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Research Paper

Examining the Significance of Disinformation to Indonesia's Democracy

Panel 3
Role of Media, Journalism, and Information Literacy in the Disinformation Era

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Abstract

Mass media has played a significant role in influencing political processes in Indonesia. Its role as the platform for public opinion also important in affecting voting behaviour, especially during election cycles. During the authoritarian era of the 1960s through late 1990s, mass media were heavily-controlled by state apparatus leading them to barely taking part in any dimension of public aspiration. After a long-standing tradition of mass media as the primary tool of political propaganda, the fall of Suharto triggered a transformation of Indonesian media landscape – from a state-controlled mechanism to a more free and private capital-induced growth industry. This particular shift has generated more engagement by the public especially in supervising democratic transition. As the mass media industry grows, however, its potential as one of the most revered democratic pillars is at times tainted by its contribution to the spreading of disinformation. More often than not, this disinformation is produced both by mass media and social media. This article aims to explain how disinformation becomes one of the significant political strategy within the context of Indonesian politics. By doing literature review, we hope that our study will disclose the motivation behind the disinformation campaign, the parties that are benefited by it, and how it will affect Indonesia's democratic aspirations. We start by hypothesising that disinformation has contributed maximize electoral popularity for the candidates. Our hypotheses are eventually confirmed as the disinformation strategy are commonly used usually by the supporter group by dramatising half-truth information, posting click-baity headlines, and normalising hate speech. In turn, we advise the policymakers to develop a more substantial and clear guidelines on how disinformation be maintained, especially when it has a political meaning behind. This study will also contribute to the discussion on how disinformation spread through the public space during election cycles in democratic countries.

Keywords: *disinformation, Indonesian election, democracy*

Background: Information as a tool to manipulate public opinion

The concept of democracy is deeply contested, with historical debates about its meaning and different models of democracy. However, in recent times, the attention has shifted towards promoting a liberal democratic model, which has led to a neglect of the essential contestability of the idea of democracy (Kurki, 2010). This neglect has consequences for both scholars and practitioners involved in democracy promotion. This neglection oftentimes leads to a more hawkish and reactive response by the government in dealing with any sorts of the so called problems toward democracy. For example, the rise of the religious-based right-wing in Indonesia which has been dealt with criminalization and the use of force by the government (Mietzner, 2018).

In the context of the digital age, disinformation has been one of the key factors that can affect election output by influencing public opinion. Disinformation can be defined as the *intentional* distribution of false information (Tucker et al. 2018). Disinformation and propaganda have become increasingly sophisticated tools employed by state actors. For example what has been undertaken by Russia in order to manipulate public opinion on both domestic and international fronts. These orchestrated campaigns involve various elements, including state media, social media platforms, political groups, and official endorsements. To counter this growing threat, rapid identification of false narratives and propaganda is imperative (Sultan, 2019). Effective countermeasures, particularly involving social media platforms, must be developed alongside Standard Operations Procedures (SOPs) to address this challenge, although social media platforms have shown reluctance in taking action against such campaigns. This necessitates adaptation to the evolving landscape of information warfare. Information has been weaponized in the Syrian conflict, with various parties using biased, unverified, distorted, or falsified information as a means to shape public opinion and achieve their strategic goals. The passage also mentions a specific incident, the chemical weapons attack in Douma in 2018, where disinformation played a significant role. Disinformation and the manipulation of information are recognized as critical tools in modern conflicts, and understanding these tactics is essential for addressing their impact (Ghouta, 2018).

Apart from state actors, non–profit organisations have appeared to be significant in dealing with the information manipulation even for individuals rather than a group. For example, The German Marshall Fund's Digital Innovation and Democracy Initiative collaborated with MediaCloud to investigate how misinformation and disinformation campaigns targeted climate-change activist Greta Thunberg. The study identified five key narratives used to discredit her: questioning her mental abilities, associating her with Antifa, linking her to George Soros, portraying her as a puppet, and connecting her to the "climate industrial complex." (Dave, et.al, 2023).

