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Revisiting the Public Sphere: Communication, Digital Mobilization, and Misinformation in Indonesia's 2019 and 2025 Mass Demonstrations

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Abstract - This study investigates the evolving role of communication in shaping Indonesia's mass demonstrations in 2019 and 2025, two pivotal episodes reflecting civic discontent and the transformation of the digital media landscape. Grounded in agenda-setting theory, framing theory, and Habermas's public sphere theory, this research examines how digital communication has shifted from rational discourse to affective and algorithmic mediation. The study hypothesizes that changes in media ecology influence not only public mobilisation but also the legitimacy of civic movements. Employing a comparative digital ethnography, this research analyses online communication practices, visual narratives, and misinformation across platforms such as Twitter (2019) and TikTok/Instagram (2025). Data were collected from user-generated content, hashtags, and visual artefacts, followed by interpretive coding to explore evolving communication logics and the algorithmic amplification of affective messages. Findings reveal a transformation from the networked public sphere of 2019—dominated by text-based civic idealism—to the algorithmic public sphere of 2025, characterised by visual storytelling, emotional contagion, and platform-driven visibility. While digital networks expanded participatory opportunities, they simultaneously fostered misinformation, algorithmic manipulation, and emotional polarisation. These dynamics illustrate how classical communication theories require integration with affective and algorithmic dimensions to explain contemporary activism. The results align with previous studies on digital democracy, highlighting both empowerment and control in mediated civic engagement. The study concludes that Indonesia's evolving digital public sphere embodies both the promise and the peril of democratic communication. It underscores the dual function of communication—as a vehicle for civic empowerment and as a mechanism of algorithmic governance—in shaping public trust and deliberation.

Keywords: Algorithmic media; Communication and democracy; Digital activism; Digital ethnography; Indonesia's mass demonstrations

Introduction

In Indonesia, mass demonstrations are not uncommon; however, the waves of protest in 2019 and again in September 2025 share striking similarities in their origins, dynamics, and interaction between media and the public. These two protest episodes occurred during periods of heightened political tension and civic discontent, illustrating the increasingly complex relationship between

communication, media technologies, and democratic participation. This study is motivated by the observation that both events were driven by overlapping grievances—political reform, economic inequality, legislative overreach, and perceived corruption—and that both were mediated through hybrid information environments involving digital and traditional media. Understanding how communication practices and media logics have evolved across these two periods provides crucial insight into Indonesia's democratic trajectory in the platform era.

Communication, as theorized in democratic contexts, functions both as a medium for deliberation and as a mechanism of control. Classical theories such as agenda-setting (McCombs & Shaw, 1972) and framing theory (Entman, 1993) explain how media influence public attention and interpretation of issues, shaping what citizens perceive as salient and legitimate. Meanwhile, Habermas's theory of the public sphere (1989) highlights the ideal of rational-critical debate as a foundation of democracy. However, recent scholarship suggests that the rise of digital platforms has transformed these communicative spaces into what scholars call the algorithmic public sphere—a context where affective engagement, visual narratives, and algorithmic amplification increasingly determine visibility and influence (Gillespie, 2018; Papacharissi, 2016). Within this environment, communication is not merely about information transmission but also about emotional resonance, symbolic performance, and technological mediation.

In Indonesia, the interaction between media, state, and citizens has long shaped political expression. The 2019 protests marked a turning point in digital civic activism, as students and youth mobilized through Twitter, Instagram, and WhatsApp to oppose legislative reforms that were perceived to threaten civil liberties. These included controversial bills such as the Corruption Eradication Commission Bill (RUU KPK), the Criminal Code Bill (RUU KUHP), and the Omnibus Law on Job Creation. Protesters used social media hashtags such as #ReformasiDikorupsi to critique government actions and call for accountability. As Ardiyanto (2021) and others observed, these movements represented the emergence of a networked public sphere, where digital communication fostered horizontal mobilization but also faced challenges of misinformation, elite capture, and regulatory suppression (Ardiyanto, 2021a; Arianto, 2022).

