

## **Strategy for Constructing Religious Authority in the Digital Pulpit: Study of Three Indonesian Preachers on YouTube**

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### **Abstract**

This article discusses the strategies of three YouTube Indonesian Islamic preachers in constructing their religious authority in the digital pulpit. YouTube accommodates Islamic preachers to produce da'wah content that is accessible to the wider community. In this case, these Islamic preachers not only convey various Islamic information and knowledge, but also seek to construct religious authority in the digital public sphere. The three Islamic preachers examined in this study are Ustadz Steven Indra Wibowo, KH Abdul Syukur Yasin and Habib Husein Ja'far Al Hadar. They have different backgrounds and characters. Using mediatization approach and netnography method to examine the da'wah content on the YouTube channels of the three Islamic preachers, this study concludes there are three kinds of strategies they used in constructing authority, namely 1) identity commodification strategy, 2) network collaboration strategy, and 3) interactive communication strategy. These three kinds of strategies become supporting factors for the preachers in constructing their Islamic authority through the YouTube platform.

**Keywords:** Da'wah YouTube; digital pulpit; mediatization of religion; Islamic preachers; religious authority; netnography

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**Introduction:** In recent times, interest in studies of religious authorities and new media has shown a significant increase among scholars. Studies around this topic are part of the views of scholars who generally agree that the advent of internet-based media has revolutionized and transformed people's lives in various ways, starting from how we socialize, work, study, and even carry out various religious activities (Campbell & Teusner, 2011). These things take place in a new space called "cyberspace" which is an extension of real life in society.

The study of religious authority in the new media cannot be separated from the discussion on cyber-religion. The term "cyber-religion" was introduced by Brenda E. Brasher to see the presence of religious organizations and various religious activities in this semi-imaginary place (Brasher, 2001: 29). Helland described this "cyber-religion" with two concepts namely "religion online" and "online religion". Briefly, "religion online" describes the religious content available on the Web, while "online religion" describes the Internet-mediated religious practices and rituals (Helland, 2004a). These concepts comprehensively describe how "cyber-religion" really has similarities with religion in the real world.

As Young said, the first axis that stretches between religion online and online religion is the availability of religious information and participation in religious activities (Young, 2004:94). In this case, it can be seen how official religious institutions are massively present in cyberspace and are trying to establish their presence, control and authority in this new environment. Apart from that, there were also new actors outside official religious institutions to express various religious discourses. Thus, the presence of new media as a form of computer-mediated communication, as Helland stated, accommodates individuals and groups who wish to "be" religious outside the control of an organized religious institutions (Helland, 2004b:23).

In the context of Muslim society, the presence of new internet-based media has given birth to what is known as the Cyber-Islamic Environment. As Bunt said, Cyber-Islamic Environment can be defined as a computer-mediated sphere that accommodates various activities related to Islam and Muslims (Bunt, 2005:14). A new Islamic public sphere is born in new media that accommodates the spread of Islamic ideas, identities and discourses (Eickelman and Anderson, 2003:14-16).

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The birth of a new Islamic public sphere on new media, especially through social media, has contributed to the birth of new patterns in religious life. Islamic preachers take advantage of this new sphere as a medium for disseminating da'wah content containing various Islamic knowledge and guidance for religious life. On the other hand, it is easier for people to get Islamic knowledge through social media. Along with that, da'wah which is understood as a process of transmitting Islamic knowledge and guidance is carried out through new patterns. Da'wah activities have shifted to a new landscape, namely social media which has now become a place for many people to perform various activities virtually.

In particular what has happened to Muslim communities in Indonesia, the availability of various Islamic discourses on various social media platforms has changed the process of transmitting Islamic knowledge. The Muslim community, especially the Muslim youth, is turning to social media to learn about religion. The role of Islamic religious education institutions, both formal and non-formal, is slowly but surely getting reduced (Bamualim, Latief and Bakar, 2018:26). The shift in the role of social media as a means of learning religion is a challenge but also an opportunity for the presence of Islamic preachers to provide various religious knowledge in a new way and according to the needs of the community. In short, social media has become a new space for the production and reproduction of Islamic knowledge for the Indonesian Muslim community (Hasan, 2020).

