

The Role of Social Media in Paving the Ground for Reappearance: A Hijab Case

Reni Susanti

Abstract

Our today's world is not only shaped by the conventional media that provides information in the one-to-many form that controlled by media company or government, but also by the social media that gives more spaces and power to the ordinary people to spread information in the many-to-many form. In this article I will present examples of the use of social media tools by few groups of Muslim Women to increase their capacity to spread information and ideas to global public as well as to build networks among them. At the end of the paper I will describe lesson learned for the society that paving the ground for the reappearance.

Introduction

It was in June 2009 when I opened my Facebook account and found a status of Paulo Coelho telling his audience that there was a dying girl in Iran shot by a basiji member and a doctor, Coelho's friend, was trying to save her life. The girl's name is Neda Agha Solthan that soon became very popular in the social media sites. Videos of her falling down were spread through youtube and Facebook and many people from all over the world started to send sympathy and curse the killer as well as the Islamic government.

During the post –election riot in Iran, it was difficult to find unbiased media informing the actual things happened. Western media were dominated by anti-Islamic government's discourse and the Iranian media were told as being stirred by the government, hence they never gave correct information. Social media was filled with green movement supporter campaigning "Where Is My Vote" that confused outsiders like me. Whom should we believe in? The whole world seemed to be against Iran.

Still in June, I wandered around Youtube trying to find any news from Iran that was generated by government supporters. I looked for the information in Youtube with an expectation that I would be able to hear ordinary people's voices. Luckily, I found a very nice interview between NPR and an Iranian girl named Setareh who described what was happening inside her country. I was happy to listen to her, which gave me balance information from inside the country.

My experience above shows that today's world is not only shaped by conventional media like newspaper (online and printed), radio and television, but also the so called social media tools such as MySpace, Facebook, Blog, Vlog, etc.

What is social media?

The debate on social media and its roles in the modern

society is ongoing. It was a popular topic in the field of business and marketing that later became a crucial issue among politician and social scientist. It is important to understand the nature of this media so that we can use it for the benefit of our society.

Social media was known as an ability to make online information available in conversational format. It is then evolved into providing platforms and networks that enable the power put on the hands of the people (Solis ۲۰۰۷). Today, the consumers turn to be producers using social media tools such as blogs, vlogs, social networking sites, etc. When the conventional media share information in one-to-many formats, the social media conduct the job from many-to-many.

Thornley defines social media as “online communications in which individuals shift fluidly and flexibly between the role of audience and author. To do this, they use social software that enables anyone without knowledge of coding, to post, comment on, share or mash up content and to form communities around shared interests” (Thornley ۲۰۰۸).

Meanwhile Stowe Boyd explains “Social Media Is Not A Broadcast Medium, Social Media Is Many-To-Many, Social Media Is Open, Social Media Is Disruptive.” (Boyd ۲۰۰۷)

Chong, who looks at social media in the way it may shape our today’s political circumstances, emphasizes social media giving spaces and tools for those who lack of resources to develop collective action and maintain activities necessary for social movements (Chong ۲۰۰۹). He then articulates that the media is user-generated which means that the media is established by the users of social media tools. Everyone who has enough knowledge to internet and the tools can use them to spread information, build network and then constructing online community for their political purposes.

Unlike conventional media that usually work in hierarchy and certain standard on journalism, social media empowers ordinary citizen in self-publishing, social networking and group-forming. It is thus enable citizen to circumvent state or company power over information.

Women and the social media: Hijab case

In the western imagination, the image of veiled Muslim women stands for oppression and lacking of freedom. This notion became visible and more persistent particularly after the 9/11. The Kit Runner, an Oscar nominated movie based on the novel of Khaled Hosseini, for instance, draws images of Afghanistan women as covered from head to toe in their burqas and one of them is stoned to death for having an affair, right after a football match. The novel itself became a bestseller nationwide and worldwide.

Anthropologist Laila Abu-Lughod recorded that the speech given by Laura Bush to justify American bombing and intervention in Afghanistan, enlisted women to make the case. "Because of our recent military gains in much of Afghanistan, women are no longer imprisoned in their homes. They can listen to music and teach their daughters without fear of punishment. The fight against terrorism is also a fight for the rights and dignity of women" (Laura Bush in Abu-Lughod ۲۰۰۲). Hence, the notion of "saving Muslim women from the oppression of Muslim men and their backward society" became one of the justifications to bomb Afghanistan, Iraq, as well as to ban burqa from France's public sphere.

This context gives us an understanding to see the movement established by Muslim women in the western society to fight for their rights to wear hijab as their cultural and religious rights.

