Institute for Advanced Science,
Social and Sustainable Future

MORALITY BEFORE KNOWLEDGE

Unraveling hegemony digital: A framework CDA-semiotic framework for sustainable social epistemic justice

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ABSTRACT

Background: In an increasingly digitized world, religion and culture have transcended their traditional roles. They are now instruments of hegemony that shape—and often destroy—our collective perception of social sustainability. This research examines how digital media platforms, through algorithms and "echo chambers", perpetuate such "organized ignorance", a systemic erosion of critical thinking caused by structural pressures and ideological manipulation. This research is rooted in the philosophical principle of Enlightenment (Kant: "Sapere Aude") and the critique of epistemic passivity (Bonhoeffer, Nietzsche). The core argument is that digital ecosystems paradoxically democratize knowledge while simultaneously reinforcing cognitive conformity and threatening socio-cultural resilience. **Method:** Using a qualitative design, this study applies Teun van Dijk's Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) and Saussurean semiotics to deconstruct power-laden narratives in religious-cultural content on platforms such as YouTube. Primary data are taken from one of Ardhianzy's videos on collective ignorance, and secondary metadata illustrate how algorithms reduce complex symbols (e.g., Kantian Enlightenment, Luther's Reformation) into binary myths. This process legitimizes polarization and perpetuates epistemic injustice. **Findings:** The findings confirm the symbiotic role of algorithmic personalization and capitalist platforms in commercializing Enlightenment rhetoric. This fuels banality malorum (Arendt) through the normalization of misinformation and affective polarization. The research also identifies historical hegemonic mechanisms—such as colonial "enlightenment" missions and Nazi propaganda—that resurface in the digital context. This is reflected in Indonesia's socio-political fragmentation, manifested through coordinated disinformation campaigns. **Conclusion:** This research recommends the integration of "algorithmic literacy" into SDG-based education, enhanced regulatory transparency (e.g., the EU Digital Services Act), and the development of virtue ethics-based platforms to restore intellectual autonomy. By synthesizing CDA, semiotics, and moral philosophy, the study maps hidden power structures in digital narratives and proposes actionable strategies. **Novelty/Originality of this Article:** This methodological synthesis of CDA, semiotics, and moral philosophy represents a novelty not present in previous unidisciplinary studies. Theoretically, this research bridges Kantian Enlightenment with contemporary critiques of digital hegemony.

KEYWORDS: digital hegemony; organized stupidity; socio-cultural sustainability.

1. Introduction

In a global context increasingly dominated by digital media, religious and cultural narratives serve not only as tools for representing identity but also as instruments of hegemony that shape collective perceptions of social sustainability. The phenomenon of "stupidity," elaborated in one of Ardhianzy's (2025) channel videos, a condition of lack of independent thinking due to structural pressures, propaganda, and social media algorithms, has become a latent threat to a sustainable social order. Collective stupidity, fueled by conformist thinking and the echo chamber effect, not only erodes society's critical capacity

but also facilitates destructive actions rooted in the manipulation of religious and cultural narratives. Contemporary, this problem is exacerbated by the design of digital platforms that tend to reinforce polarization. Algorithms filter information to validate existing prejudices, thus creating a systemic "organized stupidity." In this context, the concept of enlightenment, initiated by philosophers such as Immanuel Kant and Martin Luther, which emphasizes the autonomy of thought and the courage to question dogma, becomes relevant as an alternative solution. Enlightenment, from this perspective, is not simply the transfer of technical knowledge, but rather a paradigmatic transformation that empowers individuals and societies to resist the hegemony of manipulative narratives, thus paving the way for social sustainability based on intellectual independence and critical awareness.

Enlightenment is philosophically defined as a process of intellectual emancipation that emphasizes the autonomy of thought, as articulated by Immanuel Kant in his exhortation Sapere Aude ("Dare to think!"). This concept refers not only to the mastery of technical knowledge but to the individual's courage to break free from dependence on dogma, external authority, or unquestioned narratives. In the context of digital media, contemporary enlightenment faces a paradoxical challenge: on the one hand, digital platforms have the potential to become spaces for the democratization of knowledge; on the other, algorithms and echo chambers actually reinforce conformist thinking, as illustrated by the phenomenon of "organized stupidity" (Ardhianzy, 2025). Here, enlightenment is no longer merely an abstract concept, but a critical practice that must be wrested from the dominance of hegemonic narratives. Sustainability in this research focuses on the socio-cultural dimension, which is often overlooked in the discourse of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Social sustainability refers to a society's ability to build structures of values, institutions, and interactions that are just, inclusive, and resilient to threats such as polarization or information manipulation. Religious and cultural narratives play a key role in shaping this dimension, both as ethical foundations and as tools of hegemony. For example, religious narratives co-opted to justify violence (as in the Holocaust or the Balkan conflicts) illustrate how social sustainability can erode when cultural symbols are reduced to tools of power.

Religious and cultural narratives operate as mechanisms for shaping public perception through internalized symbols, myths, and discourses. Dietrich Bonhoeffer and Friedrich Nietzsche highlighted the contradictions in these narratives: on the one hand, religion and culture can be sources of enlightenment (such as Luther's Reformation, which challenged church dogma); on the other, they have the potential to become tools of "bondage" when manipulated to reinforce collective ignorance. Digital media exacerbates this complexity. On the one hand, platforms like YouTube enable the dissemination of progressive narratives; On the other hand, algorithms that prioritize sensational or confirmation-biased content actually reinforce social fragmentation, as seen in the post-truth phenomenon and online radicalization. Research variables were formulated to explore the relationship between religious/cultural narratives (independent variables) and the level of social sustainability (dependent variables). Religious/cultural narratives were analyzed through two dimensions: (1) discourse structure (e.g., the use of Luther or Nietzsche quotes to establish moral authority), and (2) semiotic meaning (such as symbols of "ignorance" vs. "enlightenment" in media content). Meanwhile, social sustainability was measured through the impact of these narratives on parameters such as opinion polarization, trust in institutions, or the critical capacity of audiences. Problems arise when narratives that are supposed to be "liberating" (e.g., calls for independent thinking) are instead trapped in contradictory logic, as when digital media uses enlightenment rhetoric for commercial or propaganda purposes.

Contemporary analyses of the dynamics of religious and cultural narratives in digital media demonstrate complexities that require a multidisciplinary approach. A semiotic study of advertising in Navi Mumbai (Dave et al., 2024) reveals how signs, colors, and symbols shape brand identities and subliminally influence consumer perceptions. These findings are relevant in the context of digital media, where algorithms use similar semiotic structures to reinforce hegemonic narratives through echo chambers, creating "organized

ignorance." Furthermore, a critical discourse analysis of coverage of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict (Alwaheidi, 2024) shows how Western and Eastern media frame responsibility through lexical choices (e.g., "target" vs. "massacre"), reflecting systemic biases in the construction of reality. This phenomenon aligns with Arendt's concept of the banality of evil (Qie, 2024) in education, where blind obedience to the system results in critical impotence—a pattern evident in media algorithms that normalize polarization. A semiotic-religious exploration of the film Sonidos de Libertad (Lagua et al., 2025) strengthens the argument that religious symbols (such as white as purity and black as evil) operate as tools for shaping collective moral values. However, digital media often reduces the complexity of these symbols to dichotomous narratives (good vs. evil), which actually erode social sustainability through fragmentation. This finding aligns with Nietzsche and Bonhoeffer's (Ardhianzy, 2025) critique of the contradictions of religious narratives as both a source of enlightenment and a tool of oppression. In other words, the integration of semiotic approaches, critical discourse analysis, and moral philosophy is crucial for dismantling hegemonic mechanisms in digital media and formulating enlightenment strategies that restore spiritual autonomy and epistemic justice.

