

MEDIA BY MINORITY

Bonding and Bridging Strategies of Shia and Ahmadiyya Communities in Indonesia

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Abstract

Representations of minority groups are often examined through mainstream media perspectives, while less attention has been given to how minorities construct and negotiate their own identities through self-representation in media spaces. This article explores how the development of new media has enabled greater participation and representation among minority groups, with a particular focus on the Shia and Ahmadiyya communities in Indonesia. It analyzes how these religious minorities develop and utilize various forms of self-directed communication, referred to as “media by minorities”, and examines the broader social functions of such media practices. Using Robert Putnam’s theory of social capital as an analytical framework, this study draws on in-depth interviews with key informants from both communities. The findings indicate that increasing openness facilitated by the digital media environment has encouraged minority groups to establish diverse media platforms as instruments of self-representation and community engagement. These media initiatives serve two primary functions. First, they act as a bridging mechanism that facilitates communication, understanding, and interaction between minority communities and the wider society, particularly majority groups. Second, they function as a



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bonding mechanism that strengthens solidarity, collective identity, and internal relationships within the communities. However, despite this increased openness, digital media environments have not fully eliminated negative narratives toward minority groups.

[Representasi kelompok minoritas sering kali dikaji dari sudut pandang media arus utama, sementara perhatian terhadap bagaimana kelompok minoritas membangun dan menegosiasikan identitas mereka sendiri melalui praktik representasi diri di ruang media masih relatif terbatas. Artikel ini mengkaji bagaimana perkembangan 'media baru' telah memungkinkan partisipasi dan representasi yang lebih luas bagi kelompok minoritas, dengan fokus pada komunitas Syiah dan Ahmadiyah di Indonesia. Studi ini menganalisis bagaimana kedua komunitas agama minoritas tersebut mengembangkan dan memanfaatkan berbagai bentuk komunikasi mandiri yang disebut sebagai "media oleh minoritas", serta mengeksplorasi fungsi sosial yang lebih luas dari praktik media tersebut. Dengan menggunakan teori modal sosial Robert Putnam sebagai kerangka analisis, penelitian ini melakukan wawancara mendalam dengan informan kunci dari kedua komunitas. Temuan menunjukkan bahwa meningkatnya keterbukaan yang difasilitasi oleh lingkungan media digital telah mendorong kelompok minoritas untuk membangun berbagai platform media sebagai sarana representasi diri dan keterlibatan komunitas. Inisiatif media tersebut memiliki dua fungsi utama. Pertama, berperan sebagai mekanisme penghubung (bridging mechanism) yang memfasilitasi komunikasi, pemahaman, dan interaksi antara komunitas minoritas dan masyarakat luas, khususnya kelompok mayoritas. Kedua, berfungsi sebagai mekanisme pengikat (bonding mechanism) yang memperkuat solidaritas, identitas kolektif, dan relasi internal di dalam komunitas. Meski demikian, keterbukaan ruang media digital belum sepenuhnya menghapus narasi-narasi negatif terhadap kelompok minoritas.]

Keywords: new media, self-representation, media by minority, Shia, Ahmadiyya.

A. Introduction

Research on media and minority groups has long attracted scholarly attention, particularly in relation to ethnicity, race, multiculturalism, religion, and identity politics. Most existing studies primarily examine how mainstream media represents and constructs minority identities rather than how minority groups represent themselves through media

platforms. A substantial body of research has analyzed the representation of racial and ethnic minorities in Western media contexts, including studies conducted in the United Kingdom,¹ Switzerland,² Australia,³ and the United States,⁴ while similar discussions have also emerged in Asian contexts such as China,⁵ Thailand,⁶ and Hong Kong.⁷ Within this broader discussion, religion has become one of the most frequently examined dimensions of minority representation, especially studies on how Islam and Muslims are portrayed in Western media.⁸ These studies consistently show that media coverage tends to associate Muslims with violence, terrorism, extremism, and cultural incompatibility, contributing to stigmatization, social marginalization, and public suspicion of Muslim

¹ Simon Cottle, *Ethnic Minorities and the Media: Changing Cultural Boundaries* (Berkshire: Open University Press, 2000).

² Joachim Trebbe and Philomen Schoenhagen, "Ethnic Minorities in the Mass Media: How Migrants Perceive Their Representation in Swiss Public Television", *Int. Migration & Integration*, vol. 12 (2011), pp. 411-28.

³ Gail Phillips, "Reporting Diversity: The Representation of Ethnic Minorities in Australia's Television Current Affairs Programs", *Media International Australia*, vol. 139, no. 1 (2011), pp. 23-31; John Budarick and Gil-Soo Han, *Minorities and Media: Producers, Industries, Audiences* (London: Springer, 2017); John Budarick and Gil-Soo Han, "Towards a Multi-Ethnic Public Sphere? African-Australian Media and Minority-Majority Relations", *Media, Culture & Society*, vol. 37, no. 8 (2015), pp. 1254-65.

⁴ Hazel Atuel, Viviane Seyranian, and William D Crano, "Media Representations of Majority and Minority Groups", *European Journal of Social Psychology*, vol. 37, no. 3 (2007), pp. 561-72; Nancy Signorielli, "Minorities Representation in Prime Time: 2000 to 2008", *Communication Research Reports*, vol. 26, no. 4 (2009), pp. 323-36.

⁵ Zhenzhou Zhao and Gerard A Postiglione, "Representations of Ethnic Minorities in China's University Media", *Discourse: Studies in the Cultural Politics of Education*, vol. 31, no. 3 (2010), pp. 319-34.

⁶ Krisadawan Hongladarom, "Competing Discourses on Hilltribes: Media Representation of Ethnic Minorities in Thailand", *Manusya: Journal of Humanities*, vol. 3, no. 1 (2000), pp. 1-19.

⁷ Liz Jackson and Yulia Nesterova, "Multicultural Hong Kong: Alternative New Media Representations of Ethnic Minorities", *Multicultural Education Review*, vol. 9, no. 2 (2017), pp. 93-104.

