

Ustadz Abdul Somad and the Future of Online Da'wa in Indonesia

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Abstract:

Rapid developments in the area of information technology have transformed the nature of social interactions among people in the world. Da'wa, as a form of social interaction aimed at conveying the teachings of Islam towards all people in the world, changes as the platform of undertaking the Da'wa itself, the available media of interactions, change. The aim of this paper is to analyze the strategy of Ustadz Abdul Somad (UAS), the currently most popular preacher in Indonesia, in utilizing the internet for the purpose of Da'wa (Islamic propagation). Findings reveal that UAS's success lies on his ability to persuade his audience to record his sermons and post them individually to the internet, especially on video-sharing platform of [youTube.com](https://www.youtube.com). Abdul Somad even claimed himself as a preacher of million viewers. However, his sermons are mostly uploaded to the internet by his audiences. Abdul Somad does not rely on professional team to craft his sermons and post them online. This strategy of allowing his audience to create and share user generated contents is proven to highly successful. Not only that Abdul Somad is able to secure millions of viewers online, it also helps him to multiply the proliferation of his sermons with relatively no cost.

Keywords: *Da'wa, social media, Ustadz Abdul Somad*

A. Introduction

Da'wa is responsible to the widespread of Islam from the Arabian Peninsula to the rest of the globe. The dissemination of Islam relies solely on Da'wa as it is one of many obligations a Muslim must undertake in his/her life. How Da'wa is practiced among Muslims thus depends on the individual Muslims who practice it since there is no rigid standard of doing such task. However, in doing Da'wa, a Muslim must obey the basic principle of Da'wa as mentioned on the Qur'an which consists of three parts; knowledge, good manners, and polite dialog.¹

In the most general words, Da'wa refers to any act of conveying the teachings of Islam to others. Since every Muslim is obliged to perform Da'wa, Da'wa is indeed a very important aspect of Islam not only because the widespread of Islam as a religion relies on it but also because Da'wa could be interpreted in an unlimited number of ways. This fact that Da'wa is open for relatively free interpretation is problematic in many ways because of the possibility of conveying less credible interpretation of Islamic teachings.

Muslim scholars have different opinions about the practice of Da'wa, especially about who could practice the tasks effectively. Some believe that Da'wa must be undertaken by just every Muslims according to his/her capability. Some, however, believe firmly that Da'wa must be practiced by those who has the authority in the matter of Islamic teachings. Despite having different opinions, most scholar believe that every Muslim entitled the right to perform Da'wa provided that she or he is confident about the validity of the message of his/her Da'wa.²

The implementation of Da'wa is also related closely to the notion of *amar 'ruf nahi mungkar* (commanding good and forbidding evil). This specific

¹ QS. An-Nahl: 125

² The questions of who could practice Da'wa relate closely to the idea of authority in the interpretation of Islamic sacred texts, thus, Islamic teachings. Since after the era of the prophet, the issue of authority among Muslims have been a source of contentions. Since Islamic authority is contentious, preaching the interpretation of a set of Islamic teachings is also contentious. While most Muslims believe that making interpretation of Islamic texts even regarding to the most mundane matter is limited to scholars equipped with sets of Islamic basic knowledge, preaching those interpretation is not limited to scholars and every one is allowed to do that as long as he/she comply with the three basic principles of Da'wa mentioned on the Qur'an chapter an-Nahl verse 125. Further discussion regarding Islamic authority, please read, Frédéric Volpi and Bryan S. Turner, "Introduction: Making Islamic Authority Matter," *Theory, Culture & Society* 24, no. 2 (March 2007): 1–19, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0263276407074992>.

teaching is unique to Islam³ and has been invoking debates among Muslims and non-Muslims about how far can Muslims go to command rights and forbid evil since it is likely that this phrase is translated into taking laws to people's hand. Da'wa, in lights of the idea of "commanding rights and forbidding evil" is likely to be interpreted according to one's political and social interests.

The notion of Da'wa is integral to the overall teachings of Islam. It is not possible to separate the two from each other because Da'wa is the blood-life of Islam. However, exercising Da'wa means that people who undertake the act of Da'wa must comply to the demands of the public as his/her potential audience. If the public want a preacher to be more of an entertainer then that preacher must comply and try to incorporate certain characteristics to his/her sermons that the public would find suitable.