This research offers an innovative analytical framework by integrating two theoretical traditions rarely studied together: Teun van Dijk's critical discourse analysis (CDA), which emphasizes power structures in the production of meaning, and Ferdinand de Saussure's semiotics, which examines the symbolic dimension in narrative construction. This combination enables a comprehensive mapping of religious and cultural narratives in digital media, not only at the lexical or rhetorical level, but also on the power relations hidden behind symbols, myths, and algorithms. This methodological innovation is strengthened by an interdisciplinary perspective that combines philosophy (the concept of Kantian enlightenment and Nietzschean critique), communication science (algorithm dynamics and echo chambers), and sustainability studies (the socio-cultural dimensions of the SDGs). Thus, this research goes beyond describing phenomena but also uncovers hegemonic mechanisms that threaten the intellectual independence of society in the digital context. The urgency of this research lies in the need to understand digital media as an arena for narrative battles that actively shape social sustainability. Amidst the dominance of algorithms that exacerbate polarization and "organized stupidity" (Ardhianzy, 2025), analysis of religious and cultural narratives is crucial for identifying critical points where symbolic manipulation and power structures reinforce each other. The findings of this research are relevant for designing educational policies based on epistemic criticism, media regulations that mitigate algorithmic bias, and sustainability advocacy rooted in intellectual emancipation. By connecting critical discourse theory, semiotics, and practical philosophy, this research contributes to efforts to construct a model of social sustainability that is resilient to the threats of hegemonic narratives in the digital era.

This research aims to critically examine the dynamics of religious and cultural narratives in digital media as forces that have the potential to hinder or support the realization of social sustainability through a philosophical enlightenment perspective. In general, this research seeks to analyze how these narratives, often entangled in the hegemonic structures and algorithms of digital platforms, shape society's ability to achieve intellectual independence and social resilience. This general objective is broken down into three interconnected specific objectives. First, to identify the discourse structure (through lexical, rhetorical, and framing analysis) and religious/cultural symbols (based on a Saussurean semiotic approach) in digital media content, including how algorithms reinforce or manipulate these symbolic meanings. Second, to assess the impact of these narratives on public perceptions of social sustainability, with a focus on the mechanisms of conformity (echo chamber) and the banality of epistemic evil (Arendt, 1963) resulting from information polarization. Third, to formulate recommendations for communication strategies based on the principles of Kantian enlightenment that emphasize the autonomy of thought and critical courage to mitigate the hegemony of manipulative narratives and strengthen the socio-cultural dimension of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). These three goals are designed not only to describe phenomena but also to propose epistemic interventions

capable of restoring information justice and social resilience in the digital era. By combining Van Dijk's critical discourse analysis (CDA), structural semiotics, and the moral philosophical frameworks of Bonhoeffer and Nietzsche, this research aims to provide a theoretical and practical blueprint for sustainable development rooted in collective intellectual emancipation.

2. Methods

This study applies a qualitative design with an interdisciplinary approach that combines Teun van Dijk's Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) and Ferdinand de Saussure's structural semiotics to deconstruct religio-cultural narratives in the digital ecosystem (Dijk, 1993; Saussure, 1959). The choice of qualitative design is intended to explore the complexity of symbolic meaning, power relations, and epistemic impacts of algorithmic mechanisms contextually and in-depth. Purposive sampling technique was used with strict inclusion criteria to ensure the analysis focuses on data that explicitly represents the dynamics of hegemony in the digital context. Inclusion criteria include: (1) content containing religio-cultural narratives with ideological polarization content, (2) data that reflects the interaction between algorithmic structures and the construction of social meaning, and (3) material relevant to dimensions of social sustainability, such as the fragmentation of collective values or the erosion of the autonomy of thought. The research sample consists of two layers of data: first, primary data in the form of a transcript of the video This is the Danger of Horrifying From Stupid People! (Ardhianzy, 2025) was selected for its clear representation of the concept of "organized stupidity" and the use of religio-cultural symbols as tools of hegemony. This video was the primary focus due to its ability to integrate philosophical narratives (e.g., quotes from Bonhoeffer and Nietzsche) with a contemporary digital context, as well as its potential for analysis through the lens of AWK and semiotics. Secondary data included social media content, public comments, and algorithmic metadata (e.g., content recommendation patterns) related to the themes of collective stupidity and ideological polarization. This secondary data was obtained through digital ethnography and netnography to understand how algorithms modify user perceptions through echo chambers and filter bubbles.

The purposive sampling process was strengthened by triangulation of primary and secondary data, which allowed for validation of findings through the convergence of evidence from heterogeneous sources. For example, analysis of Ardhianzy's (2025) video transcript emphasizing the "enlightenment vs. stupidity" dichotomy was enriched with secondary data in the form of YouTube comments that demonstrated patterns of algorithmic tribalism, such as the use of heroic rhetoric to justify polarization. This triangulation not only strengthens the credibility of the findings but also reveals the symbiotic mechanisms between hegemonic narratives and algorithmic structures, as reflected in the reduction of complex symbols (e.g., Kantian "Sapere Aude") to empty signifiers that serve the platform's logic of engagement. The selection of the academic environment of UIN Sultan Maulana Hasanuddin Banten as the research location from March 28–31, 2025, was based on considerations of access to digital media databases and Scopus-indexed literature, which facilitates interdisciplinary analysis. This sampling strategy aligns with the research objective of examining the interaction between hegemonic narratives, algorithmic structures, and the construction of social meaning holistically. Thus, purposive sampling is not simply a data collection technique but a critical instrument for identifying "critical junctures" where symbolic manipulation and algorithmic power reinforce each other, as explained in a theoretical framework that combines Kantian philosophy, Nietzschean critique, and sustainability studies.

The analysis is divided into two stages. First, van Dijk's AWK model is used to identify hegemonic strategies in discourse and framing mechanisms that reinforce polarization. Social contexts such as the role of algorithms in shaping echo chambers are analyzed through the Arendtian lens of the "banality of epistemic evil" (Silva & Guzzardi, 2023), which explains the normalization of collective ignorance through the repetition of simple

narratives. Second, Saussurean semiotics is applied to deconstruct religio-cultural symbols (as in Luther's quote on Sapere Aude) that are reduced to empty signifiers by algorithms. Barthes's (1972) concept of myth is used to reveal how digital platforms commodify complex ideas into binary narratives that obscure the complexity of reality, as in Lagua et al.'s (2025) study of the exploitation of religious symbols for hegemonic purposes. The synthesis of AWK and semiotics is strengthened by the integration of critical theory (e.g., Nietzsche's perspectivism, virtue ethics (Farina et al., 2024) and sustainability studies (SDGs). This ensures a holistic analysis linking digital hegemony to its threats to epistemic justice (SDG 4) and social stability (SDG 16). The validity of the findings is enhanced through triangulation of methods (text, context, metadata), theories (CDA, semiotics, philosophy), and empirical references from related studies (Danaditya et al., 2022 on digital actor coordination in Indonesia).

