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Research Paper

Empathy as a Tool: Analyzing the Spread of Disinformation in the 2019 Indonesian Election

Panel 1
Political Manipulation, Election Interference, and Disinformation Campaigns

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Abstract

The prevalence of fake news and misinformation is not merely a consequence of a lack of critical thinking but rather a result of the exploitation of empathy. This research investigates the role of emotionalization in online political propaganda, highlighting the significant influence of empathy in disseminating fake news. Utilizing a qualitative approach, this study employs a case study analysis of the 2019 Indonesian presidential elections. It scrutinizes a series of hoax news items on social media, examining their content, spread, sources, and the interactions they engendered. This examination aims to understand how the contents of misinformation and fake news leverage emotional triggers to influence targeted individuals and groups. The research posits that in the current media landscape, fake news, strategically tailored to resonate empathetically, can incite acts of violence within society. In the Indonesian context, the prevalent empathetic attitude, though inherently noble, has paradoxically contributed to hindering the creation of a peaceful political atmosphere. This study represents an initial step in exploring how empathy as a cultural trait in Indonesia can shape political discourse. The dynamics of emotional manipulation and empathy in the consumption of fake news are shown to escalate potential violence and conflict in society. Consequently, this research concludes that empathy significantly contributes to individuals' susceptibility to false information, underscoring the need for heightened awareness and media literacy.

Keywords: *Fake News, Disinformation, Social Media, Empathy, Indonesian Politic*

2

Safeguarding Democracy: Multifaceted Responses to Election Disinformation
Jakarta, 17-18 January 2024 │ kisip.csis.or.id

Introduction

In the digital era, social media has transformed from a communication platform to a primary source of news for many people. Most internet users globally now access news through social media (Chadwick, 2017; Newman et al., 2021). This phenomenon has altered the news landscape, where emotionally engaging content often garners more attention. Additionally, social media plays a crucial role in disseminating fake news, primarily due to its viral nature and ability to quickly reach a wide audience (Allcott and Gentzkow, 2017). Social media has revolutionized the spread of information, facilitating access and opening avenues for fake news or hoaxes. Lazer et al. (2018) highlight this global phenomenon, demonstrating the significant influence of fake news on public opinion, especially in political and social contexts. Furthermore, fake news tends to spread faster and more widely than true news, largely due to its capacity to evoke emotions in readers (Vosoughi et al., 2018; Ecker et al., 2022). The impact of fake news on society and politics cannot be underestimated. Its danger lies in its ability to influence political thought and behavior, and it can even alter election outcomes (Guess et al., 2019).

In Indonesia, this impact is particularly significant, considering the role of social media as a primary source of information. Suharyanto (2019) found that social media in Indonesia has become the main platform for spreading fake news, especially concerning politics. This was notably evident in the 2019 general election, where a plethora of fake news circulated, potentially influencing public opinion (Tapsell, 2021). However, the impact of fake news is not limited to the political sphere; it also touches on social aspects. In Indonesia, where identity politics and communal emotions often play a role, this dynamic becomes increasingly complex. Emotions can be manipulated to influence political choices (Haryatmoko, 2017), and fake news is often designed to trigger empathetic responses (Preston et al., 2021). The influence of emotions in politics, particularly in voter behavior, has become a deeply researched topic. Marcus et al. (2000) demonstrate that emotions also play a vital role in political decision-making.

The factor of empathy becomes intriguing in the dissemination of fake news. Empathy, the ability to understand and feel what others are feeling, is an integral part of Indonesian culture. The strong culture of empathy in Indonesian society, as described by Geertz (1960) in his work on religion and politics in Indonesia, can be an effective tool for spreading fake news. According to Hofstede (2011), Indonesia scores high on the "Collectivism" dimension, reflecting the strength of social relationships and concern for the community. This empathy, which should be an asset in building social harmony, also creates vulnerability to news designed to target emotions. Alarmingly, fake news is often more emotionally appealing than true news (Vosoughi et al., 2018). Fake news designed to evoke empathy can create strong emotional resonance, thus promoting its wider and faster spread on social media.

