

The Hollow Umma: A Socio-Epistemic Critique of Mandaville's Transnational Politics in the Age of Algorithms

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Abstract

This study challenges the techno-optimist narrative regarding the transnational Muslim community by critically revisiting Peter Mandaville's theory of *Travelling Islam* through a socio-epistemic lens. While early scholarship envisioned digital connectivity as a mechanism for the creative reimagining of the Umma, this research argues that the digital medium has engineered a condition identified as the *Hollow Umma*. Rather than facilitating a genuine democratization of knowledge, the digital sphere triggers a radical epistemological deregulation that actively replaces traditional Islamic meritocracy—anchored in scholarly lineage (*Sanad*) and qualified expertise (*Ahl al-Dhiker*)—with a democratic logic of quantity and virality. Furthermore, driven by the epistemic habits of Generation Z and their active reliance on social media as primary search engines, the locus of religious authority has drastically shifted from classical *Ulama* to "religious micro-celebrities." Drawing upon Khaled Abou El Fadl's framework, the paper demonstrates how this socio-epistemic inversion empowers an authoritarian discourse based on digital popularity over authoritative, self-limiting scholarship. By synthesizing Heidegger's philosophy of technology with Zuboff's concept of instrumentarian power, the article diagnoses the emergence of *Digital Taqlid*—a pathological state where believers surrender

intellectual sovereignty to algorithmic authority. Ultimately, the paper concludes that without a deliberate reclamation of epistemic agency via *Digital Tabqiq*, the transnational Umma risks being reduced to a simulacrum of solidarity governed by emotional capitalism.

Keywords: Digital Taqlid, Hollow Umma, Algorithmic Authority, Cognitive Offloading, Socio-Epistemology.

INTRODUCTION

The dawn of the twenty-first century was marked by a profound techno-optimism regarding the fate of the global Muslim community. As globalization dissolved physical borders, the internet was hailed as the ultimate liberator, promising to detach the Islamic identity from the rigid confines of the nation-state. In this idealized landscape, technology was not merely a tool but a transcendental vehicle that would allow the *Umma* to reconstitute itself as a purely borderless, discursive entity. Scholars and observers envisioned a "digital public sphere" where authority would be democratized, and solidarity would flow unimpeded by geographical distance (Whyte, 2022). This era was defined by the belief that the connectivity offered by the "Network Society" would inevitably lead to a more robust, cohesive, and intellectually vibrant global Islamic community.

Central to this academic optimism was the seminal work of Peter Mandaville. In *Transnational Muslim Politics: Reimagining the Umma*, Mandaville (2003) introduced the concept of "Travelling Islam"—a dynamic form of religious identity that is not rooted in a specific locale but is constantly

negotiated through migration and media. Mandaville (1999) argued that as Muslims travel and communicate across borders, they are effectively "reimagining the Umma" not as a geopolitical entity, but as a translocal community of shared meaning. This "reimagining" was seen as a liberation from the cultural baggage of their homelands, allowing for a return to a more universal, textual Islam. Mandaville's thesis provided the foundational grammar for understanding how the *Umma* could survive and thrive in a secular, globalized world, shifting the focus from the "politics of the state" to the "politics of the people" facilitated by information technology.

However, two decades later, the digital landscape has shifted from an open information highway to a highly curated algorithmic enclosure, prompting a re-evaluation of Mandaville's premise. Recent empirical studies suggest that while the *reach* of Islamic connectivity has expanded, the *depth* of religious engagement has been fundamentally altered by the logic of digital platforms. Campbell (2020) notes that social media algorithms have decentralized religious authority, shifting power from traditional *Ulama*—who possess deep epistemological grounding—to "influencers" and "micro-celebrities" whose authority is constructed through visibility, engagement metrics, and aesthetic appeal. Furthermore, Berger & Golan (2024) highlight a paradox where increased internet use correlates with a rise in "religious unaffiliation" and a tinkering approach to belief, suggesting that digital consumption may be fragmenting rather than solidifying communal bonds. Instead of a cohesive "reimagined Umma," we are witnessing the formation of hybrid identities that are increasingly

subject to algorithmic curation rather than theological coherence (Seitakhmetova & Zhandossova, 2025; Zaluchu, 2024).

Despite the abundance of studies on "Digital Islam," a critical gap remains in the literature. Most contemporary research, such as that by Seitakhmetova & Zhandossova (2025), focuses on the sociological and psychological effects of digitalization—such as alienation or social solidarity—without interrogating the underlying *ontological* and *socio-epistemic* structures that govern these interactions. While we acknowledge that the Umma has become transnational, there is insufficient critique regarding the *quality* of the knowledge circulating within this network. The current discourse often overlooks how the medium of technology itself—specifically what Heidegger identifies as the *Gestell* or "enframing" nature of technology—restructures the very essence of religious experience (Anam, 2025b). The problem is not just *who* speaks for Islam online, but *how* the epistemological architecture of the internet favors brevity, emotionality, and performativity over the rigorous, contemplative tradition of Islamic scholarship (Sherman & Morrissey, 2017).

This article aims to bridge this gap by revisiting Mandaville's theory of "Travelling Islam" through a critical socio-epistemic lens. It argues that the "reimagined Umma" celebrated in the early 2000s risks devolving into a "Hollow Umma"—a community that is vast in scale but ontologically superficial. By integrating Mandaville's political sociology with concept of *Socio-Epistemology* and Anam's critique of technological nihilism (Anam,

2025b), this study demonstrates that without a critical understanding of how digital platforms construct truth, the transnational Umma becomes a simulacrum: a network of connections without the depth of true communion.

However, two decades later, the map drawn by Mandaville appears ontologically incomplete. While recent studies acknowledge the sociological shifts of digital religion (Berger & Golan, 2024; Campbell & Evolvi, 2020), they largely overlook the fundamental *socio-epistemic* and *ontological* mutations occurring beneath the surface. Current literature often accepts the "digital public sphere" as a neutral container for religious discourse. It fails to interrogate how the technological medium itself—what Heidegger identifies as *Gestell* (Enframing)—actively restructures the nature of Islamic "truth." By focusing solely on the connectivity of the Umma, scholars miss the critical questions of authenticity and authority. First, how does the transition from a geographically bound community to a digitally "reimagined" transnational Umma alter the fundamental architecture of Islamic authority? Second, in what ways does the algorithmic logic of the digital sphere shift the validation of Islamic knowledge from a traditional meritocratic system rooted in scholarly lineage (*Sanad*) to a system governed by virality and popularity? Finally, does the digital medium facilitate a genuine "reimagining" of the community, or does it cultivate the posture of *Digital Taqlid*—trapping the believer in a cycle of calculative thinking that erodes spiritual depth and reduces the transnational Muslim community into a 'Hollow Umma'?

Consequently, this article interrogates Mandaville's concept of "Travelling Islam" not through a political lens, but through a rigorous philosophical framework. By synthesizing Socio-Epistemology to analyze the social construction of digital authority, and the Heideggerian Philosophy of Technology to dismantle the ontological structure of the internet (Anam, 2025b), this study uncovers a pathological condition in contemporary Muslim society. The article argues that what Mandaville identifies as a liberating "Reimagined Umma" has, under the weight of algorithmic capitalism, mutated into a "Hollow Umma." This diagnosis reveals a community that is transnationally connected yet ontologically empty, where the *Umma* is no longer a spiritual communion, but a "standing-reserve" (*Bestand*) harvested for algorithmic engagement

LITERATURE REVIEW

The academic discourse on Islam and International Relations has undergone a significant transformation regarding the role of technology. In the early 2000s, the dominant narrative, spearheaded by Peter Mandaville (2003), positioned information technology as a tool for "reimagining the Umma"—a liberating force that allowed Muslims to bypass state censorship and form a cohesive transnational community. However, literature from the last decade (2015–2025) indicates a sharp departure from this techno-optimism toward a more critical examination of how digital infrastructures reshape religious life. Current research suggests that the "Network Society"

has not produced a unified Umma, but rather a fragmented landscape governed by platform logic.

Recent studies highlight that the digital sphere has fundamentally altered the epistemology of religious authority. Campbell & Evolvi (2020) argues that we are witnessing the rise of "Algorithmic Authority," where religious influence is no longer determined by depth of knowledge or traditional sanad (chain of transmission), but by visibility and engagement metrics. In this environment, authority shifts from Ulama to "micro-celebrities" and influencers who master the aesthetics of platforms like Instagram and TikTok rather than theological texts. This aligns with findings by Zaluchu (2024), who observes that digitalization and socio-political factors are forming "hybrid religious identities." These identities are curated by algorithms, leading to interactive ritual practices that prioritize performative solidarity over doctrinal coherence. Consequently, the transnational Umma described by Mandaville is now mediated by actors whose legitimacy is precarious and often detached from established Islamic scholarship.

