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DIGITAL MEDIA LITERACY FOR THE BETTER SANTRI: Reconsidering the Power of Internet for the Students of Traditional Pesantren

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Abstract; Santri in traditional Pesantren had always been blamed for their incapability to handle the negative impacts of the digital media (particularly the Internet). In consequence, there have been strict rule limited even strongly forbid the usage of Internet for the santri in that kind of Pesantren. This issue, from a larger perspective, is \an issue of the incapability of the digital natives to effectively use digital technologies. At this point, Palfrey and Gasser reminded us that “there are two possible paths before us—one in which we destroy what is great about the Internet and about how young people use it, and one in which we make smart choices and head toward a bright future in a digital age.” Arguing for the potential power of the Internet for developing capacities of the santri (intellectually, religiously, and mentally), this paper is an effort to walk on the second path by proposing a formula of what I call “DMLfS” (Digital Media Literacy for Santri). A SWOT analysis of the formula leads this paper to conclude that the Internet is considerably important for developing santri’s capacities to face the unstoppable-fast changing media technology. The formula of “DMLfS”, this paper argues, is the one of the best answers to the question of how to create a digitally literate santri.

Keywords: Santri, pesantren, internet, media literacy, SWOT analysis.

Abstrak: Santri di Pesantren tradisional selalu disalahkan atas ketidakmampuan mereka untuk menangani dampak negatif dari media digital (khususnya Internet). Karena itu, ada aturan ketat terbatas bahkan sangat melarang penggunaan Internet untuk santri di Pesantren semacam itu. Masalah ini, dari perspektif yang lebih besar, adalah masalah ketidakmampuan penduduk asli digital untuk secara efektif menggunakan teknologi digital (Oblinger, D. & Oblinger, J, 2012). Pada titik ini, Palfrey dan Gasser (2008) mengingatkan kita bahwa “ada dua jalur yang mungkin ada di hadapan kita — satu di mana kita menghancurkan apa yang hebat tentang Internet dan tentang bagaimana kaum muda menggunakannya, dan satu di mana kita membuat pilihan cerdas dan menuju masa depan yang cerah di era digital.” Berdebat tentang potensi kekuatan Internet untuk mengembangkan kapasitas para santri (secara intelektual, religius, dan mental), makalah ini merupakan upaya untuk berjalan di jalur kedua dengan mengusulkan formula apa yang saya sebut “DMLfS” (Literasi Media Digital untuk Santri). Analisis SWOT dari formula ini mengarahkan makalah ini untuk menyimpulkan bahwa Internet sangat penting untuk mengembangkan kapasitas santri dalam menghadapi teknologi media yang berubah dengan sangat cepat. Rumus “DMLfS”, makalah ini berpendapat, adalah salah satu jawaban terbaik untuk pertanyaan tentang bagaimana membuat santri yang melek secara digital.

Kata Kunci: Santri, pesantren, internet, literasi media, analisis SWOT.

A. Introduction

This research began from the fact I got during my field research in some traditional *Pesantrens* where the the Internet are strictly forbidden for the *santri*. When I asked the Kyais why the *Pesantren* should restrict even hardly forbid the using of Internet in *Pesantren*, most of them agrees that the *santri* are not capable enough to handle the negative impacts may be caused by using that new technology.

From a wider perspective, I see this problem is not limited to the *santri*, but generally, it is a problem of the so-called Digital Native or Net Generation that, "...having grown up with widespread access to technology, the Net Gen is able to intuitively use a variety of IT devices and navigate the Internet. Although they are comfortable using technology without an instruction manual, their understanding of the technology or source quality may be shallow" (Oblinger and Oblinger, 2005)

By this, they would like to emphasize that even though the Digital Natives are intuitively able to use a variety of digital devices, particularly the Internet, they are actually lacking a capacity to use those tools wisely.

On the other side, despite the negative records of the Internet, it has huge potential benefits for the *santri* and digital natives, in general, to upgrade their lives. So, there are two possible paths before us, as Palfrey and Gasser argue—one in which we destroy what is great about the Internet and about how young people use it, and one in which we make smart choices and head toward a bright future in a digital age. My standpoint here, of course, goes to the second; makes smart choices and moves forward for a brighter future, specifically by promoting what is known as 'digital media literacy.

