

Nahdlatul Ulama and Digital Civil Society in the Post-Truth Era: Contesting Moderate Islamic Narratives on Social Media

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Abstract

This article examines the framing contestation surrounding Nahdlatul Ulama (NU) within Indonesia's post-truth digital environment. Employing framing theory, information disorder frameworks, and communication power theory, this study analyzes how NU is represented, contested, and negotiated across social media platforms. Through qualitative document analysis and systematic literature review, three dominant competing frames are identified: the moderate-nationalist frame promoted by NU's official digital ecosystem, the radical-opposition frame constructed by conservative Islamist networks, and the populist-identity frame deployed by political actors for electoral mobilization. The study finds that post-truth conditions, algorithmic amplification, and networked disinformation campaigns create structurally asymmetric conditions that disadvantage NU's moderate Islamic narratives. In response, NU has developed multifaceted counter-narrative strategies encompassing institutional digital platforms such as NU Online, media literacy programs within pesantren communities, creative da'wa content production, and collaborative regulatory engagement with state institutions. The article argues that NU increasingly functions as a significant digital civil society actor whose communication strategies contribute to the preservation of democratic discourse and religious moderation in Indonesia. These findings offer broader insights into how large-scale Islamic organizations navigate digitally mediated information disorders while maintaining commitments to democratic pluralism and social cohesion.

Keywords: Digital Civil Society; Framing Contestation; Nahdlatul Ulama, Post-Truth; Religious Moderation.

Abstrak

Artikel ini mengkaji kontestasi framing seputar Nahdlatul Ulama (NU) dalam ekosistem digital Indonesia yang diwarnai fenomena pasca-kebenaran (post-truth). Dengan menggunakan teori framing, kerangka disorder informasi, dan teori kuasa komunikasi, penelitian ini menganalisis bagaimana NU direpresentasikan, dikontestasi, dan dinegosiasikan di berbagai platform media sosial. Melalui analisis dokumen kualitatif dan tinjauan literatur sistematis, tiga bingkai dominan yang saling bersaing berhasil diidentifikasi: bingkai moderat-nasionalis yang dipromosikan oleh ekosistem digital resmi NU, bingkai oposisi-radikal yang dibangun oleh jaringan Islamis konservatif, dan bingkai identitas-populis yang digunakan

aktor politik untuk mobilisasi elektoral. Penelitian ini menemukan bahwa kondisi pasca-kebenaran, amplifikasi algoritmik, dan kampanye disinformasi terjaringan menciptakan kondisi yang secara struktural tidak menguntungkan narasi Islam moderat NU. Sebagai respons, NU telah mengembangkan strategi kontra-narasi multidimensi yang mencakup platform digital institusional seperti NU Online, program literasi media di lingkungan pesantren, produksi konten dakwah kreatif, serta keterlibatan regulasi kolaboratif bersama lembaga negara. Artikel ini berargumen bahwa NU semakin berfungsi sebagai aktor masyarakat sipil digital yang signifikan, di mana strategi komunikasinya berkontribusi pada pelestarian wacana demokratis dan moderasi beragama di Indonesia. Temuan ini memberikan wawasan lebih luas tentang bagaimana organisasi Islam berskala besar menavigasi kekacauan informasi bermediasi digital seraya tetap berkomitmen pada pluralisme demokratis dan kohesi sosial.

Kata Kunci: Masyarakat Sipil Digital; Kontestasi Framing; Moderasi Beragama; Nahdlatul Ulama, Pasca-Kebenaran.

Introduction

The rapid expansion of digital communication technologies has fundamentally transformed the landscape of public discourse, religious communication, and socio-political contestation across the globe. In Indonesia, one of the world's largest democratic and Muslim-majority nations, social media platforms have become influential arenas for the production, circulation, and contestation of religious narratives. Platforms such as Facebook, YouTube, Instagram, TikTok, and WhatsApp no longer function merely as channels of communication; rather, they constitute digital public spheres where competing actors struggle to shape public perceptions, religious identities, and political orientations. The convergence of digital technology, democratic openness, and religious expression has generated new opportunities for civic participation while simultaneously producing vulnerabilities to misinformation, polarization, and ideological contestation (Lim, 2017)

These developments are closely associated with the emergence of the post-truth condition, a phenomenon characterized by the declining influence of objective facts in shaping public opinion and the increasing dominance of emotional appeals, personal beliefs, and identity-based narratives (Hardoš, 2019). Within digital environments, algorithmic amplification, echo chambers, and networked disinformation campaigns facilitate the rapid dissemination of emotionally charged content, often regardless of its factual accuracy. In Indonesia, the post-truth phenomenon has become particularly visible through the proliferation of religious hoaxes, identity-based political mobilization, and ideological polarization that intensified during several major electoral moments and socio-religious controversies (Lim, 2017). Consequently, social media has evolved into a contested arena where competing interpretations of Islam, religious authority, and national identity continuously interact and compete for legitimacy.

Within this context, Nahdlatul Ulama (NU) occupies a uniquely significant position. Established in 1926 and widely recognized as the world's largest Muslim civil society organization, NU has historically played a central role in promoting religious moderation, social harmony, and national cohesion in Indonesia (Fajriyah et al., 2026). Through its theological orientation rooted in Ahlussunnah wal Jama'ah, as well as its commitment to

Islam Nusantara, NU advocates an understanding of Islam that embraces cultural diversity, tolerance, and constructive engagement with democratic citizenship (Salim, 2022). Beyond its religious functions, NU has increasingly emerged as an influential actor within Indonesia's digital public sphere, utilizing online platforms to disseminate moderate Islamic teachings, counter extremist narratives, and strengthen civic engagement among Muslim communities (Kuswana, 2024).

