

## MEDIATIZATION OF ISLAMIC DA'WAH: VIRTUAL RELIGIOUS EXPRESSION, ALGORITHMIC AUTHORITY, AND THE DIGITAL RELIGIOUS CREDIBILITY CRISIS IN INDONESIA

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Received: 2026-05-28; Accepted: 2026-06-03; Published: 2026-06-20

**Abstract :** Digital platforms have changed Islamic da'wah not only from the medium side, but also from the deepest structure. YouTube, Instagram, and TikTok are now the dominant spaces for religious communication in Indonesia reshaping the way Islam is expressed, authorized, and trusted by millions of digital Muslims. The study examines three interrelated dimensions: how digital platforms shape virtual religious expression; how algorithmic logic shifts religious authority from scholars and scholarly sanad to content creators and popularity metrics; and how the crisis of digital religious credibility arises when popularity replaces scientific competence in da'wah. Using a descriptive qualitative approach with critical discourse analysis, data were collected through digital observation of more than 150 da'wah content on three platforms, semi-structured interviews with seven deliberately selected informants, and documentation. The data analysis followed the interactive model of Miles, Huberman, and Saldana. The theoretical framework integrates Stig Hjarvard's theory of Religious Mediatization with the logic of Jose van Dijck's platform which includes algorithmicity, connectivity, popularity, and the economy of attention. These findings suggest that digital platforms impose a different grammar of religiosity that prioritizes spectacle, brevity, and emotional resonance over doctrinal depth. Algorithmic authority is progressively marginalizing scholars who do not adapt to the logic of the platform, while at the same time elevating da'i-influencers whose digital capital exceeds their scientific credentials. The result is a real crisis of credibility: Islamic knowledge is increasingly measured by the number of views and followers, not by sanad and scientific competence. This research contributes a new integrated analytical framework for the study of digital da'wah and provides practical implications for Islamic media literacy and da'wah communication ethics in the platform era.

**Keywords:** *Religious Mediatization, Digital Da'wah, Algorithmic Authority, Religious Credibility, Platform Logic, Islamic Communication*

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DOI: <https://doi.org/10.47453/>

## Introduction

Islamic da'wah in Indonesia is no longer unfamiliar with the screen. What used to be heard only from mosque pulpits, pesantren rooms, or face-to-face meetings between ustaz and students, can now be watched at any time on YouTube, Instagram, TikTok, by anyone with a mobile phone and an internet connection (Ulyan, 2023). This transformation is taking place at an incredible pace, and the impact goes far beyond just technological change. It is a sociological, epistemological, and communicative change that fundamentally reconfigures the way religious knowledge is moved, legitimized, and contested.

Indonesia is a context that cannot be ignored in this map. As the country with the largest Muslim population in the world as well as one of the fastest growing digital economies in Southeast Asia, Indonesia is witnessing an unprecedented explosion of digital da'wah. APJII data consistently shows that more than 200 million Indonesians are connected to the internet, with religious content in the category of the most consumed (Indonesia, 2024). From this was born the phenomenon of da'i-influencers: religious communicators who build millions of followers on social media, whose presence fundamentally changes the public perception of who is entitled to be called a religious authority.

In the classical sense, Islamic religious authority is built through a long chain of scientific transmission that connects a scholar with recognized predecessors, relying on the competence, academic rigor, and institutional legitimacy of Islamic boarding schools or universities (Hasanah, 2023). This authority is gained through years of learning, mentorship under established scholars, and community recognition of scientific achievements. But the reality of the digital era deviates sharply from that ideal condition. On a platform governed by algorithmic logic, what determines which content reaches the audience is not scientific depth or doctrinal precision but virality, aesthetic appeal, and emotional engagement. A persuasive short video on TikTok can reach millions of viewers in a matter of hours, while a senior scholar's in-depth lecture struggles to garner adequate views (Alfi et al., 2025). This misalignment between digital visibility and scientific legitimacy is widening and that is what this study aims to capture.