B. *Santri, Pesantren, and Internet: Pros and Cons*

Before I discuss about the case of *Santri, Pesantren, and Internet* and the pros and cons of this case, it is worth noting here that there are at least 965, 646 *santri* in east Java of the total 1, 821, 149 *santri* in Indonesia. This to show a potential disaster can rise if we choose to destroy what is great about the Internet and about how young people use it.

Pesantren is an Islamic boarding school where the students of the *Pesantren* (or the *santri*) spend 24 hours a day with particular systems of life developed by the *kiai*. According to Abdul Hafidz Dasuki in his thesis from 1974 on "*the Pondok-Pesantren: An Account of its Development in Independent Indonesia (1965-73)*",²⁷⁰ he argues, that the *Pondok Pesantren*, historically speaking, contributed to the development of the country, Indonesian society, and the continuity of Islam in Indonesia. As the time passes, then the ideas and demands come to modernize the *Pesantren*. The *Pesantren* was encouraged to adopt to modernity to be able to survive in the current era. This then creates two categories of *Pesantren*: modern and traditional *Pesantren*. Modern *Pesantren* is characterized by its modern system of learning, modern infrastructures, and modern life management. On the other side, traditional *Pesantren* are characterized by their consistency to preserve what has been good in tradition (*almuhafazah ala l qodim sholih*) in many aspects including systems of learning, infrastructure, and management.

In terms of our discussion on the Internet and *Pesantren*, the modern *Pesantren* are more adaptive to technology, in general. It comes from the understanding of the *Pesantren* stakeholders of the urgent needs to take benefits from technology for the development of *Pesantren*. Despite their awareness of the negative impacts of the Internet, at the same time, they are aware of its huge potential benefits for both the *santri* and *Pesantren*. They regulate the use of the Internet, but do not ban it.

As we can see from Aa Gym argument's here saying that "All modern achievement of everything including technology is nothing but Allah's creation. All is but Allah's *nikmat* (courtesy) to human beings...Muslims have, therefore, first priority and every right to utilize all

²⁷⁰ See: Abdul Hafidz Dasuki, "The Pondok-Pesantren: An Account of Its Development in Independent Indonesia (1965-1973)," *Thesis* at the Faculty of Graduate Studies, McGill University, Montreal (1974).

the advanced achievements of whatever technology. And it is wrong to undermine and deny all of this or otherwise we [Muslims] would remain backward” interview with Aa Gym as cited in Dindin Solahuddin (2008).

On the other hand, there is a clear anxiety from the *Kiai* of the traditional *Pesantren* toward the negative impact of the Internet. They tend to see the Internet more from its negative sides. They see that it is better to forbid the *santri* from using the Internet from the very beginning before there will be some problems that happen to them. What is more, there is a clear anxiety from the *kiai*’ side towards changing traditions that have been preserved in the *Pesantren* caused by the Internet.

C. Understanding Digital Media Literacy

As it is argued before, instead of destroying what is good about the Internet and how young people use it, we need to make smart choices and move forward towards a better future. For the context of *santri*, that means that instead of banning the use of the Internet for the *santri*, I prefer to educate them to be active and creative users by applying digital media literacy.

Before further exploration on what digital media literacy is, we first of all need to understand that

“the notion of literacy must now go beyond basic literacies and include network literacy, global literacy, information literacy, media literacy, and digital citizenship” (Jacobs, 2012, p. 57).

So, what is digital literacy and how to be digitally literate? Here I take Jacob’s concept of “digital, media, and global literacy.” He argues that there are three kinds of literacy that students in this era need to achieve:

1. Digital literacy, which includes four capabilities:
 - a. Accessing capability (skill sets to access the Internet and other digital tools. Also, an ability to access different languages, the abilities to use a keyboard, as well as touch and voice activated entry points)
 - b. Selection capability (knows how to select quality sites and sources)
 - c. Curation capability (the act of building a quality teacher-built website full of pertinent links with which students can deepen and extend their learning)
 - d. Creation capability (the capacity to select digital tools for creating solutions to problems)
2. Media literacy, consisting of
 - a. Generative capacities (the technical and creative skills needed for students to express themselves through an array of media formats and knowing how to create visual images, moving images, and audio messages through a range of readily available applications and hardware)
 - b. Receptive capacities (learners can make meaning from a variety of multimedia formats and do so critically. They need to engage actively, to know how to analyze both the media source and its content)
3. The previous two literacies (digital and media) will then lead to another level of literacy which is global literacy: an ability to investigate the world, an ability to recognize perspective, an ability to communicate ideas, and an ability to take action. This digital literacy in the context of *santri* means that the digitally literate *santri* are:
 - a. Those who have a set of skills to access the Internet (know how to connect the digital tools to the Internet). A digitally literate *santri* also means that they are able to use the shortcuts of the keyboard and type words other than Latin words fluently (such as Arabic, for instance).
 - b. Those who are able to filter information they find from the Internet, to realize which sites are dependable and which are not, know where to find religious materials (articles, books, etc)