Furthermore, empirical data suggests a correlation between high digital connectivity and the erosion of deep religious commitment. Exploring the effects of internet use on belief, Berger & Golan (2024) found that increased digital consumption correlates with a rise in "religious unaffiliation" and a decrease in religious exclusivism. The internet encourages a "tinkering" approach to faith, where users assemble

customized belief systems from fragmented sources, a phenomenon McClure (2017) describes as the construction of "Digital Theology." While Seitakhmetova & Zhandossova (2025) argue that internet technology can facilitate social solidarity in the era of Industry 4.0, they also acknowledge that this occurs amidst a backdrop of "alienation" in a disrupted society. This suggests that the solidarity formed online is often a reactive mechanism to modern alienation rather than a proactive spiritual communion.

While the aforementioned studies successfully map the sociological and psychological shifts of the digital Umma, a significant theoretical gap remains. Most contemporary literature treats technology as a neutral medium—a tool that simply facilitates or hinders communication. There is a scarcity of research that interrogates the ontological status of the digital Umma itself. The existing body of work has yet to fully utilize the Philosophy of Technology to analyze how the very essence of the internet—what Heidegger explicates as *Gestell* or "Enframing"—restructures the nature of the believer's existence (Anam, 2025b).

Therefore, this article seeks to bridge this gap by revisiting Mandaville's political sociology through a rigorous philosophical framework. It integrates Socio-Epistemology to critique the construction of digital truth and employs the Heideggerian analysis of technology to diagnose the "Hollow Umma." By doing so, this review moves beyond the symptoms of fragmentation identified by Campbell and Berger, to uncover the root

cause: the reduction of the Umma into a technological "standing-reserve" (Bestand) (Dimopoulos & Koulaidis, 2002).

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

To rigorously interrogate the concept of the "Reimagined Umma," this study departs from the standard political sociology approach and instead adopts a dual-layered philosophical framework. We posit that the phenomenon of digital transnationalism cannot be understood solely through the flow of information; it must be analysed through the structure of knowledge (epistemology) and the structure of being (ontology) (P. G. Mandaville, 1998). Therefore, this article synthesises Socio-Epistemology and Heideggerian Philosophy of Technology to construct a diagnostic model of the "Hollow Umma."

The first pillar of this framework is drawn from concept of Socio-Epistemology. Knowledge is never a neutral reflection of reality but is socially constructed through specific "bases of validity." In traditional Islamic epistemology, the validity of religious knowledge is anchored in Sanad (chain of transmission) and Dirayah (intellectual comprehension). However, Socio-Epistemology framework allows us to analyse how the "social basis" of knowledge shifts when mediated by technology. In the digital sphere, the social mechanism of validation is no longer the scholarly consensus (Ijma), but the algorithmic logic of the platform. Truth is determined by "virality" and "engagement," creating a new epistemic regime

where religious authority is detached from intellectual depth. This lens helps explain how the Umma is reimagined: not through theological renewal, but through the aggregation of superficial data (Khasri, 2020).

The second, and foundational, pillar is the Philosophy of Technology, specifically the concept of *Gestell* (Enframing) by Martin Heidegger. To rigorously define this mechanism, we draw on the interpretation by Dreyfus and Spinoza (2003), who elucidate that modern technology is not merely a tool, but a mode of revealing that “challenges forth” reality to appear strictly as a “standing-reserve” (*Bestand*)—resources waiting to be optimized for maximum efficiency. Building on this ontological groundwork, Anam (2025) contextualizes the digital platform not as a neutral public sphere, but as a specific mechanism of *Gestell* that “enframes” the user. Within this structure, the Muslim subject is no longer a *Dasein* (being-there) seeking spiritual authenticity, but is reduced to a data point to be calculated and consumed. As Anam suggests, this technological enframing ultimately leads to an “ontological homelessness,” where the subject feels connected everywhere but is rooted nowhere.

By integrating these two perspectives, this theoretical framework establishes the concept of the “Hollow Umma.” Crucially, “Hollow” here does not denote a void or a total absence of content. Rather, it signifies a state of ontological deracination. The Hollow Umma is a community that is “crowded” with signs, symbols, and connections, yet lacks the grounding substance of spiritual communion. It operates as a *Simulacrum*: it possesses

the perfect epistemic form of Islamic solidarity (mediated by algorithms) but has been emptied of its ontological kernel (the friction of Mujahada). While Mandaville (2003) viewed the “travelling” of ideas as liberation, this framework reveals it as a displacement—where the Umma is everywhere digitally, but rooted nowhere ontologically.

RESEARCH METHOD

This study employs a qualitative library research design, rigorously framed within the Critical Methods of International Relations as proposed by Aradau and Huysmans (2014). Departing from the conventional positivist assumption that methods are merely neutral tools for data extraction, this research reconceptualises methodology as a "critical device" designed to actively enact and disrupt specific political worlds. In this context, the study functions not merely as a descriptive observation but as an epistemic intervention seeking to dismantle the techno-optimist narrative of "Travelling Islam" by exposing its inherent ontological contradictions.

To ensure a rigorous inquiry, the research is structured not as a standard bibliometric analysis, but as a theoretical confrontation. Instead of employing abstract 'data topologies,' this study establishes a specific Critical Corpus divided into two dialectical clusters. The primary object of study—representing the phenomenon—is the textual corpus of Peter Mandaville, specifically *Transnational Muslim Politics* (2003) and *Reimagining the Umma*

(1999), which serve as the artifacts of the 'Transnational Turn' in IR. Conversely, the secondary cluster serves as the diagnostic lens, comprising the Philosophy of Technology (Anam, 2025b) and recent Socio-Epistemic scholarship (Han, 2017; Zuboff, 2019). The method is, therefore, a reading of Mandaville *through* the lens of Heidegger, using the latter to dismantle the ontological assumptions of the former.

The data collection was conducted through the Critical Documentation Technique. Unlike standard systematic reviews that seek to aggregate consensus, this collection process was inherently purposive and dialectical, selecting texts that represent significant "ruptures" in the narrative of global Islam. This process involved tracing the genealogical development of the term "Umma" within International Relations discourse, mapping its trajectory from traditional theological roots, through Mandaville's sociopolitical reinterpretation, to its current fragmentation within algorithmic spaces.

For data analysis, the study employs Critical Intertextuality, a method inspired by Aradau's notion of methods as "acts of disruption" (Aradau & Huysmans, 2014). This analysis does not aim to synthesise Mandaville and Heidegger into a harmonious agreement, but rather to stage a theoretical confrontation between them. The analytical procedure unfolds in three sequential steps: first, a deconstruction of Mandaville's argument to reveal its reliance on a "neutral" understanding of technology; second, a socio-epistemic framework to test the validity of knowledge produced in the

digital sphere; and third, an ontological diagnostic using Heidegger's concept of *Gestell* to re-read the phenomenon of transnationalism. Here, the analysis transcends the political question of *what* the Umma does, to address the ontological question of *how* the Umma is revealed.

Finally, to clarify the abstract philosophical shift from "Travelling Islam" to "Hollow Umma," the research findings are synthesized into a Conceptual Schematic. This visualization maps the trajectory of the Umma by contrasting the "Networked Structure" visible at the surface level with the "Ontological Emptiness" residing at the deep level, thereby rendering the invisible mechanism of the hollowed-out digital existence visible to the reader.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

The Transnational Turn: De-territorializing the Umma

Before Peter Mandaville's intervention in the early 2000s, the discipline of International Relations (IR) was largely suffocated by a "Westphalian straitjacket." The orthodox political imaginary viewed the world exclusively as a chessboard of nation-states, where religious communities were rendered invisible unless they were co-opted by state power. Within this rigid ontology, the concept of the Umma was frequently dismissed by realists as mere romantic rhetoric or, at best, a pre-modern relic incompatible with the secular logic of modern sovereignty. Mandaville

marked a decisive epistemological rupture by challenging this methodological nationalism. He posits that to understand contemporary Islam, one must look beyond the static borders of the Middle East and instead analyse the "spaces of flows" where Muslims actually live and interact. Mandaville successfully demonstrated that the Umma is not a geopolitical abstraction awaiting a Caliphate, but a vibrant, lived sociological reality that operates parallel to, and often permeates through, the porous borders of the nation-state (Shani, 2008).

