggested interlink between media and religion based on the two functions of media; as ritual and god (Idi Subandi & Bachruddin, 2014). Inevitably, the increasing penetration of media into religious life causes the audiences to rely on the technology as an important source of information. The

emergence of modern media, as the uses and gratifications theory stated, has turned the passive audiences into active users. Mohd Adam (2013) emphasised that technology has initiated the expansion of religious perspectives, from traditional to borderless global engagement. The internet for example, is a platform that provides people with information through millions of websites (Nor Shahriza & Norzelatun Rodhiah, 2005). Social media, the latest invention of the internet, have the 'answers' to the questions any user has on religion, including Islam, with just a click on the search button (Nasya, 2018). Widely, social media are treated as the necessary tools to inform and invite people to the offline gatherings such as religious talks held at mosques (Ruzain Syukur Mansor, 2011). Even though social media are on the rise, the audience do acknowledge the significance of traditional media such as television and newspaper, implying that the old media are still relevant. In the study on the da'wah work of a convert preacher, Salinayanti (2018) discovered that traditional media, namely television is used as the primary platforms for religious campaigns, whereas social media are perceived as the complementary tools. Mu'amalah (2018) synthesised that television is an influential platform for Islamic soap operas which promote commercial process and Islamic expressions simultaneously.

Traditional media have a widespread, yet targeted reach. Even though smaller in volume, the platforms have long established and spent decades 'taming' the audience. Traditional media also remain as credible sources, of which Wathen and Burkell (2002) stated the importance of credibility, or judgement formed by the perceiver of a sender's message, in filtering information. In terms of authenticity of the news, Kovačič, Erjavec and Štular (2010) discovered that traditional media are more trustworthy than online media. Furthermore, the productions of traditional media are more serious, highly formalised (Kovačič Erjavec and Štular, 2010), governed by professional standards (Palfrey & Gasser, 2008; Haidir, Mustari & Fauziah, 2016) and certified contributors (Hew, 2018). The contributors will have to undergo some screening process to prove their credibility in sharing information, which is the way of traditional media like newspaper companies. Mohamed Hashim (2006) sustain the accuracy of the information prior releasing it to the public. The information shared by traditional media with the audience is often specific and detailed (Umar & Samsudin, 2010). Traditional media such as television and newspaper provide lengthy discussion on a particular topic or issue.

Social media on the other hand, is more exposed because it is a platform for different people to get open access and gain greater control over knowledge and social information (Cheong, 2013). Regardless, the widespread availability of social media means people with relatively modest financial resources can create their own media content and contribute to

other media platforms. According to datareportal (2021), as of January 2021, there were 28 million social media users in Malaysia and 435 thousand social media users in Brunei, implying an inevitable domination of New Communication Technology (NCT), bringing together with it, a set of opportunities and challenges for conventional media (Ali et al., 2011). Prior to internet technology, the interaction between the broadcasters and the audience was highly limited where there was no direct feedback that could be retrieved from the receivers of the messages. The arrival of social media which are more 'audience friendly' and easily penetrated into the human daily activities (Mukarom, Rosyidi & Muzzammil, 2020), allows the users to not only communicate with their existing friends but also with celebrities and famous persons (Bennet, 2012), or at least according to Soukup (2006), it would create perceptions among the users that the celebrities would visit the "fansites". Furthermore, the users can either engage in social conversation or for other purposes like academic and business even with the strangers (Baym, 2012) who later on become their friends. In short, social media has created a more democratic sphere for the citizens (Muhamad Zaki et al., 2013).

