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**MEDIA PRACTITIONERS' PERSPECTIVE ON NEWS MEDIA
REPORTING OF ISLAM AND MUSLIMS: A ROOM FOR IMPROVEMENT
THROUGH A FORMULATION OF WRITING NEWS GUIDELINE*****Perspektif Pengamal Media terhadap Pelaporan Berita Mengenai Islam dan
Masyarakat Muslim: Ruang untuk Penambahbaikan Melalui Pembentukan Garis
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The idea to embark this study on Islam and Muslim issues is still relevant due to there are many reportings from the Western media especially about Middle East. On that account, the purpose of this study is to find out the solution to encourage more positive reporting about Islam and Muslim issues. Eight Malaysian media practitioners have been interviewed to share their experiences and ideas in finding an answer to formulate a new, fair and balanced guideline to be practiced. All of them were interviewed via face-to-face methods and phone calls. From the interview, the researchers found out the important tips with regards to assisting students, journalists and individuals to become more expert in writing news accurately. The researchers found out how a journalist played the role of an Islamic journalist and anchor the meaning of Islamic journalism. In addition, the results of this study also managed to formulate a guideline in writing reports or news related to Islam and Muslim community to produce a positive image of Islam and the Muslims in the media.

Keywords: Media representation, news writing, news writing formula, news reporting on Islam and Muslim.

Abstrak

Idea untuk menjalankan kajian mengenai isu berkaitan Islam dan umat Islam dilihat masih relevan dibincangkan kerana banyaknya pelaporan berita oleh media Barat yang banyak memberikan representasi negatif terutama di negara-negara Timur Tengah. Oleh itu, kajian ini bertujuan mencari cadangan solusi kepada pelaporan berita negatif kepada pelaporan yang lebih positif. Seramai lapan pengamal media di Malaysia dipilih untuk ditemubual serta berkongsi pengalaman dan idea dalam mencari satu formula baharu atau panduan untuk dipraktikkan dalam menulis berita yang lebih adil dan seimbang. Kesemua mereka ditemubual menerusi kaedah bersemuka dan melalui panggilan telefon. Menerusi temubual yang dijalankan, para penyelidik mengenalpasti keperluan untuk menghasilkan pelaporan yang baik untuk membantu para pelajar, wartawan dan individu lebih mahir dalam menulis berita. Para penyelidik menemukan bagaimana seorang wartawan itu memainkan peranan sebagai wartawan Islam dan merungkai apa yang dimaksudkan dengan kewartawanan Islam. Selain itu, hasil dapatan kajian ini juga berjaya membentuk satu panduan dalam menulis laporan atau berita yang berkaitan tentang Islam dan masyarakat Muslim bagi menghasilkan imej positif Islam dan masyarakat Muslim di media.

Kata kunci: Representasi media, penulisan berita, formula menulis berita, laporan akhbar Islam dan Islam.

INTRODUCTION

Issues on Islam and Muslim have been presented and debated intellectually in many platforms such as seminars, conferences, workshops and etc. among researchers, academics, politicians and also the whole society. The emergence of social media has now encouraged massive reportings on Islam and Muslim in any forms such as news, videos, photos, infographics and others. and eventually dominated media contents. Because of that reason, Isyaku et al. (2017) suggested that this is the time to check whether social media users are aware with all the media contents or are just being manipulated by the media. Considering that the media contents shared on social media, websites, blogs and any other platforms are just excessively creating the negative representations of Islam.

The topic on representation of Islam and Muslim in the media has been constantly negative in which Islamophobia becomes the main agenda (AlJazeera, July 10, 2019). The news saying that the rise of Islamophobia in the United Kingdom (UK) contributing to the negative coverage on Islam and Muslim. Beforehand, Espiritu (2016) in her study revealed that the topic of Islamophobia becomes the mainstream issue by labelling Muslims as fanatics, bigoted, extremists and terrorists. They started with the conflict emerged during the Iranian revolution in 1978, followed by the rise of Islamophobia, the September 11 attacks in 2001 and others which have associated

Islam and Muslims with negative portrayals in Western media. Moreover, the conflict in Iraq and Afghanistan has also increased the international reporting about Islam and Muslim and made this issue becomes more global which come to a halt labelling Islam and Muslim as negative and led to the misrepresentation of Islam in the media.