This situation is exacerbated by the low media literacy in Indonesia (Annisa, 2021). Empathy and emotions play a significant role in how people share news on social media (Brady, 2017; Zubiaga et al., 2018). According to Batson et al. (1997), empathy is a strong driver of human behavior, including in the context of

communication and media. Empathy motivates individuals to emotionally respond to situations experienced by others, which in turn influences their decision to share information. The dynamics of empathy in spreading fake news on social media can be seen from two aspects: first, the ability of fake news to trigger empathetic responses by featuring relatable narratives or human elements. Second, is the tendency of social media users to interact with content that confirms their beliefs or emotions. When fake news presses the empathetic button, users tend to respond in a way that confirms their beliefs, often without questioning the validity of the information (Sunstein, 2001).

The context of Indonesia's general election presents a unique case in the study of fake news. Politics in Indonesia, especially during elections, is often marked by negative campaigns and the use of social media to spread false news. Since the Jakarta Gubernatorial Election in 2017, the conduct of elections in Indonesia has been marked by sophisticated strategies. As linked with Tapsell (2017) findings, these strategies include targeted advertising, manipulation of algorithms, and the mobilization of "cyber troops" or digital campaign teams. This creates new dynamics in Indonesian politics, where information and political propaganda are rapidly and widely disseminated. Fake news during the 2019 presidential election did not only attack one side but both candidates Joko Widodo – Ma'ruf Amin and Prabowo Subianto – Sandiaga Uno. Both were involved in post-truth politics, framing information and stories by appealing to emotions with little or no regard for policy details and objective facts.

The spread of fake news during the 2019 presidential election illustrates how news that triggers empathy, especially those related to religious or ethnic issues, tends to go viral. Additionally, social media was also used to construct narratives and rally support. This strategy often involved content designed to elicit emotional reactions, whether through positive content praising a candidate or negative content attacking political opponents. This phenomenon has significant implications for democracy in Indonesia. Fake news and social media campaigns relying on disinformation can undermine public trust in the electoral process, exacerbate political polarization, and disrupt healthy political dialogue (Lim, 2017; Masduki, 2021). The implications of the spread of fake news that exploits empathy are substantial. It concerns not just the issue of misinformation but also how fake news can affect social stability and public trust. Spreading fake news on social media can damage public trust in institutions and official media, as well as worsen social polarization and conflict (Garrett, 2019). The 2019 Indonesian Presidential Election has revealed challenges and opportunities in the digital era. Further efforts are needed to enhance media literacy and public awareness of the importance of verifying information, as well as stricter regulations against the spread of fake news to ensure the integrity of the democratic process.

This phenomenon raises an important question: how has empathy, traditionally seen as a positive value, can become a tool in the spread of fake news. Given the significant impact of fake news and the role of empathy in its spread, there is an urgent need for more in-depth studies. This research aims to fill this gap, focusing on how empathy influences the perception and spread of fake news in Indonesia. This study is important not only for understanding this phenomenon more deeply but also for informing mitigation and education strategies for the

4

Safeguarding Democracy: Multifaceted Responses to Election Disinformation
Jakarta, 17-18 January 2024 | kisip.csis.or.id

public. The implications of this study are highly relevant to informing public policy and political communication strategies. Research by Tucker et al. (2018) in the American Journal of Political Science emphasizes the importance of understanding how fake news affects politics, especially in the context of democracy. In Indonesia, this understanding is crucial, given the existing social and political diversity. This research is not only important in the local context of Indonesia but also provides insights for global studies on fake news. As revealed by Wardle and Derakhshan (2017) in the Council of Europe report, fake news is a global issue that requires cross-cultural understanding. Therefore, this study also contributes to the global discussion on fake news and its impact on society and politics.

Methods

In this study, we adopted a qualitative methodology using a case study approach to focus on specific examples of fake news spread on social media. This research selected news disseminated through the social media platform Facebook. According to research findings (Daily Social, 2018; Mafindo, 2019), hoax information in Indonesia is most commonly found on Facebook. This involved identifying and analyzing several cases of fake news that had a significant impact or went highly viral. Case studies help in understanding the context, motives, and consequences of the spread of such fake news. This research utilized analysis involving an examination of the fake news text to comprehend the narrative, rhetoric, and emotions contained within. We investigated the phenomenon of fake news spread on social media, especially during the period leading up to the 2019 general election in Indonesia. This approach was chosen because it allows for an in-depth analysis of specific contexts and unique dynamics associated with the spread of fake news, including emotional and empathetic aspects that might influence it.

