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Research Paper

## Facing a Flood of Lies: Unveiling the Impact of Source Choice on Reliability in Indonesian Hoax Debunking

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*Panel 2*

Technological Challenges and Innovations in Combating Disinformation

# Bhredipta Socarana

## Ministry of Communications and Informatics, Jakarta, Indonesia

Bhredipta is currently working as Expert for Director General of Application Informatics at the Ministry of Communications and Informatics of the Republic of Indonesia. His work primarily intersects between policies, regulations, technology, and innovations. Specifically, he also overseen the Ministry's hoax debunking activities implementation. He was Policy and Substantive Lead of the G20 Digital Economy Working Group, a specialized track of G20 forum discussing digital economy issues. Prior to his time at the Ministry, Bhredipta was a Lawyer specializing on intellectual property, technology, media, and telecommunication issues. Bhredipta obtained his LL.M degree from, University of California Berkeley, USA, and his LL.B/S.H degree from Universitas Gadjah Mada, Indonesia where he also took a semester in Leiden University, the Netherlands. He is a Certified Information Privacy Professional/Europe of International Association of Privacy Professional.

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Editor: Dandy Rafitrandi

## **Facing a Flood of Lies: Unveiling the Impact of Source Choice on Reliability in Indonesian Hoax Debunking**

By: Bhredipta Socarana

Indonesia's fight against hoaxes relies on diverse fact-checkers from government, academia, media, and civil society. While united in debunking disinformation, these groups employ distinct approaches, particularly for politically charged hoaxes. This study delves into how the sources cited for clarification – witness statements, logical reasoning, or lack of evidence – influence the perceived reliability of their reports. Using literature analysis, this research attempts to assess on the potential consequences of hoax debunking report and explore the ethical implications for fact-checkers navigating a complex information landscape. By unravelling the source-reliability link, this research aims to empower fact-checkers, inform policymakers, and equip the public to navigate Indonesia's ever-shifting digital realities.

## Background

The discussion on the effort of disinformation is among one of the most discussed topic nowadays with the increased use of emerging technology with ability to manipulate information easily such as deepfake. The emergence of deepfake technology that has changed the landscape of information verification, becomes one of the serious threats in ensuring information integrity. This happened mostly due to the limited ability of ordinary member of society that commonly relies on the image or video as sources of reliable information.

Before the deepfake era, members of the society would normally require certain information to be supported with image or video as proof of authenticity. Such approach is well understood, given the difficulties of ordinary people without certain skillset to change image or video would hamper the effort to manipulate information. Unfortunately, with the democratization on deepfake technology, the game has now changed.

One of the most notable deepfake incident was in 2022 when a video depicting a figure of Ukrainian President, Volodymyr Zelenskyy, circulated on the internet. The video that made appearance among the public in the middle of Russia's aggression to Ukraine, shows President Zelenskyy's declaring surrender to the Russia's government. Fortunately, the video was later debunked by the President himself, calling out the video depicting his surrender to the Russia as a hoax.

President Zelenskyy's deepfake video was not the only one. Recently in Indonesia, a video depicting Indonesia's President Joko Widodo or Jokowi gave speech in mandarin language was circulated. It turned out the President's original video was manipulated, as President Jokowi gave speech in English. The video was then debunked by the Indonesian Ministry of Communication and Informatic's hoax debunking report. Jokowi's video, while may not have the same degree of severity to Zelenskyy's report, evidences the degree of access of deepfake video.

The democratization of Artificial Intelligence (AI) technology has proven to increase the number of incidents and controversies. In comparison to the incident happened in 2012, the number of incidents involving AI has increased for 26 times. Many of the incidents involved the disruption of information integrity, compared to other incident such a cybersecurity and other type of threats.

Given such background, the effort to ensure the information integrity among of the member of public thus is important. Especially on the situation requiring a heightened response due to the importance of the situation such as general election which may further polarize society that has been divided naturally by the climate of election.

One of the approaches to respond to disinformation is by debunking the false information circulated in the public. Unlike other sophisticated method that involves the deployment of technology such as content take down facilitated by AI technology, debunking effort is mostly done through manual activities. A debunking report plays pivotal role in orchestrating anti-disinformation effort, as it provides a counter narrative to the false information circulated around the public.

Many has debated on whether issuing hoax debunking reports remain an effective measure given the massive and a never-ending circulation of information disorder. A US-based news publisher was initially very active to issue clarification and to debunk disinformation as its effort to maintain information integrity. Nonetheless, such effort is now defunct due to its opinion of seeing the effort is ineffective.

