

Strengthening harmony in the midst of the rapid advancement of information technology

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ABSTRACT

Indonesia is a pluralistic country in many aspects, including race, ethnicity, regional languages, customs, and religion. To manage this diversity in terms of ethnicity, religion, race, and intergroup relations (SARA), the government frames it within the format of religious harmony, which is defined as "... the state of relationships among religious communities based on tolerance, mutual understanding, mutual respect, appreciation of equality in practicing their religious teachings, and cooperation in social, national, and state life within the Unitary State of the Republic of Indonesia, based on Pancasila and the 1945 Constitution of the Republic of Indonesia." Since religious harmony is a state of being, it is dynamic and influenced by its ability to adapt to social changes in society, including shifts in social structures that encompass patterns of social relationships, social norms, and social roles. Social changes vary not only in terms of degree but also in scale and scope. The development of technology, particularly information technology, has brought significant changes to social behavior. The rapid growth of information technology has altered old social patterns and structures. This change is marked by shifts in interaction patterns, lifestyles, behaviors, perspectives, ways of living, and social orientations. It is worth exploring how we (especially religious leaders) can strive to maintain religious harmony amidst the rapid advancement of information technology. The research method used in this study will be literature research. This literature research will focus on textbook analysis. The research will involve a comprehensive analysis of works discussing the relationship between information technology and religion. The rapid advancement of information and communication technology has accelerated social changes in various fields. An important phenomenon to observe is the fading of values, including religious, cultural, and national values. Society tends to neglect moral values when engaging in social media, focusing instead on what can go viral and generate profit. It is imperative for religious leaders to enter the digital technology realm to carry out their sacred role of delivering messages of morality and goodness, ensuring that religious harmony remains strong. In this context, it is important to involve and provide space for the younger generation to play a role.

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1. Introduction

Indonesia is a pluralistic country in many aspects such as race, ethnicity, regional languages, customs, and religion. This diversity is a valuable asset, like a beautiful and precious mosaic when managed well, but it can also pose a threat if not handled wisely. A critical factor in this diversity is ethnicity, inter-group, race, and religion (SARA). Therefore, the nation's survival depends on how we manage SARA diversity into a synergistic force to achieve national unity and cohesion. Diversity should stimulate entities to complement each other, cooperate, and realize national integration for the common good. However, if not managed properly, SARA diversity can become a boomerang, serving as ammunition for disintegration (Kusrahmadi, 2007).

To manage SARA diversity, the government frames it within the format of religious harmony, defined as "a state of relations among religious communities based on tolerance, mutual understanding, respect, equality in practicing their religious teachings, and cooperation in societal, national, and state life in the Unitary State of the Republic of Indonesia based on Pancasila and the 1945 Constitution" (Joint Regulation of the Minister of Religion and the Minister of Home Affairs No. 9 of 2006, No. 8 of 2006, Chapter I, Article 1). This religious harmony can be realized if there is tolerance, mutual understanding, respect for equality in practicing religious teachings, and positive, productive cooperation (Kusrahmadi, 2007).

Religious harmony is a dynamic state influenced by its ability to keep up with societal changes, particularly social structure changes, which include patterns of social relationships, norms, and social roles. Social change occurs at various levels and scope, from individual behavior shifts (e.g., lower birth rates or abortion rates) to changes in group norms, inter-individual or group relations, and transformations in customs or societal values (Grossman & Grossman, 1971). The level of change varies between societies depending on factors like technological advancement, natural environment, organizational development stages, political awareness, cultural diversity, and the degree or character of interaction with other societies (Friedman, 1969). Among these variables, the most influential today is technological advancement, especially in information technology (Cotterrell, 2023), which shapes human thoughts and behavior (Veblen in Putra, 2010).

The development of technology, particularly information technology, has significantly altered societal behavior. This rapid technological progress impacts not only regions confined by borders but also extends beyond regional boundaries globally (Tomlinson, 1999). New discoveries in information technology have had a massive impact, as the utilization of information technology has altered social patterns and disrupted the old social order. These changes are characterized by shifts in interaction patterns, lifestyle, behavior, worldviews, and social orientation (Putra, 2010). It is interesting to explore how efforts, particularly by religious leaders, can maintain religious harmony amidst the rapid advancement of information technology.

2. Method

The research method used in this study is literature research. Based on various expert reviews, Amir Hamzah identifies four types of literature research: (1) studies of revelatory texts, (2) analysis of prominent thinkers' ideas, (3) textbook analysis, and (4) historical studies (Hamzah, 2019). This study focuses on textbook analysis. The research will involve a comprehensive analysis of works that explore the relationship between information technology and religion. Data will be collected through a literature review of books, scientific journals, articles, and other significant works that discuss the impact of technology on social change and religious norms.