The research gap here is significant. Scholars have indeed studied certain aspects of digital da'wah including the use of social media by Islamic organizations (Nasrullah, 2015), the rise of celebrity preachers (Hasan, 2018), and the commodification of Islamic content (Ida et al., 2020). But almost nothing integrates three dimensions at once: virtual expressions of religiosity, shifts in algorithmic authority, and digital credibility crises in one unified theoretical and analytical framework. This research closes the gap by applying the theory of Religious Mediatization (Stig Hjarvard, 2008, 2013) together with the logical framework of the platform Jose van Dijck, 2013) in a systematic analysis of contemporary Indonesian digital da'wah practices.

The mediatization perspective views that the media is no longer just a channel of religious messages, it is a structural environment that imposes its own logic on the content, form, and acceptance of religion (Hjarvard, 2008). When da'wah migrates to digital platforms, it does not just move channels; It is reshaped by platform-specific norms: brevity, interactivity, aesthetic performance, and algorithmic ranking. van Dijck, (2013) analysis of platform society sheds light on the working mechanism of those norms: algorithms reward content that maximizes engagement metrics—likes, shares, comments, watch time thus creating an attention economy in which the most emotionally stimulating content dominates the most intellectually substantive content.

Nuryati et al., (2024) show that the animated video format as a da'wah medium offers a significant opportunity to attract young Muslim audiences, while presenting the challenge of maintaining doctrinal loyalty. Their findings confirm the adaptive pressures that digital affordability poses on da'wah practitioners and the need for a media literacy framework that can guide responsible digital religious communication. Research on the commodification of Islamic content in Indonesia's digital space also highlights how market logic and religious logic are intertwined in ways that have the potential to undermine the integrity of religious communication (Ida et al., 2020).

The novelty of this research lies in its integrated approach. By synthesizing Hjarvard's mediatization framework with the logic of the Van Dijck platform and applying both to Indonesian digital da'wah, this study offers one of the first studies to comprehensively analyze all three dimensions simultaneously. His contribution is twofold: theoretical, by developing an integrated analytical model that can be applied to the comparative study of digital religions; and practical, by providing insights for Islamic educational institutions, da'wah practitioners, policy makers, and platform providers. Its urgency is reinforced by the continued rapid expansion of digital da'wah and documented public confusion around the reliability of online Islamic guidance which has been linked to the spread of religious misinformation and the erosion of community trust in established religious institutions.

### **Research Methodology**

This study uses descriptive qualitative design with critical discourse analysis (AWK) as the main interpretive lens. This choice is not without reason because the phenomenon studied is related to the meaning, process, and dynamics of power embedded in the practice of digital da'wah, not its frequency or distribution that can be quantified. AWK allows researchers to examine how language and visual communication in da'wah content reflect and reproduce the structure of authority, legitimacy, and credibility in the Indonesian Islamic public space (Fairclough, 2003; Wodak & Meyer, 2009).

The research was conducted on three digital platforms: YouTube, Instagram, and TikTok. The three were chosen because they represent the main environment of da'wah content consumption in Indonesia, while reflecting the algorithmic logic and demographics of different audiences. YouTube prioritizes long-form content and

search-based discovery; Instagram operates through visual aesthetics and social network dissemination; TikTok is driven by short videos and recommendation-based viral distribution. The study of all three platforms also allows for a comparative understanding of how different architectures shape religious communication in different ways.

Primary data sources consist of two things. First, digital observation of video da'wah content, reels, stories, and posts from purposively selected accounts, including institutional da'wah organizations, certified scholars, and da'i-influencers. Second, semi-structured interviews with seven informants: two graduates of established Islamic boarding schools who actively manage digital da'wah channels; two da'i-influencers with more than 500,000 followers but without formal Islamic boarding school credentials; an Islamic communication academic; one social media content manager of a major Islamic organization in East Java; and one regular consumer of digital da'wah content who actively participates in online religious discussions. The diversity of informant profiles is deliberate, so that the perspectives that emerge do not come from just one position. Secondary data sources include academic literature, institutional reports, publicly available platform analytics data, and Ministry of Religion policy documents related to digital religious communication.