Both traditional and social media are sophisticated tools adopted not only to compose Islamic contents that would appear interesting to audiences, but also to sustain their faiths in diverse society (Denffer, 1983; Hureri, Mohd Nor & Tahir, 2020). The need of using media in spreading *da'wah*, is based on the similar objectives shared by media and *da'wah* which are; to inform and persuade, to transform and to achieve certain goals. Media have the upper hand to discharge the duty of *da'wah* because the platforms are known to understand the interest and pleasure of the audience (Hoover, 2006). This is compatible with the first principle of *da'wah* which is to attract people to Islam (Abdussalam, 1996). Fulton (2005) suggested that the narratives of media are unique thus they can capture the soul of the audience, individually and in mass. Furthermore, media contents are managed by experienced communicators (DeFleur & Dennis, 1985) and editorial policy (Haidir, Mustari & Fauziah, 2016), to competently break down complex information, while weaving some entertainment so it does not bore the audience. It is aligned with the second principle of *da'wah*, where the propagators are encouraged to be as straightforward and easy as possible, to avoid confusing the listeners (Abdussalam, 1996).

Thirdly, media offer the audience variety of platforms, handing the power to choose to the audience (Fadzli, Marhana & Ab. Hamid, 2014). Some media do not require literacy, thus the audience who are unable to read, can opt for screen media such as television. As for travellers and commuters, they have the option to be engaged in news over the media by listening to radio car or scroll for it on mobile phones. Fourthly, media are

capable of spreading messages to mass audience as individuals or groups (DeFleur & Dennis, 1985) resulting in inclusive and miscellaneous preaching. Media generally do not expose their target audience, thus anyone who is curious about Islam may search about it discreetly. It represents the next principle of *da'wah* which emphasises on making recipients feel comfortable while receiving *da'wah* (Abdussalam, 1996). Fortunately, the progressive technologies of media permit the audience to seek information inside their homes via computers or hand-held devices (Stout, 2012). Finally, 'there is no compulsion in religion' (Al-Quran 2: 256), therefore, media are suitable to be used to spread and receive *da'wah* because media do not 'force' the audience to utilise their outlets or platforms. Media may use strategies to persuade the audience to choose their outlets instead of the others, but ultimately, the choice is in the hands of the audience.

METHODOLOGY

Data for this study was collected through one-on-one interview with nine Muslim converts in Sabah, Sarawak and Brunei respectively, totalling up to 27 informants. The informants were all Muslim converts who lived or resided in the city areas of Sabah, Sarawak and Brunei. All of the states had Islam as the religion of the majority, except for Sarawak, which the majority of residents adhered the Christian denomination. The interview with each informant lasted around 45 minutes on average. The informants comprised of both males and females with different ages ranging from 20 to 60 years old. The informants possessed different educational backgrounds, from as high as master's degree to one informant who did not attend formal education. As for occupation, the informants' jobs were rather disparate, with a mixture of government personnel, activists, entrepreneurs, housewives and university students. Most of the informants were Christians and free thinkers prior to their conversions to Islam. Also, they were of different ethnicities where each state was mainly represented by the informants from the dominant ethnicities (Sabah; Kadazan and Dusun, Sarawak; Iban and Bidayuh, Brunei; Dusun). The data obtained was analysed using thematic approach where the half of the themes emerged from the literature review and the other half was discovered during transcriptions and coding processes. Afterwards, the results were presented using the descriptive and interpretive phenomenology approach.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Sabah Findings

Regarding *da'wah*, Sabah informants mentioned the technical features of media as the pre-requisite for their preferences. Media, which embrace the advanced technicality, either traditional or social and are deemed suitable for Muslim converts who desire novel ways in receiving information about Islam. In this case, the informants preferred social media because each platform activates the important senses such as listening and seeing, was more international and more interactive. Surprisingly, the informants from Sabah comprised of Muslim converts whose ages ranged between 35-60 years old. In other words, they are not exactly the generations that 'grew up' with the new media as they are usually grouped as the traditional media generation. However, the informants seem to be adjusting themselves quite well when it comes to adapting to the characters of new media.

