

DISCURSIVE CONVERGENCE AND THE LEGITIMATION OF EDUCATIONAL CRITICISM IN INDONESIA'S DIGITAL PUBLIC SPHERE

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ARTICLE HISTORY

Received : 06-06-2026

Revised : 05-07-2026

Accepted : 30-07-2026

KEYWORDS

Digital Public Sphere;
Educational Criticism;
Discourse Network
Analysis;
Alternative Media;
Youtube;

ABSTRACT

Despite the growing body of research on digital public discourse, limited studies have examined how educational criticism gains social legitimacy through discourse interactions using a Discourse Network Analysis (DNA) approach. The growing use of digital media has transformed the ways public opinion is formed and negotiated around social issues, including education. In Indonesia, alternative media platforms increasingly function as spaces where citizens discuss and evaluate educational policies and practices. This study examines how educational criticism gains legitimacy within Indonesia's digital public sphere through public discourse on YouTube. Employing a critical paradigm, the research uses Discourse Network Analysis (DNA) to analyze public responses to the video Fondasi Keropos Pendidikan Indonesia published on the Malaka Project YouTube channel. A total of 1,706 comments were collected, of which 1,025 valid comments generated 2,376 statements involving 886 actors and 15 concepts. The coding process achieved a satisfactory intercoder reliability score (Krippendorff's Alpha = 0.854). The findings reveal that educational criticism emerged as the most dominant concept within the discourse network and occupied a central position in connecting various educational issues. The distribution of discursive positions shows that 68.5% of actors expressed agreement with the criticism, while 31.5% expressed disagreement, indicating a pattern of discursive convergence rather than polarization. The actor-concept affiliation network further demonstrates that Malaka Project functions as an alternative media platform that facilitates public discussion, discursive convergence, and the social legitimization of educational criticism. This study contributes to the literature by demonstrating how discourse network structures can reveal the processes through which educational criticism becomes collectively validated within digital public spheres. These findings suggest that YouTube operates as a digital public sphere where alternative media can shape collective understanding and strengthen the legitimacy of educational criticism in contemporary Indonesia.

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INTRODUCTION

Education is one of the most strategic sectors in determining the quality of human capital development and a nation's competitiveness (Safitri et al., 2022). However, various indicators suggest that Indonesia's education system continues to face persistent structural challenges. The results of the 2022 Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) revealed that Indonesian students' literacy, numeracy, and scientific competencies remain below the average of Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) member countries (OECD, 2023). These findings reinforce earlier evidence regarding the ongoing learning crisis in developing countries, including Indonesia,

characterized by low learning outcomes despite increasing levels of educational participation (Ardhiya et al., 2022). Such conditions have generated growing public criticism concerning educational governance, instructional quality, unequal access to education, and the overall direction of national education policies.

The rapid development of digital communication technologies has fundamentally transformed the ways in which citizens express, distribute, and discuss criticism regarding public issues, including education (Kustiawan et al., 2023). Whereas social criticism was previously mediated primarily through conventional mass media, digital media now enable individuals to participate directly in the production and circulation of public discourse (Elfa Fadilah et al., 2024). Social media platforms no longer function merely as tools for interpersonal communication, rather, they have evolved into arenas for public opinion formation, meaning negotiation, and the contestation of social and political interests (Nasution & Azizah, 2025). Within this context, educational criticism emerges not only as an individual expression of dissatisfaction but also as a form of public communication involving diverse actors with varying perspectives and experiences.

One of the platforms that has played a significant role in shaping digital public discourse is YouTube. As a video-based platform that facilitates interaction through comments, responses, and discussions, YouTube has evolved into a digital public sphere where content creators and audiences engage in participatory communication processes (Burgess & Green, 2018). Unlike conventional media, which predominantly operate through one-way communication, YouTube provides opportunities for users not only to consume information but also to construct collective interpretations of emerging social issues (Papacharissi, 2014). From the perspective of public sphere theory, digital platforms create new deliberative arenas that expand citizens' opportunities to participate in discussions concerning matters of public interest (Habermas, 1991).

