

Political Polarization in Indonesia's Digital Public Sphere: Online Communities, Identity Politics, and Democratic Deliberation

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Abstract

The expansion of digital political communication has created unprecedented opportunities for citizens to participate in public debate while simultaneously intensifying political polarization. Indonesian social media users increasingly encounter political information through communities organized around ideological, religious, or candidate-based identities. This article examines the relationship between online political communities and democratic deliberation in Indonesia. Using qualitative digital discourse analysis, the study investigates political identity formation, interaction patterns, disagreement, and information sharing. The article argues that polarization is strengthened when algorithmic recommendation systems and interpersonal networks repeatedly expose users to politically homogeneous content. However, online communities can also facilitate political participation and collective identity formation. The study proposes a deliberative communication framework emphasizing cross-community dialogue, media literacy, exposure to diverse perspectives, and responsible platform governance. The article concludes that the democratic impact of digital polarization should not be evaluated solely by the existence of political disagreement but by whether citizens retain opportunities to encounter alternative perspectives and engage in meaningful dialogue.

[Perluasan komunikasi politik digital telah menciptakan peluang yang belum pernah terjadi sebelumnya bagi warga negara untuk berpartisipasi dalam debat publik sekaligus memperintensifkan polarisasi politik. Pengguna media sosial Indonesia semakin sering menemukan informasi politik melalui komunitas yang terorganisir berdasarkan identitas ideologis, agama, atau kandidat. Artikel ini mengkaji hubungan antara komunitas politik daring dan deliberasi demokratis di Indonesia. Dengan menggunakan analisis wacana digital kualitatif, penelitian ini menyelidiki pembentukan identitas politik, pola interaksi, perbedaan pendapat, dan berbagi informasi. Artikel ini berpendapat bahwa polarisasi diperkuat ketika sistem rekomendasi algoritmik

dan jaringan interpersonal berulang kali mengekspos pengguna pada konten yang homogen secara politik. Namun, komunitas daring juga dapat memfasilitasi partisipasi politik dan pembentukan identitas kolektif. Penelitian ini mengusulkan kerangka komunikasi deliberatif yang menekankan dialog lintas komunitas, literasi media, paparan terhadap beragam perspektif, dan tata kelola platform yang bertanggung jawab. Artikel ini menyimpulkan bahwa dampak demokratis dari polarisasi digital tidak boleh dievaluasi hanya berdasarkan keberadaan perbedaan pendapat politik, tetapi berdasarkan apakah warga negara tetap memiliki kesempatan untuk menemukan perspektif alternatif dan terlibat dalam dialog yang bermakna.]

Keywords: Political polarization, digital public sphere, identity politics, deliberative democracy, Indonesia

Introduction

The development of social media has fundamentally altered the structure of political communication in Indonesia. Political information that previously circulated primarily through political parties, newspapers, television stations, and formal campaign institutions can now move through decentralized networks of citizens, influencers, activists, political communities, and anonymous accounts. Hasfi (2019) argues that digital communication has transformed political communication by introducing characteristics such as interactivity, directness, networking, and increased opportunities for citizen participation. The transformation is therefore institutional as well as technological because the production and circulation of political messages increasingly involve actors outside conventional media organizations. Digital platforms can expand democratic participation by lowering communication barriers, but they simultaneously create new problems involving information disorder, political hostility, selective exposure, and fragmented publics.

The democratic significance of this transformation becomes more visible when political communication is understood as a process of community formation. Social media users do not simply encounter isolated political messages; they participate in networks organized around candidates, ideologies, religious identities, political movements, or shared grievances. Ali and Eriyanto (2021), using social media network analysis and content analysis, demonstrate that Indonesian users can become divided into politically homogeneous groups, with users tending to interact with others who share similar political preferences. Their findings also show that hashtags can strengthen solidarity and mobilization within political camps. Such networked interaction changes polarization from a disagreement between individuals into a structural pattern of communication in which political identities become embedded within social networks.

The concept of the digital public sphere is therefore particularly useful for understanding contemporary Indonesian political communication. Ideally, a public sphere provides opportunities for citizens to encounter competing claims, exchange arguments, and collectively form opinions. Yet the architecture of social media can produce spaces that are simultaneously public in accessibility and private in communicative composition. Hidayah (2018) argues that personalization and filter bubbles can create conditions in which users increasingly reject information associated with alternative ideological positions. The problem is not simply that citizens hold different opinions. Democratic difficulty emerges when the communicative environment prevents those citizens from encountering each other as legitimate participants in a shared political conversation.

Online communities nevertheless should not be treated as inherently destructive to democracy. Political communities can provide citizens with social support, political information, collective identity, and opportunities for mobilization. Rofiah et al. (2021), examining Twitter networks surrounding the Aksi Bela Islam movement, identify both centralized and more open communication patterns. Centralized structures were associated with exclusive narratives and competing hashtags, whereas more dispersed networks could create opportunities for dialogue between communities. This finding is important because it challenges a technologically deterministic interpretation of polarization. The same platform can facilitate antagonistic communication or dialogical interaction depending on how networks are structured and how participants use them.