An activist, Informant J preferred YouTube as not only effective for his personal use but also in spreading *da'wah* to people in Sabah at large:

Videos combine three sets of skills and YouTube is a great platform for that. It is effective because the skills such as visual, audio and kinaesthetic are used all at once. So, YouTube has a huge influence in Islamic da'wah. People do not need to read, they just have to watch and think. [trans] [Sabah. Informant J]

It appears that the more skills one could integrate in using media, the more effective the media is for the user. After all, people of today are familiar with multitasking practices in managing their daily errands. It also reflects how the audiences utilise their sensory skills in maximising religious input from their favourite media. It is imperative for the media to provide a memorable impact so that users will continue utilising it for their own satisfactions. Informant J claimed that YouTube videos are useful to spread *da'wah* to the people of Sabah based on his experiences as the manager of a branch of a religious body where he socialises with a large group of people for *da'wah* purposes.

Meanwhile, to those who are frequently on the move, they will rely on media that are still accessible at any time and place such as YouTube:

Because the videos are in softcopy, all you need is an internet connection when you need to check for YouTube videos. That is what I do when I am outstation. [trans] [Sabah. Informant J]

Other than that, media that offer Muslim converts international reach wins the 'popularity contest' because the users are keen in obtaining information from around-the-globe preachers and not limited to the local Islamic preachers. In the case of Informant J, who was a fan of Ahmad

Deedat's *da'wah*, he could easily locate Ahmad Deedat's videos on YouTube for references. Furthermore, in the absence of hardcopy materials like books and journals due to travelling, he would be able to get the same information from the lectures and sermons delivered by Muslim preachers on YouTube. More than that, he could learn to hone his preaching skills by observing the preachers in those videos. Another convenient feature about YouTube is that viewers can always trace the videos they used to watch through 'search history', in case they need them again.

The user-friendly features media such as of YouTube encouraged more Muslim converts in this study to be actively involved in spreading *da'wah* in the online world. Such is an example of interactive activity between two users, as proposed earlier by Mukarom, Rosyidi & Muzzammil, (2020). Not only can they spread *da'wah* on YouTube, but they can also search for current information which otherwise would be difficult to obtain. Another activist in this study, Informant C confessed that YouTube was an important source for him to get access to the teachings of his favourite Muslim preachers as well as his favourite Islamic entertainment:

When I was searching about Islam, I got a lot of information from preachers like Ahmad Deedat and Zakir Naik. Also, the videos of Hussin Yee, Yusuf Estes...they are all available on YouTube. YouTube has a lot of videos of why people chose Islam. Malaysian media do not have that. [trans] [Sabah. Informant C]

The researcher assumed Informant C meant to compare the global feature of YouTube to Malaysia television specifically because both platforms are broadcast media. Media that allows more freedom and has a more neutral setting, in this context, YouTube is more favoured by Muslim converts compared to media which ostracise the needs of Muslim converts, as claimed by the informant, local mainstream media. In other words, he did not feel the sense of belonging when he consumed Malaysian traditional media, whereas social media were more welcoming.

Interactivity is another criterion that Muslim converts preferred in any medium. Facebook for instance, remains popular even though there are a number of social media outlets invented before and after it. In fact, the number of people using Facebook is increasing day by day. According to Google, Facebook users have reached 2.7 billion in 2020. Informant EL below stated that she liked the medium (Facebook) where she could conveniently develop a network with people or organisations around the world:

I have connections with anyone I want, my friends...my students. I also got to know about MACMA from Facebook. Compared to television, you have to sit in front of it. Facebook is mobile. Even people who live in remote areas have Facebook. When you have a mobile phone with internet connection, you have Facebook. [trans] [Sabah. Informant EL]

Facebook users can have up to 5000 friends on their lists, but this limitation is not imposed on a closed-community or a fan page. This means that there is a wide range of 'friendship' circulating on the Facebook virtual space and each user can view the posts of other users, justifying the preference towards the medium among Muslim converts. In fact, the informant learned more about Islam by reading her friends' Facebook updates or shares. She owed it to Facebook for introducing her to MACMA (Malaysian Chinese Muslim Association) when she was anxiously looking for a religious organisation where she felt she could blend in with the other Chinese Muslim converts. Having a sense of belonging albeit through online relationship elevates the motivation of Muslim converts who may struggle with their faith and feel disowned by the offline community. For examples, engaging in a frequent conversation with another Muslim convert or reading the daily updates on Muslim convert's Facebook pages help them see better days and reaffirm their beliefs in Islam.

