
AN EXPLORATION OF MEDIA WORK OF A CONVERT DA'I: SPECIFIC REFERENCE TO IMAM SUHAIB WEBB*

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ABSTRACT

This study examines the roles of traditional media and social media in spreading da'wah (Islamic propagation) through the media work of an American Muslim convert, Imam Suhaib Webb, who is active in doing da'wah on television (traditional media) as well as on social media. This study also investigates the impact both traditional and social media have on the audience. His media work was chosen because he uses English in spreading da'wah and it is essential especially to the non-Malay speaking communities in Malaysia. The data was collected through a method of observation on TV Al-Hijrah (Malaysian Islamic television) where Imam Suhaib Webb has his own segment, and on social media namely Facebook. The data were then analysed using thematic approach and the themes related to the roles of media in spreading da'wah were established after the observation. The findings reveal that traditional media (television) has an important role in spreading da'wah. However, it is found that social media (Facebook) has a more significant role in spreading da'wah as social media has extensive roles and gives more impact on the audience than traditional media.

Keywords: *da'wah, media, roles and impacts, television, Facebook.*

INTRODUCTION

To begin with, below are some definitions of terms used in this paper:

- Islamic da'wah @ da'wah
A duty of calling or inviting Non-Muslims to Islam; by words, actions as well as lifestyles. It can also mean reminders and motivations for those who are already Muslims.
- Da'i
A preacher, a person who carries out da'wah. Any Muslims can be da'i and it is not only the responsibility of the religious authorities or religious institutions (Abdullah Muhammad Zin, 1991, p. 28)
- Traditional media
Media which have existed before the arrival of the internet. This paper will only concentrate on television as traditional media.

- Social media
Web-based services which allow users to build their public or semi-public profile and they are highly interactive. This paper will only concentrate on Facebook as social media.

This study was motivated by the existing and perpetual bombardments on Islam by the Western media. The conversion of a 'Westerner' to Islam who later became a Muslim religious leader (*Imam*) seems like a timely way to counteract the negative images depicted in the western media. There is a significant possibility that the influence of Imam Suhaib Webb is capable of attracting other non-Muslims, especially in the West, to know more about this controversial religion. Therefore, it is believed that the study on the media work of Imam Suhaib Webb would offer new contributions to the research fields of media, communication and religion.

The media work of Imam Suhaib Webb were selected due to the fact he is an international scholar who converted to Islam and now actively doing da'wah. Moreover, he has got a segment on a free-to-air television channel in Malaysia, which is a rare but good opportunity for him to expand his da'wah to Malaysian audiences. This also justifies the limitation of this study which only focuses on the work of da'wah of Imam Suhaib Webb in traditional media (television) and social media (Facebook). The da'wah efforts of other Muslim scholars would probably bring about other beneficial roles and impacts of the media as agents of spreading the call to Islam. Webb's segment on television is chosen because he has attracted a lot of audience and this has increased the rating of TV Al-Hijrah. The same reason applies to selecting his Facebook page which until March 2018, has garnered over 230,000 followers. This paper puts more focus on the roles of the media rather than their impacts. However, the impacts are also included because roles and impacts are closely interrelated. Thus, the impacts are deemed significant in the discussion throughout this paper.

MODERN MEDIA AND SUITABILITY FOR DA'WAH

The media are considered suitable platforms or tools to attract people to Islam (Denffer, 1983, p. 2) and to motivate people to sustain their faith (Abdussalam, 1996, p. 5). Regardless of the types of media, it is believed that they can be powerful tools to spread da'wah. It is because some of the objectives of da'wah are in line with the primary objectives of the media; to inform and persuade, to transform and to achieve certain goals.