This phenomenon has many implications, including the birth of new Islamic authorities or, in Anderson's view, new religious interpreters (Anderson, 2003). By producing da'wah content on various social media platforms, Islamic preachers seek to construct religious authority. They turn social media into a digital pulpit, which, according to Bunt, is a place for Islamic preachers to project their authority (Bunt, 2005:168). In addition, the presence of Islamic preachers through various new media platforms has formed a new pattern of relationship and communication between the ulama and the Muslim community which is more participatory, open and interactive (Syahputra, 2018).

Various da'wah content in the digital pulpit reinforces the idea of a new visibility and picture of Islam in the modern world. As Göle said, Islamic actors in the modern world use global communication

networks, engage in public debates, follow consumption patterns, learn market rules, enter into secular time, get acquainted with values of individuation, professionalism, and consumerism, and reflect upon their new practices (Göle, 2002:174). These Islamic preachers on social media are new young creative agents that offer innovative da'wah models for the new Muslim middle class (Hasan, 2009:238). As creative agents, they are looking for the suitable model in preaching so that religious teaching can reach the wider community and be in accordance with the contemporary demands.

Continuing the discussion about religion in the virtual space, this article will explore how the new media accommodates Islamic actors in Indonesia, both traditional authorities and newcomers, in their efforts to produce various Islamic knowledge and guidance. Through da'wah content uploaded on the YouTube platform, they seek to construct their Islamic authority in order to obtain virtual consensus from social media users. Moreover, in this article, it will be shown what strategies they use in an effort to construct Islamic authority through their YouTube channels.

To explore these issues, this article discusses three figures of Indonesian Islamic preachers who are actively producing da'wah contents through the YouTube platform. They are Ustadz Steven Indra Wibowo, KH Abdul Syakur Yasin and Habib Husein Ja'far Al Hadar. As Islamic preachers, they actively use social media, especially YouTube platform, as a means of da'wah.

## **METHODOLOGY**

In exploring the three preachers, this study uses mediatization approach and netnographic methodology. The mediatization approach is used as an analytical framework to look at the changes that have occurred in the relationship between Islam and the media.

In this research, I combine two mediatization traditions developed by scholars. The first tradition, which is called the institutionalist tradition, claims that media logic has played an important role in shaping social domains such as religion, in which religion is increasingly incorporated into media logic, both institutional regulation, symbolic content, and individual practices (Hjarvard, 2008, 2012, 2013).

In contrast, the second tradition, namely the social-constructivist tradition, sees that the media is not the only dominant factor in the process of social transformation, but co-exists with various other

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socio-cultural processes, such as globalization, individualization and commercialization. This tradition focuses on how the efforts of actors carry out daily communication practices as a shaping factor of society and highlights how communicative constructions change from culture and society (Krotz, 2009, 2014; Krotz & Hepp, 2011). From these two traditions, I will explore how these Islamic actors adapt to the logic of the media in an effort to construct their religious authority through communication practices on YouTube social media.

Meanwhile the netnographic method is used as a methodological framework in viewing culture that takes place in the digital space. As explained by Kozinets, the netnographic approach is a new qualitative research method that adapts ethnographic research techniques in the study of culture and community that takes place through computer-mediated communication (Kozinets, 2010:3-4). Through this netnographic method, I will explore the YouTube channels of the three preachers, the da'wah contents they upload, and how the various activities occur, both within the channel itself and in each content. The notes generated from the exploration are then analyzed critically by utilizing relevant theoretical studies.

## **RESULTS AND DISCUSSION**

### **The diversity of YouTube Indonesian Islamic preachers**

The three Islamic preachers who will be discussed show their uniqueness and different backgrounds. The first figure, Ustadz Steven Indra Wibowo, hereinafter referred to as Koh Steven, is one of the Islamic preachers who can be categorized as newcomers. His background as a Chinese Muslim convert is also interesting to discuss in his attempt to construct Islamic authority. The second figure, KH Abdul Syakur Yasin, hereinafter referred to as Buya Syakur, can represent the ulama or traditional authority groups. Although his da'wah content on YouTube still shows the old style of delivery, he is still gaining popularity in the midst of new media. And the third figure, Habib Husein Ja'far Al Hadar, hereinafter referred to as Habib Husein, was chosen because of his background as a descendant of the Prophet Muhammad and at the same time his age in the millennial group. His da'wah content is delivered in a fresher style and tries to adapt to the

world of young people, where social media is part of the life of this group.

Even though they have different characters and backgrounds, these three preachers try to play the same role as authority holders. In this case, referring to Krämer and Schmidtke, the Islamic authority holders are those who have the authority to explain about Islam and its teachings (*intellectual aspect*) and those who are able to become guides for the people on various issues (*spiritual-charisma aspect*) (Krämer and Schmidtke, 2006:1,9).

