

THE CREDIBILITY OF ISLAMIC RELIGIOUS INSTITUTIONAL WEBSITES IN MALAYSIA

NORHAFEZAH YUSOF
UNIVERSITI UTARA MALAYSIA

Abstract

This study is an attempt to fill the gap in website credibility studies and online religious studies, as these areas seldom link when researching the credibility of Islamic religious websites. The researcher investigates the nature of 13 state-based Islamic institutional religious websites to discover whether these websites are seen as credible, based on a framework of website credibility. Eight media and communication experts were interviewed. The findings suggest that institutional Islamic religious websites have achieved the authority and objectivity features of website credibility. However, the authority of the websites requires that the accuracy, currency and coverage features are upgraded. This study is timely as it contributes to the fields of internet, communication, and religious studies.

Keywords: *Islam, Malaysia, website credibility, religious website.*

KREDIBILITI LAMAN WEB INSTITUSI AGAMA DI MALAYSIA

Abstrak

Kajian ini adalah satu percubaan untuk mengisi jurang dalam kajian kredibiliti laman web dan pengajian agama dalam talian. Ini adalah kerana kurangnya perkaitan antara kedua bidang apabila kajian terhadap kredibiliti laman web agama Islam dijalankan. Penyelidik mengkaji sifat 13 laman web agama institusi Islam berdasarkan negeri untuk mengetahui sama ada laman web mempunyai ciri yang boleh dipercayai, berdasarkan rangka kerja laman web kredibiliti. Lapan pakar media dan komunikasi telah ditemubual. Hasil kajian menunjukkan bahawa laman web agama institusi Islam telah mencapai kuasa dan objektiviti untuk ciri-ciri laman web kredibiliti. Walau bagaimanapun, pihak berkuasa laman web perlu mempertingkatkan ciri ketepatan, terkini dan liputan. Kajian ini adalah tepat pada masanya kerana ia menyumbang kepada bidang internet, komunikasi, dan kajian agama.

Katakunci: *Islam, Malaysia, kredibiliti laman web, laman web agama.*

INTRODUCTION

Credibility and the internet are two interesting entities. Credibility is a concept that binds human beings to authentic sources as references (Fogg et al., 2001; Hovland & Weiss, 1951). On the other hand, the internet is a platform that offers speed, flexibility and borderless opportunities to reach audiences (Connelly et al., 2015). With the combination of these two entities, media and communication scholars can investigate the impact of the internet on website credibility. From an examination of the literature, it seems that the studies on website credibility have not included religious websites. In other words, studies of website credibility often focus on the media content (Ampofo, Anstead, & O'Loughlin, 2011), advertising (Yoo & Jin, 2013) and health information (Dong, 2015). In contrast, studies of religious websites ignore the credibility part of the website, as religion is considered as an authentic source. Therefore, the question that remains unresolved is whether we can investigate the credibility of religious websites.

With the availability of information technology, many Muslim states and popular Muslim figures have been trying to design and use websites to inform others of their principles and practices. This is not exclusive to Islam; other religions, such as Christianity (Campbell, 2011; Knowles, 2013), Buddhism (Busch, 2011; Connelly, 2015) and Hinduism (Chopra, 2006; Scheifinger, 2010) have also been active in developing and maintaining websites to propagate their beliefs and practices.

Drawing upon the need to understand the nature of the Islamic websites, this study explores the scenario for the establishment of Islamic Religious Institutions (IRI) websites and the related literature regarding the internet and its credibility.

The websites in this study are viewed from two perspectives. First, they are developed by religious authorities governed by the respective states. The term states refer to primary provinces of Malaysia. Second, each state is autonomous in managing its own regulations. The state religious authority in Islamic affairs is unique in Malaysia. According to the constitution, each state in Malaysia governs its own religious institution under the jurisdiction of the Head of State which, in this case, is the King. However, for states with no monarchs, the responsibility falls under the authority of the *Yang Dipertuan Agung*, the equivalent to the Leader of Kings who is appointed by the Council of Kings, once every five years (Thukiman, Abdul Rahman, & Abu Bakar, 2009) (Table 1).

Although autonomous in terms of rules and policies, each IRI website shares similar features. The similarities in terms of website content features include Main, Communication and Economy and, in the footer of each web page, there is a copyright line that states that the website is under the authority of the state. Any malicious attempt by person(s) to alter, copy or use the website would be penalized.