3. Result and Discussion

Bonhoeffer's analysis of systemic stupidity in the Nazi regime, which viewed the lack of independent thinking as the foundation of collective cruelty, is reinforced by Raymond Chin's critique of intellectual stagnation in contemporary society (Chin, 2025). Both assert that stupidity, as a product of submission to authority or dominant narratives, is not simply passive ignorance, but a structural failure to question internalized realities (Dave et al., 2024). This phenomenon, as demonstrated in Ardhianzy's (2025) narrative, explains why mass crimes such as the Holocaust (Table 1) or the Rwandan genocide were not simply committed by "bad guys" but by individuals trapped in a logic of "collective stupidity" that is resistant to correction. This framework is further enriched by the integration of Dunning-Kruger's concept (Bisa, 2022) with Ardhianzy's "echo chamber" thesis, which reveals how overconfidence in ignorance (e.g., Indonesia's claim to be the "stupidest country" in Chin's (2025) content) actually exacerbates social vulnerability.

Table 1. Analysis of hegemonic structures in the narrative of "collective stupidity"

Analysis Framework	Analysis Points	Quoted From Video Transcript (Ardhianzy, 2025)	Critical Interpretation
AWK van Dijk (Discourse Structure)	The "Enlightenment vs. Ignorance" Dichotomy as a Framing Device.	"Stupidity is more dangerous than evil. We can protest against evil, expose it, and even fight it with force. But against stupidity, we are powerless." (Bonhoeffer).	This quote reinforces polarization by framing ignorance as a latent, uncontrollable threat, while crime is considered "manageable." This dichotomy creates a hierarchy of values that justifies hegemonic narratives. In the context of critical discourse analysis (CDA), this dichotomy functions as a hegemonic strategy to normalize ignorance as a "common enemy," while simultaneously deflecting criticism from the power structures that produce epistemic injustice (Hasnaa & Alfian, 2023). The "enlightenment vs. ignorance" polarity ignores social complexities, such as the role of algorithms in reinforcing conformity.
		"Stupidity is not a lack of knowledge, but the loss of freedom of thought." (Bonhoeffer).	Reducing the complexity of the concept of stupidity to a binary narrative ("freedom vs. limitation") facilitates conformity. Bonhoeffer linked stupidity to the loss of intellectual autonomy, which aligns with Arendt's concept of the "banality of evil" (Qie, 2024). Collective stupidity in the digital age is exacerbated by algorithms that

	Polarization through Algorithms	The modern ecosystem of ignorance, where many people only accept information that fits their beliefs.	filter information to validate biases, thereby eroding critical capacity (Alwaheidi, 2024). Social media algorithms create echo chambers that amplify collective ignorance. This phenomenon reflects Bonhoeffer's "organized ignorance," in which algorithms act as structural actors that reproduce hegemony (Capano et al., 2023). Echo chambers not only limit access to information but also transform religious/cultural narratives into tools for legitimizing power (Lagua et al., 2025).
Saussurean Semiotics	Symbols of "Enlightenment" vs. "Ignorance"	"Sapere Aude, dare to think for yourself." (Kant).	Kant's concept is reduced to a simplistic slogan, stripped of its philosophical context. This reduction creates the myth of absolute enlightenment (Gómez, 2017), in which "Sapere Aude" is commodified to justify the dominant narrative. This contradicts Kantian principles that emphasize independent thinking as an emancipatory process, not a rhetorical slogan (Siswadi, 2024).
	Co-optation of Religious Symbols	Luther posted 95 theses on the door of the Wittenberg church, opposing the buying and selling of indulgences.	Luther's Reformation has been transformed into a heroic myth to justify the narrative of rebellion versus oppression. Luther's symbolism has been reduced to a binary (rebel versus tyrant), stripping him of his historical context as a critique of institutional corruption. This narrative has been used to reinforce polarization, such as the Balkan conflict being reduced to "vice versus virtue" (Dave et al., 2024).
	Stupidity as a Structural Product	Organized stupidity through information control, propaganda, and ideological imposition.	Stupidity is presented as a systemic outcome, not an individual weakness. This concept aligns with Milgram's theory of "blind obedience," in which authority structures (including algorithms) force individuals to surrender their autonomy of thought. Collective stupidity becomes a tool for the reproduction of hegemony, much like Nazi propaganda exploiting the "banality of evil" (Arendt) to justify its genocidal policies.
	Nietzsche: The Death of God and the Crisis of Meaning	"God is dead, God remains dead and we are the ones who killed him."(Nietzsche).	This quote is used to emphasize the crisis of moral values in modern society. In the context of digital media, Nietzsche's "death of God" reflects the breakdown of metaphysical narratives that fuel nihilism. Digital platforms exacerbate this crisis by replacing transcendental meaning with consumerist symbols (e.g., clickbait, monetization), thereby reinforcing organized ignorance (Hobbs, 2021).
	Hannah Arendt: The Banality of Evil	"Eichmann felt no guilt, because he had never broken the law."	Collective ignorance enables systemic crimes without moral reflection. Arendt pointed out that systemic crimes (e.g., the Holocaust) are enabled by the "blind obedience" generated by bureaucratic structures. In the digital context, algorithms function as virtual bureaucracies that

		reinforce conformity, thereby facilitating epistemic crimes such as misinformation and online radicalization (Qie, 2024).
Kierkegaard: Individual vs. Mass	The crowd/mass is a lie. To be an individual is to face existential anxiety (Kierkegaard).	Conformity is considered a form of deception; freedom requires individual courage. Kierkegaard rejected the concept of "mass truth" produced by algorithms. In the context of social sustainability, individuals' reluctance to think independently hinders the achievement of the SDGs, particularly the goals of quality education (SDG 4) and social justice (SDG 16).
Milgram: Blind Obedience to Authority	The participants continued to increase the voltage despite hearing screams of pain, because someone gave the order.	The Milgram experiment has been used as an analogy for blind obedience in authoritarian systems. The results of this experiment are relevant to the algorithmic era, where users "obey" content recommendations without critical reflection. This creates a cycle of ignorance that threatens social sustainability by reinforcing polarization and tribalism (Alwaheidi, 2024).
Neil Postman: The Media and Intellectual Indifference	"Modern media doesn't suppress free thought. It just makes it irrelevant." (Postman)	Social media distracts from critical thinking through excessive entertainment. Postman points out that digital media transforms public discourse into a spectacle that prioritizes sensation over substance. This aligns with Ardhianzy's (2025) argument about the commodification of enlightenment narratives for commercial purposes.
Karl Popper: Falsifiability and Democracy	In a democracy, institutions must be open to criticism and ready to correct mistakes (Popper).	This quote emphasizes the importance of rational critique to counter hegemony. Popper's falsifiability principle is relevant for designing media policies that mitigate algorithmic bias. Digital democracy requires regulations that ensure algorithmic transparency and critical education to restore epistemic justice (Capano et al., 2023).

