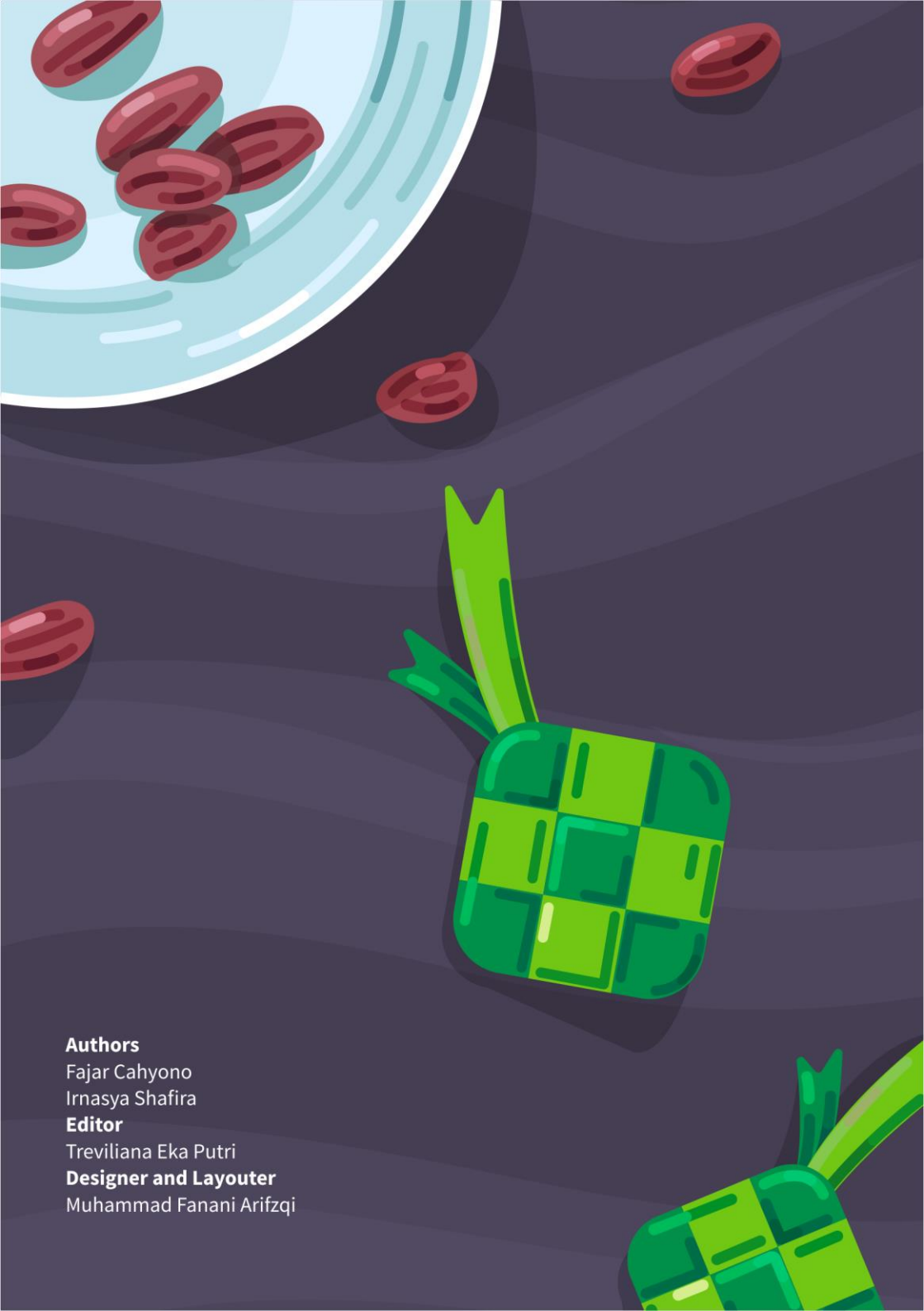


# *New Piety*

A CRITICAL NOTE ON INDONESIAN MUSLIMS  
RELIGIOUS ACTIVITIES IN NEW MEDIA





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## SUMMARY

In the current era, new piety is seen as a response to rapid technological advancement. New piety is also a part of Indonesia's Muslim group evolution in regards to the media used to *do prayers*, *dakwah* (religious preaching), and finding religious knowledge. This writing aims to explore further the concept of new piety, starting from how it was formed, its definition, and also exploring the new problems that emerge along with its existence.