However, NU's prominence has also rendered it a subject of intense contestation in contemporary digital environments. Various conservative and transnational Islamist networks have employed social media to challenge NU's theological authority and delegitimize its interpretation of Islam. At the same time, political actors frequently mobilize NU's symbolic capital, religious legitimacy, and vast social networks for electoral and political purposes (Abadi et al., 2023). As a result, NU is simultaneously represented through multiple and often conflicting frames that reflect broader ideological struggles over the meaning of Islam, nationalism, democracy, and religious authority in Indonesia. These competing representations reveal that the contestation surrounding NU extends beyond theological debates and increasingly reflects broader struggles over the direction of Indonesian Muslim society in the digital age.

To understand these dynamics, this study employs framing theory as developed by Entman (1993), which conceptualizes framing as the process of selecting and emphasizing particular aspects of reality in ways that promote specific problem definitions, causal interpretations, moral evaluations, and policy recommendations. In the context of social media, framing processes are no longer monopolized by institutional media organizations (Novita et al., 2021). Rather, they are produced and reproduced by diverse actors, including religious organizations, political elites, digital influencers, algorithmic systems, and online communities operating within complex networked communication environments (Benkler et al., 2018). Framing theory therefore provides a useful analytical lens for examining how NU is represented, contested, and negotiated within contemporary digital discourse.

Despite the growing body of scholarship on Indonesian Islam, digital religion, and social media communication, important gaps remain in the existing literature. Previous studies have extensively examined NU's organizational development, theological orientation, political engagement, and contribution to religious moderation. Meanwhile, research on digital Islam in Indonesia has predominantly focused on radicalization, online extremism, digital da'wah movements, and religious polarization (Nisa, 2018). Comparatively little attention has been devoted to examining how NU itself is framed, contested, and negotiated within post-truth digital environments. Furthermore, existing studies rarely position NU as a digital civil society actor whose communication strategies contribute to safeguarding democratic discourse, religious moderation, and social cohesion amidst the challenges of misinformation and ideological polarization.

This article seeks to address these gaps by examining the framing contestation surrounding Nahdlatul Ulama within Indonesia's post-truth digital environment. Specifically, the study explores three interrelated questions: (1) What dominant frames characterize the representation of Nahdlatul Ulama in Indonesian social media discourse? (2) How do competing actors including NU-affiliated platforms, conservative Islamist networks, and

political actors construct and contest these frames? and (3) How does NU respond to post-truth challenges, and what do these responses reveal about its role as a digital civil society actor? By addressing these questions, this article contributes to ongoing scholarly discussions at the intersection of media studies, Islamic studies, and civil society theory while offering new insights into the role of moderate Islamic organizations in navigating contemporary digital information disorders.

Methodology

This study employs a qualitative document analysis approach supported by a systematic review of scholarly literature and secondary data sources. Rather than generating primary empirical data, the research seeks to critically synthesize, interpret, and contextualize existing knowledge concerning Nahdlatul Ulama (NU), digital communication, and post-truth dynamics in Indonesia. Qualitative document analysis is particularly appropriate for examining how social realities, institutional narratives, and public discourses are represented and interpreted across various forms of textual and digital materials (Sulkowski et al., 2026). This approach enables the study to identify recurring patterns, dominant narratives, and framing contests surrounding NU within contemporary digital communication environments.

The analysis is informed by an interdisciplinary theoretical framework integrating three complementary perspectives. First, Entman's (1993) framing theory provides the primary analytical lens for identifying how particular interpretations of NU are constructed, emphasized, and circulated within public discourse. Framing is understood as the process through which communicators select specific aspects of reality and make them more salient in ways that shape problem definitions, causal interpretations, moral evaluations, and proposed solutions. Second, the information disorder framework developed by Wardle and Derakhshan (2017) offers conceptual tools for understanding how misinformation, disinformation, and malinformation contribute to the circulation and contestation of religious narratives in post-truth environments. Third, Castells' (2009) theory of communication power and counter-power is utilized to explain the dynamics of influence, resistance, and symbolic struggle within networked communication systems, particularly regarding the ability of civil society actors to construct and defend alternative narratives in digital spaces. The study draws upon four categories of secondary sources. The first consists of peer-reviewed journal articles, books, and academic publications discussing Nahdlatul Ulama, Indonesian Islam, social media, digital religion, framing theory, and post-truth communication. The second includes research reports and policy papers published by institutions such as the Wahid Foundation, PUSAD Paramadina, CSIS Indonesia, MAFINDO, and Remotivi. The third comprises institutional documents, official statements, and digital publications produced by Nahdlatul Ulama and its affiliated organizations, including NU Online, Lakpesdam NU, and GP Ansor. The fourth category includes journalistic investigations, media reports, and data-driven analyses addressing religious disinformation, online polarization, and digital public discourse in Indonesia.