However, there are Muslim converts who are dependent on more 'relax' media because the contents are decided by the producers and editors, and the preachers' credentials are out-of-question. Informant JL in this study chose television as her favourite medium with the following reasons:

Unlike books, you just read. But television, they will read, they will explain. Also, they give examples according to the context. Like Al-Hijrah and Oasis, there are a lot of preachers whose preaching are sufficient and easy to understand for people like me. [trans] [Sabah. Informant JL]

Admittedly, watching qualified preachers give further explanations, without having to search for any specific content, has a calming effect on certain audiences such as Informant JL. In this case, television is convenient to those Muslim converts who spend more time at home than outside like housewives and those who work from home. Since the informant was a housewife who stayed at home most of the time, she was able to keep track of her favourite Islamic programmes on television. The informant also admitted that she did not attend school when she was young.

Limited academic background might contribute to the informants who preferred television to other media because consuming the contents from the medium does not require the audiences to be religiously-literate.

When Informant JL said “but television, they will read, they will explain”, it suggested that she trusted people with qualifications to interpret the Islamic contents for her than her doing it for herself.

Sarawak Findings

The media qualities preferred by Sarawak informants contrast with those of the Sabah informants. Most Sarawak informants were interested in media that could be enjoyed by a group of audience, and they were more concerned about the reliability of *da'wah* content, hence the choice was leaned towards traditional media outlets. The Sarawak informants mostly favoured traditional media such as television, radio and newspaper primarily because the platforms are able to reach a large group of audiences at one time. Thus, media are deemed effective in spreading *da'wah* if the platforms can offer general information and be accepted by the audience as in masses:

To me, I still think television has a huge role in spreading da'wah. In the past, the Islamic contents were not much but it is different now. Television also offers information to audiences in a bigger group than social media which are more personal. Even better, they have Islamic programmes for children which I think should be increased in the future. [trans] [Sarawak. Informant N]

In reference to Informant N's statement, Muslim converts view the growing quantity of Islamic programmes in media as a positive development, for instance on television. It concurs with Zakir Naik's opinion that the best medium for spreading *da'wah* in today's world is the television. In his debate titled 'Media and Islam', he stated that television will always be the first medium in relaying the message of Islam. If there are people who say it is the internet, such opinion then needs to be re-examined (Badli Shah Alauddin, 2016). Furthermore, the emphasis on *da'wah* for children is relevant since the love for Islam should be instilled in the humans' hearts as early as possible. Fortunately, there is an increase in the number of Islamic animations for children on Malaysia television channels.

Furthermore, media have the potential to be the favourite of Muslim converts by having fixed airtime for the programmes, so the audiences do not have to search for the programmes like in social media. Based on this, television seemed like a 'safe' medium for children compared to social media outlets like YouTube. In many cases, social media have the smallest parameter of professional censorship as opposed to traditional media, where most output is screened thoroughly before airing. Most of the time, it depends on the awareness of the parents to supervise their children while they are on social media. Because the informant is a mother, she would

prefer television over YouTube because she wanted to protect her children from the dangers of unsupervised search on the internet.

Watching television for the purpose of receiving da'wah is not a mere ritual because it can create a sense of intimacy with the characters. These are the affordances that should be in any media if it aims to garner the attention of Muslim converts as a site for *da'wah*, supported by the following extracts that emphasised on qualified preachers and sufficient depth in discussion.