## INTRODUCTION

Just as one Internet provider advertised this Ramadan, Indonesia is currently entering a different kind of Ramadan and Eid Al-Fitr. Amid the looming terror of COVID-19, which brings the government to issue a stay at home (PSBB) policy, we are forced to rely on the Internet, particularly social media, for our social needs. Within a holy month like Ramadhan for the Indonesian Muslims, the Internet and social media became one of the ways, or the only way, even, to do their religious activities.

We can see various religious activities ranging from the breaking of Iftar virtually done together via applications such as Zoom or Google Hangouts to khutbah and *pengajian* (studying of Islamic teachings) everywhere in our social media. However, this phenomenon does not arise solely because of the current pandemic. Most people in Indonesia already utilize the Internet as one's source of information, especially social media. Thus a lot of Islamic groups and communities, including religious leader-figures, appear on social media



The space-transition occurring in the spreadings of religions and religious activities then brought writers to think even more closely on the aftereffects of the expansion of information technology towards the Islamic practices since Islam is the religion of the majorities in Indonesia (87%). Along with the practices, we also ponder about how piety and religion itself evolve with the emergence of the Internet as a new media and what we can critically assess from this reinvigoration.

This case study uses desk study method, which explains the chosen title of *New Piety: A Critical Note on Islamic Religious Activities in New Media*. We will be focusing on the consequences of the advancement of communication technology towards the practice of piety in the Indonesian Muslims and give a critical note regarding the said phenomenon. To coherently build argumentations on this topic, we define piety as a form of religious practice and explain how it was before the emergence of new media. We will also explain the correlation between religion and new media as the effect of the development of communication technology, starting from when it first intersects until a relationship is formed. In the following section, we will also explain the new piety's challenges, especially on the filter bubble, one of the current social media's notable characteristics. Then, we will also give a note on the potential of *riya* caused by new piety that connects all Muslims in Indonesia regardless to time and space.



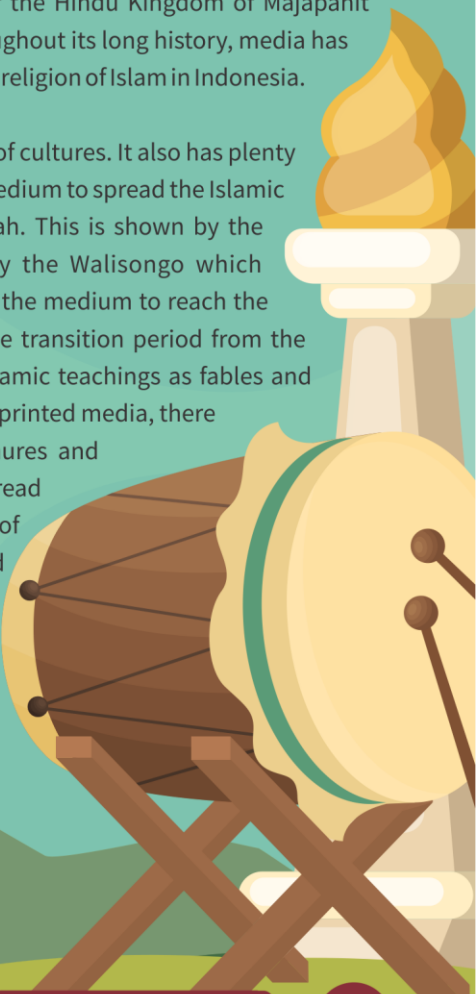
In the next part, the writer will explain the practice of Islam and the evolution of the concept of piety with the emergence of new media.

# ISLAM, NEW MEDIA, AND THE EVOLUTION OF PIETY: THE INDONESIAN STYLE

Islam, as a religion, has had its root in Indonesia for a long time. The earliest traceable root is the travelogue of Venetian trader Marco Polo who wrote in his journals that at the time of his visit back at 1292. At that time, the citizens of Perlak, a port city in the north of Sumatra (nowadays known as Pereulak Regency in Aceh) has just converted to Islam<sup>2</sup>. Most history books in Indonesia agree that Islam is spread peacefully through trading activities but gained momentum when a king of the Hindu Kingdom of Majapahit converted to Islam in the fifteenth century<sup>3</sup>. Throughout its long history, media has become an imperative part on how people practice religion of Islam in Indonesia.