Therefore in the rise of digital information, scholars coined the term “cyber election interference”. The concept of "cyber election interference" raises concerns about foreign nations using disinformation and "fake news" to influence the electorate of target nations, potentially violating international obligations like nonintervention. The perspective on social media platforms has shifted from initially being hailed as tools for enhancing democracy to recognizing their role in perpetuating disparities in access and participation, particularly driven by digital marketing (Rotondo, et.al, 2019). Effective regulation should, therefore, focus on digital marketing as a significant driver of disinformation. Furthermore, democracy itself is a subject of debate, with varying

models and interpretations. A dual approach involving the "pluralization" and "contextualization" of democratic conceptions is recommended to recognize diverse democratic models and the distinct contexts in which democracy is practised and promoted. In summary, these concepts collectively underscore the intricate and evolving nature of democracy, the role of information technologies, and the global challenges posed by disinformation in the digital era.

In the context of Indonesia, Indonesian political campaigns have a long tradition of traditional media utilisation, such as radio and TV. The dawn of social media which happened post-2010s goes hand in hand with its possibility to be used as "a political tool". Such a thing had not been significant–at least in the nation-scale–until the 2012 Jakarta governor election where we saw a lot of multimedia creation to campaign one of two candidates (Jokowi and Fauzi Bowo). Both campaigners were actively involved in producing video and jingle which later were posted on social media like Youtube or Facebook. Twitter was also proven to be significant in engaging public with the use of hashtag like #ReplaceTitleSongWithJOKOWI, #CoblosKumisnye, etc. (Yang Hui, 2020)

Nevertheless, during the high optimism of social media as a potential platform for a more inclusive and open engagement, the use of false information was somehow inevitable. The term which generally used at this period was "black campaign" referring to a false or half-truth information distribution about specific candidates. However, at this particular period the distribution of such information relied more on private social media platforms like Black Berry Messenger or WhatsApp. Therefore the process of black campaigns was more subtle yet deeply seated in the community. Several socio-political terms later were used on the campaign, such as communists, foreigners, proselytizers and so on. (Yang Hui, 2020)

One of the most notable experiences of "political" disinformation was the 2014 and 2019 presidential election. The use of disinformation was recognised widely in 2014-onwards for example, the use of false information of "Jokowi PKI" by the infamous "Obor Rakyat" magazine. The strategy of disinformation spreading is also called hoax–considering the massive use of social media. This particular phenomenon gains its momentum in the event of Ahok's trial for the case of religious blasphemy.

Disinformation and Politics in the Context of Indonesia

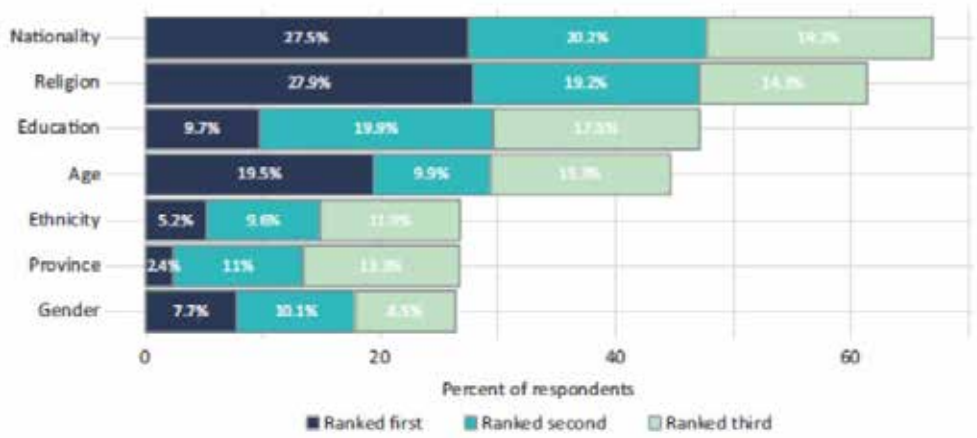
The use of disinformation kept rising as we entered the "political year" of 2019 which brought Jokowi (right-centred Islamic nationalist) and Prabowo (nationalist-conservative) to the ballot (Mietzner, 2018). Disinformation strategy usually relies on two fundamental principles. First, it is false information based on non-existent data (misinformation). Secondly, even if it is true it tends to exaggerate the already-known fact or new information (malinformation). Nevertheless, as seen in several cases like the Brexit or Trump campaign, the use of disinformation is effective since it is designed to unfold a long-standing socio-political taboo. In the context of Indonesia, the disinformation strategy is carried out in several manners.