Unfortunately, as of now there is yet another solution that corresponds the issue of information integrity. With society would remain prone to disinformation, considering the disparity of digital literacy rate, making many members of society are susceptible to disinformation. As such, hoax debunking report issuance remains one of the use approaches in countering disinformation at present.

The effort to orchestrate the initiative of issuing debunking report still attract many members of societies. From government agencies issuing debunking report, media publishers, not-for-profit entity, to civil society initiatives. For instance in Indonesia, [\*]. The varied background of entity issuing debunking report or more popularly known as fact-checker has resulted with a varied types of debunking report whether it is in its writing, business process, counter resources as well as the accountability.

Considering the varied degree of such background, as an attempt to ensure information integrity, it would be important for the debunked report and its issuer to be reliable and trustworthy. Especially, since many of the element of a debunked report will be reliant to the internal process of the report issuer.

This writing thus will seek to investigate how the practices of various debunking report attempt to establish its credibility as way of ensuring reliability of its report. This writing will focus on how the debunking report, as fact-checker's outputs, attempt to support information integrity through presenting reliable debunking, denying false claim circulated as part of disinformation.

This writing will limit its sources only to disinformation circulated in Indonesia, specifically on politically-related hoaxes circulated around 2022 - 2023, given the brevity of resources. Nonetheless, the potential magnitude of politically related hoaxes to the society is another contributing factors of having the limit of the writing to hoaxes involving political issues. As it was hoaxes related to political issues that had shown to Indonesian community the real impact of hoaxes resulting with society polarization back in 2019 during governor election process. Some references will be made to hoaxes related covid-19 as during such period shows the 'clash' between covid deniers and fact checkers in term of influencing general society.

Accordingly, through this writing, it is wished such occasion may be prevented through having more discussion on the effort to improve reliability of hoax debunking report thus society trust to the report increased. Furthermore, this writing is hoped to be able to initiate discussion on how relevant stakeholders shall engage in a discussion to minimize the disparity of practices in fact-checking activities as a mean to strengthen information integrity.

### **The Quest for Hoax-Debunking Report's Reliability**

As one of the means to counter disinformation, a debunking hoax report would be required to be able directly challenge the false information spread in a disinformation. This is important especially considering that within a disinformation narrative, the false information often involves narrative that attempted its audience believes such information to be accurate. Despite its motivation, the belief of the audience would thus trigger to do certain action or inaction.

One of the overwhelming situations where the 'battle' on convincing audience on the trustworthiness of information, specifically in Indonesia, was during Covid-19 pandemic. Regardless the massive public communication effort orchestrated back then, massive numbers of disinformation circulated. Such disinformation came in many topics and issues. The data from the Ministry of Communications and Informatics of Republic Indonesia recorded from hundreds of

hoaxes issues on covid-19. Such issues were narrated into various sub-topics. They were ranging from the narratives that covid was engineered in a lab of a country, covid-19 was part of global conspiracy, until a narrative dictating that covid-19 did not actually exist as it was part of hospital scam.

To response such conditions, many fact-checking initiatives issued its hoax debunking reports. Using their own preferred platforms, each of the initiatives that came from different stakeholders debunked various covid-19 hoaxes and orchestrated the counter-narratives. For instance, the Mafindo which is known for their turnbackhoax.id platform consistently issued numbers of debunking report. The Ministry of Communications and Informatics, together with Jakarta Province Authority (known through its platform jalahoaks.go.id) and West Java Province Authority (known through its platform saberhoaks.go.id) were among of the government's office actively issued debunking report on covid-19 hoaxes with the support of the Ministry of Health and other institutions. From media both online and offline were also actively involved in the effort of countering covid-19 disinformation.

Unfortunately, despite such effort, our society remain doubtful to the information and counter disinformation narrative issues. One of the most tragic incidents to happen during covid-19 in Indonesia was many of individuals were not trusting the information that covid-19 was real. Instead, many of them believes that covid-19 was a made up symptoms by the hospital for its profit. As its result once such individuals arrived too later for treatment and had to pass away. Similar conditions also happened in Iran, when hundreds of individuals were intoxicated for believing that consuming eye drop medicine.

From the above situations it can be seen that debunking report plays important role in the society to strengthen as well convince public on the accurate information. It is thus crucial for a debunking report to be reliable as it will have the role to challenge the existing information circulated in the public.