I feel closer to the preachers on television and they are the qualified to teach about Islam. Unlike on social media, anyone can be 'ustaz' or 'ustazah' even though they are not qualified. Also, the topics they discuss on television have more impact because they are covered in detail by the preachers. [trans] [Sarawak. Informant R]

On television we can see the true information and whether the preacher is good or not. [trans] [Sarawak. Informant ST]

The finding is in line with that of Bennet (2012) in the Literature Review section supporting the audience's or user's preference of media outlets that provide the sense of intimacy with their favourite celebrities. The audiences feel 'connected' to the preachers they see in the media due to the 'close-up' cinematography. It seemed the informants R's and ST's preferences for television are motivated by their favourite Muslim preachers. It was established that the invited preachers are qualified thus their credibility is not a concern for the informants. Muslim converts are exceptionally sensitive about receiving information related to Islam and reliability of a medium would convince them to select it as their favourite platform to receive *da'wah*, without having to question whether the preachers are preaching the truth about Islam or otherwise. This creates an adult version of 'safety' especially for Muslim converts in order to avoid misinterpretations.

Meanwhile, printed media like newspaper and books are treated as archaic by most people nowadays. Most printed media companies have shifted to online media where manuscripts and news articles are available in soft copies. It may seem like a bleak future for the printed materials, but one informant still preferred printed newspaper for Islamic information:

I like newspaper because I can buy them every day and there is always at least one Islamic article in it. I throw out the rest after reading except for the Islamic articles. I have collected many of them so far. [trans] [Sarawak. Informant UN]

Newspapers still have ‘fans’, especially among the older generation. For example, Informant UN is 54-years-old and his generation grew up with printed materials like newspapers, magazines and books. Even though he has embraced the use of social media, he still resorted to traditional media when he wanted to search for more Islamic information. In Sarawak, Malay newspapers are circulated and most are from West Malaysia such as the government-owned, *Utusan Malaysia*, and private-owned tabloids, *Harian Metro* and *Kosmo!* Some newspapers have a daily column for Islamic articles and usually on Friday, they will extend it to a full one-page or two-page spread. Informant UN also mentioned a local newspaper, *Utusan Sarawak*, which he bought every day as it contained daily Islamic articles.

One more thing, television sometimes focuses on already Muslims, I do not see that with newspaper. [trans] [Sarawak. Informant UN]

For some Muslim converts, they feel they have more control with the newspaper because they could physically keep the articles. Printed media are not completely out-dated as there are informants who preferred to refer to hard-copy articles than the on-line versions. Another advantage of such media is that Islamic articles in newspapers are deemed to be free from ‘discrimination’ as opposed to Islamic programmes on broadcast media because they are more neutral for the readers. In other words, the contents in the newspaper address the general audience which include Muslim converts and non-Muslims as well and not just those born Muslims.

Meanwhile, Muslim converts who seek for more modern media that offer more in-depth explanation on Islam resorted to one social media platform, website. Websites could be the convenient sources for receiving *da’wah* and to increase one’s Islamic knowledge. One informant shared her reason for preferring websites to other media:

Websites are interactive. The explanations given are elaborative. I once submitted a question to a website but I did not check for the answer. [trans] [Sarawak. Informant NH]

Websites offer more space for the users to interact with the websites’ administrators or other users compared to the one-way feature of traditional media. Since websites can store large volumes of information, explanations could be detailed to help minimise misunderstandings on topics and issues. In addition, the administrators are able to write about any topic and invite readers to share their thoughts on the websites. Hence, it gives users more satisfaction than media that have limited space for the same purpose. Other than that, Informant NH stated how she sent a question to one website but

she did not follow up to check whether it was replied. Even if the question was replied, it might not be instantaneous.

To balance the infamous side of social media that always have issues with information authenticity, many websites are flooded with Quranic verses and thus, can be the favourite tools among Muslim converts who are interested, beside attending traditional Quran class, to learn to read and understand the Quran in their own times and places. A 29-year-old informant, Informant SF shared a positive remark towards websites:

It is easier to search for the information that I want. Everything is there in the websites. I like searching for Quranic verses on websites, with one click they immediately appear. [trans] [Sarawak. Informant SF]

Informant SF stated the advantage of using websites is that users can search for any information they desire through search engines. Users can key in the exact words or anything keywords related to the topic and it will list suggested websites that contain such information. This thorough search feature may be the quality that attracts Informant SF and other Muslim converts on resorting to websites more than the other media platforms. There are endless lists of websites concerning the Quran, either in full version or in parts with or without translations. The users can even learn to recite Quran from certain websites which upload audio recording of a Quran reciter. Not only that, but some websites are also designed specifically for the interpretations of Quranic verses which are managed by qualified preachers.

