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A Discorsus on Religious Harmony in Social Media in Indonesia

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Article Info	ABSTRACT
	This article discusses the dynamics of religious harmony in social media within Indonesia context, particularly in relation to the phenomenon of religious panic. As a contemporary issue, religious panic has emerged as a discourse among netizens, often shaping public perceptions and interactions regarding religious diversity. This study employs a literary approach by collecting and analyzing various academic perspectives relevant to the topic. This is a literary study conducted by collecting various ideas from a number of literary sources relevant to the topic of study. These various ideas were subsequently employed to elaborate on religious panic as a phenomenon. The study aims to explain that religious panic is a term included in media's social-political-cultural category, and not in the category of religion. This means that panic emerges or is triggered not by religious texts but by media texts instead. Panic is not triggered by religious actors (figures) but by (social) media actors. In order to avoid or be rid of religious panic, this article offers the idea of perspective taking. In the Indonesian context, perspective taking is very appealing to be used to manage religious differences without being offensive. Accordingly, this article may have implications in developing science/knowledge integration-interconnection when approaching various religious phenomena.

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1.   INTRODUCTION

When distant and unfamiliar and complex things are communicated to great masses of people, the truth suffers a considerable and often a radical distortion.
(Walter Lippmann 2017: 25).

One notable example is a sermon delivered by Ustad Abdul Somad (UAS), which circulated widely in video form in 2019. In the video, UAS provides a theological explanation regarding the symbol of the crucifix and the statue of Jesus Christ, in response to a question from a congregant who asked why they felt emotionally affected when seeing a cross [54]. This statement, originally made in a closed religious forum three years earlier, later became a subject of national debate after being reported to law enforcement authorities by several civil society organizations on allegations of religious defamation [35 &27].

A similar situation involved Habib Rizieq Shihab, who, in one of his sermons, responded to the greeting "Merry Christmas" by reaffirming the Islamic theological principle of tawhid—specifically, the belief that God neither begets nor is begotten. His statement, delivered in a rhetorical and doctrinal manner, was uploaded by the Zetro Media account and went viral [36]. The video drew varied public responses, with some interpreting the message as offensive to followers of Christianity. This ultimately led to a police report filed by the Indonesian Catholic Students Association (PMKRI) on charges of inciting hatred and religious defamation [55].

On the other hand, several non-Muslim figures have also drawn public attention due to their online statements [9], which were perceived as touching on sensitive aspects of Islamic teachings. Abraham Ben Moses, a Christian

pastor, uploaded a series of videos to social media discussing elements of the Prophet Muhammad's personal life, particularly regarding polygamy, and comparing them with Islamic teachings on marriage [13]. His statements were widely criticized for potentially undermining interfaith harmony.

A similar controversy arose in the case of Donalds Ignatius, a Christian adherent who uploaded a YouTube video expressing his personal interpretation of the Islamic declaration of faith (shahada). He argued, from a philosophical standpoint, that a testimony should be based on direct experience and, by extension, questioned the validity of declarations made without such personal encounters [4]. The video sparked public outcry and resulted in legal action by authorities in Bali on the grounds of alleged religious blasphemy [15]. Hate speech on social media often emerges as a response to religious sermons by religious figures that are perceived as discrediting other religions. This indicates the presence of interreligious tensions expressed through digital platforms.

Kastolani (2020) notes that Islamic movements have shifted from internal debates to public campaigns that spark fear among Muslims, reflecting growing religious sensitivity in digital spaces. These cases show two key trends: the spread of hate speech targeting other religions, and the role of social media as an unfiltered platform where anyone can produce and share content without moderation.

These examples illustrate at least two observable phenomena. First, there is an indication of content containing hate speech directed at other religious beliefs in sermons delivered by religious figures or adherents of different faiths. This phenomenon often pits one religious belief against another, thereby creating potential conflict in the public sphere, especially in digital spaces. Second, the emergence of social media as a new form of media with complex and specific characteristics. Social media not only serves as a platform for public discourse on various issues, but also functions as an autonomous force, enabling anyone to become both a content producer and distributor without editorial or verification processes.