For example, social media algorithms that reinforce cognitive biases create an autopoietic cycle: the more individuals are exposed to information that validates their prejudices, the more convinced they are of their ignorance, while simultaneously becoming more vulnerable to manipulation by actors who exploit ignorance as a tool of hegemony (Dave et al., 2024). This finding aligns with semiotic studies showing that dominant visual symbols and narratives in advertising not only shape consumer preferences but also reinforce the internalization of meanings that are resistant to critique (Dave et al., 2024). Thus, ignorance is not only a trigger for violence but also an infrastructure that sustains the reproduction of injustice, both in historical and contemporary digital contexts.

Alwaheidi's (2024) study of Western and Eastern media framing of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict corroborates this argument. Through critical discourse analysis, he shows how Western media tend to legitimize Israeli attacks with the narrative of "targeting terrorists," while Eastern media highlight civilian casualties as "massacres" (Alwaheidi, 2024). This difference reflects how collective ignorance is produced through linguistic framing that frames reality according to dominant political interests. For example, CNN and the BBC's use of the word "target" implies military precision that "justifies" civilian

casualties, while Al Jazeera and Middle East Eye emphasize the location of attacks in "safe zones" to expose violations of humanitarian law (Alwaheidi, 2024). This phenomenon aligns with Dave et al.'s (2024) thesis on the structural failure to critique internalized narratives.

This research highlights the importance of critical analysis of mass media and its role in shaping public opinion. As consumers of information, we need to be aware of the framing used by the media to influence our perceptions of an issue. By understanding how linguistic framing can influence how we perceive political reality, we can be more critical of the information we receive and develop a more comprehensive understanding (Hasbullah & Maella, 2025). We need to question the motives behind the narratives presented by the media and seek information from multiple sources to gain a more complete picture. Education on media analysis also needs to be improved so that the public can identify possible propaganda or manipulation (Galanton, 2019). In this way, we can form a more inclusive and critical view of the political reality around us.
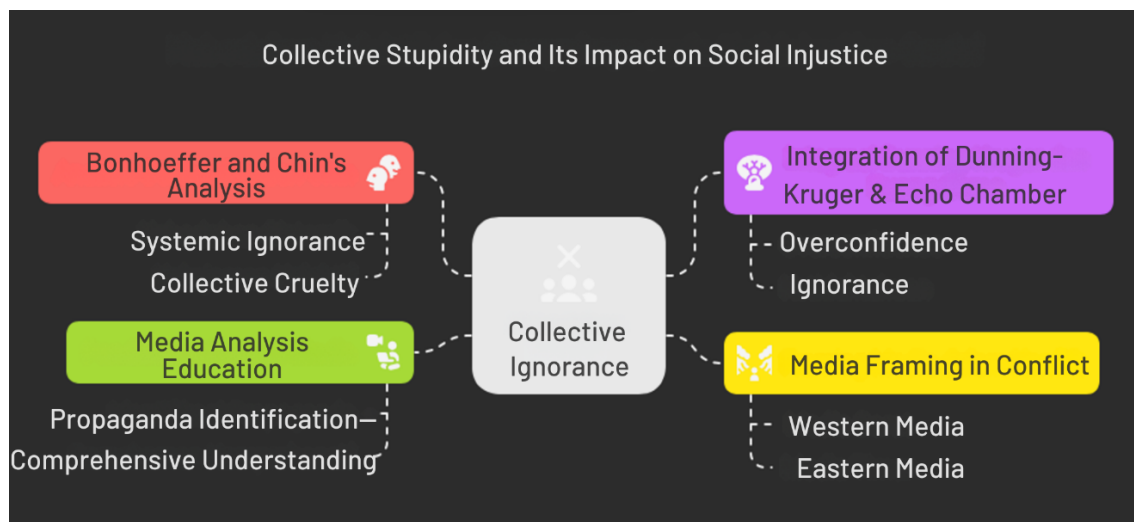

Fig 1. Collective ignorance and its impact on social injustice

The continuity between historical hegemonic mechanisms and contemporary digital dynamics can be analyzed through the lens of Ferdinand de Saussure's semiotics and Teun van Dijk's critical discourse analysis (CDA). As shown in Table 2, digital platform algorithms not only replicate the logic of Bonhoeffer's "ecosystem of ignorance," in which individuals cede the authority of thought to external structures, but also reinforce it through personalized content that validates prejudice. This phenomenon creates the banality of (Arendtian) epistemic evil, where algorithmically produced misinformation is legitimized through engagement, similar to how Nazi propaganda utilized narrative repetition to consolidate power.

Table 2. The role of algorithms in shaping "organized stupidity"

Analysis Framework	Analysis Points	Quoted From Video Transcript (Ardhianzy, 2025)	Critical Interpretation
AWK van Dijk (Hegemonic Structure)	Polarization through Personalized Recommendations	The modern ecosystem of ignorance, where many people only accept information that fits their beliefs.	Algorithms function as structural actors that reinforce polarization. "Convenient" content recommendations create echo chambers, validate users' prejudices, and erode critical thinking (in line with Arendt's concept of the banality of evil).
	Normalizing Simplistic Narratives	Organized stupidity through information control, propaganda, and ideological imposition.	Algorithms reproduce binary narratives (right/wrong, good/evil) that diminish social complexity. This reflects the Barthesian myth in which symbols are co-opted to maintain hegemony.

	Commodification of Emotions in Content	Social/mass media doesn't suppress freedom of thought. It just makes it irrelevant (Neil Postman).	Algorithms prioritize emotional content (clickbait, sensationalism) to increase engagement. This creates a transactional sluggishness, where users are "bought" by cheap entertainment (Hobbs, 2021).
	The Formation of Virtual Reality	We live in a hell created with perfect legality (Arendt).	Algorithms create a simulacrum reality (Baudrillard) in which false narratives are believed to be true. This aligns with Arendt's banality of evil, where systemic crime is considered "normal" because it is considered legal.
	Distraction Strategy through Entertainment	Unlimited entertainment that distracts from critical questions (Postman).	Algorithms leverage the attention economy to distract users from structural issues. This is a form of hegemonic soft power that reinforces the status quo (Capano et al., 2023).
Saussurean Semiotics	Reduction of the Concept of Enlightenment	"Sapere Aude, dare to think for yourself!" (Kant).	The slogan Sapere Aude is reduced to an empty signifier used to brand educational content as "progressive," even though it only replaces old dogma with new dogma (Siswadi, 2024).
	Co-optation of Religious Symbols	"Luther attached 95 theses... against the buying and selling of indulgences." (Ardhianzy, 2025).	Luther's Reformation narrative is used as a symbol of heroic resistance to justify contemporary polarization (e.g., the Balkan conflict). This reflects a Barthesian myth that obscures historical context (Dave et al., 2024).
	Algorithms as Strengtheners of Tribalism	Netizen comments that validate the narrative of 'collective stupidity' without criticism (Video comments, Ardhianzy, 2025).	These comments reflect the mass truths generated by algorithms. In Saussure's semiotics, the sign "stupidity" is defined relationally with "enlightenment," but algorithms reinforce this dichotomy for the sake of market segmentation.
	Contradiction in the Symbol of "Truth"	We cannot fight ignorance with force, only with enlightenment (Bonhoeffer).	The symbol of "enlightenment" here has a dual connotation: as intellectual emancipation (Kantian connotation) and as a tool of social control (hegemonic connotation). Algorithms exacerbate this ambiguity.
	Symbiosis of Algorithms and Capitalism	Modern media turns public discourse into a spectacle (Postman).	Algorithms serve as the semiotic infrastructure of platform capitalism. "Enlightenment" content is commercialized through advertising and monetization, turning knowledge into a commodity (Lagua et al., 2025).