The era of Industrial Revolution 4.0 (IR 4.0) has made the society becomes too overdependent on the media. Furthermore, with the emergence of the social media such as Instagram, Twitter, Facebook and others. society stays updated and connected with all the current issues. This is in congruence with Isyaku et al. (2017) who justified that the situation of overdependence has made the media become more powerful and newspapers are one of the most powerful sources of delivering knowledge and information.

Therefore, the idea of this study is to find tune on how to develop a positive, fair and balanced reporting on issues related to Islam and Muslim. This is an alternative way to have a different idea in writing news technique and not merely following a monotonous guideline of principles of news writing from the book. The plan to come out the new guideline or formula of news writing is to enlighten that the issue of imbalanced reporting and negative portrayal on Islam and Muslim in the media can be improved. This is also to produce a proactive and creative Muslim journalists with an eye toward to respond on the negative representation about Islam and Muslims in the media especially from the West.

BACKGROUND OF THE STUDY

Many studies have proved that news media over the world has portrayed negatively issues related to Islam and Muslims. But maybe very little know on how the journalists and other media practitioners contribute to the way on how particular issues being reported or framed. Studies by Poole (2002), Hafez (2000), Karim (2003), Said (1997) and Sheikh, Price and Oshagen (1995) demonstrated that media representations of the threat from Islam and Muslims were in full swing before September 11 attacks, which had been expected by many. The emergence of “Muslim attacks” on the public, such as the London bombings in July 2005, the attacks on Palestinian territories by Israel, the war in Iraq, the Norway’s anti-Muslim terrorist attacks in 2011 etc. have also contributed to the mass coverage related to Islam and Muslims in the media representation scope. Many scholars are conducting continuous research on the media representations of Islam and Muslims in particular and have found that news stories on Islam have been composed mostly about violence, hostages, crises, kidnappings, wars and conflict.

Recently, news organization such as AlJazeera, The Guardian, BBC and any other international media do report on the negative representation of Islam and Muslims. Even though AlJazeera is located in the Middle East, it still reports on the issue of Islamophobia, poverty, the Rohingya refugee crisis, the economic disparity and the issue of Uighur minority in China (AlJazeera, 2019). Waterson (2019) from The Guardian reported that UK news coverage about Islam is all negative. This has been discovered by the analyst of Muslim Council in Britain who said that most coverage of Muslims in British news outlets has a negative slant and with 78% of its stories featuring Muslims are directing towards negative themes. Other than that, over generalization towards some pictures such as women wearing niqab has led to the negative interpretation. This is the time to highlight to the editors of UK newspapers to create an awareness of how their coverage was perceived by Muslims. The analysts from Muslim Council in Britain also encourage the UK journalists to include more positive stories about Muslims and not simply focus on terrorists and extremists and consider the tone of the coverage to increase transparency.

The literature review indicated that Islam and Muslims have been viewed more negatively than positively from the Western point of view and it is true that the negative coverage on Islam and Muslims in the Western media is not surprising (Fauziah, 2017). Moreover, from the same study, Fauziah (2017) has found that majority of the news on Islam and Muslims as reported by The Telegraph (one of the newspapers in UK) took a negative view which highlighted on topics including the issues of Islam disputes, religious conflicts, political turmoil, incompetent leadership, discrimination against women, blasphemy, atheism, insulting videos and others. Based on the scenario discussed above, the researchers focused on the following research objectives which are; to identify the news coverage on Islam and Muslims issues from a perspective of media practitioners; to investigate the factors contributing to the negative portrayal of Islam and Muslims issues in the media; to find out the real meaning of Muslim journalists; and to produce a fresh concept of Islamic journalism from a perspective of media practitioners.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