Disinformation against a specific group, especially minority groups. For example, during the Ahok Trial, Rizieq's daughter posted claims that "Ahok's election would open the door to 80 million mainland Chinese to settle in Indonesia" (Mietzner, 2018). Apart

from verbal discourses, discrimination was also inflicted by the use of "Memes"—a form that is easier to spread, and their potential on creating funny, though sometimes cruel depictions of candidates, and attracting public attention (Gazali, 2018)—and deceptive images tailored together with a false narrative of the candidates. (Utami, 2018). Most important characteristics for group identity. Survey was taken from 24–28 December 2018. N: 2,003. Thinking about the group(s) of people they identify most strongly with indicates the first, second and third most important characteristics that matter to your group identity (Hudson, et.al, 2020).

Figure 1: Hudson, et al. (2020)

It is important to emphasize that in Indonesian context, disinformation that involves identity politics predominantly runs through three lines of nationalism, religion,



and ethnicity, which disproportionately target vulnerable minority of Indonesians with Chinese descendants. These lines of conflated, where anti-Chinese bias commonly intersected with religious sentiment and the sentiment towards the state or the government, hence the recurring discourse of equating Chinese descendants as Christian, Communist, or "China (PRC) Stooges". All of those were apparent in both the 2017 Jakarta Election and 2019 Presidential and General Election. Key thing to note here is that, there is an overt "othering" laden in electoral discourse—where words such as *Negara* and *Islam* are being juxtaposed with anti-Chinese biases—, in which disinformation as a mode plays a significant part. In the 2019 Election especially, disinformation exacerbates many latent fault lines that are already deep-seated in Indonesian society, such as urban vs rural, *santri* vs, *abangan*, etc. (Mujani, 2020). Figure 2 below shows the word cloud of hate speeches tweets from 2019 most associated with keywords of *Cina* and *Indonesia* (Gani, 2020). A larger size represents a higher frequency.

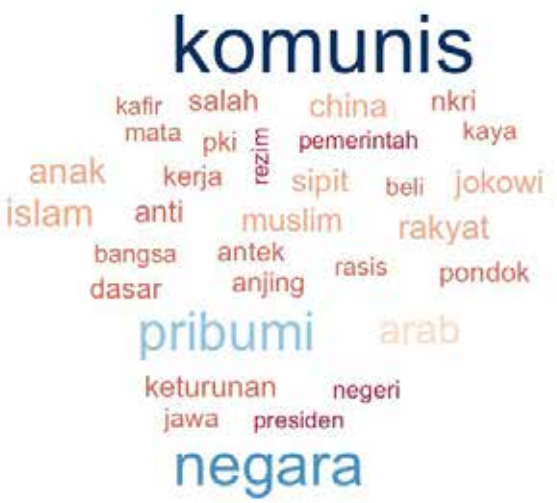


Figure 2: Hate Speeches World Cloud with *Cina* and *Indonesia* as Keywords (Gani, 2020)

Parahita (2016), from their data on the study case of disinformation of "*Ahok simpatisan PKI*" ("*Ahok is a sympathizer of PKI*"), claims that there is a strong correlation between the political stand and the tendency to believe disinformation. This result supports the idea that people might trust disinformation as long as it echoes certain preexisting beliefs. In electoral context especially, political partisanships correlate strongly with gullibility on disinformation.