Central to Mandaville's thesis is the radical deterritorialization of Muslim identity. He argues that the traditional dichotomy of Dar al-Islam (Abode of Islam) and Dar al-Harb (Abode of War)—which tethered religious identity to physical geography—has been rendered obsolete by the forces of globalization. In its place, the Umma has been reconstituted as a "discursive space." It is no longer defined by where a Muslim is, but by how a Muslim communicates. Through the circulation of ideas, cassettes, pamphlets, and nascent internet forums, the Umma emerges as a translocal community held together not by soil, but by shared symbols and a common moral vocabulary. Mandaville astutely observes that this shift allows Islam to become a "travelling theory"; capable of traversing cultural boundaries and taking root in diverse sociopolitical contexts without losing its core universalist appeal. This conceptual move effectively liberated the study of political Islam from the confines of "area studies" and placed it squarely within the dynamics of global civil society (Ezzat, 2011).

Furthermore, Mandaville (2011) provides a compelling analysis of the diaspora paradox, where distance from the "Islamic heartland" paradoxically intensifies religious consciousness. In his observation of Muslim communities in global cities like London or New York, Mandaville notes a profound "objectification of religion." For a Muslim in a traditional village in Egypt or Pakistan, Islam might be a habitual, unexamined culture—a "taken-for-granted" background noise. However, when transplanted to a secular, pluralistic Western context, that same Muslim is forced to view Islam as a distinct object of identity that must be explicitly articulated, defended, and negotiated against a non-Muslim "Other." Consequently, the diaspora condition fosters a form of "critical distance" where cultural accretions are stripped away in search of a "pure," universal Islam. Mandaville correctly identifies that globalization does not dilute faith; rather, it demands a higher level of reflexivity, transforming the passive believer into an active agent of religious construction.

This reconfiguration of identity gives rise to what Mandaville terms "counter-publics." Excluded from the mainstream public spheres of their host countries due to Islamophobia or cultural alienation, and simultaneously disconnected from the authoritarian politics of their home countries, translocal Muslims create their own alternative arenas of discourse. These spaces—initially physical study circles and later digital forums—function as laboratories for a new "politics of the people." Here, ordinary Muslims engage in lateral communication, bypassing the vertical hierarchy of traditional Ulama. Mandaville's appreciation of this

phenomenon is grounded in the recognition that these counter-publics are not merely reactionary bunkers, but productive sites where the meaning of the Umma is constantly debated, contested, and "re-imagined" to fit the exigencies of modern life (P. Mandaville, 2011).

Ultimately, Mandaville's scholarship must be credited for accurately diagnosing the morphology of the contemporary Muslim world. He foresaw that the primary vehicle of Islamic politics in the 21st century would not be the state, but the network. By shifting the analytical lens from "government" to "governance," and from "territory" to "discourse," he provided the grammar necessary to speak about a global community that exists everywhere and nowhere simultaneously. His theory of "Travelling Islam" validates the sociological fact that the Umma has successfully transitioned from a static historical legacy into a dynamic, transnational social movement. The infrastructure of connectivity he described has not only persisted but has expanded exponentially, proving that the form of the Umma is indeed resilient, fluid, and structurally capable of surviving the pressures of a secular global order (Vasilaki, 2012).

The Mechanics of "Travelling Theory": Migration and Translation

To explicate the transformation of the *Umma*, Mandaville appropriates and repurposes Edward Said's concept of "Travelling Theory." Within this framework, Islam is not conceptualised as a static cultural parcel that is mechanically transported from the "centre" (the Middle East) to the

"periphery" (the West) without alteration. Instead, Mandaville posits that as Islam travels through the conduits of migration and media, it inevitably undergoes a process of "translation." This translation is not merely linguistic but sociologically transformative. When a theory—or in this case, a religion—moves from its point of origin to a new setting, it loses some of its original power but gains new vitality by adapting to new conditions. Mandaville argues that the physical migration of Muslims necessitates a conceptual migration of Islam itself, forcing it to shed its "local particularisms" to survive in a pluralistic, secular environment (Nowicka, 2015).

This mechanism of translation operates primarily through a process of deculturalization or purification. In their countries of origin, Muslim practices are often deeply embedded in local customs—what Mandaville identifies as the "village Islam" of Pakistan, Turkey, or Morocco, where religion and culture are indistinguishable. However, in the diaspora, these cultural idiosyncrasies often become liabilities or barriers to inter-generational and inter-ethnic solidarity. A second-generation British Muslim of Bengali descent, for instance, may find the cultural rituals of their parents alienating but still seeks a connection to the Divine. Mandaville observes that to resolve this tension, diasporic Muslims tend to strip away the "cultural accretions" of their parents' faith to uncover a "pristine," universal core of Islam that is applicable anywhere. In this view, migration does not weaken the faith; it distills it (Allievi & Nielsen, 2010).

Mandaville regards this distillation as a positive, creative force. By decoupling Islam from specific ethnic cultures (e.g., "Punjabi Islam" or "Anatolian Islam"), the diaspora reconstructs an "abstract Islam" or "Universal Islam" based strictly on scripture (Quran and Sunnah) rather than tradition. This shift facilitates the creation of a broader, trans-ethnic *Umma*. It allows a Pakistani Muslim in London to pray and organize alongside a Nigerian or convert Muslim, united by a shared, de-culturalized set of Islamic norms. Mandaville's data from the late 1990s and early 2000s validates this observation robustly. He documented how young Muslims utilized the available media of the time—from cassette sermons to early internet mailing lists—to bypass local cultural gatekeepers and access a "global Islam" that felt more modern, rational, and universally valid than the folk traditions of their elders (Allievi & Nielsen, 2010).

The role of media in this mechanism cannot be overstated. Mandaville correctly identified that information technology acts as the primary engine of this "disembedding" process. The widespread circulation of digital texts and sermons allowed Islam to be consumed independently of its traditional social context. A sermon recorded in Cairo could be listened to in Bradford, interpreted not through the lens of Egyptian culture, but through the lens of a minority experience in the West. This technologically mediated separation of "text" from "context" is what empowered the *Umma* to become truly transnational. Mandaville's optimism here is grounded in the belief that this "Objectified Islam"—accessible via screens and audio—empowers the individual believer to engage directly with the sources of their

faith, fostering a more intellectual and conscious form of religiosity compared to the "inherited" faith of the homeland (Hefner & Zaman, 2010)

However, while acknowledging the accuracy of Mandaville's descriptive analysis, a subtle critical question arises regarding the nature of this "Universalism." Mandaville celebrates the stripping away of culture as a path toward a more authentic, scriptural *Umma*. Yet, one must query whether this process is purely a form of purification, or if it also constitutes a form of ontological thinning. When religion is severed from its cultural roots and "village traditions" to become a portable, digital object, does it gain universality at the cost of its depth? While Mandaville views this "Travelling Islam" as a triumph of adaptation, it creates a unique vulnerability: an Islam that is easily formatted for transmission but perhaps detached from the organic, lived wisdom that only "culture" can provide. This tension between the *portability* of the faith and its *embeddedness* remains the central unresolved paradox in Mandaville's transnational vision.

The Pluralization of Authority: From Pulpit to Platform

Mandaville's most penetrating insight lies in his analysis of the structural transformation of religious authority. In traditional Islamic sociology, authority was historically constituted through a vertical, top-down hierarchy. Knowledge flowed from the *Ulama*—the custodians of the text who possessed the requisite linguistic and theological training—down to the lay believer. The interpretative monopoly was secured by the sheer

difficulty of accessing the source texts (Quran and Hadith) without mediation. However, Mandaville identifies that the defining feature of the transnational age is the shift from this vertical transmission to what he terms "lateral communication." In the emerging spaces of the *Umma*, Muslims are no longer passive recipients of fatwas; they are engaging in horizontal dialogue with one another, debating the meaning of their faith in chat rooms, mailing lists, and forums that operate outside the purview of state-appointed muftis (Samson, 1989).

This shift has effectively reopened the "gates of *ijtihad*" (independent reasoning) for the layperson, not through theological decree, but through technological enablement. Mandaville observes that the digitalization of Islamic corpus—beginning with CD-ROMs in the 1990s and exploding with the internet—has led to a radical democratization of access. Classical texts that were once locked away in dusty madrasa libraries or required years of mastery in Arabic philology are now searchable, translatable, and accessible to any university student in London or engineer in Kuala Lumpur. Mandaville rightly argues that this accessibility strips the traditional scholarly class of their gatekeeping power. When a lay Muslim can instantly verify a Hadith or compare competing legal rulings online, the mystique of the specialized scholar evaporates, replaced by a new form of epistemological egalitarianism (P. Mandaville, 2001).