In order to formulate the concept of Islamic journalism, the researchers believed that an in-depth interview with eight Malaysian media practitioners would map out the research gap. The interviews were made with media practitioners from Bernama, TV AlHijrah, Radio Television Malaysia (RTM), Harian Metro and Berita Harian. Interviews were conducted by the researchers between March 2020 until July 2020 through phone calls and each interview session lasted within an hour. The semi-structured interview was conducted to explore their views on news reporting related to Islam and Muslims either by Malaysian or international media and why. Other than that, they were also asked about the real meaning of Muslim journalist and how to

practice it. This study also investigated interviewees' idea on the strategy to develop the good surrounding of Islam in the media industry. Last important point is to comprehend the characteristics of so called 'Islamic journalism'. The interviews were all recorded, transcribed, coded and categorized to smoothen the process of identifying themes in order to formulate the guideline of news writing. In doing the coding, the researchers used an inductive coding in which the researchers were required to read and interpret the raw data in order to develop concepts, themes or a model based on the data interpretation (Joffe & Yardley, 2003).

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Our findings present a starting point on the general insights about news media reportage on Islam and Muslims by Malaysian and international media. Other than that, the researchers also build other three main themes that emerged from the interviews in order to formulate the guideline of news reporting for journalists and students.

Perceptions of News Media Coverage on Islam And Muslims

To start the interview, the researchers tried to grasp an attention of the interviewees to give a reflection on news coverage related to Islam and Muslim in the media especially from the West. A variety of perceptions and opinions obtained when the discussion on the news coverage started. One of the interviewees commented that Western media is really emphasizing the propaganda agenda in dissemination news. Keeping that in mind, if we have no channel or platform that can fend off propaganda, then the propaganda is considered true by some people. He then suggested to have a Muslim consortium within Islamic countries as an initiative to oppose propaganda made by the West (*Informant 4*). Other interviewees also perceived that until now no media will oppose the propaganda made from the West notwithstanding AlJazeera which also did not put themselves as independent news organization and they do not see themselves as the voice of Islam but they will give a fair room of reporting towards issues related to Islam and Muslim (*Informant 5*). The other interviewees pointed to negative connections between a so called Islamic State (IS) and Islam as she observed that the Western media has linked the issue of IS or Daesh with Islam and this has tarnished the image of Islam. In fact, Islam never teaches all Muslims to become terrorists and we are combatting IS and very upset with this issue. This is because their mission is just more into political ideology to gain power (*Informant 3*). The perceptions on the coverage of Islam and Muslim issues contributed to a negative representation:

“I see the Western media is mocking Islam by linking Islam with IS or Daesh as they perceived it has similarities. Sadly, there were few media

in Malaysia at that time verifying what has been said by the Western media and confirming that all the attacks were because of Muslim” (*Informant 3*).

The stories about Islam and Muslim was raised by one of the interviewees who identified that issue such as September 11, Islamophobia, IS, Osama bin Laden and others has put Islam perpetuated in wrong context:

“September 11, Islamophobia, IS, Osama bin Laden which was highlighted by the America just to intimidate and destabilize society about Islam. This is the agenda from the West, and this should be understood by each and everyone. But today, I noticed that the situation has changed as people start to accept Islam and admit that not all Muslims are terrorists” (*Informant 1*).

Underlying Factors and Impacts of this Reportage

Informant 4 argued that all our reporting on Islam and Muslims issues are not so detailed. For an example, reporting on Palestinian issues, our stand just to report on the particular issue without investigating deeper with detailed analysis. Another thing I can find out is that our courage to do such a reporting.

I can see that the limitation is our media exposure is different with international media. From the aspect of wide coverage, this is the main factor why we cannot dismiss external propaganda and along that, we should also need to look at leadership as well. The international media has full right to practice freedom of speech especially in social media. For example, in the US. Due to their freedom of speech, the society has full power to do whatever they want to do. They are still going out as they think that they have right even though the government does not allow considering that pandemic Covid-19 is an infectious disease (*Informant 4*).

Informant 5 has new perspective when discussing on factors contributing on negative representation of Islam and Muslims. He said that AlJazeera itself did not put themselves as independent news organization and they don’t represent themselves as the voice of Islam, but they still give fair reporting. Other than that, is because of sources we have and to what extend we can get fast coverage immediately.