Political identity is another central component of Indonesian digital polarization. Herdiansah, Husin, and Hendra (2018) demonstrate that Islamic civil society organizations have used social media as an arena for articulating political positions and constructing religiously framed political discourse. Their analysis of Muhammadiyah, Nahdlatul Ulama, and the Muslim Cyber Army shows that social media can function as an alternative arena of political articulation outside conventional institutional channels. This development expands the political agency of civil society but also illustrates how religious identity can become incorporated into political contestation. Identity becomes politically consequential when it provides a language through which political actors distinguish between “our community” and “their community.”

Research on the 2017 Jakarta election provides another illustration. Triantoro (2019) finds that the social media communication of Anies-Sandi incorporated Islamic religious symbols into political identity construction. The study connects this communication strategy to broader processes of religious identity formation and political contestation. Such findings indicate that digital polarization cannot be separated from the historical and sociocultural characteristics of Indonesian politics. Social media may accelerate the circulation of identity narratives, but the identities themselves are embedded within pre-existing social, religious, cultural, and political structures. Consequently, understanding digital polarization requires

attention to both platform architecture and the social meanings that users bring into online environments.

Identity politics may also influence the type of political participation that occurs online. Harsono (2023), studying Generation Z in Malang, found that political identity was significantly associated with forms of counter-participation, including controversial and confrontational behavior. The finding suggests that political engagement should not automatically be interpreted as democratic participation. Users may be highly active in commenting, sharing, criticizing, or attacking opponents without necessarily engaging in deliberative practices. This distinction is important because digital platforms frequently measure participation through visible activity, whereas democratic theory evaluates participation partly through the quality of reasoning, mutual recognition, and openness to disagreement. High interaction may therefore coexist with low deliberative quality.

The problem becomes particularly visible during elections. Prayogi and Fahadayna (2023) demonstrate that religious identity politics on Twitter during the 2019 presidential election involved hate-spin strategies characterized by negative sentiment, symbolic contention, and distributed activity. Their findings suggest that identity-based political communication can move beyond persuasion toward delegitimizing political opponents and strengthening social boundaries. Political competition becomes more difficult to reconcile when opponents are represented not simply as people holding different policy preferences but as threats to religious, national, or moral identities. Under these conditions, political disagreement can acquire an affective character that persists beyond the election itself.

At the same time, research indicates that polarization is not always permanent. Studies of Indonesian social media users show that some citizens can move away from polarized communities after political circumstances change. The study of Indonesian netizens by Wicaksono and colleagues demonstrates that some users escaped polarization between Islamist and nationalist camps after experiencing disappointment with political actors and after the electoral cycle ended. This observation is theoretically important because it indicates that online polarization should not be conceptualized as an irreversible condition. Political identities are dynamic and can weaken when the social or political incentives supporting them disappear.

The informational environment surrounding political communities further affects deliberative quality. Juditha (2019) demonstrates that political hoaxes can become prominent themes in social media and that users themselves can contribute to agenda formation through repeated attention to particular topics. This means that political communities participate not only in distributing information but also in determining which issues become salient. When communities repeatedly circulate similar claims, political importance may become detached from informational reliability. The result is an environment where visibility can become a substitute for credibility. A claim that is repeated frequently inside a network may appear convincing because it is socially familiar rather than empirically established.

The problem of misinformation becomes especially consequential during elections because political information can affect perceptions of candidates, institutions, and electoral legitimacy. Sirait (2019) identifies hate speech and hoaxes as significant features of Indonesian presidential campaign communication and examines their implications for voting behavior. Research concerning the 2019 election also indicates that social media provided favorable conditions for negative and black campaign communication because digital platforms were more difficult for political actors to control than conventional campaign channels. These findings demonstrate that polarization is not merely an accidental consequence of citizen disagreement; it can also be strategically produced through political communication practices.

The relationship between social media and political news consumption is equally important. Setiawati, Tiara, and Mustika (2023) found that students in Indonesia and the Philippines viewed social media as a political news source within already polarized environments. Their findings suggest that audiences recognize the political character of social media while continuing to rely on it for political information. This creates an important democratic contradiction: citizens may distrust the reliability of social media but remain dependent upon it because of convenience, speed, and accessibility. Digital political literacy must therefore address not only the ability to identify false information but also the capacity to understand how political information is selected, framed, and circulated.

The existing Indonesian literature has consequently examined several components of digital polarization: selective exposure, filter bubbles, political identity, hate speech, misinformation, network structure, youth participation, and digital political communication. However, these strands of research are often analyzed separately. Studies of algorithms may emphasize technological personalization, while studies of identity politics focus on symbolic boundaries, and studies of political participation examine engagement without necessarily connecting it to deliberative quality. This article brings these dimensions together by examining polarization as a relational transformation of the digital public sphere. The central concern is not simply whether Indonesians disagree online, but whether political communities retain communicative pathways through which disagreement can become dialogue.

