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Implementation of Agenda Setting Theory on the Role of Islamic Higher Education Public Relations in Building Moderate Islamic Discourse in Digital Media

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Abstract. The spread of religion-based radicalism in digital spaces requires strategic communication efforts from Islamic higher education institutions to build counter-narratives through the strengthening of moderate Islamic discourse. This study aims to analyze the implementation of Agenda Setting Theory in the role of Public Relations at Islamic Religious Higher Education Institutions in developing moderate Islamic discourse through digital media. Using a qualitative approach with a case study design, data were collected through in-depth interviews and documentation analysis of both institutions' communication activities. The findings reveal that PR plays four major roles in disseminating moderate Islamic values: as a communication technician, communication facilitator, expert prescriber, and problem-solving facilitator. Through the application of the Agenda Setting Theory, PR successfully establishes key issues such as religious moderation and humanism as the main focus of the universities' digital communication. Strategies employed include maintaining visual identity consistency, strengthening media networks, and aligning messages with institutional visions and missions. This study concludes that PR at PTKI functions not only as an information manager but also as a social change agent and a driver of digital da'wah that supports moderate Islamic discourse in digital media.

Keywords: Agenda Setting, Public Relations, Islamic Religious Colleges, Moderate Islam, Digital Media

1. BACKGROUND

Radical Islamic ideology is still spreading widely through social media. While previously it spread directly through meetings or discussions, the spread of radical Islamic ideology has now become more widespread with the advent of social media (Djafar Shodiq, 2021). If examined in depth, radical Islam can pose a threat to societal peace and national unity. This is because radical Islam portrays Islamic teachings in an exclusive and narrow manner, and to achieve its goals, this ideology permits the use of extreme methods, including acts of terror. (Sukarman et al., 2019).

Terrorist acts, often referred to as terrorism, prioritize threats and physical actions aimed at creating fear and destruction within a broader context. Terrorist acts can be driven by various motives, including economic, political, and, in this context, religious motives driven by radical Islamic ideology (Zulfadli, 2017). Terrorism driven by radical Islamic ideology is defined as terrorism carried out by individuals or groups claiming to be based on Islamic teachings but with a limited and exclusive interpretation that justifies the use of violence to achieve their goals (Jumaidi, 2023).

In the digital context, the spread of radical Islam has become more widespread. For adherents of this ideology, social media not only easily disseminates their ideology but also serves as a means of recruiting and planning terrorist acts (Rachmawati & Karisma, 2018). During the pandemic, the spread of radical Islam has increased, with hundreds of thousands of pieces of content about radicalism being found spreading through social media, specifically targeting teenagers and young adults (Mahendro, 2023).

To neutralize and counter the widespread spread of radical Islam on social media, a counter-narrative is needed through a more moderate Islamic discourse (Zumrotus Sholikhah & Muvid, 2022). Moderate Islam, as a teaching derived from Islam as rahmatan lil'alamin (blessing for all the universe), means being a blessing for the universe and supporting the harmony of society in all its diversity by adhering to wasathiyah (moderation), neither leaning to the right nor to the left (Prastyo & Fikra, 2022). This right, as mentioned by Quraish Shihab, states that moderate Islam refers to a tolerant attitude, accepting differing views from anyone, and rejecting any form of coercion of a particular understanding or ideology (Mahmudi, 2018). Tolerance can refer to how to interact with others regardless of ethnicity and religion (Marina & Prasetya, 2022).

Through the above explanation, the author argues that the dissemination of moderate Islamic discourse in digital spaces plays a key role in countering the narrative of radical Islamic ideology that leads to terrorism and religious radicalization. This dissemination of moderate Islamic discourse should be organized by institutions or agencies authorized to disseminate more moderate Islamic ideas. Given that the spread of radical ideology is often targeted at teenagers and young adults, universities, and specifically Islamic Universities, are the appropriate institutions for fostering moderate and tolerant Islamic discourse (Hefni, 2020).