⁸ Mustafa Hussain, "Islam, Media and Minorities in Denmark", *Current Sociology* vol. 48, no. 4 (2000): 95-116; Nahid Kabir, "Representation of Islam and Muslims in the Australian Media, 2001-2005", *Journal of Muslim Minority Affairs*, vol. 26, no. 3 (2006), pp. 313-28; Amir Saeed, "Media, Racism and Islamophobia: The Representation of Islam and Muslims in the Media", *Sociology Compass*, vol. 1, no. 2 (2007), pp. 443-62; Saifuddin Ahmed and Jörg Matthes, "Media Representation of Muslims and Islam from 2000 to 2015: A Meta-Analysis", *International Communication Gazette*, vol. 79, no. 3 (2016), pp. 219-44; Rusi Jaspal and Marco Cinnirella, "Media Representations of British Muslims and Hybridised Threats to Identity", *Contemporary Islam*, vol. 4, no. 3 (2010), pp. 289-310.

communities. Scholars further argue that such portrayals are influenced by historical and political factors, particularly global conflicts involving Muslim-majority countries, as well as commercial pressures that encourage sensationalized reporting and reinforce the construction of Islam as the “other”. In addition to Islam, several studies have also explored the representation of Jewish communities in the media.⁹ Overall, previous scholarship has largely concentrated on representations produced by mainstream media institutions, leaving comparatively limited attention to the ways minority groups construct and negotiate their own identities through self-representation in media spaces.

This disparity is even more pronounced in studies of intra-religious minorities, namely minority groups that exist within a single religious tradition. In the Indonesian context, where the majority of the population is Muslim, adherents of the five other religions recognized by the state have historically been afforded representational space within mainstream media. Religious programming is widely broadcast on television and radio; although Islamic content remains dominant, programming from other state-recognized religions is also regularly produced and disseminated. Indonesia’s publicly funded broadcaster, TVRI, for instance, allocates dedicated airtime for religious programming representing all officially recognized religions. National private television networks similarly maintain comparable programming segments. However, this institutionalized form of inclusion does not extend to intra-religious minority groups such as the Ahmadiyya and Shia communities, which are not formally recognized by the state.

The development of new internet-based media platforms like YouTube, which can be understood as a video-based streaming video, and technologies such as podcasts, which represent a new form of audio media, has created new spaces for the participation of minority groups that have traditionally faced difficulties in obtaining self-representation within mainstream media. In Indonesia, there are no clear state regulations governing digital media and digital platforms, while the existing broadcast law does not grant the Indonesia Broadcasting Commission (Komisi Penyiaran Indonesia, KPI) the authority to regulate, control, or supervise digital media. This regulatory gap has created opportunities for the rapid

⁹ Cora Alexa Døving, “Jews in the News Representations of Judaism and the Jewish Minority in the Norwegian Contemporary Press”, *Journal of Media and Religion*, vol. 15, no. 1 (2016), pp. 1–14; Yulia Egorova and Tudor Parfitt, (eds), *Jews, Muslims and Mass Media: Mediating the ‘Other’* (London: Routledge, 2004).

growth of new media and enabled minority groups to access alternative channels for self-representation. Furthermore, digital media platforms, including websites and social media, have facilitated new forms of two-way communication. Scholars of new media argue that these platforms enables broader public participation in social discussions, while also providing opportunities for the empowerment of marginalized groups and reducing social inequality.¹⁰

Against this backdrop, this article examines how new media provide space for Shia and Ahmadiyya communities in Indonesia to participate in public discourse and construct their own forms of self-representation. Drawing on Caspi and Elias's concept of "media by minorities", this article emphasizes the active role of minority communities in producing, managing, and disseminating their own digital media narratives. In addition, the study employs Putnam's theory of social capital to analyze how "media by minorities" functions both as a bonding mechanism that strengthens internal group solidarity and as a bridging mechanism that facilitates interaction between minority and majority communities. In this respect, the present study differs from Schäfer's research, which focuses primarily on the use of online platforms by Shia and Ahmadiyya communities in Indonesia and Malaysia as a means of self representation under conditions of restriction and contestation.¹¹ Rather than focusing primarily on content analysis, this study examines the processes through which minority groups construct, negotiate, and maintain self-representation in digital media spaces.

The research draws primarily on in-depth interviews with key informants involved in media management and organizational structures within Jemaat Ahmadiyah Indonesia (JAI, an Ahmadiyya organization) and Ikatan Jamaah Ahlulbait Indonesia (IJABI, a Shia organization). Seven informants from both communities were interviewed to examine the motivations for developing minority media and the processes of religious

¹⁰ Larissa Hjorth and Sam Hinton, *Understanding Social Media*, 2nd edition (London: Sage, 2019); Josef Trappel, "Inequality, (New) Media and Communications", in *Digital Media Inequalities: Policies against Divides, Distrust and Discrimination*, ed. by Josef Trappel (Sweden: Nordicom, 2019), pp. 9–30.

¹¹ Saskia Schäfer, "New Practices of Self-Representation: The Use of Online Media by Ahmadiyya and Shia Communities in Indonesia and Malaysia", in *New Media Configurations and Socio-Cultural Dynamics in Asia and the Arab World*, ed. by Nadja-Christina Schneider and Carola Richter (Baden-Baden: Nomos Verlagsgesellschaft, 2015), pp. 174–97.

content production.¹² To contextualize these findings within Indonesia's media regulatory framework, this study also included interviews with representative of the Indonesian Broadcasting Commission (KPI) and the Regional Indonesian Broadcasting Commission (KPID) of East Java to understand their regulatory and supervisory roles, particularly in relation to media platforms developed by the Shia and Ahmadiyya communities.¹³

B. State Control and the Emergence of New Media

Shia and Ahmadiyya are two religious communities whose presence in Indonesia has long been subject to contestation with broader Muslim society. Despite significant theological differences between the two, public criticism directed at both groups often converges around similar accusations, particularly claims of heresy and religious deviance. More broadly, debates surrounding these communities center on their perceived position within Islam, with many rejecting them on the grounds that they are not considered part of the Islamic faith.