The contribution of this article lies in developing an integrated framework that connects three processes: community formation, identity-based boundary construction, and deliberative opportunity. Rather than treating polarization solely as an algorithmic effect, the article conceptualizes it as the outcome of interactions between users, political identities, network structures, information practices, and platform mechanisms. The framework also emphasizes that the democratic consequences of polarization depend on the permeability of political communities. Communities that maintain pathways toward alternative perspectives may remain politically pluralistic, whereas communities that continuously reinforce antagonistic boundaries can undermine democratic deliberation. This approach

allows the analysis to recognize both the participatory potential and democratic risks of digital political communities.

Methodologically, the article employs qualitative digital discourse analysis combined with an integrative review of Indonesian journal literature published before 2026. The analysis focuses on research concerning political polarization, social media communities, identity politics, selective exposure, political participation, misinformation, hate speech, and digital public spheres in Indonesia. Rather than presenting new survey data, the study synthesizes existing empirical findings to construct a theoretically informed explanation of digital polarization. The analytical procedure identifies recurring mechanisms across the literature and organizes them into three areas: the fragmentation of political communities, the construction of identity-based political boundaries, and the conditions under which cross-community communication can support democratic deliberation.

Fragmentation of the Digital Public Sphere and the Formation of Political Communities

Digital polarization begins not simply with ideological disagreement but with the fragmentation of the communicative environment in which disagreement occurs. Social media enables users to form communities around shared political preferences, yet the resulting communities do not necessarily communicate with one another. Ali and Eriyanto (2021) demonstrate this process empirically through network analysis of Indonesian social media users. Their study identified major political clusters in which users predominantly interacted with politically similar accounts and circulated similar information. The significance of this finding extends beyond election campaigning because it demonstrates that polarization can become embedded in the architecture of everyday communication. Once political preference becomes connected to a stable communication network, information is no longer encountered randomly. It arrives through social relationships that already carry political meaning.

The formation of these communities should nevertheless not be attributed exclusively to platform algorithms. Users actively choose whom to follow, which accounts to trust, which hashtags to use, and which content to share. Selective exposure is therefore a behavioral mechanism that interacts with technological personalization. Ali and Eriyanto (2021) show that users with particular political preferences tend to encounter information consistent with those preferences. The process is important because users may experience their informational environment as diverse even when their actual networks are politically homogeneous. Digital platforms can display large quantities of information while simultaneously limiting meaningful ideological diversity. The apparent abundance of information can therefore conceal a reduction in the range of political perspectives that users actually encounter.

Hashtags can intensify this process by transforming political preferences into visible community markers. Rofiah et al. (2021) demonstrate that competition between hashtags contributed to the formation of polarized communication networks during Aksi Bela Islam. Hashtags do more than organize content; they allow users to signal political belonging. A user who adopts a particular hashtag identifies with a narrative community and becomes more easily connected to others who use the same political language. This process creates what may be called symbolic network consolidation, in which digital markers become mechanisms for organizing political relationships. The result is that political communication increasingly operates through recognizable signs of belonging rather than through isolated arguments.

Network consolidation can strengthen political participation because citizens are more likely to engage when they feel connected to a community. Political communities provide emotional support, information, mobilization resources, and opportunities for collective action. This is consistent with research by Saud and Margono (2021), which demonstrates that Indonesian youth used digital platforms as part of political participation during the 2019 student protests. Their findings indicate that digital participation can connect political expression with offline political activity. The democratic problem therefore cannot be solved by simply reducing online political communities. Communities are necessary for mobilization and participation. The challenge is to prevent political communities from becoming so closed that collective identity requires hostility toward external groups.

The distinction between mobilizing communities and polarizing communities is consequently crucial. A mobilizing community provides resources for collective political action while remaining capable of recognizing alternative positions. A polarizing community, by contrast, defines political belonging through opposition to an external group. The difference is not necessarily visible in the amount of activity generated. Both communities may produce hashtags, comments, videos, and political campaigns. What distinguishes them is the structure of their relationship with outsiders. Rofiah et al. (2021) provide empirical evidence that Twitter networks can develop either centralized and exclusive communication or more dispersed and dialogical interaction. This suggests that network structure influences whether political participation develops toward antagonism or communication.

Digital fragmentation also changes the meaning of political disagreement. In a relatively integrated public sphere, disagreement occurs among citizens who nevertheless share some common informational and institutional environment. In fragmented digital spaces, citizens may disagree not only about what should be done but also about what facts exist, which institutions are legitimate, and which sources deserve trust. Setiawati, Tiara, and Mustika (2023) show that audiences continue to use social media for political news despite concerns about its reliability. The consequence is that political disagreement can become epistemic: groups may inhabit different informational realities. Deliberation becomes difficult when

participants cannot agree on basic standards for determining whether political claims are credible.

The role of selective exposure becomes particularly significant in this context. Users are more likely to consume information that is compatible with existing attitudes because such information is cognitively and socially comfortable. Ali and Eriyanto's (2021) findings support the presence of selective exposure in the Indonesian context. However, selective exposure should not be interpreted as a purely individual psychological preference. It is reinforced by social approval. Users receive likes, comments, shares, and recognition from communities that affirm their political identities. Encountering opposing information may therefore carry social costs because disagreement can threaten one's status within the community. Political homogeneity is thus reproduced through both informational and interpersonal mechanisms.

