

Exclusivism in Cyberspace: Challenges in Interfaith Communication

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Abstract—This article tries to see a phenomenon called *Echo Chambers* through the perspective of *Stella Ting-Toomey's Intercultural Communication theory*. This study shows that the development of social media was also followed by the shadow of *Echo Chambers*. The tendency to isolate oneself and associate with those who understand one another will create separate spaces between one religion and another. As a result, communication which is an effort to eliminate the polarization of the differences between "Us" and "The Others" is precisely the way to form exclusivism in cyberspace. Among the efforts to anticipate the emergence of a gap is to create *melting-pot spaces* in the real world. Counter narrative also needs to be built to open these exclusive barriers. Muslim scholars sought to introduce the importance of communication in achieving the harmony in community. Some *Ulama* have also explained the role and function of communication in achieving the goals of the muslims, as well as trying to provide an Islamic perspective regarding communication behavior. More importantly, is to create a person who is a wise, open user of social media and uses *epoche* in looking at the world outside.

Keywords—Exclusivism, *Echo Chambers*, *Interfaith Communication*, *Cyberspace*.

I. INTRODUCTION

Echoes of "the Industrial Revolution 4.0" are more and more often heard in various forums. Springboard development of technology and the Internet have become a necessity that would come over mankind these days. After the digital era, the world nowadays began preparing to enter the industrial revolution 4.0, which requires the human need for internet and make it live in two worlds, the real world and the virtual world.

In 2018, the Association of Indonesian Internet Service Provider (APJII) released statistical data related to Internet users in Indonesia. As a result, internet users in Indonesia increased to 143.26 million in 2018, equivalent to 54.7% of the overall Indonesian population [1]. In fact, in 2019 predicted Internet users exceeded 175 million, or 65.3% of the total 268 million population of Indonesia [2].

From these data, 79% of whom are active Internet users who access the Internet every day. The average internet use in Indonesia reaches 8 hours 36 minutes [1], and 3 hours 23 minutes of which is used to access social media [3]. Based on the most downloaded applications, various companies

under Mark Zuckerberg dominate the top three. The succession is WhatsApp, Facebook, Instagram, and then Line. Based on research conducted by We Are Social. YouTube occupies the first position of the most accessible social media with a percentage of 43%. Followed by Facebook which is 41%, WhatsApp 40%, and Instagram 38% [3]. At least 130 million people in Indonesia, or 49% of the total population in Indonesia is social media users [4].

Various data above confirms the important role of the Internet in people's lives today. In addition, social media becomes one of the virtual world content of the most accessible and popular with Internet users. Through Internet, a person needs to communicate, access information, and search for entertainment can be fulfilled despite being away from the crowds.

The technological advances in the digital era brought many changes in human relationships. Such changes affect almost all aspects and socio-cultural level, including in the realm of religion. The characteristic of this globalization and the digital era abolishing the limit (borderless) [5] in fact makes private spaces in a pluralistic community in cyberspace. The virtual world community contains those who have the same ideas and beliefs and tends to talk about the match.

The phenomenon is called "Echo Chambers" creating barriers between one community and another. Instead of becoming more open and inclusive, this phenomenon could potentially create a new exclusivism space in the digital world. In fact, a variety of 'voices' outside their communities would be considered contradictory and contrary to the ideology which they believed to be right. Aggravated circumstances with special algorithms of social media will recommend various groups, impressions, and news and frequently accessed.

Exclusivism in religion and the claims of absolute truth in the social domain are the beginning. Thus, transnational ideology will be able to easily penetrate into the reading material and the spectacle of youth Internet users. In the next step, it will create a variety of digital radicalism that led to terrorism and violence in the name of religion [6]; [7].

It is considered by the researcher to be a challenge in 'healthy' communication between communities and religions. Through the principle of inter-religious

communication by Stella Ting-Toomey, researcher will try to identify the challenges that may be present on the phenomenon of the echo chambers. In the end, the researchers will give a bit of advice and solutions to avoid the creation of a new radicalism.

II. COMMUNICATION BETWEEN PERSONAL AND INTER-COMMUNITY

Selecting a The era of globalization that began in the late 19th and early 20th century gives much impact in the development of human culture and way of life [8]. Exchange of culture, economics, science, ideology, and information today is hard to avoid. In fact, exchange and interaction become a man and society needs to exist and survive [9]. Without it, people will only be in a primitive circle and the community is in danger of extinction gradually.