Media and Principals of da'wah

First and foremost, both traditional and social media are suitable to discharge the duty of da'wah because according to Hoover (2006, p. 142), the media are attractive and pleasurable to capture the interest of the audience. This is compatible with the first principle of da'wah which is to attract people to Islam (Abdussalam, 1996). The media have their own way of narrating stories which the audience feel they can relate to (Fulton, 2005, p. 5). Moreover, the media contents are handled by professional communicators (DeFleur & Dennis, 1985, p. 6) who work together to produce influential yet straightforward media message, making it pleasurable for the audience to comprehend their texts. As for the second principle of da'wah, the preachers are always reminded to use easy words as not to confuse the listeners. Secondly, the media consist of different outlets to convey their messages such as printed and

electronic (Fadzli Adam, Marhana Mohamed Anuar & Ab. Hamid Ali, 2014, p. 76) which gives complete preferences to the audience to choose their favourite medium of learning about Islam, either oral or written. Because the media do not require any print literacy, the audience who are unable to read can opt for screen media such as television and YouTube to watch Islamic programmes.

Thirdly, the media are capable of reaching to mass audience as individuals and groups (DeFleur & Dennis, 1985, p. 7), resulting in wider and more diverse propagation of da'wah. The media are known to have a big coverage and they usually do not specify their target audience. It means, anyone who is curious about Islam can access any information pertaining to Islam. This illustrates the media appropriateness for da'wah because the Muslims are encouraged to spread the call to Islam as far as possible. Fourthly, the principle of da'wah highlights the importance of the recipients being comfortable while receiving the call to Islam (Abdussalam, 1996). The advanced technologies that the media possess allow the audience to seek information inside their homes via computers or hand-held devices (Stout, 2012, p. 11), making it convenient especially for those who are just starting to learn about Islam and not ready to go out in public to ask questions. Fifthly, "there is no compulsion in religion" (Quran 2: 256), therefore, the media are appropriate to be used to spread da'wah because they do not force the audience to watch or listen to them. The media may use some strategies to persuade the audience to choose their outlets instead of others, but ultimately, the choice is in the hands of the audience.

Imam Suhaib Webb

Imam Suhaib Webb was born in Oklahoma, US in a Christian family and his grandfather was a priest. At the age of 14 years old, he lost interest in his religion. As a result, he was struggling with spiritual crisis, to an extent, he joined a local gang and was engaged with delinquency (Siti Aniza Kamsari, 2012).

After his conversion to Islam in 1992, he turned his life around. He obtained a bachelor's degree in Education from the University of Central Oklahoma and received intensive private training in the Islamic Sciences under a renowned Muslim Scholar of Senegalese descent. Webb was hired as the Imam at the Islamic Society of Greater Oklahoma City, where he gave khutbas (sermons), taught religious classes, and provided counselling to families and young people; he also served as an Imam and resident scholar in communities across the US.

In 2011, one year after the establishment of the Malaysian Islamic television channel (TV Al-Hijrah), Webb extended his da'wah career by becoming a host at the aforesaid television station, for one programme that goes by the name *Reflections*. Interestingly, the programme is delivered in the English language, making it one of the attractions in TV Al-Hijrah. Now, four years have passed by and he is still the host for that programme.

Webb is not only involved in traditional way of doing da'wah, but he is also participative in social media such as Facebook, YouTube and Twitter. He even owns his own website named 'Virtual Mosque'. His website received recognition as the Best Blog of the Year for 2009 by Brass Crescent Awards. A year later, he won the Best Muslim Tweeter with the highest vote (Siti Aniza, 2012). With over 200,000 followers on Facebook, it is not an overstatement to assume that he is well-liked and respected.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The media used in this study like television and Facebook are considered as mass media because they are capable of reaching to a large group of people at one time. There are four functions of mass media according to Snow (1983, p. 27-31); to transmit information, to educate, to relay credible information and to provide interaction networks between media industry, the audiences and the medium.

The theoretical framework adopted in this study is anchored in how media act as the agents of religious change which was introduced by Stig Hjarvard in 2008. Hjarvard (2008, p. 24) concluded that:

In some instances, media may further a re-sacralization of society, in others, they undermine the authority of institutionalized religion and promote secular imaginations, rituals and modes of worship. At a general level, these processes share a common feature: they are all evidence of the mediatization of religion.