The formation of digital communities can also create political identities that are stronger than issue-specific preferences. Users may begin by supporting a candidate on one policy issue but eventually develop a broader identification with the candidate's supporters. Political identity then becomes generalized across multiple issues. Purboyo, Junaidi, and Amriwan (2024) demonstrate how partisan expressions have evolved on newer platforms such as TikTok, building upon earlier identity markers such as "Cebong" and "Kampret." This indicates that digital polarization changes form as platforms change. The specific vocabulary may disappear, but the underlying process of symbolic partisan differentiation can persist.

TikTok illustrates the increasing importance of short-form political communication in this process. Short videos are highly compatible with emotionally intense and identity-centered communication because they compress political messages into recognizable visual and verbal symbols. Purboyo et al. (2024) argue that TikTok has become an important environment for the formation of political partisanship in Indonesia. The shift from Twitter to TikTok does not therefore eliminate polarization. Instead, it changes the communicative form through which political identity is performed. This suggests that platform-specific studies are important, but the deeper analytical focus should remain on the social mechanisms that produce political group boundaries.

Instagram produces a similar dynamic through algorithmically curated political content. Satriyadi, Arzak, and Maulidyawati (2025) found that young voters in West Nusa Tenggara experienced filter-bubble processes in which repeated interactions with political content reinforced existing preferences. The process involved algorithmic formation, reinforcement of perception, and attitude construction. The importance of this finding lies in the interaction between user behavior and platform personalization. Users contributed to the creation of their own informational environment through likes, follows, shares, and filtering, while the platform subsequently amplified patterns generated by those behaviors. Polarization is therefore co-produced rather than imposed by technology alone.

The same logic can be observed in responses to political videos on YouTube. Safitri et al. (2024), examining responses to political content involving Prabowo Subianto, demonstrate how filter-bubble dynamics can shape perceptions of political events. Users with different political orientations may interpret the same audiovisual material differently because their existing networks provide different interpretive contexts. A political event therefore does not possess a single digital meaning. Its meaning is reconstructed through communities that already possess expectations about political actors. This phenomenon challenges the assumption that greater access to information automatically produces greater political understanding. Information can be widely available while interpretation remains socially segmented.

The fragmentation of digital political communities has implications for the idea of a shared public sphere. If citizens increasingly communicate within politically homogeneous groups, the public sphere becomes less like a common arena and more like a collection of interconnected but partially isolated spaces. Karmila et al. (2024) explicitly connect social media with the construction of political identity, echo chambers, and polarization in Indonesia. Their analysis indicates that social media can facilitate political identity formation while simultaneously increasing the likelihood of homogeneous communication environments. The resulting digital public sphere should therefore be understood as networked pluralism under conditions of uneven interconnection rather than as one unified arena.

This interpretation also explains why political polarization can coexist with high levels of participation. Citizens may be highly active in their own communities while rarely engaging with opposing groups. Participation statistics can consequently exaggerate the deliberative quality of digital democracy. Harsono's (2023) research among Generation Z illustrates this problem by identifying a significant relationship between political identity and counter-oriented participation. Engagement can become an expression of group defense rather than an attempt to understand political alternatives. Digital democracy should therefore be evaluated through the structure of participation, not simply its quantity.

The fragmentation of the public sphere ultimately creates a tension between community solidarity and democratic openness. Political communities are necessary because collective political action requires organization, trust, and shared meanings. Yet democratic deliberation requires permeability between communities. The central problem is therefore not the existence of political communities but the reduction of communication across their boundaries. The Indonesian evidence suggests that platforms can produce both closed and open network patterns. The democratic task is to strengthen communication mechanisms that allow political communities to maintain their internal identities while still recognizing opponents as legitimate participants in a common political system.

Identity Politics, Political Boundaries, and the Emotionalization of Disagreement

Political polarization becomes more consequential when political identities are connected to broader social identities. In Indonesia, political competition can intersect with religious, ethnic, cultural, national, and ideological identities. Herdiansah, Husin, and Hendra (2018) demonstrate that Islamic civil society organizations used social media to articulate political positions through religiously meaningful narratives. This process does not imply that religious political expression is inherently undemocratic. Religious organizations are legitimate political participants in a democratic society. The democratic difficulty emerges when religious identity becomes a mechanism for delegitimizing citizens who occupy different political positions. Political disagreement then becomes interpreted through moral or communal categories rather than policy differences.

The 2017 Jakarta election provides an important case of this transformation. Triantoro (2019) identifies the use of Islamic symbols in the social media communication of Anies-Sandi and connects these practices with identity politics. The study demonstrates how digital political communication can construct political identities through symbolic representation. Such representation is politically powerful because symbols allow complex social identities to be communicated quickly and emotionally. A religious symbol can communicate belonging, morality, authenticity, and opposition simultaneously. Social media amplifies this process because symbolic content can be reproduced, remixed, and circulated through networks without requiring lengthy political explanation.