Nevertheless, digital public spheres do not always generate the ideal deliberative processes envisioned by Habermas. Numerous studies have demonstrated that social media environments often facilitate polarization, opinion fragmentation, and the formation of competing discursive groups (Schäfer, 2016). Conversely, other studies suggest that digital spaces may also function as arenas for consensus-building and legitimacy formation when participants exhibit relatively similar interpretations of a particular issue (Leifeld, 2017). Therefore, it is important to understand how public criticism gains support, achieves broad acceptance, and ultimately develops into a legitimate discourse within digital public spheres (Gustomy & Afala, 2019).

In the Indonesian context, the emergence of alternative media has further strengthened the production and dissemination of social criticism in digital environments (Atton, 2002). Alternative media generally emerge as a response to the limitations of mainstream media in representing certain perspectives and providing space for communities to articulate alternative narratives regarding public issues (Luik, 2020). Through their relatively independent and participatory characteristics, alternative media possess considerable potential to influence public opinion formation and the production of social meaning (Altheide, 1972). One platform that has consistently presented critical narratives concerning social and educational issues in Indonesia is the Malaka Project YouTube channel (Elfa Fadilah et al., 2024).

In 2025, Malaka Project published a video entitled *Fondasi Keropos Pendidikan Indonesia* (The Fragile Foundations of Indonesian Education), which highlighted a range of fundamental problems within the national education system. The video attracted substantial public attention and generated thousands of comments from YouTube users who discussed, supported, and challenged the arguments presented in the content. The high level of participation observed in the comment section indicates that education has become more than merely an object of information consumption, it has evolved into a site of public discourse formation involving actors with diverse positions, experiences, and interests.

Previous studies have examined educational issues in digital media (Anzani et al., 2025), the role of social media as a public sphere (Nasution & Azizah, 2025; Papacharissi, 2014) and discourse formation through online interactions (Bakry & Ardianto, 2025; Leifeld, 2017). However, most of these studies have relied on content analysis, sentiment analysis, or descriptive approaches to digital communication. While these methods are useful for identifying themes, narratives, and emotional tendencies within online discussions, they provide limited insight into how actors, concepts, and discursive positions interact to construct legitimacy around a particular issue. Discourse Network Analysis (DNA) offers a distinct analytical perspective by systematically mapping the relational structures between actors and ideas, thereby revealing how support, opposition, and discursive convergence emerge within public debates (Leifeld, 2017). Despite its growing application in policy and political communication research, the use of DNA to examine the legitimization of educational criticism in digital public spheres remains limited, particularly within the context of YouTube-based discussions and alternative media in Indonesia. This gap is significant because legitimacy is not merely

reflected in the prevalence of opinions but is socially constructed through patterns of interaction, affiliation, and discursive alignment among participants.

This study offers both theoretical and methodological contributions to the literature. Theoretically, it extends discussions on digital public spheres by examining legitimacy formation as a discursive process shaped through interactions among actors and concepts within online communication environments. Methodologically, it advances digital communication research by applying Discourse Network Analysis to educational criticism, an area that has received limited attention within DNA scholarship. By integrating public sphere theory, alternative media studies, and discourse network analysis, this research provides a novel framework for understanding how educational criticism evolves from individual expressions into collectively legitimized public discourse in Indonesia's digital media ecosystem.

Based on these considerations, this study aims to analyze how criticism of the Indonesian education system gains legitimacy within the country's digital public sphere through public discussions surrounding the *Fondasi Keropos Pendidikan Indonesia* video on the Malaka Project YouTube channel. By employing Discourse Network Analysis (DNA), this study examines the relationships among actors, concepts, and discursive positions that contribute to the legitimization of educational criticism in digital public discourse.

RESEARCH METHOD

This study adopts a critical paradigm to examine how educational criticism gains legitimacy within Indonesia's digital public sphere. The critical paradigm was selected because it enables researchers to investigate how discourse functions in the production, negotiation, and legitimation of social meanings, as well as how public narratives shape collective understandings of social issues ((Habermas, 1991). Within this perspective, public discourse is not viewed merely as a reflection of social reality but as a site where meanings, power relations, and social legitimacy are continuously constructed and contested (Anbarini et al., 2023).