According to Ting-Toomey, interactions occur more quickly with the help of technology and media. Every-day, human will be faced with a situation which must be met by those who differ in various different backgrounds [10]. Various interactions can not be avoided. On the contrary, this interaction should be more open humans with the outside world. Therefore, interpersonal, inter-community, and inter-cultural communication are needed in minimizing various friction between "us" and " the others " [11], [12].

According to her, the process of intercultural communication should begin with an introduction. The introduction is an active attitude from both sides against each other's identity. This process is followed by the encountered value and orientation of each party either through verbal or non-verbal communication [10]; [9]. Hasan al-Banna stated it as at-ta'aruf 'knowing each other' [9].

In that phase, there will be a lot of contact between two different cultures that cause big amount of conflict management. Various common words can be gained from understanding each group of identity and the identity of other groups (at-tafahum) [9]. For the climax, it will create cross-cultural adaptability, even the transformation of identity and competence among the community (at-ta'awun) [9]; [10].

The rapid development of technology and exchange of information should be able to smooth out the process of recognition and understanding between cultures. However, in fact, the extent of access to information and the insistence of the multicultural world in the real world are creating exclusive spaces in the other world, the virtual world.

III. ECHO EFFECT CHAMBERS: EXCLUSIVISM IN CYBERSPACE

The development of Internet has positive and negative effects for human life. Among its benefits the young generation can easily connect with friends who have the same hobbies and trends from around the world. They can communicate intensively without having to meet in the real world. They also have a space for their self-actualization and demonstrate the existence of themselves [12]. They also can easily obtain the information they want from a variety of digital resources that exist. Therefore, they can be more open

to the world as a whole and not confined to specific regions and countries.

Those positive effects were also followed by the shadow of the negative impact affected by Internet. Various digital addictions like pornography, gambling, film, video games, cyber-bullying, discrimination, and the radicalization potential users become some side effects from the use of the Internet in everyday life [13].

Radicalization is the result of one's activities on the Internet. Unique algorithms that are used in a variety of social media like Facebook and YouTube will show you the things that we often access [14]. A variety of content, friends, and the pages are advised to have relationships with a variety of things that is accessed through their account. It makes users will only be met with the things that they are interested in and prevents them from accessing other things that they do not approve [15].

The other thing is the social network that is built in social media such as Facebook and WhatsApp makes a person getting harder to get out of the circle of their community. He will be caught in the polarization information and tend to be in one community only [14]; [16] or in other words, modernization and globalization have accelerated the process of polarization in religion [17]. This is called the phenomenon of Echo Chambers [14]; [13]; [18]; [19], convergent practice [20] or Homophily [21].

Circles advice content and social networking increasingly facilitating the exchange of information are wrong, the transnational ideology that is incompatible in Indonesia [20]; [22]; [13], the interpretation of religion autodidact [22], the intolerant point of view, and absolute truth claims. The effects of the implications for the occurrence of exclusiveness in religion and religious polarization are in the understanding of right and wrong. Thickening the identity of each group and religious community will more easily lead to blaming others and ignite tensions [6].

The exclusivism point of view that is born in cyberspace barriers is more fertile on the weakness of the younger generation to understand their own religion. One of the advantages (or lack of) the younger generation of the Internet users is their way of studying religion by social media guidance and digital features coming from sources that are not reliable. The virtual religion [22] is susceptible to various narrow interpretations and spawned stereotyping and labeling to other parties [23]; [7].

Various side effects above are utilized by the radical groups and terrorist networks. Media that used in the form of books and magazines shifted to the virtual world media [22]. They spread their erroneous ideologies and teachings and bad label to the other party through the digital platform. Therefore, mobilization activities and religious movements in the digital era become easier and more global on the impact than using 'traditional' ways [13].

IV. INTERNET USER EDUCATION

Echo Chambers created the network of friends and information access needs to receive more attention. One solution is to destroy (or minimize) those barriers (*embubbling*) [24] and change the moral individual bubble into collective moral bubble [24]. The latter method is called

Cognitive Bubble that requires two prerequisites for implementation, which are moral reasoning and religion [24].