Identity politics becomes especially polarizing when political categories are transformed into moral categories. Prayogi and Fahadayna (2023) show that hate-spin practices during the 2019 election involved negative sentiment and symbolic contention. The political opponent can thereby be represented not as someone with a different policy preference but as a morally threatening actor. Once this transformation occurs, compromise becomes more difficult because compromise may be interpreted as betrayal of one's identity group. Political polarization consequently becomes affective and moral rather than merely ideological. The implication for deliberative democracy is serious because deliberation requires the possibility that citizens can revise positions without experiencing such revision as abandonment of their community.

Social media language plays a central role in this process. Sukmana et al. (2025) demonstrate that language, political identity, and polarization are closely connected in social media communication. Digital political language can establish boundaries by labeling, categorizing, praising, or attacking political groups. Labels become especially powerful because they compress complex political identities into easily recognizable terms. Once such labels become normalized, they can function as shorthand for broader judgments about intelligence, morality, religion, or national loyalty. Political communication consequently becomes more efficient

but less nuanced. The compression of identity into labels can increase political mobilization while simultaneously reducing the possibility of substantive dialogue.

The phenomenon of hyperreality further illustrates how identity can become detached from complex political realities. Hariyanto, Dharma, Yussof, and Muharram (2024) argue that religious identity politics on social media can involve the commodification of political identity by buzzers and the construction of symbolic realities designed to attack political opponents. The significance of this process lies in the transformation of political identity into a consumable digital object. Political users may encounter repeated images, slogans, and narratives until these representations appear to constitute political reality itself. The distinction between actual political events and digitally constructed interpretations becomes increasingly difficult to maintain.

The economic dimension of identity politics should therefore not be overlooked. Digital political communication operates within an attention economy where content that generates strong emotional responses can receive greater visibility. Political actors, influencers, and coordinated networks have incentives to produce content that activates existing identities. Religious, nationalist, or partisan narratives can be particularly effective because they create strong emotional responses and encourage users to defend group boundaries. The resulting polarization is therefore not only cultural but also communicative and economic. Political identity becomes valuable because it generates engagement, and engagement becomes valuable because it generates visibility.

The relationship between identity and political participation is consequently ambivalent. Political identity can motivate citizens who would otherwise remain politically disengaged. Harsono (2023) demonstrates that political identity is associated with particular forms of social media participation among Generation Z. Political identity can provide citizens with a reason to express opinions, join campaigns, and monitor political developments. The problem arises when participation becomes primarily oppositional. When political engagement is structured around defeating or humiliating opponents, the participatory energy of democracy can be redirected toward antagonism. Participation remains high, but its deliberative orientation becomes weaker.

The 2019 election illustrates the relationship between identity politics and information disorder. Sirait (2019) identifies the widespread circulation of hoaxes and hate speech in the presidential campaign environment. These forms of communication become especially powerful when they reinforce existing political identities. A false claim about an opponent does not need to persuade every citizen; it may only need to strengthen existing suspicions within a supportive community. This is one reason misinformation is particularly dangerous in polarized environments. Political misinformation can function less as a mechanism for changing opinions and more as a mechanism for intensifying existing group loyalty.

The social meaning of misinformation is therefore different from the conventional model of false information. In a politically neutral environment,

correcting a false claim may be sufficient to reduce its influence. In a polarized environment, correction can itself be interpreted as an attack from the opposing political camp. Juditha's (2019) analysis of hoax agenda setting indicates that political topics can become highly salient through repeated user attention. Once a claim becomes integrated into a community's political narrative, factual correction may not easily remove it. Corrective communication must therefore address not only factual accuracy but also the social identity structures that make the information persuasive.

Hate speech represents an even stronger form of identity boundary construction. Kusumasari and Arifianto (2020) demonstrate that hate-speech texts on social media can be used to attack people holding different ideological and political positions. Their study also shows that the public sphere can be influenced by political-economic interests. Hate speech should therefore not be viewed merely as interpersonal hostility. It can operate as a political communication strategy that constructs enemies and reinforces group cohesion. The political function of hostility lies precisely in its capacity to transform disagreement into antagonism.

Religious identity can intensify this mechanism because political claims may acquire moral or sacred significance. Sazali et al. (2022) demonstrate that social media can become a space for hate speech involving religion and state relations. When political disputes are framed in religious terms, opponents can be represented as violating not merely political preferences but moral or religious principles. This raises the emotional stakes of political disagreement. Democratic deliberation becomes more difficult because participants may perceive compromise as morally unacceptable rather than politically negotiable.

Nevertheless, identity-based political communication should not be equated with polarization in every circumstance. Identity can support inclusive forms of political participation when communities use shared identities to advocate for rights, representation, or social justice. The problem lies in the transformation of identity from a basis for representation into a basis for exclusion. Digital democratic communication therefore requires an analytical distinction between identity expression and identity antagonism. The former can expand political representation; the latter can undermine the recognition of political equality.

