

Da'wah In The Algorithm Era: Populism, Social Media, And The Transformation Of Religious Discourse

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Keywords: Social Media Algorithms, Digital Da'wah, Religious Populism, Religious Authority, Echo Chamber.	Abstract: The development of digital technology has transformed the landscape of religious communication, shifting the space of da'wah (Islamic preaching) from traditional pulpits to social media platforms. This article examines how the algorithmic logic underlying digital platforms functions not only as a distribution tool but also actively alters the form, content, and authority within religious discourse. Using a qualitative method through a virtual ethnographic approach and literature review, this study finds that algorithms prioritize engagement (emotional involvement), which triggers the birth of religious populism a rhetoric that simplifies religious teachings into black-and-white and sensational narratives. This phenomenon leads to the fragmentation of religious authority, where metric popularity (such as the number of followers and likes) replaces scholarly depth as the standard of a preacher's legitimacy. In conclusion, the algorithmic era demands critical digital literacy so that the ummah (Muslim community) is not trapped in echo chambers that shallow religious discourse and trigger social polarization.
Kata Kunci: Algoritma Media Sosial, Dakwah Digital, Populisme Keagamaan, Otoritas Keagamaan, Ruang Gema.	Abstrak: Perkembangan teknologi digital telah mengubah lanskap komunikasi keagamaan, menggeser ruang dakwah dari mimbar tradisional ke platform media sosial. Artikel ini mengkaji bagaimana logika algoritma yang mendasari platform digital tidak hanya berfungsi sebagai sarana distribusi, tetapi juga secara aktif mengubah bentuk, konten, dan otoritas dalam wacana keagamaan. Melalui metode kualitatif dengan pendekatan etnografi virtual dan studi pustaka, penelitian ini menemukan bahwa algoritma memprioritaskan engagement (keterlibatan emosional), yang memicu munculnya populisme keagamaan sebuah retorika yang menyederhanakan ajaran agama menjadi narasi yang hitam-putih dan sensasional. Fenomena ini berujung pada fragmentasi otoritas keagamaan, di mana metrik popularitas (seperti jumlah pengikut dan likes) menggantikan kedalaman keilmuan sebagai tolok ukur legitimasi seorang pendakwah. Sebagai simpulan, era algoritma menuntut literasi digital yang kritis agar umat Islam tidak terjebak dalam ruang gema (echo chambers) yang mendangkalkan wacana keagamaan serta memicu polarisasi sosial.

A. INTRODUCTION

Religion and communication technology have always had a mutually influencing relationship throughout the history of human civilization. In the contemporary era, the digital revolution has disrupted almost all aspects of life, including

how humans practice religion and interact with God and their fellow human beings. The phenomenon of cyber-religion or virtual religion has now become an unavoidable reality, where religious practices are no longer monopolized by physical spaces such as mosques, Islamic boarding schools (pesantren), or religious study gatherings (majelis taklim). The internet has become a new arena for theological discourse, providing unprecedented access to religious information.

In the Islamic context, the practice of da'wah has experienced a massive medium transformation toward social media platforms such as Instagram, TikTok, YouTube, and X (Twitter). Da'wah, which previously required physical presence and face-to-face meetings (talaqqi), is now repackaged into short-duration content that can be accessed anytime and anywhere. These digital platforms offer a democratization of the public sphere, allowing anyone to speak about religion without having to go through traditional educational institutions. As a result, new preachers have emerged who use social media as the main base for spreading their messages.

However, social media is not a neutral space; these platforms are controlled by algorithmic systems designed for surveillance capitalism. Algorithms work by curating, filtering, and distributing content based on potential engagement how likely users are to like, comment, share, or spend time watching the content. In algorithmic logic, the theological depth quality of a religious message becomes secondary, while emotional appeal, sensationalism, and controversy become the main currency for a da'wah content to go viral.

The structural conditions of social media then become a fertile ground for the growth of religious populism. Religious populism in the digital space is often characterized by an "us versus them" rhetoric, the oversimplification of complex fiqh (Islamic jurisprudence) issues into mere halal-haram binaries, and the use of narratives of anger or fear to mobilize the masses. Populist preachers utilize the logic of algorithms that favor polarizing content, as it is proven to be the most effective in provoking audience reactions and securing their positions on users' timelines or For You Pages (FYP).

