

## **Religion and Counter-Narratives of Hoax about Covid-19: Enhancing the Role of Youth Interfaith in Bukittinggi**

**Zulfan Taufik**

Universitas Islam Negeri (UIN) Sjech M. Djamil Djambek Bukittinggi, Indonesia  
Email: zulfantaufik@iainbukittinggi.ac.id

**Abstract:** *This article aimed to analyze the relationship between religion and hoax related to the COVID-19 pandemic, particularly the role of interfaith youth in countering negative narratives developed in Bukittinggi, West Sumatra. In the context of a religious community like Bukittinggi, religion is one of the constructive instruments that must be considered. This research used the action research method. This research began with mapping the condition of hoaxes related to COVID-19 in Bukittinggi through three Focus Group Discussions (FGD). Researcher was also involved with partners in intervening through local training activities to strengthen the capacity of interfaith youth to respond to hoaxes. This research showed that apart from religious leaders, interfaith youths play an essential role in breaking the chain of hoaxes related to COVID-19 through counter-narratives. In addition, this research showed a trend of positive change in interfaith youth, from being only passive objects of COVID-19 hoaxes to being active agents who carry out hoax counter-narratives through various media. As the dominant population in Indonesia that is so massive in the use of the internet and social media, young people have great potential to become 'victims' of hoax narratives. However, with the increasing number of digital literacies received by young people, they also have great potential to become agents who can break the chain of hoaxes.*

**Keywords:** *Bukittinggi; Counter-Narratives; COVID-19; Hoax; Youth Interfaith*

**Abstract:** *Artikel ini bertujuan untuk menganalisis hubungan antara agama dan hoaks terkait pandemi COVID-19, khususnya peran pemuda lintas agama dalam melawan narasi negatif yang berkembang di masyarakat Kota Bukittinggi, Sumatera Barat. Dalam konteks masyarakat beragama, seperti Bukittinggi, agama merupakan salah satu instrumen konstruktif yang harus diperhatikan. Penelitian ini menggunakan metode riset aksi. Kajian ini diawali dengan pemetaan kondisi hoaks terkait COVID-19 di Bukittinggi melalui tiga focus group discussion (FGD). Saya juga terlibat dengan mitra dalam melakukan intervensi melalui kegiatan pelatihan lokal untuk memperkuat kapasitas pemuda lintas agama untuk menanggapi hoaks. Penelitian ini menunjukkan bahwa selain tokoh agama, pemuda lintas agama memainkan peran penting dalam memutus rantai hoaks terkait COVID-19 melalui kontra-narasi. Selain itu, penelitian ini menunjukkan tren perubahan positif pada pemuda lintas agama, dari hanya*

*menjadi objek pasif dari hoaks COVID-19 menjadi agen aktif yang melakukan kontra-narasi hoaks melalui berbagai media. Sebagai populasi dominan di Indonesia yang begitu masif dalam penggunaan internet dan media sosial, anak muda memiliki potensi besar untuk menjadi 'korban' narasi hoax. Namun, dengan semakin banyaknya literasi digital yang diterima anak muda, mereka juga memiliki potensi besar untuk menjadi agen yang dapat memutus mata rantai hoaks.*

**Keywords:** Bukittinggi; Kontra Narasi; COVID-19; Hoaks; Remaja Lintas Agama

## INTRODUCTION

The infodemic<sup>1</sup> is one of the real threats amid the struggle against the spread of COVID-19. Many facts and hoax information circulating in the mass media and social media have confused the public. Social media, especially in democracies, provides alternative information about COVID-19 that is in some ways different from that provided by the mainstream media. On the other hand, posting on social media benefits citizen participation. However, material circulating on social media is often uncontrolled and politicized by certain interest groups. It has dire consequences if it is received uncritically.<sup>2</sup>

The Director General of the World Health Organization (WHO) said, "We are not just fighting the pandemic, we are also fighting the infodemic."<sup>3</sup> WHO also called on CEOs, social media platform owners and state officials to

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<sup>1</sup>According to WHO, infodemic is an excess of information, including false or misleading information, in the digital and physical environment during a disease outbreak. It leads to confusion and risk-taking behavior that can be harmful to health. It has also led to a distrust of health authorities and undermined the public health response. [https://www.who.int/health-topics/infodemic#tab=tab\\_1](https://www.who.int/health-topics/infodemic#tab=tab_1)

<sup>2</sup> Asfa Widiyanto, "Religion and Covid-19 in the Era of Post-Truth: The Case of Indonesia," *International Journal of Islamic Thought* 18 (2020): 1–12, <https://doi.org/10.24035/IJIT.18.2020.176>.