The seemingly limitless definition of Da'wa in its practical understanding would eventually lead to defining Da'wa as how Da'wa is applied. It means that Da'wa refers to means available for undertaking it. Da'wa, thus, relates closely to the media available to actually practice the Da'wa. Before mass media, Da'wa was conducted directly. It could be understood as a process where a speaker speaks about some Islamic teachings to other person or people.

In the age of mass media, this pattern changed. Conventional newspapers, magazines, and other types of printed mass media have enabled Da'I (preachers) to switch from direct Da'wa to mediated Da'wa. However, the emergence of electronic media in the forms of television and radio also changed the practice of Da'wa.

Both electronic and printed mass media have one thing in common, it is that they are essentially not interactive. Rapid development of the information technology allows Muslims to practice Da'wa in ways unimaginable just few decades ago. Globalization brought new modes of interactions since people from different places in the world can share information in real-time with essentially no cost. In this regard, it is relatively safe to say that the emergence of cyberworlds facilitated by the internet is responsible in the constant reshaping of social interaction among Muslims and between Muslims and non-Muslims within the framework of Da'wa.

³ Look, Michael Cook, *Commanding Right and Forbidding Wrong in Islamic Thought* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001).

Recent survey conducted by the Indonesia Internet Service Provider Association (APJI; Asosiasi Penyelenggara Jasa Internet) stated that active internet users in the country is estimated to be around 143 million people.⁴ That is indeed a huge number of potential audiences for Da'wa by many preachers competing to win public votes. The relation between internet and religion is, however, still in the process of maturation. This paper thus looks at such relationship from the lenses of culturalist practice in which the primary aim is to reveal the use of internet by certain group to shape and frame religious messages to its' targeted audiences and how they respond to such messages.⁵

B. Cyber Islam and Da'wa

The relation between religion and technology is as old as the history of mankind. As the only species capable of making advance technologies to tackle challenges of the nature, mankind has been progressing since day one of its' existence on earth. In the aftermath of the industrial revolution in the eighteenth century in West Europe, such progress has been so rapid that it is now very hard to catch up with. New inventions would not last very long since other new inventions would renew the former. The cycle of inventions and reinventions becomes anything but news.

Muslims in pasts enjoyed great benefits from being relatively more advanced than others during their time. Islam was a dominant power in the world stage during periods known as the golden age of Islam. Those periods were marked by many conquests by Muslim powers over lands in almost every part of the globe.⁶ The Muslims had enjoyed a millennium of being in charge on the world stage politics due to their capacity in utilizing technology. However, as any power that ever reigned on Earth, the Muslims lost their place during the emergence of industrial revolution in West Europe and found themselves to be what the Russia's Tsar Nicholas I called "the Sick man of Europe".⁷

⁴ "Asosiasi Penyelenggara Jasa Internet Indonesia," accessed February 18, 2019, <https://apjii.or.id/content/read/39/342/Hasil-Survei-Penetrasi-dan-Perilaku-Pengguna-Internet-Indonesia-2017>.

⁵ For a brief account on the development of research on the interrelation between religion and the internet, please see Heidi A Campbell, "Surveying Theoretical Approaches within Digital Religion Studies," *New Media & Society* 19, no. 1 (January 2017): 15–17, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1461444816649912>.

⁶ A very brief account on the history of Islam on the global stage, including the emergence and its' demise could be seen in Ed Husain, *The House of Islam: A Global History* (New York: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2018).

⁷ Ed Husain, 106.

The glory days of Islam emerged from the core tenets of the religion regarding the purpose of life for Muslims. Islamic teachings are full of notions that glorify the capacity of mankind to control the earth for the best interest of humanity. The Qur'an even stated that mankind is the best creation of God, the *ahsan at-takwim* (best creature) that God has ever created.⁸ However, such notions of immense potentials of mankind are also followed with cautions. Mankind, according to the Qur'an, could also become much worse than the worst evil. In other verse of the Qur'an, it is also stated that everyone is misfortunate but those who enjoin good and forbidding evil. In other words, everybody is doomed unless s/he takes part in the act of Da'wa.⁹

Weismann suggested that Da'wa, instead of Jihad, is the primary backbone of modern organized Islamic actions around the world. However, Da'wa was a relatively neglected topic in the history of Islam. It, perhaps, relates to certain believes that the spread of Islam was facilitated mainly by traders and armies rather than religious clerics. It is still little that has been known about the nature of Da'wa both among Muslims and between Muslims and non-Muslims. According to Weismann, the contemporary nature of Da'wa in the Islamic worlds could be summed as a holly struggle to defeat the combination western Christian missionary and the ideology of materialism¹⁰