The presence of these three preachers shows the fragmentation of Islamic authorities in social media. The fragmentation of authority in Islam does not only occur in social media, but, as said by Saat and Burhani, is a feature throughout Islamic history (Saat & Burhani, 2020). This is partly due to the absence of a hierarchical structure of authority such as that of the Catholic Church. So, what is meant as an Islamic authority can refer to different figures or institutions, such as an individual *ulama* (*ustadz*) or an Islamic organization. In the context of the state bureaucracy, some *ustadz* serve as bureaucrats and receive appointments from the state so that they are often referred to as “official *ulama*”. Meanwhile in some other Islamic communities, Islamic authority can refer to the descendants of the Prophet (*habib*), *imam* or *marja'* (in Shia Islam), and caliph (in Ahmadiyya).

In the context of Islam, as mentioned by El Fadl, there is no single authoritative body other than Allah and the Prophet, but both are represented in a number of texts. So, it is this text that functions as the center of authority in Islam (El Fadl, 2001:38). Meanwhile, the Prophet Muhammad, because of his role as the recipient of Allah’s Revelation, was recognized as the authoritative voice representing Allah’s will and at the same time playing the role of authority in the earliest Muslim societies. Then, the question that arises is how can the messages of the source of authority survive and be preserved in the face of various changes and civilizations after the death of the Prophet Muhammad? And as a religious community that maintains the traditions and noble heritage of divine revelation, how can Islam itself survive if there is no authority to protect and maintain it? This is the crisis faced by the early Muslim community regarding issues of legitimacy and authority.

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The problem of the legitimacy of religious authority has led to the fragmentation of authority in Islam. Alatas notes that Islamic religious authorities and their role in cultivating a Muslim community revolving around the teachings of the Prophet can vary widely (Alatas, 2021:2). Everyone can claim to be connected to the Prophet and spread that claim to constitute a religious community. There was a reconstruction and representation of the Prophetic past by different actors, which resulted in various Islamic texts, practices, and institutions, and led to the birth of various forms of religious authority, from caliph and jurist to charismatic saint, holy warrior, and Sufi master.

Along with the increasing use of social media as a medium of da'wah, the diversity of Islamic preachers has shown a drastic increase. More and more Islamic preachers are trying to gain influence in the virtual Islamic community. Social media has presented new authorities with diverse characters, who seek to construct their religious authority.

**Leveraging the YouTube platform as a digital pulpit**

As mentioned at the beginning of this article, da'wah which is understood as an activity of transmitting Islamic knowledge is experiencing a changing landscape. Various da'wah activities can be easily found and accessed through various social media, including the YouTube platform. In other words, the YouTube platform can be understood as a digital pulpit for the dissemination of various religious discourses.

Following Habermas' idea of the public sphere (Habermas, 1993:30–31), YouTube can be said to be a new form of coffee houses and salons where various groups of people meet virtually, and freely upload various topics of conversation that can be accessed, refuted or affirmed by someone else. YouTube is a social media platform that facilitates users to share various content in audio-visual form. Every user has the same opportunity to access videos from other users, as well as share videos through their channel. In addition, users can also provide comments and responses (*like* and *dislike*) to a video that they access. Users can also build a network with a channel by means of subscribing.

The use of YouTube as a medium for delivering da'wah was carried out in various ways by the three preachers. In a mediatization

perspective, they adapt to the logic of the media to convey various Islamic knowledge through da'wah content uploaded via YouTube channels.

Koh Steven does not have a personal channel to upload videos of his da'wah or other religious activities. He and Mualaf Center Indonesia (MCI), an organization he founded, collaborated with the Vertizone TV channel, which became their media partner. As stated in the description on the YouTube channel, Vertizone TV is a channel with da'wah content, both studies, converts (*mualaf*), stories of *mualaf*, creeds (*shahada*) and various other content. This channel was created on June 29, 2014 before Koh Steven and MCI collaborated as media partners. Of the hundreds of videos uploaded since the Vertizone TV YouTube channel was created, the MCI logo first appeared in the video entitled "Jogja Kota Hijrah" (Jogja the Hijrah City) which was uploaded on August 24, 2017. And since then, almost all videos uploaded have always used the MCI and Vertizone TV logos. It seems that from then on Vertizone TV became a part of the official MCI channel, where Koh Steven was on it.