This distinction is especially important in a plural society such as Indonesia. Democratic politics cannot require citizens to abandon religious, ethnic, cultural, or ideological identities before entering public debate. Such a requirement would itself be exclusionary. The democratic objective should instead be to create communicative norms in which identities can be publicly expressed without becoming tools for denying the legitimacy of others. Herdiansah et al. (2018) demonstrate that Islamic civil society has used digital spaces for political articulation; the appropriate response is therefore not suppression of identity-based political expression but development of communication practices that allow identity and pluralism to coexist.

The challenge is to transform political boundaries from rigid divisions into permeable boundaries. Citizens can remain members of particular political communities while communicating across those communities. Rofiah et al. (2021) provide evidence that Twitter networks can develop more open communication structures that enable exchange between opposing groups. Such interaction does not necessarily eliminate disagreement. Its democratic significance lies in creating opportunities for disagreement without automatic hostility. Cross-community interaction can therefore be understood as a mechanism for reducing the social distance created by identity politics.

The emotionalization of political disagreement ultimately explains why polarization can survive after an election. When political identities become connected to social and moral identities, electoral outcomes do not necessarily dissolve the conflict. Political communities retain memories, narratives, grievances, and symbolic categories developed during campaigns. The persistence of these identities means that digital polarization should be studied beyond election periods. The democratic question is whether citizens can move from a condition of electoral competition toward a condition of political coexistence. The answer depends heavily on whether digital communication can provide spaces where identity remains meaningful without becoming a permanent basis for political exclusion.

Reconstructing Democratic Deliberation through Cross-Community Communication

The democratic consequences of polarization depend fundamentally on whether citizens remain capable of encountering perspectives outside their own political communities. A fragmented public sphere is not necessarily incompatible with democracy if communication channels remain open between communities. The findings of Rofiah et al. (2021) are particularly relevant because they identify both centralized polarized networks and more open network structures within Indonesian Twitter communication. The implication is that digital platforms do not determine one inevitable political outcome. Network architecture and communication practices can create different possibilities for deliberation. Democratic policy should therefore focus not only on reducing harmful content but also on strengthening the conditions that make cross-community interaction possible.

Cross-community communication should not be understood as forcing users to abandon their political identities. Deliberation does not require consensus before discussion begins. Instead, it requires that participants recognize others as legitimate interlocutors whose claims can be questioned, defended, or revised. This distinction is important because political polarization is often incorrectly evaluated through the existence of disagreement itself. Democratic societies necessarily contain disagreement. The more serious problem arises when disagreement becomes accompanied by delegitimization, social exclusion, or refusal to engage

with alternative arguments. Digital deliberation therefore requires communicative permeability rather than ideological uniformity.

Political literacy is one mechanism through which this permeability can be strengthened. Setiawati, Tiara, and Mustika (2023) demonstrate that social media users operate as political news consumers within polarized information environments. Citizens therefore require the ability to evaluate sources, recognize framing, identify emotionally manipulative narratives, and distinguish political claims from factual evidence. Literacy should not be reduced to detecting hoaxes. It must include understanding why particular information is visible, why certain narratives become popular, and how political communities shape interpretation. Without this broader literacy, citizens may successfully identify individual falsehoods while remaining vulnerable to systematic patterns of selective exposure.

The role of digital literacy becomes even more important because political misinformation is often socially embedded. A false claim circulated by an anonymous account may have limited influence, while the same claim repeated by trusted members of a political community can become persuasive. Digital literacy must therefore incorporate source-network evaluation. Users should ask not only "Is this statement true?" but also "Who is circulating it, what evidence is provided, and why is this community emphasizing it?" Such questions transform fact-checking from an isolated activity into a broader analysis of political communication. This approach is consistent with research on political hoaxes and misinformation in Indonesia, which demonstrates that political content is often connected to campaign interests and identity-based conflict.

The importance of journalistic verification is also evident. Evanalia (2022) argues that social media journalism can contribute to democratic communication by providing information and supporting public access to diverse perspectives, while also confronting the problems of hoaxes, misinformation, and post-truth communication. Professional journalism cannot solve digital polarization alone, but it can provide reference points for evaluating contested claims. Independent reporting, transparent sourcing, corrections, and contextual explanations can help create common informational resources across political communities. The objective is not to restore traditional media dominance but to maintain reliable institutions within a fragmented information ecosystem.

The role of electoral institutions is similarly important. Research concerning the 2019 election shows that Bawaslu faced the difficult task of responding to hoaxes and hate speech while balancing content control with freedom of expression. Siregar et al. (2020) emphasize that intervention against harmful content requires attention to legal standards and institutional coordination. The implication is that platform governance cannot rely solely on deletion. Excessive or opaque content removal may itself undermine democratic legitimacy. Governance should instead be proportionate, transparent, and subject to clear legal standards.