- c. Those who are able to build a web-based learning system to study religion.
- d. Those who are able to select digital tools for creating solutions, for instance, able to use their smart phone to give them directions for *salah* when they are going to some new area.

What is more, based on Jacob's explanation on media literacy, media literate *santri* means the *santri* who are not only technically able to create some channels to express themselves, but are also able to be creative in that skill. Also, and the most important here, to be a media literate *santri* means to be able to critically contextualize what they get from the media. They do not blindly and passively consume what they get from the media.

Based on Jacob's explanation, I would like to conclude the formulation of Digital Media Literacy for the *Santri* as follows:

It is a set of skills to create active and critical users who are able to technically and creatively use digital devices to solve problems.

To give a clearer explanation, please see the diagram below:

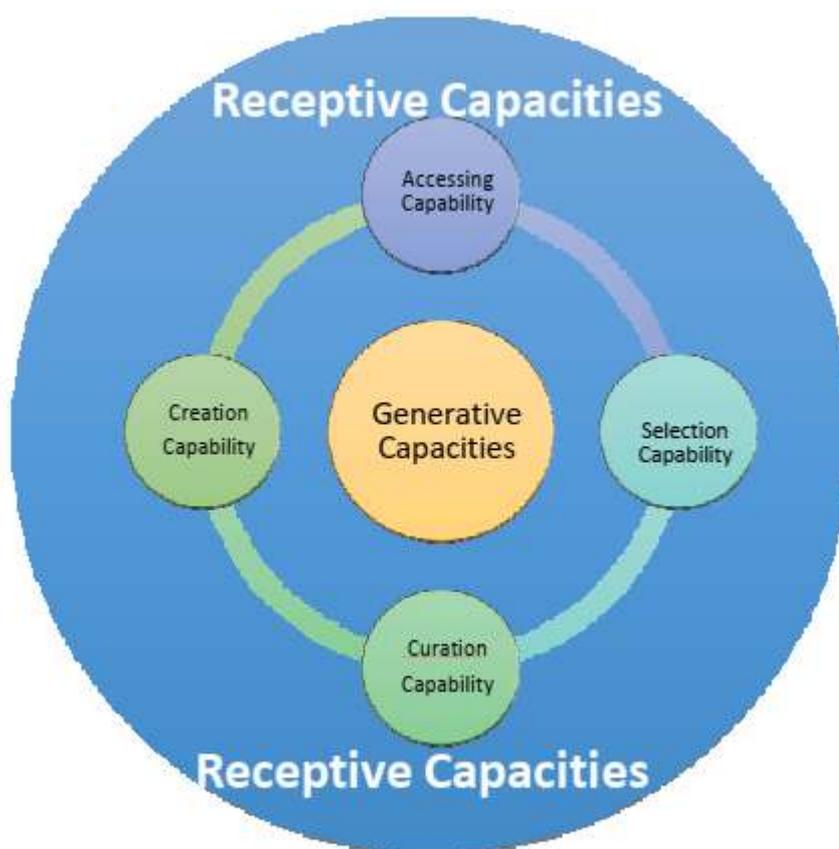


Figure 1. Diagram of the formula of Digital Media Literacy for the *santri*

As we see here, what I would like to emphasize in this formula of Digital Media Literacy are the receptive capacities that mean that the main goal of this formula is not only for developing technical skills, but reflective capacities, as well.