Fast forward to September 2025, widespread demonstrations once again erupted across Jakarta and other major cities. While the grievances were updated—rising living costs, parliamentary privileges, austerity policies, and labor reforms—the communicative patterns showed both continuity and change. Protesters, including students, workers, gig-economy laborers, and civil society groups, turned to visual platforms such as TikTok and Instagram to mobilize support, share testimonies, and produce emotionally charged content (Arianto, 2022; Lee & Abidin, 2023). The communicative landscape of 2025 thus exemplified the shift from the text-based networked public sphere of 2019 to a more affective, image-driven, and algorithmically filtered public discourse. This transformation aligns with what scholars describe as the affective turn in communication, where emotion and digital circulation reshape the dynamics of collective action (Arianto, 2022; Jalli, 2025; Papacharissi, 2016; S. L. Wahyuningroem et al., 2024)

Empirically, both protest periods demonstrated the dual nature of digital communication. On one hand, digital media expanded civic participation, lowered organizational barriers, and amplified marginalized voices. On the other hand, they also facilitated the rapid spread of misinformation, algorithmic manipulation, and emotional polarization (Effendi, 2023; Sokowati, 2019; Widyatama et al., 2025). These paradoxes raise critical questions about how communication functions in Indonesia's contemporary democracy: Is it primarily a tool for empowerment, or has it become an instrument of surveillance and control? Addressing this question is particularly urgent as Indonesia's digital ecosystem becomes increasingly commercialized, algorithmically mediated, and politically contested.

Theoretically, this research extends classical communication frameworks by integrating affective communication and algorithmic mediation into analyses of public discourse and activism. While agenda-setting and framing theories explain issue salience and interpretive structures, they often overlook the emotional and algorithmic forces that shape visibility and engagement in digital environments. By employing a comparative digital ethnography, this study aims to trace how communication logics, media narratives, and participatory practices evolved between the 2019 and 2025 protest cycles.

Previous studies have examined Indonesia's digital protests from various perspectives—political communication (Ardiyanto, 2021b), civic mobilization (Lim, 2017) and online discourse

(Nugroho, 2025). However, most analyses remain temporally bound to single events or limited to textual platforms such as Twitter, overlooking longitudinal changes and the affective dimensions of communication. Moreover, there is limited empirical evidence on how algorithmic visibility and emotional expression intersect in shaping public legitimacy and collective mobilization in the Indonesian context.

Therefore, this research fills that gap by comparing two temporally distinct yet thematically linked protest moments to illustrate the evolution of communicative practices in Indonesia's digital democracy. Indeed, this research intends to demonstrate how the communicative transformations from 2019 to 2025 reconfigure civic trust, participation, and deliberation in an era of algorithmic governance. The purpose of this study, which relates to communication and democracy, is to analyze how media practices, affective communication, and algorithmic systems jointly shape the possibilities and limitations of civic expression in Indonesia's evolving public sphere.

Theoretical Framework

Communication theory provides the analytical foundation for understanding how messages, meanings, and media structures shape civic participation and political engagement (Gil de Zúñiga et al., 2012; Ramanair, 2020). This study primarily draws upon three classical communication frameworks—agenda-setting theory, framing theory, and public sphere theory—which together offer a lens for analyzing how communication influences public perception, collective mobilization, and legitimacy in democratic contexts. These theories are subsequently extended through contemporary perspectives on affective communication and algorithmic media, which explain how digital technologies and emotional dynamics transform communicative processes in the digital era.

Agenda-setting theory, first articulated by McCombs and Shaw (1972), posits that the media do not tell people what to think but rather what to think about. By selecting and prioritizing certain issues, the media establish the public agenda, guiding what citizens perceive as important. In the context of political protests, this theory helps explain how mainstream and digital media can amplify or marginalize specific grievances. In Indonesia's 2019 and 2025 protest cycles, agenda-setting processes operated not only through traditional news outlets but also through the viral circulation of hashtags, memes, and visual symbols that shaped collective attention.

Closely related to agenda-setting, framing theory (Entman, 1993) highlights how the media construct meaning by emphasizing certain aspects of reality while downplaying others. Frames shape how audiences interpret events, assign blame, and evaluate legitimacy. In the 2019 protests, for instance, different frames emerged: protesters and activists framed their actions as a moral defense of democracy, while some state-linked media framed them as disorder or political manipulation. By 2025, framing had evolved in a more visual and affective direction—through videos, short clips, and emotional imagery circulated on TikTok and Instagram—reflecting a shift from cognitive persuasion to affective engagement. Framing thus serves as a crucial analytical tool for exploring how communication contributes to both empowerment and control in public discourse.