Da'wa on the cyberworld tends to be more fluid since the so-called audiences have a wide range of options from which they want to learn Islamic teachings. In the early days of Da'wa on the cyberworld, Da'wa was in a constant struggle for authority between brands of Islamic teachings. It was a contestation between old and new authorities in which technical literacy and creativity tended to outsmart those who are less sophisticated with digital technology.¹¹ This period happened mainly when infrastructure for high-speed internet connection had not yet available for everyone. It was during the text-based Da'wa where only a handful of people with high literacy skill could access the relatively new Da'wa phenomenon.

However, with the emergence of high-speed internet connection that allows multimedia contents, competition for authority on the cyberworld become

⁸ William B Brown, trans., "The Holy Quran," n.d., 320.

⁹ William B Brown, 323.

¹⁰ Itzchak Weismann, "Framing a Modern Umma: The Muslim Brothers' Evolving Project of Da'wa," *Sociology of Islam* 3, no. 3-4 (February 2, 2015): 146-69, <https://doi.org/10.1163/22131418-00303008>.

¹¹ Gary R. Bunt, *Hashtag Islam: How Cyber-Islamic Environments Are Transforming Religious Authority*, Islamic Civilization and Muslim Networks (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2018), 19.

more intense as people with any background, including those who lack the necessary skill to craft sophisticated online contents, could compete with a relatively equal footing. Today, an amateur video clip from ordinary people could win more “votes” than a professional video made by established organizations since there is no agreement on what constitute a good Da’wa material.

The advancement of information technology not only benefits the Da’is as it allows them to extend the reach of their messages to wider audiences. As the audience of the Da’wa, the Mad’u, became media literate and media savvy, the growing tendency to rely on digital media by the Da’I could potentially lead to, what Rahman said as, the death of the the Da’i.¹² the Da’is are losing their power due to more equality brought by the internet. On the cyberworld, the boundary that once separated the preachers (da’i) from the preached (mad’u) is becoming more and more blurry.

The core purpose of Da’wa, regardless of the media used to exercise it, is to influence people to follow Islamic way of life. What constitute an Islamic way of life is, however, vague and even contradictory. What a brand of Islamic teachings perceive Islamic could be un-Islamic in the eye of other brands of Islamic teachings. This contradiction, however, has been around since the early days of the religion. In many occasions, differences between understanding of Islam among Muslims led to conflicts.

Da’wa on the cyberworld diversify as preachers find new ways to maximize the reach of their sermons and lectures. New methods and techniques of conveying the teachings of Islam emerge since preachers also find themselves in a competition with other preachers. The need to practice Da’wa in team rather than practice it individually emerged since many preachers who excel at religious matters are not expert on digital technology. The meeting of preachers and professionals in digital technology has led to the need to compromise authoritative claims about what makes good Da’wa in the eyes of Muslim audiences. In short, Da’wa has been transformed from a simple act of conveying Islamic teachings into a full-scale enterprise of influencing people.¹³

¹² Fazlul Rahman, “The Death of the Da’i: The Autonomization of Religious Messages within Cyberspace,” *Ulumuna* 22, no. 2 (November 17, 2018): 255–76, <https://doi.org/10.20414/ujis.v22i2.313>.

¹³ Mellor’s observation on the Da’wa of Muslim Brotherhoods in Egypt shows that Da’wa as a social movement needs to adjust to the need of people where the preachers operate. Mellor reveals that in the Egyptian context, Muslim Brotherhood preachers would

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Despite the close connection between Da'wa and Jihad, as argued by Weismann earlier in this paper, Da'wa constitute the main backbone for most of organized Islamic actions in the modern worlds. Da'wa, however, is not immune from getting hijacked by extremists to further their goals of waging terrorism in the disguise of holy war. In this context, the blurry boundary separating Da'wa and jihad is exploited and thus it leads to the disempowerment of Da'is. Public hate generated by such exploitations would then paves ways to the emergence of catastrophic conflicts.