To investigate these processes, the study employs Discourse Network Analysis (DNA), a methodological approach that combines the interpretive strengths of discourse analysis with the structural capabilities of social network analysis (Pribadi et al., 2024). DNA enables researchers to systematically identify relationships among actors, concepts, and positions within a public debate and to visualize how specific ideas become dominant within a discourse network. Unlike conventional content analysis, which focuses primarily on frequencies and thematic patterns, DNA captures relational structures by examining how actors express support for or opposition to particular concepts and how these interactions contribute to the formation of collective narratives (Pratama & Illahi Ulfa, 2017).

The empirical data were collected from the comment section of the YouTube video *Fondasi Keropos Pendidikan Indonesia* (The Fragile Foundations of Indonesian Education), published on the Malaka Project channel. The video was selected because it generated extensive public engagement and discussion regarding educational issues in Indonesia. Compared with other educational content available on YouTube, this video explicitly presents a comprehensive critique of Indonesia's education system and attracted a substantial volume of audience responses, making it particularly suitable for discourse network analysis. Its high level of interaction and the diversity of viewpoints expressed in the comment section provide a rich empirical setting for examining how educational criticism is debated, supported, contested, and ultimately legitimized within a digital public sphere.

Data collection resulted in an initial dataset of 1,706 comments. To improve data quality and analytical validity, a data-cleaning process was conducted. Duplicate comments, spam content, irrelevant remarks, and comments that did not contain substantive references to educational issues were removed from the dataset. After this screening process, 1,025 valid comments were retained for analysis. These comments were subsequently segmented into 2,376 individual statements, which served as the primary units of analysis. The final dataset contained 886 actors and 15 concepts identified throughout the discourse.

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Table 1. Dataset Characteristics

Indicator	Total
Initial comments	1,706
Valid comments	1,025
Statements	2,376
Actors	886
Concepts	15

Source: Authors' Analysis (2026).

Following the DNA framework proposed by Leifeld (2017), each statement was manually coded according to four analytical categories: actor, concept, agreement, and disagreement. The actor category refers to the individual YouTube user expressing a particular opinion. The concept category identifies the issue, argument, or idea being discussed. The agreement and disagreement categories indicate whether the actor supported or opposed a specific concept. This coding procedure allowed the construction of relational data linking actors to concepts through positive or negative positions.

The coding process followed a structured codebook developed from an initial exploratory review of the dataset. Concepts were inductively identified from recurring themes in the comments and subsequently refined into a set of fifteen analytical categories. Each statement was then assigned to one or more concepts based on its substantive content. Through this procedure, the study generated a discourse network representing the relationships among actors, issues, and evaluative positions within the debate on educational conditions in Indonesia.

To ensure the reliability and consistency of the coding process, an intercoder reliability test was conducted using Krippendorff's Alpha, a widely accepted measure for assessing agreement among coders in content analysis and discourse studies ((Krippendorff, 2013)). Krippendorff recommends a minimum reliability coefficient of 0.80 for drawing reliable conclusions from coded data. The results of the reliability assessment indicate that all coefficients exceeded this threshold, demonstrating a high level of coding consistency and confirming the robustness of the dataset for subsequent network analysis.

Table 2. Intercoder Reliability Results

Coder Pair	Alpha
1	0.890
2	0.821
3	0.851
Average	0.854

Source: Authors' Analysis (2026).

Ethical considerations were carefully addressed throughout the research process. The study utilized publicly accessible comments available on YouTube and did not involve direct interaction with users. To protect user privacy, personal identifiers such as usernames were anonymized during the coding and analysis stages, and the findings are reported in aggregate form. The research focused exclusively on discursive patterns and relationships among concepts rather than on the identification of individual participants. These procedures were implemented to ensure compliance with ethical principles for research using publicly available digital data.

After the coding process was completed, the data were imported into the Discourse Network Analyzer (DNA) software for network construction and matrix generation. The resulting networks were subsequently visualized and analyzed using Gephi, an open-source network analysis platform widely used in social network research (Sumpena et al., 2025). Several network measures were employed, including degree centrality, weighted degree, betweenness centrality, and eigenvector centrality, to identify dominant concepts and influential positions within the discourse structure.