The rejection of Ahmadiyya in Indonesia is often associated with a 1980 fatwa issued by Majelis Ulama Indonesia (MUI, the Indonesian Ulama Council), which declared Ahmadiyya to be outside Islam. At the time, however, the fatwa attracted limited public attention, as distinctions between mainstream Indonesian Islam and Ahmadiyya had not yet become widely politicized during the Suharto era. Moreover, Ahmadiyya had been present in Indonesia since 1920, predating independence, which contributed to a degree of social integration with the broader Muslim community.¹⁴ This situation shifted during the post-Suharto reform era, when democratization expanded the space for religious expression and contestation. Within this context, MUI reaffirmed its anti-Ahmadiyya position in 2005. Although the fatwa is not legally binding, it has been widely invoked by segments of society and political

¹² As part of research ethics, particularly due to the need for anonymity and confidentiality of informants and media, we use community names only and do not identify the informants. Meanwhile, we only use initials for the two communities' media outlets. ID, LTV, IK, and IR are the initials of Ahmadiyya media, while MST is initial of the audio podcast of IJABI.

¹³ Since this study was conducted during the COVID-19 pandemic, interviews were carried out online via Zoom, including individual interviews and focus group discussions (FGDs) involving media administrators from these communities.

¹⁴ Ahmad Najib Burhani, "The Ahmadiyya and the Study of Comparative Religion in Indonesia: Controversies and Influences", *Islam and Christian-Muslim Relations*, vol. 25, no. 2 (2013), pp. 141–58.

actors to justify exclusion of Ahmadiyya and, in some cases, violence against its communities. Tensions escalated further in 2008, when the Indonesian government issued a Joint Decree of Three Ministers, which officially classified Ahmadiyya as deviant from mainstream Islam. This policy subsequently contributed to social conflict in various regions across Indonesia.¹⁵

Similar to the experience of the Ahmadiyya community, Shiites in Indonesia began to face increasing challenges in the 1980s. This development was closely linked to the impact of the 1979 Iranian revolution, which led to the perception that Shiites adhered to radical political and religious views associated with Iranian Supreme Leader Ayatollah Khomeini. In 1982, the Indonesian Ministry of Religious Affairs issued a report stating that Shia beliefs could not be prohibited, as Shiism had long possessed legitimacy and acknowledgment within the broader Islamic world. A year later, however, the Ministry circulated an internal directive reaffirming the principles of *ahl al-sunnah wa'l-jamā'ah* (the adherents of Prophetic tradition and the community). This directive was intended to prevent Ministry officials from being influenced by Shia ideology and departing from Sunni Islam. In 1984, MUI issued a *tausiyah* (religious recommendation), warning the Indonesian Muslims of the danger of Shia infiltration. The recommendation encouraged Muslims to reject Shia theology on the ground that it threatened social harmony and national stability.¹⁶ In doing so, the *tausiyah* institutionalized the MUI's theological opposition to Shiism by emphasizing the doctrinal differences between Shia and Sunni Islam. Although the recommendation was not legally binding, it subsequently became an important reference used by segments of society to justify the rejection of, and at times violence against, Shiite communities.

The rejection of these two religious minority communities in Indonesia is frequently accompanied by violations of religious freedom, including persecution, intimidation, blasphemy accusations, hate speech, and, in more extreme cases, physical violence. Data from Setara Institute indicate that the Ahmadiyya community experienced 27 incidents of

¹⁵ Andi M. Irawan, "‘They Are Not Muslims’: A Critical Discourse Analysis of the Ahmadiyya Sect Issue in Indonesia", *Discourse & Society*, vol. 28, no. 2 (2017), pp. 162–81.

¹⁶ Chiara Formichi, "Violence, Sectarianism, and the Politics of Religion: Articulations of Anti-Shi'a Discourses in Indonesia", *Indonesia*, no. 98 (2014), p. 7; Syafiq Hasyim, "The Council of Indonesian Ulama (Majelis Ulama Indonesia, MUI) and Religious Freedom", *Irasec's Discussion Papers*, vol. 12, (2011), p. 14

religious freedom violations in 2016, a figure that declined to eight cases in 2017 and six cases in 2022. A similar pattern can be observed among Shiite communities: 23 incidents were recorded in 2016, decreasing to 10 cases in 2017 and three cases in 2022.¹⁷ More recent data suggest differing trajectories for the two groups. The Ahmadiyya community continued to experience religious freedom violations, with six cases recorded in 2023 and eight in 2024. By contrast, no violations against Shiite communities were recorded during the same period.¹⁸

As minorities that are not always accepted by the Indonesia's Muslim-majority society, Shia and Ahmadiyya communities rarely receive fair representation in mainstream media. When they do appear, media portrayals are often shaped by stereotypes that discredit their beliefs and social presence. Drawing on the concept developed by Caspi and Elias, this phenomenon can be understood as “media about minorities”—a form of representation that broadens public discussion of minority groups while remaining fundamentally majority-oriented. Such media are largely produced by and for the majority, employing dominant cultural frameworks, accommodating majority interests, and addressing majority audiences. Consequently, minority representation within this communicative framework tends to be limited, selective, and frequently stereotypical. Rather than functioning as active participants in the construction of public discourse, minority groups are positioned primarily as objects of representation. This imbalance ultimately reinforces existing asymmetries of power within the public sphere.¹⁹

This imbalance is further reinforced by the structure of Indonesia's mass media system. Television and radio broadcasting fall under the authority of *Komisi Penyiaran Indonesia* (KPI), which performs regulatory and supervisory functions on behalf of the state. As a result, only

¹⁷ Setara Institute, “Laporan Kondisi Kebebasan Beragama di Indonesia Tahun 2017,” *Setara Institute*, 2018, <https://setara-institute.org/laporan-kondisi-kebebasan-beragama-dan-berkeyakinan-di-indonesia-tahun-2017/>; Setara Institute, “Kondisi Kebebasan Beragama Berkeyakinan, 2022,” *Setara Institute*, 2023, <https://setara-institute.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/04/Siaran-Pers-Kondisi-KBB-2022-SETARA-Institute.pdf>.