Stig Hjarvard focused this theoretical framework on media in general. Lundy (2013) added that Stig Hjarvard did not develop a theoretical framework on digital media. Therefore, this paper attempts to examine the changes in traditional media; television and extend it to social media; namely Facebook. Specifically, this paper looks at the fusion roles and impacts of television and Facebook as the modern, metaphorical 'environments' for Islamic da'wah through the work of the Muslim scholar, Imam Suhaib Webb. The changes caused by the media work of Imam Suhaib Webb are thoroughly discussed in the discussion section.

Role of Television in Spreading da'wah

Television is deemed as one of the traditional platforms for the audience to obtain information as a part of their learning process. Its presence is tacit, to an extent, if it is gone, people would notice. Being a visual media, television also has tremendous power to influence people's social attitudes (Thussu, 2000, p. 201). Issues as well as people who appear on television are often considered a priority and they will have influence in society. As a mass media transmitter, television has a propensity to deliver news in simple forms for instant viewer recognition (Snow, 1983, p. 138). On the one hand, it is useful because the audience comprised of different educational backgrounds. On the other, it creates stereotypical and superficial content, ignoring the more detailed view. However, that feature is in line with the instruction in doing da'wah, which is that propagators should use easy yet attractive approaches in conveying the message of Islam. Hence, it makes television a suitable medium for educating the audience about Islam.

In the present days, there are many kinds of Islamic programmes designed for all members of a household, making the methods of spreading the message of Islam more lively and diverse. da'wah-based programmes are also available on television and they come in both direct and indirect genres. Examples of direct genres are through monologue shows (Dede Mulkan, 2014, p. 62) and forums, whereas indirect genres come in dramas (Noorhaidi, 2009, p. 230) and impressions (Dede Mulkan, 2014, p. 62).

However, according to Mazni and Rizalawati (2012), the Islamic programmes in Malaysian free-to-air television channels (seven channels) are still relatively low with 13.5 percent (128 hours 30 minutes) a week. The reasons for this insufficiency include lack of personalities on television who can attract Malaysia's contemporary audience. Having an

interesting preacher who is also equipped with Islamic knowledge can motivate the audience to watch the television programme.

It is because of the conundrum mentioned in the previous paragraph, the method of da'wah on television which will be discussed in this study is television footage da'wah through monologue. Monologue is when an Islamic preacher appears on screen as an educator and without any guest. Sometimes the show can be held indoors or outdoors. In this situation, television acts as a platform for teaching and learning, where the audience consists of those at the studio and at home. The study will explore the role and impact of television in educating the audience through Imam Suhaib Webb's show, *Reflections*.

Role of Social Media (Facebook) in Spreading da'wah

The use of social media is on the rise today as they turn communication into interactive dialogue. The advantage of online communication is knowledge sharing with people from different backgrounds and it is global. It means, the users are able to communicate with their friends and other communities from all over the world. A lot of relationships (*silaturrahim*) and alliances have been created through social media (Nurdin-Rusli, 2013, p. 2). As a result, this empowers the Muslims as individuals and groups.

The close connection that people have with social media such as Facebook has influenced some Muslim scholars and *da'i* (Nurdin-Rusli, 2013, p. 12) to adopt the platform to expand their da'wah. Facebook is an interesting medium because it allows the Muslim scholars to receive comments from the followers and the followers have the opportunity to interact with their favourite scholars.

Furthermore, the nature of social media has changed the role of an individual to becoming more active in voicing out personal ideas (Hjarvard, 2013, p. 85). For instance, Facebook allows the users to share their thoughts or feedbacks in their own creative way. Unlike traditional media which are restricted to people who are affiliated with the media companies such as television channels or newspaper outlets. Even though traditional media also provide opportunities for the audience to contribute, these are limited. In the context of da'wah, this 'freedom of voice' created by social media has inspired a lot of Muslims to carry out the da'wah duty by becoming a *da'i*. It is made clear that spreading the message of Islam is a duty upon every Muslim. In other words, da'wah is not just the responsibility of Muslim scholars. Any Muslim who shares good words or shows exemplary behaviour which later attracts people to Islam can be considered as a *da'i*. In addition, social media are suitable platforms for disseminating da'wah because they are not restricted by time and place. This study will explore the role and impact of Facebook as social media in spreading da'wah through Webb's Facebook page.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

The study attempts to answer the following questions:

1. What are the roles of television and Facebook in spreading da'wah?
2. Which one of the two has a more significant role in spreading da'wah?
3. What are the impacts of television and Facebook in spreading da'wah?
4. Which one of the two has a more significant impact in spreading da'wah?