The role of 'challenger' for debunking report also comes with a risk. With many of disinformation circulation happened to be piggybacked by nefarious motives, debunking report and its organization also prone to threats and malicious activities. As once told by the presidium of Mafindo, one of its fact-checkers was targeted by a malicious actor that was presumed to be related to the fact-checkers activities issuing hoax debunking report. The situation also happened in Spain, where factchecker of Newtral.es and Maldita.es which area part of International Fact Checker Network were receiving harassment from one of political party in Spain. The assault took place as the result of Whastapp's rule of limiting message, which neither fact checker had anything to do with such decisions except they were part of Whatsapp's parents, Facebook, fact-checking partners.

The debunking hoax report thus was not only as a medium to circulate counter disinformation narratives. Rather it also embodies and represents the issuing factchecker organization, even the individual of carrying out factchecking activities. Of which to some extend also relates to the safety and security of the factchecker themselves.

Putting both situation on the political context happened at present, while the landscape is more fluid compared to covid-19 situation, where during covid-19 the battleground was between covid-19 deniers and non-deniers, the current Indonesia's election also not prevented from the danger of disinformation. As its consequence, the necessity of issuing hoax debunking report would remain exist, and with the issuance of hoax debunking report, the position of hoax debunking



report as challenger to disinformation that may lead to factchecker being at risk also persists. Such condition thus highlights the importance of hoax debunking to be reliable.

## Debating the Hoax-Debunking Report Reliability

Given the absence of a uniformed standard of a hoax debunking report, the effort to determine reliability of a hoax debunking report would be challenging. Nonetheless, from the practice of hoax debunking, it can be observed that it would rely on the sources of debunking report, the issuing organization origin, as well the conformity of the debunking report with other sources of information. This can be seen from the uniformed practice of debunking report in Indonesia, which each of a hoax debunking report would contain the following elements:

1. The information on the issuing organizer

The information about the issuing organizer normally will be seen as name of the issuing organizer, brand, and ‘corporate profile’ of the issuing organizer when it creates a special content/post on social media. If the hoax debunking report is published through website online, it might insert information on the identity of factchecker, and contact information for public to consult on certain disinformation.

2. The alleged false information narratives and its explanation

This information will provide the context for the reader in terms of false narratives or false claim circulated. The most common practice on providing the false information as a context is to provide screenshot of the false information, and reference link to the false information. While there is yet to be consensus on how to provide snippet of the false information, some factchecker initiative focuses on the content of the false information rather than the identity of the account or internet user circulating the false information, thus having the identity of the user blurred or cropped out.

3. The counter narratives (or clarification)

This part of the debunking report is where the analysis from the factchecker is presented. While there is no common agreed practice on how the analysis is made and presented, several of factchecker initiative normally would make reference to support the analysis they present using several sources such as official statement from government institution, the actual individual in questions, as well as information from the media. Nonetheless, it can be seen from some occasion that in carrying out factchecking activities there are no sources or evidence supporting the clarification the factchecker proposed. This might happen if the false information is far stretch from the accurate information. Such condition may occur if the false information presents a doctored documentation or a made-up narratives that often beyond common sense.

4. The sources or references to support the debunked report.

This section is normally placed at the end of the debunked report. It would contain URL, links, or other source of verifiable information such as news media, government account, corporate official website or government website. For instance, the factchecking unit from the Ministry of Communications and Informatics normally would receive a letter providing clarification from entity being subject of false narratives.

While there is no agreed reference, on the standard of hoax debunking report, most of hoax debunking report circulated in Indonesia would hold the same reference. Some deviation may appear on how the clarification narrative is crafted, as it would entirely be subject to the writing style of the factchecker and the issuing organization. Certain illustration and imagery may also be different, depending on the issuing organization.

Nonetheless, the formula remains the same, a clarification would be paired with the disinformation that has been circulated. The clarification would play the major role of providing clarification to the disinformation. This is where the ‘magic’ takes place. The factchecker would dedicate this section to present its result of research and analysis countering the disinformation narratives. Such clarification is expected to convince reader that the information claimed as a disinformation is false and not to be trusted.

Based on the existing practice, the clarification narratives could be classified into three major categories as follows:

1) Citing direct clarification

This type of clarification refers to the relevant individual or organization that related to the false information circulated. For instance, a clarification issued by a public figure or their spokesperson on certain information circulated.

