

Public Space, Religion, and Political Polarization in the Digital Age: A Case Study of the Controversy Surrounding Islamic Boarding Schools (*Pesantren*) and Trans7 from Habermas' Perspective

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Abstract. This study aims to discuss religious-based political polarization in Indonesia's digital public sphere, as seen in the controversial case between *Pesantren* and Trans7. The formal object of this study is the digital public sphere as a social communication construct in Habermas' perspective, while the material object is the phenomenon of religious-based political polarization in the controversial case between *Pesantren* and Trans7. This study uses a qualitative approach with a systematic literature review method. The results and discussion in this study show that the digital public sphere has shifted from an arena of rational discourse to an arena of opinion battles filled with emotions, identity sentiments, and political interests. Therefore, it is necessary to revitalize the digital public sphere by strengthening the ethics of dialogue, social media responsibility, and public rational awareness so that freedom of expression is in line with moral values, justice, and the principles of deliberative democracy.

Keywords: Digital Media, Religious Polarization, Algorithms, Social Construction.

1. Introduction

Indonesia is one of the countries with the highest number of internet users in the world. Based on a 2018 report by the Indonesian Internet Service Providers Association (APJII), the national internet penetration rate was recorded at 64.8%, indicating that more than half of Indonesia's population is actively using the internet (APJII, 2018). This percentage has increased significantly, especially since the pandemic, when online activities have become part of everyday life. By 2022, the internet penetration rate in Indonesia is expected to rise to 77.02%, indicating the wide spread access and dependence of the community on the digital world (APJII,2022).

Technological advances today have developed so rapidly that it is difficult to limit them, because almost all aspects of human life now depend on communication media and digital technology. Various social media platforms offer ease of access and their own appeal to users, such as WhatsApp, TikTok, Instagram, and various other applications that have become an important part of the interactions and activities of

modern society. Social media has now become a new public space for people to express their opinions and views. However, the development of digital media and social media has changed the form of this public space. This is because social media, where users respond to each other's posts, does not function as a space for rational and argumentative discussion (Haezer, 2018).

In this context, the controversial case between *Pesantren* and Trans7 is a clear representation of the distortion of the digital public sphere. The public reaction on social media shows how the public sphere is now vulnerable to religious-based political polarization, which arises from weak rationality in communication and a lack of balanced social control among media users. Therefore, seeing the existence of religious-based political polarization in Indonesia's digital public sphere, as seen in the controversial case between *Pesantren* and Trans7. This phenomenon shows that the digital public sphere, which should be a place for rational dialogue, has instead experienced distortion due to the dominance of political narratives and religious identity. Therefore, this study considers it important to discuss the dynamics of the digital public sphere and the forms of religiously based political polarization in the case of *Pesantren* and Trans7 using Jürgen Habermas' public sphere theory.

Previous research relevant to the current research title: Studies have been conducted by a number of researchers. Among others, the most recent research reports were conducted by:

Angga, Stepanus, et al. (2023). "*Etika Komunikasi Netizen Indonesia di Media Sosial sebagai Ruang Demokrasi dalam Telaah Ruang Publik Jurgen Habermas.*" Ganesha University of Education, Bali. This study discusses the phenomenon of Indonesian netizens' comments on social media, which are considered a form of freedom of expression in a democratic system. The authors aim to examine the ethics of netizen communication based on Jurgen Habermas' public sphere theory, particularly regarding rational communicative action. A qualitative approach was used, with data collected from journals, books, and articles discussing Indonesian netizen communication. The analysis was conducted using Habermas's theory of communicative action and public sphere to understand how netizens interact on social media. This study shows that comment sections on social media often become a forum for emotional, irrational, and even sarcastic communication, thereby obscuring the meaning of the ideal public sphere. Based on Habermas' public sphere theory, good communication should be based on rationality and four claims of validity: truth, accuracy, honesty, and comprehensibility. However, digital communication practices in Indonesia are still far from these principles. Therefore, the author emphasizes the importance of communication ethics and critical awareness so that social media can truly become a democratic public sphere, a place for healthy, equal, and respectful dialogue, and one that is capable of promoting social solidarity and meaningful public participation (Angga et al., 2023).