Informant 6 and 3 have a well explanation on this. She said that Westerners really want to control the human mind to create hatred among Muslims. She said, this issue started with the September 11 tragedy in the US, followed by the incident in Christchurch, New Zealand and etc.

In fact, these issues are deliberately exaggerated by the western media. They want to make things worse; the fact is that Islam is not like that. Thus, the attitude of some Muslims has further strengthened their negative perspective on Islam. In addition, the propaganda from the mass media and movements that often tarnish the image of Islam itself has worsened this situation (*Informant 6*).

However, Informant 3 said that this issue can be improved as social media plays a role in disseminating information about Islam. "I think this is the best platform to give awareness and send a real message about Islam. It is true that people are still watching television, but many people are using sophisticated phones and social media such as Instagram, Facebook and Twitter nowadays. So, that is why we need to move forward to deliver information on digital platforms. Thus, awareness and goodness of Islam will be shared and soon will be accepted". This is in line with Informant 8 who said:

With the emergence of social media, this is the way to correct all the misunderstanding so that the western media do not completely look at the negative side. We should published contradict issues and different news that can make 'other' people think. To me, the context of news writing should be balanced and not from one side. So that 'they' will think why 'our story' is different from them (*Informant 8*).

The explanation on this has been continued by Informant 7 who said that this issue happens due to the system which brings great influence to the world such as the United Nations is vetoed and controlled by elite countries for example, the United States and Russia. Both big countries are anti-Islam and anti-Muslims. So, this world is ruled by anti-Muslims who do not like Muslims from the past and furthermore the media is controlled by them. Therefore, it will automatically have a negative impact on Islam. Later, there was an ideology to Islam and its followers as terrorists such as citizens in the United States and Australia who forbade women to wear headscarves. We cannot help them to understand Islam and discard their ideology of Islamophobia. There have been many attempts to eradicate Islamophobia such as the Organization of Islamic Cooperation (OIC) but it has not gone smoothly.

Informant 8 continued explain that the issue of negative representation on Islam and Muslims in the media is depending on their level of understanding. This is very much related with the term Islamophobia. They do not understand about Islam and they only receive explanation in general from several sources such as from world international leaders who has negative views about Islam which has worsen their understanding

and eventually perceived Islam as negative. The understanding of the western media is very shallow towards Islam. Not only they do not understand Islam, but they also do not want to understand Islam. Because of that, negative views always overshadow the news released by the western media. So, this pattern could be seen on the tendency of misunderstanding about Islam.

Anchor the Meaning of Muslim Journalist

When the question on the meaning of Muslim journalist comes into the picture, many of the interviewees would agree that all journalists should be true and honest in their work. Even though all the interviewees in this study are Muslim, but the researchers try not to be biased in interpreting the answers. One of the interviewees said that the beauty of Islam lies in objectivity and fairness. But there is a situation where the Muslim journalists are very alert and observant. Informant 1 took the example of news on drunk driver. If the case is related with other races, journalist will not mention any names, but if that case relates with Malays, we will directly and openly expose. He was aware that, Muslim journalists are very kind and sensitive towards other races just to maintain peace and harmony. However, other interviewees describe this in a different way. He would prefer to look into where the Muslim journalists work with. In other words, choosing the right organization is important to determine and translate the meaning of Muslim journalists. Considering that, choosing an organization to work is also a challenge by Muslim journalist as this organization can value and appreciate you as a Muslim. Informant 4 explained:

It depends on where he or she works with. If he or she works at a right organization, the meaning of a Muslim journalist can be translated. But, if he or she works at a wrong organization, he or she has to follow all the rules set by that particular organization. In my workplace now, the meaning of a Muslim journalist is all about trustful and trustworthy (*Informant 4*).

The true meaning of Muslim journalist has been described in a different way by Informant 5. According to her, her organization is emphasizing on the content. As a Muslim journalist we never publish any sensational content even though the news will spark and get high views and likes. If it will give negative representation to Islam, political parties, or can create anger we will keep that information. This is in line with Syariah compliance of media content. She continuously said:

This is the role of Muslim journalists as we are not only disseminating the news through social media but considering the impact and we should be responsible towards the content we made. That is why we choose not to publish any sensational or unverified news (*Informant 5*).