On that channel, the figure of Koh Steven first appeared in a short video uploaded on January 17, 2018. In the video, Koh Steven is shown guiding a young man named Andreas to perform the *shahada*. On February 2, 2018, a video entitled "Belajar Sholat di dalam Gereja" (Learning to *Shalat* in the Church) was uploaded, showing the figure of Koh Steven lecturing somewhere. Since then, Koh Steven's videos have often appeared on the channel, both recorded lectures and various activities with MCI. The channel also has a playlist with the name "Koh Steven Indra Wibowo" which contains videos of his lectures.

Different from Koh Steven, since 7 May 2017 Buya Syakur has a YouTube channel in his own name, namely the KH Buya Syakur Yasin MA channel, which is under the Wamimma TV label as official media. This channel is a means for uploading recorded videos of his lectures and for broadcasting *pengajian* or lectures given by him directly. Through this channel, the name of Buya Syakur is finally getting more and more widely known along with the increasing number of viewers of his video lectures. The use of his name as the name of the channel seems to be intentional to highlight him as the main character of this channel.

Meanwhile, as part of the millennial group, Habib Husein utilizes various social media platforms to convey his da'wah. Prior to his

presence through social media, he was a prolific writer, whose writings were published in various media. Then he used social media, as he said, to meet young people who now gather more in the social media space. From this awareness, Habib Husein began to actively use social media. Specifically, through the YouTube platform, Habib Husein has several channels created with different segments, namely the Jeda Nulis channel, the Cahaya Untuk Indonesia channel and the Pemuda Tersesat channel. The Jeda Nulis and the Pemuda Tersesat channel became a means to convey discussions on topics related to everyday life from an Islamic perspective. Meanwhile, Cahaya Untuk Indonesia channel is used to discuss Islamic topics in more depth. Apart from going through these three channels, Habib Husein also often fills in on other YouTube channels.

The differences in the ways and styles of presenting themselves by the three preachers on the YouTube platform are indeed very possible. In accordance with its characteristics, YouTube as a participatory cultural site allows its users to express themselves, both individually and collectively, as well as collaborate and interact with other users (Mueller, 2014:10). Various activities that can be carried out by users show how YouTube supports the occurrence of a “participatory culture” in the media, which is understood as the antithesis of consumer culture by rejecting consumer passivity in the capitalist system, and inviting individuals to play an active role in the production, dissemination and interpretation of cultural objects. This concept was first developed by Jenkins, an American media expert, to interpret the changes in media industry. And in the era of new media technology, consumers have the opportunity to participate in archiving, annotating, customizing, and even redistributing media content in new ways (Jenkins, 2006:135–136; Jenkins *et al.*, 2009:8–9).

The opportunity to be present and participate in the new media space, especially YouTube, is wide open for anyone. This includes those three Islamic preachers. They take advantage of the YouTube platform to produce and reproduce da’wah content, and actively participate by presenting various Islamic discourses that can be accessed, commented on, and even criticized by other social media users.

In a broader context, various da’wah activities that occur on the YouTube platform are seen as the result of the active participation

of Islamic preachers in presenting Islamic discourse through new media. Da'wah content can be accessed, commented on and even refuted by other users. YouTube has become a means for the development of a participatory culture that accommodates various virtual activities of the Muslim community.

### **Constructing Islamic authority on the YouTube platform**

The active roles of the three Islamic preachers show how YouTube accommodates the dissemination of various Islamic discourses in new media. There is a migration in the production and reproduction of knowledge from old media to new media by actors in providing Islamic messages and teachings that are accessible to a wider audience. However, it can also be seen that this activity is part of their efforts to construct Islamic authority on social media.

This is closely related to the traditional view that places Islamic religious authorities as an authoritative source of Islamic knowledge. As Mandaville notes, traditional structures and figures of Islamic religious authority focus on the interaction between texts, discursive methods, and personified knowledge, with the construction of authority in Islam being seen as a combination of these materials in varying degrees and configurations (Mandaville, 2007:101). Referring to this, it can be said that those who are seen as the holders of authority in Islam are those who are able to combine the three things and take part in the production and transmission of Islamic knowledge.