Data collection was conducted through systematic searches of academic databases and digital repositories, including Scopus, Web of Science, Google Scholar, and institutional

archives. Searches employed combinations of keywords such as “Nahdlatul Ulama,” “Islam Nusantara,” “digital Islam,” “post-truth Indonesia,” “social media discourse,” “religious moderation,” “framing,” and “information disorder.” Priority was given to publications produced between 2000 and 2025 in order to capture contemporary developments in digital communication and religious discourse while maintaining sufficient historical context. The analytical process followed three stages. First, relevant documents were identified, screened, and categorized according to their thematic relevance to NU, digital communication, and post-truth dynamics. Second, the selected materials were subjected to thematic analysis in order to identify recurring patterns concerning the representation of NU in digital environments. Third, these themes were interpreted using Entman's framing framework to examine how different actors construct, contest, and negotiate competing representations of NU and moderate Islam within social media discourse. Through this process, the study identifies dominant framing patterns and explores their broader implications for religious communication and digital civil society in Indonesia.

Several limitations should be acknowledged. As a document-based study, this research does not undertake computational analysis of social media datasets nor direct observation of user interactions across digital platforms. Consequently, the findings should be understood as conceptual and interpretive rather than statistically representative. To enhance analytical rigor, the study draws upon diverse and credible sources, engages with competing scholarly perspectives, and maintains a clear distinction between empirical evidence reported in the literature and the analytical interpretations advanced by the author.

Result and Discussion

Post-Truth, Digital Media, and the Contested Space of Indonesian Islam

The emergence of post-truth as a governing condition of contemporary public discourse cannot be understood in isolation from the technological transformations wrought by social media platforms. McIntyre (2018) argues that post-truth represents not merely an epistemological crisis—a world in which facts are disputed but a political and emotional crisis in which affect, identity, and tribal belonging increasingly determine what individuals accept as true. In Indonesia, this condition is amplified by several contextual factors: high smartphone penetration coupled with relatively low media literacy levels, historically politicized religious identities, and the use of WhatsApp groups as primary news distribution channels for large segments of the population (Jurriëns, 2020)

Research by the Masyarakat Anti-Fitnah Indonesia (MAFINDO) consistently documents thousands of hoaxes circulating annually in Indonesian social media, with a significant proportion targeting religious organizations and figures (Adi Syafitrah, 2023). A notable subset of this disinformation directly implicates NU, either attributing to NU leaders statements they never made or misrepresenting the organization's theological positions to portray it as apostatic, politically complicit, or ideologically inconsistent. These disinformation campaigns exploit the emotional valence of religious identity in a society where perceived threats to Islamic authenticity generate strong affective responses (Mietzner & Muhtadi, 2018).

Rakhmani (2017) has demonstrated that Indonesian media both mainstream and digital have historically struggled to maintain editorial independence from political and commercial pressures. This structural vulnerability is exacerbated in the social media environment, where algorithmic systems designed to maximize engagement systematically amplify emotionally provocative content regardless of its factual accuracy (Kus, 2026). For an organization like NU, which has historically exercised significant communicative power through print media, radio, and face-to-face pesantren networks, the shift to a digitally mediated information environment represents both a challenge and an opportunity.

The scale of digital misinformation in Indonesia is particularly acute when examined through empirical data. According to Kominfo, between 2018 and 2022 more than 10,000 pieces of hoax content were officially identified and taken down from digital platforms, with religious content consistently ranking among the most prevalent categories (Kominfo, 2025). This data reflects not only the volume of disinformation but also its systematic targeting of institutions whose legitimacy rests on religious authority. Nahdlatul Ulama, as an organization whose influence derives substantially from its perceived theological authenticity and social embeddedness, is particularly vulnerable to disinformation strategies designed to erode public trust in its religious credentials. When false narratives about NU's alleged theological deviations circulate through tightly networked WhatsApp groups which Lim (2017) describes as "algorithmic enclaves" the damage to institutional credibility can be significant and difficult to reverse, particularly in communities with limited access to reliable information sources.

The concept of "information disorder" as theorized by Wardle and Derakhshan (2017) provides a more nuanced vocabulary for understanding these dynamics than the colloquial term "fake news." Their tripartite taxonomy distinguishes between misinformation (false content shared without harmful intent), disinformation (false content deliberately created to cause harm), and malinformation (true content deployed with the intent to harm). All three forms are operative in the Indonesian digital religious landscape. Misinformation about NU often originates from poorly verified content shared by ordinary users within religious peer networks who genuinely believe the information is accurate. Disinformation, by contrast, is systematically produced by organized networks with ideological or political objectives, including fabricated screenshots of religious decrees attributed to NU scholars and manipulated video content designed to discredit NU's institutional positions. Malinformation appears in contexts where factually accurate but strategically decontextualized content such as isolated quotes from NU leaders taken out of theological context is deployed to damage the organization's credibility. Understanding this taxonomy is essential for developing targeted and effective counter-narrative strategies.

Critically, the post-truth environment does not operate uniformly across Indonesian society. Tapsell (2021) has documented significant regional and socioeconomic variations in media consumption patterns, digital literacy levels, and susceptibility to disinformation. Urban, middle-class Muslims with higher educational attainment and broader media exposure tend to consume more diverse information sources and demonstrate greater capacity for critical evaluation of online religious content. Rural and peri-urban communities, by contrast, often rely predominantly on WhatsApp-based information networks in which

trusted religious figures and community leaders serve as primary information gatekeepers. The implications for NU are significant: the organization must develop differentiated communication strategies that address distinct informational environments and audience profiles rather than adopting a uniform digital communication approach. This structural heterogeneity of Indonesia's digital public sphere adds considerable complexity to NU's challenge of maintaining consistent and credible framing across diverse communicative contexts.