D. Toward the Media Literate-Santri: A SWOT Analysis

Considering the general assumption about the lacking capacity of the *santri* in facing the negative impacts of the Internet, while in the previous chapter I have developed what I call "digital media literacy for the *santri*," in this section I would like to analyze the efficacy or the power of this formula before we can carry out this project. In order to assess comprehensively this formula, I choose the SWOT analysis as the method to extract factors of strengths and

weakness from our product. Before we begin assessing, let's look at a full picture of this SWOT analysis:



Figure 2. Diagram of SWOT analysis, with its four elements (Wikipedia.org)

In order to use this SWOT analysis in analyzing our digital media literacy formula, I would like to discuss each element of the SWOT analysis: Strength, Weakness, Opportunities, and Threats.

a. Strengths

What I mean by strength here is the strength owned by the Digital Media Literacy formula and the *Pesantren* as the “company.” With regard to the strength of the formula, it is clear from previous explanations that the formula will be practically helpful to widen the *santri*’ intellectual horizons. Also, the formula is really helpful, generally, in preparing literate *santri* to actively make use of the media. In addition to the strength of the formula, the students of *Pesantren*, the *santri*, should be seen as a helpful element to achieve the objective for the *santri* who are the digital natives naturally born with intuitive ability to navigate the media. This ability will be really helpful for them to understand and make use of the formula. What is more, the *santri* are religiously motivated. This factor is helpful for them as there are a lot of religious arguments supporting the *santri* to be able to handle and make use of the media as one of God’s current blessings to humanity.

b. Weaknesses

Despite the previous strengths, we should carefully consider the weaknesses inside the formula and the *Pesantren* that will be harmful to achieve the objective to create a literate *santri* generation. Among the obvious weaknesses is the lack of human resources and facilities needed to apply the formula. Most of the *Pesantren*, especially the *salafi* ones, do not have proper facilities and qualified human resources to teach and carry out the steps of the formula. What is worse, the *Pesantren* rarely make collaborations with any other institutions to educate their *santri*. Another clear weakness that will harm the efficacy of the formula is the long existing traditions of *Pesantren* and on top of that is the *Kiai*’ anxiety toward the negative impacts of the media.

c. Opportunities

The previous two factors are considered as the attributes of the “internal company,” the following two opportunities and threats factors are more from outside the company. For this Digital Media Literacy project, the obvious opportunity that is already there is the urgent need to upgrade *santri*’ capacities. It is obvious that the *Pesantren* should be aware of the challenges

facing their students when they graduate and it is *Pesantrens'* duty to prepare them for a better future. The other opportunities that we have are the affordable cost and the available support from various institutions. To be connected to the Internet nowadays is not an expensive thing. The technological advancements have given us options to choose affordable options to access the Internet. There are, for instance, *wifi* modems that can be used for more than 20 users with only Rp. 450.000 (less than \$50 per month). If the *Pesantren* cannot afford the cost, there are national institutions that are ready to help to give media education for *Pesantren*, as what has been done by Telkom with its "*Santri Indigo*" project. Another opportunity is the fact that media now is ubiquitous. This is a clear opportunity for this project to educate the *santri* who live in this media life.

d. Threats

Through my field observation, there are at least four threats that might be harmful to make the project successful: first, religious stigmatization on media and modernization. There are some claims from particular religious groups that condemn the media in particular and modernization in general using religious arguments. The second threat will be a solid institutionalized authority of the *kiai*. As we discussed previously that a *kiai* in his *Pesantren* is like a king in his palace where no one stands against the *kiai's* argument. This is a clear threat for the project, for the *kiai* is the sole power who will decide to allow or not to allow the usage of media in his *Pesantren*. The third threat is the fast-changing technology. This is actually a real threat for anyone who wants to catch up with technology. The last factor will threaten the success of this literacy project if the psychological instability of the *santri*, who are in the phase of high curiosity to know many things including the bad things that media can provide.

All of the four elements of SWOT can be summarized as follows:

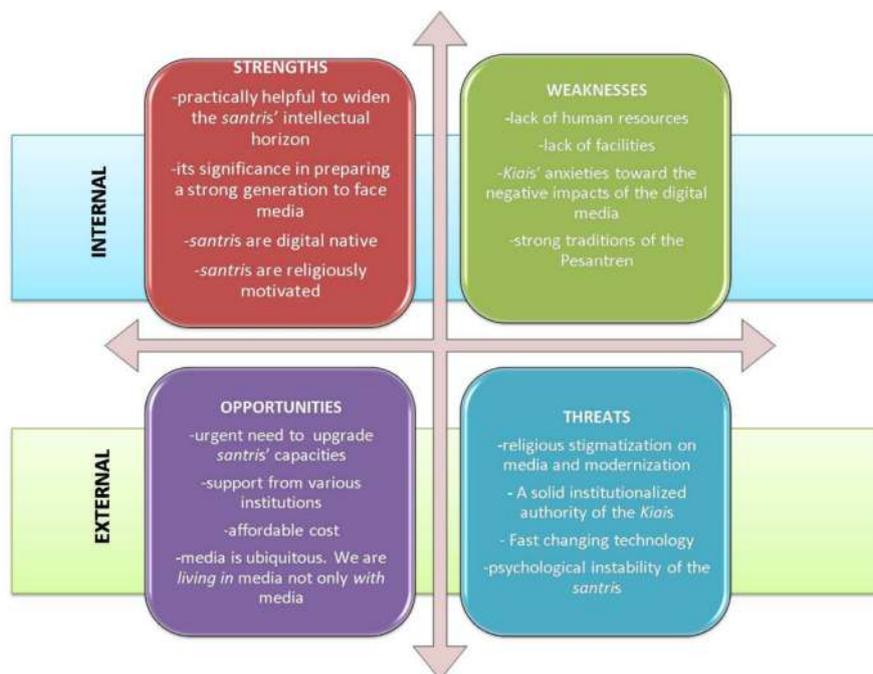


Figure 3. Diagram of SWOT elements of the "Digital Media Literacy for The *Santri*" Project

A further step in SWOT analysis is to assess the elements through particular questions in order to gain a clear picture of the efficacy of the project. Here we need to question:

1. How the (S) can take advantages of the existing (O)?
2. How to overcome the (W) to get the (O)?
3. How the (S) is able to deal with the (T)?

4. How to deal with (W) to prevent external (T)?

The first question is how the strengths of the formula and the *Pesantren* can take advantage of the existing opportunities. If we recall what we have been said about the opportunities that we have (from the need to develop *santri's* capacities, the possibility of support from various institutions, affordable, and the existing media), I will confidently answer that the Digital Media Literacy Project is indeed the answer to the demand to upgrade *santri's* intellectual and technical capacities. The other three opportunities, in my opinion, even complement the strengths that we already have.

The second question is regarding the ways to overcome the weaknesses to get the opportunities. As we mentioned that we have four weaknesses: lack of human resources and facilities, *Kiai* concern regarding the negative impact of the media, and the strong tradition of the *Pesantren*. The first two weaknesses can be overcome by initiating a cooperative and collaborative work with other institutions that will help to provide the human resources and facilities we need to carry out this project. The third and fourth weaknesses can be overcome only by making convincing arguments of the benefits of the project for the *santri* and it will not violate any of the preserved *Pesantren* traditions. This might be supported through providing real examples of the benefits gained from similar projects done in other *Pesantren*.

The third question is about the ways to deal with the threats (from religious stigmatization on media and modernization, the solid authority of the *Kiai*, fast changing technology to the *santri's* psychological instability) by using the strengths that we have. To deal with the first threat, we need to convince that Islam is not only compatible with technology, but it is a religious obligation to support technology. This can be done through providing contextual understandings of particular Qur'anic verses and *hadith* that are usually used to condemn technology and modernization. From this, we can confidently negotiate with the *Kiai* and convince them that the media literate *santri* will never ever devalue the *Kiai*; they will even strengthen the *Kiai* authority. The other threat is concerning the fast-changing technology. This actually will not trouble the digital native *santri* who has given intuitive ability to adapt to technology. The last threat that we need to deal with is the psychological instability of the *santri*. As it is accepted previously that one of the strengths the *santri* have is the fact that they are religiously motivated, so, to overcome this threat of *santri's* psychological instability is to provide them with religious narratives that touch on the history of the young *sahabahs* and how they were able to manage their psychological immaturity and what they can get if they succeed in managing their immaturity.