The term Main refers to areas that focus on the introduction of the institutions. Examples are 'about us and profile picture of the institutions'. The term Communication refers to areas that focus on interactivity between the institutions and the web users. Examples are 'contact us, frequently ask questions and feedback'. And the term Economy refers to areas that focus on building the economy of the community. Examples are '*zakat, waqf*, property development, investment and job vacancy'.

In Malaysia, each state's official Islamic website is governed by state law. This means that legally, the states can decide on their own website and are not forced to follow the *fatwa* or consensus reached at the Central Religious Council meetings at the federal level (Nasohah, 2005). For example, when it was decided at the federal level that smoking was forbidden among Muslims, only a few states followed this *fatwa* (Nasohah, 2005).

The drive to study the credibility of IRI websites is due to the concern that religious websites are more accessible, compared to fundamental sources, such as written and face-to-face religious teaching. Websites reach beyond borders. However, if the viewers or followers of websites are not equipped with a sufficient fundamental knowledge of religion, they cannot differentiate real teaching from deviant teaching. Thus, there is a significant chance that website users will be involved in deviant teaching. There have been real life examples where Islamic religious websites have been tainted with deviant religious teaching, which has led to extremism, such as *Jemaah Islamiyah* (Harrigan, 2013).

On the other hand, religious preachers are positive about the impact of the internet on religious education and they embrace online platforms. For examples, studies have indicated that Buddhist (Cheong, Huang, & Poon, 2011a; Cheong, Huang, & Poon, 2011b) and Muslim (Sisler, 2011) religious preachers can see the positive effects of reaching people beyond local and national boundaries. However, the negative side is that, when there are many choices that are unregulated, deviant websites might

supersede the non-deviant websites (El-Said & Harrigan, 2013). This is because religion is a complex issue and religious practices are needed to be understood within the context of a specific community.

To date, no studies of the internet have specifically focused on studying the credibility of IRI within an Asian context. With the exceptions of Ho, Lee and Hameed (2008), Wall and Kirdnark (2011) and Azimaton, Nor Hazlina and Hasrina (2015), there have been few studies on Islam and cyberspace in the Southeast Asian context. Ho et al. (2008) found that Singaporean Muslim surfers tend to engage in online activities that were more related to religious concerns than activities that were related to fundamental institutional religion. Wall and Kirdnark's (2011) study is on participatory media, i.e., Flickr images of Thailand Muslims; they argued that the images were controlled by Flickr and the images did not dispel stereotypes of Thailand Muslims but strengthened them. Azimaton et al., (2015) study was a replication of Ho et al., (2008) study and was conducted on Malaysian Muslims; they found five important variables that could predict the respondents' online religious behavior. They are "attitude-Internet perception, the subjective norms of the Muslim community, the Internet self-efficacy, level of religiosity among Muslims, and offline media usage for religious purpose". (Azimaton et al., p.1)

In addition, studies on website credibility focus on two main areas: content features and structural features (Connelly et al., 2015; Metzger, 2007; Metzger, Flanagin, & Medders, 2010; Teven & McCroskey, 1997). The content covers five areas: accuracy, authority, objectivity, currency, and coverage. The structural features focus on the facilities and the dynamism of the websites. As discussed in the next section, this study will be using content features as described by Metzger (2007) as a research framework.

Source credibility

Studies on source credibility originate from Aristotle's work, *The Rhetoric*, which focuses on ethics (ethos), logic (logos) and emotion (pathos). These three proofs define the credibility of a source to the intended audiences. Inspired by Aristotle, Hovland, Janis and Kelly (1953) proposed a source credibility model, which assumes that trustworthiness and expertise are prerequisites for source credibility. Other scholars also contributed to this theory, such as McCroskey (1966) and Cornan, Hess and Justus

(2006). These scholars agreed on the assumption that trustworthiness, expertise and attractiveness influence how audiences interpret a message. It means that the higher the degree of trustworthiness, expertise and attractiveness of the source, the higher the degree of acceptance by receivers of the messages.

Trustworthiness refers to ethics from an Aristotelean perspective. The term explains the confidence in, and acceptance of, the message of the speakers by the audiences. Expertise means that the sources are authentic, authoritative and legitimate from the audience viewpoint. Attractiveness refers to the degree of likeability of the sources from the perspective of the audiences and some studies argue that it involves more than physical attractiveness (Ohanian, 1990).