In ۲۰۰۳, Pink Hijab Day movement settled by Hend El-

Buri and her friends in the United States. They are a group of Muslim women concern about breast cancer along sidetheir motivation to promote Islamic dress in the western society. El-Burifound out that during her middle school days, wearing pink attracted people to ask friendly questions; thus, she took the concept of wearing pink nationwide to raise people awareness on breast cancer as well as encourage people who are curious about hijab to ask questions (Abdullah ۲۰۰۹: ۲۶).

“It is important for Muslim women to work toward bettering their societies, whether they live in the Muslim countries or abroad. Breast cancer is something that affects all women- supprting with donations and raising awareness are essential parts of fighting breast cancer” (El-Buri in Abdullah ۲۰۰۹). However, El-Buri’s project was beyond the breast cancer issue as she wanted to use the pink hijab to override negative stereotype against Muslim women, particularly after the ۹/۱۱. Hence, the missions of Pink Hijab Day as described in the website and Facebook page come as follows: (۱) To encourage people to ask questions about Hijab, and extinguish stereotypes people may have about hijab; (۲) To raise awareness and funds for breast cancer foundations across the globe; (۳) To encourage Muslim women to participate in helping their own communities (Pink Hijab Day ۲۰۱۰; The Official Global Pink HIjab Day Site ۲۰۱۰).

At the beginning, the project did not attract people at large as many people thought it was funny and silly. The organizer then used social media to promote the cause and it reached larger public, particularly from South Africa, Australia, Canada and Egypt. In ۲۰۰۷, more than ۷۰۰۰ people joined the cause online through Facebook. It is noted that in

۲۰۱۰, ۱۰۱ organizations participated in the movement around the world(The Official Global Pink Hijab Day Site ۲۰۱۰; Abdullah ۲۰۰۹). It was even reached support from the non-Muslim women, particularly the university students and lecturers who wanted to wear pink headscarves to support the Muslim hijabis(Abdullah ۲۰۰۹)

The movement by nature was a real world action conducted by Muslim women in America but then through the social media it could reach its global public and became a global action. The organizer uses social media tools such as Facebook, Youtube and Blogs to get support, although these media are only massively used once in a year, particularly few months before the Breast Cancer Day in October. In ۲۰۱۰, this movement became an alternative for the secular campaign on breast cancer in the net that brought a vague and multi-interpretative slogan “I Like It on the Floor”.

Another example of the Muslim women use of social media is a page settled in facebook under the title “Women Against the War on Hijab”. This page was established as a “protest of the recent Hijab and Niqab bans in various countries - notably France, Turkey, Tunisia, Holland and Germany” (Women Against the War on Hijab ۲۰۱۰). The page has reached more than ۲۰,۰۰۰ followers from different Islamic sects and is currently still active in engaging the public with issues on hijab as Muslim women’s right.

However, the movement is not conducted offline, although it is followed by an online petition that articulates stronger statements in to action:

(۱) It is neither Constitutional nor Democratic for a government to ban the wearing of certain traditional / religious / conservative clothing, by women (or by men); (۲) Any government that passes such legislation cannot claim to

be Democratic, and damages its country's reputation as a Democracy; (۳) To ban Islamic women's clothing discriminates both against Women, and their choice of faith (freedom of religion); (۴) Such bans are an assault on Human Rights, and Women's Rights; (۵) We protest against such action in the name of our Constitutional Rights as Human Beings, and our rights to freely and peacefully practise our faith; (۶) What a woman wears is her personal choice, and hurts nobody else. To tell a woman what she can and cannot wear (unless it falls under public indecency, which Hijab and Niqab do not) is an abuse on that woman's rights as a Human Being (Women Against the War on Hijab ۲۰۱۰).

The use of social media by Muslim women emphasizes few issues. First, in the social media we can see the representation of Muslim women. Muslim women show the way they are, the way they want to be treated and understood, regardless their dress code. The nature of the media helps the women to narrate their own stories and images; in the other hand, the audience may expect originality of the representation.

Second, social media enabled peer-education among Muslim women. Muslim women teach each other how to wear proper hijab and to support each other to be strong in faith and commitment to follow the Islamic rules on dressing. A group settled in Facebook under the title "Hijab=Freedom, Reputation, Pride..Not Elimination, Oppression" put a special album to show the audience pictures of improper way of wearing hijab. It shows simple definition of what is hijab and which hijab is Islamic and which one is not. Another group named "Da Hijabi Code" goes farther by making classification of hijabi in its info page "What Hijabi are you?" then it gives five types of hijabi, that one of them says:

۱) HIJABI HOEs: They are the Hijabis that wear the Hijab then try to even out not showing their hair with short sleeves, capris and the all famous low cut tops. These girls give other Hijabis a bad name..... This group of too "friendly" Hijabis do everything a Muslim let alone a Hijabi should NOT do. We hope none of u fit this description...if u do...we say to u with nothing but love...Respect the Hijab...Stop being a HOE (Da Hijabi Code ۲۰۰۶).

