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Digital Isnād: Redefining Islamic Religious Authority in the Digital Age: A Case Study of the Cariustadz.id Platform

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Abstract: This study examines how digital platforms reconfigure the classical Islamic isnād system, contributing to discourse on religious authority transformation in the digital age. The isnād —traditionally a linear teacher-student chain establishing scholarly credibility—faces challenges in contemporary contexts where physical proximity no longer governs religious instruction. Employing qualitative case study methodology, this research analyzes CariUstadz.id through interviews, document analysis, and platform observation. The findings reveal systematic isnād reconceptualization through two mechanisms. First, the platform's Expert Council (Majelis Dewan Pakar) conducts centralized vetting, functioning as a digital fatwa verification board performing rigorous credential assessment before endorsement. Second, transparent public display of validated credentials makes scholarly legitimacy immediately accessible. This dual mechanism preserves classical principles —transmission continuity (al-tasalsul) and scholarly credibility (maqbuliyyah)—while adapting them digitally: linear chains are replaced by centralized, technology-facilitated authentication maintaining epistemic rigor without physical co-presence. This reconfiguration significantly impacts contemporary Islamic practice. By institutionalizing verification previously embedded in personal relationships, the platform democratizes access to authenticated guidance while maintaining standards. Digital platforms thus serve as mediating institutions bridging classical knowledge transmission and technological realities, ensuring both accessibility and authenticity in an increasingly digitized religious landscape.

Keywords: New Isnad System; Islamic Religious Authority; CariUstadz.id Platform; Digital Religious Platform; Scholarly Credibility.

Abstrak: Penelitian ini mengkaji bagaimana platform digital merekonfigurasi sistem isnād Islam klasik, berkontribusi pada pembahasan transformasi otoritas keagamaan di era digital. Isnād —secara tradisional merupakan rantai guru-murid linear yang menetapkan kredibilitas akademik—menghadapi tantangan dalam konteks kontemporer di mana kedekatan fisik tidak lagi menjadi penentu utama dalam pengajaran keagamaan. Menggunakan metodologi studi kasus kualitatif, penelitian ini menganalisis CariUstadz.id melalui wawancara, analisis dokumen, dan pengamatan platform. Temuan menunjukkan rekonseptualisasi sistem isnād secara sistematis melalui dua mekanisme. Pertama, Dewan Ahli (Majelis Dewan Pakar) platform melakukan verifikasi terpusat, berfungsi sebagai dewan verifikasi fatwa digital yang melakukan penilaian kredensial yang ketat sebelum memberikan dukungan. Kedua, tampilan publik yang transparan dari kredensial yang diverifikasi membuat legitimasi akademik segera dapat diakses. Mekanisme ganda ini mempertahankan prinsip klasik—kelanjutan transmisi (al-tasalsul) dan kredibilitas akademik (maqbuliyyah)—sambil menyesuaikannya secara digital: rantai linier digantikan oleh otentikasi terpusat yang difasilitasi teknologi, menjaga ketatnya epistematik tanpa kehadiran fisik. Rekonfigurasi ini berdampak signifikan pada praktik Islam kontemporer. Dengan menginstitutionalkan verifikasi yang sebelumnya tertanam dalam hubungan pribadi, platform ini mendemokratisasi akses ke bimbingan yang

terverifikasi sambil mempertahankan standar. Platform digital berfungsi sebagai lembaga perantara yang menghubungkan transmisi pengetahuan klasik dengan realitas teknologi, memastikan aksesibilitas dan keaslian dalam lanskap keagamaan yang semakin terdigitalisasi.

Kata kunci: Sistem Isnad Baru; Otoritas Keagamaan Islam; Platform CariUstadz.id; Platform Keagamaan Digital; Kredibilitas Akademik.

INTRODUCTION

Isnād or *sanad* is a term originally used by ulama in the process of transmitting (narrating) hadith as a step in authenticating and verifying information originating from the Prophet Muhammad (Al-Qattan, 1992, pp. 57–58). This information is then conveyed by his companions, followed by the *Tābi 'īn*, *Tābi ' al-Tābi 'īn*, and subsequent generations, indicating the existence of relationships and social networks in the dissemination of knowledge (Alamsyah et al., 2021). The conventional *isnād* system, introduced by the *muhaddithīn* (hadith scholars) as a requirement for the transmission of hadith, serves two main objectives. First, it ensures the continuity of the chain of transmitters back to the primary source, the Messenger of Allah. Second, it acts as a safeguard against the circulation of unreliable information regarding the Prophet. This principle was emphasized by the renowned hadith scholar Abdullah ibn Al-Mubarak (d. 181/797) (At-Tahhan, 1993, pp. 344–348).

Although the *isnād* system was no longer strictly applied after the codification of hadith by scholars in the 2nd and 3rd centuries *Hijriyah* (Yunitasari, 2020; Dozan, 2021), the practice of *tasalsul al-sanad* (continuous sanad connection) remained an intellectual tradition among subsequent ulama (Muthiah, 2020). This tradition extended beyond hadith narration to the broader transmission of Islamic religious knowledge. Academic culture, rooted in the *sanad* system, became one of the fundamental pillars of legitimacy and authority, ensuring that religious knowledge could be responsibly passed down (Damanhuri, 2019). The *isnād* system thus established a historical precedent for verifying religious authority through traceable scholarly lineages, a principle that remains relevant even as the mechanisms of knowledge transmission have evolved.

The issue of religious authority remains a central topic of discussion and contestation in the modern Islamic world (Zaman, 2009; Alatas, 2021). In today's digital era, the crisis of religious authority has become a particularly significant concern. With access to information readily available through electronic devices, individuals can receive and share religious content without verifying its authenticity through *tabayyun* (verification) and *mujālasah* (direct learning) with credible scholars (Dodik Harnadi et al., 2021). While the rapid flow of digital information has improved accessibility and relevance, it also poses serious risks, especially for individuals with limited religious literacy. Many people are easily influenced by extreme religious ideologies due to misinformation and a lack of discernment regarding the credibility of their sources (Muhtador, 2018). This issue is particularly relevant in traditional Islamic educational institutions, such as pesantren (Islamic boarding schools), which emphasize scholarly credibility and the preservation of authentic knowledge (Bouziane Zaid et al., 2022). The tension between digital accessibility and epistemic authority thus represents a critical challenge for contemporary Islamic scholarship.

