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A modest proposal for conducting future research on media portrayals of Islam and Muslims in Indonesia

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Abstract

Recent issues on politics have been dominant in Indonesia that people are divided and become more intolerant of each other. Indonesia has the biggest Muslim population in the world and the role of Islam in Indonesian politics is significant. The current Indonesian government claim that moderate Muslims are loyal to the present political system while the opposing rivals who are often labelled 'intolerant and radical Muslims' by Indonesian mass media often disagree with the central interpretation of democracy in Indonesia. Studies on contributing factors and discourse strategies used in news and articles in secular and Islamic mass media which play a vital role in the construction of Muslim and Islamic identities in Indonesia are, therefore, recommended.

Keywords: critical discourse analysis, Islam, mass media portrayal, Muslim

Introduction

Issues on politics have recently become so influential in Indonesia that people are divided and become more intolerant of each other. Indonesia has the largest Muslim population in the world and therefore, the role of Islam in Indonesian politics is important. Indonesian Muslims who were mostly seen as moderate Muslims during President Suharto's New Order era in the 1960s-1990s have changed over time. Since the Indonesia Democratic Party of Struggle (PDIP) won the 2014 general election and Joko Widodo was elected the President of the

Republic of Indonesia, the Indonesians have been obviously divided into two massive opposing groups. The Indonesian government under the administration of President Joko Widodo claim that moderate Muslims are loyal to the present political system while the opposing rivals who are often labelled 'intolerant and radical Muslims' by Indonesian mass media often disagree with the dominant interpretation of democracy in Indonesia. The later opposing group demands the change of the secular political system in Indonesia to the *Khilafah*/caliphate political system that many Indonesians object to as it is potential to be more exclusive and more hostile to any non-believers of Islam in Indonesia and in the world (Gathmyr, R.M., Suryanto, H., Rezasyah, H., 2018; Masduqi, 2019).

From global perspectives, the two opposing groups have become the subject of several prominent articles in mass media. One of them was controversially entitled *Right Islam vs. Wrong Islam* which was written by the former President of the Republic of Indonesia, the late Abdurrahman Wahid. It has gained a lot of attention since its publicationin the Wall Street Journal in 2005 due to its polemical nature and Wahid's position as an international Islamic scholar and a global defender of pluralism (Masduqi, 2019). Furthermore, numerous scholars across disciplines have investigated mass media representation of Muslims and Islam through various lenses of analytical inquiry and across varying geopolitical contexts, which include: North America (Ibrahim, 2010; Kumar, 2010; Said, 1980; Shaheen, 2009), Europe (Ehrkamp, 2010; Poole, 2002), Latin America (Ahlin and Carler, 2011), Oceanian countries (Ewart, 2012; Kabir, N, 2011; Kabir, S, 2010; Patil, 2015), Asia (Ahmed, 2010, 2012; Green, 2013), and Indonesia (Gathmyr et al., 2018; Irawan, 2017; Santoso, Abdullah, Sjuhro, & Maryani, 2019). Although there has been a considerable body of research, a methodical analysis of literature that gives readers a more detailed, objective understanding of mass media portrayals of Islam and Muslims is still rare and therefore, needs to be conducted.

Mass Media Portrayals and Critical Discourse Analysis

Mass media play a vital role in the construction and distribution of ideologies (Gitlin, 1980; Hall, 1990) and therefore, contribute to the whole cultural production of knowledge (Poole, 2002). The stories and images in mass media give symbols through which we construct a common culture and through the adoption of which we put ourselves into the culture (Van Dijk, 1991). Several studies have shown mass media to articulate dominant social values, ideologies and developments, and that these characteristics often lead to misrepresentation or stereotypical portrayals of minorities in the media (Hall, 1990, 1992a, 1992b; Saha, 2012; Van Dijk, 1991). Today, of all the minorities in world affairs, Muslims and Islam are at the core of criticisms and debates. There is a dominant antagonistic view against Muslims and Islam

across many societies, with the most strained sociopolitical relationships being witnessed in America (Ahmed & Matthes, 2016; Powell, 2011; Kumar, 2010).

One research discipline working in the area of minorities portrayals in mass media is critical discourse analysis. Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) as an analytical tool is a powerful means for revealing social and political issues, and therefore it has been extensively used to investigate social issues of power, power abuse, discrimination and social inequality and injustice. One of the strengths of CDA is its ability to reveal how certain minority individuals or groups are discriminated against in texts. In CDA, certain individuals or groups are discursively discriminated against when they are presented or depicted negatively using discriminatory discourse strategies (Blackledge, 2005; Fairclough and Wodak, 1997; Flowerdew, Li, &Trans, 2002; Irawan, 2017; Irawan and Adnan, 2018; Khosravinik, 2009; Van Dijk, 1993b, 2002; Wodak and Reisigl, 1999, 2001, 2007). The discriminatory discourse strategies, such as 'metaphor', 'scapegoating' and 'lexicalisation', are effectively used to construct prejudice, stereotype and other negative presentations (Flowerdew et al., 2002). In texts, the text producers always present themselves positively and depict others negatively. This is popularly known as *'the ideological square'*,a theoretical model for analysing texts in mass media that identify ideological strategies used to differentiate characteristics of social groups (Van Dijk, 2006b).

Recommendations for Future Research

As stated in the background, even though there have been substantial previous studies, a systematic analysis of literature that gives readers a more detailed, objective understanding of mass media representation of Muslims and Islam is still sporadic and therefore, needs to be conducted more extensively. Studies using the ideological square as an analytical tool toexamine discourse strategies used in news and articles in the secular and Islamic media which play a vital role in the construction of Muslim and Islamic identities in Indonesia, the country with the biggest Muslim population, are recommended. Hence, future researchers need to discuss contributing factors that might impact on mass media portrayals of Islam and Muslims in Indonesia such as the different cultural, social, and religious backgrounds of the subscribers/readers of the mass media.

By investigating the relationship between discourse strategies and contributing factors of the mass media in the portrayals of Islam and Muslims in Indonesia, the future researchers will attempt not only to obtain a better understanding of the representation of Islam and Muslims in Indonesia, but also to contribute to cultural studies, Islamic studies, and linguistic studies using critical discourse analysis which could be replicable in other developing countries with

similar cultural contexts.

The findings of the future research will potentially provide guidance to media readers, Islamic organization followers, press, public policymakers, government officials, and academics on how to better understand the portrayals of Islam and Muslims in Indonesian mass media and what discourse strategies the mass media have been used to portray Islam and Muslims in Indonesia. Finally, the research results are expected to help people in general, regardless of their religions, understand the true image of *Islam rahmatan lil 'aalamin* orIslam which is good for all human beings, nature, and the environment.

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