Previous and current research have similarities and differences. Both previous and current research examine political polarization in the digital media space in Indonesia. The difference is that previous research discussed the importance of

communication ethics and critical awareness so that social media can truly become a democratic public sphere, a place for healthy, equal, and respectful dialogue, and one that is capable of promoting social solidarity and meaningful public participation. Meanwhile, current research discusses the digital public sphere in the case of *Pesantren* and *Trans7*, representing religious-based political polarization in Indonesia from the perspective of Habermas' public sphere theory.

The term public sphere first appeared in the 18th century and was dominated by the bourgeoisie, who were bound by political and economic interests (Menoh, 2015). Habermas later restored this concept to its original meaning as a space for rational discourse, where citizens could engage in free and critical dialogue. He emphasized the importance of an "interstitial space" that allowed the public to express their opinions without domination by the state or the market, so that the ideal public sphere was open, inclusive, and participatory (Hardiman, 2009).

According to Habermas, the ideal public sphere is one that is open, freely accessible, participatory, and free from the domination of the state or the market. The public sphere no longer belongs to the bourgeoisie, but has become a shared space for the public interest, where everyone has the same right to express their opinions and participate regardless of their social status or profession (Supriadi, 2017).

The development of digital media and social media has changed the form of the public sphere. This is because social media, a place where users respond to posts, does not function as a rational and argumentative discussion space, as ideally conceived in Habermas' concept of the public sphere. Instead of being used to exchange ideas critically and logically, comment columns often turn into arenas for emotional debates, mutual attacks, or self-justification, without clear arguments. In other words, interactions on social media are driven more by emotion, fanaticism, and group identity interests than by a spirit of rationality and open dialogue (Haezer, 2018). Social media, which should be a means of democratizing information, often becomes an arena for the commodification of discourse where information is produced for specific political and economic interests.

The theoretical basis for this study uses Jürgen Habermas' Public Sphere theory, which explains the importance of free, open, and non-oppressive communication spaces. Habermas argues that in the modern era, the spirit of emancipation and liberation that developed from the 15th to the 18th centuries has been replaced by a logic of control and domination over social processes that are considered technical objects. In his view, humans are no longer treated as free subjects, but rather as objects that are systematically manipulated by oppressive political and economic forces. This condition reflects the reality of today's society, where systems and power tend to regulate social life unilaterally. In response to this situation, Habermas criticizes the oppressive structure of modernity and introduces the concept of public space, which is a forum for society to engage in rational and equal dialogue as a form of resistance against the domination of power (Supriadi, 2017).

The concept of public space plays an important role in the dynamics of democratic life because it provides a forum for the community to express their aspirations and build social communication. In public spaces, every individual has the same opportunity to express their ideas, views, and interests in a logical and argumentative manner. This space serves as a means of interaction and exchange of ideas among communities regarding the issues they face. Through the public sphere, people can express their opinions openly without restrictions based on social status or background (Habermas, 2007).

According to Jürgen Habermas, there are four main prerequisites for the public sphere to function ideally. First, a person's social position should not be a measure of participation. Second, the issues discussed should be new issues that have not yet received attention from either the government or the wider community. Third, the decisions made must be based on a rational and argumentative discussion process. Fourth, the public sphere must be inclusive, providing space for all parties to participate, while also being exclusive in the sense of keeping the discussion focused on the common interest. Based on these four principles, it can be understood that the public sphere acts as an arena for communication that allows the public to engage in dialogue on an equal footing, ultimately resulting in collective decisions born of rational deliberation (Roza, 2013).

The main issue of this study is the existence of religious-based political polarization in Indonesia's digital public sphere, as seen in the controversial case between *Pesantren* and Trans7. This phenomenon shows that the digital public sphere, which should be a place for rational dialogue, has instead been distorted by the dominance of political narratives and religious identities. In line with the main issue, the research question of this study is how the digital public sphere in the case of *Pesantren* and Trans7 represents religiously based political polarization in Indonesia from the perspective of Habermas' public sphere theory.

This study aims to discuss the dynamics of digital public space and forms of religious-based political polarization in the cases of *Pesantren* and Trans7 using Jürgen Habermas' public space theory.

Scientific research generally has both theoretical and practical benefits and uses. Theoretically, this study is expected to contribute to the development of public communication studies and the application of Habermas' public sphere theory in the digital and religious contexts in Indonesia. Practically, this study is expected to provide an understanding and awareness of the importance of public communication ethics, digital literacy, and religious moderation in maintaining rational and harmonious social dialogue in the digital sphere.