Furthermore, the reduction of complex symbols like the Kantian "Sapere Aude" to empty signifiers (Table 3) reflects an ironic commodification of enlightenment: progressive narratives are manipulated to reinforce new dogmas, following the pattern of the co-option of religious symbols in the Balkans or Palestine-Israel conflicts (Alwaheidi, 2024). In other words, digital media is not merely a neutral medium but a semiotic infrastructure that actively produces epistemic injustice. The historical context of colonialism and the Holocaust provides a framework for understanding organized ignorance in the digital age.

Table 3. Synthesis of algorithmic-semiotic mechanisms and implications for social sustainability

Mechanism	Semiotic-Algorithmic Analysis	Impact on Social Sustainability	Enlightenment-Based Mitigation Strategy
Complex Symbol Reduction	The algorithm simplifies religious symbols (Kant's "Sapere Aude") into empty signifiers to increase engagement.	The erosion of transcendental meaning, triggering epistemic nihilism (Nietzsche) and the fragmentation of collective values.	Recontextualization of symbols through critical education that connects Kantian principles to contemporary issues (e.g., AI ethics).
Algorithmic Binary Polarity	Algorithms reinforce the "enlightenment vs. ignorance" dichotomy (Table 1) through echo chambers, ignoring the cognitive spectrum.	Collective stupidity is seen as a "common enemy", diverting criticism from power structures (CDA van Dijk).	Platform designs that promote content ambiguity and complexity (such as, Socratic method-based discussion forums).
Commodification of Emotions	Emotional content (Bonhoeffer's "legal hell" rhetoric) is algorithmically optimized to trigger tribalistic reactions.	Radicalization of public opinion, such as the cases of the Rohingya or the Balkans, is driven by affective polarization (Dave et al., 2024).	Algorithmic regulation that limits emotional contagion and prioritizes evidence-based narratives (Popperian falsifiability).
The Myth of Systemic Legitimacy	Historical symbols (Luther's Reformation) are used as myths to legitimize neoliberal hegemony (Lagua et al., 2025).	The "rebellion vs. tyrant" narrative is used to justify unjust policies (resource exploitation).	Deconstruction of myths through critical discourse analysis (Barthes) and advocacy of algorithmic transparency policies.
The Banality of Epistemic Evil	Blind obedience to algorithms (Milgram) facilitates misinformation being "legalized" through engagement (Arendtian).	The normalization of systemic lies (e.g., digital Holocaust: climate hoaxes, anti-vaxxers) threatens SDGs 13 & 3.	Strengthening algorithmic literacy as part of the SDG 4 (Quality Education) curriculum.
Capital-Algorithm Symbiosis	Algorithms commercialize enlightenment narratives (e.g., paid educational content) to power the attention economy (Postman).	Knowledge becomes an exclusive commodity, eroding inclusive access to enlightenment (contrary to SDG 10).	Public good-based platform business models, such as subsidies for educational content by the state or philanthropy.
Death of Transcendental Meaning	The death of God (Nietzsche) in the digital age is replaced by consumer symbols (for example, influencers as materialistic "prophets").	The crisis of life purpose leads to empty hedonism, hindering the achievement of SDG 3 (Mental Health).	Revitalization of the transcendental narrative through critical interfaith dialogue, guided by the Kierkegaardian principle (individuation).

Just as the exploitation of the Dutch East Indies utilized the myth of the "civilizing mission" to legitimize exploitation, contemporary algorithms utilize heroic narratives such as those of Luther's Reformation, which serve as symbols of resistance (Table 2) to justify ideological polarization (Harum, 2017). A critical discourse analysis of YouTube comments

(Ardhianzy, 2025) shows how algorithmic tribalism transforms individuals into actors who consciously reinforce echo chambers, just as post-Weimar Germans voted for the Nazi Party out of blind faith in authority (Dave et al., 2024). However, a methodological synthesis between Nietzschean philosophy (the rejection of herd morality) and CDA (van Dijk) opens up opportunities for counter-hegemonic strategies. For example, deconstructing the myth of "absolute enlightenment" through critical education can restore the transcendental meaning of symbols like "Sapere Aude," transforming them from empty slogans into practices of intellectual emancipation resilient to algorithmic bias (Lagua et al., 2025).

However, not everyone exposed to echo chambers will adopt beliefs without critical thought, and some individuals may remain skeptical of the information they receive. Beyond skepticism, the approach of deconstructing the myth of absolute enlightenment may be ineffective in overcoming the powerful influence of echo chambers on opinion and belief formation. For example, in situations where individuals are constantly exposed to information that reinforces their own beliefs on social media, they may find it more difficult to critically consider differing viewpoints (Nisa et al., 2024). Conversely, individuals trained in critical thinking and skepticism may remain able to maintain an independent perspective (Indrapangastuti, 2023).
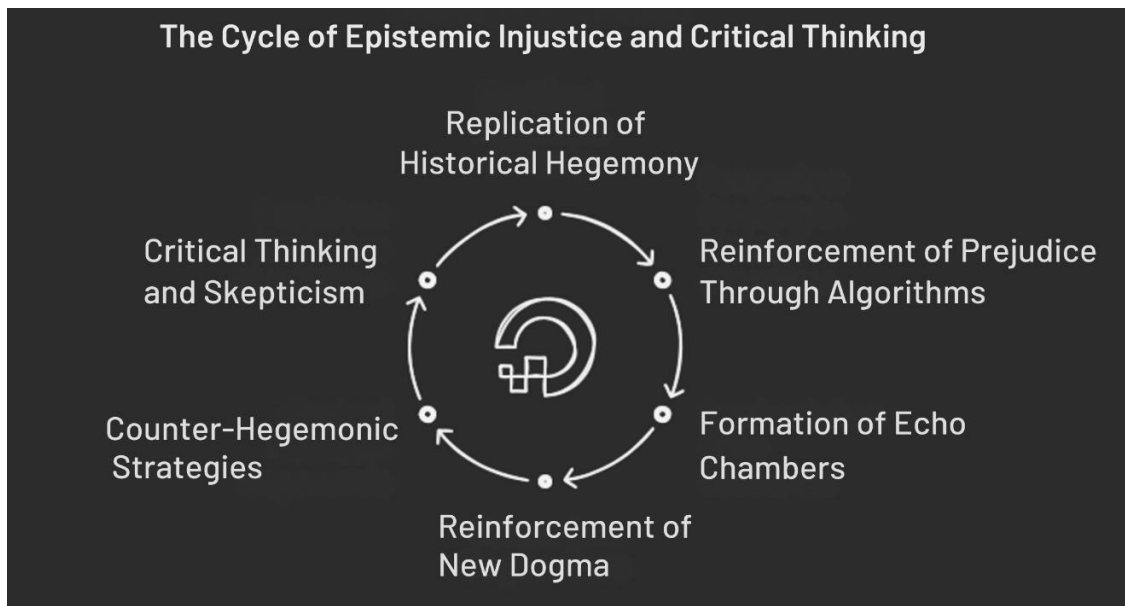

Fig 2. The cycle of epistemic injustice and critical thinking

In this case, a more effective approach is to encourage individuals to continuously practice their critical thinking and skepticism, so they are less easily influenced by information that only reinforces existing beliefs. Furthermore, it is also important to promote healthy dialogue and discussion between individuals with differing viewpoints (Dwiyanti et al., 2023), allowing them to see multiple perspectives and consider information more objectively. This way, individuals can develop a broader understanding and avoid being trapped in echo chambers that only reinforce their own views (Saumantri, 2023).