Awan, for example, noted that the widespread use of social media among youth Muslims, including those who feel disenfranchised, is a great opportunity for extremist groups such as Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) to recruit new terrorists. ISIS has been very successful in reaching young Muslims from non-Muslim countries in West Europe to be the extension of their army. ISIS, according to Awan, relies heavily on the use of social media platform such as YouTube, Facebook and Twitter to spread the professionally crafted images and videos to entice young Muslims to take part in its' cause.¹⁴

ISIS's exploitation of Da'wa has proven to be extremely successful. ISIS could punch far above its' weight thanks to many social media platforms that act as its' extensions in pursuing its' goals. ISIS uses three level of framing strategy, namely: Diagnostics, Prognostics, and Motivational framing strategy to attract supports from a wide array of Muslims on the internet. It diagnoses what it calls a deviation within Muslim society and propose simple answer for its' eradication. ISIS continuous media campaigns pose a clear white and black picture about its' intended goal where mankind is led by a single supreme leader, a caliphate, under strict Islamic law.

ISIS's way of doing Da'wa as part of their larger jihad project is divisive to Muslims in general. However, such divisive Da'wa is not so fruitful that a large proportion of Muslims are attracted and join the group in doing unimaginable atrocities on daily basis. The ISIS way of doing Da'wa is successful, however, in mainstreaming the more conservative and fundamental interpretation of Islam since conservatives and fundamentalists

have to adapt to new challenges brought by globalization. The abandonment of isolationist politics by the Muslim Brotherhood in order to reach wider audiences for its cause during the period of 2011 and 2013. See, Noha Mellor, *Voice of the Muslim Brotherhood: Dacwa, Discourse and Political Communication* (London ; New York: Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group, 2018).

¹⁴ Imran Awan, "Cyber-Extremism: Isis and the Power of Social Media," *Society* 54, no. 2 (April 2017): 138–49, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s12115-017-0114-0>.

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look moderate if compared to ISIS. Progressive brands of Islam, furthermore, are labelled bad names and are targets of ISIS hate-speech and violence.

This imagined Islamdom spreads across the globe through social media platforms such as Facebook and Twitter and add to the complexities of relation between competing brands of Islam. It is already a murky relationship and adding new player into the game is risky as it may lead to a new level of competition. Regarding this, the cyberworld is certainly the most interesting and important playing ground for preachers.

C. Ustadz Abdul Somad and the Indonesian Cyberspace

The beginning of the cyberspace in Indonesia has contributed to the fall of Suharto's authoritarian regime. Mass mobilization initiated by students during the 1990s relied heavily on mailing list on internet to organize strategy among students' leaders. Not only did internet provide platforms for information sharing, it also provided relatively real-time monitoring capability to protesters.

Not only in Indonesia, in many parts of the world, internet, especially social media, are also responsible for the success of overthrowing authoritarian regime. People use internet to set up and execute plans more effectively. Most importantly, many of those governments, like Egypt for example, do not possess the capability to contain the flood of information provided by the emergence of internet.

Before the emergence of high-speed internet connection which allows the proliferation of information with videos and moving pictures, text-based information was the norm. During the text-based internet era, only a handful of professionals are capable of harnessing the true power of internet due to many factors such as (1) the audience of the internet was still tiny, and (2) skills to craft materials to be circulated is rare.

When high-speed internet is finally coming, everybody is about in a relatively equal footing. Both professional journalists and mere citizens have the same opportunity to win public attentions. It takes only a phone with camera and some megabytes of internet package plans to generate video contents that can go viral. High-speed connection is really democratizing the opportunity once only possessed by a tiny minority of people of which corporate media journalists are dominant players.

The popularity of Abdul Somad among Indonesian is located within the intersection of the rise of cheap high-speed internet (and internet infrastructure) and the maturation of democracy in Indonesia. High speed

internet allows popular figures like Abdul Somad to circulate their message with relatively easy and the process of maturation of democracy allows such message to circulate more extensively. Add the ever-increasing number of internet users in Indonesia into the equation and we will get popular preachers like Abdul Somad.

Nowadays, it hard to argue that Abdul Somad is the most popular preachers in Indonesia. With millions of views and likes on popular sites such as YouTube.com, Facebook.com and Twitter.com, Abdul Somad is perhaps the most successful preacher to utilize internet for Da'wa or Islamic propagation. Abdul Somad has great number of followers in the real world as well as on the online realm.

However, Abdul Somad does not rely on creative media team to craft internet content. He himself does not even post things online very often. His twitter account, for example, contains only few posts where he wrote mostly about the saying (hadith) of the Prophet Muhammad pbuh. However, it is his fans that post most of the contents that makes Abdul Somad so famous in the country.

