HERMENEUTICS OF THE QUR'AN IN DIGITAL SPACE: DISCOURSE ANALYSIS OF INTERPRETATION AND RELIGIOUS AUTHORITY

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Abstract

Digital transformation has reshaped how Muslims access, interpret, and share the Qur'an. If previously interpretation was dominated by scholars through classical texts and formal forums, today the digital sphere enables the rise of new authorities fluid, populist, and often detached from traditional scholarship.This paper explores Qur'anic hermeneutics in digital spaces by examining interpretive discourses and the construction, negotiation, and contestation of religious authority. Using critical discourse analysis, the study investigates practices on social media, YouTube, and digital da'wah platforms to uncover underlying power relations, ideological currents, and strategies of legitimacy. Findings reveal that the digital realm is not merely a medium of dissemination, but a contested arena where classical traditions, puritan currents, progressive interpretations, and lay voices intersect. This dynamic simultaneously fosters democratization of interpretation while risking fragmentation of authority and trivialization of meaning. Hence, Qur'anic hermeneutics in the digital age requires a critical framework attentive to textual, socio-political, and technological dimensions.

Keywords: *Al-Qur'an, Digital Hermeneutics, Religious Authority.*

Abstrak

Transformasi digital telah mengubah cara umat Muslim mengakses, menafsirkan, dan membagikan Al-Qur'an. Jika sebelumnya penafsiran didominasi oleh para ulama melalui teks klasik dan forum formal, kini ruang digital memungkinkan munculnya otoritas baru yang lebih cair, populis, dan sering kali terlepas dari tradisi keilmuan klasik. Tulisan ini mengeksplorasi hermeneutika Al-Qur'an dalam ruang digital dengan menelaah wacana penafsiran serta konstruksi, negosiasi, dan kontestasi otoritas keagamaan. Dengan menggunakan analisis wacana kritis, penelitian ini mengkaji praktik di media sosial, YouTube, dan platform dakwah digital untuk mengungkap relasi kuasa, arus ideologis, serta strategi legitimasi yang mendasarinya. Temuan menunjukkan bahwa ranah digital bukan sekadar medium penyebaran, melainkan arena yang diperebutkan, tempat tradisi klasik, arus puritan, tafsir progresif, dan suara awam saling berinteraksi. Dinamika ini sekaligus

mendorong demokratisasi penafsiran, namun juga berisiko menimbulkan fragmentasi otoritas dan trivialisasi makna. Oleh karena itu, hermeneutika Al-Qur'an di era digital memerlukan kerangka kritis yang peka terhadap dimensi tekstual, sosial-politik, dan teknologi.

Kata Kunci: Al-Qur'an, Hermeneutika Digital, Otoritas Keagamaan

INTRODUCTION

The development of digital technology has disrupted nearly all aspects of life, including the ways Muslims interact with the Qur'an. In the past, interpretation was produced, distributed, and legitimized through mechanisms of authority such as scholars, pesantren, or formal religious institutions. Today, however, the digital sphere enables anyone to interpret, disseminate, and even assert claims of truth without passing through established epistemological filters. This phenomenon raises a fundamental question: does interpretive authority still rest in the hands of classical scholars, or has it shifted into the digital space fluid, instant, and highly contested?

Within the digital sphere, society has transformed into what Zygmunt Bauman describes as a *liquid society*. This term refers to the condition of late modern society characterized by uncertainty, flexibility, and rapid change. According to Bauman, while solid modernity was marked by stable institutions, relatively firm norms, and long-term orientations such as family, permanent employment, and the nation-state, liquid modernity depicts an era in which everything is fluid, fragile, and easily altered. In liquid modernity, individual identity is no longer permanent but continuously negotiated in response to social and technological demands. Social relations become temporary, consumption takes precedence over production, and life is defined by high mobility. Bauman emphasizes that the freedom offered by liquid modernity also brings insecurity, alienation, and community fragmentation. Thus, liquid modernity serves as Bauman's metaphor for contemporary society—fast-moving, unpredictable, and full of paradoxes—opening opportunities for freedom while simultaneously generating instability and new social risks.

Similarly, Qur'anic hermeneutics has become fluid and fragmented. In the digital context, Qur'anic hermeneutics is not only concerned with the methodology of textual interpretation, but also with power relations, ideological currents, and social legitimacy operating behind interpretive discourses—often experiencing what may be called a *liquid hermeneutics*. Interpretation in digital spaces does not emerge in a vacuum; rather, it is shaped within ecosystems of algorithms, click-based economies, and the logic of popularity, which frequently determine authority more than traditional scholarly legitimacy. As a result, interpretation can function as a tool of political mobilization, a medium of populist da'wah, or even a cultural commodity consumed on a mass scale.