2. Method

Explain the research methods and techniques used in the study. Provide a concise yet accurate description, including details such as size, volume, replication, and procedures. For newly developed methods, provide a detailed explanation to enable

other researchers to replicate the experiment. Established methods may be described by citing appropriate references. Avoid presenting general scientific concepts, literature reviews, or common definitions.

3. Results and Discussion

3.1. Overview of the *Pesantren* and Trans7 Case

The controversy between *Pesantren* and Trans7 is a clear example of how the digital public sphere in Indonesia has shifted from being an arena for rational dialogue to one for emotional and identity-based debates. Trans7's coverage presented an disproportionate framing of *Pesantren* schools and religious leaders, portraying boarding schools as closed, traditional environments that are irrelevant to modern developments. The content of the news report creates a negative impression that does not correspond with the reality of *Pesantren* as Islamic educational institutions that play an important role in shaping the moral, intellectual, and character of the nation.

The news coverage sparked widespread reactions among the public, especially from the *Pesantren* community, who felt aggrieved and harassed. Clerics, students, and alumni of *Pesantren* expressed their objections to the broadcast through various social media, demanding clarification and an apology from Trans7. The public criticism that emerged was not only based on moral offense, but also on the awareness that the media had abused its informative function by presenting a biased discourse that was detrimental to certain parties. This phenomenon shows how the power of the media can shape social reality and massively influence public opinion in the digital space.

In the context of Jürgen Habermas' theory of public space, this case shows a real form of public communication distortion, where social interactions in digital space are no longer based on communicative rationality that emphasizes honesty, openness, and argumentation, but are driven by instrumental rationality that is oriented towards interests and influence. Ideally, the public sphere functions as a place for rational and inclusive discourse, where citizens engage in dialogue on an equal footing to achieve mutual understanding. However, in reality, the digital space has become an arena for contestation of opinions dominated by collective emotions, identity fanaticism, and specific political interests (Aryanto & Sitorus, 2025).

This phenomenon shows that the digital public sphere in Indonesia is not yet fully capable of functioning as a forum for democratic communication as idealized by Habermas. The public reaction to Trans7's reporting shows a spirit of participation, but this is not balanced with the ability to engage in argumentative and critical dialogue. This has led to religiously-based political polarization, where differences of opinion in the digital space do not result in mutual understanding, but rather reinforce social and ideological barriers between community groups.

This event can be understood as a reflection of the crisis of public rationality in the digital age. Mass media and social media, as instruments of public communication, should serve to strengthen the quality of social discourse and expand citizen participation, not exacerbate it. Therefore, there needs to be a collective awareness to

rebuild a healthy digital public sphere through media literacy, communication ethics, and the strengthening of public rationality values so that the digital space can once again become a means of open, equal, and common interest-oriented dialogue (Iswadi, 2025). The controversy between *Pesantren* and Trans7 came to light in Indonesia's digital public sphere after the Trans7 television station aired a news report that contained negative framing of *Pesantren* and religious leaders. In the report, *Pesantren* were portrayed disproportionately, as if they were synonymous with deviant practices and behavior that did not conform to religious values. This reporting was considered to have created a false stigma against traditional Islamic educational institutions and degraded the image of *kiai* as moral figures and role models for the community.

The news content sparked a wave of strong reactions from the public, especially from *santri* (Islamic boarding school students), *ulama* (religious scholars), Islamic boarding school administrators, and alumni of Islamic boarding schools in various regions. They believe that Trans7's broadcast violated the principles of ethical journalism and media objectivity by presenting a one-sided view of *Pesantren* without in-depth verification and without presenting sources representing the boarding schools. The broadcast was also considered to have the potential to cause public misunderstanding and reinforce negative stereotypes about Islamic education.

Various digital platforms such as Twitter (X), Instagram, TikTok, and Facebook have become the main outlets for the dissemination of public opinion. Netizens uploaded video clips, tagged the official Trans7 account, and created viral hashtags such as *#SavePesantren* and *#BoikotTrans7*. Public reaction grew rapidly in a short period of time, indicating how the digital space has now become the main arena for the formation of social and political opinion. Through comments, posts, and online discussions, the public has shown an emotional response to issues that touch on their religious identity.