Sociologically, Mandaville validates this trend through his robust fieldwork among Muslim diaspora youth in Europe. He documents a

widening "relevance gap" between the younger generation and the traditional religious leadership. In many Western cities, the local mosques were often staffed by "imported Imams" sent from the homelands (such as Turkey, Pakistan, or Morocco) who spoke little English and addressed issues irrelevant to the lived experience of Western Muslims. Mandaville's data reveals that for these youths, the internet offered an alternative, and often more compelling, source of authority. They turned to "Cyber-Islamic environments" not just for convenience, but because the digital sphere offered a version of Islam that was articulate, modern, and responsive to their specific identity crises—something the traditional pulpit failed to provide (P. Mandaville, 2001).

Consequently, Mandaville predicts a profound pluralization of authority. The singular voice of the *Minbar* (pulpit) has fractured into a cacophony of competing voices on the digital platform. In this new marketplace of ideas, authority is no longer endowed by institutions (like Al-Azhar or Deoband) but is earned through performance and persuasion. Mandaville views this as a sign of the *Umma's* vitality. He champions the idea that this "crisis of authority" is actually a moment of maturation, where the responsibility for religious understanding shifts from the institution to the individual. The "new Muslim intellectual"—often a lay professional rather than a cleric—emerges as a key figure in this landscape, mediating between the text and the modern world (P. Mandaville, 2013).

In retrospect, Mandaville's diagnosis was exceptionally visionary. He correctly foresaw that the monopoly of the *Ulama* would not survive the information age intact. His framework provides the essential sociological grounding to understand why contemporary Muslims feel empowered to "speak for Islam" without traditional credentials. By identifying the mechanics of lateral communication, Mandaville successfully mapped the transition from an authority based on genealogy (who your teacher was) to an authority based on connectivity (who you interact with). This observation remains an indisputable sociological fact: the hierarchical structure of the *Umma* has indeed been flattened, creating a vast, open plain where authority is constantly contested and renegotiated (P. Mandaville, 2013).

The Verdict: Successful Form, Missing Substance

In the final analysis of the "Transnational Turn," one must concede that Peter Mandaville's prophetic vision regarding the morphology of the future *Umma* was almost flawless. If one were to superimpose Mandaville's theoretical map from 2001 onto the reality of 2025, the contours would align with startling precision. The "Westphalian straitjacket" has indeed been torn apart; the *Umma* today operates as a fully deterritorialized entity where a fatwa issued in a bedroom in Birmingham can have immediate repercussions in the streets of Jakarta. Sociologically, the infrastructure of the "Reimagined Umma" is complete. The channels of lateral communication are open, the counter-publics are thriving, and the

mechanism of "Travelling Islam" functions with a speed and efficiency that exceeds even Mandaville's most optimistic projections. In terms of form, the project of globalizing Islam is an absolute empirical triumph (Ho, 2010).

However, it is precisely within this triumph of form that the failure of substance begins to materialize. Mandaville's entire thesis rests on a latent Enlightenment assumption: that the *liberalization of access* to information would automatically result in the *liberalization of thought*. He operated under the optimistic premise that by breaking the monopoly of the traditional *Ulama* and empowering the lay individual with digital tools, the *Umma* would naturally gravitate toward a more critical, rational, and "authentic" understanding of the faith. He conflated connectivity with consciousness. The assumption was that once the technological floodgates were opened, the water that flowed through them would be the clear spring of *Ijtihad* (critical reasoning). He did not anticipate that the same floodgates would also admit a deluge of epistemological debris (P. Mandaville, 2020).

This reveals the fundamental "blind spot" in Mandaville's transnational politics. His analysis was rigorously attentive to the *sociology of the actors* (the migrants, the students, the activists) but surprisingly naive regarding the *ontology of the medium* (the technology itself). Mandaville looked at the Network—the impressive web of human connections—but he failed to examine the Cable—the technological essence that structures those connections. He treated the internet and digital media as "neutral conduits," empty pipes through which the *Umma* could simply pour its discourse. He

did not ask whether the medium itself possessed a logic—a specific way of revealing the world—that might alter the very nature of the message being transmitted (P. Mandaville, 2020).

Consequently, Mandaville celebrated the emergence of "new voices" without sufficiently interrogating the epistemic quality of those voices. He championed the pluralization of authority as a democratic victory, assuming that in the marketplace of ideas, the best arguments would rise to the top. He did not foresee an algorithmic environment where visibility is determined not by theological depth or intellectual rigour, but by sensationalism, emotional triggering, and brevity. The "Critical Islam" he hoped for requires deep reading, slow contemplation, and historical context—modes of thinking that are structurally discouraged by the very digital platforms Mandaville hailed as liberators (P. Mandaville, 2026).

The verdict, therefore, is one of successful structure but hollowed content. Mandaville gave us the blueprint for a house that has now been built; the walls of the transnational *Umma* are standing, and the roof of global solidarity is in place. Yet, upon entering this house, one finds it strangely empty of the spiritual and intellectual furniture that defines a civilization. We have achieved the "Traveling Islam" (the movement), but we seem to have lost the *Islam* (the substance) in the process. The *Umma* is everywhere, yet it is nowhere. This paradox—the abundance of connection amidst the scarcity of meaning—compels us to move beyond Mandaville's sociology and enter the domain of ontology, to diagnose the specific

technological pathology that has turned the "Reimagined Umma" into a "Hollow Umma" (P. G. Mandaville, 1999).

The Socio-Epistemic Shift: From Sanad to Algorithm

To deconstruct the optimism surrounding the transnational *Umma*, one must first interrogate the nature of the knowledge circulating within it. Mandaville's analysis, while sociologically astute regarding *movement*, is epistemologically naive regarding *validity*. He operates under the tacit assumption that religious knowledge is a stable entity that remains untainted as it moves through different media. However, framework of Socio-Epistemology challenges this neutrality. Knowledge never descends from a vacuum; it is always socially situated and constructed through a specific "social basis of validity." Truth is not merely a correspondence to reality, but a product of the social agreements and mechanisms that legitimize it. In traditional Islamic societies, this basis was communal and genealogical; in the digital sphere, the basis has fundamentally shifted (P. Mandaville, 2007).

This new Epistemic Regime argues that every society establishes a specific "regime" that dictates what counts as true and who has the right to speak it. In the pre-digital era, the epistemic regime of the *Umma* was governed by the rigorous standards of *Usul Fiqh* (principles of jurisprudence) and institutional consensus (*Ijma*). However, the migration of Islam to the digital realm does not merely expand the audience; it

replaces the regime entirely. Mandaville failed to perceive this rupture because he viewed the internet as a passive "conduit"—a neutral pipe through which the water of Islam flows unchanged. He did not anticipate that the pipe itself would alter the chemical composition of the water. The digital platform is not a neutral carrier; it is an active gatekeeper that imposes its own criteria for what constitutes valid religious knowledge (P. Mandaville, 2007).

Consequently, the transition from offline to online communities represents more than just a change in location; it is a radical transformation of the standard of truth. In the physical world, the validity of a religious claim is often tied to the *habitus* of the speaker—their education, their piety, and their standing within the community. In the digital world, these social markers are stripped away. Theory suggests, when the social basis changes, the definition of truth mutates to fit the new medium. The digital *Umma* is governed by a logic where "truth" is increasingly defined by its ability to circulate rather than its theological accuracy. A statement becomes "true" not because it is supported by centuries of scholarship, but because it resonates with the immediate emotional needs of the audience (P. Mandaville & Williams, 2015).

This leads to a precarious situation where the *Umma* is operating under a delusion of continuity. Muslims online believe they are engaging with the same "Islam" as their predecessors, unaware that the underlying epistemic architecture has been swapped. Mandaville celebrated the

"democratization" of knowledge, but viewed through social epistemology lens, this is not democratization; it is an epistemological deregulation. By removing the traditional checkpoints of validity without establishing new, rigorous ones, the digital sphere has created a vacuum. In this vacuum, the authority of knowledge is no longer derived from its source, but from its performative power. The "Social Basis" of digital truth favors the loud, the visual, and the simple, implicitly marginalizing the complex, textual, and nuanced traditions of classical Islam (P. Mandaville & Williams, 2015).