The analysis was conducted in three stages. First, a concept network analysis was performed to identify the most central educational issues discussed by participants. Second, an agreement–disagreement analysis was conducted to examine the distribution of supportive and opposing positions toward educational criticism. Third, an actor–concept affiliation network analysis was undertaken to explore how actors clustered around particular concepts and how these relationships contributed to the legitimation of educational criticism. Through these analytical procedures, the study

reveals how educational criticism is articulated, reinforced, and transformed into a socially legitimate discourse within Indonesia's digital public sphere.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Dominant Educational Criticism in Digital Public Discourse

The concept network analysis reveals that public discourse surrounding the YouTube video Fondasi Keropos Pendidikan Indonesia was overwhelmingly centered on the concept of Educational Criticism Legitimization (C6). Among all identified concepts, C6 achieved the highest values across all centrality measures, including degree, weighted degree, betweenness centrality, and eigenvector centrality. This finding indicates that the concept occupied a strategic position within the discourse network and functioned as the primary node connecting various educational issues discussed by participants.



Figure 1. Concept Network of Educational Discourse

Source: Authors' Analysis using Visone software (2026).

Within discourse network analysis, degree centrality reflects the number of direct connections a concept maintains with other concepts, while weighted degree captures the intensity of these relationships. Betweenness centrality indicates the extent to which a concept acts as a bridge connecting different clusters of discourse, whereas eigenvector centrality measures the influence of a node based on its connections to other influential nodes (Sousa et al., 2013). The exceptionally high values recorded for Educational Criticism Legitimization suggest that the concept not only appeared frequently but also served as the principal organizing framework through which other educational concerns were interpreted.

Table 3. Top Five Concepts in the Discourse Network

Concept	Weighted Degree	Degree	Betweenness Centrality	Eigenvector Centrality
Educational Criticism Legitimization	243	374	121,853,566.845	1.000
Teacher Competency and Professionalism Crisis	159	232	68,248,658.013	0.611
Educational Governance and Bureaucratic Problems	122	189	47,915,516.081	0.420
Evaluation and Assessment System Problems	109	152	40,570,945.663	0.376
Parental Involvement Problems	91	126	31,237,881.129	0.332

Source: Authors' Analysis (2026).

The network visualization further demonstrates that Educational Criticism Legitimization was strongly connected to several substantive concerns, including teacher professionalism, educational governance, assessment systems, and parental involvement. Rather than existing as separate issues, these concerns converged around a shared narrative that framed Indonesia's educational challenges as structural rather than incidental. Consequently, criticism of education emerged as a unifying interpretive frame through which diverse educational problems were collectively understood. From the perspective of the public sphere, the centrality of Educational Criticism Legitimization suggests a high degree of civic engagement with educational issues. Habermas (1989) argues that public discourse becomes politically and socially significant when citizens collectively deliberate on matters of common concern. In this study, educational criticism functioned as a discursive anchor that connected multiple public concerns and facilitated the formation of shared interpretations regarding the state of education in Indonesia.

The findings also support Borgatti et al., (2018) argument that contemporary public spheres consist of multiple discursive arenas in which citizens negotiate and construct meanings collectively. The dominance of Educational Criticism Legitimization indicates that participants were not merely reacting to information presented in the video. Rather, they actively participated in the production of discourse by reinforcing, extending, and contextualizing educational criticism through their own experiences and interpretations.

Beyond confirming existing theories of digital public discourse, this finding extends previous research by demonstrating that educational criticism can function as a central organizing principle within discourse networks. While earlier studies on educational discussions in social media have primarily focused on identifying dominant themes, sentiments, or patterns of engagement, the present study reveals how specific concepts acquire structural importance by connecting multiple educational concerns within a single discursive framework. This suggests that legitimacy is not determined solely by the frequency with which a topic is discussed but also by its capacity to integrate diverse issues and actors into a coherent public narrative. Such a perspective provides a more relational understanding of discourse formation than conventional content-based approaches.

In this regard, the comment section operated not simply as a feedback mechanism but as a participatory space in which educational criticism was transformed into a collectively recognized social issue. The discourse thus reflects the emergence of a digitally mediated public sphere where citizens contribute to the construction of educational narratives beyond institutional or governmental channels.

Discursive Legitimacy of Educational Criticism

To evaluate the degree to which educational criticism was accepted within the discourse, the study examined the distribution of agreement and disagreement positions expressed by actors across the network. The results indicate that supportive positions significantly outnumbered opposing positions.