These comical ways of defining what is a hijabi trigger many responses range from affirmation to one of the types, to the discussion on niqab and burqa.

Third, social media can be used as a tool for resisting injustice. Muslim women work together to challenge the stereotype and bad images portrayed in the western media and society about Muslim Women as well as campaigning on the rights for modest dress for the Muslim Women.

Fourth, through the hijab issue, it is easily to invite Muslim women regardless their sects to unite; they are working together to challenge the hijab ban regulation and the increasing of Islam phobia in the world. The social media natures that are open, transparent, egaliter, and diverse make it reachable by Muslim women from any walks of life.

Lesson learned for the society that pave the ground for the reappearance

It is evidenced that social media plays crucial roles in our world today. It provides many features that can not be fulfilled by conventional media, even the ones that go online. The social media enables ordinary people to make news and spread it everywhere, so the power that usually held by media industry or government is now shared among the ordinary people. It is also enable the users to set networks with whom they want to establish allegiances.

Thus, it is important to educate our society and raise people's awareness on the nature of the media and how they can use it for noble purposes, such as paving the ground for the awaited Imam's reappearance.

However, I strongly suggest that the social media activities must be well organized in order to reach the goal we are expected, because the bulk information in the cyber world may easily mislead the audience. In this regard, we need cyber volunteers from all over the world to spread good information and knowledge, to educate their peers as well as to build global networks of the waiting society. The other important actors in the movement are the seminary and Islamic scholars as the think tank, parents and local Islamic leaders for their physical assistance, adequate digital library from which the cyber activists can take sources, and last but not least is the trusted conventional media where the cyber volunteers can find information, particularly the ones need deep investigation.

The social media activities that mostly happen in the cyberworld must be followed by offline/physical and vice versa so that the activities may reach their broader public and impacts because the message of paving the ground for the Imam's reappearance is a global one.

Reference

Abdullah, Umberine. ۲۰۰۹. Pink Purpose. *Islamic Horizons*, ۲۶-۲۷.

Abu-Lughod, Lila. ۲۰۰۲. Do Muslim Women Really Need Saving? Anthropological Reflections on Cultural Relativism and Its Others. *American Anthropologist* ۱۰۴ (۳):۷۸۳-۷۹۰.

Boyd, Stowe. ۲۰۱۱. *Scoble Asks What Is Social Media?* ۲۰۰۷ [cited ۱ April ۲۰۱۱]. Available from <http://www.stoweboyd.com/post/1339189186/scoble-asks-what-is-social-media>.

Chong, Shihao. ۲۰۰۹. Social Media and Social Movements in Contentious Politics: Understanding New Movements in Iran and Egypt, Middle Eastern Studies of School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London, London.

Da Hijabi Code. ۲۰۱۱. *Basic Info*. Facebook ۲۰۰۶ [cited ۱۳ April ۲۰۱۱]. Available from <http://www.facebook.com/group.php?gid=2204765316&v=info>.

Pink Hijab Day. ۲۰۱۱. *Basic Information*. Facebook ۲۰۱۰ [cited ۱۶ April ۲۰۱۱]. Available from <http://www.facebook.com/pages/Pink-Hijab-Day/159442831321?v=info&ref=ts>.

Solis, Brian. ۲۰۱۱. *What's Wrong with Social Media* ۲۰۰۷ [cited ۳ April ۲۰۱۱]. Available from <http://www.briansolis.com/2007/02/whats-wrong-with-social-media/>.

The Official Global Pink HIjab Day Site. ۲۰۱۱. *Participating Oraganisations* ۲۰۱۰ [cited ۱۵ April ۲۰۱۱].

Available from <http://pinkhijabday.net/index.html>.

Thornley, Joseph. ۲۰۱۱. *What is "social media?"* ۲۰۰۸ [cited ۳ April ۲۰۱۱ ۲۰۱۱]. Available from <http://propr.ca/2008/what-is-social-media/>.

Women Against the War on Hijab. ۲۰۱۱. *Basic Information*. Facebook ۲۰۱۰ [cited ۹ April ۲۰۱۱]. Available from <http://www.facebook.com/defend.hijab?sk=info>.

———. ۲۰۱۱. *The Petition*. iPetitions ۲۰۱۰ [cited ۱۲ April ۲۰۱۱]. Available from <http://www.ipetitions.com/petition/womenagainstthewaronhijab/>.