The intersection of these two phenomena can lead to what may be called *religious panic*. This panic emerges as a collective reaction to content perceived as attacking the faith of a particular religious group, and is exacerbated by the speed and reach of information dissemination through social media. In this context, netizen activity plays a significant role in escalating the issue—through comments, emotional reactions, and even police reporting. Religious panic in the era of new media control should be considered a serious threat to the harmonious interreligious life in Indonesia, which has long been known for its peaceful coexistence.

Based on this phenomenological background, this conceptual article aims to examine how hate speech content related to different religious beliefs on social media can provoke religious panic. It is assumed that religious panic has the potential to undermine the harmony that has been established between different religious communities, particularly between Muslims and Christians. Therefore, it is crucial to discuss how interreligious harmony can be preserved on social media through approaches grounded in ethical communication, digital literacy, and the strengthening of interfaith dialogue values.

2. METHOD

This study employs a *library research* method, collecting various ideas, theories, and prior studies from relevant literature sources. These concepts are then used as analytical tools to explore the contemporary phenomenon of religious communication on social media, particularly regarding hate speech and its impact on interfaith relations. The data collected is categorized to answer the research questions posed, with the hope of contributing both theoretically and practically to strengthening tolerance and harmony amidst religious diversity.

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

In this section, it is explained the results of research and at the same time is given the comprehensive discussion. Results can be presented in figures, graphs, tables and others that make the reader understand easily [14], [15]. The discussion can be made in several sub-sections.

3.1. Religious Panic, between the Phenomena of Religion and Media

The term religious panic was initially coined by Syahputra (2011) to illustrate the public's anxiety concerning deviations of religious understanding caused by low culture television media production [47]. In his research, Syahputra actually intends to explain that religious mystical soap opera programs broadcasted by television are hyper-realities. The concept of religious panic subsequently emerges to explain the mystical hyper-realistic phenomenon in the television industry at the time. The term religious panic itself refers to the concept of moral panic.

Moral panic is a concept that was originally used by Stanley Cohen (1972) to explain deviations performed by the mass media in producing the media messages that will be disseminated [11]. Cohen (1972) stated that moral panic occurs when a condition, episode, person or group of persons emerges to become a threat to societal values. According to Cohen, mass media is not a neutral institution. Mass media is an ideological actor that may contribute to reinforce the social construction in affording particular meaning to a certain reality. It is this ideological force that mass media holds which is then considered to potentially cause moral panic.

Accordingly, moral panic is an excessive social reaction in his study about Mods and Rockers in 1960s Britain at the time. As an excessive social reaction, moral panic caused by the latest technological advances is actually not something new. In America in 1938, there was moral panic caused by a radio broadcast. It was 8.18 pm at the time on October the 30th, 1938 when the radio broadcasted that Professor Farrell of Mount Jennings Observatory detected

an explosion on the planet Mars. Then, there was a report heard from the site informing that the explosion was not a meteor that will hit the earth, but a spaceship that will land on earth. The broadcaster reporting the incident directly described the aliens from Mars coming out of a huge metallic colored cylinder. All of this was mere drama, but the spark of panic had been ignited. In New Jersey, the frightened residents began to evacuate causing congestion on the streets. The police stations were overwhelmed as residents came begging for gas masks so that they can be safe from the poisonous air that the aliens have brought along with them. There are also people demanding that the power company cut of its power, so that the Martians will be unable to see lights in their house [26].

Nevertheless, various studies explain that mass media contents are incapable of causing moral panic [37]. A research by Periyayya and Krishnan (2012) does indeed explain about three newspapers in Africa that succeeded in causing moral panic among Africans, not only due to the mass media content but it was also supported by deviations performed by the public [42]. However, the study explains that despite of the moral panic, there was no widespread enmity among the public. Meanwhile, a research conducted by Moinipour (2018) describes that moral panic through the power of discourse (media) is in fact used by the state to abuse the Bahái community as a non-Muslim minority in Iran through the supremacy of Shia [38]. There are various studies that position mass media as the object of study and media content as the subject of analysis.

As for the current condition, in addition to mass media, there is also social media which has different features from mass media. In the current era of social media, the activities of netizens may also deviate such as expressing hate speech [2], pornography [56], gambling [28] or spreading hoaxes [41]. These various deviations can easily be disseminated, received, reproduced, and redistributed to generate what Grömping (2014) considers as an echo chamber [22]. According to Syahputra (2019), the activities of netizens in echo chambers subsequently cause moral panic that virtually emerges in virtual enclaves like WhatsApp or Facebook [50]. These private groups function as hotbeds for limitless dissemination of various hate speeches against groups of differing religious and political beliefs.