Mujani (2020) identifies at least four major disinformation that were widely circulated leading to the 2019 Presidential Election. Two of those are mainly directed towards the incumbent President Jokowi: 1). Jokowi PKI, and; 2). Jokowi is an agent of the Chinese government, due to his substantial accommodation of Chinese Investment in his first period, in which one of the disinformation was that Jokowi allegedly imported ten million Chinese workers to Indonesia. The other two major disinformation were directed towards Prabowo Subianto: 1). Prabowo was endorsed officially by The Indonesian Army and Police Force, and; 2) Prabowo endorsed a celeb *ustaz* that regularly expressed an anti-LBTQIA+ stance. Despite both sides having had their share of disinformation targeted at them, Mujani argued that the disinformation attack on Jokowi was more detrimental due to the historical prejudice being directed towards Indonesians with Chinese descendants and PKI.

Disinformation within Political Framework from Time to Time

In order to understand the rampant disinformation in -present-day Indonesia, perhaps we ought to take a step back. It could be argued that the Suharto-led New Order regime had already imprinted a lasting legacy on the minds of the Indonesian people, where it was characterised by a state-controlled (traditional) media that serves as the megaphone of Suharto's government "truth"/propaganda. Amidst the limited,

pro-government official information on the mainstream level, citizens were more likely to turn to non-official sources. The non-government source, *extra* information, primarily circulated through rumour, gossip, word of mouth, in a smaller bubble, became a prevalent practice among citizens, and as Ross Tarnell argued, the practice and general distrust of mainstream media continued post-1998 and moved to the digital realm (Tarnell, 2020).

This general distrust towards mainstream mass media is probably pertinent due to the fact that the private capital, growth-induced mass media industry, are owned by moguls that, more often than not, have a conspicuous political partisanship, even simultaneously controlling political parties. The partisanship manifested itself through the editorial and subsequently skewed information disseminated by each outlet. The most striking example can be found on the nights following the announcement of the 2014 Presidential Election. TVOne, one of the major television outlets owned by Aburizal Bakrie (then Golkar Chief, part of Prabowo Subianto coalition), was claiming that Prabowo had won the election, backing it up with fake polls to support their claims (Tarnell, 2020).

Social Media, with its rapid-fire circulation and more personal, user-generated characteristics, rose to prominence as the premier platform of information sharing and circulation among people. Social media thus constitute the contemporary "alternative" source, a "discursive space" where citizens "reinstate their function of public control over the administration of state [...] capable of inciting political mobilization and induce political change" (Ritonga and Syahputra, 2019). Due to its personal characteristics, social media users also do not usually adhere to any ethical media conduct, they can easily spread misinformation that can contribute to racism, xenophobia, sexism, etc. And, it is important to note that affect also plays a pivotal part in social media, providing a seedbed for populist rhetoric on what Harsin (2015) termed as "regime of posttruth", characterized by proliferating "truth markets".

"Campaign" of Disinformation: Strategy to Gain Electoral Popularity

Combined with increased distrust towards professional journalism and traditional news media, facilitated by social media "algorithmic enclave" (Lim, 2017), each side stakes its claim as the propagator of truth. Political campaigns and strategy, then, for a considerable part, shifted to the utilization of social media. It has been well-documented, especially during times approaching electoral years, of the rise of paid social media campaigners, the infamous *buzzers*, who produce and disseminate politically skewed content (Tarnell, 2020), where these "online armies" conducted "propaganda wars" amongst candidates running for elections. Ghazali, et.al (2018) observed that since 2008, almost all of the candidates in multiple Regional Election (Pilkada) have employed some sort of "Team of Degrading the Opponents", "Shadow teams" (Ong and Taspell, 2020), a team that is specifically assigned to demean the client's opponent, primarily through hate speech, which constitute a sizable part in disinformation, not less in the Indonesian context. This demonstrated that rampant disinformation is ubiquitous in elections across Indonesia, not exclusive to the 2017 Jakarta Election and the 2019 Presidential and General Election (Lim, 2017; Gianan, 2020; Ong and Taspell, 2020; Mujani, 2020; Iannone, 2022).

Disinformation is largely produced by covert online syndicates, willing to buzz, disseminating bombardments of fake news for any parties interested for a sum of fee.