Indonesia is a country that has a plethora of cultures. It also has plenty of local wisdom that serve as an essential medium to spread the Islamic teachings or commonly known as dakwah. This is shown by the famous dakwah strategy employed by the Walisongo which utilizes the Wayang shadow puppets as the medium to reach the Javanese population that are still in the transition period from the Hindu culture<sup>4</sup> until the existence of Islamic teachings as fables and folktales around Indonesia. In the era of printed media, there are plenty of books, pamphlets, brochures and others that are utilized as a media to spread Islamic teachings<sup>5</sup>. With the emergence of the digital era, the chance to spread religious teachings also increases. This situation dramatically helps Indonesian Muslims to enrich their knowledge on religion, and to some extent, their religious piety<sup>6</sup>.





The existence of Wayang shadow puppets and folklores is a form of 'old media,' which was the best media to spread Islamic teachings in Indonesia at the given time. Nowadays, the Internet is the 'new media' that has long since replaced the standings of the old media in the game of spreading religious teachings. This transition of a new medium is not anything new for Islam, which places an obligation to *do dakwah* for every Muslims<sup>7</sup>.

Peter Mandaville summarizes this media transition particularly well. Mandaville<sup>8</sup> He explains how contemporary Muslims have made speculations about how electronic information technology could be used to organized religious knowledge. Mandaville also describes how information technology does not change the relationship between an individual and their religion, but gives supplements of knowledge and clarifies the information sources that could be found and verified.



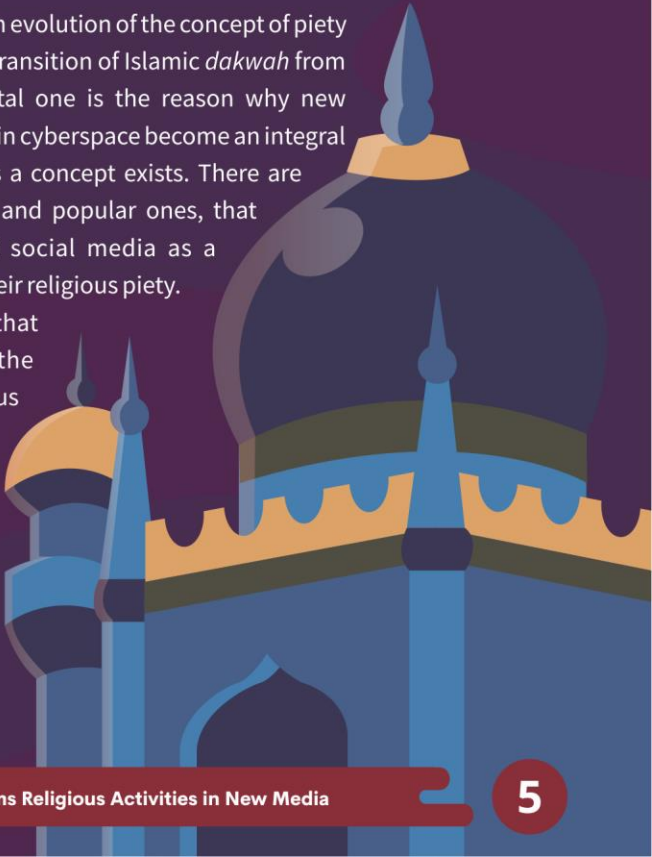
In 2019, Indonesia is the 4th country with the most Internet users in the world<sup>9</sup>; this number brings significant changes in various aspects of Indonesian society, including religion. Currently, one of the significant changes is the increase of Indonesian Muslim's reliance on social media to practice their faith. To some extent, the practice of media is no longer distinguishable from religious practice. Muslims may have considered their online activity as part of their pious endeavors to increase their religiosity since social media is so prevalent in everyday life that it is relevant to practice religious piety there<sup>10</sup>.





This writing discusses the new piety, or '*kesalehan baru*' in Indonesian. But the definition of piety and piousness is also a debate in itself. In English, piety stems from the Latin word *pietas*, which means reverence or obedience to God. This word is also associated with pity. This word also references habitual acts that are embodiment of one's reverence and obedience towards God. Sociologically, piety is the everyday practice that represents a set of dispositions that determines the taste of a particular religious faith<sup>11</sup>. But when the word piety is translated to Bahasa Indonesia, it can be translated as *kesalehan*, *ketakwaan*, and also *kealaman* which has different epistemological meanings. In this writing, the word piety means various activities done by humans to obey their religious teachings. This definition considers the obligation to *pray five times a day (shalat)*, the obligation to *do dakwah*, and the obligation to study and develop one's knowledge on religion a part of one's piety.