To understand this transformation, this study engages with Berger's sacred canopy (1967) and Campbell's theory of networked authority (2012) as analytical lenses. Berger's framework explains how institutional religion maintains legitimacy by providing a unified "canopy of meaning," while Campbell's approach illuminates how digital media

redistributes religious legitimacy through interactive, networked relations. Integrating these theories allows an examination of how traditional epistemic structures—like *isnād*—are being renegotiated through digital infrastructures, revealing mechanisms of authority change rather than merely its decline or crisis. Within this theoretical frame, digital religious platforms can be interpreted as efforts to reconstruct Berger's "sacred canopy" within a digital environment—preserving coherence of meaning amid informational pluralism—while also manifesting Campbell's notion of "networked authority," where legitimacy is co-produced among institutions, algorithms, and audiences. Such hybridity underscores a form of "structured digital *isnād*," in which authority is simultaneously verified (institutionalized) and negotiated (networked).

Although prior studies have discussed transformations of religious authority in digital contexts, their analyses often remain descriptive or limited to sociological trends. For instance, Bunt (2018) highlights identity formation in Muslim online communities; El-Nawawy and Khamis (2009) explore the digital public sphere but neglect internal verification mechanisms; and Anderson (2020) emphasizes participatory discourse without linking it to epistemic lineage. These works collectively reveal a lack of engagement with how digital systems operationalize epistemological functions traditionally maintained through *isnād*, *tazkiyah al-'ulama*, or scholarly *ijazah* structures. Furthermore, academic inquiry has yet to thoroughly investigate how contemporary systems of digital curation and expert verification can serve as functional analogues to classical practices like *al-tasalsul* and *tazkiyah al-'ulama* (endorsement by scholars). Without this analysis, discussions on religious authority in the digital age risk falling into binary categories of "authentic" versus "inauthentic," without appreciating the nuanced processes that platforms employ to bridge traditional legitimacy and modern accessibility.

Recognizing the challenge of religious authority in the digital age, the Qur'an Study Center (*Pusat Studi Al-Quran/ PSQ*), founded by Prof. Dr. Muhammad Quraish Shihab, MA, in 2019, launched the digital platform CariUstadz.id as a strategic response. This platform aims to identify and connect users with credible and trustworthy religious scholars through a structured networking system (Nurdin, 2023). Rather than simply promoting religious figures, CariUstadz.id institutionalizes a credential-based model of authority that contrasts with populist and participatory models such as *UstadzKita*, which emphasize accessibility and responsiveness over scholarly continuity (Anderson, 2020). This comparison demonstrates how platform architectures embed differing epistemological assumptions about who qualifies as an authority and how legitimacy is constructed online. CariUstadz.id thus represents an effort to operationalize the principles of *isnād* within a digital infrastructure, creating what can be understood as a contemporary form of structured scholarly verification that maintains continuity with classical Islamic epistemology while adapting to the affordances and constraints of digital media.

By positioning CariUstadz.id within these theoretical debates, this research offers a concrete model of how classical epistemic practices can be adapted to contemporary digital infrastructures. The study's contribution lies in explicating a hybrid authority model—combining institutional validation (sacred canopy) with networked circulation (networked authority)—thus filling a theoretical gap between traditional religious legitimation and digital-era verification systems. This study therefore contributes a novel perspective by treating CariUstadz.id not merely as a tool of dissemination, but as a case of epistemological innovation in the Islamic tradition—one that potentially updates classical authority models through structured digital mechanisms and offers a replicable system for restoring

scholarly authority and combating disinformation in an era marked by algorithmic influence and rapid religious content consumption. Using digital ethnography and verification protocol analysis (2020–2023), this study deconstructs how *CariUstadz.id* operates as a contemporary, curated *isnād* structure, integrating classical epistemology with technological mediation to sustain the credibility of Islamic knowledge transmission.

METHOD

This study employs a qualitative approach with a case study design, focusing on *CariUstadz.id*, a digital religious platform developed by Pesantren Bayt Al-Qur'an in Pondok Cabe, South Tangerang. The case study design enables an in-depth and contextual exploration of how the classical *isnād* system—originally a mechanism for hadith authentication—is reformulated in the digital era to preserve scholarly authority and epistemic credibility. The central research question guiding this inquiry is how *isnād* principles can be adapted and applied in digital contexts to maintain the authenticity and authority of religious information, thereby demonstrating its continuing relevance amid digital transformation.

Research data were drawn from two complementary sources: library materials and field data (Wijaya, 2019, p. 95). The library component consisted of a comprehensive review of literature concerning the *isnād* system and its historical functions, the transformation of religious authority in the digital age, and Islamic epistemology and its application in technological mediation. This theoretical foundation informed the conceptual framework used to interpret field observations. Field data were collected through three interconnected techniques: observation, semi-structured interviews, and document analysis. Observation was conducted at the *CariUstadz.id* office to understand the platform's verification workflow, team coordination, and operational structure. These observations provided firsthand insight into how digital *isnād* mechanisms function in practice, revealing the day-to-day negotiations between traditional scholarly standards and platform affordances.

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with seven informants selected through purposive sampling based on their direct engagement in the verification process, policy development, and implementation of digital *isnād* mechanisms. The informants included two platform administrators responsible for coordinating verification procedures, one member of the Expert Council (*Majelis Dewan Pakar*) who oversees scholarly standards, and four *ustadz/ustadzah* who have been verified on the platform and actively use it to connect with audiences. These interviews explored how principles such as *al-tasalsul* (continuity of transmission) are adapted and negotiated within the digital system, and how different stakeholders perceive the relationship between traditional authority and digital mediation. Document analysis complemented these primary data sources by examining internal operational manuals, verification guidelines, and public digital materials issued by *CariUstadz.id*. This analysis focused on how the platform constructs and communicates authority and scholarly legitimacy through its policies, interface design, and public-facing discourse.