The presence of social media has increasingly opened up opportunities for efforts to interpret and spread Islamic teachings, which in turn encourages the fragmentation of authority in the production and transmission of Islamic knowledge. In the Indonesian context, the fragmentation of Islamic authority has actually been seen in line with the proliferation of private television channels and new modes of communication technology. Saat and Burhani noted that this new media has transformed ordinary Muslims with limited religious qualifications into new religious authorities (Saat and Burhani, 2020:3). Their presence is considered a challenge to traditional authorities.

At the same time, it seems that the traditional authorities are also not willing to stay silent. The traditional clerics began to adapt to the new media to produce Islamic knowledge through various platforms. They try to preserve their Islamic authority in the new space. As far as this discussion goes, the construction of Islamic authority is

carried out by Islamic preachers from newcomers who seek to build Islamic authority and those who seek to maintain their authority. The term “construction” is understood by two terms according to its level, namely “to build” and “to maintain” to refer to different actors.

It is necessary to add another term in understanding how the construction of authority occurs. Among the two groups that have been mentioned, there is one other group that also contributes to the production and reproduction of Islamic knowledge, both offline and online. They are descendants of the Prophet, who in the Indonesian context are seen as having special privileges as holders of Islamic authority because of their genealogical status. We can call this group the “middle” group that is between the old and the new. However, not all of the descendants of the Prophet are involved in religious activities as preachers. So, the “middle” group in the context of this study are the descendants of the Prophet who are trying to strengthen their Islamic authority as an Islamic preacher. Thus, it is necessary to add a third term “to strengthen” in understanding the efforts of “construction” of Islamic authorities through social media.

Therefore, the construction of Islamic authority in this study will be understood in three terms, namely “to build”, “to maintain” and “to strengthen”. These three terms are used to emphasize differences among Islamic preachers who seek to construct their Islamic authority, starting from different situations. By the term “to build” it is shown how the construction effort is carried out in a long process, often starting from zero. In this case, Koh Steven’s attempt to construct authority can be categorized at this level. He is not only new as a preacher, but as a Muslim he is relatively new because of his background as a convert. In addition, he is an ethnic Chinese who in the context of Indonesian society is still seen as a minority group. This matter will be discussed further in the following section.

Furthermore, with the term “to maintain” to see how a preacher already has that authority and in the midst of the challenges of social media they are trying to defend it. At this level, Buya Syakur will be seen in his efforts to construct his Islamic authority on social media. He is one of the *ulama* in Indonesia who has succeeded in accommodating social media as a means of maintaining his Islamic authority. This success dispels the view that traditional authority holders will be eroded by the presence of new preachers. One of the proofs

of Buya Syakur's success in utilizing social media is that his name is increasingly being known by the wider community, especially in Indonesia. Before using the YouTube platform to upload his da'wah content, he was only known around the Pondok Pesantren Cadangpinggan, Indramayu, a boarding school which he founded and the surrounding society. In that circle, Buya Syakur's Islamic authority was recognized.

While the term "to strengthen" is used to see Islamic preachers who actually already have the "basic capital" as authority holders, trying to assert that authority through their activities on social media. Habib Husein's efforts in constructing authority on social media can be said to be an effort to strengthen his Islamic authority. He is a millennial preacher who has the lineage of the Prophet Muhammad as the "basic capital". In Indonesia, the descendants of the Prophet used to use the title "Habib" in front of his name. Another term for this group is *sayyid* or *sharīf* for men and *sayyidah* or *sharīfa* for women (See. Kazuo, 2012:2-3). Kazuhiro noted that the descendants of the Prophet who are currently in Indonesia are immigrants from Hadramaut since the XIX century. And judging from the origin, their lineage comes from Husein, the grandson of the Prophet Muhammad, where the grandchildren of Husein migrated and settled in Hadramaut around 952 AD (Kazuhiro, 2012:248-249).

Even though they have different levels in their efforts to construct authority, the three figures participate in spreading Islamic discourse through the YouTube platform. Viewed from the perspective of a discussion about post-Islamism piety, they take part in the production and reproduction of Islamic knowledge. In the context of the discussion on post-Islamism piety, these actors take part in the production and reproduction of Islamic knowledge. They seek to provide Islamic knowledge with a ready-to-use standard to meet the needs of the community, especially the upper middle class who have new religious interests and lifestyles, for practical references on how to understand and apply religious messages without compromising their identity (Hasan, 2020:5).

### **Production and reproduction Islamic knowledge on the YouTube**

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As a means of constructing Islamic authority, the production and reproduction of Islamic knowledge can be regarded as a commodification of religion in a virtual space. Through da'wah content, Islamic preachers not only appear as transmitters of doctrine and rituals, but also as marketing agents who offer and simultaneously transmit Islamic symbols and messages as commodities for public consumption. Therefore, they needed adequate strategies to attract public attention.