METHODOLOGY

The method employed in this study to identify the role and impact of traditional media and social media in disseminating da'wah is online observation. The researcher acted as both an observant and participant for this study. The advantage of conducting an online observation is the data is open for public consumptions. In other words, it does not require any formal permission and that justifies its selection in this study. Nurdin-Rusli (2013) conducted an online observation on web pages and social media of Muslim scholars in general. The study covered both Indonesian as well as international Muslim scholars. The data was analysed using iterative and interpretive approaches. Another previous study by Jasbeer (2014), analysed textually the characteristics of online Islamic evangelism and the consumption patterns among Indian Muslim youths.

Nurdin-Rusli's and Jasbeer's studies focused on multiple Muslim scholars and only on networking sites. This study, by contrast, focuses on one Muslim scholar and his da'wah work on both traditional and social media. For traditional media, five episodes of *Reflections* were observed and analysed and each episode lasted for 30 minutes. Due to the restricted online policy of TV Al-Hijrah, the researcher was unable to get access to the *Reflections* programme via streaming. Therefore, the videos of *Reflections* were acquired from the YouTube channel. Even though there were only five episodes available on YouTube at the time the observation was conducted, the data collected were sufficient for the analysis in this paper. As for the role of social media, Webb's personal Facebook page was examined by looking at his updates posted on the page.

The impacts of both traditional media and social media in disseminating da'wah were deduced from the feedback of the Malaysian audience on the social networking sites:

- The audience feedback for *Reflections* were obtained from the comment sections of the *Reflections'* videos on YouTube and *Reflections'* Facebook page. Due to seasonal updates of the programme on its Facebook page, the observation went back to at least one year from the most recent post which was in September 2015. During the observation, it is found that the audience also gave their responses on Webb's personal Facebook page.
- The audience feedback for Webb's personal Facebook page was obtained from the comment sections on the page. As opposed to the *Reflections* Facebook page, Webb's personal Facebook page is constantly updated and receives very many comments from the Facebook users. Hence, the observation only covered from August 2015 to December 2015.

Data Analysis: Thematic Approach

The data were analysed according to themes which were developed from one of the main roles of the media: as transmitter of culture (Snow, 1983, pp. 27-31). The sub-roles emerged during the online observation on both traditional media and social media and then were categorized as the themes for the findings. The major theme for the role that both television and Facebook similarly play is a platform for 'Quranic education'. However, Facebook's role is a more extensive version of the 'Quranic education' presented on television. Also, another extended role of Facebook emerged is a platform for the audience to participate. The role is then formed into a theme in the findings section.

Meanwhile, the themes of the impacts of the media on the audience were categorized into positive and negative based on the audience's responses in the comment section on Facebook.

FINDINGS

Role of *Reflections*: A Platform for 'Quranic Education'

The *Reflections* programme is basically a platform for the audience to learn about Quranic verses and their interpretations. Each episode which is aired once a week will have a specific theme related to people's daily life. For examples, Webb will provide some Quranic verses as a guidance on how to react towards or handle the situation. The role of television as an Islamic education platform is essential today because most people have busy schedules which limit their time to go and learn about the Quran at an institution or the mosque. 'Quranic education' in this context of study encompasses understanding and internalisation of Quranic verses, as well as receiving spiritual reminders. In a way, this programme transmits a positive culture which instils the love for the Quran in the hearts of the audience. It is a monologue show and mostly recorded in the studio. However, sometimes there are live broadcasts which are done outdoors with a live audience.