This condition demands a hermeneutical reading that goes beyond textual understanding, requiring the uncovering of digital mechanisms that generate polarization, fragmentation of authority, and even the trivialization of meaning. Thus, Qur'anic hermeneutics in digital spaces must be read not only as the interpretation of texts, but also as the socio-technological field that shapes the interpretation itself. The struggle over authority in the digital sphere is, in essence, a struggle of discourse, where scholars, intellectuals, activists, and ordinary users alike become actors who claim truth and legitimacy.

On the other hand, interpretive authority has always been embedded within hierarchical structures of scholarship—classical exegetes with their monumental works, pesantren institutions, and fatwa councils endowed with social legitimacy. Yet within the digital ecosystem, these boundaries have become blurred. Interpretation can now be produced by anyone, from charismatic scholars to "hijrah" influencers, and rapidly disseminated to millions of users through a single post. This shift presents a dual problem: on one side, it democratizes access to religious knowledge, while on the other, it generates epistemological confusion between scholarly authority and digital popularity.

Furthermore, the digital sphere is inherently non-neutral, as social media algorithms, trending logics, and the attention economy play decisive roles in determining which interpretations surface and which are marginalized. Consequently, religious authority in this context is shaped not only by the intellectual capacity of an exegete, but also by the ability to manage digital visibility. Qur'anic hermeneutics in digital spaces, therefore, cannot be understood merely as a shift in interpretive methodology, but must be read as a discursive arena saturated with power relations, contests of authority, and ideological struggles. Ultimately, interpretation in the digital sphere reflects the transformation of religious authority in the contemporary era a field where tradition, modernity, and technology converge, clash, and simultaneously construct new horizons in Qur'anic studies.

METHOD

This study employs Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) as its primary analytical framework. This approach is chosen because Qur'anic hermeneutics in digital spaces involves not only textual interpretation, but also networks of power, ideology, and social relations that shape and contest meaning. Accordingly, the study does not stop at describing interpretations, but seeks to uncover how tafsir is produced, disseminated, and negotiated in terms of authority within the digital ecosystem.

The research focuses on digital content, particularly Qur'anic interpretive texts such as social media posts on platforms like TikTok and da'wah videos. Equally important are digital interactions—comments, shares, likes, and discursive practices—that contribute to the legitimation or delegitimation of interpretations. The analysis covers three dimensions: textual practices, examining language structures, narratives, and rhetorical strategies in digital tafsir; discursive practices, tracing how interpretive texts are produced, circulated, and consumed in digital spaces, including the role of algorithms and popularity logics; and social practices, revealing how digital tafsir operates within broader relations of power, ideology, and religious authority.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Qur'anic Hermeneutics in Digital Spaces

Qur'anic interpretation in digital spaces no longer takes the form of lengthy texts or scholarly works, but is often packaged into short, visual, and populist content. Verses are excerpted as quotations for da'wah memes, short videos, or Instagram captions. This simplification makes interpretation more accessible, yet also risks reducing meaning by neglecting the complexity of classical exegesis. The process of digitalization reflects a shift in orientation—from tafsir as a scholarly discipline to tafsir as a commodity of attention. This transformation occurs due to a significant change in interpretive authority. Scholars with traditional chains of knowledge now compete with "hijrah" influencers, young preachers, and religious celebrities with millions of followers. Such new authorities are often measured more by digital popularity and engagement than by the depth of interpretive methodology. As a result, religious authority becomes fluid, fragmented, and at times banal, as anyone can claim the role of interpreter merely through digital visibility.

Moreover, the digital sphere reveals sharp ideological contestations of interpretation. Puritan groups utilize social media to reinforce literalist readings, emphasizing scripturalism and often rejecting contextual approaches. Conversely, moderate and progressive groups employ digital platforms to promote inclusive, gender-sensitive, and socially just interpretations. This contestation demonstrates that the digital realm functions as a hegemonic arena, where tafsir is not only about competing meanings of verses but also about claims to truth and socio-political legitimacy.

Within social media algorithms, the interpretive space itself becomes a determinant of new authority. Content aligned with trending logics or sensational appeal tends to surface more easily in the digital public sphere compared to serious academic works. Thus, digital tafsir is not merely the product of scholar–community

relations, but also of interactions with technology. Algorithms act as invisible editors that construct meaning and determine who is perceived as authoritative.