Referring to Castells' network theory of power, the process of spreading Islamic discourse carried out by Islamic preachers can be seen as part of an attempt to gain power or influence through internet communication networks. Castells believes that power is based on control over communications and information, be it macro power over the state and media companies, or micro power over organizations (Castells, 2011:773). The process of establishing and exercising power relations is decisively transformed in the context of new organizations and technologies stemming from the rise of global digital communication networks as the fundamental symbol processing system of today's era. In other words, power is exercised through the construction of meaning in the human mind through global and local multimedia communication processes and networks (Castells, 2009:3-4). The ability of actors to form networks and carry out inter-network collaboration is an important factor in efforts to build control over the community, which is none other than the authority itself.

Searching YouTube channels, both the main channel of the three preachers and other channels related to them, we can see their strategy in constructing their Islamic authority. From the three preachers, we can find similarities and uniqueness in each of the figures. Briefly, we first review these three figures in their attempt to construct Islamic authority, and then conclude some related important points.

***a. Koh Steven's strategy in building authority***

In an attempt to build his authority, Koh Steven often displays his identity by framing in such a way that it can become an attraction for the public. His background as a Chinese Muslim and a convert seems to be the main attraction that gets a lot of attention in his da'wah contents. According to Weng, the Chinese Muslim group in In-

Indonesia has a double minority status, because the ethnic Chinese population is very small compared to other ethnic groups and the number of ethnic Chinese Muslims is very small compared to the total population of Chinese people in Indonesia (Weng, 2018:13–15). But in the context of the construction of Islamic authority, I suggest that Koh Steven not only has a double minority status, but a triple minority. In addition to the two reasons as Weng mentioned above, his status as a *mualaf* is also a minority status in Indonesian Islamic society.

Even though he has a triple minority background, Koh Steven has managed to become a well-known Islamic preacher in Indonesian society. He succeeded in negotiating his ethnicity and religiosity in building Islamic authority in society. Even the status as a triple minority is a distinct advantage for Koh Steven in positioning himself among other Islamic preachers and easily gaining a place among the Indonesian Muslim community. His triple minority status seems to have had a lot of influence in his efforts to gain public sympathy and attention.

Among the three aspects of his minority status, Koh Steven mostly tells his background as a convert to various da'wah activities that can be accessed in various da'wah videos. Regarding his story as a *mualaf*, there are often inconsistencies in the stories and data mentioned by Koh Steven from one story to another (Pranoto, 2021:234). This often invites suspicion from many groups who question the truth of his story. Meanwhile, his identity as a Chinese physically can be easily seen from the shape of his slanted eyes, which are generally different from most other ethnic groups in Indonesia. Likewise, the greeting "Koh" to him is identical to the typical Chinese call, which means elder brother, even though it is not because of blood ties. It should be noted that in Indonesia there are so many distinctive greetings for each ethnic group, such as "Mas", "Kakak", "Bang" stands for "Abang" and many others with the same meaning.

Regarding his status as a convert to Islam, there are three things that are often told by Koh Steven as an attraction for the community. First, he packaged his conversion story in a unique and different way from other converts. He often said that his first desire to convert to Islam was just for fun and curiosity with a friend who was praying. Second, he presents himself as a person who has good knowledge and religious education in his previous religion. Koh Steven has repeatedly said that he was educated in Catholic schools and universities, his former religion. In addition, he admitted that he received

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higher education at several universities, ranging from Leiden, London to the Vatican. Third, he often expressed his high status and position in his previous religion. Koh Steven narrates himself, though often inconsistently and can be disputed, as a priest, or “Frater” (a name for prospective priests), or even claiming to be a religious brother (in Indonesia “Bruder” – a Catholic monk) on several occasions.

It should be noted that the background of this identity is very controversial. Various criticisms and clarifications, including from an official Catholic Church institution, prove that Koh Stevens was not a former Catholic priest based on the available data (e.g. KOMSOS Keuskupan Agung Semarang, n.d.-b, n.d.-a). Regardless of whether the narratives are true or not, that three things become an attraction for the community and support his popularity as an Islamic preacher.