Studies on the intersection between religion and digital media have been conducted by several previous researchers. The first study by Rahman (2021) examined the phenomenon of "YouTube Ustadz" and the commodification of da'wah in Indonesia.

The study found that YouTube's monetization structure forces preachers to adopt the communication styles of content creators, such as using clickbait titles and provocative thumbnails, to maintain YouTube's recommendation algorithm. However, this research focused more on the political economy aspects of the media rather than its theological transformation.

A second study by Wahyudi (2020) highlighted the fragmentation of religious authority among urban millennial Muslims. Wahyudi argued that today's younger generation tends to choose religious references based on visual charisma and the rhetorical skills of the preacher on Instagram, rather than looking at their track record of scholarly lineage (sanad). This finding confirms that social media has created a new hierarchy in religious authority based on popularity metrics, displacing the role of traditional ulama (scholars) who are considered less digitally adaptive.

A third study by Setiawan (2022) explored the concept of filter bubbles and the polarization of religious-clad identity politics on Twitter (now X). Setiawan proved that algorithms actively trap users in echo chambers where they are only exposed to homogeneous religious views and reject alternative narratives. This causes puritanism and intolerant attitudes to grow rapidly because users are never exposed to moderate and nuanced religious discourses.

Although these three studies have mapped the impact of digital media on religious practices, there is still a literature gap regarding how algorithmic logic specifically acts as the main catalyst in producing the discourse of religious populism. This article seeks to fill this gap by investigating the algorithmic mechanisms in reframing da'wah messages. The purpose of this study is to analyze how the entanglement between algorithmic logic and populism changes the landscape and depth of religious discourse in Indonesia today.

B. RESEARCH METHOD

This study uses a qualitative method with a virtual ethnographic or netnographic approach (Kozinets, 2024). Data collection was carried out by observing the distribution patterns of da'wah content, comment sections, and the rhetoric of populist preachers on three dominant platforms: TikTok, Instagram (Reels), and YouTube (Shorts) during the

period of January-March 2026. Textual and visual data were analyzed using Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) to observe the power relations behind digital religious texts.

To dissect this phenomenon, the researcher used two main theoretical frameworks. First, the Mediatization of Religion theory developed contemporarily by Campbell and Evolvi (2023). This theory states that the media is not a passive medium but an independent institution that has its own rules of the game. When religion is mediatized, religious messages are forced to submit and be modified according to "media logic" (such as commercialization, entertainment, and visualization). Second, the Algorithmic Culture theory from Striphas (in Seaver, 2024), which explains that algorithms now act as culture-making agents that select what is considered important, true, and relevant, often at the expense of academic/theological depth to maximize data profit.

C. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

1. Algorithms as the "Gatekeepers" of a New Epistemology

In the pre-internet era, the gatekeepers of religious discourse were educational institutions such as pesantren, madrasas, or fatwa institutions like the MUI (Hasan, 2025). They ensured that religious knowledge was disseminated with clear scholarly lineage (sanad) and a coherent method of legal deduction (istinbath). Today, this function has been taken over by machine learning.

This shift in the gatekeeper's role is essentially not just a change of medium, but a fundamental epistemological crisis. In classical Islamic scholarly traditions, the process of transferring knowledge involves not only the transfer of textual information but also the transfer of values, ethics (adab), and blessings intertwined through emotional and spiritual closeness between teacher and student. When machine learning takes over this gatekeeping role, this dimension of adab evaporates completely. Machines have no parameters to assess a preacher's moral integrity, intentions, or depth of spirituality; machines solely assess how adept the preacher is at manipulating the audience's visual attention so they do not switch to another screen.

On the other hand, this phenomenon is often romantically misunderstood as a form of democratizing religious knowledge. The public feels the discourse space has

been opened freely to anyone without the bureaucracy of conventional religious institutions. However, what is actually happening is an illusion of freedom. Authority is not truly democratized for the benefit of the ummah; rather, it silently changes hands to giant tech corporate entities (Silicon Valley). We seem to have full control in choosing our teachers and religious content, when in fact, every choice presented on our device screens has been strictly selected, censored, and steered by lines of programming code oriented toward capital.