2) Citing indirect information contravening with the false narratives

This type of reference usually comes in the form of analysis from pre-existing information before the false information circulated that is more accurate, credible, and directly challenging the false information narratives. Several examples on this type of reference is a past hoax debunking report, laws and regulations that prevents subject of false information to do the action claimed by the narratives, or other types of similar information.

3) Claiming that a narrative is false based on the deductive analysis.

This type of reference would be the source of disinformation counter narratives where the factchecker had to deduct its analysis and given the absence of supporting information, certain narratives is claimed to be false. This type of reference would normally be used if there is no supporting information that challenges or provide rebuttal to the false information, nonetheless since the false information goes beyond common sense, the deduction may be made. Example on this type of clarification narratives may be made in the form ‘given the absence of supporting information, thus this information is false’, or wordings in the similar manner. This reference can be found when certain information is doctored or manipulated, however, it does not bother the subject/individual being claimed with the false narrative thus such individual does not provide any clarification.

From the above categories, the first categories would be the strongest sources and references a factchecker may use. As factchecker would rely on the information it can gather from reliable sources when writing its factchecking report, the direct clarification would be the most reliable source of information. Whether the information issued by the source of authority (individual or entity) is accurate or not, would not be discussed given the constraint in this writing. However, it will be the entity source of information that is responsible on the statement that they made.



The second categories would be strong sources and references a factchecker may use as well. This is considering the information cited here remains attributable to certain source of information. Nonetheless, prior to make any point of reference to this type of sources, a factchecker normally would base the argument to debunk by referring to trusted or reliable sources such as a newspaper, registered media, or other authoritative sources.

The third categories would be the challenging one. On this type of reference, the factchecker would attribute the counter narrative to the disinformation to themselves. This is since the nature of the clarification that was deducted from the other existing information, with no direct relevance to the disinformation circulated. This condition may happen where there is no directly attributable source of authority for factchecker to refer to, due to the far stretch nature of the narratives.

The use of the third categories would thus putting the hoax debunking report, compared to the other source, more prone for challenge. With the nature of information that is irreversible, it would place the factchecker and issuing organization at a disadvantage through using the third categories. Such disadvantage, in addition of the impact to the potential level of trust from the society, as well as the protection of factchecker, would also be the conditions where the information countered has been modified. As its consequence, it may further impact the reliability of the hoax debunking report.

Furthermore, with the unfortunate fact on the field where certain legal provisions are targeting the spread of misinformation, the absence of attributable reference may put factchecker on a difficult position to argue that its clarification is based on the fact. Especially amid of the political landscape where information circulated is more subjective, and complex to be debunked (compared to covid-19) factchecker must carefully select its option of resources when issuing debunking report.

### **Overcoming the gap**

As part of this writing, it is intended to seek how to fill the gap on the need to increase a reliable hoax debunking report. As it has been established the role of debunking report in the society filled with disinformation remains apparent. With the risk faced by the factchecker, and challenges when carrying out factchecking especially in providing clarification would remain the gap exist which worth to be explored to bridge.

The need of a more reliable, as it has been explored in the previous section revolves on the people's trust in believing the debunking report is providing accurate information. This would be challenging if the issuing organization holds lesser degree of credential compared to the source of authoritative circulating the false narratives. Public would tend to believe information from entity or sources that they can trust, especially amid of the false narratives circulated, the campaign on information literacy requests public to refer to the reliable and verifiable sources.

Nonetheless, given the hoax debunking activities tend to be voluntarily in nature, except the one ran by the government, it is still a long and winding road ahead to convince the society. Unlike news media organization which is bind under same ethic code and under journalism regulatory framework that has been well established in Indonesia, the fact checking activities are yet to do that. The comparison will go more extreme if it is being compared to factchecking activities carried out by the government, as it has all the government credential to convince the society.

As such, to develop more trust from the society, one of the alternative if to have the same degree of accreditation to at least what the media has. This alternative would provide more credential for the factchecking initiatives could be verified by member of the society. To that extend, once

factchecker initiative has attained similar degree of ‘credential’ to media, it might also begin advocacy report to request for certain immunity the media attained. In practice, it is observed that several of factchecking initiative from non-government entity has been member of International Fact-Checker Network (IFCN) and publish its accreditation. This may be a good start to initiate a same level of accreditation, although the government factchecking initiative may not be able to join IFCN considering the IFCN’s requirement for accreditation.