To ensure validity and reliability, this study implemented several verification strategies. Methodological triangulation was employed by cross-verifying findings from interviews, observations, and documents. The triangulation process involved comparing administrator narratives with those of the Expert Council and verified *ustadz/ustadzah* to confirm consistency in verification procedures and identify potential divergences between

policy and practice. Peer debriefing was conducted with two independent hadith scholars who evaluated the thematic coding and ensured interpretive consistency with classical hadith principles, thereby safeguarding against misrepresentation of traditional concepts. Member checking was also performed by returning summary findings to selected informants for verification and clarification, allowing participants to confirm or refine the researcher's interpretations.

Data analysis proceeded through two complementary approaches: content analysis and critical discourse analysis (CDA) (Pratama, 2021). The content analysis followed an inductive coding process in three stages. First, open coding was used to identify recurring categories such as verification mechanisms, digital *sanad*, and authority curation. Second, axial coding established relationships between categories, particularly examining how verification structures create systems of validation and control. Finally, selective coding synthesized these relationships into a conceptual model of "digital *isnād*" that captures the platform's hybrid epistemological structure. The CDA component examined the ideological and epistemic dimensions of how authority, authenticity, and credibility are represented and negotiated within the platform's discourse, interface design, and communication materials. This analysis revealed underlying assumptions about knowledge, expertise, and legitimacy embedded in the platform's architecture. Both analytical methods were applied iteratively and reflexively throughout data collection, enabling theoretical saturation and continuous refinement of interpretation.

All research activities adhered to ethical standards established for social research. Participants were fully informed of the study's purpose, their right to withdraw at any time without consequence, and the measures taken to protect confidentiality. Informed consent was obtained from all participants prior to interviews and observations. Identities were anonymized during transcription and reporting to ensure privacy, with pseudonyms used where individual voices needed to be distinguished in the analysis.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The CariUstadz.id Digital Platform and Its Role in Addressing Islamic Authority Crisis

The CariUstadz.id digital platform, an initiative of the Lentera Hati Foundation, operates under the intellectual and institutional supervision of the Pusat Studi Al-Qur'an (PSQ)—an academic center founded by Prof. Dr. Muhammad Quraish Shihab, MA. As an extension of PSQ's epistemic vision, the platform aims to reassert qualified religious authority within Indonesia's increasingly digitized religious landscape. According to an interview with PSQ administrator Qurrata A'yun (October 15, 2023), the project emerged from what she described as "a crisis of visibility—not of knowledge, but of credible voices being drowned out online." Thus, CariUstadz.id was conceived not merely as a digital marketplace for preachers but as a strategic medium for restoring epistemic trust in religious communication. This mission aligns with PSQ's broader commitment to thematic Qur'anic exegesis (*tafsir tematik*) and the cultivation of Qur'anic values in a pluralistic Indonesian context (Rakhman, 2023; Al-Qur'an, 2023).

PSQ's institutional collaborations with UIN Syarif Hidayatullah and IIQ Jakarta provide the academic infrastructure for nurturing future Qur'anic exegetes (*mufasssir*). Field observations in October 2023 revealed that the mentoring framework integrates Qur'anic recitation, thematic interpretation, and public communication skills, preparing students for intellectual leadership. However, as noted by a PSQ instructor, many graduates "remain invisible online" despite their scholarly competence (Rakhman, 2023).

This observation underscores a critical gap in traditional Islamic education: while intellectually rigorous, it remains slow to adapt to the digital epistemology where algorithmic visibility often determines perceived authority. Consequently, the challenge for PSQ and its affiliates lies in bridging the divide between scholarly legitimacy and digital presence.

In addressing this epistemological shift, CariUstadz.id reconfigures the classical sanad-based framework of religious authority into a digitally verifiable model. As Rachmadhani (2021) explains, the traditional isnād system ensured integrity through authenticated chains of transmission. Translating this principle into the digital realm, CariUstadz.id implements curated scholar profiles, expert endorsements, and periodic performance audits. Field data confirm that only religious instructors who pass academic and ethical vetting are approved for listing. Nevertheless, three contradictions complicate this mechanism: first, the verification criteria remain undisclosed, raising transparency concerns; second, no formal appeals process exists for rejected applicants; and third, the strong emphasis on institutional credentials may inadvertently marginalize community-based scholars from pesantren networks who lack formal academic qualifications (Field Notes, October 18, 2023).

The platform's selection and evaluation processes are explicitly aligned with PSQ's vision of moderation (*wasathiyyah*) and inclusivity in Islamic discourse. As of October 2023, internal data show that only 35% of applicants successfully passed the vetting stage, though the specific rationales for rejection were not disclosed (Zain, 2023). Beyond recruitment, CariUstadz.id sustains a culture of continuous professional development, offering periodic seminars and scholarly discussions to reinforce its educators' commitment to integrity, Qur'anic ethics, and balanced Islamic propagation (*da'wah*) (Al-Qur'an, 2023). Through these mechanisms, the platform seeks not only to filter credible voices but also to institutionalize digital religious professionalism.

Underlying the platform's development are three interconnected imperatives: (1) bridging public demand with credible scholarship; (2) addressing the behavioral shift among urban Muslims toward instant religious gratification; and (3) adapting *da'wah* to digital forms of engagement (Rakhman, 2023). Insights from internal research and a focus group discussion (October 2023) reveal that while users appreciate access to certified scholars, algorithmic popularity still privileges charismatic digital influencers. This finding exposes a structural tension between epistemic authority and digital virality, challenging CariUstadz.id to sustain scholarly legitimacy within the attention-driven logic of social media platforms.