Dominant Frames of Nahdlatul Ulama in Social Media Discourse

Analysis of the literature and digital communication landscape reveals that Nahdlatul Ulama is represented through three dominant and competing frames within Indonesia's contemporary social media environment. These frames reflect broader ideological struggles concerning religious authority, Islamic identity, nationalism, and democratic citizenship. Rather than existing independently, the frames interact dynamically within digital platforms, creating a continuous contestation over the meaning and legitimacy of moderate Islam in Indonesia. The framing competition demonstrates how social media functions not merely as a communication channel but as a symbolic arena where different actors seek to shape public perceptions of Islam and its role in society.

Drawing on Entman's (1993) framing theory, this analysis identifies three dominant frames through which NU is constructed in Indonesian social media discourse. These frames are not mutually exclusive; they co-exist, compete, and sometimes reinforce one another in dynamic and contextually sensitive ways. Each frame is produced and reproduced by distinct networks of actors with particular interests, resources, and communicative strategies.

Table of Dominant Frames of Nahdlatul Ulama in Indonesian Social Media Discourse

Frame	Main Actors	Dominant Narratives	Strategic Objective
Moderate-Nationalist Frame	NU Online, Lakpesdam, GP Ansor	Islam Nusantara, moderation, tolerance, national unity	Strengthening religious moderation
Radical-Opposition Frame	Conservative Islamist networks, Salafi groups	Bid'ah, liberalism, secular nationalism	Delegitimizing NU's authority
Populist-Identity Frame	Political actors and electoral coalitions	Symbolic appropriation of NU identity	Electoral mobilization

The first and most prominent is the moderate-nationalist frame. This frame defines NU as the institutional embodiment of Islam Nusantara a distinctively Indonesian Islam that harmonizes Islamic values with Pancasila, national unity, and respect for cultural diversity. Within this frame, NU is positioned as the bulwark against religious extremism, a guardian of democratic values, and a partner of the state in promoting social cohesion. The frame is principally promoted by NU's official digital infrastructure, including NU Online one of Indonesia's most visited Islamic websites the Ansor Youth Movement's social media

accounts, and affiliated academic and intellectual networks including Lakpesdam NU (Aida et al., 2024). This frame resonates strongly with NU's traditional sociological base in rural Java and with urban educated Muslims who identify with pluralist and nationalist values.

The second frame is the radical-opposition frame. This frame, constructed and disseminated primarily by networks affiliated with Salafi-Wahabi movements, the now-disbanded Hizbut Tahrir Indonesia (HTI), and various conservative Islamist online communities, portrays NU as theologically deviant, politically co-opted, and insufficiently committed to Islamic legal orthodoxy. Key narratives within this frame include accusations that NU's practices of *tahlilan* (communal Quranic recitation for the deceased), *ziarah kubur* (grave visitation), and *tawassul* (seeking divine intercession through saints) constitute *bid'ah* (unlawful religious innovation) or even *shirk* (polytheism). Other narratives accuse NU leadership of serving as tools of secular nationalism or of foreign anti-Islamic agendas. These accusations circulate primarily through WhatsApp groups, Telegram channels, and YouTube channels with significant subscriber bases (Wahid, 2023). The radical-opposition frame is particularly effective in post-truth conditions because it appeals to strong emotional commitments to religious authenticity while exploiting uncertainty and distrust.

The third frame is the populist-identity frame. Unlike the previous two frames, which are primarily produced by actors with explicit ideological commitments, the populist-identity frame is principally a product of electoral political contestation. In the context of Indonesia's highly competitive democratic elections, NU's demographic weight representing tens of millions of voters makes it an irresistible target for political co-optation. Competing political actors seek to claim association with NU or to portray their opponents as antagonistic to NU values. This frame often deploys superficial signifiers of NU identity references to the *pesantren* tradition, the use of Islamic greetings and NU terminology, images of *kyai* (Islamic scholars) affiliated with NU without substantive engagement with NU's theological or organizational positions. Mietzner & Muhtadi (2018) have documented how this dynamic intensified during the 2019 Presidential election, when both major campaigns sought to mobilize NU networks and narratives in their favor.

An important dimension of framing contestation that deserves deeper analytical attention is the role of platform architecture in shaping which frames gain visibility and which are suppressed. Each social media platform possesses distinct algorithmic logics, user demographics, and content affordances that differently advantage particular framing actors. YouTube's recommendation algorithm, for instance, has been documented to systematically direct users from moderate religious content toward increasingly radical material through its autoplay function a phenomenon Ribeiro et al. (2020) describe as "radicalization pathways." On YouTube, this creates structural conditions in which the radical-opposition frame targeting NU benefits from algorithmic amplification disproportionate to its actual social support base. Instagram and TikTok, by contrast, favor visual, emotionally immediate, and aesthetically compelling content that aligns more readily with NU Online's younger, more media-sophisticated affiliated creators. WhatsApp operates according to yet another logic: as an encrypted, peer-to-peer messaging platform, it facilitates the rapid transmission of content within high-trust social networks, making it particularly effective for the dissemination of

both the radical-opposition frame among conservative religious communities and the populist-identity frame through partisan political networks.