Table 4. Agreement and Disagreement Distribution

Orientation	Number of Statements	Percentage
Agreement (+1)	1,627	68.5%
Disagreement (-1)	749	31.5%
Total	2,376	100%

Source: Authors' Analysis (2026).

The predominance of agreement demonstrates that most actors accepted, endorsed, or reinforced the criticism articulated in the video. The findings suggest that educational criticism has acquired considerable legitimacy among participants and is no longer positioned as a marginal or dissenting perspective. Instead, criticism appears to have become a broadly accepted interpretive framework for understanding educational challenges in Indonesia.

Importantly, the distribution of positions does not exhibit the characteristics of strong polarization commonly identified in studies of political communication on social media (Darmastuti, 2016). In polarized environments, support and opposition tend to be distributed more evenly, resulting in the formation of competing ideological camps. In contrast, the present findings indicate a tendency toward discursive convergence, whereby actors gravitate toward similar interpretations of educational issues despite potentially differing personal backgrounds and experiences.

This convergence can be explained through the concept of affective publics (Papacharissi, 2014). Social media platforms enable individuals to connect through shared emotions, experiences, and narratives, thereby fostering collective

Consequently, the high proportion of agreement should not be interpreted solely as a reflection of opinion similarity. Rather, it represents a process of discursive legitimation through which educational criticism acquires social acceptance, credibility, and normative validity within the digital public sphere. Through repeated endorsement and interaction, criticism becomes increasingly recognized as a legitimate way of understanding educational realities.

This finding also challenges the dominant assumption that social media discussions are inherently characterized by polarization and fragmentation. Much of the contemporary literature on digital communication emphasizes the tendency of online platforms to generate ideological divisions and antagonistic interactions. However, the present study demonstrates that under certain conditions, digital platforms may facilitate discursive convergence around issues that are widely perceived as socially relevant. In the context of education, shared experiences of systemic challenges appear to create common interpretive ground among participants, reducing contestation and strengthening collective recognition of educational problems. This finding broadens existing understandings of digital public spheres by illustrating their potential not only as arenas of conflict but also as spaces for consensus formation and legitimacy building.

To further explore how legitimacy was constructed, the study analyzed the affiliation network connecting actors and concepts. This analysis provides insight into how participants clustered around particular ideas and how these relationships contributed to the formation of dominant discourse.



Source: Authors' Analysis using Gephi software (2026).

The affiliation network reveals that actors from diverse backgrounds converged around a relatively similar set of concepts, particularly Educational Criticism Legitimization. Rather than producing fragmented clusters characterized by competing narratives, the network exhibited a high level of conceptual cohesion. Most actors were connected through concepts that supported educational criticism, indicating the presence of a shared interpretive framework.

This pattern provides empirical evidence of discursive convergence, whereby different actors collectively reinforce similar narratives and contribute to the stabilization of particular meanings within public discourse. As discourse becomes increasingly convergent, specific interpretations gain greater visibility and legitimacy, thereby shaping public understanding of social issues.

The findings further highlight the role of Malaka Project as an alternative media platform. According to Atton, (2002)), alternative media provide spaces for perspectives that are often marginalized or underrepresented within mainstream media institutions. Unlike traditional media, alternative media encourage participatory communication and facilitate greater public involvement in the construction of meaning.

In the present case, Malaka Project acted as a catalyst that initiated public discussion regarding educational problems. However, the legitimacy of educational criticism was not produced solely by the content creator. Rather, legitimacy emerged through interactions among audiences who collectively reinforced and reproduced similar narratives in the comment section. The video served as the initial trigger, while the audience transformed the criticism into a broader public discourse.

These findings are consistent with (Luik, 2020) argument that social media function as arenas of meaning production where collective awareness of social issues is continuously negotiated. Users are not passive consumers of media content, they actively participate in the creation, circulation, and legitimization of discourse through digital interaction.

The process may also be interpreted through Gramsci's theory of hegemony. Gramsci, (1971) argues that hegemony is achieved not through coercion but through the social acceptance of ideas that gradually become perceived as common sense. The dominance of Educational Criticism Legitimization, the high level of agreement among participants, and the convergence of actor-concept relationships collectively indicate that criticism of education has moved beyond individual opinion. It has become a socially accepted framework through which educational conditions are interpreted and evaluated.