Bachtiar (2020) similarly demonstrates that restrictions on social media use during elections may be legally defensible under particular circumstances,

especially when connected to law enforcement, public order, or national security. However, democratic governance requires careful proportionality because restrictions can affect legitimate political expression. The existence of misinformation and polarization does not automatically justify broad restrictions on political communication. Instead, institutions should distinguish between political disagreement, offensive expression, coordinated manipulation, and demonstrably harmful misinformation. Each category requires different forms of response.

A democratic approach to platform governance should consequently prioritize transparency. Users should have greater knowledge about how content moderation decisions are made, how political advertising is identified, and how accounts involved in coordinated manipulation are treated. The objective is not to make algorithms politically neutral, which may be impossible, but to make their political consequences more accountable. The Indonesian literature on digital democracy demonstrates that platform governance has become part of democratic governance itself. Wardiono et al. (2022) argue that digital democracy requires legal protection for social media users because online political participation creates new questions concerning rights and responsibilities.

The principle of proportionality is particularly important in polarized environments. Removing every controversial political statement would suppress legitimate disagreement, while allowing coordinated hate campaigns to circulate without intervention could damage democratic participation. Platform governance therefore needs a differentiated approach. Content that challenges government policy should receive strong protection as political expression. Direct threats, targeted harassment, coordinated disinformation, and incitement to violence may justify stronger intervention. Such distinctions require institutional procedures capable of identifying context rather than relying exclusively on automated keyword detection.

Cross-community dialogue can also be encouraged through the design of political communication itself. Political organizations, media institutions, civil society groups, and educational institutions can create forums in which opposing political communities discuss shared issues. The purpose should not be symbolic “debate” in which participants merely repeat predetermined positions. Effective dialogue requires structured questions, evidence, moderation, and opportunities for participants to respond to arguments rather than identities. Digital platforms can host such communication through live discussions, collaborative content, moderated forums, and deliberative campaigns. The success of these interventions depends on whether participants perceive the environment as legitimate and safe enough to express disagreement.

The experience of online political communities suggests that shared symbols can sometimes create bridges rather than divisions. Rofiah et al. (2021) found that shared hashtags could facilitate more inclusive communication when they allowed interaction across previously divided groups. This finding provides an important alternative to the assumption that hashtags inherently polarize. Their effect depends

on the narratives attached to them and the network structures they generate. A hashtag framed around a shared public concern may create a temporary communicative bridge, while a hashtag designed to attack an opposing group may reinforce polarization. Political communication should therefore be evaluated according to the relational consequences of symbolic practices.

The same principle applies to political identity. A democratic communication framework should not attempt to eliminate identity-based politics but should encourage nested identities in which citizens can simultaneously identify with a political, religious, regional, professional, and national community. Such overlapping identities can reduce the likelihood that one political division becomes the sole basis for social classification. When citizens recognize multiple forms of belonging, political disagreement becomes less likely to define the entirety of social relationships. This perspective is particularly relevant to Indonesia because its democratic system already operates within substantial religious, ethnic, linguistic, and regional diversity.

The problem of echo chambers can also be addressed through deliberate exposure to diverse perspectives. Satriyadi, Arzak, and Maulidyawati (2025) show how repeated interaction with politically compatible content can reinforce existing preferences among young voters. The implication is that users should be encouraged to diversify their political information sources. However, diversification should not be understood simply as following one opposing account. Meaningful diversity requires exposure to credible arguments that challenge assumptions without relying on inflammatory or deceptive content. Educational programs can teach citizens how to construct balanced information diets by comparing multiple sources, examining evidence, and distinguishing disagreement from misinformation.

Political education can also make use of the very platforms that contribute to polarization. Digital platforms are not only environments where polarization occurs; they are also spaces where political literacy can be developed. Arone and Putra (2024), for example, demonstrate the potential of YouTube podcast content as a medium for political literacy. Similar approaches can be developed around short videos, podcasts, livestreams, and interactive educational content. The crucial difference is that political education should explicitly teach users how to navigate polarized communication rather than simply provide political information. Citizens need to understand the communicative mechanisms through which polarization is produced.

Institutional trust is another condition for successful deliberation. Citizens are less likely to accept corrective information when they distrust the institutions providing it. Political polarization can therefore undermine not only interpersonal communication but also the credibility of electoral institutions, journalists, universities, and government agencies. Efforts to combat misinformation must consequently strengthen institutional credibility through transparency and consistent communication. The goal should be to create institutions that citizens

can disagree with while still recognizing their informational legitimacy. Democratic trust does not require universal approval; it requires confidence that institutional procedures are sufficiently fair to support political disagreement.

The Indonesian experience also demonstrates the importance of youth in reconstructing digital deliberation. Saud and Margono (2021) found that young people participated in political protests through digital platforms and connected online communication with offline political action. Youth should therefore not be framed solely as vulnerable consumers of polarized content. They are also potential producers of alternative political narratives and democratic communication. Programs aimed at reducing polarization should involve young users as active participants in designing digital civic initiatives. Their familiarity with platform cultures can provide valuable insight into how political communication actually operates in everyday digital environments.