Based on the researcher's observations, among the PTKI that are actively developing moderate Islamic discourse are the State Islamic University (UIN) Salatiga and UIN K.H. Abdurrahman Wahid (UIN Gus Dur) Pekalongan. Through the intermediary of Public Relations (PR) of each campus, UIN Salatiga with the slogan Green Wastahiyah Campus and UIN Gus Dur with its mission to produce moderate graduates, referring to their media activities and publications continue to make efforts to build moderate Islamic understanding in cyberspace. By looking at the role of PR which has a management function, the effort to build moderate Islamic discourse is not seen as a partial step but as a complex and planned step (Anani-Bossman, 2022).

Public relations is a planned communication process that connects an organization with its publics. Public relations is often referred to as a bridge, given its role as a facilitator of information and communication between the organization and its stakeholders. All forms of communication are conducted with the primary goal of achieving organizational goals while prioritizing mutual understanding between the organization and its public (Jefkins, 2018). Therefore, this study aims to examine the role of PTKI Public Relations in efforts to disseminate and mainstream moderate Islamic discourse in cyberspace.

2. THEORETICAL STUDY

Agenda-setting theory in public relations involves efforts to influence the public agenda by promoting specific issues that overlap with those of broader public concern. Agenda-setting theory states that the mass media has the power to determine which issues are considered important by the public by consistently emphasizing or focusing on them. Public relations, in this context, functions to promote public awareness by focusing on topics deemed important by the public relations team or organization and worthy of media coverage and public consumption (Prasetya, 2023).

Agenda-setting theory contains three main assumptions, particularly related to the penetration of the internet (Turner & West, 2018). The first assumption is that the media selects specific topics to present to the public. This assumption has theoretically changed in the internet era, where the media environment presents more agendas than ever before. Various media types, such as traditional offline media, online media, and social media, may compete to present an agenda, support a particular agenda, or disseminate or support an issue. The second assumption of Agenda Setting Theory states that society tends to rely on mass media for guidance and direction regarding important events and happenings. This means that mass media has a strong influence on what people consider important and where they focus their attention. Mass media such as television, newspapers, radio, and digital media are the most important sources of information in today's society.

The third assumption is that there is a direct link between the issues deemed important by the media and the issues considered important by the public (Turner & West, 2018). This assumption implies that topics or issues that surface in the mass media tend to also be those deemed relevant and influential by the wider public. Mass media are considered to have the power to set the public agenda by highlighting and prioritizing news and issues that appear in the media. This indicates that topics frequently covered by the media tend to become part of the media agenda. Citizens' interaction with news and information through the media can influence their perceptions and priorities regarding issues raised in mainstream media. The interactions supported by increasingly converged media make audiences not just consumers of

information but also producers (Prasetya et al., 2022). As a result, the public, as an audience, tends to pay attention to topics that frequently appear in the media and consider them important.

3. RESEARCH METHOD

This research section uses a case study research method. Case studies are based on a real-life event or incident in a contemporary context (Yin, 2013). This event can relate to an individual, an organization, or be directly related to an ongoing issue (Flyvberg, 2013). In this context, we will examine how public relations at an Islamic university countered the narrative of religious radicalization by spreading moderate Islamic discourse in digital spaces.

The research approach employed is qualitative. This approach aims to observe, describe, and analyze phenomena based on time, place, event, and actors (Sarosa, 2021). More in-depth, through this qualitative research, researchers attempt to interpret the meaning of a phenomenon and understand and capture it based on the complexity arising from the phenomena that emerge, in this case related to the spread of moderate Islamic discourse through digital spaces. Qualitative research also focuses on understanding and providing assumptions with interpretive references to the problems faced by humans, both in personal and group contexts (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The informants who will serve as the primary data sources are individuals who have an understanding of public relations strategies in the dissemination of moderate Islamic discourse from UIN Salatiga and UIN K.H. Abdurrahman Wahid Pekalongan. Therefore, the research will target members of the Public Relations Teams from each of the two Islamic Universities. Therefore, the research will be conducted in two cities, namely Pekalongan City and Salatiga City and specifically targeting the Public Relations Teams of UIN Salatiga and UIN Gus Dur respectively.

4. RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Moderation in Islamic teachings means using a friendly and tolerant approach to preaching and opposing various forms of radical preaching thought. Therefore, moderate Islam, also known as middle-line Islam, stands in contrast to the earlier concept of radical Islam. In the definition of radical Islam, the emergence of the concept of moderate Islam is seen as an antidote or as an attempt to explain the face of Islam in a more neutral and peaceful light. This is the general understanding of UIN K.H. Abdurrahman Wahid Pekalongan and UIN Salatiga, which is also based on the vision and mission of both universities. Religious moderation, or moderate Islam, is the understanding widely promoted by both universities.

The Role of Public Relations at Islamic Universities

To achieve this vision and mission, the public relations teams of both universities play a strategic role in fostering moderate Islamic discourse through digital channels. The Public Relations Teams of both UINs fulfill four roles:

1. Communication Technician

The role of public relations as a communication technician is one of many roles held by the public relations department. This role refers to the role of public relations as a communications technician who carries out operational and technical tasks within the framework of communication and information. In relation to its role in building a moderate Islamic discourse in the digital world, the Public Relations Team focuses on creating various communication content such as news, articles, graphic designs, videos, and other types of content that incorporate moderate Islamic teachings.

UIN Gus Dur utilizes a variety of communication materials to support the delivery of moderate Islamic discourse to the public. In text form, the content is predominantly press releases related to academic and student activities. Opinions are also written by UIN Gus Dur academics. The primary distribution of text communication materials is through the official campus portal, uingusdur.ac.id, managed by the Public Relations Team of UIN K.H. Abdurrahman Wahid Pekalongan. Communication materials in the form of flyers and infographics are distributed through the campus's official social media channels, namely the Instagram account uingusdur.official and the Facebook account UIN K.H. Abdurrahman Wahid Pekalongan.

Similar to UIN K.H. Abdurrahman Wahid Pekalongan, the UIN Salatiga Public Relations Team acts as communication technicians by disseminating content embodying moderate Islamic discourse through all digital channels. Using the hashtag #GreenWasthiyahCampus, UIN Salatiga focuses on disseminating moderate Islamic messages through its news portal and campus social media. Through the uinsalatiga.ac.id portal, moderate Islamic discourse is mainstreamed through campus press releases and through articles by the UIN Salatiga Rector, which are included in the Rector's Column. Press releases cover all academic and student activities, as well as campus developments, both in terms of physical aspects and facilities. The Rector's Column features articles by the Rector on themes of Islamic moderation, including "Islamic Moderation: Maintaining Balance in Wealth" and "Moderation of Islamic Law: Sunni and Shia."

2. Communication Facilitator

The role of a public relations professional, the communication facilitator, focuses on facilitating the flow of information between an organization and the general public. In this role, the public relations team acts as an intermediary and ensures effective two-way communication between the organization and the public. The public, in this case, are individuals with interrelated cultures and backgrounds (Prayogi & Prasetya, 2023). The role of the communication facilitator also encourages the public relations team to build and maintain positive relationships between the organization and stakeholders, particularly in conveying messages about moderate Islamic teachings.

This role has been performed effectively by both the UIN Gus Dur and UIN Salatiga Public Relations Teams. The primary goal of the communication facilitator is to ensure effective and efficient communication between the campus and its public. The role of the communication facilitator fosters a transparent and open communication environment that, in the long term, can help build public trust in the organization. In carrying out this role, the Public Relations of UIN K.H. Abdurrahman Wahid Pekalongan and the UIN Salatiga Public Relations Department focus on two areas: first, listening to and responding to the public, and second, managing a two-way dialogue between the campus and stakeholders. In the first effort, which involves listening to and responding to the public, both teams collect all feedback received from the public or the wider community, submitted via social media or WhatsApp to the Public Relations admin number.

Both teams strive to understand the public's various needs and questions, particularly regarding a moderate understanding of Islam, and then communicate this information to relevant leaders and officials. The Public Relations team gathers feedback from the public and ensures that the public's views and questions are heard by the organization, including listening to and providing appropriate responses to complaints, suggestions, and inquiries.

3. Expert Prescriber

The role of an expert prescriber, also known as an expert consultant, is a public relations role focused on serving as the primary expert or consultant in formulating and providing strategic advice on how an organization should manage communications and information to the public. Regarding the dissemination of moderate Islamic discourse, the Public Relations Team is involved in consulting on branding ideas and topics to be addressed and presented to the public.