Religious panic in this article is consequently placed within the context of the highly dynamic activities of netizens on social media. In the broader contest of Indonesia, religious panic is nothing new. According to records from the Indonesian Legal Resource Center, since the early period of the New Order administration, from 1968 to 2012, at least 37 cases of social panic had occurred and they were triggered by religious sentiments. Several of the prominent cases are the HB Jassin case involving the short story titled Langit Makin Mendung (the Sky is Increasingly Cloudy) (Medan, 1968), the Arswendo Atmowiloto case concerning information about the Prophet Muhammad in Tabloid Monitor (Jakarta, 1990) [46].

From the various cases of religious blasphemy that caused social panic, the case of *Al-Maidah 51* in 2016 involving the Governor of Jakarta SCR, Basuki Tjahaja Purnama who is commonly called Ahok. The case began when the Governor of Jakarta SCR, Basuki Tjahaja Purnama made a speech in the Thousand Islands on September 27th, 2016, where he mentioned about verse 51, surah Al-Maidah from the Holy Quran. Ahok was then considered to have insulted the Quran as the holy book of Muslims for delivering the following statement [5]:

> *In your inner hearts, ladies and gentlemen, you may feel you cannot vote for me, because you have been lied to by (people) using Al Maidah verse 51 and so on. That is your right. So, if you think you cannot vote [for me] because you fear of being condemned to hell, because you are being fooled, it is fine. This is your personal calling,” he said.”*

The clause *"dibohongi pakai surat Al-Maidah 51"* ([you] have been lied to using Al Maidah [verse] 51) is deemed by Indonesian Muslims as an insult to the Quran. They demanded the National Police of the Republic of Indonesia to bring Ahok before the law. The case had spurred a series of protests known as the Defend Islam Rallies (DIR). According to Syahputra (2018), the Defend Islam Rallies were a social religious movement in the form of demonstration or protest [49]. The Defend Islam Rally had been conducted seven times as follows:

- Defend Islam Rally I, on October 14, 2016 (1410 Rally)
- Defend Islam Rally II, on November 4, 2016 (411 Rally)
- Defend Islam Rally III, on December 2, 2016 (212 Rally)
- Defend Islam Rally IV, on February 11, 2017 (112 Rally)
- Defend Islam Rally V, on February 21, 2017 (212 Rally chapter II)
- Defend Islam Rally VI, on March 31, 2017 (313 Rally)
- Defend Islam Rally VII, on May 5, 2017 (55 Rally)

According to Ahyar and Alfitri (2019), one of the reasons that the Defend Islam Rallies were able to be conducted in series and on a massive scale was due to the support provided by advances in the development of (communication) technology [1]. The presence of social media was a pivotal factor in the emergence of these rallies.

This phenomenon is subsequently known as Islamic clicktivism. This also demonstrates that the presence of social media and the changes it brings are not necessarily in line with the development of the culture, values, or morals that envelop them. To some, social media may bring about hope, but to others it may bring about anxieties as there are social media contents bearing various expressions of hatred. Activities on social media may thus result in various social reactions in the form of excessive mass protests. This is considered by Lim (2013), as a predictable linear consequence of social media [32]. On a related note, Lim (2012) considers that technology does not operate in a vacuum. Technology thrives and it is developed socially [31]. The social impact of the internet is a result of organic interactions between existing technologies and existing cultural, political, and social structures.

Thus, according to Syahputra (2011) religious panic suggests panic in the religious reflection aspect due to the ideological role taken on by the media [47]. The ideological role actively contributes in forming the system of religious meanings. Nevertheless, I think that social media still cannot be considered to hold an ideological role similar to that of mass media. This is because social media is not an ideological institution like mass media, which is managed based on profit orientation and interest or political achievement (political economy of media). Although there are differences about whether ideological content is actually present, both social and mass media develop as a socio-cultural product within a stage of reality. Hence, religious panic is a term used within the media social-political-cultural category instead of the religious category. This implies that the panic emerges or is triggered not by religious texts bt by media texts. Panic is produced not by religious actors (figures) but by media actors (media agents).