In addition to using identity as an attraction, Koh Steven’s da’wah activities are also supported by two other very visible factors, namely the Mualaf Center Indonesia (MCI) organization and his social activities in the society. In 2003, two years after deciding to convert, Koh Steven founded the MCI, an organization that accommodates and assists Muslim converts in Indonesia. His role as founder and chairman of the board seems to have played a major role in efforts to gain religious authority. Therefore, Koh Steven is often identified with MCI, and vice versa. In other words, MCI is used as Koh Steven’s vehicle in an effort to construct his Islamic authority.

While it is related to his social activities, Koh Steven develops a business which he calls a *Bisnis Ikhlas* (sincere business) and solidarity work. The *Bisnis Ikhlas* that he developed was claimed to be an Islamic business because it did not seek *riba* (usury). He also carries out various social activities by providing various aids for people in need. The various social activities carried out succeeded in framing Koh Steven as a Muslim figure who has a high sense of solidarity. Through these, he has succeeded in attracting people’s attention and appreciation, and has been able to reduce the negative images and criticisms that are often leveled at him.

***b. Buya Syakur's strategy in maintaining authority***

As an *ulama*, Buya Syakur has a very adequate Islamic education. His initial education was at Pondok Gede Raudlatut Tholibin, Cirebon, where he gained Islamic knowledge and fluent Arabic skills. Even in his youth he had succeeded in translating many Arabic books into Indonesian. Later he continued his education in several countries in the Middle East and Europe. A number of well-known figures in Indonesia such as Abdurahman Wahid (d. 2009), Muhammad Quraish Shihab, Nurcholis Majid (d. 2005) and Alwi Abdurrahman Shihab are his friends who since their return to Indonesia have been active at the national level. However, Buya Syakur instead chose a different path by carrying out da'wah activities in Indramayu, his hometown, which made him not widely known.

Regarding his personal background, either education or nickname, Buya Syakur seems to frame himself as a humble person. At the beginning of his da'wah videos, excerpts from Buya Syakur's words are shown which seem to be his life principles. In these quotes, Buya Syakur does not claim to be a *mursyid* or spiritual teacher. Through his teaching, he just wants to share his happiness and not patronize anyone. Even with his openness he is willing to accept various criticisms from various parties. This actually shows Buya Syakur's quality as a *ulama* who has the virtue of humility. Likewise with his educational background, Buya Syakur almost never directly discuss it in public. Meanwhile, related to the nickname "Buya" he interpreted it in a general sense, namely "father", not as an honorary title.

There are several interesting things related to the characteristics of Buya Syakur's da'wah as seen from the videos on the KH Buya Syakur Yasin MA channel. First, Buya Syakur uses the da'wah *bi al-lisan* method, or the lecture method. The relationship between the preacher and the congregation appears to be the relationship between teacher and student. Besides the teacher delivering the material, the congregation also had the opportunity to ask questions or discuss. This is a common model, both in mosques and in Islamic boarding schools.

The characteristics of his locality as a traditional *ulama* did not disappear. In his various da'wah videos, Buya Syakur often appears wearing a shirt or *batik* with a white skullcap, and sometimes wearing a scarf. He also often uses the local language in explaining his material.

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In addition, on the sidelines of the material explanation, he occasionally smokes cigarettes and drinks tea or other drinks served at his table. These characteristics are often found in offline *pengajian* by a number of *kyai* or *ulama* in Indonesia.

The second characteristic is related to the variety of topics and study materials presented. From the playlists available on his YouTube channel, there are at least 7 books (*kitab*) discussed by Buya Syakur, namely *Kitab Roaitullah*, *Kitab Al Islamu Minhaj Wa Suluk*, *Kitab Alamul Jin Wasy Syayathin*, *Kitab Al Hikam*, *Kitab Fidhilail Qur'an*, *Kitab Fathurabani*, and *Kitab La Tahzan*. Each of the books is discussed on several occasions with long duration. In addition to the study of these books, Buya Syakur also conducted studies on topics related to sufism, psychology, psychology of sufism, Islamic religious terminology, nationality, Islamic book review, Islamic motivation, and also discussed of his poetry. This shows Buya Syakur's ability and mastery of knowledge, and further strengthens his position as a *ulama*. Apart from being able to reach a wider community, Buya Syakur's openness to adapting and utilizing social media plays an important role in maintaining his Islamic authority.