The initial step is to identify issues and opportunities that can be addressed to project the campus' image as based on moderate Islamic teachings. This is evident in the UIN Salatiga

slogan "Green Wasathiyah Campus." The slogan was chosen based on input from the UIN Salatiga Public Relations Team, which will help the public remember UIN Salatiga as a green wasathiyah campus. This "green campus" signifies a shady and cool campus environment, while also embodying the peaceful and tolerant teachings of Islam. Specifically, the UIN Salatiga Public Relations Team performs this expert consultant role in regular forums held by the campus regarding the "Green Wasathiyah Campus" slogan.

The UIN Gus Dur Public Relations Team's role as expert prescribers involves a consultative approach to strategies for enhancing UIN Gus Dur's branding to the wider public. The Gus Dur Public Relations Team routinely engages in discussions and provides input to the leadership, particularly the Vice Rector II and the Head of the Academic, Planning, and Finance Bureau. Discussions focus not only on efforts to develop a moderate Islamic narrative but also on branding efforts for UIN Gus Dur, which is undergoing a change in campus management from a PNBP Work Unit to a Public Service Agency.

4. Problem Solving Facilitator

The role of a problem-solving facilitator refers to the professional role of public relations personnel who are able to listen and communicate information between the organization and its key audiences. These public relations personnel have the ability to collaborate with other divisions and leaders to define and resolve existing problems within the organization. In this role, the public relations team assists leaders in solving problems from a public relations perspective. This role is vital for an organization's public relations team. When a public relations team is involved in resolving organizational problems, it is considered to have a strategic position and role. In the context of the dissemination of moderate Islamic teachings, the public relations team is involved in resolving issues related to building a moderate campus image and also in developing the best strategy for approaching an Islamic campus with its moderate and modest teachings.

The role of a problem-solving facilitator begins with the public relations officer's ability to identify and address various issues or problems that could disrupt organizational performance and undermine the organization's positive image. These issues can relate to internal issues, including student dissatisfaction, lecturer protests regarding salaries, and others. Meanwhile, external issues are not limited to one or two specific topics but rather issues that can significantly lead to a crisis situation for the organization. The role of the problem-solving facilitator for the UIN Salatiga Public Relations Team falls into the realm of crisis management, targeting the organization's image or existence, specifically related to the Ferienjob Internship

issue. Rumors surfaced that UIN Salatiga had sent several of its students to the problematic internship program. This issue became a national issue and sparked heated discussions among various parties.

The UIN Salatiga Public Relations Team assisted in resolving the issue by creating a press release and utilizing media relations to disseminate it. UIN Salatiga clearly explained that the UIN Salatiga academic community was not involved in the Ferienjob internship program, as the Rector of UIN Salatiga has explained on numerous occasions..

Agenda Setting in Public Relations Roles

Agenda-Setting Theory, also known as Agenda-Setting Theory, in relation to public relations agendas, aims to raise public awareness by focusing on which issues to raise and which to exclude. In the context of this study, the highlighted issue is how State Islamic Universities build their image as moderate campuses and explain moderate Islamic teachings, rather than radical and extreme ones. In carrying out their duties, the Public Relations Department of UIN Salatiga and the Public Relations Department of UIN K.H. Abdurrahman Wahid Pekalongan also apply the principles of Agenda-Setting Theory in an effort to introduce moderate Islamic teachings to the public and wider audience. Agenda-Setting Theory is used to establish the focus of the issues reported and the perspective on the issues or information presented.

Several assumptions of Agenda-Setting Theory can be linked to the role of State Islamic Universities' Public Relations in developing moderate Islamic discourse in digital media. The first assumption is that the media sets the agenda. As this theory was developed in viewing the perspective of the mass media (press) in setting the agenda to be delivered to Public Relations, this also occurs in activities or campaigns carried out by Public Relations of UIN Salatiga and UIN K.H. Abdurrahman Wahid Pekalongan. In Public Relations of UIN Salatiga, the determination of the media agenda is rooted in the strategic target of UIN Salatiga for 2022-2024, namely increasing the content and character of Wasathiyah Islam (religious moderation), literacy, education and internalization of Islamic religious understanding at UIN Salatiga. In this strategic target, the character of Wasathiyah Islam as the core of moderate Islamic teachings is listed as the main strategic target of UIN Salatiga considering that this target is the first strategic target of a total of eight strategic targets.