In the case of UAS, religious panic emerged three years after the incident itself had occurred. This is made possible on account of advances in current communication technology that is capable of presenting social media as a new power. In this context, every netizen has the capacity to record, store, and distribute any contents to their heart's desire. Every netizen is a producer and a consumer of social media contents [58],[59].All contents are stored in "virtual space" and they can be sought, found, and even modified and redistributed at any given time.

3.2. The Power of Netizens on Social Media

The growth of the internet and social media has radically changed not only the way we produce, consume, and distribute information, but also the way we communicate and interact between one another. According to a survey conducted by APJII (2019) on the Behavior of Internet Users in Indonesia, it is stated that as many as 64.8% or 171.17 million people out of the total 264.16 Indonesian population are active internet users [3]. As many as 14.1% of internet users spend 3 to 4 hours daily using the Internet. This was followed by as many as 13.4% spending 2 to 3 hours daily in using the internet. This recent survey also mentioned that as many as 50.7% of netizens visit Facebook during their activities on social media. It was followed by Instagram with as many as 17.8%, YouTube with 15%, and Twitter with 1.7%.

The data shows that the internet, which brought along with it the advent of social media, has become a new means of interaction among the public. The interaction has produced numerous new things in various layers of social reality. A reality that even surpasses our expectations. This consequently adds to the complexity of various existing problems, including in Indonesia's interreligious life. Many activities on social media performed by netizens are mirrors that display moral reflections or deep understanding of what they believe as something that should be exhibited or presented. Some of the things displayed on social media as a virtual space do indeed provide us with inspirations, information, and even sources of happiness and newfound joy. Nevertheless, these various changes are not necessarily consistent with the expectations, values, culture, morals, and even beliefs of the different religions that each individual follows.

A number of cases concerning with religious belief such as UAS, HRS, and even Ahok, which was mentioned earlier, are part of the phenomena of internet-based technological advances that deviate from expectations, values, culture, morals, and even religious beliefs. According to Lim (2012), these deviations happen because as a technological artefact, it does not have predictable linear pre-determined social consequences [31]. Technology does not operate in a vacuum; it is socially constructed. Accordingly, the social impact of the internet is produced out of the organic interaction between existing technologies and existing cultural, political, and social structures.

The organic interaction between internet based technology and existing cultural, political, social, and religious structures is what I would like to refer to as the power of netizens on social media. According to Syahputra and Hafiar (2019), everu internet user is called a netizen [51]. This is a combination of the word network and citizen, which was coined by Michael Hauben in 1995. Netizens means citizens who are present in the digital network system, or net citizens. This applies to anyone using a digital network, like the internet, to communicate with others, to seek information, or to express their ideas via an internet network[24]. The network among citizens mediated via internet-based social media is defined by Klein [43] as a 'web like image'. Syahputra (2017) explains that it is similar to a spider web [48]. Within the network, we can find the core section (network center) as the focal point of the entire social media activity. The core section or hubs are connected to an actor who functions as the mediator (bridge).

Given these various facilities to interact among citizens mediated via internet based social media, relations among citizens proliferate and they may even explode into a center of conversation among netizens. Such conversation explosions among netizens on social media are identified with the term going viral. Going viral is a phenomenon in the new media culture concerning an issue that has become the center of conversation among netizens that rapidly spreads and progressively escalates. Accordingly, Lister, et al. (2010) explain that, in general, social media is

characterized as textual (hyper-textual), interactional (hyper-interactional), transactional, virtual, simulated, mediated, and narcissistic [34]. These features would allow a netizen who is initially a consumer of social media contents or messages, to concurrently become a producer of social media contents or messages. Such social media characteristic is defined by Wood and Smith (2017) as prosumer (producer and consumer) [58],[59].

The cases of UAS and DIR are instances of religious panic that can be presented to demonstrate the power of netizens on social media. In the case of UAS, religious panic emerged after it had been activated by netizens. Ngazis (2019) in his report on *viva.co.id* stated that the video of the sermon by Ustad Abdul Somad (UAS) had initially gained attention on the social media Instagram via the account of @kajianustabadbdulsomad_ [40]. Once it went viral on Instagram, it continued on to Twitter. The Twitter account @KatolikG admitted to being the first one to have distributed the attachement to the video. The Instagram account @kajianustadabdulsomad_ had recently disappeared. When we tried to search on Instagram or via Google, the account was not available.