Impacts of *Reflections*

Overall, the programme receives encouraging feedbacks from the Malaysian audience which can be seen through two indications. The first indication is that the programme has been one of the favourites on TV Al-Hijrah ("*Selepas Tiga Tahun TV AlHijrah*", 2013) for four years since it was introduced in 2011. The second indicator is based on the positive comments extracted from the audience on the *Reflections*' Facebook page. Most of the positive comments came in the form of compliments towards Webb's capability to host the programme. The second form of positive comment is *Du'a* (prayer) for Webb and the *Reflections* crews. The rest were requests for extended airtime, CDs and DVDs which imply that the programme has beneficial impacts on the audience.

Interestingly, the feedback for the *Reflections* programme were just not posted on its Facebook page. Some users posted their comments pertaining to the programme on Webb's personal Facebook page. Many of them admitted that the programme has benefited them. Also, they now have clearer understanding of the Quranic verses and their connection to daily lives. Some audience agreed that *Reflections* is suitable for the Muslim converts because it is taught using simple but attractive techniques. The fact that Webb is also a convert might contribute to the audience's opinion because they would presume he could relate better to the new converts.

Role of Facebook

An Extensive Platform for 'Quranic Education'

According to Webb's personal Facebook page, he also uses the platform for 'Quranic education'. However, it is more extensive, given the nature of social media which has a greater reach and impact. Unlike television, Facebook offers more varieties in relaying the message of Islam and individuals hold more freedom to share their thoughts. For examples, Webb's approach in his 'Quranic education' extends to live videos, written texts as well as photos. From the observation, it is found that live videos receive more positive feedback from the

audience. The latest video on 'Quranic education' which covered the first *surah* (chapter) in the Quran, *Al-Fatihah*, received 15 thousand views.

A Platform for Audience to Participate

Another attractive role that Facebook holds is as a platform for the audience to participate and express their individual ideas. As mentioned before, with over 230,000 thousand followers on Facebook, Webb's sharing always collects tremendous responses from the Facebook users. Webb does not always respond to people's inquiries due to his busy schedule, but he tries to provide answers when he has got free time. However, the observation reveals that almost of those who ask questions to Webb are not Malaysians but international followers. This is perhaps due to the reason that the Malaysian audiences are satisfied with Webb's teachings through videos or status updates, thus they do not feel the need for further inquiries.

Moreover, Facebook allows the audience to interact not only with the Islamic scholars but also among themselves. It is evident on Webb's Facebook page where the followers respond to each other's questions and share their knowledge of the *Deen* (religion). As a result, Facebook enhances the engagement between citizens and in this context, strengthens the ties between Muslims across the world.

Impact of Facebook

The majority of the followers include *Du'a* for Webb in their compliments. Others share their part of knowledge pertaining to Webb's posts. This signifies the audience's voluntary approval towards Webb's approach in doing da'wah. It is worth noting that Webb's da'wah work in the media also has positive impacts on Malaysians who reside outside Malaysia. For instance, one Facebook user relayed her gratitude towards Webb for clarifying that Islamic knowledge could be obtained overseas. This relates to the global feature of Facebook which is as a platform for international updates. In other words, the Malaysian emigrants can be made aware of Islamic classes available in their neighbourhood.

DISCUSSION

With reference to the findings above, several important points materialised and these will be discussed further in this section.

Media Convergence

First of all, the findings indicate that although traditional media and social media have slightly different roles and impacts, they do complement each other. As suggested by Lundby (2013, p. 225) the media can be supplementary to one another. Especially in the world today, traditional media like television seems to utilise social media in order to promote their media station. In this case, TV Al-Hijrah has its own Facebook page. In fact, social media is a useful tool to expand traditional media's coverage. As a result, more and more audience are aware of TV Al-Hijrah and its programmes. However, social media are rarely successful in setting up agenda by themselves (Hjarvard, 2013, p. 86). This means that, regardless of phenomenal acceptance towards social media, traditional media such as television is still perceived as a dominant platform in many public discussions on religion (Saodah Wok, Nor Faridah & Rizalawati, 2014, p. 653). Meanwhile, social media like Facebook can be the supplementary notwithstanding significance platforms for extensive dialogues or discussions about Islam.