The role of algorithms in amplifying "organized stupidity" (Ardhianzy, 2025) has become a critical phenomenon in the digital ecosystem. Social media platforms, through machine learning-based recommendation systems, systematically create filter bubbles that limit exposure to heterogeneous information (Rodilosso, 2024). This mechanism not only replicates the hegemonic logic identified by Bonhoeffer, where individuals cede the authority to think to external structures, but also exacerbates it through personalized content that validates prejudice (Dave et al., 2024). As demonstrated in a case study of the Palestine-Israel conflict in Indonesia (Danaditya et al., 2022), algorithms collaborate with coordinating actors (humans and bots) to spread polarizing narratives, utilizing connotatively modified religious-cultural symbols. This phenomenon aligns with Arendt's

concept of the banality of epistemic evil, where blind adherence to algorithmic recommendations facilitates the normalization of misinformation, such as climate hoaxes or anti-vaccine, which threatens the achievement of the SDGs (Hasbullah & Maella, 2025). Mitigation solutions require the integration of algorithmic literacy into educational curricula (SDG 4) and regulation of algorithm transparency that encourages information serendipity (Campbell, 2000).

In Indonesia, algorithmic amplification interacts uniquely with local sociopolitical dynamics rife with identity fragmentation. A study of coordinated activity on Twitter (Danaditya et al., 2022) reveals how hashtags like #dup6 and #d51r are used to mobilize public opinion on the Palestine-Israel issue and alcohol investment policy. These actors utilize B-maneuvers (building support networks) and D-maneuvers (disrupting opposing narratives) to amplify polarization, with bots accounting for 23% of coordinated activity (Danaditya et al., 2022). The Indonesian context, rich in religious-cultural narratives, allows for large-scale symbolic manipulation, such as the use of historical myths of Luther's Reformation to justify contemporary identity conflicts (Dave et al., 2024). This phenomenon is exacerbated by the public's low critical literacy regarding algorithmic mechanisms, which triggers cognitive dissonance and opinion radicalization (Hobbs, 2021). To address this, policies are needed that combine a virtue ethics approach in algorithm design (Farina et al., 2024) with advocacy for social sustainability based on intellectual emancipation (Hasbullah & Maella, 2025).

The concept of the "banality of evil," formulated by Arendt (1963) in her analysis of Adolf Eichmann, the architect of the Holocaust, who acted not out of personal cruelty but out of blind obedience to the system, is key to understanding the dynamics of collective ignorance in the digital age. As explained in a study (Silva & Guzzardi, 2023), contemporary epistemic crimes (e.g., the large-scale spread of misinformation) no longer depend on individual bad actors, but rather on systemic obedience to algorithms and hegemonic narratives produced in a coordinated manner (Danaditya et al., 2022). This phenomenon aligns with Milgram's (1963) findings on the human tendency to "turn off" criticism when faced with authority, whether human or algorithmic. In the Indonesian context, this blind obedience is manipulated through religio-cultural narratives co-opted by coordinated actors (Rodilosso, 2024), such as the use of symbols of the Lutheran Reformation to justify identity polarization.

Furthermore, Arendt asserted that systemic evil arises when individuals refuse to acknowledge moral responsibility for the consequences of their actions—a pattern seen in algorithmic ecosystems where users "surrender" to content recommendations without questioning their biases or social impacts (Silva & Guzzardi, 2023). This phenomenon is exacerbated by discursive structures that replace critical dialogue with the repetition of dogmatic narratives, similar to how Nazi propaganda utilized Gleichschaltung (ideological alignment) to consolidate power (Arendt, 1963). In Indonesia, where religious narratives are often used as a tool for political legitimacy, blind adherence to algorithmic recommendations has the potential to trigger passive radicalization, where individuals are trapped in a cycle of internal validation without awareness of external manipulation (Baihaqi, 2019).

In addressing the complexity of collective ignorance exacerbated by algorithmic amplification and Indonesia's sociopolitical dynamics, it is crucial to adopt a multidimensional approach that combines critical media literacy and systemic accountability. As Hobbs' (2021) study on Neil Postman's legacy explains, propaganda education must go beyond simply identifying information biases and also train the ability to map the "incomplete information environment" through semiotic and contextual analysis. This aligns with Rodilosso's (2024) findings that filter bubbles not only limit the diversity of information but also produce "selective abstractions" that bury the complexity of social reality within binary narratives (e.g., pro-contra Palestine-Israel).
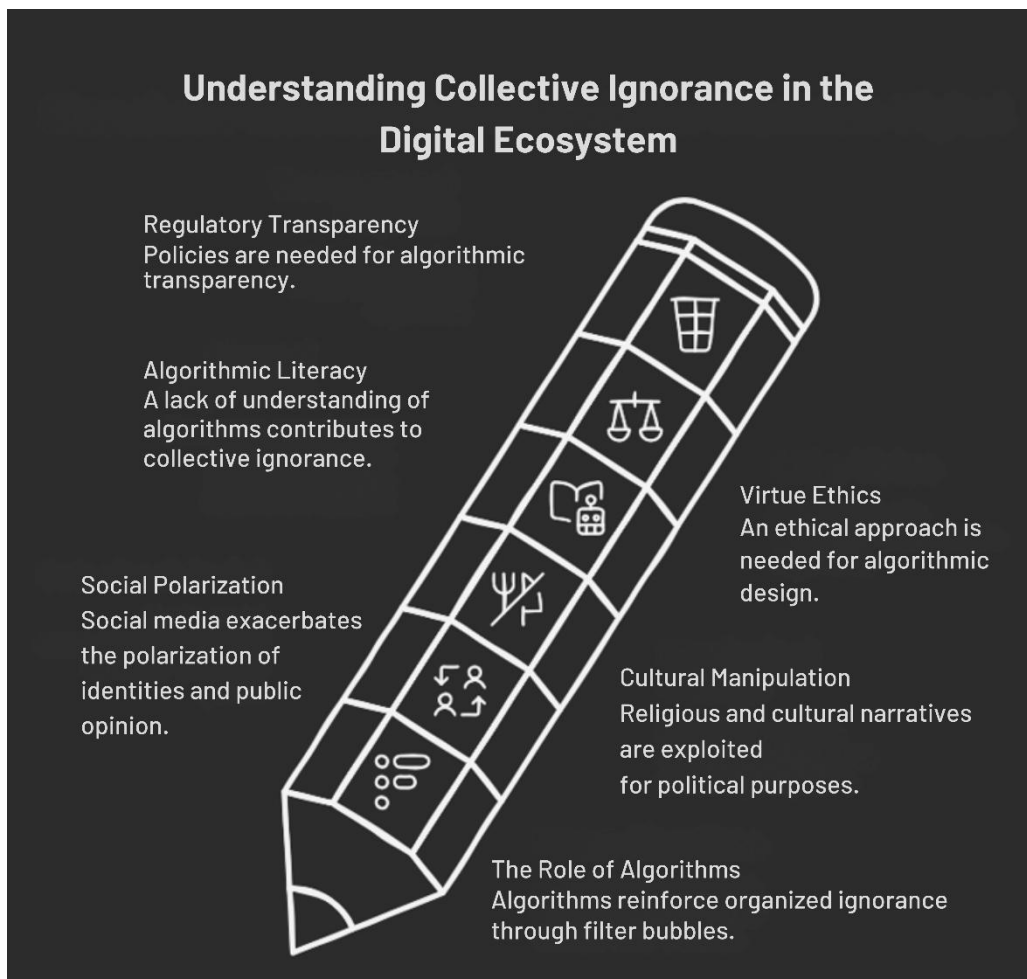
Fig 3. Understanding collective stupidity in the digital ecosystem