The study sampled posts from the Facebook account of seword.com, an online news site for pro-incumbent Joko Widodo-Ma'ruf Amin in the 2019 presidential election. Initially, seword.com was a pro-Ahok website created in November 2011. During the Jakarta gubernatorial election in 2017, seword.com attracted more visitors between October 2016 and March 2017 (56.7 million) than Tempo and Republika, both long-running national news outlets (Lim, 2017; Supardi, 2018). The main source of traffic for seword.com was social media platforms, notably Facebook, accounting for 95.6% (Lim, 2017). To address gaps, this research sampled all posts in the form of text and images archived through the photo album of the Facebook page seword.com for six weeks before the voting (from March 1, 2019, to April 18, 2019).

The data analysis model used by the researchers is the interactive model of Miles et al. (2014). The process involved collecting all posts and then thematically coding each image to identify its main message, taking into account descriptions, visual imagery, and the number of interactions (likes, comments, and shares). A total of 178 posts were analyzed to delve into the patterns and strategies used in the dissemination of news, as well as to explore how this news was received and responded to by the public.

5

Safeguarding Democracy: Multifaceted Responses to Election Disinformation
Jakarta, 17-18 January 2024 | kisip.csis.or.id

Previous research in Indonesia regarding the spread of fake news during election periods has only analyzed the emergence of fake news without a deeper examination of the news content, distribution, and user involvement. This study aims to delve deeper into the connection between empathy and the spread of fake news, examining how propaganda posts engage the emotions of readers to garner attention and spread their news without concern for its truthfulness. By exploring these cases, we aim to uncover the patterns and strategies used in the spread of fake news, as well as to explore how such news is received and responded to by the public. Therefore, this case study is important both politically and socially, with many implications for the health of democracy (to be elaborated later).

Fake News Optimizing Emotional States of the Target

Fake news, or disinformation, is defined as information that is deliberately created and disseminated to mislead and deceive readers (Lazer et al., 2018). "Fake news" refers to content that features the following three characteristics: a low level of factualness, an intention to deceive, and an appearance that mimics legitimate news (Egelhofer & Lecheler, 2019). Although resembling genuine news, fake news is typically shorter and less informative than real news, uses simpler and more personal language, and tends to have longer headlines containing the article's main claims (Horne and Adal, 2017). Unlike journalistic errors, fake news is created with a specific purpose, often political or economic (Bakir and McStay, 2018), and is crafted to appeal to readers' emotions and prejudices (Iannone, 2022). This definition distinguishes fake news from accidental reporting errors or biases in reporting. The phenomenon of fake news is not new. Recorded as far back as ancient Roman times, fake news has been used as a tool for political propaganda and psychological warfare (Tandoc et al., 2018). Fake news is not a recent development; rather, it has long been a tool in politics, primarily to influence public opinion (Lippman, 1965; Jack C., 2017). As technology and media have evolved, so have the methods of spreading and the impact of fake news.

In the modern era, the development of technology and mass media has enabled the rapid and widespread dissemination of fake news, especially through radio, television, and the Internet. However, in the current post-truth era, fake news has reached a new dimension. The post-truth era, a term introduced by Oxford Dictionaries as "Word of the Year" in 2016, reflects an environment where objective facts have less influence on public opinion than emotions and personal beliefs. This era, marked by a rejection of objective truth and facts, has transformed the landscape of fake news (Lewandowsky et al., 2017). Social media, with its reach and speed, has become the ideal platform for spreading fake news. In this context, truthfulness is no longer the main criterion but rather how effectively a narrative can garner support or evoke emotional reactions. Fake news is often designed to take advantage of the target's emotional state. Fake news tends to go viral faster than true news, particularly because it triggers emotions such as fear, anger, or happiness (Vosoughi et al., 2018; Wardle and Derakhsan, 2017). This effect is amplified by the "echo chamber" phenomenon on social media, where individuals are exposed to information that confirms their biases and beliefs (Sunstein, 2001; Sunstein, 2017; Nguyen, 2020).