However, these syndicates are hard to trace and disclose, already cementing their place as a covert industry. Different social media platforms differ in type of disinformation mode. Facebook has become a dominant platform for political advertisement due to its large user base and loose regulation on (political) advertisement. Twitter, on one hand, is dominated by urbanites and oftentimes is the go-to space for discussions among elites, academics, and professionals. But, on the other hand, Twitter is where buzzers oftentimes bombard the platform, using paid buzzers and bots, usually to manipulate *trending topics*. Telegram has become the hotbed for conspiracy theories and political as well as religious propaganda due to its encryption that facilitates evadement from apparatus surveillance. WhatsApp has become the premier platform for unchecked misinformation to spread virulent due to its large user base and its private group system that facilitates information sharing in a small group. (Ong and Taspell 2020).

Disinformation could not only undermine democracy as *qua*, but in Indonesia, the problem has engendered the highly problematic UU ITE (Act No.11/2016 of Electronic Information and Transaction Law), ostensibly formulated by the government to tackle disinformation. But in practice, the law had been abused to apprehend dissenting critics (oft ordinary citizens) towards governments (or powerful parties in general), charged with the highly controversial "rubber articles" of defamation. This presents a subversion towards democratic system, exhibiting blatant censorship and repression of freedom of speech (Ong and Taspell, 2020; Gianan, 2020).

The Prospect of Disinformation in the 2024 Presidential Election

The growth of social media and algorithm technologies has amplified the dissemination of misinformation during electoral cycles. While Twitter was heavily used for spreading misinformation during the 2014 and 2019 elections, the emergence of new social media modes like TikTok, along with features such as Instagram reels, and the expanding video industry of YouTube, has increased the potential for misinformation. In contrast with misinformation on Twitter that was disseminated through text and images, in today's social media era, it has the potential to manifest in audiovisual or video formats, particularly short videos lasting less than a minute. This evolution is marked by TikTok's rising popularity as a user-generated content platform (Jalii, 2021).

Concerns about electoral disinformation via TikTok have grown, especially following the 2022 elections in the Philippines. Experts attribute Ferdinand Marcos Jr.'s victory partly to whitewashing his father's dictatorial history, a regime that once ruled the Philippines. The younger Filipino voters, who are relatively young and may not remember or fully understand Marcos Sr.'s authoritarian regime, are seen as a crucial audience for such disinformation content (Mendoza, 2022). In Malaysia, hate speech and racially or religiously based hoaxes also thrived on TikTok during the 2023 elections (Jalii, 2023).

As Indonesia gears up for its 2024 presidential elections with three pairs of candidates—Anies Baswedan-Muhaimin Iskandar, Ganjar Pranowo-Mahfud MD, and Prabowo Subianto-Gibran Rakabuming—it is evident that these candidates have been utilizing various forms of short video-based social media. There's a possibility that supporters or hired influencers of these candidates might leverage these new social media platforms to spread misinformation. In fact, Mahfud Md, one of the candidates,

claimed to have been a victim of hoaxes on TikTok, where he was falsely accused of ordering the imprisonment of Jusuf Kalla, Indonesia's former vice president (Luxiana, 2023).

However, efforts to counter disinformation are underway, especially by electoral stakeholders. For instance, the Election Supervisory Agency (Bawaslu) has collaborated with TikTok Indonesia to ensure integrity in the 2024 elections. They've agreed on community standards that will serve as the basis for decisions to take down accounts or content on the platform (Bawaslu, 2023). TikTok itself has instituted regulations prohibiting paid political advertisements on its platform and emphasizes that TikTok is not a primary news source. Twitter has its own policies regarding elections, prohibiting content that suppresses participation, misleads about the civic process, or incites offline violence during elections. Instagram, comparatively, tends to be more relaxed regarding political ads and social issues, merely disclosing who paid for the ads.

From the election organizers' perspective, cooperation between Bawaslu, the General Election Commission (KPU), the Ministry of Communication and Information Technology and social media platforms is crucial. Simultaneously, efforts by non-governmental organizations like the Anti-Defamation Society of Indonesia (MAFINDO), consistently debunking circulating hoaxes, also contribute significantly. The key lies in seamless inter-agency coordination and ensuring that social media companies comply with nationally applicable regulations. Addressing the challenges posed by the evolving landscape of social media content requires this coordination, given that these companies have full access to their platforms' algorithms and content.

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