Furthermore, the fusion of traditional media and social media are deemed beneficial for the audience because Facebook, for instance, provides a platform for them to express their opinions (Faradillah Iqmar, Nor Azlili & Iza Sharina, 2015, p. 46) as responses to the *Reflections* programmes that they watch on television. One user commented on *Reflections* Facebook page that she was engaged in a meaningful discussion with her granddaughter offline, on a topic taught by Webb on television. Thus television can also be used to facilitate oral communication (Rubin, 1994, p. 168). Conversely, the Facebook administrations who presumably are the *Reflections* television crews and Webb himself can interact with the audience on the *Reflections* page. In other words, the media at large rely on each other to sustain their image and productions. This is done by understanding the audience's likes and dislikes. Television is not entirely a one-way communication; however, as mentioned before, the space given for the audience to give feedback is rather limited. For example, during the live show, Webb receives questions from the audience and answers their questions. Due to restricted airtime, he only manages to answer one or two questions.

Another result of media convergence is multimedia, where the audience can operate more than one gadget, move from one media outlet to another and have global access to information. The low barrier to information on the internet as well as convergence of telecommunication and computing have revolutionised information exchange (Thussu, 2000, p. 224). The impacts are significant because firstly, the information travels both locally and internationally, and secondly, the information travels from one media outlet to another. For examples, audience can watch television and fiddle with their mobiles, or listen to the radio streaming from the internet and read a magazine. In the context of this paper, the audience can watch a *Reflections* episode on air at the same time, go to the *Reflections'* Facebook page and leave comments about the programme on a laptop or a mobile. Thus it can be stated that media convergence has given 'freedom of voice' and choice in today's society which seems to be a part of their 'media diet'.

Based on the findings and discussions, both traditional media and social media act as agents in not only transmitting religious education, but also as agents in exchanging religious information. Information exchange is present in the observation of this study where, as an *Imam*, Webb always encourages the audience to give feedback so that he too can learn from them.

Cross-cultural da'wah across the Media

Media and globalisation have brought different cultures together. As predicted by Marshall McLuhan in his 'global village' theory, media would eventually shrink the world and bring people closer (Laughey, 2007, p. 36). The feature of Facebook for example, gives users equal opportunities to share their thoughts, irrespective of their cultural identities. Furthermore, Facebook has allowed many new preacher-presenters to launch their da'wah duties, either in print or broadcast. More importantly, the preachers are able to share their knowledge and promote Islam to the locals as well as international audience. As explained earlier, Webb's da'wah work also reaches Malaysians who live overseas. This is both efficient and practical to the Malaysian audience who reside outside Malaysia, because Webb's preaching conforms to the Malaysian lifestyles and cultures. Clearly the role of Facebook in this context stretched to become an international platform for 'Quranic education' for Malaysians overseas.

From a different aspect, Webb is an American with different traditions, practices and norms. However, he seems to adjust to the Muslim society in Malaysia well, in spite of few

complaints received at the beginning of his da'wah work in the local media. This is due to one similarity shared by Webb and the Malaysian Muslims; Islam, a religion that encourages unity and condemns all forms of discrimination. In Islam, it is greatly emphasized that all people are equal, regardless of their social backgrounds. The media, especially the social media minimizes the differences between Webb as an American and the Malaysian Muslims through its interactive nature. According to the Social Presence Theory, constant interaction between two communicators indicates that they embrace similarities rather than differences. In this case, the common ground of Webb and Malaysian Muslim society is Islamic da'wah where Webb is the sender and the Malaysian Muslim society is the receiver. Facebook has a higher degree of social presence compared to television, hence it is more favoured by the contemporary audience. Webb regularly updates his Facebook page with either his own experiences or motivational words. This in a way functions as a spiritual reminder for the audience. Therefore, the benefit of social media is that it blurs the line between races and cultures so that the users from different backgrounds can unite in supporting Islamic da'wah.