<sup>3</sup> Salman Bin Naeem, Rubina Bhatti, and Aqsa Khan, "An Exploration of How Fake News Is Taking Over Social Media and Putting Public Health at Risk," *Health Information & Libraries Journal* 38, no. 2 (June 12, 2021): 143–49, <https://doi.org/10.1111/hir.12320>.

take swift action to combat the spread of fake news on various media platforms. They are taking extra steps to limit the spread of COVID-19 by educating the global community. However, outside the context of science and medicine, these global efforts are not free from hoaxes and speculation about conspiracy theories.<sup>4</sup>

In Indonesia, especially amid the COVID-19 pandemic, hoaxes and misinformation have become dangerous problems. In the current digital era, the hoax is increasingly among internet users who access social media. As a result, Facebook is the most popular platform for spreading hoaxes. Therefore, the Ministry of Communication and Information (Kominfo) has announced a graph of distributing hoaxes related to the COVID-19 pandemic on social media. The Ministry of Communication and Information stated that from January 2020 to November 4, 2021, identified 1,971 issues of COVID-19 hoax at 5,065 uploading social media.<sup>5</sup> Hoax related to COVID-19 is also not merely related to health. Sometimes it is played with religious and political issues. For example, the narrative that Covid-19 is a communist, Jewish and Christian conspiracy to destroy Islam.<sup>6</sup> There was also a narrative that the Chinese regime deliberately spread COVID-19 to eradicate Muslims in Wuhan.<sup>7</sup> The massive deployment of the hoax related to COVID-19 has blurred the limit between correct and false news. As the impact, some people are finally reluctant to vaccinate.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Domenico Cucinotta and Maurizio Vanelli, "WHO Declares COVID-19 a Pandemic," *Acta Bio Medica: Atenei Parmensis* 91, no. 1 (2020): 157–60, <https://doi.org/10.23750/abm.v91i1.9397>.

<sup>5</sup> Agus Tri Haryanto, "Awat! Ada 1.971 Hoax COVID-19, Terbanyak Di Facebook," *detikinet*, 2021, <https://inet.detik.com/law-and-policy/d-5798882/awat-ada-1971-hoax-covid-19-terbanyak-di-facebook>.

<sup>6</sup> Pebrianto Eko Wicaksono, "Cek Fakta: Hoaks Konspirasi Komunis, Yahudi Dan Nasrani Manfaatkan COVID-19 Untuk Menghancurkan Islam," *liputan 6.com*, 2020, <https://www.liputan6.com/cek-fakta/read/4253224/cek-fakta-hoaks-konspirasi-komunis-yahudi-dan-nasrani-manfaatkan-covid-19-untuk-menghancurkan-islam>.

<sup>7</sup> M. Rodhi Aulia, "[Cek Fakta] Virus Korona Sengaja Disebarkan Rezim Tiongkok Untuk Membasmi Umat Islam Di Wuhan? Ini Faktanya," *medcom.id*, 2020, <https://www.medcom.id/telusur/cek-fakta/gNQ07yYK-virus-korona-sengaja-disebarkan-rezim-tiongkok-untuk-membasmi-umat-islam>.

<sup>8</sup> Fisipol UGM, "Beragam Survei Sebut Penolakan Dan Keraguan Masyarakat Terhadap Vaksin COVID-19," 2021, <https://fisipol.ugm.ac.id/beragam-survei-sebut-penolakan-dan-keraguan-masyarakat-terhadap-vaksin-covid-19/>; Firdaus Anwar, "3 Alasan Utama Masih Ada Warga RI Yang Menolak Vaksin COVID-19," *detikhealth*, 2021, <https://health.detik.com/berita-detikhealth/d-5764887/3-alasan-utama-masih-ada-warga-ri-yang-menolak-vaksin-covid-19>.

Religion has an important role in religious societies as a domain affected by COVID-19 and as an institution that can help defeat it constructively.<sup>9</sup> Many previous studies have shown how the role of religious leaders in breaking the chain of the COVID-19 pandemic through various actions with promotions and encouragement to implement health protocols, as well as examples in vaccination both in Indonesia<sup>10</sup> and other countries<sup>11</sup>. Other studies have also examined the importance of strengthening religious institutions in suppressing the spread of COVID-19.<sup>12</sup> Likewise, a study examines the effect of the level of religiosity on compliance with COVID-19 mitigation.<sup>13</sup>

However, those studies have not mentioned the role or position of youth, especially interfaith youth. In fact, in the context of breaking the chain of hoaxes related to the COVID-19 pandemic, especially on social media, the role of youth and efforts to strengthen their critical thinking capacity in fighting hoaxes is

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<sup>9</sup> Widiyanto, "Religion and Covid-19 in the Era of Post-Truth: The Case of Indonesia"; Sima Barmania and Michael J. Reiss, "Health Promotion Perspectives on the COVID-19 Pandemic: The Importance of Religion," *Global Health Promotion* 28, no. 1 (2021): 15–22, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1757975920972992>.