6

Safeguarding Democracy: Multifaceted Responses to Election Disinformation
Jakarta, 17-18 January 2024 | kisip.csis.or.id

Academic debate on fake news often revolves around its impact on democracy. On the one hand, fake news is considered a threat to democracy because it undermines public trust in media and institutions and influences public opinion based on incorrect information (Allcott & Gentzkow, 2017). On the other hand, some researchers argue that the impact of fake news is often overstated and that the public has the critical ability to differentiate between fake and real news (Marino and Iannelli, 2023). However, the impact of fake news on public opinion and trust in media and politics cannot be ignored (Lewandowsky et al., 2017). Tucker et al. (2018) demonstrate that emotionally exploitative fake news can significantly affect political thinking, especially among less informed voters. This has the potential to create polarization and divisiveness within society, which is detrimental to the functioning of democracy.

Social and Political Impact

Empathy, the ability to understand and feel what another person is experiencing, can be exploited by fake news to trigger strong emotional responses, which in turn reinforces one's inclination to share such information. This study uncovers how fake news ultimately becomes problematic in triggering social violence and the failure to create peaceful elections due to the exploitation of empathetic attitudes. This failure is caused by fake news that confirms biases, thus constricting the space to obtain information critically, the dissemination of incorrect information to the public, and its provocative nature and anger-inducing potential that can lead to conflict in society. This research collected and analyzed 178 posts from the Facebook page of seword.com. This data was gathered from their uploads during the six weeks preceding the 2019 Indonesian presidential election, from March 1, 2019, to April 17, 2019. All posts were categorized for analysis related to themes and examination of text/words, images, interactions, comments, and the extent of their dissemination. The summary is in the following table:

Table 1. Categories of Posts and Responses on seword.com's Facebook Page

Topics	Number of Posts	Likes	Comments	Reshares	Total Interactions
Work Program of Candidates Joko Widodo - Ma'ruf Amin	8	7172	488	2438	10098
Campaign Activities of Joko Widodo - Ma'ruf Amin	10	33573	3387	2098	39058
Personal Attacks on Prabowo-Sandiaga Uno	110	130939	25124	38478	194541
Praise for Candidate Joko Widodo - Ma'ruf Amin	32	122283	26777	24423	173483

7

Safeguarding Democracy: Multifaceted Responses to Election Disinformation
Jakarta, 17-18 January 2024 | kisip.csis.or.id

Praise for Joko Widodo - Ma'ruf Amin While Attacking Prabowo-Sandiaga Uno	18	29344	5294	6823	41461

Source: Compiled by the author from the Facebook page- seword.com.

The Spreads of Misinformation to Society

In the spread of news of misinformation to society, research by Pennycook and Rand (2019) indicates that when individuals emotionally identify with news content, they are inclined not to question the authenticity or veracity of that news. In the context of Indonesia's 2019 Presidential Election, the Facebook page seword.com displayed its allegiance to the duo of Joko Widodo and Ma'ruf Amin. The classification of posts during the 2019 Presidential Election fell into two categories: praising the pair of Joko Widodo-Ma'ruf Amin and attacking the opposition, Prabowo Subianto – Sandiaga Uno. On seword.com's Facebook page, all posts may have been designed to elicit empathetic responses by portraying a scenario or party as 'oppressed', thus stirring solidarity among their followers. This dynamic creates an environment where fake news can rapidly spread among groups with similar viewpoints.

Fake news on seword.com's Facebook page often utilizes emotions to divert attention from the lack of credible evidence or logic. Strong emotions can cloud critical judgment, leading audiences to accept and disseminate information without thorough scrutiny (Berger and Milkman, 2012; Al-Rawi, 2019). In the context of the 2019 Presidential Election, seword.com's Facebook page, narratives that evoked empathy were exaggerated to provoke anger and resentment, successfully motivating readers to share information without verifying its validity. On seword.com's Facebook page, out of all posts during the five weeks leading up to the election, misinformation about the Prabowo-Sandi duo was the most frequently discussed, amounting to 62% of all posts (Table 1). These posts contained misinformation, fake news, and unverifiable personal attacks.