This is also in line with Informant 7, who said that we should not be very popular with sensational issue journalists. Be a cool reporter. Do not be a divisive journalist but be a journalist who is able to unite. This is our responsibility and thing that needs to be emphasised to the Islamic media and Muslim journalists as well.

Informant 6 shared the same opinion on this matter. She said that the organization she works right now is very emphasizing on the truth of media content. This is because the dissemination of da'wah activities or work is a thorough job. In fact, any misleading content disseminated through this TV station will receive criticisms from the audience. Thus, this is their big challenge. This is in congruence with Informant 7 who said that work is a trust. Any news stories published is a responsibility. "When the community reads, watch and understand the issue, it is a success to us. So, I summarize that every journalist whether Muslim or non-Muslim, we should have a sense of responsibility and ethics that we need to understand and follow". He further said that as Muslim journalists we should deliver our task with honesty, sincerity and love. From these values, the community will be able to penetrate directly into their souls and indirectly make them understand about an issue. This statement is conforming to Informant 8 who said that being as a journalist is a professional profession. A journalist is able to influence views and attitude of the society through news published so called as community renewal agents.

Even though a journalist just uses "a pen" but our writings may bring down a government. Thus, this trust should be taken cared of as this is our responsibility to report fairly, honestly and accurately with the respect to keep the confidentiality of the information. So, we avoid in publishing news related to racists, seditious and contrary to the ethics of society (*Informant 8*).

Informant 2 put in a different way. She said that Muslim journalists should separate from political ideology. A true journalist should not be biased. If he or she does not like certain political parties, he or she should not demonstrate the dislike. Other than that, Muslim journalists should relate their writings with all Islamic knowledge especially on issues related to zakat, pilgrimage and etc. Therefore, it can be said that, it is very important to have a good background of Islam, being moderate and get good references from the experts (*Informant 2*).

The Fact of Islamic Journalism

The term of Islamic journalism has been discussed and debated by many. However, Islam and journalism cannot be segregated. Islamic characteristics have to be found

among journalists especially Muslim journalists. Simple analogy has been shared by Informant 2 who said that as Muslim journalists, they should have Islamic foundation to guide them in writing news especially news related to Islam and Muslims. According to this informant, this criterion is important as misleading content about Islam will only lead to misunderstanding in faith.

In this case, the editors play a big role. The editor must encourage journalists to find accurate references such as finding an expert about particular issues discussed. This is to avoid inaccurate sources and finally made the audience or society lack information about that issue. So, readers with less knowledge about Islam will share the news or information to the next person (*Informant 2*).

To support the above statement, Informant 3 and 4 agreed that as a journalist, we should encourage Islamic values by practicing ‘amar maaruf nahi munkar’ and spreading da’wah. For example, publish useful news and do research before disseminating, it can differentiate whether you are a good journalist or not.

Informant 2 continued saying that both western and Islamic perspectives have good principles and ethics in writing news. It is just about spinning the news. “In my opinion, news must be accurate, correct and ethical both for the benefit of Muslims and non-Muslims. Just, for Muslim journalists they are committed with sin and reward”.

In the aspect of Islam and journalism, Informant 3 accepted that nowadays ethics of writing news has been challenged with the emergence of social media such as Facebook, WhatsApp, Instagram and etc. Any individuals can be a journalist and has his or her own agenda. Thus, this is the main problem where individuals should have ethics and Islamic values inside themselves in order to prevent fake news. Informant 3 and 4 said that most importantly, news from Islamic media should contain elements of transparency, honesty, da’wah and respect to avoid disharmony. However, to achieve this, Informant 4 explained that it is quite difficult if ‘other’ media take an advantage on our reporting and create the propaganda.

This is because, when inaccurate news has been repeated many times, finally it will make people trust that news (*Informant 4*).

In discussing this, Informant 4 has brought up new idea where he hoped for a news consortium among Muslim countries or media association to counter all the propaganda from the West. “This could be a good idea, but it is not easy to realize as we should have good relationship with Muslim and non-Muslim countries”.