To mitigate this tension, the platform organizes regular capacity-building workshops for affiliated preachers. The curriculum includes media literacy, Qur'anic interpretation, and the ethics of digital proselytization, enabling participants to negotiate the theological and communicative demands of online preaching. As one trainer remarked, "some religious teachers who were initially resistant to social media have now come to appreciate its theological implications" (Zain, 2023). Despite these efforts, the impact remains uneven, particularly among senior scholars with limited digital fluency. Moreover, while the platform consistently promotes the ethos of *rahmatan lil-'ālamīn* (a compassion for all creatures), its reach remains concentrated among urban, educated Muslim audiences—those most dependent on digital media for spiritual guidance (Zamhari, 2021; Al-Qur'an, 2023).

Ultimately, CariUstadz.id represents a hybrid epistemic model—one that fuses traditional isnād-based validation with the affordances of digital technology. This synthesis enables a recontextualization of religious authority: from oral transmission to algorithmic curation, without relinquishing the core principle of scholarly endorsement. Yet, as fieldwork indicates, the platform continues to confront three enduring challenges: sustaining credibility amid populist religious content, extending inclusivity beyond urban demographics, and enhancing transparency in its verification process. Even so, its affiliation with PSQ and Bayt Al-Qur'an provides a normative backbone for maintaining continuity of religious authority. In this light, CariUstadz.id should be understood not merely as a dissemination tool, but as an institutional experiment within the ongoing transformation of Islamic legitimacy in the digital age.

Isnād System and Islamic Authority: An Integral Correlation

The discourse on religious authority has increasingly become a focal point of scholarly debate within contemporary Muslim societies. Religious authorities occupy a pivotal position in preserving the authenticity of Islamic understanding while simultaneously fostering interpretive renewal. Yet, the gradual decline of the traditional ulama's influence and the erosion of their monopolistic control over religious knowledge have opened the discursive field to new actors—lay interpreters, Islamic activists, state officials, independent preachers, and digital influencers—each seeking to define and shape the meaning of Islam in the public sphere. This democratization of authority, though broadening participation in religious discourse, has also engendered fragmentation, interpretive confusion, and, in some cases, the proliferation of extremism and radical ideologies (Whyte, 2022). Consequently, a critical inquiry into the nature, boundaries, and ethical responsibilities of religious authority, particularly within the Islamic tradition, becomes analytically indispensable.

Khaled Abou El-Fadl offers a particularly insightful framework for understanding religious authority, drawing on Richard Friedman's conceptual distinction between "being in authority" and "holding authority." According to El-Fadl, these two categories embody distinct forms of legitimacy. Being in authority refers to occupying an institutional or formal position that confers the right to command or guide others. In contrast, holding authority derives from an individual's intellectual competence and moral credibility, leading others to recognize and trust their knowledge voluntarily. El-Fadl (2004) contends that genuine religious authority rests upon two essential foundations: capability—the possession of deep and demonstrable knowledge—and acceptability—the voluntary recognition of one's credibility within the community (Carter, 1985, p. 31).

The critical difference between these two forms lies in the nature of their influence. Being in authority is sustained through structural power and institutional hierarchy, often leaving little space for dissent. Conversely, holding authority emerges from epistemic credibility, moral integrity, and personal exemplarity, eliciting voluntary adherence rather than coercive compliance. To mitigate the risk of religious authoritarianism, El-Fadl proposes five ethical and intellectual criteria that legitimate religious authority must embody: (1) honesty, (2) sincerity and diligence, (3) comprehensiveness, (4) rationality and reasonableness, and (5) self-restraint and humility.

These principles serve as safeguards ensuring that authority functions as moral guidance rather than as an instrument of domination (El-Fadl, 2004).

Within this framework, the isnād (or sanad) system of hadith transmission represents a foundational mechanism through which Islamic authority has historically been regulated and authenticated. The isnād—a verifiable, continuous chain of transmission linking scholars across generations—constitutes not merely a historical institution but a living epistemological framework central to the validation of religious knowledge. El-Fadl's differentiation between “holding” and “being in” authority illuminates this relationship: Islamic authority, as conceived in the classical tradition, is not imposed by institutional coercion but arises from demonstrable expertise, intellectual integrity, and moral credibility. Accordingly, the isnād system operates as a safeguard that preserves the authenticity of religious knowledge by ensuring that authority is vested only in those whose scholarly lineage and adherence to rigorous methodological standards are verifiable (Brown, 2021).

The ethical criteria delineated by El-Fadl—honesty, sincerity, rationality, and humility—resonate deeply with the epistemological ethos of the isnād system. Within this system, scholarly legitimacy is not self-asserted but earned through demonstrable commitment to truth, discipline, and ethical conduct. In the digital era—characterized by the rapid circulation of unverified religious content—the relevance of this framework becomes even more pronounced. The isnād continues to function as an epistemic filter, curbing the rise of self-proclaimed authorities devoid of proper scholarly credentials, and reinforcing the idea that religious legitimacy must be both intellectually rigorous and morally grounded. Hence, when recontextualized in the modern age, the isnād system serves as a crucial mechanism for sustaining the credibility and ethical integrity of Islamic authority in accordance with El-Fadl's theoretical paradigm (El-Fadl, 2004).

More specifically, the sanad system plays a vital role in verifying the reliability of transmitted religious knowledge, ensuring that it originates from credible and authoritative sources. In an age of widespread misinformation, this mechanism acts as a bulwark against distorted interpretations that diverge from authentic Islamic teachings. Upholding sanad verification enables scholars to maintain the integrity of the knowledge they transmit, thereby reinforcing both their intellectual authority and communal trust (Haryadi, 2020). Through continuous scholarly transmission facilitated by recognized institutions and qualified teachers, the isnād system strengthens the legitimacy of the ulama and ensures that religious knowledge remains both authentic and institutionally verifiable. Consequently, Islamic authority emerges not as a self-proclaimed entitlement but as a heritage of scholarly continuity grounded in a chain of validated expertise.