3. Findings and Discussion

3.1. The Impact Of Information Technology On Social Change

Ernst Cassirer states that the superiority of humans lies in their ability to communicate through the creation of agreed-upon symbols, which he describes as animal symbolicum (Mulyana, 2010). Innovation and creativity in creating and communicating symbols significantly influence human communication and interaction. The rapid development of information technology is transforming communication patterns and societal relations—from direct communication to digital communication, with the use of social media increasing. This transformation changes how individuals interact, both in personal and professional lives. Before digital technology, most communication occurred face-to-face.

Conversations happened in real-time, enriched by body language, facial expressions, and tone of voice. Social and cultural contexts also influenced communication, taking place in a shared physical space.

The advent of digital technology, such as the internet and mobile devices, has removed these physical barriers. Email, instant messaging, and social media allow individuals to interact without being in the same location, offering great flexibility to communicate anytime and from anywhere (Straubhaar & LaRose, 2000). This technological advancement reduces social and familial dynamics, with relationships becoming more streamlined and mediated by technology (Fukuyama, 2014).

Unlike direct communication that requires physical meetings, information technology enables fast and efficient communication. Messages can be sent and received in seconds, facilitating quicker decision-making. Digital platforms like email and instant messaging allow for the efficient exchange of information without the need for face-to-face interaction. While direct communication often involves limited and localized dissemination of information, digital communication can spread information quickly and broadly. A single click can deliver a message to thousands or even millions via social media, blogs, or websites, altering the dynamics of information dissemination (Straubhaar & LaRose, 2000).

In direct communication, physical presence is essential, with eye contact, body movements, and facial expressions enriching communication and deepening interpersonal relationships. In digital communication, physical presence is replaced by virtual presence. Though technology like video calls, emojis, and GIFs attempt to replicate some non-verbal aspects, they often fall short of capturing the depth of face-to-face interaction. With its convenience, digital communication risks reducing the quality of relationships. Interactions become shorter and more superficial, and there's a greater potential for miscommunication due to the absence of non-verbal cues (Athique, 2013).

The way communication has changed also affects people's lifestyles and needs (Jaya, 2022). One of the most significant impacts is the dominance of instant messaging in everyday conversations. According to an APJII survey (Aliansi Penyedia Jasa Internet di Indonesia), 89.35% of Indonesia's 143.26 million internet users use messaging services (APJII (Aliansi Penyedia Jasa Internet di Indonesia), 2020).

The social impacts of communication technology encompass all aspects, from the speed of innovation adoption, its usability, and its societal effects. The impact and effect of communication in this process differ, with "effect" referring more to behavioral changes, such as knowledge, attitudes, and actions prompted by the transmission of messages (Rogers, 1986).

In the field of education, information technology is not merely equated with tools; it goes beyond that, holding the potential to aid teaching in ways that were previously unimaginable (Schunk, 2012). Multimedia and hypermedia have a significant impact on teaching as they offer numerous possibilities aligned with students' abilities to develop and regulate themselves (Roblyer, 2006). E-learning can enhance student motivation, provide satisfying experiences, and help improve student achievement (Bernard et al., 2009). Investigations into Artificial Intelligence (AI) will provide important insights into how humans learn, think, and solve problems. Artificial Intelligence, which refers to computer programs that simulate human abilities, can be used to infer, evaluate, reason, solve problems, understand speech, and learn (Trappl, 1985).

In the economic field, information technology has the potential to positively impact economic growth, including: increasing productivity and efficiency, creating new jobs, fostering innovation in production and services, enhancing the competitiveness of products and services, and accelerating distribution (Kementerian Koordinator Bidang Perekonomian (Kemendik Perekonomian), 2023). However, the advancement of information technology is also suspected of bringing negative impacts, including: (1) promoting a consumerist culture, (2) giving the market control over economic mechanisms, (3) triggering social inequality, (4) allowing foreign entities to dominate the national economy, (5) increasing the exploitation of natural resources, (6) reducing job opportunities, (7) making it difficult for local products to compete with foreign brands, and (8) increasing economic crimes (Brynjolfsson & McAfee, 2014), (Inilah 8 Dampak Negatif IPTEK Di Bidang Ekonomi, Catat!, 2023), (10 Dampak Positif IPTEK Di Bidang Ekonomi, 2024).

In the political arena, advances in information technology have had positive effects in providing sources of information, identifying voter segments, raising awareness of the importance of politics, determining campaign models or strategies, focusing campaigns, and increasing the accessibility of fundraising (Hanindita, 2023). The negative impacts of technological advancement on political life include: (1) political polarization, where algorithms on information technology platforms tend to

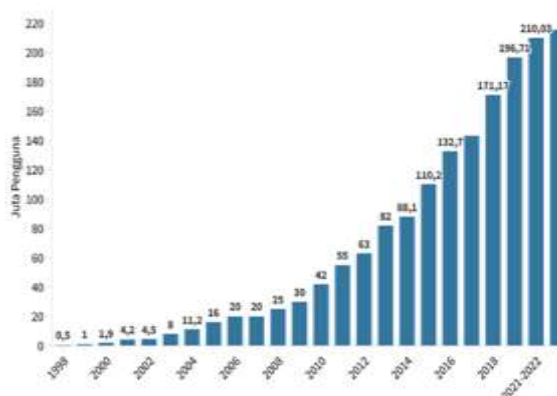
display content aligned with users' political preferences, creating "echo chambers" where users are only exposed to views that match their own, deepening political division and making cross-view dialogue more difficult, (2) the spread of fake news and hoaxes, especially in the current post-truth era, (3) manipulation of public opinion through steering and mobilizing public opinion, and (4) the rise of cyberattacks and data security breaches (Majumdar, 2022).