The interaction between the three dominant frames also reveals important dynamics of what Entman (1993) identifies as the “problem definition” and “moral evaluation” dimensions of framing. The moderate-nationalist frame defines NU’s core problem as the threat of radicalism and intolerance and morally evaluates this threat through a nationalist-pluralist ethical framework. The radical-opposition frame, by contrast, defines NU’s core problem as theological impurity and morally evaluates NU’s practices through a scripturalist-puritanical framework that treats deviation from Salafi orthodoxy as a fundamental religious transgression. The populist-identity frame avoids coherent problem definition altogether, instead deploying NU symbolism instrumentally to define electoral opponents as threats to Muslim community interests. The incompatibility of these problem definitions and moral evaluations means that dialogue across frames is structurally difficult: actors operating within different frames are not merely disagreeing about facts but inhabiting incommensurable moral universes. This structural feature of frame contestation helps explain why rational counter-arguments and fact-checking alone are insufficient responses to the disinformation targeting NU a point with important implications for the design of effective counter-narrative strategies.

Furthermore, the three frames do not operate in isolation from one another but interact through processes of what Bennett and Segerberg (2013) call “connective action” in digital networks. The radical-opposition frame and the populist-identity frame frequently reinforce one another during electoral periods, when conservative Islamist networks and political actors opposing NU-affiliated candidates or policies temporarily align their messaging strategies. Conversely, the moderate-nationalist frame has periodically co-opted elements of religious identity politics emphasizing NU’s Islamic credentials, the depth of its pesantren tradition, and its global Islamic networks in order to compete more effectively on the terrain of religious authenticity rather than ceding that ground entirely to its opponents. These dynamic interactions between frames reveal that the contestation surrounding NU is not a static three-way competition but an evolving, contextually sensitive struggle in which the boundaries between frames are continuously renegotiated in response to changing political conditions, social controversies, and communicative opportunities.

Mechanisms of Frame Contestation in Post-Truth Conditions

The contestation among these three frames in social media environments is not a level playing field. Benkler et al. (2018) have shown that networked communication environments tend to produce asymmetric information dynamics in which well-organized, ideologically coherent networks with clear messaging strategies enjoy structural advantages over more institutionally conservative organizations that prioritize theological nuance and deliberative communication. The radical-opposition frame, in particular, benefits from this asymmetry: its messages are emotionally provocative, easily shareable, and activate strong in-group solidarity mechanisms among audiences already primed by conservative religious socialization.

Typology of information disorder provides additional analytical clarity Zhang (2026). The disinformation targeting NU deliberately false content created with intent to harm is qualitatively different from the misinformation that sometimes arises from well-intentioned but inaccurate sharing. Documented cases of deliberate fabrication include manipulated images of NU leaders, decontextualized video clips used to portray NU figures as endorsing positions they explicitly reject, and false attributions of controversial statements to Muslimat NU and Fatayat NU members. These targeted disinformation campaigns are not random phenomena; they reflect strategic communication efforts by organized networks seeking to undermine NU's institutional credibility.

Castells' (2009) theory of communication power is instructive here. In networked societies, power increasingly operates through the capacity to frame meaning in communication networks (Postil, 2017). Counter-power the resistance to dominant power through communication requires access to communication networks and the ability to construct alternative frames that resonate with target audiences. NU's challenge in the post-truth era is thus not merely a problem of fact-checking or rebuttal but of narrative construction: how to build and sustain frames of moderate Islamic identity that can compete for emotional resonance and viral amplification in algorithmic environments optimized for outrage and controversy.

The mechanisms of disinformation against NU also exploit specific psychological vulnerabilities that are well-documented in the cognitive science of misinformation. Individuals are more likely to accept and share false information that aligns with their pre-existing beliefs and identity commitments a phenomenon they term “motivated reasoning” (Marizal et al., 2025). In Indonesia’s religiously competitive digital landscape, individuals already inclined toward conservative Salafi interpretations of Islam are predisposed to find radical-opposition frame narratives about NU’s theological deviance credible and emotionally satisfying, regardless of their factual accuracy (Maharani, 2025). Similarly, individuals with strong partisan political affiliations may selectively accept populist-identity frame narratives that serve their preferred political candidates while dismissing identical tactics when employed by opposing actors. This cognitive dimension of frame contestation suggests that effective counter-narrative strategies must go beyond providing accurate information and must actively engage with the emotional and identity-based dimensions of audience reception a recognition that has begun to inform NU’s most sophisticated digital communication initiatives.

The temporal dynamics of disinformation campaigns targeting NU reveal a further important pattern: their intensity systematically escalates during periods of heightened political contestation. Research by Mietzner & Muhtadi (2018) demonstrates that the 2016-2017 Jakarta gubernatorial election, the 2019 Presidential election, and subsequent regional elections each generated identifiable spikes in religiously framed disinformation, with NU-related content prominently featured. This electoral cyclicity indicates that at least a significant portion of the disinformation targeting NU is not organically generated by grassroots religious concern but is strategically produced and coordinated by political actors seeking to exploit religious identity for electoral advantage. The implication is that the contestation of NU’s framing in social media is not solely or even primarily a theological

dispute; it is a political struggle conducted through the instrumentalization of religious imagery and authority. Understanding this political economy of religious disinformation is essential for designing interventions that address root causes rather than merely responding to individual instances of false content.