The media setting the agenda for this discussion is intended to guide UIN Salatiga, specifically the Public Relations Team, in establishing the main strategic target agenda for all media managed by the Public Relations Team, including print and online media that collaborate

and are affiliated with UIN Salatiga. The purpose of UIN Salatiga's media in setting the agenda is also to align with the primary goal of UIN Salatiga's program, namely strengthening a moderate higher education system. This program's goal is to promote a learning system and academic system at UIN Salatiga that focuses on the formation of moderate Islamic values. Therefore, to support these goals, the UIN Salatiga Public Relations Team plays a crucial role in ensuring that all media managed by the Public Relations Team, including UIN Salatiga's media partners, report on topics of religious moderation.

Zidnie Ilman Elfikri, UIN Salatiga's Public Relations Coordinator, stated that the main agenda setting in the process of building a moderate Islamic discourse at UIN Salatiga focuses on efforts to recognize inclusive and tolerant Islamic teachings. He added that the content published in campus media and UIN Salatiga's media network provides useful information for all groups and all religions, not just Islam. This sentiment was echoed by the Public Relations Team of UIN K.H. Abdurrahman Wahid Pekalongan, who stated that the agenda set by UIN Gus Dur is based on the campus's Vision and Mission. The vision states that UIN Gus Dur aims to become a leading Islamic university in the development of knowledge for humanity. Meanwhile, the first mission states that UIN Gus Dur provides transformative education to produce superior, moderate, and humanistic graduates.

Several keywords appearing in the vision and mission are "humanist" and "moderate." Therefore, these two words form the basis for determining the agenda of the media managed by UIN K.H. Abdurrahman Wahid Pekalongan. According to the UIN K.H. Abdurrahman Wahid Pekalongan Strategic Plan document, Abdurrahman Wahid Pekalongan 2023-2027 explained the meaning of humanism as someone who desires and strives for better social interactions, based on the principles of humanity, serving the interests of fellow human beings, and considering humans as the most important object. Meanwhile, the meaning of moderation is finding middle ground or avoiding the extremes, demonstrated by appreciating diversity and strengthening unity in achieving the university's vision. With this moderate nature, the academic community of UIN K.H. Abdurrahman Wahid Pekalongan always prioritizes the values of Islamic teachings, which are *rahmatan lil alamin* (blessing for all the worlds).

Based on this explanation, the UIN Gus Dur Public Relations Team used the two keywords, humanist and moderate, as agenda-setting tools in the media they manage. Humanism and moderation, as reflected in Gus Dur's own thinking, are inseparable parts and constitute the essence of Islamic teachings. Therefore, when IAIN Pekalongan became UIN and later took the name of K.H. Abdurrahman Wahid, the Public Relations Team's perspective is that UIN Gus Dur is now not simply an Islamic university, but also a public campus due to

its transition to a university. With its university status, the scope of public relations' work also broadens. While IAIN Pekalongan's image was previously limited to that of an Islamic campus, after becoming an UIN, it has become an Islamic university with widespread acceptance, both in terms of its teachings and perspectives.

The role of public relations in determining the agenda in managed media is part of the role of public relations as an expert prescriber, or what is commonly referred to as an expert consultant. Public relations focuses on being the primary expert or consultant in formulating and providing strategic advice on how organizations should manage communications and information to the public. Regarding the dissemination of moderate Islamic discourse, the Public Relations Team is involved in consulting on branding ideas and topics to be addressed and presented to the public. In setting the agenda, the Public Relations Team also provides various suggestions and input to the campus through meetings and forums attended by the leadership and academic community of UIN Salatiga and UIN K.H. Abdurrahman Wahid Pekalongan.