In sum, the isnād system remains an indispensable pillar in safeguarding Islamic religious authority amidst contemporary epistemic challenges. By maintaining a traceable and authenticated chain of knowledge transmission, it protects the Muslim community from misinformation and ideological radicalization while reinforcing the credibility of scholars committed to intellectual honesty and moral rectitude. In an age defined by digital acceleration, reasserting the sanad system is essential for preserving the integrity, continuity, and reliability of Islamic scholarship. Nevertheless, while the examination of sanad remains foundational, it must be accompanied by a critical engagement with the matan (the textual content) of hadith. Classical hadith scholarship has historically emphasized the chain of transmission, at times to the detriment of textual scrutiny. Yet, in light of evolving social and ethical realities, the matan must also be evaluated for coherence,

consistency with Qur'anic principles, and alignment with prophetic ethics (Wasman, Mesraini, & Suwendi, 2023). A balanced methodology that integrates both sanad and matan analysis ensures that hadith interpretation remains faithful to its authentic spirit while maintaining relevance to the lived realities of contemporary Muslim communities. Accordingly, the present study focuses specifically on sanad analysis to trace the continuity and authenticity of hadith transmission. By examining the structural integrity and credibility of narrators, this research seeks to reaffirm the epistemological robustness of the isnād tradition as a vital safeguard of religious knowledge—anchoring Islamic authority in both classical continuity and modern intellectual accountability.

The Digital-Based Isnād System of the CariUstadz.id Platform: A New Isnād System Formulation

The Ustadz/Ustadzah Qualification and Authorization System

The digital sphere has increasingly become an integral dimension of contemporary life, exerting profound influence on patterns of information dissemination, including within the domain of religion (Baihaki, 2020). In Indonesia—the world's most populous Muslim-majority nation—there has been a marked expansion in digital engagement with religious content (Purwanto, 2020). Given that not all Muslims possess the requisite skills for independent interpretation of Islamic teachings, the presence of credible religious authorities remains essential. Such figures assist lay audiences in properly understanding sacred Islamic texts and navigating the complexities of theological interpretation (Ni'am, 2023).

In response to the growing public demand for accessible Islamic knowledge—particularly through electronic media—the Pusat Studi Al-Qur'an (PSQ) in collaboration with the Lentera Hati Foundation established CariUstadz.id, a digital platform designed to connect users with qualified religious scholars while extending da'wah activities beyond traditional venues such as mosques or prayer halls (mushollas) (Rakhman, 2023).

Functioning as a centralized digital repository, CariUstadz.id enables users to access verified religious instruction from qualified ustadz and ustadzah. As of October 2023, the platform had successfully enlisted 469 preachers. This considerable operational scale raises significant methodological questions concerning quality assurance: How does the platform maintain consistent standards across such a large network, and what accreditation mechanisms guarantee the credibility of its religious authorities? The platform employs a curation-based recruitment model grounded in peer recommendations from existing verified members (Rakhman, 2023). Acceptance of candidates depends on the fulfillment of several criteria, including mastery of Qur'anic recitation, proficiency in classical Islamic textual traditions (*turāth*), possession of formal academic credentials (minimum of a bachelor's degree), experiential grounding in Islamic boarding schools (*pesantren*), and demonstrated political neutrality (Al-Qur'an, 2023).

Interview data indicate that numerous alumni of PSQ's educational programs—such as the Program Kader Mufassir (PKM), Post-Tahfidz Bayt Al-Qur'an (PPT), and Daurah Bidayatul Mufassir (DBM)—have joined the platform through this recruitment mechanism, although the exact proportion remains undisclosed (Interview, October 19, 2023). Central to this process is the Majelis Dewan Pakar (Expert Council), a body of senior scholars serving as gatekeepers who evaluate and approve prospective members. During the platform's early development phase, prominent national scholars were directly invited to

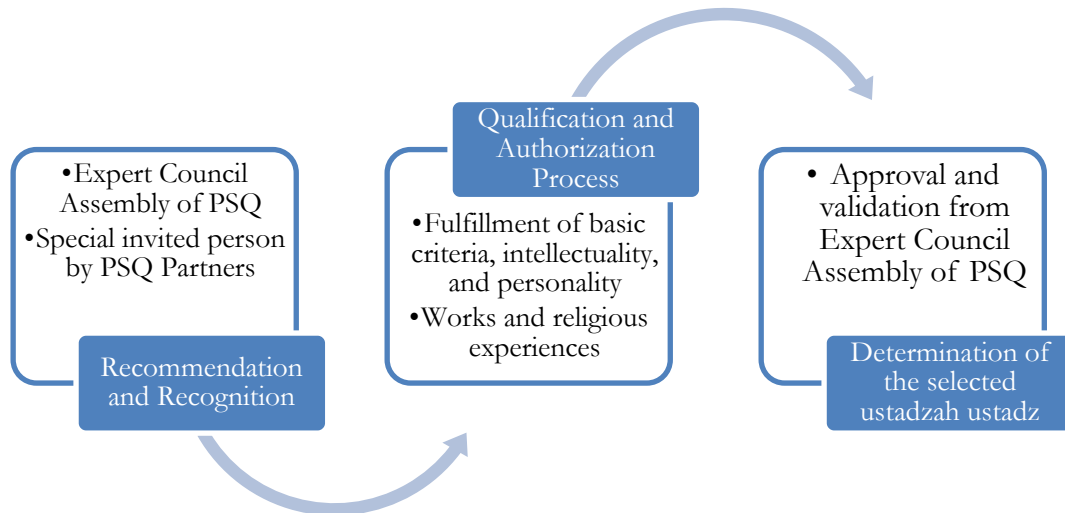
participate, including Prof. Dr. Nasaruddin Umar, Prof. Dr. Ahmad Thib Raya, and Dr. Das'ad Latief. Additional recommendations were obtained from major Islamic organizations such as Nahdlatul Ulama and Muhammadiyah, represented by scholars including Dr. K.H. A. Mustafa Bisri and Dr. Ulil Abshar Abdalla (Zamhari, 2021).