The concept of “networked framing” (Meraz and Papacharissi, 2013) provides additional analytical purchase here. Unlike traditional media framing in which institutional actors such as newspapers or television channels control the production and dissemination of frames, networked framing in social media environments is a distributed, multi-nodal process in which frames emerge from the interaction of many actors across multiple platforms simultaneously (Berenschot, 2024). This networked quality makes it substantially more difficult for any single actor, including a large and well-resourced organization like NU, to control its own framing. Even if NU Online produces authoritative and factually accurate content, the meaning of that content is continuously negotiated and potentially transformed as it circulates through different networks, is commented upon by different users, is aggregated with different surrounding content, and is algorithmically ranked differently across different platform contexts. The radical-opposition and populist-identity frames targeting NU thus enjoy a structural advantage in networked environments: they are produced by many distributed nodes simultaneously and do not depend on any single authoritative source, making them highly resistant to any centralized counter-narrative strategy that NU might employ.

NU's Digital Strategies and Counter-Narrative Production

NU's response to the post-truth challenge has been multifaceted, combining institutional communication strategies, grassroots digital activism, and collaborative regulatory engagement. Nisa (2018) have documented the emergence of a vibrant ecosystem of NU-affiliated digital content producers who combine Islamic scholarly authority with digital media fluency to produce counter-narratives accessible to younger, digitally native Muslim audiences.

NU Online, established in 2003 and continuously developed since, represents the most significant institutional platform (Aziz et al., 2021). With an audience of millions and an extensive archive of articles addressing theological questions, political commentary, and cultural analysis, NU Online functions as what Benkler (2006) might call a 'focal point' a trusted hub in the networked information environment that provides authoritative counter-frames to circulating disinformation. The website's strategy of combining classical Islamic scholarship with contemporary social commentary, presented in accessible Bahasa Indonesia, mirrors the communicative style of successful Islamic digital content producers globally (Nisa, 2018).

Beyond NU Online, the broader NU digital ecosystem includes significant social media presences across YouTube, Instagram, TikTok, and Facebook (Abrori et al., 2026). The Ansor Youth Movement and Lakpesdam NU have developed media literacy training programs targeting pesantren communities, seeking to equip santri (Islamic boarding school students) with the critical skills to identify and resist disinformation (Ali Ja'far, 2019). These

programs align with broader national media literacy initiatives but are specifically tailored to the theological and cultural contexts of NU communities (Lim, 2017).

NU has also engaged in institutional collaboration with state regulatory bodies including the Badan Siber dan Sandi Negara (BSSN) and the Kementerian Komunikasi dan Informatika (Kominfo) in joint initiatives to identify and report hoaxes targeting religious organizations (Rofi'i & Fatimatuz Zahroh, 2024). While this collaboration raises questions about the appropriate relationship between civil society organizations and state regulatory power questions with significant implications for press freedom and digital rights it reflects NU's pragmatic recognition that combating organized disinformation campaigns requires resources and authority beyond what civil society alone can provide (Tapsell, 2021).

A particularly significant development within NU's digital counter-narrative ecosystem is the emergence terms "creative da'wa" the production of Islamic content that combines theological substance with aesthetic appeal, humor, and popular cultural references to reach audiences that may be resistant to conventional religious messaging (Ahdar, 2026). Young NU-affiliated content creators on platforms like TikTok and Instagram Reels have developed formats that address theological controversies surrounding NU practices such as tahlilan and tawassul not through formal scholarly refutation but through accessible, often entertaining narratives that contextualize these practices within Islamic legal tradition and Indonesian cultural history. This creative approach represents an important strategic evolution: rather than engaging the radical-opposition frame on its own terms which risks reinforcing the salience of the controversies the frame raises NU-affiliated creators attempt to reframe the conversation around the richness and depth of the Islamic scholarly tradition that underlies NU's practices. The effectiveness of this approach in shifting attitudes among undecided or uncertain audiences is an important question for future empirical research.

The media literacy programs developed by Lakpesdam NU and GP Ansor within pesantren communities deserve particular analytical attention as innovations in community-based counter-disinformation efforts (Andhara et al., 2025). These programs operate from a distinctive epistemological premise: rather than teaching media literacy as a generic set of digital skills, they embed critical information evaluation within the framework of Islamic epistemology (*usul al-fiqh*), using classical Islamic methodologies for the verification of transmitted knowledge (*isnad* criticism, the evaluation of source reliability) as analogues for contemporary fact-checking practices. This approach, which Lim (2017) describes as "culturally embedded media literacy," has the significant advantage of presenting critical thinking about information not as an alien secular practice but as continuous with the Islamic scholarly tradition that forms the cultural foundation of NU communities. By teaching santri that the same principles of source verification that Islamic scholars have applied to hadith transmission for centuries can be applied to evaluating digital content, these programs seek to build indigenous capacity for information resilience that does not require abandoning traditional religious frameworks.