¹⁸ Setara Institute, “Kondisi Kebebasan Beragama Berkeyakinan, 2023,” *Setara Institute*, 2024, https://setara-institute.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/06/Rilis-Data-Kondisi-KBB-2023_Setara-Institute_Ind.pdf; Setara Institute, “Kondisi Kebebasan Beragama Berkeyakinan, 2024,” *Setara Institute*, 2025, <https://setara-institute.org/wp-content/uploads/2025/05/Rilis-Data-KBB-2024-2.pdf>.

¹⁹ Dan Caspi and Nelly Elias, “Don't Patronize Me: Media-by and Media-for Minorities,” *Ethnic and Racial Studies*, vol. 34, no. 1 (2011), p. 64.

broadcasters that comply with state licensing requirements are permitted to operate, and those that meet these requirements typically become part of the mainstream media landscape. In contrast, religious minority groups such as Shia and Ahmadiyya, whose existence has not been legally acknowledged by the state and which often incite public debates, tend to face significant constraints in representing themselves, even though they have developed their own media initiatives. Consequently, their ability to participate as legitimate actors within the public sphere remains limited, while dominant narratives about them continue to be shaped primarily by majority-oriented media institutions.

For Shia and Ahmadiyya communities, obtaining licenses to establish their own media platforms remains extremely difficult. Although no formal regulations explicitly prohibit minority groups such as Shia and Ahmadiyya from founding and managing media platform, including television and radio stations, the social and political realities surrounding these communities create substantial barriers in practice. Persistent stereotypes, social rejection, and even acts of violence directed against them have made it nearly impossible to develop media channels capable of representing their own perspectives and experiences. As one spokesperson from the Ahmadiyya community explained, the discrimination faced by Ahmadis makes it difficult even to consider initiating the licensing process for a radio or television station:

“There is no formal prohibition, but in practice it is extremely difficult. As is commonly understood in relation to the Ahmadiyya issue, there is persistent discrimination and obstruction, even though legally, there should not be. As a result, our applications are never processed.”²⁰

Similar to the Ahmadiyya experience, the Shiite community have also had limited opportunities for participation and self-representation within mainstream media. One informant from IJABI explained that the community had once planned to establish a radio station but encountered significant constraints related to licensing requirements, ultimately leading them to abandon the initiative. The experience of attempting to establish a *da'wa* radio station illustrates how structural and social barriers intersect in ways that disadvantage religious minority communities. The process of obtaining a broadcasting license is governed by stringent administrative and financial requirements, which can be particularly difficult for Islamic community organizations that

²⁰ Interview with Spokesperson of Ahmadiyya, 2021.

are subject to social prejudice and stigmatization.²¹ The barriers are not only technical but also ideological, as negative perceptions of the Shia community further complicate access to the licensing process. The lack of clear communication from regulatory bodies and the reluctance to grant trial broadcast reinforce implicit exclusionary practices, thereby limiting marginalized groups' access to media platforms. Ultimately, the decision by Shiite communities to abandon plans for obtaining media licenses reflects the broader challenges faced by religious minority communities in securing institutional recognition and equitable access to public communication channels.

A commissioner of KPID (Regional Indonesian Broadcasting Commission) East Java stated that, although there is no written regulation prohibiting Ahmadiyya or Shiite communities from establishing television or radio stations, no applications for such broadcasting licences had ever been submitted. The statement suggests that, at the formal level, there are no explicit legal barriers preventing Shia communities from obtaining broadcasting licenses, provided that their content complies with the Broadcasting Code of Conduct and Broadcast Program Standards (P3SPS).²² Nevertheless, the absence of applications from Shia communities raises important questions regarding the existence of structural and informal barriers that may prevent minority communities such as Shia and Ahmadis from accessing broadcasting licenses. KPID East Java also offered several possible explanations for the lack of applications from Shiite communities, including the possibility that some members conceal their religious identity and the relatively small size of the Shi'ite population.²³

The suggestion that some Shiite individuals conceal their religious identity reflects awareness within the community of existing social and institutional biases in the licensing process. In this context, identity concealment can be understood as a strategy for navigating conditions of discrimination and social exclusion. Among Shia communities, this practice is commonly associated with *taqiyya*, a concept referring to the precautionary concealment of religious belief or identity in situations where disclosure may expose individuals to hostility or harm. In some instances, this may extend to concealing religious affiliation within

²¹ Interview with IR IJABI, 2021.

²² Interview with KPID East Java, 2021.

²³ Interview KPID East Java 2021.

familial settings where intra-family confessional differences exist.²⁴ The explanation that the relatively small size of the Shiite population accounts for the absence of broadcasting licensing applications likewise risks oversimplifying the issue, as it neglects the broader socio-political context of religious marginalization. Taken together the rationales illuminate the tension between formal regulatory neutrality and that informal mechanisms that continue to structure unequal access to media institutions. Within the governance of religion in Indonesia, a formal neutral broadcasting regime does not imply regulatory absence; rather, neutrality itself constitutes a modality of regulation that shapes the conditions under which participation becomes possible.²⁵ Although no formal provision explicitly prohibit minority religious groups from applying for broadcasting licenses, interview data from a KPID East Java commissioner indicate that the community consultation mechanisms, particularly those involving majority religious actors, may function as an informal site of constraint. Within such processes, stigmatization and pre-existing normative assumptions about minority religious communities can shape evaluative judgments, thereby indirectly affecting the perceived legitimacy and viability of applications submitted by groups such as the Shi'ite and Ahmadiyya communities.

Due to the limited opportunities for participation in mainstream media, particularly television and radio under the supervision of the state and KPI, the Ahmadiyya community in Indonesia previously relied on the international platform Muslim Television Ahmadiyya (MTA) International to represent itself, especially prior to the development of the internet and social media. MTA is the only international television station representing Ahmadiyya communities, broadcasting across multiple countries through satellite networks. MTA was established, and it came to Indonesia in 1984 during the preparation phase, with its official launch in 2000.²⁶ In addition to television, the Ahmadiyya spokesperson stated that communities also managed local radio stations for internal purposes. This was easier from a licensing perspective, as the stations were not used solely by the Ahmadiyya community but by the

²⁴ Im Halimatusa'diyah, "Being Shi'ite Women in Indonesia's Sunni Populated Community: Roles and Relations among Themselves and with Others", *South East Asia Research*, vol. 21, no. 1 (2013), p.147.