<sup>10</sup> Siti Khodijah Nurul Aula, "Peran Tokoh Agama Dalam Memutus Rantai Pandemi Covid-19 Di Media Online Indonesia," *Living Islam: Journal of Islamic Discourses* 3, no. 1 (June 28, 2020): 125, <https://doi.org/10.14421/lijid.v3i1.2224>; Mustaqim Pabbajah et al., "Deauthorization of the Religious Leader Role in Countering Covid- 19: Perceptions and Responses of Muslim Societies on the Ulama's Policies in Indonesia," *International Journal of Criminology and Sociology* 9 (2020): 262–73, <https://doi.org/10.6000/1929-4409.2020.09.25>; Muchammadun Muchammadun et al., "Peran Tokoh Agama Dalam Menangani Penyebaran Covid-19," *Religious: Jurnal Studi Agama-Agama Dan Lintas Budaya* 5, no. 1 (2021): 87–96; Simon Simon et al., "Participation of Religious Leaders in Helping the Success of the Government's COVID-19 Vaccination Program," *Evangelikal: Jurnal Teologi Injili Dan Pembinaan Warga Jemaat* 5, no. 2 (2021): 234, <https://doi.org/10.46445/ejti.v5i2.405>.

<sup>11</sup> Javad Yoosefi Lebni et al., "The Role of Clerics in Confronting the COVID-19 Crisis in Iran," *Journal of Religion and Health* 60, no. 4 (2021): 2387–94, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10943-021-01295-6>.

<sup>12</sup> Barmania and Reiss, "Health Promotion Perspectives on the COVID-19 Pandemic: The Importance of Religion."

<sup>13</sup> David DeFranza et al., "Religion and Reactance to COVID-19 Mitigation Guidelines," *American Psychologist* 76, no. 5 (July 2021): 744–54, <https://doi.org/10.1037/amp0000717>.

crucial. The survey released by the Association of Indonesian Internet Service Providers (APJII) in 2019-2020 showed that the age group 15-19 years and 20-24 years dominates the penetration of internet users in Indonesia. It means that, beside dominating the population in Indonesia, young people also dominate the use of the internet, especially in social media.<sup>14</sup> To complement previous studies, this article is a portrait of action research to increase the capacity of interfaith youth to fight hoax about the COVID-19 pandemic in West Sumatra. Researcher argued that interfaith youths have a role in handling hoaxes related to the COVID-19 pandemic. They have critical sensitivity in reading hoaxes and creativity in making counter-narratives through various media.

## **METHOD**

This research used an action research method. Researcher began with mapping the condition of hoaxes related to COVID-19 in Bukittinggi through three Focus Group Discussions (FGD). First, FGD with representatives of the Bukittinggi Health Office, the Bukittinggi City Religious Harmony Forum (FKUB), and representatives of the Ushuluddin, Adab and Da'wah Faculty (FUAD) IAIN Bukittinggi on June 2, 2021. Second, FGD with the representative of Bukittinggi Communication and Informatics Office (Diskominfo), Majelis Ulama Indonesia (MUI) Bukittinggi, and representatives of the Anti-Defamation Society (MAFINDO) Padang West Sumatra on June 30, 2021. Third, FGD with representatives of various religious-based youth organizations in the City of Bukittinggi, representatives of Religious Counselors in the City of Bukittinggi, representatives of Public Relations of the Ministry of Religion of Bukittinggi, and representatives of Public Relations of Diskominfo Bukittinggi, on August 30, 2021.

After researcher obtained a map of the condition of hoaxes related to COVID-19 in Bukittinggi, especially regarding religion. So, we did intervention was carried out with local training activities to strengthen the capacity of interfaith

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<sup>14</sup> "Laporan Survei Internet APJII," 2020, <https://apjii.or.id/content/read/39/521/Laporan-Survei-Internet-APJII-2019-2020-Q2>.

youth to respond to hoaxes in the form of counter-narratives or alternative narratives. The participants of this activity consist of 30 youths, representatives of Youth Interfaith, extension workers religion, Public Relations Ministry of Religion, and Public Relations Diskominfo Bukittinggi. The activity was collaboratively organized by the Center for Religious Studies and Democracy (PUSAD) Paramadina, Faculty of Ushuluddin, Adab and Da'wah (FUAD) IAIN Bukittinggi, Religious Harmony Forum (FKUB) Bukittinggi City, and the Communications and Information Office (Diskominfo) Bukittinggi City. This activity was conducted for two full days online on 30-31 August 2022. This training workshop invited keynote speakers from academics and practitioners in peacebuilding, conflict resolution, and hate speech with experience and local sources. The researcher acted as a facilitator with the team from PUSAD Paramadina.