One of the highlighted posts covered the case of the discovery of tens of thousands of ballots pre-marked for the Jokowi-Ma'ruf pair before Election Day at overseas polling stations in Kajang and Selangor, Malaysia.[2] These ballots were found in dozens of bags by community groups. Both the General Elections Commission (KPU), the Election Supervisory Body (Bawaslu), and the Election Organizing Committee Council (DKPP) confirmed the finding. Assisted by the Selangor police, the KPU secured the ballots and conducted a re-vote for the Indonesian citizens in the region. Meanwhile, a post uploaded on the Facebook page seword.com claimed that the case of ballot discovery was a setup or scenario

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[2] Diakses dari Kompas.com dengan judul berita "[KLARIFIKASI] Penjelasan soal Temuan Surat Suara Tercoblos di Malaysia".
https://nasional.kompas.com/read/2019/04/12/13243831/klarifikasi-penjelasan-soal-temuan-surat-suara-tercoblos-di-malaysia?page=all.

Safeguarding Democracy: Multifaceted Responses to Election Disinformation
Jakarta, 17-18 January 2024 | kisip.csis.or.id

8

by the Prabowo-Sandi party. The narrative used in the post was "*Setelah gagal dengan cerita 7 kontainer dan server KPU, sekarang mulai main sinetron grebek-grebek. Ga usah terlalu serius, nikmati saja cerita ini. Catat nama-nama yang sekarang begitu lantang menghujat, nanti kalau sudah kebongkar jangan pura-pura ga kenal satu sama lain ya.*"[3] The post included four photos, with each photo restating the narrative of cheating by the Prabowo-Sandi party. The four photos stated:

- The first photo was a black background collage showing the raid scene and the stacked black bags. At the top of the photo, in white lettering, the narrative was, *PENEMUAN SURAT SUARA TERCOBLOS SETINGAN KUBU 02.*[4] Then, at the bottom of the photo in yellow, it reads *Seluruh pengrebek dari kubu 02.*[5]

- The second photo is a screenshot of the news headline "*Penemu Surat Suara Tercoblos di Malaysia: Kami Ingin Prabowo Pimpin RI!*"[6] This photo is also added with black text at the top labeled "SKENARIO 02[7]". Then at the bottom, more text in yellow with a red background: *"Masa saat penggerebekan gak ditemani polisi??"*[8] Upon fact-checking the news source in the screenshot, it became invalid as the video included (and scrutinized) did not contain the words found in the news headline in the screenshot uploaded by the seword.com Facebook account.

- The third photo is a collage of the moment the illegal ballots were found and a photo of one of the raiders suspected to be a campaign team member from Prabowo-Sandi. This photo accompanies a yellow text on a black background "*SKENARIO 02 DI MALAYSIA.*"[9] At the bottom, it is added "*Penggerebekan tidak Bersama aparat KPU, Panwaslu dan Kepolisian. Seluruh penggrebek dari kubu 02.. ada yg pakai baju Tauhid, ada yg pakai baju timses 02, dan ada yang berkaus kutang melakukan tangan kampanye coro dari kubu 02...*"[10]

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[3] English Translation: After failing with the story of 7 containers and the KPU server, now they start playing soap opera raids. Don't take it too seriously, just enjoy the story. Note the names who are now so loudly denouncing, when it's exposed don't pretend not to know each other.
[4] English Translation: DISCOVERED BALLOTS MARKED IN A SETUP BY CAMP 02
[5] English Translation: All the raiders are from camp 02
[6] English Translation: Finder of Marked Ballots in Malaysia: We Want Prabowo to Lead Indonesia!
[7] English Translation: Scenario by Camp 02.
[8] English Translation: How come there were no police accompanying the raid?
[9] English Translation: Scenario by camp 02 in Malaysia
[10] English Translation: The raid did not include KPU officials, Panwaslu, or Police. All the raiders are from camp 02, some wear Tauhid shirts, some wear 02 campaign team shirts, and some in tank tops doing a coro campaign hand gesture from camp 02.