²⁵ Ismatu Ropi, *Religion and Regulation in Indonesia* (Singapore: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017), p. 34.

²⁶ Interview with Spokesperson of Ahmadiyya, 2021

broader community, meaning they functioned as shared radio stations. Establishing a radio station with a broader network was relatively difficult for the Ahmadiyya community, so they opted for this alternative and chose to build a community radio station with a local scope. Even now, some local Ahmadi radio stations are still in operation. Streaming radio does not fall under state or KPI regulation, as it does not use a conventional terrestrial network. Streaming radio was usually used to broadcast national programs, as videos would require a significant amount of bandwidth. With streaming radio, Ahmadis could more easily access broadcasts.²⁷ Since satellite networks are used, as stipulated in the Law No. 32/2002 on Broadcasting, the state did not have the authority to issue licenses or supervise the station. In the absence of state control and regulation, the religious media market tends to flourish, in which religious communities, including minority groups take this opportunity to develop their media freely.²⁸

It has only been with the rise in popularity of the internet and social media that the Ahmadiyya community has developed audio-visual platforms on YouTube and audio-based platforms such as podcasts. For Ahmadiyya communities, the evolution of the MTA's media strategy indicates a broader shift in religious communication, in which it also functions as a digital platforms in countering extremist narratives concerning their minority status. Initially constrained by satellite-based broadcasting, the MTA adapted to the rise of social media, gradually expanding its presence on YouTube and other digital channels. This strategic shift, which began with exploratory efforts in 2012 and gained momentum in 2017 among Ahmadiyya communities, underlines the increasing role of video content in shaping public discourse.²⁹

The development of MTA was also driven by Ahmadiyya communities' awareness of the dominance of intolerant religious narratives online, in which other established groups utilize digital tools to disseminate their message. Recognizing this imbalance, there has been

²⁷ Interview with Spokesperson of Ahmadiyya, 2021.

²⁸ Roger Finke and Laurence R. Iannaccone, "Supply-Side Explanations for Religious Change", *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, vol. 527, vol. 1 (1993), pp. 27–39; Roger Finke, "The Consequence of Religious Competition: Supply-Side Explanation for Religious Change", in *Rational Choice Theory and Religion: Summary and Assessment*, ed. L. A. Young (New York and London: Routledge, 1997), pp. 46–64; Steve Bruce, "The Supply-Side Model of Religion: The Nordic and Baltic States", *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion*, vol. 39, no. 1 (2000), pp. 32–46.

²⁹ Interview with Spokesperson of Ahmadiyya, 2021.

an emphasis on encouraging moderate religious groups to use podcasts and shorter-form content, such as TikTok, in order to reach a wider audience. For the Ahmadiyya community, the integration of podcasts in 2019 further illustrates the MTA's adaptability in reaching audiences that prefer audio-based engagement over visual media. This transition demonstrates how religious organizations, particularly minority groups, must navigate an increasingly complex media landscape to ensure that their perspectives are heard amid competing ideological voices. In media and minority studies, media sociologist Charles Husband emphasizes the importance of multiple perspectives being heard as a part of the right to be understood, which complements the right to communicate in a multireligious public space.³⁰ The right to be understood entails an important obligation for all parties, including majority groups, to actively seek to understand others.³¹

Shia communities also have used the development of the internet and social media to develop Shiite media. Besides YouTube-based media, IJABI developed an audio podcast called MST. The podcast originated from recording and producing cassettes. Some of the cassettes were sold, while the remainder was distributed for free. Subsequently, with changing technologies, IJABI also produced VCDs and DVDs for sale, while books were distributed for free. With the further development of the internet and social media, IJABI established a SoundCloud account as its main podcast platform, as Spotify had relatively complicated terms and conditions in its early development. Only after the rapid growth of YouTube and Spotify did IJABI begin to use both platforms. In 2020, Spotify began facilitating access for podcasters. Thus, IJABI could also use Spotify, although SoundCloud is still actively used.³²

The decisions of the Ahmadiyya and Shia communities to develop and manage their media platforms have enabled them to represent themselves to the public in the ways they intend to be seen. However, representations of these communities have often been shaped by stereotypes and discrimination. There have been numerous anti-minority narratives, partly due to the limited presence of minority

³⁰ Charles Husband, "The Right to be Understood: Conceiving the Multi-ethnic Public Sphere", *Innovation: The European Journal of Social Sciences*, vol. 9, no. 2 (1996), pp. 205–15.

³¹ Tanja Dreher. "Speaking Up or Being Heard? Community Media Interventions and the Politics of Listening", *Media, Culture & Society*, vol. 32, no. 1 (2010), pp. 85-103.

³² Interview with IR IJABI, 2021.

voices themselves. This has meant that mainstream media tend to rely on sources they have already established. In response, the Ahmadiyya community has taken proactive steps in several ways, including providing contact details to mainstream journalists so that they can serve as resource persons for news production and media narratives. They have also developed their own media platforms to present their perspectives and narratives that differ from those circulated in mainstream media, which tend to reflect majority-oriented language and framing.³³ Some studies also confirm this finding by showing that the use of new media can help minorities present a different image of religious minority groups, countering negative perceptions associated with their minority status in public spaces, while also encouraging dialogue with others including the majority.³⁴

The development of Ahmadiyya and Shia media through various new platforms has become possible because the internet and social media are open to public participation. New media have so far not been subject to state control or supervision, as broadcasting law only authorizes KPI to supervise television and radio channels that use conventional terrestrial networks. Therefore, this domain of openness allows religious media by minority groups to operate with minimal regulations. As a result, public participation is more flexible. Those who were previously constrained by state regulations can now participate online to construct their religious narratives and represent themselves. In the context of media freedom, the state is often seen as the main threat, and state power is considered the primary obstacle to the unrestricted circulation of ideas. Media freedom includes the ability of the media to operate without state interference and control. It also includes the ability to challenge arguments put forward by state representatives and to monitor their activities through scrutiny of government licensing and regulatory practices.³⁵ Therefore, the absence of state regulation is often considered a more appropriate way to protect freedom of expression, including for minority groups who, under strict state regulation and mainstream media domination, often have a very limited space to represent themselves. Religious minorities such as the

³³ Interview with Spokesperson of Ahmadiyya, 2021.