The last question is how to eliminate the weaknesses (lack of human resources, lack of facilities, *kiai's* anxieties toward the negative impacts of the digital media, and strong traditions of the *Pesantren*) to prevent the external threats (religious stigmatization on media and modernization, solid institutionalized authority of the *kiai*, fast changing technology, and psychological instability of the *santri*). There are at least four ways this research sees as the way to deal with these weaknesses: first is to include the *kiai* and religious leaders in the media education project. The project of educating *santri* to be digitally literate is obviously a collaborative work. *Kiai's* engagement in the project is crucial not only for the success of the project as the *kiai* are the main holder of authority in *Pesantren*, but also to counter religious stigmatizations against the media. In addition to that, introducing the positive use of media for *Pesantren* through establishing a particular curriculum on media literacy can be the other possible way to eliminate the anxiety. With regard to the threat of the fast-changing technology and psychological instability of the *santri*, this research sees that there is no other way to deal with it except by providing them access to information along with some efforts to activate the *santri's* self-control through religious indoctrination

E. Millennial *Santri* and the Challenge of Media Era: Concluding remarks

As, the world today is celebrating what so called 'mediating tradition' (the era when media plays significant role in society, much more than ever before), there are some phenomena emerge as a corollary to the efforts of self adjustments to this changing tradition in human history. One of many is the religion's self adjustment to its new environment, the mediated environment.

Today, Muslims are welcoming the new 'mediated tradition' (marked by continuous improvement and innovation of media technology and the ubiquitous presence of media in our life) for better or worse, depends on their capacities. The more they aware of and build their capacities the more they ready to face the new era. If not, this new era will only be a 'failed civilization' for them. The different pattern of Islamic knowledge transmission caused by the coming of media (from print to what so called 'new media'), requires a different higher capacity in many sectors of Muslim society. The Millennial *santri* or what so called "santri zaman now" in this matter should be the frontline in realizing a more glorious future of Islam. This in turn requires the *santri* to be able to rejuvenate and upgrade at least three important capacities in themselves: creative capacity, mental capacity, intellectual capacity and religious capacity.

First, creative capacity. The *santri* are millennials who are believed to have high creative potential. They are millennials who have high ambitions to expose themselves and to be known in the world. They are the generation that has high enthusiasm to think outside the box, create unique things that are genuine, and become problem solvers. They have high expectations about themselves and about things around them (Espinoza, Ukleja, & Rusch, 2010). On the other hand, they have *santri* souls inherent in them. In addition to being known for their strong attachment to religious values, the *santri* are also known for their creative ideas in living their lives since they are still in their boarding school (Muharsafa & Zainuddin, 2012; Ibrahim, 2018). With both of these potentials, a millennial *santri* should be able to create genuine creativity in various fields of community life. Especially in terms of religious life. So, that a noble religion can always be packaged creatively without losing its main essence. Digital media literacy at this point becomes an urgent need to be developed among them.

Second, mental capacity. As it is well known that adolescence is a period of searching for identity and emotional formation which is still unstable (Gunarsa & Yunarsa, 2008). The internet in this case can be a threat to adolescents, where their emotions can easily change immediately because of the information they consume without filtering. Cases of intimidation in the cyber world, especially through social media, which attack teenagers and cause death, for example, become a serious problem that must be resolved (Tempo.co, 2016). The problem of the unfiltered information among adolescents will have a more dangerous impact when it is related to religion. Therefore, Millennial *Santri* in Indonesia should be wiser and more open minded in dealing with information, especially those related to Islamic traditions. Selection capability, at this point, is one of the most important factors that should be emphasized in any kind of media literacy. They must be able to filter not only *what* information they will consume but also which sources they can trust.

Third, intellectual capacity. This including capacity in knowledge about religion and nationality. Indonesian Millennial *Santri* should first of all understand that religion should goes hand in hand with nation. Means that they should be aware of how to be Muslims and Indonesian (or to be Indonesian and Muslims) at the same time. Religious leaders in this regard, plays most important role in teaching the society a 'full version' of Islam and of Indonesia and how both interact and not intersect one another. The government, at this point, has significant power in educating Indonesian people about media. The Indonesian ministry of education should provide one important lacking curriculum in Indonesian education system, the media literacy, in every level of education, be it in religious-based and non-religious based schools

Last but not least, religious capacity. This means Millennial *Santri* should be able to actualize and contextualize their religion for the better society's life. This also applies to their religious life with media. They need to be religiously objective and wise in using and living with

and in media life. In this regard, not the religious leaders nor the government who is responsible for upgrading this capacity, but the Santri themselves as the individuals.

F. Conclusion

Internet could be an alternative powerful source for social empowerment (particularly for Pesantren's community), only if they equip themselves with proper literacy. From the previous discussion, I would like to reemphasize that Internet is actually a double-edged sword in the hands of young generation. The santri, at this point, hold a great responsibility to be able to use that sword for creating a better future. This, of course, should go hand in hand with other sources in society as it is essentially a collaborative work.

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