The concept of new piety is an evolution of the concept of piety itself. In this context, the space-transition of Islamic *dakwah* from the physical world to the digital one is the reason why new piety—where religious activities in cyberspace become an integral part of one's religious piety—as a concept exists. There are many writings, both academic and popular ones, that discusses the positive role of social media as a medium for people to express their religious piety. But there are also problems that emerge as the aftereffect of the transition from physical religious activities to the digital world, which will be explained in the next part.





## THE PROBLEM OF ISLAMIC RELIGIOUS ACTIVITIES IN NEW MEDIA

As explained before, the existence of new piety brought upon new challenges that ought to be our concern. There are two problems that we brought upon to discuss in this paper. The first one is the strengthening of one's identity caused by social media's filter bubble. Nowadays, our social media provides a global platform for sharing, studying, and collaborating. Social media also brings us to a state of convergence between personal communication and public media for sharing with everyone without regard to time and space<sup>12</sup>. The many platforms that offer such services can never be separated with the high volume of internet usage by the people, including the Muslim groups in Indonesia.

Due to its short-term nature, there is bound to be an overwhelming accumulation of data from the interactions between netizens, such as sharing photos, videos, and texts. This vast accumulation of data renders the user unable to manage and capture all the available information. Thus, social network platform providers use an automatic filter (termed by Pariser as filter bubble) that is personalized for its users. Eli Pariser explains the filter bubble as a world made of similarity<sup>13</sup>; a world where we cannot learn anything because users are isolated from inputs of information within a huge bubble without any other alternative point of view.

The filter bubble phenomenon is well illustrated by Aulia Adam in his writing<sup>14</sup> where he recounts his meeting with a man in a commuter line that had been a part of the people who have finished the 169 Actions– Save Rohingya (known locally as *Aksi Bela Rohingya*) on 16 September 2017. The man was opening his Facebook account and Adam had seen that the man's timeline is only filled with posts from the 169 Actions– Save Rohingya . Driven by his curiosity, Adam opened his personal Facebook account and saw a completely different content with the aforementioned man. Adam's personal Facebook's timeline is filled with news and information about how Indonesian police dismissed a 1965 Seminar at Indonesian Legal Aid Foundation (Lembaga Hukum Indonesia) office that happened on the very same day. There isn't any information on the – Save Rohingya whatsoever.



This illustrates the phenomenon in which people in social media will only see what they want to see and based on what they have been following (their close friend). Sayooran Nagulendra and Julita Vassileva use the satirical term of "Too Good" to explain this sort of phenomenon<sup>15</sup>. The term references the system created by the social media platform providers to limit the user information exclusively to the information they wish to receive. The high level of optimization for the user's needs enable the algorithm to record the user interests in the system. It shows the appropriate information based on previously recorded interests.

Pariser identifies this filter bubble in 5 parts<sup>16</sup>:

- 1 Relevant—the algorithm tends to show information that is relevant with the subject's life.
- 2 Important—the algorithm only shows information that is important for the subject's life.
- 3 Uncomfortable—the algorithm has a small probability of showing uncomfortable information.

4

Challenging—the algorithm will show challenges for its user based on their preferences; and finally.

5

Other point of view—the algorithm will only show information that conforms to the subject's point of view.

These 5 categories will create a specific personalization for every Internet user. A user will also automatically receive similar sorts of information continuously; this phenomenon is called the echo chamber. Echo Chambers will create polarization based on the user's preferences. This kind of polarization has very worrying consequences for the continuity of science and it can even threaten our collective wellbeing<sup>17</sup>.



According to Popper's falsificationism perspective, all ideas need their truth to be tested. The test meant here is to eliminate one idea with another or to match two different ideas. Popper's concept gave us the lesson that every idea proposed needs to be tested with an opposite idea to enrich one's perspective, the chances of other truths, and even to eliminate these ideas. The Echo Chamber does not give the user a chance to test the idea they believe in, or even in the more extreme note, renders the thoughts or ideas that are opposite of what the user believes to become invisible. This will lead to the strengthening of the user's identity.