However, public reaction, which should have been a form of critical participation, has instead turned into a wave of polarization. Some social media users viewed Trans7's actions as a form of abuse against Islamic values and Islamic boarding school institutions, while others argued that the public's anger was excessive and disproportionate. The debate then developed into an ideological and political identity battle, where religion was used as a symbol to strengthen the social position and political views of each side.

This phenomenon illustrates how Indonesia's digital public sphere has become distorted, as criticized by Jürgen Habermas in his theory of the public sphere. Habermas emphasizes that the public sphere should be a place where citizens can engage in rational, open discussion, free from the domination of power and economic interests. In this context, interactions on social media actually reveal the dominance of instrumental rationality, namely communication that is directed towards achieving emotional, political, or popularity gains, rather than achieving mutual understanding (Tobing, 2017).

This form of distortion is clearly evident in the patterns of public communication that have emerged on social media. Many comments are emotional, sarcastic, and even provocative, thereby closing off the space for healthy dialogue. Habermas refers to this condition as a failure of communicative action because communication is no longer directed toward seeking truth, accuracy, and honesty, but rather toward strengthening the position of certain groups. As a result, social media no longer functions as a space for deliberation, but has become an arena for the battle of opinions and symbolic legitimacy between community groups.

Meanwhile, Trans7 issued an official statement and a public apology as a form of institutional responsibility. However, the wave of debate in the virtual world did not immediately subside. The apology even sparked a new debate between those who accepted it and those who considered it insincere. This situation shows that the crisis of public trust in mainstream media is one of the factors that strengthens digital polarization. The media, which originally functioned as a means of public communication and social education, is now viewed by some people as part of a power structure that is insensitive to cultural and religious values.

From the perspective of Habermas' theory of public space, this case can be interpreted as a form of commercialization of public space. Habermas argues that modernity has caused public space to lose its critical character because it has been absorbed by the economic and power systems. In the context of the Trans7 case, the mass media, which should be a means of rational communication, is instead trapped in the logic of industry and ratings. Programs are designed not to educate the public, but to attract the attention of the market. As a result, the public sphere has been colonized by the economic system, where market logic has replaced communicative rationality (Afifi, 2022).

In addition, the emergence of social media as a new public sphere has expanded the dynamics of communication, but it also presents new challenges. The public now has broad access to express their opinions, but this freedom is often not balanced with adequate communication ethics and digital literacy. In such a situation, public discourse becomes very easy to manipulate by political actors, influencers, and social media algorithms that encourage emotion rather than rationality. As a result, religious discourse, which should be a means of shaping social morality, has instead turned into a political commodity and viral entertainment.

The case of *Pesantren* and Trans7 shows that digital interactions among Indonesians are still dominated by emotional communication and group identity, rather than rational dialogue oriented toward the search for shared truth. This indicates that the digital public sphere does not yet fully reflect Habermas's ideal of a deliberative society, in which every individual has an equal opportunity to engage in discussion without social pressure or domination by those in power. In this context, the polarization that has emerged is not solely the result of differences in opinion, but also the result of an imbalance of rationality in communication in the digital public sphere.

The controversy between *Pesantren* and Trans7 is not only a matter of media ethics or religious sensitivity, but also a reflection of the crisis of public rationality in the digital age. This incident shows that freedom of expression on social media has not been accompanied by moral responsibility and critical awareness as idealized by Habermas. Therefore, collective efforts are needed to revitalize the digital public sphere through media literacy education, strengthening communication ethics, and shaping public rational awareness so that the public sphere can once again become a forum for inclusive, equal, and common interest-oriented dialogue.

3.2. The Digital Public Sphere and Polarization

The development of communication technology and the emergence of social media have fundamentally changed the form of human social interaction and the way societies build public awareness. In this context, the public sphere, which was once understood as a physical arena where citizens engaged in direct dialogue, has now shifted to the digital public sphere, a virtual arena where individuals can express their opinions, engage in discussion, and shape collective perceptions on various social, political, and religious issues. This change has had major consequences for modern democratic life, including in Indonesia, as digital media has become the primary means of shaping public opinion and social discourse (Zuhri, 2021).

In Jürgen Habermas' view, the ideal public sphere is a place where communicative action oriented towards rationality, honesty, and openness takes place. Every individual has the same opportunity to express their opinion without the domination of political, economic, or ideological power. However, in reality, the digital public sphere in the modern era is often far from ideal. Social media, which was originally expected to be a means of democratizing information, has instead developed into an arena for emotional expression and identity conflicts. Information is no longer constructed based on rational argumentation, but rather through emotional narratives laden with vested interests.