Mandaville celebrated the "democratization" of knowledge, but viewed through a socio-epistemological lens, this is not democratization; it is a radical epistemological deregulation. To dismantle this illusion of "democratic" Islamic scholarship, one can deploy Khaled Abou El Fadl's critical distinction between the *authoritative* and the *authoritarian*. The very application of the term "democratic" to religious truth reveals a categorical error. Democracy operates on the principle of majority rule, validating truth through sheer quantity and popular consensus. In stark contrast, as Abou El Fadl's framework implies, the Islamic epistemic tradition is fundamentally anchored in scientific meritocracy to establish *authoritative* knowledge. Within this paradigm, truth is never determined by a tally of votes or digital popularity; it is established solely by the strength of the evidence (*hujjah*) and the rigorous methodological capacity of the scholar (*Ulama*). By flattening this hierarchy, the digital sphere violates a core Islamic injunction which mandates that every matter must be entrusted to its rightful experts (*Ahl al-Dhikr*). Consequently, what Mandaville perceives

as a democratic triumph is, in reality, the rise of an *authoritarian* discourse—where unqualified digital masses usurp the custody of religious knowledge. As Islamic teachings warn, leaving a matter to non-experts is not a liberation; it is the ultimate sign of structural ruin and destruction. By removing the traditional checkpoints of validity without establishing new, rigorous ones, the digital sphere has created a vacuum (Fadl, 2001).

Therefore, applying socio-epistemology reveals the fatal flaw in the "Travelling Islam" thesis. The *Umma* may be travelling, but it is leaving its epistemological baggage behind. By ignoring the "social basis" of validity, Mandaville's framework cannot account for the degradation of religious discourse we witness today. He saw the network connecting millions of minds, but he missed the mechanism that was simultaneously hollowing out the content of their thoughts. To understand the crisis of the modern *Umma*, we must stop looking at the *spread* of information and start analyzing the *structure* of its validation—a structure that has shifted from the sanctity of the scholar to the anarchy of the algorithm (Van Den Heever, 2022).

The Death of Genealogy: From Sanad to Search Engine

To understand the magnitude of the epistemic crisis within the digital *Umma*, one must first appreciate the classical architecture of Islamic authority. Historically, the transmission of religious knowledge was strictly governed by the logic of Genealogy (*Sanad*). In this tradition, a text or a ruling was never autonomous; its validity was inextricably tethered to the

chain of transmitters who preserved it. This genealogical structure ensured that knowledge was not merely "downloaded" as cognitive data, but was inherited through *Suhbah*—prolonged physical companionship between teacher and student. Within the circle of *Subbah*, the student acquired not only the intellectual content of the law (*Ilm*) but also the ethical embodiment of the law (*Adab*). Authority, therefore, was corporeal and relational; one could not simply "know" Islam without being disciplined by a master who stood within a continuous lineage stretching back to the Prophet (Neuberger et al., 2023). Admittedly, blind imitation (*Taqlid*) is not a uniquely modern phenomenon; pre-digital agrarian societies were also characterized by hierarchical deference to authority. However, the structural difference is profound. Traditional *Taqlid* was rooted in an interpersonal trust toward a living subject (the scholar) whose ethical integrity could be witnessed. Digital *Taqlid*, conversely, is a deference to an opaque "black box" mechanism whose criteria for sorting truth are driven by commercial metrics, not theological ethics.

The advent of the digital age has precipitated a catastrophic Genealogical Rupture. The internet does not merely speed up transmission; it severs the umbilical cord of the *Sanad*. In the online sphere, religious texts are digitized, fragmented, and uploaded into a vast, ahistorical database, effectively stripping them of their pedagogical context. The relational bond of *Subbah* is replaced by the transactional interface of the user and the screen. Mandaville's "Travelling Islam" celebrates this detachment as a form of liberation from hierarchical gatekeepers, but from a socio-

epistemic perspective, it represents the death of the witness. The guarantee of truth is no longer the integrity of the transmitter, but the accessibility of the file (Primig, 2025).

This rupture has given rise to the phenomenon of "Sheikh Google." In the pre-digital era, the primary epistemological question facing a seeker of knowledge was, "Who is your teacher?" (implying a qualitative assessment of lineage). Today, that question has been displaced by, "What does the search result say?" (implying a quantitative assessment of relevance). The search engine operates on a logic that is fundamentally agnostic to religious truth; it ranks information based on keywords, hyperlinks, and metadata, not on theological soundness. When a Muslim queries a legal ruling online, the algorithm does not prioritize the most authoritative scholarly opinion, but the most optimized content. Consequently, the user is presented with a flattened landscape where a centuries-old fatwa from Al-Azhar competes for screen space with a radical interpretation from an anonymous blog, with no epistemological marker to distinguish between them (Ibragimova & Beloglazova, 2021).

The ultimate consequence of this shift is the Decapitation of Tradition. When texts are uprooted from their interpretive communities and the guardianship of scholars, they become "orphaned data"—free-floating signifiers devoid of their historical anchors. A verse of the Quran or a Hadith, once protected by layers of commentary and contextual jurisprudence, is now laid bare, vulnerable to the immediate, often literalist,

interpretation of any lay reader. This "orphaned data" does not speak with the weight of history; it serves as a mirror reflecting the biases of the user. Without the *Sanad* to provide a hermeneutical guardrail, the text becomes pliable, easily weaponized to support extremist narratives or watered down to fit liberal sensibilities (P. Mandaville, 2010).

Therefore, the "democratization" hailed by Mandaville is, in reality, a crisis of interpretative anarchy. By bypassing the *Ulama*, the digital *Umma* has not liberated itself; it has merely exchanged the authority of the scholar for the tyranny of the interface. The death of genealogy means that knowledge is no longer a transformative discipline but a consumable commodity. We are witnessing a generation of "cut-and-paste" Muslims who possess vast archives of digital scriptures but lack the *Adab* that can only be cultivated through the friction of human mentorship. The *Umma* is technically more "knowledgeable" than ever before, yet structurally incapable of verifying the spiritual lineage of what it knows (Addzaky et al., 2024).

This crisis of interpretative anarchy fundamentally shatters the illusion of "democratization" in Islamic scholarship. Mandaville and early techno-optimists frequently conflated digital accessibility with democratization, assuming that breaking the monopoly of traditional scholars would create an egalitarian public sphere. However, from a socio-epistemic perspective, what occurred was not democratization, but a radical epistemological deregulation (Laor, 2024). The traditional Islamic knowledge system is

inherently meritocratic, rigorously guarding its validity through *Sanad* (chain of transmission), *Dirayah* (intellectual capacity), and the ethical cultivation of *Subbah* (mentorship). Truth is established by the weight of the *Hujjah* (evidence) and the authority of *Ahl al-Dbiker* (the people of knowledge), not by majority vote. In stark contrast, the digital sphere operates on a democratic logic of quantity, where authority is commodified and granted based on algorithmic visibility and engagement metrics (Sulfikar & Yasmine, 2026).

Consequently, this deregulation has facilitated the death of the traditional *Ulama* concept in the digital space, replacing them with "religious micro-celebrities" and influencers (Afidah et al., 2024; Baidawi, 2025). Recent studies demonstrate that the self-presentation of these young preachers is often a form of brand management, prioritizing selfies, humor, and daily life aesthetics to resonate with digital natives, particularly Generation Z, rather than focusing on profound theological rituals (Afidah et al., 2024). Authority is no longer monolithic or rooted in textual mastery; it is now a "platformized religious authority" where the platform acts as the new gatekeeper, rewarding performative piety and affective resonance (Sulfikar & Yasmine, 2026). This shift empowers Gen-Z users, who actively rely on social media searches and follow popular figures, to participate in shaping interpretive discourse (Amin et al., 2025). Thus, the title of religious guide is frequently bestowed upon content creators based purely on their popularity and entertainment value (Baidawi, 2025), accelerating the fragmentation of religious authority and fostering a plurality of digital piety.

The Umma has not been democratized; its epistemic foundation has merely been outsourced to the logic of virality (Muthohirin, 2025).

The New Validity: Algorithmic Approval and the Logic of Virality

The hollowing of the Umma is not solely a product of algorithmic coercion; it is actively perpetuated by the epistemic habits of the digital society itself, particularly Generation Z. The algorithmic logic of virality only functions because it is fueled by users who actively shift their information-seeking behavior. As recent empirical studies indicate, Gen-Z Muslims increasingly rely on social media platforms as their primary search engines for religious guidance, intentionally bypassing traditional scholarly institutions to seek answers that are immediate and aesthetically packaged (Amin et al., 2025; Sulfikar & Yasmine, 2026). In this landscape, there is a profound sociological tendency to idolize and follow "popular figures" or content creators whose appeal lies in their relatable persona rather than their theological rigor (Afidah et al., 2024; Baidawi, 2025). Consequently, the locus of religious authority has been radically inverted: legitimacy is no longer determined by scientific competence or mastery of the Islamic tradition, but purely by the scale of popularity and digital fandom.