- The fourth photo is a collage of dozens of black bags piled up and a photo from the scene of the ballot discovery. It also includes yellow text in the middle of the photo "*benarkah yg didalam kantong plastic itu surat suara???? Kenapa nggak dibuka semua? Padahal Namanya penggerebekkan itu wajib semua diobrak abrik.*[11] At the very bottom, it is white text reads *SKENARIO 02.*[12]

This post reached a total 27,000 interactions and was shared by 14,000 users. In reality, this case was identified as a violation by Bawaslu, leading to a re-vote by KPU in two locations, Kajang and Selangor, for 319,293 registered postal voters.[13] Although this case was not pursued further, Bawaslu considered two members of the Overseas Election Committee (PPLN Malaysia) responsible for these election frauds/violations.[14]

Nearly all posts of the Facebook page of seword.com attacking Prabowo-Sandi were classified as disinformation. Information was selectively cut and modified to evoke emotions and anger towards the opposing pair (Prabowo-Sandi), and to generate sympathy for the Jokowi-Ma'ruf pair. This pattern was also observed in 109 other posts (table 1). Besides disinformation, attacks on the opposing party's personal integrity dominated the seword.com Facebook page. In the five weeks leading up to the election, disinformation posts containing hate speech against Prabowo-Sandi were shared over 38,000 times, accounting for 52% of all reshares on the page (table 1). Moreover, 18 posts were attacking Prabowo-Sandi in the category 'Praise for Jokowi-Ma'ruf VS Attacks on Prabowo-Sandi.' Each post in this category compared personalities between Jokowi VS Prabowo and Ma'ruf VS Sandi, often resorting to ad hominem attacks on personal traits, which couldn't be substantiated. These posts tended to provide misinformation about the opposing party's character. Posts about the Jokowi-Ma'ruf pair evoked empathy by portraying them as embodying Indonesian values of politeness, respect, and familial closeness (Ali et al., 2021), in contrast to the Prabowo – Sandi pair.

Research in psychology and communication has delved into how empathy influences human perception and behavior in the context of spreading fake news. Understanding how emotions and empathy impact information perception is crucial in combating disinformation (Paschen, 2020; Corbu, 2020; Rony and Ahmed, 2021). The online news environment, increasingly emotional, always requires the right mix of emotions to engage audiences and make them pay attention to the news (Papacharissi, 2012). Previously, we also noted that social media is an emotionally charged environment. However, what is the "right" way to optimize emotions on social media? The answer depends on the subject's position within the digital media ecology. In the case of seword.com, this understanding is vital to inform the public on identifying and responding to fake news and for

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[11] English Translation: Is it really ballots inside those plastic bags???? Why not open them all? After all, a raid necessarily involves turning everything upside down.
[12] English Translation: Scenario by Camp 02.
[13] Kasus kertas suara tercoblos di Malaysia, KPU: 'Pemungutan suara melalui pos akan diulang' https://www.bbc.com/indonesia/indonesia-47952186
[14] *Ibid.*

10

Safeguarding Democracy: Multifaceted Responses to Election Disinformation
Jakarta, 17-18 January 2024 | kisip.csis.or.id

policymakers and media practitioners to design strategies to counter disinformation.

Fake News Confirms Bias and Limits Critical Information Access

Fake news often targets audiences cleverly, exploiting pre-existing prejudices and beliefs. It is more effective when aligned with the audience's presuppositions (Lazer et al. 2018). Ultimately, the entire narrative in Facebook posts from seword.com only highlights narratives that align with their political or social views, portraying the Joko-Ma'ruf duo as the ideal choice in Indonesia's presidential election. On the seword.com Facebook page, 18% of the posts depict Joko-Ma'ruf as bold, good, and ideal leaders. Posts with themes like these are much fewer than those attacking the Prabowo-Sandi pair.

A post with narrative caption, "*Subhanallah walhamdulillah. Ikut merasakan getaran nikmatnya. Tak sembarang orang diijinkan masuk. Alhamdulillah Presiden Jokowi diberi nikmat dan kesempatan. Maha baik Allah dengan segala taqdir baiknya untuk Presiden Jokowi. Sehingga membukakan hati para pemimpin muslim dunia, para ulama, habaib dan pemegang kunci Ka'bah, untuk mendampingi Presiden masuk ke dalam.*"[15] This post is accompanied by photos showing Joko Widodo with his family and entourage inside the Ka'bah, one picture walking with the group, and four photos being welcomed by King Salman in a meeting. All the photos convey the impression that Joko Widodo is a leader specially favored by the Muslim community in Saudi Arabia, even by King Salman. This post received significant interaction, up to 60,000. It garnered around 14,000 comments, most of which praise Joko Widodo, was shared by ten thousand Facebook users, and liked by 36,000 users (Table 1).