To strengthen the relationship between Islam and journalism, Informant 5 gave an idea that each journalist whether Muslim or non-Muslim should have an integrity and not only uses religion as a guidance but completing the task or 'amanah' given with Islamic values. For example, a journalist should really understand what Al-Quran says and the hidden message of it. Thus, to develop good journalist in the future, we should practice the Islamic values and spiritual values.

Informant 6 said that to translate the definition of Islamic journalism is a big challenge. First of all, is how we can develop to disseminate Islamic values especially to the youngsters. If we want our content to be acceptable by other religions as well, we have to make 'them' understand about Islam. So as TV station, we should provide content they want to see. This is because if our content is only about Islam, they will not learn about our religion. So, this is a challenge for media industry to create a big picture of Islamic contents.

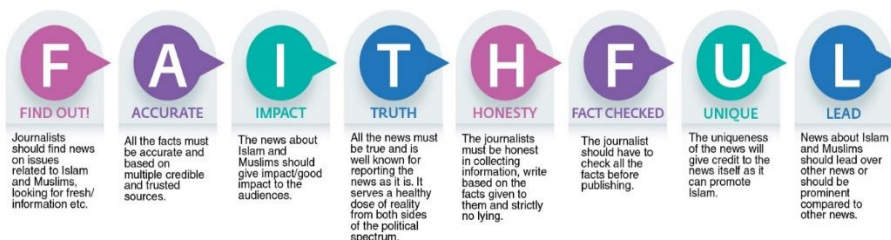
Hence, this is a responsibility of the authority and the news organizations to develop a strong relationship between Islam and journalism. The struggle of journalists is to make the society understand with the content they provide. Therefore, all the news should have positive impact to the society by implementing the 'amanah' as a journalist with full responsibility. To end the discussion, Informant 1 stated that we need to have a basic understanding of Islam and we need to understand the value of Islamic laws is very much important. So, with this kind of good reporting, the outsiders know that this reporting is from an Islamic country. As Muslim journalists, we should know what is lying in reporting? What is slander? This is the basis of Islamic reporting and all Muslims should obliged to these principles.

CONCLUSION

Due to the main aim of this study, the results gained may provide insight on how news writing can help to improve the image of Islam and Muslims in the media. In this case the content creators such as media practitioners should realize. The news writing from an Islamic perspective remains significant, with respect to not only understanding about Islam itself, but also in view of incorporating diverse global religious, multi-racial societies and most importantly to capitalise on Islamic values and principles towards media representation of Islam and Muslims. Therefore, the researchers realized that there is a need to formulate a guideline in news writing to create a concept of Islamic journalism based on Islam and Muslims issues to enlighten the standard and quality image Islam and Muslims in the media. Steele (2018) who researched many in the area of Islam, Muslims and value as a journalist said that Malaysian journalists choose to refer to passages or verses from the Qur'an in which they anchor

the meaning of their work as journalist from the context of Islam. Thus, from this the researchers believed that the standard and quality of news writing can be enhanced by all. Below is the formula that has been found based on the interviews to help the formation of Islamic journalism concept.

Figure 1: Islamic Journalistic Model of News Writing (LY2019007145)



The researchers believe that the media also act as a peace media (as discussed before) to promote harmony and peace through news reporting. Not only that, the media organisations are also encouraged to reinforce their journalists and train them to understand Islam better by working together more closely. Finally, the researchers believe that not only the printed newspapers are able to misrepresent the image of Islam and Muslims in the media as they actually can be further exacerbated by several groups of anti-Islamic groups who use the new media such as the Internet, You Tube, the social media application to spread the negative message of Islam and Muslims over the world. Therefore, this study can be a platform if there is a room to improve the news reporting on Islam and Muslims by media in the West. Through this study, the researchers would like to draw the important mechanism on how to improve the news reporting especially when it is about Islam and Muslims issues. In this situation, the researchers would agree more if the journalists could provide good style of reporting equipped with credible news sources which later will determine the meaningful content of the news (Fauziah, 2017).

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