The third foundational concept, Habermas's theory of the public sphere (1989), offers a normative ideal of communication in democratic societies—where rational-critical debate among citizens fosters consensus and accountability (Habermas, 1984). However, in practice, this ideal has been increasingly challenged by digital media environments that are fragmented, commercialized, and algorithmically governed. In Indonesia, the networked public sphere that emerged in 2019 represented a moment of deliberative optimism, where social media enabled horizontal communication and civic dialogue. Yet, by 2025, the rise of algorithmic visibility and emotional amplification had transformed the communicative landscape into what scholars term the algorithmic public sphere (Bucher, 2018; Gillespie, 2018) in which platform logics and engagement metrics determine what becomes visible and influential.

To address these transformations, this research incorporates contemporary theoretical developments in affective communication. Papacharissi (2016) introduced the concept of the affective public, emphasizing that emotions, rather than purely rational arguments, increasingly drive digital participation (Papacharissi, 2016). Affect serves as a connective force that mobilizes publics through shared sentiments of anger, hope, or solidarity. In the Indonesian case, affective communication was central to the viral spread of protest narratives, shaping how citizens connected and acted collectively online. Emotional contagion through short-form videos and visual storytelling became a primary

mechanism of mobilization, indicating that civic action in the platform era cannot be understood through rational models alone.

Furthermore, this study integrates perspectives from algorithmic media theory, which examine how digital platforms structure visibility and participation through data-driven systems. Algorithms, as argued by Gillespie (2018) and Beer (2017), play an active role in shaping communication by filtering, ranking, and amplifying content according to engagement metrics (Beer, 2017; Gillespie, 2018). This algorithmic governance influences which voices gain prominence and which are silenced, thereby reshaping the democratic promise of digital participation. In Indonesia's 2025 protests, algorithmic amplification intensified both emotional resonance and misinformation, creating feedback loops that polarized public discourse and complicated collective deliberation.

The synthesis of these theoretical approaches provides a comprehensive framework for analyzing communication in Indonesia's evolving democracy. Agenda-setting and framing theories explain the cognitive and interpretive dimensions of communication; public sphere theory provides a normative democratic benchmark; and affective communication along with algorithmic media perspectives capture the emotional and technological transformations of digital activism. Together, these frameworks enable an understanding of how communication operates simultaneously as a tool of empowerment and as an instrument of control in the digital public sphere (Scheufele, 1999; Wiley, 2024).

Based on these theoretical considerations, the temporary hypothesis of this research is that the transformation from a networked to an algorithmic public sphere has altered the communicative logic of protest in Indonesia—from text-based deliberation to affective visual engagement—thereby reshaping the relationship between citizens, media, and the state.

Material and Methodology

This study adopts a comparative digital ethnography approach to examine how communication practices and digital media platforms shaped Indonesia's mass demonstrations in 2019 and 2025. The method enables the researcher to explore communicative behaviors, meaning-making processes, and online social interactions across two temporally distinct but thematically related protest movements. Through both retrospective and real-time digital observation, the study seeks to identify continuities and transformations in media framing, networked mobilization, and digital discourse in Indonesia's democratic communication landscape (Jansen, 2024; Juwita et al., 2025; Kristiyono & Ida, 2019).

The research was conducted across two principal digital environments corresponding to Indonesia's major protest cycles: (1) the 2019 *Reformasi Dikorupsi* movement, and (2) the September 2025 demonstrations. Data collection for the 2019 episode was performed retrospectively through digital archives and online repositories from September 2019 to February 2020, while the 2025 phase involved real-time digital ethnography from August to November 2025. Although the study is virtual in nature, the primary geographical context is Indonesia—particularly online networks and media communities based in Jakarta, Surabaya, and Yogyakarta, where digital activism was most visible (Perkasa, 2025).

Digital ethnography, as defined by Kozinets (2020), is the systematic observation and interpretation of social and cultural phenomena within online environments. It allows the researcher to understand how individuals and groups construct meaning, negotiate identities, and mobilize action through digital platforms. The comparative element of this research is both temporal (2019 vs. 2025) and thematic (communication strategies and misinformation dynamics). Temporal comparison highlights the shift from text-based activism (Twitter, Facebook) to visual and algorithmic activism (TikTok, Instagram, YouTube Shorts), while thematic comparison examines how misinformation, emotional discourse, and digital literacy shaped public trust and participation across the two periods(Cocq & Liliequist, 2024; Kozinets, 2019).