## **RESULT AND DISCUSSION**

### **The COVID-19 Infodemic Narratives on Social Media**

Recognition of the power of social media to spread fake health news came long before COVID-19, especially topics like tobacco, vaping, and drugs. However, in 2020, online disinformation is massive and reinforced by political and scientific misinformation.<sup>15</sup> In March 2020, when the COVID-19 pandemic was recently announced, the World Health Organization (WHO) used the term “infodemic” coined in 2003 by journalist and political scientist David Rothkopf to refer to the rapid and widespread dissemination of false information or to mislead in digital and physical environments. Social media companies and platform users both played a significant role in the birth of the COVID-19 infodemic that year.<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> Michael A Gisondi et al., “A Deadly Infodemic: Social Media and the Power of COVID-19 Misinformation,” *Journal of Medical Internet Research* 24, no. 2 (February 1, 2022): e35552, <https://doi.org/10.2196/35552>.

<sup>16</sup> M. Ayelén Milillo et al., “Fake News and Vaccination: How the Science Anti-Fake News Team in Argentina Is Fighting the Infodemic,” *Medical Writing* 31, no. 1 (2022): 48–53.

According to WHO, the infodemic "cause confusion and risk-taking behavior that can be harmful to health. It also causes distrust of health authorities and undermines the public health response." Thus, scientists, journalists, and governments must not only help overcome the COVID-19 pandemic but also combat the infodemic and its impact on people's behaviour.

The shift from the traditional news paradigm has profoundly affected the construction of social perceptions and framing of narratives; it influenced policymaking, political communication, and the evolution of public debate, especially when issues are controversial. Online users tended to acquire information that follows their worldview to ignore disparate information and form polarized groups around shared narratives. Furthermore, when polarization is high, misinformation can quickly multiply. Several studies had shown that fake news and inaccurate information can spread faster than fact-based news.<sup>17</sup>

Social media plays a significant role in influencing the public during the Covid-19 pandemic because the public tends to prioritize information from social media. As the COVID-19 pandemic spreads, social media has become essential for socializing, finding and sharing information about the disease. In the process, it allows for an uncontrolled explosion of information and the spread of misinformation. The current infodemic generally touches on four main domains: origin or cause, prevention, diagnosis, and treatment of Covid-19. The topics are very diverse, ranging from speculation that Covid-19 is part of a biological weapon that was released accidentally from the laboratory, conspiracy theory, spy operations, population control, and miracle cures. Its spread is through mass media, social media, and the internet, intentionally or not. The spreaders range from ordinary people to medical professionals, scientists, state leaders, and formal and non-formal institution.<sup>18</sup>

Misinformation on COVID-19 is a matter of life and death, adequate intervention and the right communication strategy are crucial requirements. The

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<sup>17</sup> Matteo Cinelli et al., "The COVID-19 Social Media Infodemic," *Scientific Reports* 10, no. 1 (2020): 1–10, <https://doi.org/10.1038/s41598-020-73510-5>.

<sup>18</sup> Naeem, Bhatti, and Khan, "An Exploration of How Fake News Is Taking Over Social Media and Putting Public Health at Risk."

scale of the crisis and the sheer volume of misleading information requires scientists, health information professionals, and journalists to take serious steps to help the public identify and recognize fake news or hoaxes. There is a need to train people, especially young people, about the nature of social media and how to use it effectively and safely if we win the war against hoaxes. There is a need to let people know about the sources, methods, and guidelines they can use to help identify fake news during a pandemic. There is also a need to teach the public that we can prevent the spread of misinformation by not sharing it or simply pausing before sharing any information.<sup>19</sup>

### **Religion and Covid-19 Hoax Narratives in Bukittinggi**

Bukittinggi is a multi-religious and multi-ethnic city that religious groups do not widely inhabit outside Islam. However, when compared to other regencies in West Sumatra, Bukittinggi is a city that is mostly inhabited by non-Muslims (3%). The small number of Muslim people causes many villages to be homogeneous in terms of religion, namely Islam.<sup>20</sup> As a predominantly Muslim region, the fight against the COVID-19 outbreak cannot ignore the influence of religion because religion is often a reference, even in the COVID-19 pandemic. The influence of religious factors, both directly and indirectly, can be seen in the public's compliance in believing in the existence of COVID-19 and obeying health protocols.