Data collection is carried out through three complementary techniques. Digital observations were conducted systematically and documented on more than 150 da'wah content items across the three platforms over three months, with attention to content themes, presentation styles, audience engagement patterns, and algorithmic performance indicators. Semi-structured interviews were conducted using flexible guidance that included informants' perceptions of religious authority in the digital space, their experiences with the platform's algorithms, and their assessment of the credibility of the digital da'i. Documentation includes published reports, scientific articles, platform policies, and media coverage of the digital da'wah controversy in Indonesia.

The data analysis follows the interactive model of Miles et al., (2014) which includes four recursive phases: data condensation, data presentation, conclusion drawn, and verification. Condensation involves systematically encoding observational notes, interview transcripts, and documentation into thematic categories that fit into three research focuses. Conclusions were drawn iteratively and verified through member-checking with two informants and triangulation between data sources. Trust is strengthened through prolonged involvement in the digital field, peer debriefing, and reflective journaling throughout the research process (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

## **Results and Discussion**

This research resulted in three main interrelated findings: first, the emergence of a typical religiosity grammar formed by platform logic; second, the systematic shift of traditional religious authority by algorithmic authority; and third, the crisis of digital

religious credibility resulting from the previous two processes. All three are discussed in order below.

### **Virtual Religious Expression in the Digital Platform Era**

The first finding is related to the typical religiosity grammar that appears when da'wah is carried out through digital platforms. In line with Hjarvard's (2008) proposition that mediatization does not leave religion unchanged but transforms it according to the logic of the media it uses, this study found that YouTube, Instagram, and TikTok each impose formal and performative constraints that are specific to Islamic da'wah content.

On TikTok, the most dominant obstacle is brevity combined with affective intensity. Algorithmically successful preaching content tends to compress complex theological questions into short segments of thirty to ninety seconds that are visually stimulating and evocative. This format prioritizes accessibility and emotional resonance over doctrinal elaboration. Some informants admit that they consciously adapt religious messages to fit the requirements of TikTok's format, often sacrificing nuances and scientific qualifications for the sake of reach. As one of the da'i-influencer informants revealed, platforms reward content that elicits an immediate emotional response whether it's admiration, humor, or affirmation of communal identity, rather than content that encourages careful theological reflection. These observations are in line with a broader analysis of the mindfulness economy that drives content toward emotional triggers (Goldhaber, 1997; Wu, 2016).

On Instagram, virtual expressions of religion are very aestheticized. Da'wah content that reaches a wide reach on this platform is embedded in a visual culture that values beauty, aspiration, and lifestyle coherence. Successful creators tend to present religion as something compatible with the modern mid-range aesthetic of beautiful hijab, elegant environments, inspirational typography over landscape images. This aestheticization of da'wah reflects the findings of Nuryati et al., (2024) that visual formats attract broader engagement from young Muslim audiences showing both inherent opportunities and risks: the accessibility gained has the potential to be offset by the shallowness of theological depth.

YouTube provides a more conducive environment for substantive religious content, given its support for long-form videos and search-based discovery. Certified scholars who actively manage YouTube channels can achieve significant views for long lectures, interpretations, and scientific debates. But even on YouTube, algorithmic incentives still prioritize strong openers, dramatic titles, and thumbnails designed to maximize click-through rates. Documentary data reveals that some established Islamic boarding schools are starting to invest in specialized video production capacity to compete in YouTube's algorithmic environment, an institutional adaptation to the platform's logic as described by Hjarvard, (2013) as the institutional mediatization of religion.

Overall, these findings show that digital platforms do not simply amplify existing da'wah practices. They are actively reshaping the practice according to what

Van Dijck, (2013) calls "engineered sociability" social interactions and communicative norms that are systematically structured by platform architectures to maximize engagement and data extraction. The virtual expression of religiosity that emerges from this engineered sociality is at the same time more accessible, more aesthetically sophisticated, and more doctrinally simplified than traditional forms of da'wah.