The findings also carry important implications for educational policy and public communication practices. The strong convergence observed around educational criticism indicates that public concerns regarding educational quality, governance, and professional capacity are not isolated individual complaints but collectively recognized issues. Policymakers may therefore view digital public discussions as a valuable source of public feedback capable of informing educational reforms and policy evaluation processes. Furthermore, the results suggest that alternative media platforms can serve as complementary channels for civic engagement by facilitating dialogue between citizens and policymakers. Incorporating insights emerging from digital public discourse may contribute to more participatory and responsive approaches to educational governance.

Accordingly, the legitimation process identified in this study can be conceptualized as a sequential mechanism. First, criticism is articulated through alternative media. Second, public discussion amplifies and reproduces the criticism. Third, repeated interactions generate discursive convergence among participants. Finally, the convergence of discourse produces social legitimacy, transforming educational criticism into a dominant narrative within Indonesia's digital public sphere. This finding contributes to the growing literature on digital public spheres by demonstrating that social legitimacy can emerge not only through institutional actors or mainstream media but also through participatory interactions among citizens in alternative media environments. More importantly, the study shows that legitimacy formation can be understood as a networked discursive process in which actors, concepts, and evaluative positions become interconnected through repeated interactions. By applying Discourse Network Analysis to educational criticism, this research extends existing scholarship on digital communication and offers empirical evidence that alternative media can facilitate not only public participation but also the collective construction of socially legitimate narratives. Such interactions play a crucial role in shaping collective understandings of educational issues and influencing public perceptions of systemic educational reform.

CONCLUSION

This study demonstrates that criticism of the education system has evolved into a dominant discourse within Indonesia's digital public sphere. Through discourse network analysis of public comments on the Fondasi Keropos Pendidikan Indonesia video published on the Malaka Project YouTube channel, the concept of the legitimization of educational criticism was found to occupy the most central position within the discourse structure. The dominance of this concept indicates that educational criticism has become not only a widely discussed topic but also a focal point through which diverse public perspectives on the condition and challenges of education in Indonesia converge. The findings further reveal that the majority of actors supported the criticism presented in the video. The substantially higher proportion of agreement compared to disagreement suggests that the discourse was characterized more by convergence than by

polarization. This pattern indicates that educational criticism has gained broad public acceptance and has developed into a legitimate discourse within digital public conversations. Consequently, the legitimacy of educational criticism is constructed through processes of interaction, negotiation, and collective meaning-making among social media users.

Moreover, this study highlights the role of YouTube as a digital public sphere that facilitates the exchange of ideas, opinion formation, and the construction of shared meanings regarding educational issues. Within this context, Malaka Project functions not only as a content producer but also as an alternative media platform that enables public engagement with educational concerns. Through interactions within the comment section, criticism initially articulated through media narratives gains reinforcement, support, and social legitimacy from audiences, ultimately evolving into a dominant public discourse. This study has several limitations. First, the analysis was limited to a single video and a single social media platform, which restricts the generalizability of the findings to broader educational discourses within Indonesia's digital environment. Second, the study focused primarily on the structural relationships between actors and concepts without examining the demographic characteristics or individual motivations of participants in greater depth. Future research may expand the scope of analysis across multiple digital platforms, compare different forms of educational discourse, or integrate Discourse Network Analysis with qualitative approaches to explore the contextual factors underlying discursive convergence and legitimacy formation. Such efforts would contribute to a more comprehensive understanding of how public legitimacy is negotiated across diverse digital communication environments.

Beyond its empirical findings, this study offers a conceptual contribution to the literature on digital public spheres and discourse legitimacy. The findings demonstrate that the legitimacy of educational criticism can be understood as a networked discursive process rather than merely an outcome of opinion aggregation or message exposure. By applying Discourse Network Analysis, this research shows how legitimacy emerges through the relational dynamics connecting actors, concepts, and evaluative positions within online discussions. This perspective extends existing studies of educational discourse by illustrating that public acceptance is constructed through patterns of discursive convergence that develop across digital interactions. Consequently, Discourse Network Analysis provides a valuable analytical framework for examining how social legitimacy is formed, maintained, and reinforced within Indonesia's contemporary digital communication environment.

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