To uphold quality and professionalism, CariUstadz.id implements continuous monitoring and evaluation of its registered preachers. The management team actively oversees the da'wah activities of affiliated scholars as part of their ethical and institutional responsibilities. When deviations from PSQ's guiding values occur or valid complaints are submitted, the management—under the supervision of the Expert Council—issues formal warnings or, in severe cases, removes the preacher from the platform. However, during fieldwork, the operational definition of “deviation” and the procedure for appeal were not clearly articulated. When questioned, one administrator remarked, “We know it when we see it,” indicating reliance on tacit institutional judgment rather than codified evaluative criteria (Field Notes, October 18, 2023). This governance model illustrates how CariUstadz.id not only facilitates public access to Islamic knowledge but also exercises interpretive oversight, thereby shaping the expression of religious authority within digital spaces (Rakhman, 2023).

The platform's religious orientation and ethical framework are firmly grounded in the principles and values of the Pusat Studi Al-Qur'an (PSQ), which serve as the guiding foundation for every da'wah activity conducted by ustadz and ustadzah affiliated with the platform. At the heart of PSQ's framework lies the principle of tauhid (monotheism), emphasizing unwavering devotion to the oneness of Allah SWT as the Creator and Sustainer of the universe. This theological foundation shapes PSQ's broader vision of religious life and scholarship. Equally central is the value of humanity, which underscores the intrinsic dignity of every individual and the importance of respecting diverse perspectives, recognizing that all people possess the capacity to contribute meaningfully to religious discourse. Complementing these is the principle of brotherhood, which stresses that differences in ethnicity, language, sect, school of thought, or religion should never become obstacles to unity and social harmony. Collectively, these values form the ethical core of PSQ's mission and are reflected in CariUstadz.id's commitment to promoting a moderate, inclusive, and dialogical interpretation of Islam in both traditional and digital contexts. PSQ's intellectual and spiritual ethos further emphasizes a moderate and inclusive interpretation of Islam—one that promotes harmony, tolerance, and accessibility in religious dialogue (Al-Qur'an, 2023).

In evaluating the personal integrity and intellectual competence of prospective ustadz and ustadzah, the platform's curation process incorporates a systematic assessment of scholarly output and homiletic documentation. These records are integral to understanding each candidate's theological orientation and hermeneutical approach. The platform's administrators prioritize candidates whose religious perspectives align closely with PSQ's institutional vision and mission, particularly its commitment to moderation and intellectual rigor, when granting formal recognition as religious authorities within CariUstadz.id (Zain, 2023).

Building upon the foregoing discussion, the qualification and authorization process for ustadz and ustadzah on CariUstadz.id can be schematically represented in the following framework:



Picture 1. Authorization Flow Scheme for Ustadz and Ustadzah on the CariUstadz.id Platform

The picture above shows that the selection and authorization process for ustadz and ustadzah on the CariUstadz.id platform follows a carefully structured and systematic framework designed to uphold scholarly integrity and institutional credibility. The process begins with the involvement of the Expert Council of PSQ, supported by specially invited individuals from PSQ's partner institutions, who play a central role in the initial stage of recommendation and recognition—known as the curation phase. This stage serves as the platform's first quality filter, ensuring that only candidates with demonstrable religious competence and moral integrity proceed to the next phase. The subsequent stage entails a comprehensive qualification and authorization procedure, during which prospective ustadz and ustadzah are evaluated based on a set of predetermined criteria encompassing intellectual capacity, personal conduct, scholarly contributions, and experiential engagement in religious practice. Candidates who meet these standards then undergo formal approval and validation by the Expert Council, whose endorsement marks the final stage of recognition as qualified preachers on the platform. Collectively, this multi-layered process reflects CariUstadz.id's institutional commitment to preserving the authenticity, credibility, and scholarly authority of Islamic knowledge in the digital era.

The Concept and Significance of New Isnād System Formulation

The term *isnād*—also referred to as *sanad*—etymologically signifies “support” and, in the context of Islamic scholarship, denotes a system of transmission that upholds the authenticity of religious knowledge. Terminologically, it refers to the sequential chain of narrators who transmit *hadith* from one generation to another until the report reaches its original source, the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him). The concept is described as *sanad* because the process entails a student (*talib al-‘ilm*) relying upon a teacher (*shaykh*) for the accurate transmission of textual content (*matn*) (Al-Khatib, 2006, pp. 22–23).

Beyond its procedural function, the *sanad* constitutes a deeply rooted epistemological tradition that safeguards the purity of Islamic teachings. It ensures that the transmitted knowledge remains faithful to the Prophet's guidance and the interpretive legacy of the early Muslim generations (*salaf al-salih*). As Maihula (2022) observes, the enduring presence of the *sanad* system affirms not only the authenticity of transmitted

knowledge but also its alignment with the moral and theological foundations of Islam. In the modern era, comprehension of the sanad's significance becomes indispensable, as it functions as a protective mechanism against distortion, ensuring that Islamic scholarship retains its original integrity amidst rapidly shifting intellectual and digital landscapes.

Muslim scholars historically maintain a near-universal consensus that sanad occupies a foundational position in the authentication of any report attributed to the Prophet (peace be upon him) (Akmaluddin, 2021). The validation of hadith through isnād involves two interdependent stages, which collectively enable the muhaddithūn (hadith scholars) to determine the reliability of a narration. The first stage focuses on verifying the continuity of transmission (ittiṣāl al-sanad) by scrutinizing the biographies of transmitters—a discipline known as 'ilm tarīkh al-ruwāh (the science of narrator history). Within this framework, scholars examine whether each narrator had direct contact with their teachers and whether the chain remains uninterrupted ('Itr, 1988, pp. 44–48).

The second stage entails evaluating the moral and intellectual credibility of each transmitter through 'ilm al-jarḥ wa al-ta'dīl (the science of criticism and validation). This discipline determines whether narrators meet the established standards of 'adālah (uprightness) and ḍabt (precision) that qualify them as reliable transmitters of hadith (At-Tahhan, 1993, p. 41). Through this dual-layered verification process, hadith scholars construct an epistemic framework that combines biographical scrutiny with ethical evaluation, thereby ensuring the authenticity and accuracy of transmitted knowledge.

The Andalusian scholar Ibn Ḥazm (d. 458 H) underscores the indispensability of these methodological components within the conventional isnād system. His framework—summarized in the following table—illustrates the critical role of both continuity and credibility in determining the reliability of hadith transmission (Al-Qattan, 1992, pp. 58–59).