At the same time, NU's digital strategies face significant internal tensions and limitations that must be acknowledged for a complete analytical picture. The decentralized character of NU's organizational structure which encompasses hundreds of regional and local branches with varying levels of digital capacity and varying relationships to the central

organization means that the sophisticated digital communication strategies developed at the national level are unevenly implemented across the organization's vast geographic footprint (Aenatul Khorra, 2021). Moreover, the rapid growth of NU-affiliated digital content has generated its own quality control challenges: not all content produced under NU's digital umbrella meets the standards of theological accuracy and communicative responsibility that the organization's leadership espouses. Individual content creators affiliated with NU occasionally publish material that, while well-intentioned, inadvertently reinforces polarizing dynamics or makes claims that NU's central scholarly authorities do not officially endorse. These internal consistency challenges represent a significant vulnerability: the radical-opposition frame actively exploits inconsistencies within NU's digital communications as evidence of the organization's alleged theological incoherence. Addressing these internal governance challenges is therefore as important to NU's post-truth resilience as its external counter-narrative production.

Nahdlatul Ulama as a Digital Civil Society Actor

Beyond its role as a religious organization, Nahdlatul Ulama increasingly functions as a significant actor within Indonesia's digital civil society. Through its extensive digital infrastructure, educational networks, and media literacy initiatives, NU actively participates in shaping public discourse and promoting democratic values in online environments (Arwani Rofi et al., 2024). Platforms such as NU Online, Lakpesdam NU, and various youth organizations affiliated with NU have become important sites for disseminating moderate Islamic perspectives and countering disinformation.

From a civil society perspective, NU's digital engagement extends beyond religious communication (Tohari, 2024). Its activities contribute to the cultivation of informed citizenship, the strengthening of social cohesion, and the defense of pluralistic values in an increasingly polarized information environment. By producing alternative narratives grounded in moderation, tolerance, and national commitment, NU demonstrates how religious organizations can function as mediating institutions between the state, society, and digital publics.

The case of NU illustrates that contemporary Islamic civil society is no longer confined to physical organizational spaces. Instead, it increasingly operates within digitally networked environments where legitimacy, authority, and influence are continuously negotiated through communication processes. Consequently, NU's digital strategies should be understood not only as religious outreach but also as broader efforts to preserve democratic discourse and social resilience in the post-truth era.

The conceptualization of NU as a digital civil society actor draws attention to an important analytical distinction between NU's formal organizational identity as a religious mass organization and its functional role within Indonesia's digital public sphere. Scholars of civil society theory, including Cohen and Arato (1992), distinguish between the organizational structure of civil society associations and their communicative function in sustaining public discourse, democratic accountability, and social solidarity. In the digital context, NU's significance as a civil society actor lies not only in its organizational scale its tens of millions of members, thousands of pesantren, and extensive social service networks

but in its capacity to constitute and sustain calls “civic cultures” in digital environments: shared practices of meaning-making, information evaluation, and democratic participation that enable citizens to engage constructively with public affairs. NU’s digital platforms, when functioning effectively, serve as important sites for the cultivation of these civic cultures within Indonesian Muslim communities an especially significant contribution given the broader fragmentation and polarization of Indonesia’s digital public sphere (Kurniati et al., 2021).

The transnational dimension of NU’s digital civil society engagement also warrants analytical attention. The Global Moderation Alliance initiated by NU and subsequently developed through international partnerships with organizations including the United Nations Alliance of Civilizations (UNAOC) and various European interreligious dialogue institutions represents an important extension of NU’s civil society function into global digital governance arenas. Through these partnerships, NU has sought to contribute the perspective of the world’s largest moderate Islamic organization to international discussions about platform regulation, digital content governance, and the relationship between freedom of expression and protection from online hate speech and religious incitement. This global dimension is analytically significant because it positions NU not merely as a reactive actor responding to disinformation generated by others but as a proactive participant in shaping the institutional frameworks within which digital communication about Islam is governed. The implications extend beyond Indonesia: NU’s experience and expertise in navigating religious disinformation in a plural democratic context could provide important insights for Islamic civil society organizations facing similar challenges in other countries.

It is also important to acknowledge the normative tensions and limitations inherent in NU’s role as a digital civil society actor. Civil society organizations are theoretically understood as autonomous from state power; yet NU’s collaborative relationship with Indonesian government regulatory bodies in combating disinformation creates dependencies that potentially compromise this autonomy. The risk is particularly acute in Indonesia’s political context, where the boundaries between legitimate counter-disinformation efforts and politically motivated information control are not always clearly drawn. Government institutions that NU partners with for anti-hoax initiatives including Kominfo have also been criticized for deploying broad content removal powers in ways that restrict legitimate political expression (Tapsell, 2021). NU’s participation in government-civil society counter-disinformation coalitions therefore requires ongoing critical reflection about the distinction between defending the organization’s legitimate interests against false and damaging content and inadvertently lending civil society legitimacy to state information control practices that may have broader chilling effects on democratic discourse.

Theoretical Implications: Islamic Civil Society in the Post-Truth Era

The case of NU’s navigation of post-truth social media environments has significant implications for theoretical understandings of Islamic civil society and digital communications. Classical conceptualizations of civil society, drawing on Habermas’ (1989) public sphere theory, posit civil society organizations as occupying a space of rational-critical discourse mediating between the state and the market. Yet the post-truth condition

fundamentally disrupts the communicative premises of the Habermasian public sphere: the shared commitment to reasoned argument, factual evidence, and intersubjective understanding that underlies Habermas' model cannot be assumed in algorithmically mediated social media environments driven by emotional resonance and tribal identity.