This phenomenon is clearly evident in the controversial case between *Pesantren* and Trans7, where media coverage that presented a negative framing *Pesantren* and clerics caused an uproar in the digital space. The coverage was considered to be cornering *Pesantren*, as it presented an image that did not correspond with the social reality and Islamic values taught in these schools. The *pesantren* community viewed the content of the news as a form of information distortion that could damage the honor of Islamic scholars and religious institutions. As a result, there was a strong reaction from the public, especially *santri* and religious leaders who voiced massive protests through social media.

The widespread wave of protests in the digital space shows how social media acts as a new public space where people express their collective aspirations and feelings. However, the discourse formed in this space does not run within the corridors of rational communication as idealized by Habermas. People's reactions are mostly driven by emotions, anger, and group fanaticism. Social media comment sections are filled with heated debates, sarcasm, and even hate speech that leaves no room for open dialogue. In the context of Habermas' theory, this condition reflects a crisis of public rationality,

because the communication that takes place is no longer oriented towards achieving mutual understanding, but rather towards self-defense and discourse battles between social groups.

The Indonesian digital public sphere in this case also shows symptoms of religious-based political polarization. Polarization arises because society is divided into two opposing camps. On one side, there is a group that defends *Pesantren* and considers that Trans7's broadcast has insulted religious symbols, while on the other side there is a group that considers the public reaction to be excessive and contrary to the principle of freedom of the press. This polarization is reinforced by social media algorithms that only display content according to user preferences, thereby narrowing the space for the exchange of ideas and creating an echo chamber phenomenon. In this situation, media users only receive information that reinforces their personal views, while differing arguments are ignored. As a result, the digital public sphere, which should be a means of deliberation, has turned into a closed group resonance space that deepens social and ideological differences.

In addition, the phenomenon of polarization cannot be separated from the role of the mass media in framing religious issues. The media, which should function as the guardian of public rationality, often gets caught up in market logic and economic interests. Sensational and controversial news is considered more attractive to the public and increases ratings, even at the expense of objectivity and balance of information. From Habermas' perspective, this illustrates the colonization of the lifeworld by the system, in which the media, as part of the economic and political system, has intervened in the social life of society. This process causes public communication to lose its emancipatory nature, because what prevails in the public sphere is no longer the rational voice of society, but commercial logic and the interests of power (Alimi, 2018).

The cases of *Pesantren* and Trans7 show that digital media and mainstream media have a dual role: on the one hand, they are a means of public participation, but on the other hand, they can be a source of discourse distortion. The digital public sphere allows people to speak, but at the same time also facilitates the spread of misinformation, biased opinions, and provocative narratives. When public participation is not balanced by digital literacy and communication ethics, the digital space becomes vulnerable to polarization rooted in fanaticism and misinformation.

Polarization in the digital space also reflects the weakening of critical awareness among the public in interpreting freedom of expression. In Habermas' theory of the public sphere, freedom of speech must be accompanied by moral responsibility and respect for the principles of communicative rationality, namely truth, accuracy, honesty, and comprehensibility. However, communication practices on social media often violate these principles. Freedom of expression is often used to attack others, rather than to build constructive dialogue. Sarcastic and emotional comments attract more public attention than rational arguments, turning the digital space into an arena for competition for influence, rather than a healthy exchange of ideas.

In the context of democracy, this condition poses a major challenge for the future of public communication in Indonesia. As religious polarization continues to intensify in the digital space, the potential for social disintegration also increases. Habermas asserts that the main function of the public sphere is to create a deliberative arena that

allows the public to form opinions and collective will rationally. Therefore, serious efforts are needed to restore the function of the digital space as a forum for inclusive and participatory dialogue. Media literacy education, strengthening communication ethics, and understanding the values of public rationality are important steps to restore the quality of social communication in the midst of a complex digital society (Fatimah, 2025).

The digital public sphere and polarization that emerged in the case of *Pesantren* and *Trans7* can be understood as a reflection of the imbalance between freedom of expression and public rationality. When freedom is not accompanied by ethical responsibility and critical awareness, the public sphere becomes a source of social disintegration rather than a tool for strengthening democracy. Therefore, public communication in the digital age must be redirected towards deliberative values as idealized by Habermas, namely open, argumentative, equal, and truth-oriented dialogue that is oriented towards the common good. Only in this way can the digital public sphere truly become a means of social emancipation and a forum for rational and civilized citizen participation.