There are two directions in website credibility studies in media and communication. One is website credibility in the communication and information literary area, focusing on the skills that website users need to assess the credibility of online information. These studies examine the strength of motivation to use the internet and the psychology of audiences. The main method used is quantitative, such as quasi-experimental and survey. The second direction is religious website studies that offer nuances of description of the relationship of the internet to religion, based on a community specific context. The main method used is qualitative, such as interview, observation and case study.

Studies on website credibility from the communication and information areas have focused on how the user experiences and perceives the credibility of the website sources. Connelly et al. (2015) carries out a comparative analysis of two groups: the websites of non-violent ideological and non-ideological groups and of violent ideological and non-ideological groups, which revealed some interesting results. Using content analysis, the findings indicated that the violent ideological group websites manifested a greater degree of social categorization, out-grouping, and moral disengagement than non-violent ideological and non-ideological websites. Dong's (2015) study on health communication and source credibility also reveals interesting findings. Using an Elaboration Likelihood Model, the study indicated that using a dietician as the source was most persuasive to people with a high health consciousness, while people with low health consciousness were most influenced by a celebrity. In Johnson and Kaye's (2015) study, the findings indicated that, even though social media

credibility was considered low, users were willing to use social media as it satisfied their need for immediate information. In another study, Trevino and Hargittai (2011) examined the uses of Wikipedia in two Midwestern United States university students. The findings indicated that, although the students were aware of the low credibility of Wikipedia as a source, they still referred to the website as their reference in searching for information. In Flanagin and Metzger's (2011) work on the perceived credibility of user-generated (e.g., Wikipedia) content versus online information that had been provided by experts (e.g., Citizendium and the online version of the Encyclopaedia Britannica) across generations, the findings were astonishing. The results showed that Encyclopaedia Britannica was rated as a more credible source than Wikipedia, even though the same information existed in Wikipedia. Thus, studies on website credibility focus on the credibility features of the websites, such as factors that motivate the users to use the websites and how these factors define website credibility for the website providers and users.

Internet studies on religion have acknowledged the importance of religious websites as sources of information for users. For example, Campbell (2012) presented five main themes in relation to internet studies and religion: "internet rituals, online-offline connectivity, online community building, identity performance space and dynamic conceptions of authority" (p. 682). Others focused on end users (Azimaton et al., 2015; Ho et al., 2008; Ogan & Cagiltly, 2006), developers (Noomen, Aupers, & Houtman, 2011), mediators (Etling, Kelly, Faris, & Palfrey, 2010) and agencies (Marmura, 2008). These studies are evidence that religious websites have impacted web users in delivering religious knowledge to the intended users.

Busch (2011) and Campbell (2007) have presented several issues that need to be considered by researchers, such as authority roles and sources of legitimization. As mentioned, IRI websites are regulated by the state. Thus, each website is governed by an institution that fall under the jurisdiction of the ruler of the state. There is a committee that is responsible for validating the online content and the process is verified through formal meetings. Hence, the degree of trustworthiness is allegedly high.

Studies of Islamic religious websites have explored popular websites due to the demand from the website users for fast and interactive feedback on day to day religious

matters (El-Nawawy & Sahar, 2009). The popularity of these websites has meant a high profile for their developers. In line with website developments, the actors behind the scenes are religious scholars and self-made preachers who are without religious schooling. Nonetheless, the linkage between the websites and the religious leaders is strong. An example of a popular international and charismatic Islamic leader is Shaykh Yusuf al-Qardawi, a Qatari-based scholar, who runs a popular independent religious website and has a significant following in Europe and North America (Baroudi, 2016).

A study in Malaysia indicated that an Islamic leader is one who is highly regarded as a charismatic leader in terms of his contribution to the development of Islam in Malaysia (Ismail & Mat Zain, 2014). As evidenced in most studies on Islamic communities and cyberspace, religious authorities tend to possess an influential impact on the viewpoints of Muslims (Bunt, 2000, 2003; Musthafa, 2014). This phenomenon of religious authorities playing an influential role in religion is also evident with Christianity in Africa (Asamoah-Gyadu, 2007) and Hinduism in India (Scheifinger, 2010), where these communities can be regarded as possessing the collectivism concept of a community.