Although this phenomenon generates a paradox of Qur'anic hermeneutics in the digital age. On the one hand, digitalization opens the door to the democratization of interpretation, providing space for broad participation of Muslims in engaging with the Qur'an. On the other hand, it produces fragmentation of authority, increases the potential for misinterpretation, and shifts tafsir from an epistemological domain to a pragmatic–populist one. Hermeneutics in this context is no longer limited to reading the text, but must also account for the power of algorithms, market logics, and ideological dynamics that shape digital interpretive discourse.

AI and the Symptoms of Fragmented Authority

The phenomenon of fragmented authority described in this paper resonates with the perspective of Denny JA, delivered in his address at the *Komunitas Puisi Esai* in Jakarta on Friday, March 15, 2024. In his speech, Denny JA presented a provocative theme: *"The Role of Intellectuals, Priests, and Monks Will Be Replaced by Artificial Intelligence."* He argued that artificial intelligence has already entered the religious lives of communities. Smart technologies have penetrated Protestant churches, Buddhist temples in Japan, and major mosques in Saudi Arabia. Denny JA recounted these developments: in the Protestant Paul Church during the summer of 2023, 300 congregants listened attentively to a religious sermon delivered by an AI-powered robot. A similar case occurred at the Kodai-ji Buddhist Temple in Japan, where since 2019 worshippers have been able to consult the AI-driven monk *Kannon Mindar* for advice based on Buddhist doctrine.

In Saudi Arabia's Grand Mosque, since 2023 AI robots have been deployed to answer public inquiries in 11 languages. Worshippers can request information about the imam, receive spiritual lectures, or hear Qur'anic recitations. They may even interact via video with local scholars integrated into the AI system. Meanwhile, in June 2023, the Vatican issued a 140-page code of ethics outlining permissible and

impermissible uses of AI in Catholic religious services. Across Protestantism, Buddhism, Islam, and Catholicism, the presence of artificial intelligence has become increasingly intense. This reality raises a critical question: in the future, will the roles of scholars, imams, priests, and monks be supplanted by AI robots? Denny JA elaborated on this question by identifying several key issues.

First, the capacity of artificial intelligence surpasses that of any individual scholar, imam, priest, or monk in terms of breadth and depth of religious information. AI systems can store all scriptural verses, the social contexts in which they emerged, the historical development of doctrines, the finest religious sermons ever delivered, the most profound religious poetry ever written, and provide services in 40 international languages. No single human scholar can master such vast knowledge, but AI can process and integrate it. Second, AI offers uninterrupted service—24 hours a day—whereas human religious leaders must rest, sleep, and take leave. AI can be consulted at any time, even at 2 a.m., when individuals struggle with insomnia or loneliness. Third, scholars, priests, and monks may be biased toward particular sects or ideological perspectives, while AI can compare diverse interpretations and highlight universal and enduring aspects of religious doctrine. Fourth, human religious leaders inevitably fall ill and die, whereas AI robots continue to "live," constantly upgraded with new information and updated capabilities.

These four factors gradually but inevitably position artificial intelligence as superior to any individual scholar, imam, priest, or monk in terms of religious knowledge and service. While human religious leaders will continue to play a role, their dominance will diminish, leading to the fragmentation of religious authority under the pressure of AI and media politics. Ultimately, this dynamic points toward struggles over image and identity, culminating in contests of religious legitimacy in the age of artificial intelligence.

Digital Hermeneutics

As discussed in this paper, the digital sphere opens opportunities for anyone to interpret the Qur'an. This phenomenon generates two perspectives: on the one hand, the democratization of interpretation makes tafsir more inclusive, participatory, and closely connected to the everyday experiences of Muslims. On the other hand, it produces a crisis of authority, as claims of interpretation are no longer based on scholarly chains of transmission or rigorous methodology, but rather on digital popularity. Social media algorithms further determine which interpretations appear on users' feeds, often privileging sensational, provocative, or populist content. This dynamic leads to the commodification of tafsir, where verses are transformed into content material for the sake of engagement. Algorithms simultaneously create echo chambers that reinforce the views of particular groups.

Classical hermeneutics emphasized the triadic interaction of text, context, and readers, as well as Gadamer's hermeneutic triad of text, author, and readers. In digital spaces, however, media and technology must be added as formative factors of meaning. Interpretation is not only about understanding texts, but also about digital mediation. Digital hermeneutics thus opens new possibilities for reading, while also carrying the risk of reducing meaning due to short-form formats.