Another role of media is it creates a sense of belonging. For example, Quereshi (2009, p. 26) quoted in his book a confession of one British Muslim, stating that he senses a belonging to the Muslim *ummah* (nation) whenever he goes through Muslim media. Being a convert himself, Webb is sensitive to the issues evolving around the Muslim converts, be it as individual or a group. He once invited over two Muslim converts who also happen to be public figures as guests in one of the television episodes of 'Reflections. They were Aliza Kim and Warren Fernandez. Even though the *Reflections* form of da'wah is mainly monologue, there are times when Webb will have guests in order to have interactive discussion. Usually the guests are expected to share their experiences and in regards to the special session with the aforementioned converts, both of Miss Kim and Mr Fernandez shared their personal stories and struggles in becoming Muslims. This indirectly creates a sense of belonging specifically for the home audience who are also Muslim converts (Osman, 2006, p. 71) and are probably dealing with their own tough situations at the moment (Severin & Tankard, 1979, p. 213). This is how the media provides a platform for the Muslim converts to feel connected with those who are in similar conditions as they are.

However, Webb's da'wah in the media is rather different between traditional media and social media. The social media platform is more spacious and flexible, thus Webb's sharing is far more diverse. It means, Webb's sharing is not targeted only at Muslim converts but also at Muslims in general. The issues that he selects to discuss are generally the common ones which are faced by Muslims today. For instance, *Islamophobia*, racism and free speech. He also includes in his sharing the knowledge of prayers, fasting, pilgrimage and motivations.

Breaking Barriers between Languages

Another useful role of the media in spreading the message of Islam is that it breaks the barrier between languages. In the past, acquiring different language backgrounds hindered the communication between people. However, the advancement of the media has lifted the boundary and become a prominent mediator among the audiences. As shown in the results above, several Malaysian audience members commented in the Malay language, albeit Webb's Facebook page is administered in English. On the one hand, it probably implies that the audience understood English but preferred to use Malay instead to make their comments. While on the other hand, the audience may not be proficient in English but they understood

the content of *Reflections* because it provides Malay subtitles or due to the Google Translate facility.

Impact

The results show that social media is more preferred by the audience than traditional media. The increasing use of the social media is probably due to limited airtime on traditional television and it is less interactive. It indicates that the audience today is more involved and more motivated to provide public feedback on what they watch on television. Furthermore, on social media, the audience might feel more intimate with the knowledge shared by Webb and with Webb himself. Knowledge has more meaning when it is delivered in a two-way communication where the learners are allowed to converse with the teacher.

CONCLUSION

Since Islamic resurgence in 1970, da'wah in Malaysia keeps increasing in line with the advancement of technology. While this study found social media have an extensive role and a more significant impact, it can be argued that traditional media still have their loyal audiences. This is perhaps because traditional media in Malaysia have significantly embraced the use of social media in order to prolong their existence in the media industries. Aside from that, traditional media have also developed their productions using the latest technologies. The contents of traditional media today are updated and more varied thus give the audiences more wider choices. As for social media, unlimited time and easy access are the advantages that win over the hearts of today's users.

The involvement of Islamic scholars in the media is timely. This is because, in the case of Webb, he has attracted a lot of audiences through his da'wah work in both television and Facebook. Often Webb's sharing on *Reflections* is different than on social media. This is because television station is more strictly governed by state policies than Facebook which relies on self-censorship and the owner's discretion. Nevertheless, it can be concluded that based on Webb's media work, the role of both traditional media and social media is informing the audience about the cultures of Islam through different ways of educational approaches. Concurrently, the media maintains the practices of Islam by providing continuity for its culture. In this situation, the media, both television and Facebook are able to broadcast the Islamic culture beyond the Islamic contents of Webb's teachings. One of them is seen in the *Reflections* programme where Webb, who is a foreigner in Malaysia and a Muslim convert hosts the show. This is a new culture which is well-accepted by the Malaysian society. Furthermore, he always appears in casual attire and not in a religious robe like some other preachers. As a result, it sends a positive message to the audience that Islam is a simple religion and da'wah can be executed in different outfits as long as they are compliant to the Islamic precepts. All in all, both television and Facebook are seen as suitable, modern and favourable platforms for spreading da'wah to either individuals or the wider public.

NOTE

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