Echo Chambers, without a doubt, provides user with the satisfaction of only consuming particularly preferred information. But it also limits one's understanding and destroys the diversity offered by varying cultures, ethnic groups, religions, and even truth itself. Within the context of new piety, the filter bubble is a challenge presented to a religious life in the current technology era. Being religious in a virtual world is extremely vulnerable to multiple narrow and misleading interpretations thus birthing various stereotypes and labels to other parties<sup>18</sup>.

An illustration of a large orange hand holding a gold coin with a dollar sign. The hand is positioned over a stylized globe showing continents in green and oceans in blue. Several other gold coins and green dollar bills are floating around the globe. The background is a solid dark blue.

This situation causing various opinions outside of one's community considered as a contradiction and against the ideology that one's believes in. Echo Chambers will create exclusivism for a user with particular beliefs or teachings even within the same religion. The walls of exclusivism are made out of homogenous information received by an Internet user. In a more extreme note, when the wall of exclusivism is high enough, it will be the start of digitally-induced radicalism that might end in the act of terrorism and in the act of violence committed under the banner of religion<sup>19</sup>.

The second problem that will be discussed in this writing is how the concept of *riya* has gained a new significance in the Internet. In today's world, social media is also used by the Indonesian Muslim to increase and showcase one's piety. Social media has become a platform for people to share experience and study about Islam. This is affirmed by Barendregt, who stated that in Indonesia, communication technology experiences 'domestication' within Muslim community causes 'a more interesting example of cellular Islamic religiosity'<sup>20</sup>.

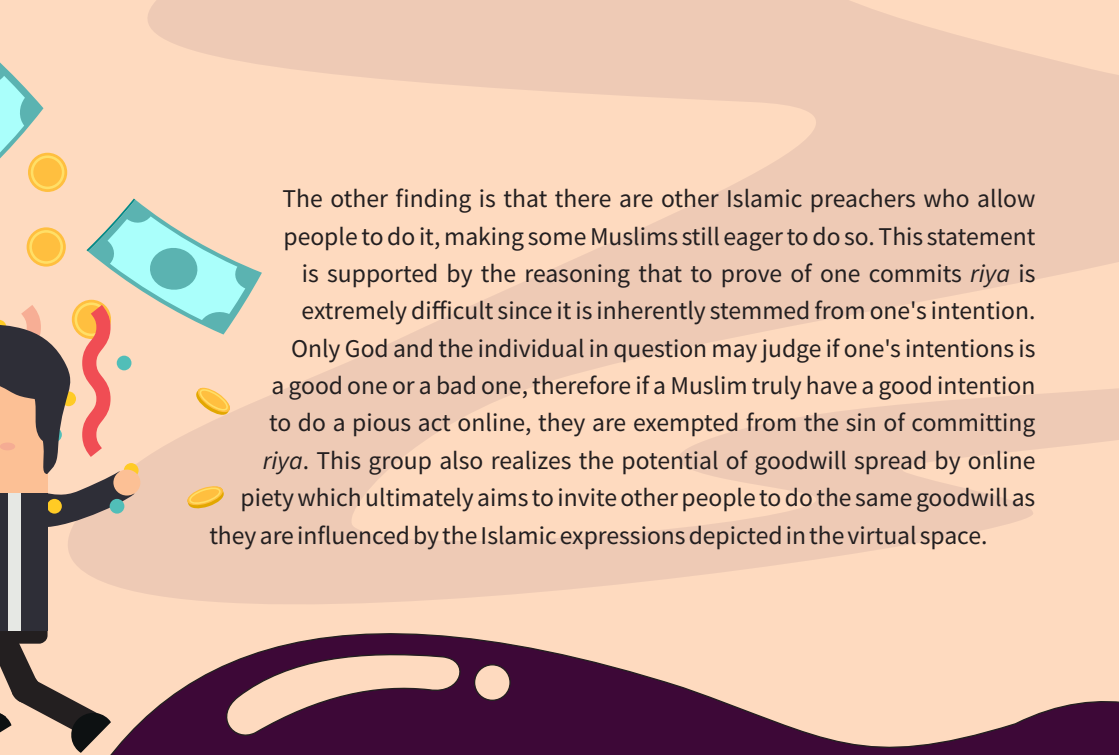
An illustration of a black microphone with a silver grille and a small cross on top. Next to it is a white smartphone with a black screen. The background is a light blue with some faint geometric shapes.