³⁴ Irene Trysnes & Ronald M. Synnes, "The Role of Religion in Young Muslims' and Christians' Self-Presentation on Social Media", *Young*, vol. 30, no. 3 (2022), pp. 281-96; Stine Eckert & Kalyani Chadha, "Muslim bloggers in Germany: An Emerging Counterpublic", *Media, Culture & Society*, vol. 35 no. 8 (2013), pp. 926-42.

³⁵ Des Freedman, "Media Policy Silences: The Hidden Face of Communications Decision Making", *The International Journal of Press/Politics*, vol. 15 no. 3 (2010), p. 346.

Shia and Ahmadiyya communities, who were previously constrained from managing their television or radio channels, can now manage their media with the assistance of new media platforms.

New media promote greater agency and self-representation among minority groups. It allows minority voices to question dominant narratives and define alternative identities and discourses. It is linked to wider forms of minority representation, as minorities develop, express, and define their own experiences. This type of media, “media by minority”, is different from “media for minority”. The latter occupies an intermediary position. Linguistically, both may use minority languages or a mix of majority and minority languages, showing an attempt to reach a wider audience. Despite its focus on minority concerns, such media frequently serve both majority and minority audiences. In this context, minority representation is characterized primarily by increased visibility compared to “media about minorities”. However, the persistent orientation toward majority audiences may limit the extent to which minority perspectives are expressed freely. By contrast, “media by minority” is the most autonomous type of minority media.

C. New Media as Social Capital: Bridging to Majorities and Bonding within Minorities

The freedom of minority groups to represent themselves through self-managed media generally serves to counter dominant representations produced by the mainstream media. In the Indonesian context, where mainstream media have often been associated with anti-Ahmadiyya and anti-Shia narratives, both communities utilize new media to mediate their relationships with the broader public and other social groups. Through these platforms, the Shia and Ahmadiyya communities are able to present multiple perspectives simultaneously, including those shaped by majority framings and those articulated from minority standpoints. As a result, the programs they produced tend to adopt a broader communicative scope, allowing wider audiences to engage with them. A more universal narrative which seeks to bridge diverse viewpoints, thus becomes a central feature of media channels oriented toward intergroup mediation. In this context, media produced by minority groups function as means of mediating their relationships with the majority, particularly in ways that mainstream media are often unable to achieve.

IJABI, for example, stated that the purpose of developing IJABI

media and content is to serve as social capital to mediate group relations. Based on the interviews, IJABI has developed three distinct platforms for different target audiences and communicative purposes: one channel focuses on internal religious studies and teachings, another provides broader content incorporating diverse perspectives within Islam, and the third is dedicated to the influential figure *Kang* Jalal. The emphasis on *Kang* Jalal as a central communicative figure underscores the role of charismatic leadership in media influence, drawing on his reputation as a prominent communicator in Indonesia. By expanding its content beyond academic studies, IJABI positions itself as a multi-faceted media entity, aiming to contribute to public discourse on Islam while addressing the complexities of minority religious representation in the digital era.

This orientation is also reflected in IJABI's own articulation of its media objectives. As one interviewee explained:

“Its purpose is not to spread Shia, but more accurately, to spread Islam with love. Even he [*ustadz* Jalal] serves to mediate Sunni-Shia dialogues. Anyone who loves *Ahlul Bait* can be part of us. We also attempt to distribute information to correct negative perceptions of IJABI because we still need to introduce ourselves. Our purpose is to provide alternative choices for those who want to learn about religious and humanitarian values. The other purpose is to counter negative information spread about IJABI. Another purpose is also to serve as *tabayyun* (clarification). It can reach a wider audience, especially during the current pandemic. We also disseminate information about unity.”³⁶

This multi-level approach reflects a deliberate effort within the Shia community to bridge the organizational messaging with inclusive outreach, ensuring that its content resonates beyond a single religious framework.

Similarly, Ahmadis regard their media not as instruments for conversion, but as vital tools for correcting narratives and enhancing visibility. The Ahmadiyya spokesperson stated that MTA was established as a strategic response to the widespread misrepresentation and stigmatization of the Ahmadiyya community. Public misconception, fostered by MUI's fatwas and the lack of clear and accessible information, have significantly contributed to the marginalization of Ahmadiyya adherents. In this regard, MTA is framed primarily as a corrective aimed at countering dominant narratives that contribute to misunderstanding

³⁶ Interview with IJABI, 2021.

and persecution, by filling the informational gap created by conventional religious authorities while also countering extreme voices that frequently dominate public discourse.

Ahmadiyya community has developed a structured media strategy distributed across several online channels designed to balance broad public engagement with content targeted at specific demographics. ID, for example, is a channel focused on presenting Islamic perspectives on peace, while LTV serves as a platform featuring nationalism-oriented content. In contrast, IK is designed as a millennial-centric channel. The development of these channels demonstrates an attempt to make Islamic teachings relevant across generations and ideological orientations. Additionally, IR is another media channel led by women and centered on themes of natural living and coexistence, reflecting an inclusive perspective within Ahmadiyya media that extends beyond doctrinal concerns. Furthermore, the involvement of experts and community leaders in LTV demonstrates an effort to position Islamic narratives within the broader intellectual and national discourse. Overall, this multi-platform approach reflects an adaptive and strategic use of media to advance the religious, educational, and social goals of the Ahmadiyya community.³⁷

The emergence of Ahmadiyya media has diversified the sources of information available to the public, further underscoring the power of media access in challenging dominant narratives and encouraging more balanced representations. To ensure that minority voices are heard and represented more fairly, the Ahmadiyya community, particularly its spokesperson, has proactively engaged with journalists by maintaining direct communication with Ahmadiyya representatives. In cases where incidents involving the minority community occur, journalists are therefore able to contact Ahmadiyya spokespersons to obtain the minority perspective. The recent development of digital media has further intensified media dynamics, in which speed and accessibility often determine whose perspective is amplified. While some ideologically driven media may remain selective in their coverage, many others are open to presenting multiple perspectives, provided that the information is accessible. In this regard, the availability of minority perspectives highlights the importance of engaging with the media to counter misinformation and encourage a more open public discourse.³⁸

While new media may have opened up new spaces for

³⁷ Interview with Spokesperson of Ahmadiyya, 2021.