All posts in this category contain praise for Joko Widodo and Ma'ruf and their families. Seword.com published only 32 posts (18%) related to this category, but these garnered a massive response of over 173,000 interactions or 38% of all interactions in that period. Additionally, more than 24,000 accounts shared all this positive propaganda. Although all posts in this category are glorifications of Joko Widodo and are not found to be misleading news, they attempt to confirm the public's view of Joko Widodo as an ideal leader with traits and personas like an ordinary citizen. This triggers empathetic responses and identification, which further facilitates the spread of these posts, even though not all glorifications are true since they cannot be proven. For example, one post with caption: "*Karena Jokowi punya solusi! Kalau toko sebelah? Karena gak punya, ya jadinya nyalahin. Nanti amit-amit kalau terpilih, ada salah, pasti ga ada solusi karena kerjanya bakal nyalahin terus.*[16] This post features a graphic of Jokowi against a blue background

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[15] English Translation: Subhanallah walhamdulillah. Feeling the vibration of delight. Not everyone is allowed to enter. Alhamdulillah, President Jokowi is blessed and given the opportunity. Allah is kind with His good fate for President Jokowi. Thus, opening the hearts of the Muslim world leaders, scholars, habaibs, and keepers of the Ka'bah, to accompany the President inside

[16] English Translation: Because Jokowi has solutions! What about the other side? Since they don't have any, they end up blaming. God forbid if they get elected, any mistake will have no solution because they will just keep blaming."

with the text: *SAYA TIDAK MAU MENYALAH-NYALAHKAN TETAPI SAYA MAU CARI SOLUSI.*[17]

In the dynamics of digital media, fake news tends to spread in 'echo chambers' where information aligning with group beliefs is reinforced (Bruns, 2021; Bond and Garret, 2023). On Facebook and seword.com during the 2019 Presidential Election, fake news that confirms a particular political or social bias rapidly spread among ideologically homogeneous groups. Ultimately, this serves to strengthen existing beliefs within certain groups.

Fake News Generates Horizontal Conflict

Posts on the Facebook page seword.com often use provocative sentences designed to evoke strong emotions like anger or fear. This kind of emotion-provoking fake news can motivate individuals to take action (Tandoc et al., 2018). For instance, nearly all posts attacking the character of the opposition (Prabowo-Sandi) incite derogatory remarks and anger among supporters, often leading to mutual insults among followers. The impact of fake news in creating polarization and social conflict is explained by Garrett (2019), who notes that fake news has intensified divisions between supporters of different candidates or ideologies. When an audience with existing biases receives this misleading or false information, the effects can be extremely destructive, sparking deeper conflict and division in society.

The social consequences of fake news are not limited to political polarization but also affect public trust in media and political institutions (Allcott and Gentzkow, 2017). As a result, during the 2019 presidential election, disinformation released by social media pages and accounts like seword.com influenced how people interacted with political information. The side effects of collective action triggered by fake news often include conflict and heightened group polarization. As analyzed by Van Bavel et al. (2021), emotionally charged news can deepen polarization by accentuating intergroup differences and strengthening group identities. This dynamic was evident in the interactions between supporters during Indonesia's 2019 Presidential Election, where fake news exacerbated divisions and sparked intergroup conflict.

The prevalence of provocative fake news also sidelines discussions about the candidates' work programs. On the seword.com Facebook page, less than 6% of posts cover Jokowi-Ma'ruf's work program. All posts related to work programs are presented positively, while there are no posts about Prabowo-Sandi's work program. Platforms like seword.com understand the type of posts/news that can trigger interaction and reader reaction. It is not the programs but provocative personal attacks that are hard to verify for authenticity.

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[17] English Translation: I don't want to blame, but i want to find solutions.

12

Safeguarding Democracy: Multifaceted Responses to Election Disinformation
Jakarta, 17-18 January 2024 | kisip.csis.or.id

Fake News, Social Media, and the Future of Indonesia's Elections

Previous researchers have underscored the importance of emotions in public and political discourse, as well as in the construction of collective identity and social bonds (Lunt & Pantti, 2007; Richards, 2007). In line with this, political campaigns and communication have long manipulated images, metaphors, symbols, speculative politics, and politics of fear to disseminate populist messages (Herbst, 2016). In the post-truth era, Indonesian elections face significant challenges due to the spread of fake news, not just through social media but also via mainstream media. This phenomenon threatens the integrity of the elections and raises serious questions about how information is presented and received by the public.