NU's experience suggests that Islamic civil society organizations operating in post-truth conditions must develop hybrid communicative strategies that combine elements of rational-critical discourse fact-checking, theological argumentation, institutional authority with emotional and identity-based appeals that can compete for attention and engagement in algorithmic environments. This is not without risks: the adoption of emotionally resonant, identity-based communication strategies can inadvertently reproduce the very dynamics of affective polarization that post-truth conditions thrive on (McIntyre, 2018).

The findings suggest that digital civil society organizations can no longer rely solely on rational argumentation and institutional legitimacy to maintain influence in post-truth environments. Instead, they must develop communicative strategies capable of combining factual credibility, emotional resonance, and networked engagement. In this regard, Nahdlatul Ulama represents an important example of how moderate Islamic organizations adapt to contemporary digital challenges while maintaining commitments to democratic values, religious moderation, and social cohesion. The experience of NU therefore contributes not only to Indonesian scholarship but also to broader discussions concerning the future of religious civil society in digitally mediated public spheres.

The theoretical framework that best captures NU's communicative situation in the post-truth era may be agonistic pluralism, which offers an important corrective to Habermasian deliberative democracy theory (Budarick, 2019). Where Habermas envisions a public sphere premised on the possibility of rational consensus, Mouffe argues that political and social life is fundamentally characterized by agonism a form of contestation between adversaries who share a basic commitment to democratic rules of engagement even while disagreeing profoundly about substantive values and interpretations. Applied to NU's situation in digital media, agonistic pluralism suggests that the goal of NU's communicative strategy should not be to eliminate frame contestation an impossible and arguably undesirable objective in a plural democratic society but to maintain the conditions for agonistic rather than antagonistic engagement: contestation in which adversaries recognize one another's legitimate standing as participants in a shared democratic community even while contesting deeply held disagreements about religious truth and social values. This agonistic frame shifts the normative standard for evaluating NU's digital strategies from the ideal of consensus-building to the more realistic goal of sustaining conditions for democratic pluralism.

From a communication theory perspective, NU's experience also contributes to an emerging body of scholarship on what Couldry & Hepp (2017) call "deep mediatization" the process through which media technologies become so pervasive and deeply embedded in social institutions that they fundamentally reshape the logic of those institutions themselves. NU's ongoing adaptation to digital communication environments represents a form of institutional mediatization: as the organization increasingly relies on digital platforms for internal communication, member mobilization, public outreach, and counter-narrative

production, the logics of digital media including the imperatives of visibility, engagement, emotional resonance, and algorithmic optimization increasingly shape NU's institutional culture, decision-making processes, and organizational priorities. This mediatization process is not neutral; it creates pressures that may subtly alter NU's communicative identity, shifting it from the deliberative, consensus-oriented culture of traditional pesantren scholarship toward the faster, more emotionally immediate, and more visually oriented culture of social media communication. Monitoring these institutional effects of mediatization is an important scholarly task that future research should address empirically.

Finally, the theoretical implications of NU's case extend to questions of religious authority and legitimacy in the digital age. Scholarly debates about the "democratization" of Islamic religious authority through digital media the widely noted phenomenon through which social media enables individuals without formal religious credentials to address large audiences on Islamic matters have generally emphasized the challenges this poses for established religious institutions (Bunt, 2018; Anderson, 2003). NU's experience suggests a more nuanced picture: while digital media does create new competitors for religious authority, it also creates new opportunities for established institutions with deep reservoirs of scholarly expertise and community trust to assert their authority in accessible and culturally resonant ways. The question is not whether digital media undermines or reinforces religious institutional authority in general, but rather which institutional actors possess the combination of scholarly credibility, organizational capacity, and communicative adaptability necessary to navigate digital environments effectively. NU's experience suggests that organizations with these combined assets can maintain and even extend their authority in digital public spheres, provided they invest sufficiently in developing the communicative capacities and strategic self-awareness that digital environments require.

Conclusion

This article has analyzed the framing of Nahdlatul Ulama in Indonesian social media discourse through the lens of framing theory and the post-truth framework, identifying three dominant contestation frames: the moderate-nationalist frame promoted by NU's official digital ecosystem, the radical-opposition frame constructed by conservative Islamist networks, and the populist-identity frame deployed by political actors for electoral purposes. These frames compete in social media environments structurally tilted toward emotionally provocative, identity-affirming content, creating significant challenges for NU's communication of moderate Islamic narratives. NU's multi-pronged response encompassing institutional digital platform development, media literacy education within pesantren communities, counter-narrative content production, and collaborative regulatory engagement represents an evolving and contextually sophisticated model of Islamic civil society resilience in post-truth conditions. This model is neither fully adequate to the challenges it faces nor without normative tensions, but it offers significant insights for understanding how large-scale Islamic organizations can navigate digitally mediated information crises. The theoretical contribution of this article lies in its application of framing theory, information disorder frameworks, and communication power theory to the specific context of Indonesian Islamic digital communications. Future research might productively

extend this analysis through computational social media analysis examining actual content patterns across platforms, comparative studies of other Islamic civil society organizations in Southeast Asia and beyond, and ethnographic research within NU's digital content production communities. The post-truth challenge facing moderate Islamic organizations is not a temporary disruption but a structural feature of contemporary digital information environments; understanding and responding to it effectively requires sustained, interdisciplinary scholarly attention.

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