This active idolization by digital users precipitates a dangerous epistemic crisis, perfectly echoing Khaled Abou El Fadl's profound distinction between the *authoritative* and the *authoritarian* in Islamic discourse. Traditional Islamic scholars are *authoritative* precisely because they are

constrained by a rigorous, self-limiting methodology (*Usul*) and historical lineage (*Sanad*). In contrast, the micro-celebrities and influencers empowered by Gen-Z's engagement metrics frequently slip into *authoritarian* discourse—dispensing absolute, binary religious rulings without the requisite methodological restraint or scholarly competence. By actively substituting the search for competent scholarship with the consumption of popular content, the digital society does not merely democratize Islam; it actively participates in replacing the meritocracy of Islamic jurisprudence with the authoritarianism of popular appeal (Fadl, 2001).

In the absence of traditional genealogical safeguards, the digital *Umma* has adopted a new, fundamentally secular mechanism for determining truth: Algorithmic Validity. Historically, the gold standard for Islamic legal theory was *Ijma'*—the consensus of qualified scholars. *Ijma'* was a deliberate, qualitative process that required centuries of debate to settle complex theological matters. However, in the transnational digital sphere, *Ijma'* has been displaced by the instantaneous consensus of the algorithm. The "truth" of a religious proposition is no longer determined by its alignment with the Quranic sciences, but by its mathematical ranking within a proprietary code. The algorithm functions as the "New Mufti," invisible yet omnipotent, curating which fatwas appear on the user's screen and which are relegated to digital oblivion. Unlike the human Mufti who is accountable to God and the community, this digital Mufti is accountable

only to engagement metrics and ad revenue (Ibragimova & Beloglazova, 2021).

The primary instrument of this new validity is Search Engine Optimization (SEO). In the marketplace of "Travelling Islam," theological accuracy is subordinate to keyword density. A ruling on Islamic finance or marital ethics that is written with profound scholarly depth but lacks SEO formatting will remain invisible to the searching masses. Conversely, a simplified, perhaps erroneous, interpretation that is optimized for search engines will rise to the top of the hierarchy. This creates a distortion where visibility is conflated with legitimacy. The digital believer, operating under the assumption that "top-ranked" equals "most correct," unknowingly submits to a logic where the machine dictates the theology. The search engine does not index truth; it indexes popularity and technical compliance, effectively rewriting the canon of Islamic thought based on metadata rather than metaphysics (Saputra & Islamiyah, 2019).

Furthermore, this regime is governed by the Logic of Virality. Within social media platforms, the validity of a fatwa or sermon is measured by its "viral load"—the speed and breadth of its dissemination. This has given rise to the Commodified Fatwa, a snippet of religious guidance packaged specifically for shareability. To achieve virality, content must trigger an immediate reaction—usually outrage, humour, or sentimentality. Consequently, the "truest" Islam in the digital sphere is the one that receives the most "likes," "shares," and comments. This feedback loop creates a

dangerous precedence: a religious opinion is validated not by the strength of its evidence (*Dalil*), but by the volume of its applause. The *Umma* is thus trained to recognize truth through the dopamine hit of social validation rather than the intellectual rigour of study (Nurul Hakim, 2025).

Crucially, this phenomenon of interpretative anarchy is not merely an algorithmic imposition but is actively driven by the epistemic habits of the digital society, particularly Generation Z, who increasingly utilize social media as their primary engine for seeking religious truth (Amin et al., 2025; Laor, 2024). Instead of adhering to the rigorous meritocracy of traditional Islamic scholarship—which safeguards its validity through *Sanad* and the profound intellectual capacity of *Ahl al-Dhikr*—these digital natives demonstrate a strong sociological tendency to idolize "religious micro-celebrities" and content creators (Afidah et al., 2024). Consequently, the traditional concept of the *Ulama* is marginalized, and authority is commodified into a "platformized religious authority," where legitimacy is granted based on viral engagement, relatability, and entertainment value rather than scientific competence (Baidawi, 2025; Sulfikar & Yasmine, 2026). This epistemic inversion perfectly illustrates Khaled Abou El Fadl's critical distinction between the *authoritative* and the *authoritarian* (Fadl, 2001); by actively outsourcing their spiritual agency to popular figures who frequently dispense absolute rulings without methodological restraint, the digital Umma effectively replaces the authentic, self-limiting authority of traditional jurisprudence with the authoritarianism of digital popularity,

ultimately accelerating the fragmentation of religious piety and deepening the ontological emptiness of the community (Muthohirin, 2025).

This structural shift precipitates the rise of Quantified Authority. Authority in the digital realm is no longer qualitative (based on the depth of knowledge) but quantitative (based on the breadth of reach). We witness a stark inversion of status: a traditional *Kyai* or scholar teaching classical texts (*Kitab Kuning*) in a rural madrasa, possessing immense erudition but zero digital footprint, is rendered ontologically invisible. Meanwhile, a "micro-celebrity" influencer with a superficial grasp of Arabic but a million followers on Instagram is elevated to the status of a religious guide. The numbers—follower counts, view statistics, subscriber bases—become the new *Ijazah* (certification). For the transnational Muslim youth, the influencer is perceived to be "more Alim" (more knowledgeable) simply because the metrics say so (El Naggar, 2024).

Ultimately, this system produces an echo chamber that reinforces bias rather than challenging the soul. The algorithm, designed to maximize retention, feeds the user content that aligns with their pre-existing preferences. If Mandaville hoped for a "counter-public" where diverse ideas would clash and refine one another, the reality is a series of fragmented "filter bubbles." The validation mechanism of the internet does not produce a unified *Umma*; it produces pockets of radicalized or liberalized conformists who are constantly reassured of their own righteousness by the machine. In this ecosystem, the "Travelling Islam" does not lead to a

horizon of universal truth, but spirals inward into a hall of mirrors, where the believer sees only the reflection of their own desires, validated by the silent applause of the algorithm (El Nagggar, 2024).

Epistemic Fragility: The Bias of Brevity and Emotion

The final component of this socio-epistemic shift is the structural incompatibility between the depth of Islamic tradition and the formal constraints of digital media. Every medium possesses an ontological bias; for the book, it is linearity and logic; for digital platforms like TikTok, Instagram Reels, and Twitter (X), it is Brevity. The architecture of these platforms is engineered for short attention spans, imposing a strict temporal limit on discourse—often ranging from 280 characters to 60 seconds. This structural imperative forces religious content to undergo a radical compression. The complex, multi-layered tradition of Islamic jurisprudence (*Fiqh*), which thrives on detailed commentary and contextual analysis, is stripped of its nuance to fit into the Procrustean bed of the algorithm. This results in the emergence of a "Theology of Soundbites"—a fragmented form of religiosity where profound spiritual truths are reduced to catchy slogans and decontextualized quotes (Abusharif, 2019).

This bias toward brevity inevitably leads to Binary Reductionism. In traditional Islamic scholarship, the legal categories are expansive, covering a spectrum that includes not just the obligatory (*Wajib*) and the forbidden (*Haram*), but also the recommended (*Sunnah*), the neutral (*Mubah*), and the

disliked (*Makruh*). This spectrum allows for flexibility and mercy (*Rahmah*) in applying the law to diverse human situations. However, the digital format abhors ambiguity. Nuance does not go viral; certainty does. Consequently, the "Theology of Soundbites" flattens the rich topography of Islamic ethics into a stark, black-and-white dualism of absolute Halal versus absolute Haram. Complex issues requiring distinct differentiation (*Tafsil*) are collapsed into rigid binaries. In this environment, the moderate scholar who says "it depends on the context" is drowned out by the radical influencer who shouts "this is clearly forbidden," because the latter satisfies the algorithm's demand for decisive, easily consumable content (Abusharif, 2019).

Furthermore, this epistemic regime is powered by the logic of emotion. This dynamic is best elucidated by Byung-Chul Han (2017) in *Psychopolitics*, where he argues that the digital regime has transitioned into "Emotional Capitalism." Han observes that rationality is too slow for the high-speed demands of digital circulation, whereas affects and impulses are instantaneous. Consequently, the system is structurally engineered to exploit these high-arousal states. Algorithms maximize engagement by prioritizing content that triggers immediate reactions—specifically anger, outrage, or extreme sentimentality—over content that induces calm contemplation. Therefore, the digital platform structurally privileges religious narratives that act as "Emotional Triggers." A sermon that incites indignation against a perceived enemy, or a tear-jerking video that simplifies complex suffering, will always outperform a lecture on the subtle

metaphysics of the soul. Mandaville's vision of a rational public sphere is thus hijacked by an affective economy. The Umma is not united by shared reasoning, but by shared outrage. The discourse becomes reactive rather than reflective, favoring the heat of the 'burn' over the light of the "enlightenment" (Abusharif, 2019).