Higher Education Public Relations Strategy in Building Moderate Islamic Discourse

As discussed previously, in building a moderate Islamic discourse in digital media, the Public Relations Department of UIN Salatiga and the Public Relations Department of UIN K.H. Abdurrahman Wahid Pekalongan adhere to the campus vision and mission, which prioritizes the teachings of religious moderation and emphasizes moderate aspects of Islam. Elaborating through interviews and documentation studies, the researcher identified several strategies employed by both public relations departments to build a moderate Islamic discourse in the digital world. These strategies include the consistent use of a visual identity. Consistent use of a visual identity plays a crucial role in building and strengthening a moderate Islamic discourse through various means. Visual identity encompasses elements such as logos, colors, typography, graphic design, and other symbols used consistently across all media and communications.

In the context of building a moderate Islamic discourse, a visual identity can support a positive image and create a lasting impression on the audience. UIN Salatiga consistently uses the Green Wasathiyah Campus logo and words in every campaign or information dissemination activity through digital channels. Consistent use of visual elements helps establish the institution's image as a professional and trustworthy entity. The logo can first be found on the uinsalatiga.id portal, which displays the words #GreenWasathiyyahCampus adjacent to the UIN Salatiga logo and the BLU (Public Service Agency) logo.

The second strategy is utilizing media networks. Media relations is crucial for developing a moderate Islamic discourse within higher education institutions. Through effective media relations, universities can influence public opinion, strengthen their image as institutions that support moderate Islamic views, and reach a wider audience. Media relations serves to disseminate campus content to the wider world through existing media networks, both print and online. This way, universities can ensure that their messages of Islamic moderation reach a wider audience. This relationship can be implemented through mass media networks, including television, radio, newspapers, and online media, which have a much greater reach than internal campus communication channels. Through this strategy, the Public Relations Team builds and maintains relationships with journalists, enabling them to convey or entrust information and coverage on campus news, particularly on themes of religious moderation or moderate Islam, to journalists in those media outlets. Utilizing this media network is one strategy employed by UIN Gus Dur's Public Relations, particularly in disseminating campus-wide information related to religious moderation.

Each campus has a Center for the Study of Religious Moderation that regularly holds discussions and activities. UIN K.H. Abdurrahman Wahid Pekalongan, in particular, also has a foster village, Linggoasri, which has been designated a Religious Moderation Village. Through good relationships with journalists, various campus activities can be disseminated through the media's digital channels. Similarly, UIN Salatiga's Public Relations consistently sends press releases to media outlets based in Salatiga and Central Java. UIN K.H. Abdurrahman Wahid Pekalongan also collaborates with the Pekalongan City Interfaith Harmony Forum as a medium for discussion and learning about what religious moderation is from the perspective of religious figures (Prasetya et al., 2024).

5. CONCLUSION AND SUGGESTIONS

Conclusion

This research shows that the Public Relations of Islamic Universities, specifically UIN K.H. Abdurrahman Wahid Pekalongan and UIN Salatiga, play a strategic role in developing and disseminating moderate Islamic discourse in the digital space. Through their managerial and communicative functions, Public Relations serve as communication technicians, communication facilitators, expert prescribers, and problem-solving facilitators, actively creating a moderate campus image and directing public opinion toward inclusive and tolerant Islamic values. Within the context of Agenda Setting theory, both institutions consciously establish the main issues (media agenda) of religious moderation and humanity as the focus of

news coverage on various campus digital channels. Public Relations plays a role in directing the narrative, determining issue priorities, and ensuring that messages about moderate Islam are consistently conveyed to the public through internal and external media. The strategies employed by Public Relations include the use of a consistent visual identity, strengthening media networks (media relations), and managing communication messages aligned with the campus's vision and mission. With these strategies, Public Relations plays a significant role in strengthening the image of Islamic Universities as centers for the dissemination of moderate Islamic values.

Suggestions

In the context of Islamic higher education institutions, Public Relations at Islamic Higher Education Institutions need to continuously strengthen their digital communication strategies by expanding their media networks and developing creative content that emphasizes the values of Islamic moderation. The use of social media, campus news portals, and multimedia publications should be designed in an integrated manner to ensure the message of moderate Islam is widely communicated and appealing to the younger generation.

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