³⁸ *Ibid.*

communication and information exchange, many platforms continue to reproduce the representational logics of old media.³⁹ In this sense, rather than reducing social gaps, new media may also replicate and even reinforce existing inequalities.⁴⁰ On some social media platforms, such as Twitter, many narratives are developed about Ahmadiyya and Shia, tending towards discrediting and discriminating against them.⁴¹ Discriminatory and hateful narratives against these two groups on Twitter generally intensify in the lead-up to political elections. Such narratives are often instrumentalized to shape public opinion in support of particular political candidates or to benefit other groups.⁴² Thus, while new media have opened up space for the participation and self-representation of minority groups such as Shia and Ahmadiyya, these platforms remain shaped by the same representational logics found in mainstream media.

Against this backdrop, Ahmadiyya media are also subject to both positive and negative responses. In addressing this condition, the Ahmadiyya community emphasizes to primary purpose of developing its media platforms, which is to provide information to the public, particularly content grounded in humanitarian values that can help mediate inter-group relations. Therefore, theological narratives are not usually the main priority of the Ahmadiyya community, as their platforms are designed primarily to mediate relations between majority and minority groups. This strategy reflects a nuanced understanding of the social and cultural limitations within their audience, where theological debate is often considered ineffective. Based on the interviews, the Ahmadiyya community instead employs accessible content on humanitarian and social issues as an entry point. This approach acts as a bridge, softening preconceived stigmas and facilitating a gradual reshaping of public perceptions. Rather than engaging directly in potentially contentious theological discussions, which risk reinforcing existing biases, their media presence focuses on disseminating positive and relatable information.

³⁹ Christian Fuchs, *Internet and Society: Social Theory in the Information Age* (London: Routledge, 2008), p. 244; R. Hassan, *The Information Society: Cyber Dreams and Digital Nightmares* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2008), p. 16.

⁴⁰ Armand Mattelart, "An Archaeology of the Global Era: Constructing a Belief", *Media Culture and Society*, vol. 24, no. 5 (2002), pp. 591–612.

⁴¹ Lim Halimatusa'diyah, "Beragama di Dunia Maya: Media Sosial dan Pandangan Keagamaan di Indonesia", *Merit Report*, vol. 1, no. 1 (Jakarta, PPIM UIN Jakarta, 2020 <https://ppimcensis.or.id/download/beragama-di-dunia-maya-media-sosial-dan-pandangan-keagamaan-di-indonesia/>), pp.27-29.

⁴² Halimatusa'diyah, pp. 68-9.

This strategy avoids direct confrontation with entrenched prejudices but opens avenues for curiosity and engagement, encouraging individuals to seek direct contact with the Ahmadiyya community when ready. Concerning humanitarian and social engagement, Ahmadiyya in Indonesia consistently implements various programs that are inclusive of the wider public beyond its communities. These include blood donations initiatives, eye cornea donations —practices that are relatively rare among other communities— disaster response actions, environment-related programs such as “Clean the City”, through which Ahmadiyya communities periodically organize urban cleaning efforts in various Indonesian cities, alongside other social programs.

These humanitarian actions are not only implemented in Indonesia but also across various Ahmadiyya communities worldwide. They have long historical roots dating back to their establishment of the movement in British India in 1889. From its early formation, Ahmadiyya not only focused on education and health-related initiatives but also expanded into broader forms of social assistance.⁴³ In this sense, humanitarianism has been an important dimension of Ahmadiyya’s engagement with society, often functioning as a means of establishing cooperation with both state authorities and the wider public. Since its establishment, Ahmadiyya has also utilized media as part of this broader social engagement, including the launch of three newspapers in 1897,⁴⁴ positioning print media as an important medium for disseminating its activities to the public. Thus, humanitarian practice and public communication have historically been interconnected within Ahmadiyya’s social strategy.⁴⁵ In the contemporary period, digital media platforms have further extended this dynamic by enabling Ahmadiyya communities to construct self-representations and build social interaction with non-Ahmadis on a broader scale.

The IJABI community, particularly its media administrators, also receives positive responses. Despite some negative reactions, the audience’s willingness to participate in open dialogue and discussion, aimed at increasing mutual understanding, is gradually becoming more evident. One IJABI media administrator explained that the influx of positive comments on their YouTube channels indicates that these

⁴³ Katrin Langewiesche, “Politics of Humanitarianism: The Ahmadiyya and the Provision of Social Welfare”, in *Muslim Faith-Based Organizations and Social Welfare in Africa*, ed. by Holger Weiss, (Switzerland: Palgrave Macmillan, 2020), pp. 247–72.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 251.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 261.

platforms are effectively reaching audiences who are either unfamiliar with or curious about Shia perspectives, often encountering IJABI for the first time. Importantly, the administrators actively moderate the discourse by removing inappropriately hostile comments, while addressing substantive criticism through reasoned responses.⁴⁶ This strategy helps reduce negativity, suggesting that direct and reasoned interaction can soften initial opposition.

Schäfer's study also confirms these tendencies by showing that the broader online public sphere constructs and reinforces Ahmadiyya and Shia communities as deviant or outsiders. She argues that online media can be harmful to pluralism as it accelerates the distortion of scholarly categories and homogenizes Islamic discourse, making extreme positions more acceptable, which marginalizes minority voices.⁴⁷ This argument contrasts with her earlier article, which presents a more optimistic view of the relationship between new media and Ahmadiyya and Shia minorities. In that earlier work, she suggests that Ahmadiyya and Shia communities in Indonesia and Malaysia have begun to raise their own voices within a public discourse that otherwise pushes them to the margins.⁴⁸ They develop new ways of reaching the public through videos and websites, using these platforms to respond and defend themselves against aggressive campaigns that question their religious legitimacy as Muslims. However, her more recent study adopts a more pessimistic position, emphasizing that the internet, at a structural level, continues to advantage the majority and hardline voices over minority ones. In short, both studies suggest that while minorities can make use of new media to respond and assert their presence in online spaces, the broader digital environment remains unevenly structured against them.