The population of this study includes digital actors who participated in or influenced online discourse during both protest waves. These consist of activists, student organizers, journalists, media professionals, digital literacy advocates, and civil society communicators. From this population, a purposive and snowball sampling strategy is employed to recruit participants who were directly engaged in digital mobilization, media coverage, or online community organization. There are 27 participants drawn from both protest cycles, contacted through secure email and messaging platforms.

Participation is voluntary, and informed consent is obtained for all interviews and observations, with participants' identities anonymized to ensure confidentiality.

Given the qualitative nature of this study, the research variables are conceptual rather than numerical, focusing on interconnected dimensions of communication within Indonesia's digital protest landscape. The first variable, media framing, examines how issues and events are represented across different platforms, revealing the interpretive processes through which meaning and legitimacy are constructed. The second, digital mobilization, explores how communication practices facilitate protest organization, coordination, and participation, particularly through social media networks that enable rapid information exchange and collective identity formation. The third variable, misinformation and trust, investigates how inaccurate or manipulated information circulates within online spaces, shaping public perception, civic engagement, and levels of trust in institutions.

Finally, algorithmic amplification considers how platform logics—such as ranking, recommendation, and engagement metrics—determine the visibility, emotional tone, and virality of protest-related content. Together, these variables provide an analytical framework for understanding how digital communication influences political expression, public discourse, and democratic participation in contemporary Indonesia (Ahmad, 2022; Dhanessa & Priliantini, 2025; Forberg & Schilt, 2023; Surjatmodjo et al., 2024).

The study employs multiple forms of data, including textual, visual, and interactive digital artefacts, as well as qualitative interview transcripts and focus group discussions. Data were collected in three integrated phases:

Phase 1 – Archival Digital Observation (2019): Archival data from the 2019 protest cycle were collected through public online repositories, hashtags, and social media archives. These include tweets, Facebook posts, memes, digital posters, and online news articles associated with #ReformasiDikorupsi. The researcher systematically recorded and coded materials to identify narrative themes, actors, and communicative strategies.

Phase 2 – Live Digital Ethnography (2025): The second phase involved real-time digital ethnography of the September 2025 demonstrations. Observations focused on TikTok, Instagram, and Twitter (now X) to document visual narratives, trending hashtags, emotional discourses, and participatory dynamics. The researcher participated as a non-intrusive observer, collecting screenshots, engagement metrics, and interactional data to capture how digital publics negotiated meaning and collective identity during the protest.

Phase 3 – Semi-Structured Interviews and Focus Groups: To complement digital observation, semi-structured interviews and focus groups were conducted with activists, journalists, and digital literacy advocates. Interviews explored perceptions of media roles, misinformation, and public trust, while focus groups examined changes in digital participation and protest communication strategies between 2019 and 2025. All sessions were recorded with consent and anonymized during transcription.

The collected data were analyzed using thematic analysis and comparative discourse analysis, supported by interpretive digital ethnography.

Thematic Analysis: Following Braun and Clarke (2006), digital texts and visual materials were coded to identify recurring themes related to communication practices, emotional tone, and framing strategies. Themes were organized according to theoretical constructs from agenda-setting, framing, and affective communication theories (Braun & Clarke, 2022).

Comparative Discourse Analysis: Textual and visual content from 2019 and 2025 were compared to trace shifts in communicative logics—such as transitions from textual framing to affective visual storytelling—and to identify how agenda-setting patterns evolved across platforms and time (Anwar et al., 2020; Demkina, 2021).

Ethnographic Interpretation: Digital fieldnotes and observational data were analyzed interpretively to understand how citizens constructed political meaning, mobilized emotions, and negotiated civic identities online (Airoldi, 2018; Forberg & Schilt, 2023).

All data collection adhered to ethical standards for digital research, including respect for participant privacy, anonymization of personal data, and avoidance of harm. Only publicly available materials or those obtained with explicit consent were analyzed. The study complies with institutional research ethics protocols and relevant Indonesian data protection guidelines.