**Table 1. Specific Characteristics of Digital Da'wah Platforms in Indonesia**

<b>Dimensions</b>	<b>YouTube</b>	<b>Instagram</b>	<b>TikTok</b>
Content Format	Long talks, interpretations, debates	Visual posts, short reel videos	Short video (30–90 seconds)
Prioritization of the algorithm	Watch time, click rate	Like, save, aesthetic appeal	Speed of engagement, multiplication
Dominant Da'wah Style	Scientific, substantive	Aestheticized, aspirational	Entertaining, emotionally stimulating
Audience Demographics	Adult Muslims, Students	Young adult, urban woman	Gen Z, teenagers
Credibility Signals	Academic degrees, institutional affiliations	Visual branding, number of followers	Virality, trend participation

*Source: results of digital observation data analysis (2026)*

### **Algorithmic Authority: A Shift in Traditional Religious Credentials**

The second finding relates to the systematic shift of traditional religious authority by algorithmic authority, a process in which a platform's ranking and recommendation system effectively determines which voices are amplified and which voices are marginalized in the digital da'wah space. This provides an empirical foundation for the proposition of Hjarvard, (2013) and Campbell, (2010): digital media does not simply transmit existing religious hierarchies, but actively reorganizes them.

Traditional Islamic religious authority in Indonesia relies on pesantren and the concept of a traceable chain of transmission sanad that connects a scholar with recognized predecessors, ultimately leading to the Prophet Muhammad (PBUH). The digital ecosystem, however, operates with a radically different logic. The algorithms on all three platforms are designed to maximize user engagement which in practice means maximizing time on the platform and frequency of interactions. Content that achieves high engagement is promoted to a wider audience, regardless of the producer's scientific qualifications.

The interview data revealed a consistent pattern: certified scholars who refused adaptation to the platform's performative norms experienced significant algorithmic disadvantages. As described by one of the informants who graduated from the Islamic boarding school, the forty-five-minute tafsir lecture delivered in the scientific register and uploaded without strategic optimization consistently loses out to a three-minute video by a da'i-influencer who presents similar material in a more dramatized and visually appealing format. The algorithm does not evaluate scientific accuracy or doctrinal accuracy, it evaluates engagement metrics. The result is what might be called algorithmic authority: a form of influence derived from the platform's algorithm's ability to navigate, not from scientific competence.

Van Dijck's framework, (2013) is very enlightening here. He argues that the platform creates a "popularity principle" where a high engagement score serves as social proof of value, regardless of the actual quality of the content. In the context of digital da'wah, this principle effectively creates a new form of religious credential determined by the number of followers, viewing statistics, and trending status, rather than by scientific sanad and institutional recognition. Some informants explicitly expressed awareness of this dynamic. Content manager informants noted that their organizations were forced to develop a custom social media engagement strategy because failure to achieve algorithmic visibility resulted in institutional marginalization in the digital proselytizing landscape.

This does not mean that all scholars are algorithmically marginalized, or that all da'i-influencers do not have a scientific foundation. The data reveals a more nuanced landscape: some certified scholars have successfully adapted to the platform's logic without compromising scholarly integrity, and some da'i-influencers maintain reasonable doctrinal accuracy even without formal credentials. However, the structural bias of algorithmic systems that prioritize engagement over scientific quality creates systematic incentives that over time tend to prioritize the value of entertainment over scientific rigor, and digital charisma over academic credentials. This structural bias whose implications for Indonesian Islamic public discourse demands serious attention.

### **Digital Religious Credibility Crisis**

The third dimension of this study relates to the emergence of a digital religious credibility crisis in which the proliferation of da'wah content on various platforms, combined with an algorithmic shift over traditional authority, results in widespread public uncertainty about the reliability and doctrinal accuracy of online Islamic guidance. These findings represent the most practically significant contribution of this study.

The crisis of credibility manifests itself in several ways. First, documentary and interview data reveal a growing tendency among Indonesia's digital Muslim audiences to evaluate religious content primarily through digital popularity metrics of number of views, number of followers, trending status rather than through traditional scientific credibility markers such as institutional affiliation or scholarly sanad. This shift in

evaluation is in line with Van Dijck, (2013) analysis of how platform popularity metrics serve as a substitute for trust in a digital environment where other evaluative mechanisms are non-existent or unfamiliar to users.