From the above discussion, it can be concluded that advances in information technology can bring positive impacts, such as increased efficiency and broader communication, improved accessibility and equalization of education and knowledge, expanded job markets, and so on. However, technological advancements also bring negative impacts, including information imperialism, dependency on communication tools, changes in fundamental societal values, polarization and fragmentation of society, and so on.

3.2. Impact Of Information Technology On Religious Behavior In Society

The number of internet users in Indonesia continues to increase every year. According to data from the Indonesian Internet Service Providers Association (APJII), internet users have reached 215.63 million people, equivalent to 78.19% of Indonesia's total population (APJII (Aliansi Penyedia Jasa Internet di Indonesia), 2020).

The segment of society most engaged with information technology is Generation Z, born between 1996 and 2012. One of their standout characteristics is their openness to various kinds of information and cultures.



Sources: APJII

Fig 1. Number of internet users in Indonesia

They can easily access information from diverse sources, including social media and the internet, which gives them broader and more varied perspectives on the world.

According to the survey titled "Religion Among Youth: Ritual No, Conservative Yes" (2021), data show that young people, especially those categorized as Generation Z, frequently engage in religious issues online.



Sources: BPS.

Fig 2. Internet users in Indonesia

They are the generation that most frequently "like" or "dislike," share, comment on, and consume religious content on social media. The survey also found that individuals who rely on social media as a source of religious knowledge tend to interact more frequently on these platforms. Their interactions include giving feedback (like/dislike), sharing information (share), commenting (comment), and, of course, watching religious programs. Moreover, the higher an individual's religiosity level, the more frequently they engage in these interactions on social media. The same pattern applies to individuals who view themselves as religious opinion leaders—people whose religious opinions are often sought and heard.

Interestingly, despite Generation Z being the least religiously observant generation in ranking, a survey by the Varkey Foundation (2017) conducted in 20 countries revealed that 93% of Indonesian Generation Z believe that religion is a key factor in their happiness. This figure is significantly higher compared to the global average of just 44%. Key findings from the Varkey survey include: (1) declining engagement in traditional religious practices, (2) a rise in personal spirituality, (3) the influence of social media and technology, (4) critical attitudes towards religious institutions, and (5) shifts in values and priorities (Broadbent et al., 2017).

Additionally, a report titled "The Dynamics of Digital Activism Among Indonesian Youth in the Discourse of Freedom of Religion and Belief (KKB)" by the Communion of Churches in Indonesia (PGI) in collaboration with the Indonesian Consortium for Religious Studies (ICRS) (2023) stated that, in general, Generation Z demonstrates flexibility in their approach to religion, viewing it as both a guide for life and a source of identity (Outlook Kementerian Agama 2024, 2024).

A survey by the Pew Research Center in the United States about the reference sources used by the public for making major life decisions revealed that most Americans rely more on their own research than on guidance from experts. Eight out of ten Americans said they "strongly rely" on their own research when making major decisions. By comparison, 25% said they strongly rely on advice from professional experts, and only 15% strongly rely on guidance from religious leaders (Cooperman et al., 2016).

To play a strategic role in the digital information and communication world, it is imperative for religious leaders to enhance their competencies and capabilities. Whether they like it or not, religious leaders must be adept at navigating various social media platforms and be aware of viral issues that capture the public's attention. They need to actively spread positive values sourced from religious, cultural, and national principles to offer an alternative voice amidst the flood of information.

Equally important is cooperation with policymakers and law enforcement to curb the spread of false information, pornography, and extremist provocations. Strategic collaboration with Generation Z is also crucial in building a network of young religious leaders. The role of Generation Z is important because they are more familiar and technologically literate, and from a psychological standpoint, moral messages are more effective when delivered by peers (Mulyana, 2010).

4. Conclusion

The rapid advancement of information and communication technology has driven swift social change across various fields. One important phenomenon that warrants attention is the erosion of religious, cultural, and national values. People often disregard moral principles in social media interactions, prioritizing virality and profit instead. In education, teachers experiencing technological lag will struggle to guide and educate their students (Selwyn, 2021). In the economic sphere, many members of society fall prey to online loan applications (pinjol) and online gambling. At the same time, public trust in religious leaders—particularly among Generation Z—has decreased, with many seeking their own references from the digital world. All these factors pose potential risks to the religious harmony of society.

It is essential for religious leaders to embrace the digital world to fulfill their sacred role in delivering moral messages and goodness so that religious harmony remains strong. In this effort, it is crucial to involve and provide space for the younger generation to play a role.

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