An important point here is that the religious institutions are governed by a bureaucratic system, which offers systematic management but may also thwart the process of handling website content. To add to this, the state-based IRI websites also compete with the national religious websites in terms of information updates, such as issues on *halal* and *fatwa*.

In bridging the two areas of website credibility from communication and information and literary and religious website studies, the researcher proposes to use Metzger's model of evaluating website credibility that specifically covers five areas: accuracy, authority, objectivity, currency, and coverage. In detail, each term is defined within an allocated scope. For example, accuracy refers to the error-free status of the website. Authority means that the website has a legitimate source provider(s) and author(s). Objectivity refers to the website being transparent in the information provided to its users. Currency means the information in the website is recent and coverage refers to the detail of information that is available on the website.

The need to use this framework is vital as it provides a clear overview of website credibility assessments. Thus, this study attempts to contribute to the website credibility

literature as there is little research available to link website credibility studies to religious websites studies.

Research questions, data and method

This study proposes the following research questions (RQ):

- Do the IRI websites demonstrate key features that contribute to website credibility?
- To what extent are the IRI websites credible in the context of the website credibility model?

Previous studies on website credibility have largely focused on survey and experimental methods (Flanagin & Metzger, 2011). However, this study used in-depth interviews to study website credibility from the perspective of communication and media experts in Malaysia.

Eight (n=8) media and communication scholars were interviewed because their research interests focused on media, the internet and religion in Malaysia (Table 2). They all had at least 10 years of work experience in academia and most have been actively involved in teaching, consulting and researching areas related to new media. The interviews were conducted between January and August 2015, in English and Bahasa Malaysia, the native language of Malaysia. Each interview took about an hour, the longest was two hours. The interviews were transcribed and checked for accuracy. The completed data were then analyzed following Charmaz's (2006) approach to reveal consistency in thematic analysis, to develop initial categories, and linkages in the relationships between the categories (Strauss & Corbin, 2015). Based on observation and verification, the thematic categories were reviewed to ensure the authenticity of the data (Lindlof & Taylor 2002).

RESULTS

Data from the interview provided insight into media and communication experts' professional means of credibility assessment and they also shed light on the extent of IRI website credibility in the context of the website credibility model. The first section of the results discusses the key features that contribute to website credibility that arose

from the data analysis with regard to the first RQ. The second section discusses the extent of IRI website credibility that emerged from the interview data.

RQ1: Do the IRI websites demonstrate key features that contribute to website credibility?

The five key features that are used to evaluate website credibility are the standard elements that can ensure the authenticity of website information, authors and providers. Interestingly, studies on religious websites tend to neglect investigating the credibility of religious website, due to sensitivity in questioning the authority of religious sources. Researchers of religious websites have been thorough in analyzing various religious websites with a specific intent to understand the nature, problem and future of religious websites. For example, there are many important studies of religious websites, such as Højsgaard and Warburg (2005), Bunt (2009), Campbell (2010), and Cheong, (2012).

The five elements: Accuracy, authority, objectivity, currency, and coverage

Most participants agreed on two key features that consolidate the IRI websites for credibility: authority and objectivity. The authority of the IRI website from their perspective is legitimate, as the authors and the providers of the websites are appointed and regulated by the state authority. The objectivity is highly regarded as the websites information offer transparent and detailed information on Islamic jurisprudence, the line of authority of the state-based religious office, contact information, and services such as paying alms as tax deduction. For example, one of the respondents stated:

Thank God, all religious institutions under the government have their own website. This is a good development. It results from a number of government reforms through series of MAMPU [Malaysia Administrative Modernization and Management Planning Unit] through circulars on website management to be in line with myGovernment portal, i.e., an initiative of the Malaysian government. The existence of these websites helps local people and outsiders in gaining access to basic information easily and deals with the specific units/department more quickly. (MR01)

On the other hand, respondents had mixed reactions towards the accuracy, currency and coverage of the websites. In terms of accuracy, one of the respondents noted that there was a problem in terms of accessing the websites.