The mainstream proliferation of fake news is no longer confined to the realm of social media. Mainstream media also play a role in disseminating misleading information. In efforts to attract audiences and boost website traffic, mainstream media often compete to create sensational news with clickbait headlines. These headlines are sometimes designed to manipulate the reader's empathy and draw their attention (Molek-Kozakowska, 2017). However, this strategy creates an ethical dilemma between accuracy versus the appeal of news (Chakraborty et al., 2016). Ultimately, mainstream media sometimes sacrifice accuracy for sensationalism and website traffic (Tandoc et al., 2018). Mainstream media find themselves in competition with social media as a source of information. Instead of enhancing news quality with verification, mainstream media have the potential to become producers of fake news to increase web traffic. Attractive headlines often exploit readers' emotions, leading them to click and share news without verifying its truthfulness. The pressure to increase clicks and ads can push media to present false or misleading information (Conroy et al., 2015). Despite causing a dilemmatic side between the balance of profitability and journalistic integrity, the responsibility of the media in maintaining the accuracy of information is still necessary (Waisbord, 2018).

The massive dissemination of disinformation and fake news, without effective filtering, is dangerous for elections, including in Indonesia. The future of elections is at stake with the development of the digital ecosystem. This phenomenon raises serious questions about the credibility and responsibility of media in presenting accurate information. In Indonesia, the absence of effective filtering, both in social media and mainstream media, allows provocative and emotional news to spread widely, often at the expense of truth. Fake news, both in social media and mainstream media, poses serious challenges to the integrity of elections; therefore, the importance of media as guardians of truth and accurate information becomes increasingly vital amid an increasingly polarized and emotionally manipulable society. Understanding this dynamic is not only crucial for the media and policymakers to ensure the integrity of information in democracy but also for the general public in preparing for more integrity-driven elections in the future.

13

Safeguarding Democracy: Multifaceted Responses to Election Disinformation
Jakarta, 17-18 January 2024 | kisip.csis.or.id

Conclusion

This study highlights the role of empathy in the spread of fake news, especially during the 2019 Indonesian Presidential Election, which impacted social and political dynamics. The analysis of fake news on Facebook's seword.com page reveals that fake news often confirms existing biases and beliefs in society. Such news exploits empathy to strengthen identification within groups with similar views, thereby deepening polarization. This phenomenon underscores the importance of higher media literacy as a critical tool in dealing with online information, to preserve the integrity of democracy and social stability. Fake news frequently uses emotion and empathy to divert attention from the lack of solid evidence or logic. In this way, fake news reduces audience skepticism and facilitates the spread of inaccurate information.

This demonstrates that audiences tend to accept fake news uncritically, especially when it touches on their personal emotions or empathy. Therefore, promoting awareness and education on how to identify fake news is crucial to prevent the spread of misleading and damaging information. Finally, fake news that evokes empathy can trigger collective actions based on emotion. The effect of this phenomenon is increased polarization and conflict within society. These findings emphasize the importance of higher media literacy and a more critical approach to online information to prevent the negative impacts of fake news. Awareness and media literacy are vital in facing fake news and maintaining social and political stability, particularly in democratic contexts like Indonesia. The key is the enhancement of media literacy; critical awareness of online information is crucial for building a more informed society resilient to disinformation. Additionally, social media platform owners need to recognize their role as tools for communication and information, thus necessitating features that can filter the spread of fake news.

14

Safeguarding Democracy: Multifaceted Responses to Election Disinformation
Jakarta, 17-18 January 2024 | kisip.csis.or.id

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15

Safeguarding Democracy: Multifaceted Responses to Election Disinformation
Jakarta, 17-18 January 2024 | kisip.csis.or.id

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16

Safeguarding Democracy: Multifaceted Responses to Election Disinformation
Jakarta, 17-18 January 2024 | kisip.csis.or.id

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17

Safeguarding Democracy: Multifaceted Responses to Election Disinformation
Jakarta, 17-18 January 2024 | kisip.csis.or.id