The cumulative effect of these mechanisms—the death of genealogy, algorithmic validity, brevity, and emotionalism—is a profound Epistemic Fragility. The transnational *Umma* today is paradoxically characterized by information overload and a simultaneous poverty of understanding. A modern Muslim may consume hundreds of Islamic videos a week, accumulating a vast archive of religious data points, yet lack the coherent framework to synthesize them into wisdom. They know the ruling for every triviality, but they lose sight of the *Maqasid* (higher objectives) of the Sharia. They are "data-rich" but "wisdom-poor." This fragility makes the digital *Umma* highly susceptible to manipulation; without deep epistemic roots, they are easily swayed by the shifting winds of viral trends (Abusharif, 2019).

In conclusion, the socio-epistemic shift reveals that the "Travelling Islam" Mandaville celebrated is travelling without a compass. The displacement of *Sanad* by the algorithm has created a community that is vast in its reach but dangerously shallow in its grasp. The *Umma* has been democratized, yes, but at the cost of its intellectual integrity. We have traded the slow, difficult cultivation of the soul for the instant gratification of the

feed. This epistemic hollowness sets the stage for the final, and most critical, interrogation: the ontological emptiness of the digital existence itself (Zeiny, 2025).

The Diagnosis: Mandaville's "Reimagining" as "Digital Taqlid"

Peter Mandaville's central thesis rests on the conviction that the transnational *Umma* is engaged in a profound project of "reimagining" itself—a creative, discursive act akin to a collective *ijtihad*. However, when this phenomenon is interrogated through the lens of recent epistemological studies, specifically Anam (2025a), a starkly different reality emerges. What Mandaville interprets as the liberation of religious thought is, in fact, a regression into a new, technologically amplified form of intellectual servitude. Drawing upon the framework of Digital Taqlid, defined as "the epistemic posture of accepting the output of an AI or other computational system as authoritative without demanding or investigating the underlying data, logic, or evidence," we can diagnose the current condition not as a reimagining, but as a mass resignation of the intellect. The digital *Umma* does not actively reconstruct Islamic tradition; rather, it passively consumes the curated outputs of algorithmic authorities, accepting the machine's verdict (*qawl*) without ever demanding the scriptural or rational proof (*dalil*).

This surrender of critical faculties signals a catastrophic loss of Epistemic Agency. In the digital sphere, the capacity of the believer to be

the sovereign author of their own understanding is eroded by the seduction of 'seemingly autonomous' technological systems. This erosion is not incidental but structural, mirroring what Shoshana Zuboff (2019) defines as 'Instrumentarian Power,' where computational architectures are designed to monitor and automate human behavior toward guaranteed outcomes. Consequently, as Anam (2025a) argues, users cede their intellectual agency to these systems, engaging in a 'cognitive delegation that systematically weakens their own cognitive muscle'. While Mandaville's vision of a 'counter-public' implies a community of active agents debating truth, the reality of the digital Umma is a population that has outsourced the heavy lifting of thought to the algorithm. By trusting the search engine or the AI as a 'new Mufti,' the believer inadvertently steps into a 'deterministic worldview' where the algorithm prescribes their destiny, leaving them not as re-imaginings of the faith, but as passive recipients of a calculated orthodoxy.

The historical parallel here is precise and damning. Just as Al-Ghazali, in his *Tabafut al-Falasifah*, accused the intellectual elite of his time—the Peripatetic philosophers—of being nothing more than *muqallidun* (imitators) who accepted Aristotle's metaphysics with "quasi-religious reverence", the contemporary transnational *Umma* commits the same epistemic error towards the algorithm. This behavior is rooted in what Anam (2025a) identifies as a Pedagogy of Compliance, a paradigm tracing back to Alan Turing which equates intelligence not with the struggle for truth, but with the ability to "obey orders" and produce a "flawless

imitation". The digital *Umma* has been schooled by this pedagogy; they prioritize the correct "performance" of Islamic identity online—posting the right symbols, sharing the viral quotes—over the authentic comprehension of Islamic truth. They have become, in effect, "impeccable parrots" of a digital canon they do not truly understand.

The psychological mechanism driving this regression is Cognitive Offloading. The vast complexity of Islamic theology is bypassed through a process where the user "outsources the mental struggle of understanding and analysis to the machine". Instead of engaging in *Mujahada*—the arduous, internal intellectual struggle that Al-Ghazali deemed essential for transforming information into "personally owned understanding" —the believer opts for the path of least resistance. The result is a reliance on Synthetic Certainty: a fragile state where "fast, shallow answers are mistaken for deep, earned knowledge". Mandaville mistook the speed of transnational communication for the vitality of thought. In reality, the friction-less nature of digital Islam produces a community that possesses vast archives of data but lacks the *yaqin* (unshakable certainty) that can only be born from the friction of *Mujahada* (Anam, 2025a).

Ultimately, this diagnosis reveals that the "Reimagined Umma" is suffering from a profound condition of Nihilism in Thinking. This is not merely laziness, but a state where "the arduous, personal struggle for understanding is gradually replaced by a frictionless consumption of simulated knowledge". While Mandaville saw a vibrant tapestry of

"Travelling Islam," the lens of Digital Taqlid exposes a landscape populated by Digital Muqallid—users who have traded the difficult ascent of spiritual discovery for the comfort of algorithmic consensus. They are hyper-connected yet epistemically hollow, operating under the illusion that they are reforming the *Umma*, while in truth, they are merely executing the programming of a system that demands their compliance, not their consciousness (Fail, 2022).

The Mechanism: Cognitive Offloading and Synthetic Certainty

The hollowing out of the transnational Umma is not an accidental decay, but the precise result of a cognitive mechanism identified in recent scholarship as Cognitive Offloading. This phenomenon aligns with what Bernard Stiegler (2010) identifies as the 'proletarianization of the mind,' where the exteriorization of memory into digital devices leads to a 'short-circuiting' of deep cognitive processing. Stiegler argues that when knowledge is automated, the subject loses their "savoir-faire" or the ability to know. Building on this technological critique, Anam (2025a) contextualizes this loss specifically within the Islamic episteme, arguing that the omnipresence of digital tools encourages the user to "outsource the mental struggle of understanding and analysis to the machine" Instead of facilitating a deeper engagement with Islamic tradition, the digital interface invites the believer to offload the burden of theological processing to the algorithm. Consequently, what Mandaville perceived as a community of active learners is, in reality, a population suffering from Intellectual

Passivity—a condition where the "arduous, personal struggle for understanding is gradually replaced by a frictionless consumption of simulated knowledge".

This mechanism strikes at the heart of Islamic epistemology by bypassing the necessity of *Mujahada* (internal struggle). Al-Ghazali explicitly posited that authentic knowledge (*Ma'rifa*) is not merely data transmission, but the fruit of an "internal struggle that results in a transformation of the self". The digital ecosystem, engineered for maximum convenience, eliminates this friction. It offers the user an immediate answer to complex spiritual questions without requiring the corresponding spiritual discipline. By removing the struggle, the digital medium produces a form of Synthetic Certainty: a state where "fast, shallow answers are mistaken for deep, earned knowledge". The believer feels certain about a ruling or a doctrine not because they have wrestled with its proofs, but because the search engine provided it instantly with an authoritative aesthetic (P. Mandaville, 2007).

This reliance on synthetic certainty creates a dangerous Illusion of Knowledge. The *Umma* is inundated with the "cognitive counterfeit" of AI and algorithmic feeds—artifacts that "perfectly mimic thought without possessing it". This leads to a paradox where the community appears knowledgeable and vocal on the surface, yet remains epistemically fragile. The depth of the tradition is flattened into what Anam (2025a) describes as "anti-intelligence"—the fluent simulation of knowing without genuine

understanding. Crucially, this critique does not deny the theoretical possibility of “Digital Tahqiq.” The internet undoubtedly hosts vast repositories of classical heritage—from digitized manuscripts to searchable databases like Maktabah Shamela—that could technically facilitate unprecedented scholarly verification. However, the presence of the archive does not guarantee the practice of archiving. The overarching ontology of the platform, defined by the “bias of brevity” and the “lust for speed,” structurally discourages the slow, deep reading required to utilize these tools. The tools for Tahqiq are available, but the cognitive patience required to wield them is eroded by the medium itself.