Similarly, in the DIR case, religious panic emerged when it was activated by netizens. Fauzi (2016) in his report on *CNN Indonesia* informed that the ABI case emerged when Buni Yani uploaded a video clip of Ahok's statement, as the Governor of Jakarta SCR at the time, concerning the Quran surah Al-Maidah verse 51 [17]. Ahok's video clip that Buni Yani uploaded had gone viral on social media. The post was titled "BLASPHEMY AGAINST RELIGION?". The video Buni Yani uploaded had succeeded in attracting thousands of participants in the Defend Islam Rallies (DRI) to fill the streets demanding Ahok to undergo a legal process. The massive movements were also supported by the religious stance of MUI stating that Ahok had conducted religious blasphemy.

3.3. Perspective Taking, Differing without Offending

Perspective taking is a term that has its roots in the Latin per-spicere, which means to see through something or to see clearly [39]. Perspective taking subsequently develops into a method of interpersonal relations in the context of existing differences. This is one of the approaches that will be employed to maintain harmonious relations among followers of different religions. This approach is used because perspective taking can be described as a skill to understand a situation or an event from the perspective of others [45]. Hence, perspective taking is an ability that a person requires to distinguish her/his views from the views of others, and then make a proper decision about the views of others based on the acquired information [60].

Accordingly, the ability of mastering perspective taking as a skill requires the individual to first understand about the situation of different others before talking about those differences. This is an initial skill that is needed before relations among the differences are developed into more extensive skill set such as empathy, prosocial behavior, or interpersonal problem solving due to existing differences [7],[8],[52]. As a basic skill, perspective taking is pivotal in creating and maintaining social bonds, particularly to settle differences among members of the community with differences [21]. Perspective taking may be associated with stereotypes and presumptions that lack respect towards others who are different [19],[20]. Perspective taking may even be a substantial social strategy as a basis for mature moral reasoning [12].

In practice, perspective taking involves a person's imaginative process about something that is different from others, for instance in matters of different beliefs or religious teachings. There are different worlds outside the individual that must be understood as differences. That is why it is often described as a cognitive component of empathy [14]. The vital first step in this imaginative process is by imagining differences in a physical position which is subsequently known as visuospatial perspective taking. According to Galinsky, Ku, & Wang (2005) visuospatial perspective taking may be defined as a process of imagining what the world is like from another person's position [21].

Gunalp, Moossaian, and Hegarty (2019) provide an example of imagining differences under certain physical position by inviting you to imagine assisting a friend in navigating from the library of a university campus to meet and have lunch [23]. In order to provide the right instructions, first you have to imagine yourself standing where your friend is standing, perhaps outside in front of the library, imagine what your friend will see from that position, and then plan the route that your friend will take. However, visuospatial perspective taking can also be achieved by imagining a perspective that is not from the difference of physical position a person has. For instance, using a map to navigate, a person can imagine walking through the city and taking the visuospatial perspective based on landmarks along the described streets.

The two methods of visuospatial perspective taking can be utilized to understand differences in religious beliefs or teachings among religious followers, particularly in Indonesia. *First*, understanding differences in religious beliefs or teachings from a physical position. This method suggests that a person should imagine his or herself being in the position of others of differing belief or religious teachings as a minority, oppressed, insulted, or marginalized. *Second*, imagine a perspective that is not based on the difference of one's physical position. This method suggests that a person should imagine a different religious belief or teaching. If you were a Muslim who does not believe in the Trinity, then try to imagine the way that another person different from you are believe in the teaching of the Trinity.

Thus, perspective taking has two distinct levels. The *first level*, is the process of understanding what are the perspectives of and what is understood by people who are different. This means understanding how others can be different from you in understanding the same thing. The *second level*, the person who is different from you in understanding the same thing has different experiences and different perspectives of the same object that you perceive

[18]. Let us take the difference in seeing God as an object of faith for religious community as an example. A Muslim believes that God is One. God neither begets nor He was begotten. This belief is different with the concept of Trinity believed by Christians. The difference in the object of faith may be understood by using the two levels of perspective taking.