In Indonesia, where religious-cultural narratives are often manipulated to reinforce polarization, educational interventions must be based on virtue ethics (Farina et al., 2024) and Kantian-style reflexive thinking (Sapere Aude). This requires curriculum integration that combines critical discourse analysis (CDA) to deconstruct symbolic hegemony (Lagua et al., 2025) with technical training to understand algorithmic mechanisms (Campbell, 2000). Furthermore, algorithmic transparency policies and coordinated content regulation (Danaditya et al., 2022) must be supported by a legal framework that encourages public participation in auditing recommendation systems, as proposed in the EU Digital Services Act. Ultimately, mitigating collective ignorance depends not only on technology or regulation, but on epistemic transformation that positions individuals as critical agents capable of questioning dominant narratives and recognizing the uncertainty of knowledge (Postman, 1974). Thus, efforts to build sustainable social resilience (SDG 16: Peace, Justice, and Inclusive Institutions) must begin with intellectual emancipation rooted in an awareness of one's own limitations and the systems that govern information reality (HAM, 2016; Saumantri, 2023).

Educational reform as a solution to organized ignorance must incorporate a holistic approach that emphasizes independent thinking, critical literacy, and technological adaptation. The Finnish model, with its Phenomenon-Based Learning (PBL) and the teacher's role as facilitator (Sahlberg, 2014), offers a framework for reducing blind obedience through contextual and collaborative learning. However, in the increasingly complex context of digital disinformation, this model needs to be strengthened with gamification methods, as tested in the study by Cernicova-Buca & Ciurel (2022). Experimental results showed that simulating the role of a "media analyst" using the CRAAP (Currency, Relevance, Authority, Accuracy, and Purpose) criteria increased students' ability to identify information reductionism by up to 67.6% (Blakeslee, 2004). The integration of

PBL and gamification can create a learning ecosystem where students not only understand multidisciplinary phenomena but are also trained to resist cognitive biases and narrative manipulation.

Furthermore, reform must consider scalability and cultural contextualization. Sakamoto's (2023) study highlights that Finland's success is supported by holistic policies (quality teachers, technological infrastructure, and government policies), which are difficult to replicate in developing countries like Indonesia. Therefore, future research needs to develop hybrid models that adapt Finnish principles with local innovations. For example, combining community-based gamification (Hamari et al., 2014) with digital citizenship education, as Japan has done through its Digital Literacy for All program (Sakamoto, 2023). This model can be tested in the Indonesian context by utilizing familiar social media platforms (e.g., Instagram or TikTok) for critical literacy campaigns, while simultaneously training teachers as agents of change through microlearning training (Hug, 2006). Thus, educational reform becomes not only a tool to combat ignorance but also a foundation for building a society resilient to the threat of disinformation.

Effective technology policies must be able to mitigate algorithmic bias while strengthening the public's critical literacy. Wang's (2022) study emphasized that algorithmic transparency, while considered a democratic principle, has the potential to become a disguised disciplinary tool if not accompanied by clear accountability mechanisms. Regulations such as the European Union's General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR), which includes the "right to explanation," offer a legal framework to ensure the accountability of algorithmic decisions. However, their implementation is often hampered by technical complexity and information asymmetry between algorithm developers and users (Binns, 2018). In Indonesia, where digital platform algorithms often reinforce religious-cultural polarization (Hasbullah & Maella, 2025), similar policies need to be tailored to the local context through regulations that integrate transparency principles with critical education.

Furthermore, technological interventions must avoid reductionism to technical solutions. Zerilli et al. (2019) show that algorithmic transparency does not always result in better public understanding, especially when the public is less trained in dissecting algorithmic logic. Therefore, technology policies need to be designed socio-technically, combining regulation with digital literacy training based on epistemic criticism. For example, a participatory algorithmic audit system that involves civil society and academics in monitoring algorithmic decisions (Wang, 2022). This model aligns with UNESCO's (2020) recommendations on inclusive media and information literacy and reinforces the relevance of Finnish-style education reforms in countering the hegemony of digital narratives.