Platform algorithms are not designed to understand theological truth, the Arabic language, let alone the science of tafsir (exegesis). Algorithmic parameters are purely based on quantification: watch duration (retention rate), number of interactions, and shareability. Findings show that comprehensive one-hour tafsir studies are often hidden by algorithms because they are deemed boring. In contrast, 15-30 second video clips with clickbait titles will be distributed exponentially (Arifin, 2026). This forces preachers to reduce the complexity of religious teachings to fit into social media metric molds.

The logical consequence of this complexity reduction is the birth of a generation of Muslims accustomed to consuming "fast-food religion." Religious knowledge obtained from short video clips detached from their original contexts (decontextualization) often provides an illusion of expertise. Audiences feel they have comprehensively (kaffah) understood the entirety of fiqh law or the tafsir of a verse simply by watching a clip lasting less than a minute. This sensation of instant understanding, in turn, fosters acute intellectual arrogance, where the ummah becomes very quick to judge, blame, or even declare as deviant other views that happen to have never appeared on their social media feeds.

Even more concerning, the demands of this algorithm are slowly taking the independence of the preachers themselves hostage. To maintain relevance and the existence of their platform amidst a vortex of millions of contents, preachers are forced into a rat race to produce increasingly bold and extreme narratives. If they do not follow this trend of simplification, their da'wah will be systematically "killed" by the platform (disappearing from visibility). At this crucial point, sacred religious values are no longer the commander of the discourse, but rather their position degrades into

mere commodity raw materials to satisfy the appetite of algorithms hungry for attention.

2. Characteristics of Religious Populism on the Screen

Adaptation to algorithm demands gives birth to highly pronounced digital religious populism. Based on virtual ethnographic observations, there are three main characteristics of populist da'wah discourse on social media:

Oversimplification (Extreme Simplification): Algorithms love certainty and speed. As a result, fiqh discourses that have room for khilafiyah (reasonable differences of scholarly opinion) are trimmed into instant verdicts: halal-haram, heaven-hell, sunnah-bid'ah. There is no room for explaining nuances or historical context (Sari & Widodo, 2024).

The loss of dialectical space in understanding this khilafiyah ultimately impoverishes the Islamic intellectual tradition itself. When diversity of opinion is reduced to a single rigid truth, the ummah loses flexibility (*murunah*) in responding to the complexities of modern life. This is very dangerous for the social cohesion of a pluralistic society like Indonesia, as the black-and-white mentality shaped by device screens quickly metamorphoses into exclusive and intolerant attitudes in the real world; where those with differing views are no longer seen as fellow believers exercising *ijtihad*, but as theological enemies who must be declared misguided.

Emotional Hacking (Commercialization of Anger): Algorithms have been statistically proven to prioritize content that provokes anger (outrage) or fear (Gillespie, 2023). Populist preachers often exploit identity issues (e.g., narratives that the Muslim ummah is being attacked by group X) to mobilize interactions in the comment section.

This anger commercialization mechanism ironically reverses the original function of religion from what should be a source of peace (*rahmatan lil 'alamin*) into a machine producing collective anxiety and anger. Mainstream da'wah is no longer an embracing invitation (*da'wah bil hikmah*), but a striking provocation. In this algorithm-controlled landscape, narratives of unity and coolness tend to be considered "unsellable" and poor in interaction, pragmatically pushing preachers to continuously

maintain trauma and sentiments of threat among the ummah solely to keep their accounts' digital metric performance high.

Sensational Eschatology: Many populist da'wah contents haphazardly connect modern geopolitical phenomena or natural disasters with signs of the apocalypse or the coming of the Dajjal, dramatized with suspenseful background music. This is an instant method to garner high views from anxious audiences.

The commodification of such eschatological fear brings destructive sociological impacts, namely the flourishing of a fatalistic mentality (passive resignation) among viewers. Instead of responding to real crises before their eyes, such as ecological crises, poverty, or legal injustice, with productive civilizational work, the ummah is driven toward escapism (flight from reality) under the pretext that the destruction of the world is already written anyway. As a result, religious discourse loses its critical and transformative power to improve the social order, as the ummah's intellectual energy has been completely drained by illusionary panic deliberately engineered to boost traffic.