Table 1. Elements of the Conventional Isnād System for Hadith Validity

Primary Elements of the Conventional Isnād System for Optimal Validity		
A trusted individual's transmission from another equally reliable source continues uninterrupted until it reaches the Prophet (SAW)	Providing each transmitter's name along with their complete lineage	All transmitters are well-documented regarding their background, existence, personal and intellectual qualities, lifespan, and place of residence

As previously described, the traditional isnād system employed by early hadith scholars continued to function long after the codification of hadith collections. However, in later periods, its application became confined primarily to tasalsul (continuity of transmission) without necessarily ensuring the verification of each transmitter's credibility (Hasanah, 2015). Consequently, in the technical framework of hadith studies, sanad could no longer be regarded as a comprehensive mechanism for hadith authentication (Ismail, 1995, p. 23).

Over time, the function of sanad in Islamic knowledge transmission evolved beyond its original role as a tool of authentication. It gradually came to represent a mechanism for safeguarding the integrity and reliability of transmitted knowledge. In this sense, isnād served not only as a bridge connecting later generations to the teachings of the Prophet

Muhammad (peace be upon him) but also as a means of preserving the continuity and purity of Islamic learning (Mahfudloh, 2023). Its enduring presence ensures that knowledge remains consistent with the foundational teachings of the Prophet and the intellectual legacy of the early Muslim community. Within the disciplines of *hadith*, *tafsīr*, and *fiqh*, *sanad* thus performs a vital role in maintaining the authenticity, validity, and reliability of religious transmission (Ahmad Shofi Badi'ati et al., 2021).

In contemporary scholarly contexts, the *isnād* system has expanded beyond its traditional scope of *hadith* verification to encompass the broader process of transmitting Islamic knowledge in its entirety. This development reflects a shift from *tasalsul al-sanad* as a purely textual mechanism to a multidimensional framework that preserves intellectual and spiritual continuity within modern educational and digital environments (Rakhman, 2019). Consequently, what may now be termed the “contemporary *isnād* system” refers to the adaptation of classical *isnād* principles within institutional and technological structures designed to ensure scholarly credibility and the ethical integrity of transmitted knowledge.

This modern articulation of *isnād* is particularly evident in the qualification and authorization system of the CariUstadz.id digital platform. The platform represents a contemporary institutionalization of *tasalsul* by integrating both continuity of transmission and scholarly validation within a structured digital framework. Two analytical dimensions of this system correspond closely to the classical *isnād* model.

The first is the dimension of transmission (*al-tasalsul*), which concerns the continuity of scholarly endorsement and recommendation. CariUstadz.id operates through a curation mechanism in which *ustadz* and *ustadzah* are recruited via recommendations or endorsements from existing members or partner institutions, contingent on meeting predetermined intellectual and ethical criteria (Zain, 2023). This process reflects a contemporary form of *tazkiyah* (scholarly endorsement), ensuring that transmission occurs through verified and trusted channels—mirroring the relational and intergenerational nature of traditional *sanad*.

The second is the dimension of personal and intellectual competence, which underpins evaluative assessments in determining legitimate Islamic authority. Drawing upon Khaled Abou El Fadl's theoretical framework, two essential elements must be present for an individual to be recognized as an authoritative figure: *qudrah* (capability) and *maqbuliyyah* (acceptability). Capability refers to one's intellectual and scholarly competence—attributes that qualify an individual to issue religious interpretations or guidance. Within CariUstadz.id, this capability is reflected in the formal criteria required of prospective *ustadz* and *ustadzah*: fluency in Qur'anic recitation, proficiency in reading and comprehending *turāth* (classical Islamic texts), possession of at least a bachelor's degree from a recognized institution, and a minimum of three years of Islamic boarding school education (Rakhman, 2023). Acceptability, on the other hand, pertains to moral integrity and social respectability—qualities that ensure community recognition and voluntary compliance with one's authority (El Fadl, 2004, pp. 344–348).

The structured verification process implemented by CariUstadz.id exemplifies what Abou El Fadl describes as “holding authority,” a condition in which individuals are recognized as possessing the requisite knowledge, ethical standing, and scholarly discipline to speak on religious matters (El Fadl, 2004, p. 345). This is operationalized through a multi-layered screening system involving academic credential verification, peer endorsement, and expert review. According to field data, candidates must submit documentary evidence of educational background and obtain approval from the Expert Council (Majelis Dewan

Pakar), representing a digital adaptation of the classical practice of tazkiyah al-‘ulamā’ (scholarly validation). Nonetheless, field observations reveal that the Expert Council’s deliberations are not publicly transparent, raising questions regarding procedural accountability and openness (Field Notes, October 20, 2023).

Beyond this procedural aspect, the Expert Council also embodies what Abou El Fadl terms “being in authority” — the capacity to interpret and apply religious knowledge in real contexts. Their function extends beyond credentialing to include theological supervision, mentorship, and content moderation. Regular meetings are convened to assess whether da’wah materials align with PSQ’s ethical and theological values. In one observed deliberation (October 19, 2023), for instance, council members debated whether a preacher’s post on interfaith relations corresponded with PSQ’s principle of ukhuwah (brotherhood), ultimately opting for private advisory rather than public reprimand. This interpretive engagement underscores their active role in shaping the contours of legitimate authority in digital da’wah spaces.

In conclusion, the qualification and authorization framework of CariUstadz.id demonstrates a contemporary manifestation of the isnād system—one that integrates the classical principles of transmission continuity and scholarly validation into a structured digital environment. By combining traditional mechanisms of tazkiyah with modern institutional governance, the platform preserves the epistemic spirit of isnād while adapting its operational logic to the digital age. In doing so, it redefines how religious authority is authenticated, transmitted, and exercised within the evolving landscape of Islamic digital scholarship.