Facing the challenges of the post-truth era, characterized by narrative polarization and algorithmic hegemony, Kierkegaard's philosophical praxis offers a critical framework for building resilient social sustainability. First, the principle of aesthetic-ethical existence serves as an antidote to the symbolic manipulation of digital media. By encouraging individuals to critically reflect on the narratives they consume, society can break the cycle of "organized stupidity" (Denisenko, 2022) exacerbated by platform algorithms. Second, a commitment to universal moral values (ethical stage) serves as a foundation for mitigating disinformation. As explained by Guess & Lyons (2020), the ethical responsibility to verify information (tabayyun) must be integrated into digital literacy, in line with the principle of fidelity to the universal in Kierkegaard's philosophy (Czakó, 2019). Third, the religious stage, which emphasizes a personal connection to transcendent truth, fosters empathy and intergroup dialogue, overcoming the "us vs. them" dichotomy often exploited by hegemonic narratives (Lewandowsky et al., 2017). This practice not only strengthens epistemic resilience but also builds a society capable of integrating information complexity with moral integrity, as proposed by Webber (2018) in his reconceptualization of existentialism as a tool for collective emancipation. Thus, the synthesis of Kierkegaard's philosophical reflections and critical analysis of digital power structures is key to realizing social sustainability rooted in intellectual independence and inclusive solidarity.
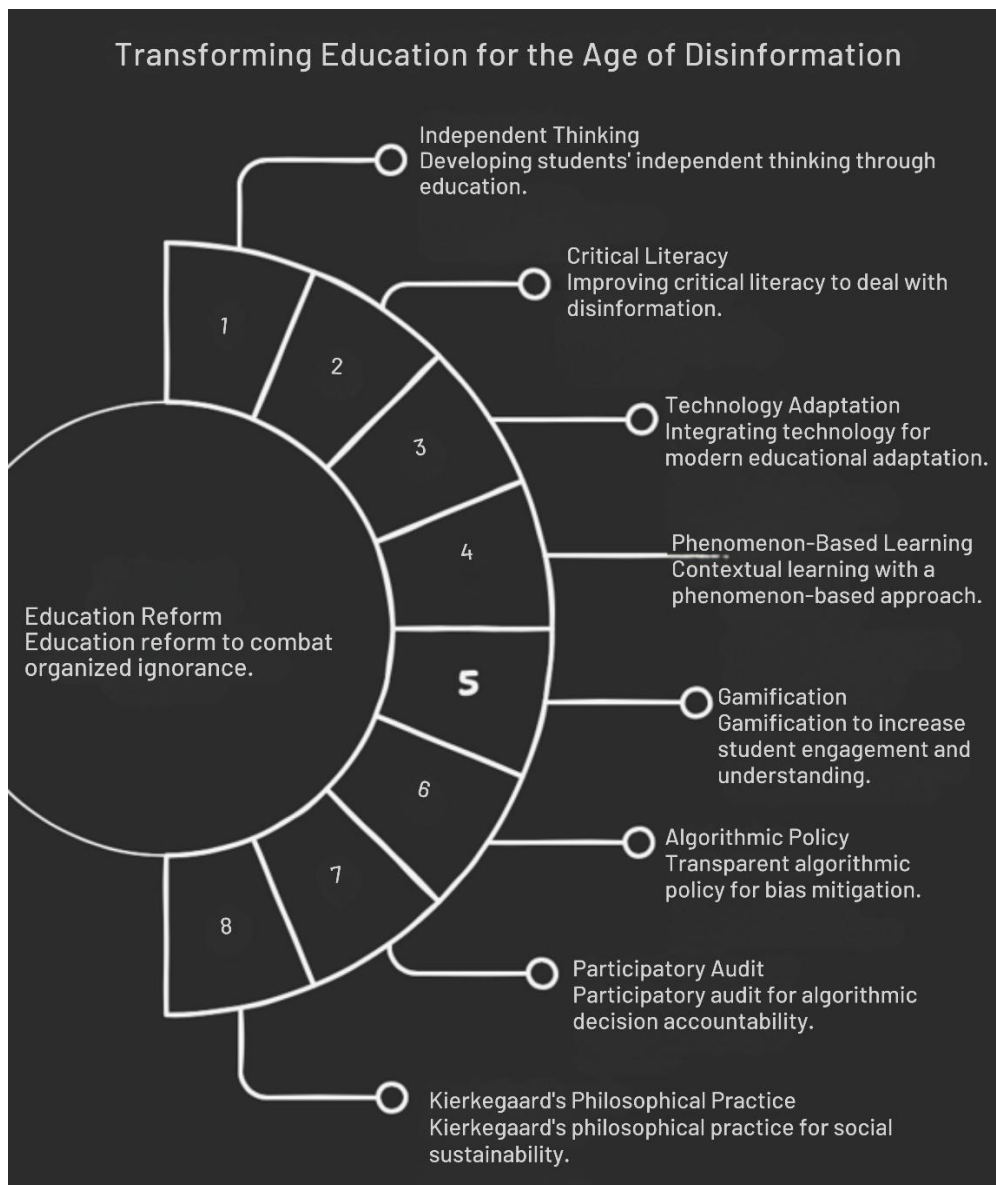
Fig 4. Transforming education for the age of disinformation

This research has several limitations that need to be considered for further research. First, the qualitative design used, while effective in deconstructing symbolic meanings and discourse structures, has limitations in terms of generalizability of the findings. As explained by Ajemba & Arene (2022), purposive sampling-based studies, particularly those focusing on specific digital content, have the potential to produce survivorship bias, where the perspectives of marginalized or non-digital groups are overlooked. This limitation is exacerbated by the focus on YouTube and social media platforms, which do not fully represent the diversity of religious-cultural narratives in non-online societies. Second, the integration of critical discourse analysis (CDA) and structural semiotics, while innovative, does not fully accommodate the temporal dimension. As noted in the study by Xenikou & Simosi (2006), a cross-sectional approach is inadequate to capture the causal dynamics between platform algorithms, opinion polarization, and social sustainability. Therefore, future research should adopt a longitudinal design to more comprehensively map the evolution of hegemonic narratives. Third, the limitations of the research variables lie in the dominant focus on the agency dimension (the role of media actors) rather than structure (platform policies or state regulations). This aligns with Ranaweera & Prabhu's (2003) critique that single-variable studies are prone to ignoring the complexity of multisectoral interactions. This gap opens up opportunities to incorporate configurational approaches (Meyer et al., 1993) in analyzing how technological, policy, and cultural factors synergize to

strengthen or mitigate collective ignorance. Furthermore, methodological limitations related to data collection, particularly the reliance on secondary sources, demand innovations such as mixed methods techniques that combine real-time algorithmic analysis with in-depth interviews to validate findings (Peersman, 2014).

4. Conclusion

This research aims to analyze the dynamics of religious and cultural narratives in digital media as forces that have the potential to hinder or support social sustainability through the lens of philosophical enlightenment. Based on the findings, religious-cultural narratives in the digital ecosystem function not only as representations of identity but also as instruments of hegemony reinforced by platform algorithms. Critical discourse analysis (CDA) and structural semiotics reveal that social media algorithms create echo chambers that reinforce polarization, reduce complex symbols (such as the Kantian "Sapere Aude") to empty signifiers, and facilitate "organized ignorance" through the validation of existing prejudices. This phenomenon aligns with Arendt's concept of the banality of evil, where blind obedience to algorithmic systems erodes the autonomy of thought and fuels social fragmentation. Furthermore, the findings also suggest that social sustainability is threatened when religious-cultural narratives are co-opted to justify polarization, as in the Palestine-Israel conflict or disinformation campaigns related to health issues. In Indonesia, this dynamic is exacerbated by the public's low critical literacy regarding algorithmic mechanisms, which allow coordinated actors to manipulate historical symbols (as in Luther's Reformation) to reinforce digital tribalism.

As an implication, study recommends the integration of critical education based on virtue ethics and algorithmic literacy into formal education curricula, such as the Finnish Phenomenon-Based Learning model combined with role-playing media analysis. Regulation of algorithm transparency and participatory auditing are also needed to mitigate systemic bias, as proposed within the framework of the EU Digital Services Act. Furthermore, digital platform design needs to adopt the principle of information serendipity to reduce polarization, while public policy advocacy should focus on recovering the transcendental meaning of enlightenment symbols through inclusive interfaith dialogue. This research contributes to the interdisciplinary literature by synthesizing critical discourse analysis, semiotics, and moral philosophy to dismantle hegemonic mechanisms in digital media. However, methodological limitations such as the cross-sectional design and focus on the dominant platform (YouTube) require further studies that incorporate longitudinal and mixed methods approaches to map narrative evolution more holistically. Thus, efforts to construct resilient social sustainability must begin with collective intellectual emancipation, where individuals are able to question dominant narratives and acknowledge the complexity of information reality in the digital era.

Author Contribution
M.N.A contributed to the literature search, interpretation, writing, and proofreading of the manuscript. The author has read and agreed to the published version of the manuscript.

Ethical Review Board Statement
Not available.

Informed Consent Statement

Not available.

Data Availability Statement

Not available.

Conflicts of Interest

The author declare no conflict of interest.

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