Brunei Findings

Like the informants in Sarawak, the Brunei informants preferred media that can disseminate reliable Islamic contents, so they selected traditional media, platforms which deliver Islamic information from qualified preachers. This echoed the idea suggested by Wathen and Burkell (2002) about the trustworthiness of information that reaches the audience. Even the young informants, aged below 30 years old exhibited high awareness towards media reliability and preferred Islamic contents delivered by credible preachers as listed below:

I like television, but not the Brunei one. I like ASTRO. I like seeing my favourite preachers on television like Dato ustaz Kazim Elias, Fadhillah Kamsah. It is not that I hate social media, but there is too much questionable information when it comes to Islam. [trans] [Brunei. Informant NU]

Social media are not entirely unreliable, in fact there are many trusted platforms where Muslim converts can seek authentic information about

Islam. Nevertheless, as pointed out by Informant NU above, Muslim converts are equally exposed to questionable sites too. It appears to be risky especially for new converts who are still finding ways to understand and practise Islam. Informant NU was not against social networking media but she believed it was imperative to receive the right information when it comes to Islam, reliability of information precedes technology. She emphasised on preferring ASTRO to Brunei television programmes, as several other Brunei informants because Malaysia ASTRO offers more varieties and more up to-date Islamic contents.

In the meantime, conventional practice has more influence on individuals than one may consider. Watching television has been a norm for many decades and even with the emergence of social media, television still garners large number of audiences. One of the strengths of family media such as television is that the programmes are predetermined, so the audiences only need to switch it on to enjoy the programmes they like, as stated in the excerpt below:

Television is watched by a lot of people. When they turn on the television, the programmes are there already and one of the many might catch their attention. Sometimes when my iman (faith) is low, I watch TV and it feels like God is sending motivation through certain programmes. [trans] [Brunei. Informant NZ]

Informant NZ liked television because the programmes are readily prepared by the producers and she could just look for Islamic programmes that might interest her. Her reason is similar to that of a Sabah informant, Informant JL who also chose medium where the contents are ‘being fed’ to the audience. In contrast, some Muslim converts may not be a fan of media that require the audience to choose the desired contents. On one hand, being ‘fed’ by the media like television may seem like a passive act but on the other, it seems like the safest way to receive *da’wah* since religious information on television is deemed more reliable and authentic.

Other than that, Muslim converts are keen on media which they can use to learn about Islam even while travelling. The Islamic radio station of Brunei, Nur Islam for instance, was chosen by two other informants. One of them stated that:

I like listening to the radio on the way to the mosque. I often go to the mosque, so I always listen to Nur Islam and I love their segments. For example, Santapan Rohani which comes after the 6 o’clock news. [trans] [Brunei. Informant AF]

Informant AF, a 22-year-old Dusun convert, explained that he liked listening to the radio because the medium is available in the car as he used it to frequent the mosque. In reference to the Sabah and Sarawak analyses, the radio is favoured mostly by the informants who spent more time travelling than staying at one place such as at home or a workplace. Thus, Informant AF's statements echoed the preferences of those in Sabah and Sabah. The duration of consuming the Islamic contents on the radio depends on the travel time.

However, another young informant claimed that the radio was special to her as she even listened to the radio at home:

I have television at home but I do not watch it. I love listening to the radio most of the time. [trans] [Brunei. Informant SR]

Despite the fact that a lot of media audiences are more attracted to the programmes on television, Informant S seemed firm with her choice. As mentioned previously, since her favourite media texts appeared in the form of Islamic lectures and sermons by Muslim preachers, she avoids media which display the speakers' physical figures. In her opinion, Muslim preachers' appearances might affect her judgement on the contents they deliver.