3.3. The Ethics of Dialogue and Public Rationality

In Jürgen Habermas' theory of the public sphere, every form of communication that takes place in society must be based on the principle of communicative rationality, namely communication that aims to achieve mutual understanding, not merely to win arguments or justify the interests of certain groups. Communicative rationality emphasizes the importance of the ethics of dialogue as the basis of social interaction, in which every individual has the same right to speak, express opinions, and be heard without pressure, manipulation, or domination. Habermas states that ideal communicative action must fulfill four claims of validity, namely truth, rightness, sincerity, and understandability. If one of these principles is ignored, public communication will experience distortion and lose its moral orientation (Muttaqien & Ramdan, 2023).

In the context of the *Pesantren* and *Trans7* case, the principles of rationality and ethical dialogue do not appear to have been optimally realized. *Trans7*'s reporting, which presented a negative framing of *Pesantren* and clerics, demonstrated the media's weak ethical responsibility in managing information that is socially and religiously sensitive. The media should function as an objective and informative facilitator of public communication, not as a tool for shaping biased and provocative opinions. When the media fails to carry out its ethical function, what happens is not a process of public enlightenment, but the spread of misleading perceptions that trigger conflict in the social sphere. This is what Habermas refers to as a form of communicative distortion, where communication is no longer driven by the intention to achieve rational understanding, but by strategic interests and market orientation.

The *Trans7* broadcast sparked widespread public reaction on social media. The public, especially *Pesantren* followers, considered that the broadcast did not reflect reality and violated the moral values upheld by Islamic educational institutions. The public response on social media showed a collective awareness to uphold symbolic justice, but unfortunately, the discourse that emerged was not entirely rational. Many of the comments were emotional, sarcastic, and even attacked others without strong

arguments. This shows that the digital space has not been able to become a deliberative space as idealized by Habermas. The public discourse, which should serve to seek mutual understanding, has instead turned into an arena of conflict of opinions, where arguments are replaced by emotions, and rationality is displaced by expressions of religious and political identity.

The ethics of dialogue in digital society should reflect the values of honesty, equality, and openness in exchanging views. However, in practice, communication on social media is often trapped in instrumental rationality, namely the use of language and arguments to achieve certain goals, such as gaining public support, maintaining image, or strengthening social position. This phenomenon causes public communication to lose its moral dimension. Society no longer strives to build collective understanding, but rather competes to reinforce the opinions of their respective groups. In this situation, truth becomes relative, and public debate shifts to a competition of influence determined by the number of followers, popularity, and intensity of emotion, rather than by the power of logic or argumentation (Fuadi et al., 2025).

Habermas reminds us that when communicative action is replaced by strategic action, the public sphere loses its emancipatory function. This is evident in the dynamics of social media in Indonesia, where public communication tends to be one-sided, reactive, and lacking in reflection. Many individuals voice their opinions not to engage in dialogue, but to justify themselves or attack their opponents. This pattern of communication creates social polarization, weakens citizen solidarity, and closes the possibility of reaching rational understanding. In a religious context, this polarization is even more dangerous because it has moral and social consequences that can widen the gap between groups based on differences in religious interpretation and political orientation.

In addition to structural factors of the media, weak digital literacy and ethical awareness among the public are also major causes of the degradation of public rationality. Many social media users do not yet understand their moral responsibility when communicating in the digital space. The spread of unverified news, provocative comments, and the use of language that offends other groups worsen the quality of social dialogue. In this case, Habermas emphasizes the importance of reflective awareness in communication, which is the ability to understand that every word, symbol, and opinion conveyed has social and moral implications. Without reflective awareness, public communication will easily turn into a tool for reproducing conflict, rather than a vehicle for creating shared meaning.

It is also important to understand that the ethics of dialogue are not only the responsibility of individuals, but also of media institutions and the government. The media, as a major actor in the public sphere, has a moral obligation to uphold the principles of ethical journalism, such as accuracy, balance, and honesty. In the case of Pesantren and Trans7, disproportionate reporting indicates that the media still often ignores religious sensitivities in pursuit of popularity and commercial interests. The government also has a responsibility to create regulations that promote healthy press freedom without sacrificing moral values and social harmony.