This approach is different from pluralism or inclusivism, because perspective taking is specified as a social process that functions automatically, for example, [10],[44],[53]. As a complex social process, perspective taking has several dimensions such as preception, cognition, or emotion. The perception dimension refers to one's ability to make accurate conclusion about what is viewed by another person who has a different perspective [29]. As for the cognition dimension, it is a skill to properly consider what is being thought by someone who is different [25]. Meanwhile, the emotional dimension is the ability to speculate on how a person who is different feels when she/he is under certain emotional conditions [30].

Perspective taking is very interesting to use in managing religious differences without offending anyone. Because every religious individual continues to stay true to their religious teachings or beliefs, yet they should be able to accept the presence of other of differing religions and beliefs. This means that the differences are accepted but the beliefs are not. This method may be used to emphasize that an individual's religious teaching or belief should be considered as the most righteous. However, that individual should accept the differences others have in their religious belief and teachings. As the religious majority in Indonesia, essentially the approach of perspective taking is in accordance with the Islamic teaching of *lakum dinukum waliyadin* (for you is your religion, for me is my religion).

Islam as the religious majority with its theological foundation of *lakum dinukum waliyadin,* should be able to appear with a tolerant countenance towards other different religions. The majority-minority dimension is also important to mention because this dimension can initiate the perspective taking process. Demonstrating a hospitable Islam instead of an angry one in Indonesia may be initiated by its religious figures. As an actor with religious authority, these religious figures are the pendulum that shapes the face of Islam in Indonesia. So that the relationship between Muslims as the majority and non-Muslims as the minority can be realized in the form of mutual understanding. From mutual understanding, fragments of mutual respect would appear. And from fragments of mutual respect, tolerance would subsequently emerge. Such tolerance towards differences would as consequence generate harmony among different religious followers.

Therefore, saving harmony on social media can be initiated by using the perspective taking method. According to Vygotsky (1980), the basic tool that can be used is language [57]. The language we use is a bridge to interact with a different environment [6],[16]. Hence, the language used by religious figures during sermons, particularly they who also use social media, is vital in understanding relations among differing faiths. The language use in sermons become another crucial factor when it is placed within the context of new media, which is full of various dynamic activities performed by netizens on social media.

In this context, as a substance of reflection for netizens active on social media, particularly to religious figures when preaching using social media, it is important to recall the statement made by Lippman (2017) in which ahwa *"When distant and unfamiliar and complex things are communicated to great masses of people, the truth suffers a considerable and often a radical distortion"* [33]. This implies that the religious teachings or faith believed by a religious follower is a complex and unfamiliar matter, it is neither believed, trusted, nor considered as truth by followers of differing religion. Because religious teachings or faith that is believed to be the absolute truth by a religious follower should not be communicated openly via social media as it may suffer distortion and even cause radical opposition towards groups that are different to them.

4. CONCLUSION

Differences in religious beliefs that are conveyed through various expressions unpleasant to people who are different set the background for the writing of this conceptual article. To start, this article describes such phenomenon as religious panic. Initially, religious panic demonstrates panic in the religious reflection aspect due to the ideological role held by the media. This ideological role actively contributes in forming the system of religious understanding. However, in the era on new media with its specific features and dynamics, the panic process is amplified on account of netizens' ability to interact on divergent social media.

In Indonesia, the rapid and dynamic growth of the internet and social media has radically altered not only the way we produce, consume, and distribute information, but also the way that we communicate and interact among one another. As a consequence, technological advances may at times deviate from our expectations, values, culture, morals, and even religious beliefs. The organic interaction between internet-based technology and the existing cultural, political, and social structures is what I would like to subsequently consider as the power of netizens on social media.

Religious panic that emerged as a dynamic activity on social media is a new phenomenon that threatens harmony among religious followers, particularly on social media. Perspective taking may be used to save harmony in the relationship among religious followers on social media. It serves as one of the approaches that can be utilized to maintain harmonious relations among followers of different religions. The approach is used because perspective taking can be described as a skill to understand a situation or incidence from the perspective of others. Perspective taking is, thus, an ability that a person requires to distinguish one's view from the views of others and then make a proper decision about the views of others based on the acquired information.

By observing religious panic as a new phenomenon in the culture of new media and as a threat to the harmony of interreligious relations, and by setting perspective taking as an approach to maintain harmony, this article may have implications on the integration-interconnection among broader sectors of knowledge. This may be a start for the development of knowledge based on the relation of religious text and social context.

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