In contrast to the preference of the young informants, one of the older informants stated that his preferred medium proposes various choices, namely websites:

It is easy to search for the information on websites. There are many choices. I do not mind whether they are Malaysia or Brunei websites because we share the same mazhab. They are easy references for us the new converts. [trans] [Brunei. Informant AH]

It is expected that the older informants would select traditional media as their favourite media but Informant AH seemed to adjust to the evolution of technology comfortably. His preference was similar to the senior Sabah informants who also embraced modern technology. Similarly, websites were selected over the other media because the choices of Islamic-related websites are endless on the search engine, which agrees with the idea forwarded by Nor Shahriza and Norzelatun Rodhiah (2005) about websites being prevalent sources in the fast-moving world. With mature consideration, Muslim converts should know to restrict the search about Islam to reliable media, in this context websites containing precepts accepted by Malaysia and Brunei, as to avoid stumbling across wrong information.

This is because, when it comes to Islamic guidelines, both countries adhere to the same *mazhab* (religious sect) known as *mazhab al-Shafi'i*. This should reduce or avoid any contradiction in the practices which could confuse new converts like himself if they referred to different *mazhabs*.

As for more outgoing and technology savvy Muslim converts, media that have wide coverage and bigger volume would be their favourite choices, for example Facebook, which was the favourite media outlet of Informant HZR. She disclosed several reasons for favouring Facebook:

I like Facebook because I am active on it. It has a worldwide coverage, unlike television and radio. There is dhikr on Facebook which I learn and practice when I am down. [trans] [Brunei. Informant HZR]

Since the application can be installed on mobile phones, Facebook has increased its access for millions of users, making it one of the most famous and relevant social media platforms today. This allows the users to socialise virtually with people from all over the world. At the same time, it might be convenient to receive information about Islam from endless sources. Informant HZR provided an example of Islamic *dhikr* (a rhythmic repetition of the name of God or His attributes), of which she gained from Facebook and she recited it to elevate her motivation.

CONCLUSION

It is not an exaggeration to estimate that a great majoritarian audience are active media users, based on their active involvements in media use and preferences in *da'wah*. This is the courtesy of media features, either traditional or social, that are always broadening thus satisfying the needs for knowledge seeking related to Islam. Therefore, the media are envisioned to continuously be the 'alternative classroom' for the audience and users as 'students' to receive *da'wah* from the preachers. The audience and users have the power of choosing their favourite media platforms based on their *da'wah* goals; content reliability, technicality or interactivity.

The audience who displays awareness towards the status of Islamic information may prefer more reliable media, in the effort to minimise, if not erase, misunderstanding. From one point of view, traditional media are deemed more reliable in disseminating *da'wah* due to strict censorship on fact-checking, thorough editorial policy and qualified preachers. The fixed airtime schedules of traditional media make great convenience for the audiences who would enjoy watching their favourite preachers on the subscription-based television channels such as Oasis and Al-Hijrah. Meanwhile, the flexible quality of modern media can be the ultimate choice

among social media users who travel and commute frequently. Transportable media ensures a continuous learning for audience or users at large, even though they are outside or not at physical religious classes considering. The dynamics of social media provides non-stop da'wah in places and in time unreachable by traditional media, now more than ever, with wider internet coverage even in remote areas.

All in all, despite the similarities and differences, media have crucial functions in supplying information regarding Islam. Each platform has its own speciality favoured by individuals who appraise the importance of media in *da'wah* from various angles that influence their preferences; content reliability, technicality as well as interactivity. Nevertheless, the preferences of media should not be treated as 'fixed' to either traditional media or social media, rather the preferences are hitched to any media that is equipped with the a forementioned affordances become the everlasting references in the scope of Islamic da'wah.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The author declares no conflict of interest.

APPRECIATION

None.

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