The debate about the response of religion, especially Islam, to COVID-19 has surfaced, especially between Islamist groups and the authorities (Government).<sup>21</sup> In the various regions, some are dissatisfied with the regulations

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<sup>19</sup> Naeem, Bhatti, and Khan.

<sup>20</sup> Zulfan Taufik, "From Negative to Positive Peace: Strengthening the Role of Youth in Religious Peacebuilding in Bukittinggi, West Sumatra," *AKADEMIKA: Jurnal Pemikiran Islam*; Vol 25 No 2 (2020), October 4, 2020, <https://doi.org/https://doi.org/10.32332/akademika.v25i2.2132>.

<sup>21</sup> Pabbajah et al., "Deauthorization of the Religious Leader Role in Countering Covid- 19: Perceptions and Responses of Muslim Societies on the Ulama's Policies in Indonesia."



issued by the government. For example, the West Sumatran Indonesian Ulema Council (MUI) rejected the elimination of activities in places of worship, especially in mosques, during the implementation of restrictions on micro-community activities (PPKM). MUI also said that Eid al-Adha prayers should still be held in mosques in the congregation. The four cities in West Sumatra that are included in the list of micro PPKM areas are the cities of Padang, Bukittinggi, Solok, and Padang Panjang. The chairman of the West Sumatra MUI, Gusrizal Gazahar, said that the West Sumatra MUI would not issue a fatwa prohibiting worshipping in mosques during micro PPKM. He appealed to Muslims to continue to worship as usual.<sup>22</sup>

Conservatism among religious people can be seen in their rejection of the government's recommendation to comply with health protocols in holding religious services. They argued that religious people should fear God more than they fear Covid-19. God's orders related to worship must be carried out under any conditions, including during the covid-19 outbreak. They also argued that destiny is in the hands of God. God has determined when we will die and for what reason. If we have tried to avoid COVID-19, but God has determined that COVID-19 will infect us, we will be infected by this disease. But if God dictates otherwise, we will not be infected with COVID-19 even though we do not adhere to health protocols, such as physical distancing and wearing masks in public places.<sup>23</sup>

This point of view is, in some ways, rooted in fatalistic theology (*jabbariyya*). This fatalistic theology is not a problem if it is only a personal belief. But this kind of theology can jeopardize public safety if embraced by a militant group of people, especially if they hold that belief and use it as a basis to fight against state authorities. Religious misinformation refers to religious authorities' fear, emotional appeal, or credibility to persuade the recipients of these messages. Unlike other forms, religious misinformation is more difficult to

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<sup>22</sup> Detiknews, "MUI Sumbar Tolak Peniadaan Ibadah di Masjid Selama PPKM" selengkapnya <https://news.detik.com/berita/d-5634466/mui-sumbar-tolak-peniadaan-ibadah-di-masjid-selama-ppkm>.

<sup>23</sup> Widiyanto, "Religion and Covid-19 in the Era of Post-Truth: The Case of Indonesia"; Barmania and Reiss, "Health Promotion Perspectives on the COVID-19 Pandemic: The Importance of Religion."

fact-check and requires a more profound knowledge of religion and its sociopolitical context to distinguish.<sup>24</sup> Government regulations regarding physical distancing will not impact public safety if people do not comply. The rule requires a reciprocal and positive response from the community. Adverse reactions, especially civil disobedience, certainly endanger state institutions and public safety.

The challenge for the government is even more significant when conspiracy issues related to Covid-19 spread on social media, such as regarding the origin of the virus, treatment, and predictions of what will happen in the future. The massive amount of hoax news about Covid-19, both medical and theological, is also of concern because it impacts the rejection of vaccines. The hoax news has caused some people to believe that COVID-19 is a conspiracy rather than factual. This picture is seen from the focus group discussion results with interfaith youth with the theme, "Mapping the Negative Impact of COVID-19 on Social Cohesion in Bukittinggi".

At the Focus Group Discussion, the participants generally said that the majority of the people of Bukittinggi did not believe in the existence of the COVID-19 virus, were reluctant to participate in the vaccination program, and were even afraid to go to the hospital to check themselves, as a result of hoax narratives. For example, Harfani said: "There are still many people who don't believe in the existence of covid, assuming that covid is a political tool, propaganda, man-made, etc. Maybe only around 30% wear masks, as a result of this distrust."<sup>25</sup> Mayhendra also said, "people don't want to go to the hospital because there are rumors that they will get COVID-19 if they have the slightest

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<sup>24</sup> Mahsa Alimardani and Mona Elswah, "Online Temptations: COVID-19 and Religious Misinformation in the MENA Region," *Social Media and Society* 6, no. 3 (2020): 4–7, <https://doi.org/10.1177/2056305120948251>.