Result and Discussion

Overview of Digital Mobilization Patterns (2019–2025)

The comparative digital ethnography reveals a significant transformation in how Indonesian citizens mobilized, expressed dissent, and negotiated meanings across two protest cycles. In 2019, during the *Reformasi Dikorupsi* movement, mobilization was largely driven by text-based communication through Twitter (now X), Facebook, and WhatsApp. Protesters employed hashtags such as #ReformasiDikorupsi, #TolakRUUKUHP, and #MahasiswaBergerak to disseminate calls for action, critique government policies, and synchronize nationwide demonstrations (Saputri, 2024; Wahyuningroem et al., 2024).

In contrast, the 2025 demonstrations—often referred to as the Digital Reform 2.0 Movement—were dominated by visual and algorithmic activism on platforms like TikTok, Instagram, and YouTube Shorts. Instead of long textual debates, users crafted emotionally charged short videos, infographics, and memes that spread rapidly through algorithmic feeds. This shift demonstrates a transition from networked coordination (2019) to algorithmic amplification (2025), where visibility was achieved less through follower networks and more through platform-driven virality (Ahmad, 2022; Beer, 2017).

This transformation supports Castells' (2009) theory of the network society, where communicative power is shaped by digital infrastructures that enable autonomous communication flows. It also aligns with Papacharissi's (2015) concept of the affective public, as emotions—rather than mere information—became the key driver of engagement and mobilization in 2025 (Castells, 2009; Papacharissi, 2016).

Evolution of Media Framing and Narrative Control

The findings indicate a profound shift in media framing between the two protest waves. In 2019, mainstream media initially adopted a neutral to critical tone toward student protesters, framing events around themes of "youth activism," "law reform," and "national stability." However, as online narratives intensified, social media users collectively reframed the protests as a struggle for justice and transparency, challenging institutional narratives through viral threads and citizen journalism.

By 2025, however, the relationship between mainstream and alternative media had become more entangled. Digital ethnography shows that professional journalists and citizen content creators often collaborated implicitly, as journalists relied on user-generated videos and livestreams to document unfolding events. This hybridization of information flow demonstrates the emergence of what Chadwick (2017) calls the hybrid media system, where power over information circulation is shared and negotiated across institutional and grassroots actors (Chadwick, 2017).

Yet, the 2025 protests also exhibited heightened misinformation dynamics. Deepfakes, edited clips, and fake news articles circulated widely, complicating trust in digital communication. Participants' interviews revealed increasing skepticism toward both official and alternative sources, suggesting a crisis of epistemic authority. This aligns with Habermas' (1989) concern over the fragmentation of the public sphere in the digital age, where communicative rationality is undermined by algorithmic distortions and polarized discourse.

Shifts in Communicative Strategies and Trust Building

Interviews with activists and media professionals highlighted evolving strategies for communication management.

In 2019, communicators emphasized informational credibility—crafting clear, factual threads to counter misinformation and gain public support. Hashtag campaigns were coordinated among university alliances and journalist groups, reflecting deliberate efforts to sustain message consistency.

In 2025, communicative practices became more performative and participatory. Influencers, online creators, and digital artists became central actors in message diffusion. Rather than fact-checking, activists leveraged humor, music, and satire to make complex political issues accessible to younger audiences. This demonstrates a shift from rational deliberation to emotional resonance in digital communication—a trend also described by Bennett & Segerberg (2013) as connective action, where identity and affect replace organizational structure as mobilization resources (Bennett & Segerberg, 2013).

However, while emotional communication enhanced engagement, it also exposed movements to co-optation by commercial and political actors who exploited viral content for personal visibility. This finding underscores the double-edged nature of affective mobilization—simultaneously empowering citizens and diluting message coherence.

Misinformation, Digital Literacy, and Public Perception

A key thematic comparison involves misinformation dynamics. In 2019, false claims about protesters being "paid agitators" circulated mainly via WhatsApp groups and pro-government Facebook pages. These were countered by student-led digital collectives producing verified infographics and short explanatory videos.

By 2025, misinformation evolved into multi-platform narrative manipulation. Deepfake videos allegedly showing violent acts by protesters circulated widely on TikTok, generating moral panic before being debunked. However, interviews revealed that despite higher digital literacy among youth, trust decay persisted. Respondents reported experiencing "information fatigue" and "algorithmic anxiety," describing how constant exposure to conflicting narratives eroded their confidence in truth claims (Basch et al., 2022; Zeng et al., 2021).