When I tried using the 'Carian' [Search] option to look for 'hadith', I saw this HTML coding: "warning: preg_replace(): Compilation failed: disallowed Unicode code point (>= 0xd800 && <= 0xdfff) at offset 1816 in C:\website\maik.gov.my\modules\search\search.module on line 333." The webmaster needs to ensure visitors will not get this error code, because it illustrates that the webmaster lacks expertise and/or awareness of the web error. (MR03)

With regard to currency, most of the respondents commented on the issue that the IRI websites need to stay current, due to the expectations of the internet nowadays. People need to be connected to the latest information as they want correct information fast to manage their life. One of respondents commented:

Not a lot of current news on the homepage. The key figure is the royal who is the patron of the religious institution. (MR02)

The coverage of the IRI websites was highlighted by most respondents as needing to be urgently improved. Some argued that, in order to ensure the websites are visited, coverage by the website needed to be enhanced.

A lot of information is hidden in drop-down menus. Elsewhere on the homepage, there is little information. (MR02)

There is little information provided. The exception is the information on prayer time. (MR08)

I do not refer to the website for religious purposes. I prefer to seek advice from trusted and knowledgeable individuals ['ustaz' or 'ustazah'] concerning religious matters. (MR06)

RQ2 To what extent are the IRI websites credible in the context of the website credibility model?

The data analysis revealed three themes that are related to the model of website credibility. In addition, the respondents also suggested steps that needed to be taken in enhancing website credibility.

Establishing the basis for Islamic reference

Developing an IRI website is a good attempt by religious institutions to cater for the

religious needs of the community. This is a trend of establishing a strong basis of Islamic reference links to the authority and objectivity of the website credibility features. As stated before, each state has its own website catering for its specific community as a result of the legal set up of Muslim matters in Malaysia. Thus, launching and providing websites for Muslim and non-Muslim users is a strategy to mark the authority of the religious institutions. In addition, due to federal legislation, the Malaysia Communications and Multimedia Commission (MCMC) is responsible for regulating all matters relating to communications and multimedia activities. Thus, each institution which launches its own website needs to be vigilant in managing its website and transparent in its provision of information. Any complaint about websites registered in Malaysia will be closely regulated by the MCMC under the Malaysian Communications and Multimedia Commission Act (1998) and the Communications and Multimedia Act (1998) (Malaysia Communications and Multimedia Commission, 2016).

The establishment of the websites has been praised as efforts towards developing websites as sources for Islamic reference that reflect authenticity and objectivity.

It is good that every state in Malaysia puts effort into developing their own website for Islamic Institutions. This can help Muslim people to access information easily from the web, promote Islam [‘da’wah’] to yet-to-be-Muslims (I would prefer to call the non-Muslims as ‘yet-to-be-Muslim’), and spread Islam more easily at any time and in any place. The information provided on the websites is adequate, with few graphics, which can ensure a faster download process. (MR03)

Generally, I think there has been much improvement in the outlook of most Islamic Institutional Websites. My personal experience with one (MAIS) was three years ago when visiting the website for information on ‘zakat’. A recent visit, specifically in response to your questions, shows that the website is much better now than three years ago in a number of areas, namely in terms of content and functionality. (MR05)

Be competitive

While there has been positive responses to the effort to build an IRI website, many respondents voiced their concerns on the accuracy feature of the websites. The errors, if

any, need to be minimized. To remain competitive, the quality of the website in being free from errors is crucial, as any element of error will have an impact on the website credibility as a reference point for the web user. The respondents voiced their concerns on this accuracy issue.

I could not find the websites for the different Islamic Religious Councils from putting the keywords in English into the Google search box. Since most of the websites can be displayed in English, they should be searchable using English keywords. This would be important for non-Malaysians who want to carry out research studies on the religious councils of different states in Malaysia. (MR02)

Even though they provide hyperlinks to the English version pages, the contents are still in the Malay language. This will give a bad impression for online visitors, especially people who do not understand Malay. (MR03)

I think they look conventional. Elements of interactivity are still lacking. Participation from viewers should be encouraged (e.g., the citizen journalism model) via the website. (MR06)

Establishing a good reputation

A good reputation could justify the continuous credibility of Islamic reference for the community and for others. Most respondents agreed that there is an urgent need for the IRI to revamp their websites to establish a good reputation through ensuring the website information is up to date, and that there is in-depth information that is relevant to Islamic references.