<sup>25</sup>Harfani (Kamisan Youth Activist Bukittinggi), *Focus Group Discussion*, August 30, 2021.

symptoms of cough or cold." <sup>26</sup> As for Fatin, he said that, "she heard a hoax among women's Islamic study group that vaccines actually increase disease in the body. Vaccines also contain chips."<sup>27</sup> Meanwhile, Nola said, "People don't believe in the existence of covid. Regarding vaccines, there are posts circulating that vaccines are made from pork oil".<sup>28</sup>

The results of the mapping of the COVID-19 hoax narrative in Bukittinggi is also a narrative that COVID-19 is a communist, Jewish and Christian conspiracy to destroy Islam. What is more worrying is that the narration is delivered by religious leaders who are role models for their followers. Hardi Fadli said, "There are lectures by Ustadz, for example, Ustadz Ihsan Tanjung on Youtube that vaccines can change our DNA. It is very troubling because the Ustadz mainly conveyed it. The Ustadz also said that masks were also part of Jewish propaganda. Because by wearing a mask, we cannot spread a smile like in Islamic teachings. The videos are then shared via Facebook and WhatsApp groups."<sup>29</sup> The same thing can also be found in Christianity. As stated by Monika, "There are pastors who in delivering sermons in churches doubt the vaccine because it contains a microchip."<sup>30</sup>

The Diskominfo of Bukittinggi has collaborated with various parties such as the Health Service, Religious Harmony Forum (FKUB), universities, and community organizations in Bukittinggi to disseminate information to the public regarding the dangers of hoaxes related to COVID-19 and how to overcome them, including those related to religious issues.<sup>31</sup> MUI Bukittinggi has also been active, both through written circulars and in various forums, socializing the importance of implementing strict health protocols in worship. The same thing was done by other religious leaders who are members of the Bukittinggi FKUB. We have

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<sup>26</sup>Mayhendra (Member of Youth Interfaith Bukittinggi), *Focus Group Discussion*, August 30, 2021.

<sup>27</sup>Fatin (Member of Youth Interfaith Bukittinggi), *Focus Group Discussion*, August 30, 2021.

<sup>28</sup>Nola (Member of Youth Interfaith Bukittinggi), *Focus Group Discussion*, August 30, 2021.

<sup>29</sup>Hardi Fadli (Religious Counselor of the Ministry of Religion Bukittinggi), *Focus Group Discussion*, August 30, 2021.

<sup>30</sup>Monika (Youth HKBP Bukittinggi), *Focus Group Discussion*, August 30, 2021.

<sup>31</sup>Novri (Head of Diskominfo Kota Bukittinggi), *Focus Group Discussion*, June 2, 2021.

carried out various activities to raise awareness about the importance of health protocols to their congregations, not only through words but also through concrete actions such as distributing free masks.<sup>32</sup>

Digital media has increased the potential for voice diversity. Religious authority, it seen as something formal or institutional previously, has turned into a more soft characteristic.<sup>33</sup> The emergence of new media since the 1980s has also transformed the face of religious authorities in Indonesia. Social media has, in some cases, disrupted and challenged traditional forms of religious authority structures. The fragmentation and pluralization of Islamic religious authority triggered by the disruption of new media technology gave birth to the so-called 'new Islamic translator.' In Indonesia. The emergence of this 'new Islamic translator' was made possible by two interrelated structural factors, namely the wave of political-economic liberalization during the 1998 reformation, which was accompanied by the information and communication technology revolution in the late 1990s. Now, anyone can claim religious authority or take over religious leadership, which would typically be out of reach without social media.<sup>34</sup>

### **Enhancing Hoax Counter-Narratives among Youth Interfaith**

Besides, the challenge of stopping the spread of COVID-19, another obstacle is the infodemic surrounding COVID-19. This infodemic leads to excess information about a problem so that its emergence can interfere with efforts to find solutions to the problem.<sup>35</sup> The rise of the infodemic containing hoaxes and

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<sup>32</sup> Aidil Alfin (Head of MUI Kota Bukittinggi), *Focus Group Discussion*, June 2, 2021.

<sup>33</sup> Nikmah Lubis, "Agama Dan Media: Teori Konspirasi Covid-19," *Jurnal Kajian Islam Interdisipliner* 4, no. 1 (2021): 45, <https://doi.org/10.14421/jkii.v4i1.1188>.

<sup>34</sup> Martin Slama, "Practising Islam through Social Media in Indonesia," *Indonesia and the Malay World* 46, no. 134 (January 2, 2018): 1–4, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13639811.2018.1416798>.