This dynamic resonates with Bandura's Social Cognitive Theory (2001)—specifically, the role of observational learning and perceived efficacy (Bandura A, 2001). When individuals repeatedly encounter manipulative or contradictory digital content, their sense of personal agency to discern truth weakens, leading to disengagement rather than empowerment. Thus, while digital literacy initiatives have grown since 2019, their impact is mitigated by the emotional and algorithmic pressures of the contemporary media environment.

Communicative Agency and Political Meaning-Making

Across both protest cycles, digital spaces functioned as arenas of meaning-making where citizens negotiated political identities and collective goals. In 2019, participants constructed shared narratives of moral outrage against legislative corruption. In 2025, meaning-making became more fragmented but also more creative—manifested through symbolic acts (e.g., mass online profile changes, TikTok challenges) that reinterpreted dissent as a cultural performance rather than solely political resistance.

This evolution illustrates the social construction of reality (Berger & Luckmann, 1966) in a digital context: collective understandings of "truth" and "justice" are co-created through communicative interaction rather than dictated by institutional authority. However, as the online public sphere becomes more individualized and algorithmically segmented, consensus-building becomes harder, threatening the deliberative ideals envisioned by classical communication theorists (Berger, 1966).

Novelty and Contribution to Communication Studies

This study contributes novel insights into temporal transformations of digital political communication in Indonesia. It expands theoretical discussions in communication studies by:

Integrating comparative digital ethnography to trace the evolution of communicative logics across distinct protest cycles; Demonstrating how algorithmic infrastructures reshape networked mobilization and meaning-making; and revealing the emotional turn in protest communication—from rational advocacy (2019) to affective expression (2025).

These findings underscore the necessity of revisiting classical communication theories—particularly public sphere and framing theories—in the context of digital, affect-driven, and hybrid media environments. The result of our research is mentioned in Table 1.

Table 1. Summary of key results

Theme	2019 Protests Circle	2025 Protest Circle	Key Transformation
Dominant platform	Twitter facebook, Whatsapp	Tiktok, Instagram, Youtube short	From text-based to visual algorithmic activism
Mobilization logic	Networked coordination	Algorithmic amplification	From coordination to virality

Media framing	Youth activism, civic resistance	Cultural dissent, Moral urgency	From institutional critique to emotional appeal
Misinformation	Limited, text based rumors	Deepfakes, visual disinformation	From fake news to synthetic media
Communicative strategy	Fact based credibility	Emotional resonance, perfomartivity	From rationale persuation to affective storytelling
Trust dynamic	Modeare trust, strong peer verification	Low trust, algorithmic fatigue	From collective verification to skeptical individualism



Figure 1. Hundreds of vocational and high school students in scout, SMK, and STM uniforms participate in a mass demonstration at the Indonesian House of Representatives (DPR/MPR RI) building, September 25, 2019. Source: Kompas.com



Figure 2. High school and vocational students (SMA/SMK) stage a demonstration in front of the Indonesian House of Representatives (DPR) building, Jakarta, August 25, 2025. Source: Inilah.com

Conclusions

This study provides new insights into how Indonesia's digital public sphere has transformed between 2019 and 2025, shifting from a networked to an algorithmic mode of civic communication. The novelty of this research lies in its comparative digital ethnographic approach, which connects two temporally distinct protest movements to reveal how communication practices evolve within changing technological, cultural, and political contexts. By integrating agenda-setting, framing, and public sphere theories with the concepts of affective and algorithmic communication, this study advances the theoretical understanding of how emotions, algorithms, and media infrastructures collectively shape democratic participation in the digital era.

Theoretically, this manuscript contributes to communication studies by extending classical frameworks to account for affective publics, misinformation dynamics, and platform governance, while methodologically demonstrating the value of comparative digital ethnography for longitudinal media analysis. Socially, the research benefits public communication by highlighting the need for critical digital literacy, ethical media practices, and inclusive communicative spaces that empower citizens to engage responsibly in democracy. Ultimately, this study reinforces communication as both a tool of empowerment and a site of contestation, shaping how Indonesian society negotiates trust, participation, and civic identity in the platform age.

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