Sound moral reasoning and good religious education will either be a strong fortress and a filter for Internet users to receive the information he receives. He will be more critical in choosing a variety of accessed content. Various distortions and false information (*Hoax*) will not be accepted immediately.

In addition, the melting-pot is fundamental thing needed in minimizing the exclusive seal that is created [25]. The encounter about them that come from the same family and far away from those who are "others" will further aggravate mutual blame. Hence, when the encounter in the digital world can not take place, there should be an intentional space encounter in the real world. Encounter and dialogue are expected to erode the barriers of exclusivity and become the early stages of the formation of one great world family consisting of interfaith and cross-cultural people [26]; [27].

Various counter-narratives are also needed to be built in stemming the extremist narratives and radicals. Youngsters often choose extremists and radical content due to lack of content that contains peace messages from every religion. Instead of getting answers to their spiritual needs, the younger generation is actually trapped in a network that uses religion as a justification for their violence.

In these efforts, some of the content creators from all over the world form some movement in order to create space encounter and melting-pot. Hence, a variety of memory of peaceful relations between religions and cultures can be constructed and presented. One of them is the hashtag #CreatorforChange which is echoed on YouTube since 2017. In Indonesia, the hashtag is supported by the Maarif Institute and the Habibie Center [28]. In 2018, there are over 94 videos using that hashtag and contains many positive messages in establishing good relations across cultures and religions. Another example is cartoon made by CISForm UIN Sunan Kalijaga to counter radical narratives.

Recognition of the existence of others and understanding the differences is key to confront polarization of religious views. When Internet users have been educated and equipped with good religious teachings, he would acknowledge the existence, even religious expression of other party. With the help of the internet, the religious expression of the younger generation is more easily recognized [13]; [6]. Furthermore, communication between religions and cultures can take place more intense and strengthened the nation's strong multicultural community.

Appreciation and preservation of local knowledge can also be a shield to resist the invasion of transnational ideologies that continue to the radical extremists. Cultural pride of the younger generation will make them tough and not easily affected by various transnational ideology which is often regarded as a practical solution of the problems of the nation [29].

According to Ting-Toomey, communication between cultures and religions is one solution in tackling the various gaps in the meeting of two or more different cultures. This communication requires a symbolic exchange between individuals or between communities that come from a different background. This process begins with culture-shock, and then proceeds with the process of knowing each other (*at-ta'aruf*), understanding each other (*at-tafahum*), and the implications for the community to help each other (*at-ta'awun*) [9]; [10].

The presence of social media should be able to enrich the interaction of various processes. It can force a person free from the shackles and isolation. It also provides the opportunity to read their different content, listen to their perspectives, and start a dialogue with them [30]. Therefore, the younger generation of social media users need to equip themselves with a view *epoche* or postpone of labeling and stereotyping to the other party [9].

V. CONCLUSION

The era of globalization which is supported by the rapid progress in the field of the Internet and cyberspace raises new concerns. The model of globalization that permeates the limits of space and time should make the dialogue and interaction between people become more open, inclusive, even multiculturalism becomes a necessity. Avoiding themselves from the various interactions and socialization with the other parties to the cultural background and religious beliefs will only make the people back to the primitive time. In fact, it is in the form of denial of human nature as social beings.

Variety of unique algorithm and propensity, the idea and the vision of making human beings actually fragmented in cyberspace. They will only obtain information similar to that they access the content. Talks, discussions, and the information they share is also limited around their network. As a result, they are more covered with various opinions out of their circle and make new exclusive thought. These exclusive attitude tendencies were used by irresponsible for the further spread of radicalism, an exclusive interpretation, to terrorism and violence in the name of religion.

Internet advancements in fact, is like a double-edged knife. It has a myriad of benefits and also overshadowed a lot of dangers. Equipping users with moral reasoning and proper understanding of religion is one of the preventive measures that can be taken. In addition, it should be implanted *epoche* perspective in viewing the phenomena and objects in the outer circles. From the other side, parents and teachers, for instance, need to create spaces of encounter in the real world and in cyberspace.

The instigators of the dialogue also need to provide a counter-narrative contents related to growing radical narrative. Internet users understand radical exposure in the absence of positive content and soothing. Their spirit for religious study utilized the various parties to further spread radicals that lead to extremism and terrorism in the name of religion.

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