Referring to the ustadz/ustadzah qualification and authorization system on CariUstadz.id digital platform, the current isnād system operates within a structured framework, incorporating both transmission continuity (al-tasalsul) and scholarly credibility as fundamental principles. The system relies on:

Table 2. Legitimacy Assessment Framework for Ustadz/Ustadzah on CariUstadz.id

1	Curation-Based Selection	Scholars (ustadz/ustadzah) are vetted based on key qualifications, such as mastery of Qur'anic recitation, proficiency in classical Islamic texts (turās), academic credentials, traditional Islamic education background, and neutrality in political affiliations
2	Verification of Authority	The system evaluates scholars' intellectual capabilities (qudrah) and public acceptability (maqbuliyyah) by assessing their academic contributions, da’wah experience, and professional recommendations

The development and transformation of the modern isnād system hold distinct significance compared to its traditional function in early Islamic scholarship. Based on the analysis of the qualification and authorization framework for ustadz and ustadzah on the CariUstadz.id platform, the contemporary isnād system performs several identifiable roles in the transmission and validation of religious authority. First, it establishes a structured selection and verification process designed to ensure authenticity in the transmission of Islamic knowledge. Second, through its institutionalized mechanism, it attempts to bridge contemporary scholars with the intellectual heritage of past Islamic authorities, thereby sustaining continuity within the broader tradition of Islamic scholarship. Third, the system

acts as a safeguard against misinformation by imposing clear standards that prevent unqualified individuals from disseminating distorted or inaccurate religious teachings. Fourth, by incorporating digital infrastructures, it enhances accessibility, enabling wider audiences to engage with credible scholarly content. In sum, the contemporary *isnād* formulation represents a technology-integrated framework that seeks to preserve scholarly credibility and epistemic authenticity in modern Islamic discourse—though its effectiveness remains dependent on addressing issues of transparency and inclusivity within its operational structure.

The establishment of a contemporary *isnād* system within digital frameworks also signifies a fundamental epistemological shift in how Islamic authority is constructed, legitimized, and disseminated. Academically, this transformation opens new avenues of inquiry in Islamic studies, particularly in redefining authority not merely as a product of orally transmitted tradition but as a verifiable, institutionally mediated process of credentialing supported by digital platforms. Within this reconfiguration, *isnād* evolves from a linear chain of hadith transmission into a multidimensional network of scholarly authority that integrates textual legitimacy, institutional endorsement, and public recognition. This conceptual expansion allows for a broader understanding of scholarly lineage—one that accommodates emerging patterns of religious authority formation in the digital age. In this way, individuals who may not emerge from conventional lines of *sanad* can nonetheless embody the foundational principles of *isnād*, particularly *tasalsul* (continuity) and *maqbuliyyah* (public acceptability), through demonstrable competence, moral integrity, and verifiable scholarly credentials.

However, the digital adaptation of *isnād* is not without contention. Critics from traditionalist perspectives argue that religious authority cannot be fully systematized through digital mechanisms, as classical *isnād* entails spiritual, affective, and interpersonal dimensions that resist technological replication (Solahudin, 2020). Moreover, the institutionalization of religious authority risks producing representational biases, privileging scholars within dominant institutional networks while marginalizing those whose legitimacy derives from grassroots or community-based recognition. Such tendencies may inadvertently reproduce new hierarchies that undermine the pluralism historically embedded within the Islamic intellectual tradition. Therefore, the digital *isnād* system should not be regarded as a replacement for its classical counterpart but rather as a complementary framework. Its sustainability depends on critical, adaptive, and context-sensitive engagement that preserves the dialogical spirit of Islamic scholarship while accommodating the evolving modalities of digital religious practice (Ichwan, 2024).

CONCLUSION

The development of the *isnād* system formulation in the digital era represents a profound transformation in how Islamic authority and religious legitimacy are constructed. Whereas the classical *isnād* system primarily centered on authenticating hadith transmission through unbroken chains of narrators, its contemporary adaptation extends beyond that scope to emphasize both scholarly credibility and accessibility in the dissemination of religious knowledge. This shift reflects broader epistemological and institutional changes within Muslim societies, where religious authority is increasingly mediated through structured organizations and digital infrastructures rather than purely interpersonal scholarly transmission.

Within this evolving context, the qualification and authorization framework of *ustadz* and *ustadzah* on the CariUstadz.id platform exemplifies a structured model of the contemporary *isnād* system. The formulation integrates two fundamental principles: continuity of transmission (*al-tasalsul*) and scholarly credibility. The process unfolds through two interrelated components. The first is curation-based selection, wherein scholars are rigorously vetted according to essential qualifications—such as mastery of Qur'anic recitation, proficiency in classical Islamic texts (*turās*), possession of formal academic credentials, a background in Islamic boarding school education, and demonstrated political neutrality. The second is verification of authority, which evaluates a scholar's intellectual capability (*qudrah*) and public acceptability (*maqbuliyyah*). This evaluation draws upon their academic contributions, da'wah experience, and professional endorsements, ensuring that each religious instructor embodies both scholarly competence and moral integrity.

Through this dual process, CariUstadz.id institutionalizes mechanisms to safeguard the credibility of religious authorities and the integrity of transmitted teachings. The system's emphasis on formal education, Qur'anic literacy, and classical scholarship ensures adherence to foundational standards of Islamic epistemology. At the same time, religious legitimacy within this framework is reinforced through peer recognition and institutional endorsement. Many scholars are invited or recommended based on their academic and da'wah track records, while the involvement of major Islamic organizations—such as Nahdlatul Ulama and Muhammadiyah—further consolidates their legitimacy. This networked validation process echoes the traditional *tazkiyah al-'ulamā'* (endorsement by scholars), situating digital isnād within the continuum of established scholarly traditions.

Ultimately, the contemporary isnād system functions both as a validation mechanism and as a connective bridge linking modern Muslim scholars to the intellectual heritage of classical Islam. By combining rigorous scholarly standards with digital accessibility, it strives to preserve the authenticity of religious knowledge while adapting to the communicative and epistemic needs of the twenty-first-century Muslim community. In this way, CariUstadz.id embodies an innovative reconfiguration of *isnād*—one that retains its historical spirit of accountability and continuity while expanding its reach through institutional and technological mediation.

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