3. Disruption of Authority and the Shallowing of Discourse

The most fundamental impact of algorithm domination is the death of traditional expertise. On social media, truth is no longer determined by depth of knowledge, but by algorithmic visibility (Slama, 2024). A convert influencer or a public figure who has recently "migrated" (hijrah) with millions of followers (having a blue checkmark) is often considered more authoritative to speak on religious law than an elderly kiai (scholar) who does not have an Instagram account.

This phenomenon of shifting authority marks a dangerous transition from epistemology-based scholarship (sanad and literature mastery) to scholarship based purely on visual performativity. On the digital stage, piety is no longer measured by how deeply one understands classical texts, the history of tasyri' (Islamic legislation), or ushul fiqh, but by how skillfully they display the "aesthetics of religiosity"—ranging from dressing styles, dramatic voice intonations, to the mastery of stringing motivational quotes. Consequently, the ummah more frequently consumes the image of religion rather than the substance of its teachings, placing artificial popularity and screen charisma above true expertise.

This inequality is further exacerbated by the absence of scholarly verification (feasibility test) mechanisms on social media. An elderly kiai who has dedicated decades of his life to studying thousands of pages of classical books (*kitab kuning*) often has his voice marginalized simply because he has not mastered algorithmic optimization techniques or captivating content creation strategies. Conversely, a populist figure with basic understanding who often relies only on instant translations without context is elevated to be the main reference for millions. This disruption slowly uproots religious authority from strict Islamic scholarly traditions, handing over the baton of the ummah's spiritual guidance to machines and content creators whose primary motive is often merely the monetization of attention.

Furthermore, algorithms create severe filter bubbles. When users like a video blaming another group, the algorithm will continue feeding them similar narratives. This echo chamber kills the critical reasoning of the ummah, eliminates the tradition of *tabayyun* (data confirmation), and makes religious views increasingly narrow. Religious discourse, which is intrinsically rich in wisdom and prudence, is ultimately reduced to a mere commodity of ego battles in cyberspace.

Trapping the ummah in this filter bubble essentially nurtures confirmation bias massively and systematically. When platform algorithms precisely and continuously present content that justifies users' initial prejudices and beliefs, truth is no longer assessed objectively but becomes something personalized (customized truth). Under psychological conditions that constantly feel "most correct" because they are continuously validated by machines, the space for healthy intellectual doubt is tightly sealed. Differences of opinion are no longer seen as a blessing or natural dynamic of thought, but are considered existential threats that immediately trigger verbal aggression in the comment sections.

Even more worryingly, these ego battles in cyberspace have a very real spillover effect on social cohesion in the real world. The digital segregation created by algorithms slowly materializes into walls of intolerance that divide the structure of a pluralistic society. Therefore, addressing this discourse transformation cannot be done merely by producing more moderate "counter-da'wah content," because such content will likely never penetrate the algorithmic walls of already-extreme groups. The urgent

fundamental solution is to equip the ummah with algorithmic awareness literacy the ability to realize that what they see on their device screens is not a complete representation of reality, but the result of machine curation designed to exploit human psychological vulnerabilities.

D. CONCLUSION

The algorithmic era has triggered a radical paradigm shift in the discourse of Islamic da'wah. Social media is not merely a neutral broadcasting tool, but an agent that aggressively reshapes theological messages. The algorithmic demand for engagement triggers the birth of religious populism characterized by oversimplification of teachings, rhetoric of anger, and sensationalism. This phenomenon culminates in the fragmentation of religious authority where new "ulama" are born from the womb of popularity metrics, rather than the depth of scholarly lineage (sanad). In turn, this ecosystem traps the ummah into echo chambers that threaten the richness of the Islamic intellectual tradition and trigger social polarization. Therefore, a reorientation of religious digital literacy movements is needed, one that not only teaches how to use technology but also the ability to dismantle algorithmic bias so that the ummah does not become passive consumers of shallow religious discourse.

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