The effort to obtain and display IFCN accreditation nevertheless should also go along with the public communication on what IFCN is. Considering the diverse demography of society, especially in Indonesia, information regarding IFCN also needs to be communicated. This way, the recognition obtained by the factchecking initiatives could have a better possibility in convincing the reliability of hoax debunking report issued by the initiatives.

As part of the campaign getting familiarize the society with the IFCN, a campaign on informing alternative source of trusted media is also worth to explore. As part of digital literacy activities, the narratives circulated on the need for the public to find accurate information from the factchecking initiatives. This approach has been started during the covid-19 pandemic through gathering the factchecking effort under one link making it accessible and being repeated for the current general election.

Of course, the effort to increase reliability would also be benefitting from the collaboration created by the relevant stakeholder from jointly resharing the debunking report made by one and another, as well carrying out joint digital literacy. Through collaboration each of the factchecking initiative would support other initiatives to ensure its sustainability and discoverability. It thus allows factchecking initiative to be known by the society, providing the opportunity to increase trust and reliability.

## **Conclusion**

In conclusion, as Indonesia stands on the precipice of its upcoming general election in 2024, the landscape is marred by the pervasive influence of disinformation, intricately woven into the fabric of political narratives, misinformation, and technological manipulation. The escalating threat of hoaxes, fueled by the advancements in deepfake technology and other deceptive tactics, casts a looming shadow over the democratic process, raising crucial questions about the integrity of information and the credibility of political discourse.

The advent of deepfake technology has significantly altered the dynamics of information verification, posing an unprecedented challenge to the authenticity of political communication. The democratization of artificial intelligence has ushered in an era where manipulating images and videos has become increasingly accessible, threatening the reliability of information. The recent case of the deepfake video involving Ukrainian President Zelenskyy serves as a stark reminder of how these deceptive tools can be employed to fabricate political narratives, exploiting vulnerable moments, especially in the midst of geopolitical tensions.

Closer to home, Indonesia has witnessed its share of disinformation challenges, exemplified by the manipulated video of President Jokowi delivering a speech in Mandarin. While not as severe as the Zelenskyy case, this incident underscores the far-reaching access of deepfake videos and their potential impact on political narratives. As the nation approaches a critical juncture in its democratic journey, the prevalence of such deceptive tactics threatens to erode public trust, heighten societal polarization, and disrupt the electoral process.

The urgency to counter disinformation in the lead-up to the general election is underscored by the historical context of the 2019 governor election, where political hoaxes played a significant role in shaping public opinion. The lessons learned from that period highlight the tangible consequences of unchecked disinformation, which can sway voters, create divisions, and compromise the democratic ideals that underpin the nation.

In this intricate landscape, the role of debunking reports emerges as a linchpin in the fight against disinformation. These reports, issued by a diverse array of entities ranging from government agencies to civil society initiatives, serve as crucial counter-narratives to the falsehoods that permeate political discourse. However, their effectiveness is a subject of ongoing debate, particularly given the relentless nature of disinformation circulation.

As the quest for reliable debunking reports becomes paramount, there is a need to navigate the nuances of Indonesia's political terrain, especially in the context of the approaching 2024 general election. The absence of a uniformed standard for hoax debunking reports complicates the determination of their reliability. Yet, within this complexity lies the opportunity for collaboration among stakeholders – fact-checking initiatives, media organizations, and government bodies – to establish a more standardized accreditation process for fact-checkers. Such an accreditation could not only enhance their credibility but also offer a level of protection in the face of potential threats and harassment, especially in a politically charged environment.

Furthermore, the multifaceted nature of disinformation challenges demands a comprehensive approach. Digital literacy campaigns, aimed at empowering citizens to discern accurate information from manipulated narratives, must be intensified. As the nation braces for the impact of political hoaxes on the electoral landscape in 2024, collaboration becomes a key strategy to fortify the reliability of debunking reports. Fact-checking initiatives, when united, can amplify their impact, support each other's sustainability, and collectively contribute to building public trust.

In the intricate dance between political nuance and information integrity, Indonesia's upcoming general election in 2024 serves as a pivotal arena. It is within this arena that the nation must navigate the complexities of disinformation, strive for reliable debunking reports, and fortify its resilience against the corrosive impact of manipulated narratives on its democratic fabric. Through nuanced, collaborative efforts, Indonesia can not only weather the storm of disinformation but emerge stronger, with a democratic foundation that stands firm against the tides of misinformation.

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