<sup>35</sup> Naeem, Bhatti, and Khan, "An Exploration of How Fake News Is Taking Over Social Media and Putting Public Health at Risk."

rumors about COVID-19 in the community can worsen the pandemic situation itself,<sup>36</sup> including in Bukittinggi. The spread of hoax news often occurs because people often do not check when sharing with others and do not understand the impact of the information itself in the future. The infodemic that spreads in Bukittinggi is correlated and spiced up with religious issues that cause people to distrust or underestimate COVID-19 and are reluctant to vaccinate.

Religious misinformation about COVID-19 has further underlined the need for a region to allocate more resources to the issue and to train their content moderators against all kinds of misinformation<sup>37</sup>. Among the resources in Bukittinggi City that can strengthen community solidarity and resilience during a pandemic is religious and ethnic diversity, especially among the youth.<sup>38</sup> Young people who understand what a negative narrative is needed to maintain sanity during a pandemic. After understanding, they also need to have the ability to produce positive stories or reports that can be an alternative for the community to maintain social cohesion. According to Bulfin and McGraw, individuals (particularly young people) urgently require digital literacy skills. These misleading abilities allow us to put information into context, distinguish fact from fiction, and identify intentionally if we come across it.<sup>39</sup> Furthermore, it is expected that young people will act as agents of change to solve problems in the digital society. To achieve this, they are encouraging efforts to reduce the spread of fake news, particularly in Indonesia, so that people are more intelligent in their responses to fake news that spreads quickly through various media.

Based on the theory, interfaith youths are expected to spread and make the positive narrative the mainstream in society. The program to strengthen interfaith

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<sup>36</sup> Mia Angeline, Yuanita Safitri, and Amia Luthfia, "Can the Damage Be Undone? Analyzing Misinformation During COVID-19 Outbreak in Indonesia," *Proceedings of 2020 International Conference on Information Management and Technology, ICIMTech 2020*, no. August (2020): 360–64, <https://doi.org/10.1109/ICIMTech50083.2020.9211124>.

<sup>37</sup> Alimardani and Elswah, "Online Temptations: COVID-19 and Religious Misinformation in the MENA Region."

<sup>38</sup> Taufik, "From Negative to Positive Peace: Strengthening the Role of Youth in Religious Peacebuilding in Bukittinggi, West Sumatra."

<sup>39</sup> Scott Bulfin and Kelli McGraw, "Digital Literacy in Theory, Policy and Practice: Old Concerns, New Opportunities," in *Teaching and Digital Technologies*, ed. M. Henderson and G. Romeo (Melbourne: Camb, 2015), 266–81, <https://doi.org/10.1017/cbo9781316091968.026>.

youth in carrying out COVID-19 hoax counter-narratives in Bukittinggi was carried out with the theme, “Training for Strengthening Youth Interfaith Capacity: Responding to Negative Narratives and Strengthening Social Cohesion in a Pandemic.” This workshop aimed to strengthen the capacity of interfaith youth to understand and produce positive narratives of COVID-19 on social cohesion in Indonesia; Interfaith youth have the skills and ammunition to turn negative narratives into positive ones regarding the impact of COVID-19 on social cohesion in their communities. This training was carried out for two full days with various materials related to mapping the COVID-19 hoax and its negative impact on social cohesion in Bukittinggi, to the practice of making counter-narratives and follow-up plans for its implementation.

In the pre-test and post-test on the participants' understanding of rumors and hate speech, the ability to analyze negative narratives, compose alternative narratives, and develop alternative strategies, we got positive results. In practice, the participants were divided into several groups, where each group consisted of 4 people with one facilitator. The following is one of the results of the group discussion, starting from an analysis of the negative narrative that developed in the community, making a counter-narrative, and its implementation strategy.

**Table 1.**  
**Negative Narrative Analysis**

Narrative	COVID-19 is made by non-Muslims and is a conspiracy that prevents Muslims from worshipping (Hajj, congregational prayers, celebrating Eid, etc.)
Structure	We used to be able to worship freely. However, since the outbreak of COVID-19, we have been hindered by various policies that are not in favor of Muslims, such as PSBB, PPKM, etc.
Context	The activity of the government (Ministry of Religion) in relation to the prohibition of worship and the tightening of prokes during the pandemic. Implementation of restrictions on selective slashing activities so that it seems to corner Muslims.

Character/ Figure	Government (Health Department) vs Muslims (MUI)
Relation/ emotion	Suspicion, fear, compulsion, injustice, indifference
Narrative meaning/messa sage	COVID-19 doesn't really exist. It's just a human trick to tarnish God's commandments. We should fear God, not humans. Muslims must continue to worship as usual, don't reduce it just because of the pandemic.