Abdul Somad's source of fame comes mainly from videos posted on YouTube.com. Concerning this, he even joked about himself as a preacher of million veiwers. The topics of his posted sermons ranges from mundane issues about jokes to serious political debates about the constitutions. Abdul Somad comments on almost any issues of public interests. And while it is relatively easier to comment about almost anything superficially than to write serious and rigorous work on certain topic, the first is more rewarding.

Abdul Somad, however, consistently promote three things related to the role of Muslim leaders who hold public authority. They are (1) enforcement of Zakat regulation (sharia by law), (2) enforcement of jilbab by laws, and (3) Islamic subjects in public schools. A quick survey on popular media site like YouTube.com will show that Abdul Somad's is consistent in preaching these subjects.

In this regard, Abdul Somad's political stand point fell within the domain of post-Islamist movement in which he actively promotes the idea of securing power through democratic process of ballot box. According to many of Somad's videos posted online, Muslims should have the privilege to lead because they are the majority. In Somad's view, in a democratic society, rule by the majority should not be regarded as a problem.

The real success of Abdul Somad as both an online preacher and off-line preacher perhaps lies in his ability to deliver fun and easy-to-understand sermons and his ability to ensure people to share his sermons to the online world. In many occasions, Abdul Somad admitted that he himself is not very active in the online world but his online followers are.

The phenomenon of popular online preachers such as Abdul Somad reflects the new rules of popular culture in Indonesia as well as in the world. In this new rules, mainstream news and media outlets are constantly being challenged by user generated contents due to the fact that producing video contents is very easy nowadays. For example, in an interview with one of Indonesia's most famous television Hosts, Karni Ilyas, Somad stated that in order to decrease the political tensions following the presidential elections in 2019, all people with huge number of "followers" must provide example how to behave politically. Somad also stated that those people include actresses and actors.

Abdul Somad strategy of proliferating his sermons widely throughout the internet, once again, is by persuading his audience to take recording on him delivering sermons and post them on video-sharing platform such as YouTube.com. This strategy is brilliant, indeed. Because not only that his messages can be share widely, in this way, the number of shared videos online is multiplied thousands of times, if not millions, because each one of his audience is urged to make a recording and share it individually.

This strategy, however, comes with weaknesses and limitations. When, for example, Abdul Somad delivered a sermon of two and a half hours, his audiences may record it but when posting it to video-sharing platforms like YouTube.com, his followers would likely to cut and edit that recorded sermons into shorter pieces of video clips and add interesting caption to it. In this way, Abdul Somad's true intention of giving such sermons is likely to be distorted and misunderstood. It is not an exception, therefore, to get an impression that Abdul Somad talks and comments on almost anything.

To ensure that his sermons are understood properly by his online viewers, Abdul Somad frequently calls his audience to listen to his full sermons. He even uses this to defend himself from accusation against him made by his rivals or 'haters'. Regarding this, Abdul Somad would usually mock those who disagree with him as people with limited amount of internet package plans (*kurang paket data*).

In the future, Abdul Somad's strategy of online Da'wa (Propagation) might become rules for other preachers to follow, not only because it is proven to be effective but also it is way easier that to organize a professional team to craft online contents and share the alone. There will be more people like Abdul Somad, who have the skill needed to deliver fun and easy-to-understand subjects, that will garner public votes by persuading their audiences to duplicate and multiply their message by creating user generated contents.

D. Conclusion

Abdul Somad source of fame as the most popular preacher in Indonesia nowadays comes mainly from videos on him delivering sermons about almost anything a Muslim could expect. Abdul Somad even claimed himself as a preacher of million viewers. However, his sermons are mostly uploaded to the internet by his audiences. Abdul Somad does not rely on professional team to craft his sermons and post them online.

This strategy of allowing his audience to create and share user generated contents is proven to highly successful. Not only that Abdul Somad is able to secure millions of viewers online, it also helps him to multiply the proliferation of his sermons with relatively no cost.

A closer look into this phenomenon reveals that the success of the implementation of this strategy lies on several factors such as the growing numbers of internet users in the country and the rise of cheap high-speed internet connection and its' overall supporting infrastructures. Cheap high-speed internet connection allow people to enjoy video contents with relatively very low cost while the rapid development of information technology allows people to buy gadgets (such as smart phones) in relatively very low price.

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