**c. Habib Husein's strategy in strengthening authority**

In Indonesia, not all of the descendants of the Prophet became preachers. Many of them are traders, teachers or work in various other sectors. Because of that, becoming a preacher is a choice, just like with other professions. This also happened to the figure of Habib Husein. Regarding the choice to live on the path of da'wah, he admitted that this was inseparable from his father's hope that he would become an *ulama* (Tretan Universe, 2020). Habib Husein admitted that his status as a descendant of the Prophet was not a status that needed to be highlighted. He views this status as a responsibility that must be carried out to maintain the authority of the Prophet Muhammad and maintain Islam as a religion (See. Deddy Corbuzier, 2020; Tretan Universe, 2020).

Having a background as a descendant of the Prophet is not the only capital for Habib Husein in constructing his Islamic authority. He also has a qualified Islamic education, ranging from studying at Islamic boarding schools to Islamic universities. Regarding his physical appearance, he tries to appear as close as possible and as if without

distance from young people in general. He did not appear in a robe, but in the ordinary clothes of society in general. Sometimes he wears a *koko* shirt with a skullcap on his head, which is also commonly worn by people in Indonesia. His close presence with the community, especially young people, actually made Habib Husein easier to be accepted among the young people.

In addition to utilizing several YouTube channels as previously mentioned, Habib Husein has other strategies to expand his audience reach. He utilizes collaboration networks with other Islamic figures, or even with celebrities, other religious leaders, Youtubers and other well-known influencers. The strength of this collaboration is recognized as an effective strategy to further expand the scope of its da'wah market.

Another strategy that he uses is his interaction with the audience, where the topics of da'wah presented come from various kinds of questions submitted by the audience. Although not all topics can be discussed, in this way Habib Husein seems to pay attention to the reciprocal relationship with his audience. There is an affective closeness to be built through the contents of his da'wah. Therefore, Habib Husein not only uses social media as a medium, but also becomes an interactive space between himself and his audience. Through his presence on social media, Habib Husein has further strengthened his Islamic authority, not only because of his background as a descendant of the Prophet, but also as a millennial *ulama* who is competent in Islamic knowledge and in his ability to take advantage of developing technology.

### **Strategies to construct Islamic authority**

From the three preachers explored, different strategies are seen in an effort to construct Islamic authority on social media. The strategies can be summarized into three, namely: 1) identity commodification strategy, 2) network collaboration strategy, and 3) interactive communication strategy.

First, the identity commodification strategy is an effort made by the preachers by presenting their identity in such a way that it can become an attraction for the public. In other words, the preachers make their identity as a commodity that is offered to the public through narration and framing of their appearance. This strategy is seen in the three preachers who try to present their background by

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telling and framing ethnicity, experience of repentance, qualified knowledge, the virtues of life, and close relations with the community that is the target of da'wah.

Second, the network collaboration strategy is intended as an effort to expand the reach for the delivery of the da'wah message that is given. The ability to build networks and collaborate with other networks will further expand the range of communication carried out through da'wah content, which ultimately has implications for their success in gaining authority. This strategy is carried out by preachers by building communities, collaborating with various organizations, groups and other well-known figures, and even participating in political and bureaucratic activities.

Third, the interactive communication strategy is intended as a way for preachers to gain emotional closeness and strong social bonds with their audience by means of intense interaction. In the context of social media, interactive communication is important to overcome the gap between the preacher and the audience. Da'wah is not a one-way communication, but a reciprocal relationship needs to be made. This means that the audience can provide feedback on the material provided, or even a preacher can involve the audience to propose a theme they want to know. In an effort to build this interactive communication, the preachers are carried out by responding to comments on da'wah content, answering questions, and responding to topics proposed by the audience.

### **CONCLUSION**

Exploration of the strategies of Islamic actors in constructing Islamic authority on social media YouTube on three preachers shows different characters. The construction of Islamic authority carried out by the three Islamic preachers discussed in this article is understood as an effort to build, maintain and strengthen the authority to explain Islam and its teachings, as well as guide Muslims on the various problems they experience.

The three strategies above show how the preachers adapt YouTube platform in an effort to construct their Islamic authority. The efforts of Islamic preachers in presenting Islamic discourse on social media have succeeded in dispelling the pessimistic view of the erosion of traditional authorities in this new media era. On the other hand,

with optimism, it can be said that every Islamic actor has the opportunity to have the same opportunity in constructing Islamic authority. And in the current era of new media, the ability to discuss religious dogmas in the context of daily life and needs is also the basic capital for a preacher to be accepted by people who are increasingly turning to the new space of social media.

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