It would be good if the websites had the following added features, such as (1) Q&A section discussing a current national issue, for instance, the issue of Goods and Services Tax (GST) from an Islamic perspective, the issue of 'tarikat' [religious sect] etc., (2) a research capsule [a one page summary of research findings] from research conducted by the institution or commissioned by a research body, and (3) enhanced online consultations for customers and public enquiries. (MR03)

Create a 'one-stop centre' website/portal which is administered by an experienced webmaster. It is important to have a dedicated webmaster to take care of the website so that the content is updated from time to time, and the

presentation (inclusive of front page, interactivity, multimedia, etc.) is always improved. (MR06)

First, perhaps they could cluster or categorise the information so that the pages are not crowded (too much information on one page). Second, consider having interactive 'question and answer' because different people have different queries or issues. (MR07)

They should (1) make it more interactive to allow the public to interact, (2) provide more information, not just on the institution, i.e., Majlis Agama Islam, but related to current issues that are relevant to religion that needs experts from the religious institutions to voice their opinions and views, (3) make it more appealing to attract young people to read useful information from the website, or for them to attend religious programmes organized by the Islamic institutions, and (4) make the information up to date. They must regularly update the information. (MR08)

DISCUSSION

The historical basis that defines Islamic legislation in Malaysia means that Islam is a matter for the state. Starting from that point, IRI websites are therefore a production of a state-based institution. Thus, it is important to investigate the credibility of the websites, in this case, using the five elements of a website credibility framework.

The interview data brings out interesting themes in the areas of internet, religion and organization. The first theme, '*Establishing the basis for Islamic reference*', represents the credibility of the websites in terms of authority and objectivity. The establishment of the websites is an effort to reach the masses through the structured planning and execution by an institution. Moreover, because the IRI websites are considered as official religious websites, the status of trustworthiness and expertise was not questioned. Official religious websites tend to be respected in terms of authenticity and trustworthiness (Hackett, 2009; Ho et al., 2008). The websites enjoy a privileged status as they are endorsed by the state and federal governments while other, non-official websites, i.e., independent Islamic religious websites, have less credibility due to lack of official endorsement from the authorities. This phenomenon has also become apparent from the religious extremism issues that have emerged in Malaysia (The Star, 2014) and MCMC has been carrying out intensive monitoring on the websites that are considered as deviant from religious teaching (Zolkepli, 2014).

The second theme, '*Be competitive*', indicates the concerns of the respondents

on the accuracy features that may affect the reputation of the IRI websites. As they are the credible and authoritative websites for Muslims and others, the websites need to position themselves as leading websites in Islamic reference. Interactivity has been helpful element in sustaining religious websites as in the case of popular international independent Islamic websites, where interactivity is the factor that captures the attention of the visitors to keep on using the websites (Bunt, 2003, El-Nawawy & Sahar, 2009). Of course, the capability to offer accurate and extensive sources of reference, such as in the case of the website that is operated by Qardawi, guarantees continuous support from the targeted consumers. In addition, Qardawi has been influential in the establishment of the internationally popular Islamonline.com portal (Baroudi, 2016). Perhaps being autonomous has its drawbacks in the case of the IRI websites in Malaysia as they are not subject to competition from others. Nonetheless, this issue of accuracy is important for IRI websites, especially when there are many competitive Islamic religious websites that could offer better accuracy in terms of website credibility. With the latest developments in the deviant teaching of Islam, such as *Daish*, there is an urgent need for IRI websites to remain free of errors, as Islam today is freely misinterpreted and abused by those who have no knowledge of Islamic teaching.

The third theme, '*Establishing a good reputation*', is a call to sustain the currency and coverage features of website credibility. Even though the IRI websites are set up and regularly managed by the respective religious institutions and the majority of the Malaysian citizens are Muslims, the stakes are high for these websites. Nowadays, being complacent is not an option, especially with millions of unauthorized and independent Islamic religious websites being developed. There are also websites that are set up to create conflict among Muslims, and between Muslims and non-Muslims (Bräuchler, 2004), so authoritative Islamic websites, such as IRI, should play an important role in managing up to date resources and detailed information for the viewers. Hate campaigns against Muslims can easily go viral due to the speed, low cost and visual images on the internet that are manipulated to create discrimination against Muslims (van Zoonen, Vis, & Mihelj, 2011).

