Investigating the Seeking Behavior for Religious Information in Social Media

Abdullah Almobarraz, College of Computer & Information Sciences, Department of Information Management, Al-Imam University, Riyadh, Saudi Arabia

ABSTRACT

Reading and learning about religious information is a habit that Saudis practice to increase their understanding of Islamic rules. It is common now for people to learn about religion from social media. Therefore, the study reports on a survey that was distributed to people in Saudi Arabia to investigate the use of social media technologies for religious information seeking. The objective is to determine if Saudis utilize social media to search for religious information and to understand their information-seeking behaviors when using such a resource. In addition, the study is an attempt to investigate how religious information on social media changes and influences people, and what obstacles and difficulties Saudis encounter when they use social media to obtain religious information.

KEYWORDS

Information Behavior, Internet Resources, Religious Information, Saudi Society, Social Media, Social Network

INTRODUCTION

Social media has become a popular tool used to search for information during the past few years. Currently, a growing number of people use social media in all activities related to their lives. People can now use social network to promote events or causes they care about (Melton, Miller, & Saloma, 2012).

Social media tools can also be excellent for searching out, learning, and publishing religious information. As people become more adept in their use of social media in religious learning and practice, questions begin to emerge about the implications of new media platforms and practices for faith formation, leadership, and religious practice across traditions (Anderson, 2013). By answering these questions, we can come to understand why social media is commonly used to change religious views and deliver beliefs to different types of people.

As social media increasingly becomes part of our daily lives, people will find new ways to interact with religion and spirituality. In the digital age, a group of virtual religionists will emerge, comprising individuals who do not affiliate with religious institutions, but are nevertheless engaged in many aspects of a faith community through social networking (Miller, 2011).

RESEARCH PROBLEM

Reading and learning about religious information is a habit that Saudis practice to increase their understanding of Islamic rules. In the past, most people learned about religion from traditional resources, such as attending religious events, reading books and journals, and watching television programs. But with the advent of social media, religious information and resources have become
accessible through this new channel. However, we do not know how religion and new forms of social media interact or what impact they have on each other.

Indeed, no study has thus far investigated the use of social media or its content on the subject of religion. Therefore, this study explores the extent to which Saudis utilize social media to find religious information and examines how this affects their knowledge and learning style. Specifically, this exploratory study employs a quantitative approach through the distribution of a questionnaire to collect data related to the population.

**LITERATURE REVIEW**

Social media plays a clear role in changing the way people talk about faith and share religious information and perspectives, so religious leaders find it a great way to involve younger generations who may not be growing up with religion in their households (Cyprian, 2015). Recent years have seen a concern with the publishing of new information to help religious scholars understand digital media—especially social media. Religious leaders can now find texts to guide them through the construction of websites, blogs, and social media (Hutchings, 2012). However, the use of social media is not limited to religious leaders, but is also used by laypeople. It has increasingly become an important source of religious information for many people in the world (Harvey, 2014). In an average week, one in five Americans shares their religious faith online (Pew Research Center, 2014).

In addition to sharing their religious faith, people use social media to share information about their favorite religious organizations, activities, preachers, religious resources, Web sites, educational materials, new issues, and much more (Groenpj, 2011). Some experts believe social networks are more successful than traditional, offline forms of communication in spreading new viewpoints including religious believe (Balint & Gustafson, 2015).

Preston (2011) reported that although it is too early to say that social media has transformed the way in which people practice religion, the number of people discussing faith on Facebook has significantly increased in the past year. This trend is supported by the findings of Tallant (2013), who declared that over 43 million Facebook users are fans of at least one religious page, and 31% of users in the United States list a religion in their profile. At this very basic level, it is possible to see that members of religious groups are using Facebook and are incorporating their religious beliefs into their online activities. As the use of social media evolves into an essential part of people’s daily lives, religious organizations are also using social media tools in increasingly inspired ways to spread their influence and build communities (Newberg, 2013). For example, a recent study in China showed that digital and social media have allowed one of the largest international religious and benevolent organizations to keep in touch with its more than 10 million followers worldwide, helping it in its mission to provide humanitarian relief (Cheong, Hwang, & Brummins, 2014).

Religious information in the Islamic world is also in the category of favored information. Baddawy (2014) surveyed 250 Muslim Facebook users and found that the highest percent of them are attracted by religious information. Mustafa et al. (2013) states that the attraction of information may contribute to religious understanding; however, this is reliant on how people perceive the Islamic information shared on social media. Religious information may lead to improper behavior due to various reasons, such as ignorance of a religion, ease of online publishing, and spread of fringe groups (Hammad & Faraj Allah, 2011).

In Saudi Arabia, over the past few years, social media usage has been one of the most rapidly adopted activities, with more and more users accessing the Internet via their smartphones and tablets (Al Jabre, 2013). Research conducted by Global Web Index suggested that almost 25% of the population in Saudi Arabia is active on social media (Zarovsky, 2013). Moreover, a social media agency report showed that there are 3 million Twitter users (around 12% of the population), growing by 3000%, with an average 50 million tweets per month, 840,000 LinkedIn users (4% of the population), and 6 million Facebook users (23% of the population) (Social Clinic, 2014).
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