Despite the minority agency, the overall ecosystem of online discourse remains uneven, as it tends to narrow debate, concentrate religious authority, and produce echo chambers that work against these communities. This structural condition is partly shaped by the openness of new media, where anyone can participate and construct narratives, including those that discredit minority groups. In this sense, the online

⁴⁶ Interview with IJABI 2021.

⁴⁷ Saskia Schäfer, "Islam in the Echo Chamber: Ahmadiyya and Shi'a Identities in Indonesian and Malaysian Online Discourses," *Asiascape Digital Asia* 5, no. 1–2 (2017), pp. 124–58.

⁴⁸ Schäfer, "New Practices of Self-Representation: The Use of Online Media by Ahmadiyya and Shia Communities in Indonesia and Malaysia", pp. 174–97.

religious sphere resembles an open marketplace in which competing narratives circulate freely, intensifying contestation over religious interpretation and legitimacy. At the same time, however, this openness also provides space for minority groups to participate in these struggles over representation and to assert their presence within public religious discourse.

While much of the preceding discussion has focused on outward-facing communicative practice, these media also perform inward-facing functions. Another function of the media managed by the Shia and Ahmadiyya communities is to strengthen relationships among their members and to deepen their religious understanding. Such content is typically disseminated through the internal media channels within IJABI and the Ahmadiyya community. Due to theological differences between the Shia, the Ahmadiyya, and the Sunni Muslim majority in Indonesia, theological issues are rarely discussed in media content intended for the general audience. Instead, theological discussion is primarily directed toward internal constituencies, where media function as platforms for religious education, organizational communication, and the reinforcement of collective identity.

In the Ahmadiyya case, this internal orientation is reflected in the production of content related to organizational activities, regulations, and institutional policies. This differs from their channels designed for broader audiences, where content and narratives tend to be more general and simplified, whereas internal programs and narratives are typically more complex.⁴⁹ In particular, Ahmadiyya operates two distinct media platforms, JAI and JMA (*Jamaah Muslim Ahmadiyah*), which highlight the distinction between general Islamic *dakwah* and Ahmadiyya-specific outreach. The existence of JAI and JMA suggests a dual strategy within the Ahmadiyya community: one aimed at promoting interfaith and community harmony, and the other dedicated to internal education and identity reinforcement.

The Shia community also operates different channels for developing its internal community. IJABI uses the media internally to deepen the religious understanding and intellectual engagement of IJABI *ustadh* (religious teachers or leaders). IJABI's digital platforms have existed for a long time to disseminate religious teachings, particularly those of *ustadh* Jalal, while responding to both long-term audience habits and emergent challenges like the COVID-19 pandemic. From the

⁴⁹ Interview with spokesperson of Ahmadiyya, 2021.

outset, IJABI integrated online learning methods within its educational and organizational activities, ensuring that religious content initially disseminated through in-person study sessions was systematically recorded and made accessible across various digital platforms such as SoundCloud, Spotify, and YouTube. This long-standing consistency has built a robust digital archive that not only preserved *ustadz* Jalal's teachings but also broadened their reach. When the pandemic disrupted traditional religious gatherings, IJABI quickly pivoted to strengthening its YouTube presence, demonstrating agility in maintaining audience engagement. IJABI also uses surveys to assess platform preferences, highlighting a data-driven approach and ensuring that virtual *da'wa* efforts are tailored to congregational needs.

The distinction between media functions oriented toward external engagement and those focused on internal consolidation in the cases of IJABI and the Ahmadiyya community can be further understood through Robert Putnam's concept of social capital.⁵⁰ Communications that connect different social groups may be described as bridging social capital between communities. This form of social capital serves as a prerequisite for participation and interaction across group boundaries, fostering better understanding and social integration. In this sense, media play an important role in facilitating relations among different groups. In addition to this function, which is typically based on two-way communication across social boundaries,⁵¹ media also facilitate internal communication within groups, helping members build and maintain relationships with one another. Putnam refers to this process as bonding social capital.⁵²

D. Concluding Remarks

The development of the internet and social media-based new media has opened up greater space for the participation of minority groups, such as the Shia and Ahmadiyya communities, to represent themselves through self-managed media. This openness is related to the lack of clear regulations and effective state control over online media,

⁵⁰ Robert Putnam, *Bowling Alone, the Collapse and Revival of Civic America* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2000), pp.15.

⁵¹ Allerd L. Peeters and Leen d'Haenens, "Bridging or Bonding? Relationships between Integration and Media Use among Ethnic Minorities in the Netherlands", *Communications*, vol. 30, no. 2 (2005), pp. 201–31.

⁵² Putnam, p. 15.

including visual platforms such as YouTube and audio platforms such as podcasts. KPI, the state agency responsible for supervising television and radio broadcasting, has no authority over digital media under the current broadcasting law.

Within this context, media platforms developed by minority groups such as the Shia and Ahmadiyya communities perform two interrelated functions. First, they serve as instruments of external representation between minority communities and the broader society, particularly majority groups. Second, they function as a tool of internal consolidation, strengthening communication and relationship among community members. However, because digital media are inherently public and accessible, communicative strategies tend to prioritize more universal and inclusive narratives aimed at intergroup understanding, rather than narrowly theological or *fiqh*-based content, which is often less accessible to majority audience

At the same time, although the new media expands opportunities for the participation and self-representation of Shia and Ahmadiyya, it does not necessarily eliminate structural inequalities in public discourse. This is partly due to the open nature of digital media which enables a wide range of actors to construct and circulate narratives, including those that express hostility toward minority groups.

This study focuses specifically on the perspective of minority groups, namely the Shia and Ahmadiyya communities, in managing and developing their own media (media by minorities). It does not examine in depth how majority groups perceive or respond to these media. Future research may therefore explore how majority audiences interpret minority media productions and how they interact with the narratives circulated by these platforms.

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