Religious websites are subject to scrutiny from many stakeholders, such as the government, media, religious community, non-governmental agencies, and communities. The popular Islamic religious websites have longevity, due to their ability

to be relevant, user-friendly and up to date in terms of serving the needs of existing and potential website users (El-Nawawy & Sahar, 2009). In the context of this study, the IRI websites have a position of high credibility in terms of authority and objectivity due to their close links to the state and federal agencies in Malaysia. However, where religious extremist groups are optimizing their websites as platforms to influence and recruit Muslims to be part of their community, the IRI websites authority needs to be stepped up in their efforts to provide the latest information on Islam with a counter-narrative to negate the radicalization of terrorist religious groups. MCMC has been monitoring deviant websites with the support from the security forces (Zolkepli, 2014). However, the efforts will be meaningless if the root of the problem is not tackled at an earlier stage, which is the understanding and interpretation of Islamic knowledge.

The present study is based on the credibility of the IRI websites from the perspective of a credibility model. The findings demonstrate the call to associate website credibility with religious websites that could benefit the media and communication literature, religious institutions and policymakers in managing online resources vigilantly in the era of digital technology.

CONCLUSION

This study concludes that IRI websites have much to offer to users. They are authoritative and legitimate Islamic religious websites and are supported financially by the states. They are referred to as authoritative and objective websites that have been used for Islamic religious resources, at least for Muslims in Malaysia and neighboring countries that share the *lingua franca* of Bahasa Malaysia. However, the IRI position as authoritative, that secured the privilege of autonomy for the websites is not an excuse to be complacent. Competition from other independent Islamic websites is enormous. Given the context, IRI websites need to be at the forefront in terms of the accuracy, currency and coverage features of website credibility.

These findings are given with a caveat, i.e., the users of the websites were not surveyed. Longitudinal survey methods need to be considered in future research to complement the methods used in this study.

In summary, this study is among a few that attempts to increase our understanding of the website credibility of authoritative Islamic religious websites in

Malaysia. Given the fact that Malaysia is considered as a model Islamic country in South East Asia (Van der Westhuizen, 2004) and Malaysia has been part of the Mobile INTERPOL Network Database, which suggests that the country has put serious efforts into curtailing online religious extremism (Gardeazabal & Sandler, 2015), this study is a significant contribution to internet studies of Islamic religious websites in the South East Asia region from the media and communication perspectives.

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BIODATA

Norhafezah Yusof is an Associate Professor of Communication at Universiti Utara Malaysia. Her research interests include religion, culture and communication education. She has published in *Space and Culture* and is an author in *Cyberjaya: Space and Sociality*. norhafezah@uum.edu.my

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Table 1. The authority of Islam in Malaysia

State	Authority in Islam
Selangor	King
Johor	King
Kelantan	King
Kedah	King
Perak	King
Terengganu	King
Pahang	King
Penang	YDPA
Negeri Sembilan	King
Sarawak	YDPA
Sabah	YDPA
Melaka	YDPA*
Perlis	King

*YDPA: Yang DiPertuan Agung (The Leader of Kings)

Data extracted from Department of Statistics, Malaysia (2014)

Table 2. Respondent Profile

Reference	Position	Gender
MR01	Senior Lecturer	Male
MR02	Assistant Professor	Female
MR03	Senior Lecturer	Female
MR04	Senior Lecturer	Female
MR05	Professor	Male
MR06	Senior Lecturer	Female
MR07	Assistant Professor	Female

MR08	Assistant Professor	Female
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Appendix 1

- 1) Islamic Religious Council of Johor (<http://www.maij.gov.my/>)
- 2) Islamic Religious Council of Malacca (<http://www.maim.gov.my/>)
- 3) Islamic Religious Council of Pahang (<http://www.muip.gov.my/v3/index.php>)
- 4) Islamic Religious Council of Perak
(<http://www.maiamp.gov.my/maiamp/maipk/index.php>)
- 5) Islamic Religious Council of Negeri Sembilan (<http://www.mains.gov.my/>)
- 6) Islamic Religious Council of Terengganu
(<http://www.maidam.gov.my/index.php/>)
- 7) Islamic Religious Council of Kelantan (<http://www.e-maik.my/v2/index.php>)
- 8) Islamic Religious Council of Penang (www.mainpp.gov.my/)
- 9) Islamic Religious Council of Kedah (<http://www.maik.gov.my/>)
- 10) Islamic Religious Council of Selangor (<http://www.mais.gov.my/>)
- 11) Islamic Religious Council of Sabah
(<http://www.jheains.sabah.gov.my/index.php?lang=en>)
- 12) Islamic Religious Council of Sarawak (<http://www.jais.sarawak.gov.my/>)
- 13) Islamic Religious Council of Perlis (<http://www.maips.gov.my/>)