However, identifying this mechanism serves a higher diagnostic purpose than mere pessimism; it highlights the critical absence of Epistemic Agency. The crisis is not that technology exists, but that the believer has surrendered their sovereignty over their own mind. Epistemic agency—the capacity to be the “author of one's own life” and understanding—is the foundational quality required for a genuine *Umma*. By diagnosing *Cognitive Offloading* as the cause of the *Umma's* hollowness, we clarify that the solution lies in reclaiming this lost agency. The *Umma* is hollow because it has allowed the algorithm to usurp the role of the intellect. Therefore, the “Reimagining” Mandaville hoped for cannot occur until the believer transitions from being a passive receptacle of data to an active agent of *Tahqiq*, reclaiming the ownership of their spiritual cognition from the machine (P. Mandaville, 2007).

The Ontological Context: Enframed by *Gestell*

To understand why *Digital Taqlid* has become the dominant epistemology of the transnational *Umma*, we must look beyond the sociology of behavior and interrogate the ontology of the space itself. Mandaville's optimistic thesis assumes that the digital sphere is a neutral "public square"—an empty container that Muslims can fill with their own re-imagined meanings. However, drawing on the Philosophy of Technology as explicated in Anam (2025a), we argue that the internet is not a neutral tool but a manifestation of *Gestell* (Enframing). Heidegger revealed that modern technology is a specific mode of revealing that challenges reality to present itself as a *Bestand* ("standing-reserve") (Dreyfus & Spinoza, 2003). In this ontological setup, the *Umma* is not liberated; it is "enframed." The digital ecosystem forces Islam to appear not as a spiritual mystery requiring deep contemplation, but as a stockpile of information—consumable content ready for on-demand access, optimization, and algorithmic distribution.

Within this regime of *Gestell*, the very nature of religious thinking undergoes a mutation. Heidegger distinguishes between two modes of thought: Meditative Thinking (*besinnliches Denken*) and Calculative Thinking (*rechnendes Denken*). Meditative thinking is the essence of genuine religiosity; it is slow, dwells on meaning, and roots the individual in the truth of Being (Rae, 2012). It aligns with what Søren Kierkegaard identified as the realm of "Subjectivity"—where faith is not a public consensus but a solitary,

passionate "Leap of Faith" undertaken by the single individual in silence (2022, روحانی). However, the digital platform is ontologically hostile to this mode of being. The architecture of the internet is built exclusively for Calculative Thinking: it prioritizes speed, efficiency, metric quantification, and binary logic. In this environment, religion is stripped of its meditative depth and reduced to calculable data points—likes, shares, and viral trends.

Consequently, the "Transnational Umma" finds itself trapped in a system that structurally prohibits the pause required for *Tabqiq*. The speed of the digital stream—what Paul Virilio termed Dromology—creates a state of permanent urgency. The believer is bombarded with a relentless flow of information that demands an immediate reaction, leaving no temporal space for the slow digestion of meaning. In this high-speed environment, *Meditative Thinking* is not just difficult; it is obsolete. The user cannot afford to "dwell" on a verse or a ruling; they must scroll, react, and move to the next stimulus. This dominance of Calculative Thinking creates the perfect habitat for *Digital Taqlid*. The *Umma* adopts the opinions of the algorithm not merely out of laziness, but because the ontological structure of their world allows for no other way of thinking (Goh, 2019).

Thus, the "Hollowness" of the *Umma* is an engineered inevitability. By displacing religion from the realm of the Meditative/Subjective (the domain of the soul) to the realm of the Calculative/Objective (the domain of the system), the digital sphere creates a paradox: a religion that is everywhere visible but nowhere felt. The believer is connected to the "totality" of

Islamic data but severed from the "singularity" of Islamic faith. They possess the *Bestand* of religion—the files, the quotes, the videos—but they have lost the capacity for the *Leap*, rendering their transnational solidarity a mere statistical aggregation rather than a spiritual communion (Lewis, 2017).

The Final Verdict: The Hollow Umma

The convergence of Mandaville's sociological observations with the rigorous philosophical critique of Anam (2025a) leads us to a definitive and unsettling verdict. While the "Transnational Turn" has successfully constructed a global infrastructure of connectivity, it has simultaneously facilitated a collapse of internal meaning. We are witnessing the emergence of a paradox: an entity that is sociologically massive yet ontologically vacuous. This entity is the Hollow Umma.

The Hollow Umma is defined as a community characterized by Hyper-Connectivity without Epistemic Agency. Sociologically, Mandaville was correct: the *Umma* has broken free from the nation-state. However, philosophically, this liberation has come at the cost of intellectual sovereignty. By submitting to the logic of the algorithm, the digital believer has surrendered the very capacity to be the author of their own understanding. They have traded the vertical tyranny of the state for the invisible, horizontal tyranny of the platform. In this state, the "Reimagining" of Islam is exposed as a grand illusion; the *Umma* is not

engaging in a creative renaissance, but is trapped in a Pedagogy of Compliance—a systematic conditioning inherited from the Turing paradigm where intelligence is reduced to the flawless imitation of data, and piety is reduced to the performative compliance with viral trends.

The root of this hollowness lies in the mechanism of Digital Taqlid. As explicated in Anam (2025a), this is not merely a habit but an epistemic posture where the believer accepts the output of algorithmic authority without demanding the underlying *dalil* (proof). This posture is sustained by Cognitive Offloading, where the arduous burden of theological thinking is outsourced to the machine. By delegating the struggle of interpretation to Google or AI, the believer bypasses the necessary Mujahada—the internal intellectual struggle that Al-Ghazali identified as the only path to authentic knowledge (*Ma'rifa*). Without *Mujahada*, there is no transformation of the self; there is only the accumulation of data. The result is a community intoxicated by Synthetic Certainty—a fragile, unearned confidence derived from instant answers that feel true because they are popular, yet lack any grounding in verified reality.

Consequently, the psychological condition of the Hollow Umma is one of Nihilism in Thinking. This is the state where the human capacity for meditative, deep thought creates a vacuum, filled instantly by the noise of *Calculative Thinking* (Hemming et al., 2011). The digital believer knows "what" the ruling is, but has lost the ability to ask "why" or "how." They possess information, but they do not *own* it. This distinction—between

borrowed knowledge (received passively from the feed) and owned understanding (earned through *Tabqiq*)—is the dividing line between a living tradition and a dead one. The Hollow Umma is "knowledge-rich" in terms of access, but "wisdom-poor" in terms of internalization (Morris, 2024).

Thus, Mandaville's celebrated "Travelling Islam" must be re-evaluated not as the migration of meaning, but as the circulation of Simulacra. What travels across the fiber-optic cables is not the spirit of Islam, but the *sign* of Islam—a "cognitive counterfeit" that looks like religion but functions as content. The *Umma* becomes a vast hall of mirrors, reflecting images of piety back and forth in an endless loop of *Gerede* (idle talk), while the essence of the faith remains untouched. They are everywhere, yet they are nowhere. They are connected to everyone, yet they are ontologically homeless (Rojek et al., 2002).

In the final analysis, the "Hollow Umma" is a tragedy of potential. The technology that promised to unite the believers has instead enframed them as *Bestand* (resources) for the attention economy. Unless this trajectory is interrupted by a radical return to *Tabqiq* and the reclamation of epistemic agency, the "Reimagining" of the Umma will remain a digital fantasy—a beautiful, high-resolution map of a territory that no longer exists.

CONCLUSION

This inquiry concludes that Peter Mandaville's vision of a "Reimagined Umma" has not materialized as an intellectual liberation, but has instead mutated into what this study identifies as the "Hollow Umma." While the sociopolitical infrastructure of the transnational community is undeniably established, its ontological core has been eroded by the mechanism of Digital Taqlid. The analysis reveals that the digital sphere functions not as a neutral discursive space, but as a regime of *Gestell* that fosters Cognitive Offloading and Intellectual Passivity, replacing the rigour of *Mujabada* with the fragility of Synthetic Certainty. Consequently, the "Travelling Islam" of the 21st century is characterized by high connectivity but low Epistemic Agency, rendering the community vulnerable to Nihilism in Thinking. Future research must therefore transcend mere sociological mapping and urgently formulate a "Digital Tahqiq" —a practical onto-epistemic framework to restore the sovereignty of the Muslim subject in the age of algorithmic governance.

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