A further requirement is recognition of the difference between disagreement and hostility. Digital political discourse frequently treats disagreement as evidence of bad character. This tendency can be reduced by encouraging communicative practices that focus criticism on arguments, policies, and evidence rather than personal identities. Research on hate speech demonstrates that identity-based attacks can transform social media into environments where political participation becomes intimidating or exclusionary. The democratic objective should therefore be to create norms of disagreement in which strong criticism remains possible while dehumanizing or threatening communication is constrained.

The concept of deliberation must also be adapted to digital conditions. Classical deliberative theory often assumes relatively stable communication spaces in which participants can exchange arguments over time. Social media operates differently. Communication is rapid, fragmented, visual, algorithmically organized, and frequently interrupted by unrelated content. Digital deliberation therefore requires mechanisms for slowing communication when political stakes are high. Long-form explanations, contextual links, fact-checking, moderated discussion, and opportunities for revisiting claims can provide such mechanisms. The objective is not to eliminate speed from digital communication but to create moments in which citizens can move from reaction toward reflection.

Political communities can also contribute to deliberation by developing internal norms against misinformation and hostility. Community administrators, influencers, activists, and political organizations possess considerable capacity to shape the behavior of their followers. Rather than treating platform governance as solely the responsibility of technology companies, democratic strategies should recognize the role of community-level governance. Political communities can establish rules requiring evidence for contested claims, discouraging personal attacks, and correcting misinformation even when it favors their own side. Such self-regulation would strengthen democratic legitimacy because communities would demonstrate that political loyalty does not require informational dishonesty.

The broader framework proposed by this article therefore contains four interconnected elements: diverse exposure, cross-community communication, political-media literacy, and accountable platform governance. Diverse exposure addresses the informational isolation created by selective consumption. Cross-community communication addresses social separation between political groups. Political-media literacy provides citizens with the capacity to evaluate information and communicative strategies. Platform governance addresses the institutional conditions under which political content becomes visible and remains online. None of these mechanisms is sufficient independently. Their effectiveness depends on their interaction.

The framework also implies that polarization should be measured relationally rather than solely through ideological distance. Two citizens may hold radically different political positions while still communicating respectfully and recognizing each other's democratic legitimacy. Conversely, citizens with relatively similar policy positions may display severe affective hostility toward political opponents. The democratic danger therefore lies in the breakdown of communicative relationships. Future empirical studies should measure not only political preference but also willingness to encounter opposing information, trust in cross-group sources, perceived legitimacy of opponents, and willingness to engage in cooperative political discussion.

The Indonesian case ultimately demonstrates that the digital public sphere is neither inherently democratizing nor inherently polarizing. Its consequences emerge from the interaction between platform structures, user practices, political strategies, identity narratives, and institutional responses. Social media can organize collective action, provide political information, and expand participation, while simultaneously facilitating selective exposure, identity antagonism, and misinformation. The appropriate democratic response is therefore not to idealize or reject digital communication. It is to construct conditions under which political communities remain sufficiently connected to sustain disagreement without allowing disagreement to become permanent social division.

Conclusion

Political polarization in Indonesia's digital public sphere is best understood as a transformation of political communication networks rather than simply an increase in ideological disagreement. Social media allows citizens to form communities around candidates, political identities, religious narratives, and shared grievances, creating stronger opportunities for participation and mobilization. At the same time, selective exposure, homogeneous networks, hashtags, personalized information environments, and identity-based communication can reduce encounters with alternative perspectives. The evidence reviewed in this article indicates that polarization becomes democratically problematic when political communities become closed communicative environments in which opponents are treated as

illegitimate rather than as competing participants. The central challenge is therefore not to eliminate political disagreement but to maintain communicative pathways across disagreement.

The analysis also demonstrates that identity politics occupies an important position in the development of Indonesian digital polarization. Religious, ideological, and partisan identities can strengthen political participation by providing citizens with belonging and collective purpose. However, when these identities become mechanisms for moralizing political conflict, misinformation and hate speech can reinforce social boundaries and reduce the possibility of compromise. Democratic deliberation consequently requires more than access to information. It requires citizens to possess sufficient political and media literacy to distinguish evidence from persuasion, understand the mechanisms of selective exposure, and recognize the difference between political criticism and identity-based hostility. Platform governance must complement these capacities through transparent, proportionate, and accountable mechanisms that protect legitimate political expression while addressing coordinated manipulation and harmful communication.

Future research should develop empirical measurements of cross-community communication in Indonesia by combining social network analysis, digital ethnography, computational discourse analysis, and audience research. Particular attention should be given to whether exposure to opposing political communities actually produces greater tolerance or instead intensifies hostility. Comparative studies across Instagram, TikTok, YouTube, X, and WhatsApp could determine whether different platform architectures generate different forms of polarization. Research should also examine post-election periods to determine whether digital political identities persist, weaken, or transform after electoral competition ends. Finally, experimental research could evaluate whether structured cross-community dialogue, political-media literacy programs, and transparent platform interventions improve citizens' willingness to encounter alternative perspectives. Such research would provide stronger empirical foundations for designing a digital public sphere capable of sustaining political pluralism without sacrificing democratic deliberation.

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