Second, the proliferation of da'wah content has created conditions of information overload that some informants described as making it difficult for the audience to distinguish between doctrinally correct guidance and religious content that is well produced but potentially misleading. Consumer informants describe how difficult it is to judge whether a particular da'i-influencer's fatwa or religious opinion reflects mainstream Indonesian Islamic jurisprudence or an idiosyncratic or even heterodox position. This difficulty is compounded by the fact that social media algorithms recommend content based on user engagement patterns rather than based on doctrinal alignment with Indonesia's recognized Islamic framework.

Third, the credibility crisis is exacerbated by the dynamics of commodification in digital da'wah. When da'i-influencers build a large audience, they gain commercial value through brand partnerships, paid content, merchandise, and paid appearances. This commercial dimension creates incentives that can further separate digital religious performance from scientific integrity, because the most commercially valuable da'wah content tends to be the most emotionally and aspirationally appealing, not the most doctrinally appropriate. The commodification of da'wah content has been recorded in previous Indonesian media study literature (Ida et al., 2020), and the findings of this study confirm and expand on these observations.

The implication is clear: there is an urgent need for Islamic digital media literacy the systematic capacity of the Indonesian Muslim public to critically evaluate online religious content using criteria that go beyond popularity metrics. This includes an assessment of scientific credentials, doctrinal consistency with recognized Indonesian Islamic jurisprudence (as represented by Nahdlatul Ulama and Muhammadiyah), and transparency about the commercial dimension of da'wah content production.

Overall, the three dimensions analysed virtual religious expressions, shifts in algorithmic authority, and digital credibility crises form an integrated picture of the mediatization of Islamic da'wah in Indonesia. This picture confirms the core theoretical insights of Hjarvard's religious mediatization framework while expanding the framework by specifying the mechanisms through which platform logic operationalizes the transformation of religious authority and credibility in specific national and religious contexts.

## **Conclusion**

This research comes to three interrelated conclusions and all three, when read together, provide a fairly complete picture of what is happening in Islamic da'wah in Indonesia.

First, digital platforms apply a typical religious grammar to da'wah content. He reshapes the expression of Islamic religiosity according to platform-specific norms: brevity, aesthetic appeal, and emotional engagement. This process at the same time

expands the reach of da'wah and simplifies its doctrinal content a trade-off that is not widely realized, let alone managed.

Second, the algorithmic logic of digital platforms systematically shifts traditional Islamic religious authority that relies on scientific sanad, pesantren credentials, and community recognition. It replaces it with a form of algorithmic authority determined by digital engagement and popularity metrics. This is not just a technical change it is a sociological reconfiguration of religious expertise in the public space of Indonesian Islam that is taking place quietly but really.

Third, the two processes together produce a digital religious credibility crisis. Indonesian Muslim audiences face significant challenges in distinguishing doctrinally appropriate guidance from algorithmically optimized but potentially misleading content a condition exacerbated by the commodification dynamics in the digital da'wah economy.

Theoretically, this research contributes to the development of Islamic media studies by integrating Hjarvard's mediatization framework and Van Dijck's platform logic in one integrated analytical model that can be applied to comparative studies in other national and denominational contexts. Practically, the implications touch several actors at once: Islamic educational institutions (Islamic boarding schools and universities) that need to develop strategies to maintain scientific authority in an algorithmically mediated environment; da'wah practitioners who need an ethical framework to navigate the tension between platform optimization and scientific integrity; The Ministry of Religion needs to consider the development of Islamic digital media literacy programs; and platform providers who bear responsibility for the structural biases that their algorithmic systems introduce into religious public discourse.

Follow-up research needs to address several areas. Longitudinal studies that track changes in perceptions of religious authority over time will provide important evidence of the resilience and direction of the trends identified here. Comparative studies in other national contexts of Malaysia, Egypt, Turkey, or the Muslim diaspora in Europe will test the generalizability of Indonesia's findings. And quantitative content analysis of large datasets of da'wah content will complement the qualitative depth of this research with statistical breadth, allowing for a more precise characterization of the relationship between scientific credentials and algorithmic performance. Because ultimately, the question this research asks is not just academic: it touches on how Islam is understood, authorized, and trusted by millions of Indonesian Muslims in the digital age.

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