The presence of digital public spaces should be an opportunity to strengthen deliberative democracy that emphasizes participation, equality, and freedom of thought.

However, without strengthening communication ethics, these spaces have the potential to become a source of social disintegration. Therefore, the application of public dialogue ethics needs to be directed towards the formation of a culture of civil discourse, where freedom of expression is exercised alongside moral responsibility. The public needs to be equipped with comprehensive digital literacy in order to be able to distinguish between rational opinions and manipulative narratives (Ridha et al., 2025).

True public rationality is reflected not only in the ability to speak, but also in the ability to listen and understand. In Habermas' framework, rational communication is communication that is open to criticism and reflection, not communication that is closed and defensive. By reviving the spirit of ethical dialogue, Indonesian digital society can build a healthy public space, where differences of opinion are seen as an asset, not a threat.

The cases of *Pesantren* and *Trans7* provide an important lesson that freedom of expression without ethics will only give rise to conflict, while communication based on rationality and responsibility will give rise to understanding and social solidarity. Therefore, revitalizing the ethics of public dialogue is an urgent necessity in maintaining the quality of democracy and diversity in Indonesia. Only through honest, open, and truth-oriented communication can the digital public sphere truly function as a deliberative forum for a rational, critical, and civilized society, as idealized by Jürgen Habermas.

4. Conclusion

Based on the results of a study of the controversial case between *Pesantren* and *Trans7*, it can be concluded that this phenomenon reflects a shift in the function of digital public space in Indonesia from an arena for rational dialogue to an arena for battle of opinions laden with political, economic, and religious identity interests. *Trans7*'s coverage, which presented a negative framing of Islamic boarding schools and clerics, triggered widespread public reaction on social media. This reaction shows that digital space is now not only a place for the exchange of information, but also an arena for opinion formation, identity expression, and moral debate that is not always based on communicative rationality as idealized by Jürgen Habermas.

This case shows that mass media and social media play a major role in shaping public perception and awareness, but both also have the potential to cause communication distortions when information is not presented objectively and ethically. *Trans7*'s broadcast shows how media practices that ignore religious sensitivities can have a broad social impact, especially in religious societies. The emotional public reaction in the digital space also shows that society is still vulnerable to religious-based issues that are symbolically manipulated to build social and political sentiment.

From the perspective of Habermas' theory of the public sphere, this condition illustrates the weakening of communicative rationality in Indonesia's digital public sphere. Ideally, the public sphere functions as an arena for rational, inclusive discourse, free from the domination of power. However, in practice, the current digital public sphere tends to be dominated by instrumental rationality, where communication is used to gain influence and support, rather than to achieve mutual understanding. The polarization that emerged on social media in the case of *Pesantren* and *Trans7* shows that

public communication has lost its deliberative orientation and shifted to strategic communication driven by emotions, ideology, and identity interests.

In addition, the weak ethics of dialogue and moral awareness in communication have exacerbated the crisis of public rationality. The discourse that emerges on social media is more often colored by hate speech, sarcasm, and one-sided claims of truth than by rational and open argumentation. This shows that freedom of expression in the digital space has not been balanced with adequate moral responsibility and media literacy. As a result, the digital public space, which should function as a means of democratizing information, has instead become an arena for polarization and social conflict.

To that end, collective efforts are needed to revitalize the digital public sphere so that it can once again function in accordance with Habermas' principles of communicative rationality. These efforts include improving the digital literacy of the public, strengthening journalistic ethics and social media accountability, and encouraging open and argumentative dialogue in the public sphere. The public needs to be equipped with critical awareness so that they are able to distinguish between rational discourse and emotional propaganda. Meanwhile, the mass media needs to place the public interest above commercial and political interests, by upholding the values of truth, honesty, and justice in every news report.

By restoring the function of public communication to rationality and ethical dialogue, the digital space can become a deliberative forum that is democratic, inclusive, and oriented towards the common good. The cases of the Islamic boarding school and Trans7 provide an important lesson that freedom of expression must be exercised with moral responsibility, and that the media, as a pillar of the public sphere, has an obligation to maintain social harmony by presenting information that is educational, objective, and balanced. Only then can the digital public sphere in Indonesia develop into a means of shaping collective consciousness, strengthening social solidarity, and realizing the ideals of true democracy as envisioned by Jürgen Habermas.

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