The existence of new piety for Indonesian Muslim also faces a serious challenge of the *riya* trap. The Islamic teaching advocates its followers to distance themselves from the act of *riya*. One of the a famous *ulama* (religious leader) in Indonesia, Quraish Shihab, describes *riya* as "the act of showing off one's *ibadah* (act of religious piety) with the purpose of getting other people's praises before, during, or after doing said *ibadah*"<sup>21</sup>. In Islamic teaching, the act of *riya* renders the pray to become useless or worthless in the eyes of God.

Furthermore, *riya* is categorized as a form of 'asy syirkul ashghar' or lesser shirk, an act considered one of the sins most-hated by God. Even so, *riya* is a matter of one's heart, thus making it extremely difficult to know if a Muslim has committed *riya* or not. In other words, only God and the acting individual know if an act is *riya* or not. Therefore, we can conclude that *riya* is an aspect very near to our everyday behavior.

New piety means presenting a Muslim's piety for a much bigger audience than what is feasible offline. New piety also gains a new meaning when discussed in the discourse of defining *riya*. So, new piety has higher risks of being *riya* or accused of being *riya* rather than the conventional, offline, religious piety—and it poses a new potential risk to commit *riya*. Even then, the classical debate about the potential to commit *riya* online or offline still persists until today.

This debate has been reviewed extensively by Husein and Slama, who had researched about how an online community which facilitates all Muslims to report their Al-Quran reading activity online<sup>22</sup>. To summarize, this writing concludes that there are some Muslims who decline the invitation to report their Al-Quran reading activity online because they want to avoid being *riya*. Some of the reasons are based on one of Muslim *ulama* who discusses plenty of Tasawuf (sufism, the Islamic mysticism) Al-Ghazali, who argues that trying to be careful and mindful towards all sorts of worldly sin includes avoiding the potential of being *riya*.

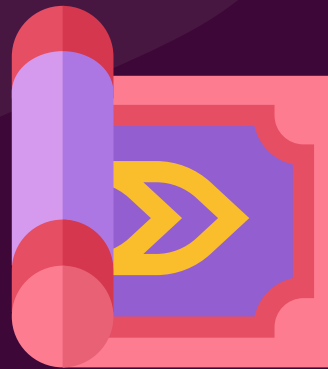


The other finding is that there are other Islamic preachers who allow people to do it, making some Muslims still eager to do so. This statement is supported by the reasoning that to prove of one commits *riya* is extremely difficult since it is inherently stemmed from one's intention.

Only God and the individual in question may judge if one's intentions is a good one or a bad one, therefore if a Muslim truly have a good intention to do a pious act online, they are exempted from the sin of committing *riya*. This group also realizes the potential of goodwill spread by online piety which ultimately aims to invite other people to do the same goodwill as they are influenced by the Islamic expressions depicted in the virtual space.

## NEW PIETY: THE CHALLENGES AND FUTURE PREDICTIONS FOR INDONESIAN MUSLIM

New piety is the inevitability that comes with the advancement of communication technology employed by Muslim people of Indonesia. Even so, it needed serious attention because it will become a challenge to diversity and the meaning of Muslim piety itself. This is due to the existence of social media's prevalent filter bubble. Filter bubbles comforts us; it gives us freedom to act online since it gives us the information we want and nothing else. As a result, filter bubble then proceeded to create serious problems such as strengthening of one's identity, exclusivism, radicalism, and at its most extreme, terrorism, within Indonesia's muslim community.



Extensive interconnectedness also causes an expression or act of religious piety easily accessible by other people and this environment fosters the hated and sinful act of *riya*. The act of *riya* committed online is a new challenge for Muslim people to improve one's intention and limit oneself when facing difficulty in determining one's intention to show an act of religious piety to the public.

In the future, new piety is unavoidable due to the extensive nature of Internet access for all Indonesians--with a Muslim majority. Multi-stakeholder effort between the government as the policymakers, service providers, ulama, and people is needed because self-regulation is not enough to minimize the threats that come with the expansion of communication technology. As a regulator, the government is expected to be able to create policy to ensure that channels of religious studies and expression of piety can put an emphasis on religious values and are not utilized as a tool which motivates violent act in the name of religion. The role of ulama, who gives knowledge and facilitate Muslims to study Islam, is also essential. Especially, to implement the value of unity and to conduct even further studies about *riya* in new media. Platforms and service providers also need to contribute in keeping and improving the system to guarantee the collective public wellbeing. This teamwork's objective is to ensure that Muslim people of Indonesia to be wiser in utilizing the new media in the pursuit of religious piety and are aware of the looming threats and consequences.



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