**Table 2.**  
**Counter-Narrative Analysis**

Narrative	COVID-19 is real. We are not forbidden to worship but must comply with health protocols because the virus can harm us all. COVID-19 does not just affect one people, it affects all people in the world.
Structure	COVID-19 has had a negative impact on various fields (health, economy, social). COVID-19 causes us to be apart but not apart. The pandemic also fosters solidarity and raises awareness across identities (religion, race, etc.).
Context	There are many who want to worship as before (pilgrimage, congregational prayers). Continue to obey the health protocols to break the chain of COVID so that you can immediately worship normally. Many developed countries have started to loosen restrictions because most people have been vaccinated, adhere to health protocols, and the transmission rate has drastically reduced.
Character/ Figure	The government, religious leaders, traditional leaders, and the community synergize with each other.
Relation/ emotion	Togetherness, peace, comfort, enthusiasm, optimism
Narrative meaning/messa ge	It is better to anticipate than to treat. To break the chain of COVID-19, obey the health protocol by paying attention to hygiene and health aspects so that God's orders can be carried out.

From the tables above, we know that counter-narratives are deliberately structured and framed narratives to prevent or minimize the influence of the negative narratives of hoaxes. The counter-narrative is based on a narrative that is to be opposed and minimized. Every counter-narrative must begin with an analysis of the narrative to be compared. The negative narrative or hoax that "COVID-19 is made by non-Muslims and is a conspiracy that prevents Muslims from worshipping" is countered that "COVID-19 is true. We are not prohibited

from worshipping but must be proactive because the virus can harm us all. COVID-19 does not just affect one people, it affects all people in the world."

After understanding negative narratives and how to create counter-narratives, the next important thing is related to implementation strategies. Narrative, by definition, is a collection of stories that are repeated and developed according to the social context. For the positive narrative to reach the target audience and be able to change behavior in the long term, a clear implementation strategy is needed.

The following table 3 described the implementation strategies designed by the participants.

**Table 3.**  
**Implementation Strategy**

<b>No.</b>	<b>Action</b> (what to do)	<b>Actors</b> (who will do)	<b>Time</b> (at what moment will be done)	<b>Medium</b> (through what medium)
1	COVID-19 misinformation campaign	Fitri	Once a month	Social media content
2	Writing an opinion about disinformation on the website	Nofri	Once a month	Opinion on the West Sumatran local website
3	Health protocol implementation campaign	Ulil	Al-Quran khatam event at September 10, 2021	banner/billboard
4.	Health protocol appeal campaign	Syafrial	Once a month	Banners/posters on official and personal accounts (Kemenag Bukittinggi, FKUB Bukittinggi) and personal accounts

From the workshop sessions that have been held, interfaith youths can create counter-narratives and alternative narratives related to the COVID-19



pandemic hoax circulating in Bukittinggi. They can also campaign for the narrative through various forms such as writing in the form of opinions, memes/posters, and videos published in multiple media such as websites, youtube, WhatsApp, and Facebook. Although youth is a segment that is vulnerable to the spread of hoaxes, they are also important actors who have sensitivity in identifying hoaxes. As described above, there are many hoaxes regarding the COVID-19 pandemic that interfaith youths have identified in local training, including religious issues. They also have creativity in creating harmful counter-narrative content through various media. It is not surprising because young people, as the digital native generation, are the most significant users in the use of social media. They use the internet range 3 hours until 7 hours a day.<sup>40</sup> It also makes them highly effective as counter agents for the Covid-19 hoax narrative through various online media.

## CONCLUSION

Preventing hoax about COVID-19, especially those related to religious issues, are one of the crucial efforts in breaking the chain of COVID-19 spread. In a religious society like Bukittinggi, religion is often one of the constructive instruments that must be considered in these efforts. Therefore, not only religious leaders but also interfaith youth are essential actors who can play a role in breaking the chain of hoaxes related to COVID-19 through counter-narratives. Strengthening the capacity of interfaith youth in Bukittinggi to carry out counter-narratives of the Covid-19 hoax has shown how they can develop from being merely the object of the COVID-19 hoax to becoming active agents carrying out counter-narratives and can implement them in society through various media.

As the dominant population in Indonesia in the use of the internet and social media, youth have great potential to become 'victims' of hoaxes. However, with the increasing number of digital literacy received by the youth, they also have great potential to become agents who can break the chain of hoaxes. Therefore,

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<sup>40</sup> Mentari Wulan Dwi and Maria Puspitasari, "Sustainability of Digital Literacy among Youth in Palembang City," *IOP Conference Series: Earth and Environmental Science* 716, no. 1 (2021), <https://doi.org/10.1088/1755-1315/716/1/012097>.

research on the importance of youth in controlling hoaxes, such as the COVID-19 pandemic hoax, needs to be more emphasized.

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