In the framework of digital hermeneutics, Alberto Romele emphasizes interpretation as a process of meaning-making. Traditional hermeneutics focused on texts, language, and human interpretation. Romele expands hermeneutics into the digital realm, where interpretation is carried out not only by humans but also by machines, algorithms, and digital media. Technologies such as search engines, social media, and algorithms are not neutral tools but active agents that mediate and shape interpretation. For instance, Google search results, AI systems, or YouTube recommendations represent forms of algorithmic hermeneutics—machines themselves perform interpretation. In this sense, interpretation is not only human but also digital, through data mining, pattern recognition, and machine learning. Digital interpretation is automatic, massive, and data-driven, differing from human interpretation, which is reflective and historical. Yet both influence each other:

humans interpret through digital media, while digital media shape how humans understand the world. Ultimately, meaning production in the digital age is a collective endeavor between humans and technology.

This collective work between humans and technology aligns with Donna Haraway's notion of the cyborg—an organism-machine hybrid. The cyborg serves as a metaphor for human identity in the technological era, symbolizing the interconnectedness of humans and technology that dissolves conventional boundaries. Reality has become hybrid, where humans are not merely biological bodies but are integrated with digital tools and data. Thus, digital hermeneutics is not simply about individual interpretive experience, but about the relationship between author and reader now embedded in networks of data, avatars, social media, and digital devices. In this cyborg condition, hermeneutics merges with biopolitics, as interpretation is shaped not only by human agency but also by those who control technology—since whoever controls technology also controls how humans construct themselves and their interpretations.

An Example of Qur'anic Interpretation Using Fazlur Rahman's Double Movement Method The first movement involves contextual understanding of the past. At this stage, the interpreter must grasp the Qur'anic text within the socio-historical context in which the verses were revealed. The aim is to identify God's intent as bound to the specific situations and conditions at the time of revelation to the Prophet Muhammad. This requires examining the *asbāb al-nuzūl* (occasions of revelation), as well as the social, political, cultural, and moral values of seventh-century Arabian society. Rahman argues that understanding the original context of the Qur'an is a crucial step to avoid misinterpretation. The interpreter must discern the underlying moral objectives of the laws or commands contained in the text, rather than limiting interpretation to their literal meaning.

The second movement involves application to the present context. After uncovering the moral message and fundamental objectives of the text in its historical

setting, the interpreter must then bring these meanings into the contemporary context. This means applying the universal moral and ethical principles of the Qur'an to modern society, while taking into account the social, economic, cultural, and political changes that have occurred since the time of revelation. Fazlur Rahman maintains that Qur'anic laws and commands are flexible, with their ultimate purpose being the establishment of social justice and human welfare. Therefore, specific rules that were relevant in the Prophet's era may need to be adapted or reinterpreted to address the challenges of modern times, without neglecting the moral principles and ultimate objectives intended by the text.

This theory is not merely a bridge between textualist and contextualist groups, but rather a dynamic and critical process that moves between the two. It implies that interpretation must be carried out continuously, since society itself is constantly changing. A rigid understanding of the text without considering social dynamics risks rendering Qur'anic laws irrelevant, while an interpretation that completely detaches from the original context of the text may distort the Qur'an's core moral message. Fazlur Rahman emphasizes that the Qur'an carries an ideal moral vision that must be realized in social practice. For example, laws related to women's rights, slavery, and social justice were historically contextual, yet their ultimate purpose was to achieve broader justice and human equality in the modern era. Thus, while specific rules may change, the underlying moral values must remain intact.

An illustration of hermeneutical analysis within the double movement framework can be seen in two cases. First, regarding *riba* (usury). The Qur'an strictly prohibits *riba* because it caused exploitation and social injustice in pre-Islamic Arab society. Rahman argues that interpreters must grasp the moral objective of this prohibition—namely, protecting the poor from economic oppression. In the modern era, financial transactions have evolved, and the task of Muslims is to apply the principle of anti-exploitation within today's economic systems, rather than focusing solely on the literal prohibition of *riba*. Second, women's rights. Many Qur'anic verses address women's rights within the cultural context of seventh-century Arabia, where

women had limited freedoms and entitlements. Rahman suggests that the moral purpose of these verses was to elevate women's status and grant them fair rights. Therefore, modern interpretation must prioritize gender equality in line with the Qur'an's overarching values of justice.

CONCLUSION

Qur'anic hermeneutics in digital spaces demonstrates that interpretation is no longer monopolized by classical scholarly authorities, but emerges within discursive dynamics that are fluid, open, and interactive. Digitalization creates opportunities for the democratization of knowledge, yet at the same time raises challenges concerning legitimacy, authority, and authenticity of interpretation. Therefore, the digital sphere must be understood not merely as a medium of distribution, but as a new *habitus* in the formation of meaning and religious authority that is continuously transforming.

Ultimately, the digital realm not only changes the way Muslims access interpretation, but also reshapes how they perceive religious authority itself. Interpretation in the digital age becomes easier, faster, and more accessible, yet it must be approached critically to avoid losing its depth and authenticity.

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