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Gaming Democracy: AI, Buzzers, and the Limits of Platform Governance

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Gaming Democracy: AI, Buzzers, and the Limits of Platform Governance

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This paper examines the impact of artificial intelligence (AI) on democracy through Indonesia's influence industry, or buzzer industry. Drawing on ethnographic fieldwork and interviews with buzzers in Greater Jakarta (2023 and 2025), we move beyond AI's role in spectacular electoral moments to examine its place in the buzzer industry's everyday operations. We situate AI within the broader marketisation of publics through social media—and, by extension, its manipulation—where visibility is determined by metrics and influence is a function of capital.

We argue that AI accentuates the "algorithmic marketing culture" of social media platforms. Both the persistence of the buzzer industry and the uptake of AI are logical, automated outcomes of internet publics ordered by visibility gaming. In this sense, "disinformation" offers limited analytical and practical use for addressing the structural problem. Critiques of AI must move beyond symptomatic concerns, such as deepfakes, to interrogate the market ordering of publics as exemplified by the symbiosis of AI, buzzers, and platform architectures—an arrangement largely overlooked in platform governance debates. Thus, by foregrounding this structural issue, we reframe AI's democratic impact as a publics-ordering concern, and offer alternative models for internet publics that potentially resist the commodification of attention.

Keywords: buzzer industry, influence operations, marketing culture, internet publics, platform governance

Rafi (not his real name) was proud. Two years prior, his buzzing firm was still looking for ways to streamline artificial intelligence (AI) in their workflow. By mid-2025, as generative AI tools became ubiquitous in Indonesia, Rafi boasted that his operation had been "systematised" (*disistem*) with AI—which, in his understanding, also included other forms of automation such as screen synchronisation. Despite the AI systematisation, his firm's work remained labor-intensive. Upstairs, his staff ran multiple sockpuppet accounts, their social media windows open side by side with generative AI screens, juggling multiple clients of all sorts in one day. Some worked for boosting press coverage for a local parliamentarian; others worked for inflating a TikTok influencer's metrics; while a select few busied themselves posing as locals supporting military operations in conflict areas. Stitching together human-machine labour through the use of AI, his team ran a semi-manual operation that sustains Indonesian social media publics.

What is the impact of AI on democracy as a form of popular constituency? Attempting to answer this question, much of the existing concern pertaining to AI revolves around the discussion on deepfakes and synthetic audio in creating seemingly authentic disinformation. This article argues otherwise: instead of starting from the surface, we must dive into the flow of infrastructure itself. To ask about the role AI plays, we must first inquire the basic question: what happens when public life is mediated and constituted by platforms? Then, what role does AI play in the continuity and transformation (Rudyansjah, 2009) of such social media publics?

We identify two principal logics of platform-mediated publics in Indonesia. First is the logic of visibility. Social media platforms curate visibility through algorithms, shaping who gains attention and who does not. An important aspect of such "visibility game" (Cotter, 2019) however is its artificial manufacture, or, we posit, deception of its infrastructure. To be visible in the Indonesian market is to deal with deception: follower inflation, message flooding, dissent drowning, content baiting, and other forms of coordinated means to capture attention. As we will discuss below, this "algorithmic marketing culture" (Lim, 2024) is not limited to electoral politics or public policy; it structures the market of attention within social media publics in Indonesia.

Second is the logic of inflation. Platforms survive through advertising; and advertisers require users' activity. But where does the activity come from? While the wealth of users boasted by Big Tech companies seem to generate already massive activities, in the Global South market, visible engagement is also a result of manufactured deception. Social media platforms, which structure individuals as channels for marketing and content generation, rely on those most

visible users—influencers. Their visibility often depends on inflated metrics: fake followers, purchased engagement, and coordinated amplification. Once an account gains traction, "organic" participation follows, and thus becomes valuable to platforms (Bogost, 2022; Ong & Cabañes, 2018; Woolley & Howard, 2019). In other words, the market for fakes sustains platforms.[1] In Indonesia and beyond, a parallel economy of "paraplatforms" has formed to generate attention, manage metrics, and simulate life online; and in this case, their relationship with platforms is mutually beneficial (Weltevrede & Lindquist, 2024).

By understanding these two principal logics, we thus argue that, more than simply producing seemingly convincing deepfakes, AI is a part of the larger fabrication of visibility and activity. From the platform side, AI is deployed to optimise content and filter visibility, including from content moderation; at the same time, influence operators deploy AI to simulate authenticity, inflate participation, and steer perception. The result is not the breakdown of democracy, but its modulation into a system of continuously engineered consent, and participation becomes performance of content.

This article takes the case of Indonesia's influence operators, known as buzzers, or cybertroopers, to examine how social media publics are manufactured and maintained, and how platforms are kept alive. Buzzers or cybertroopers, we argue, are not just activated in "events" (Trouillot, 2015) such as elections, protests and violent outbreak, or controversial policymaking—moments in which sets or assemblages of narratives attract public attention and are circulated and remediated. Rather, they are a permanent, life-sustaining feature of social media publics in Indonesia. Rafi's office, one among countless others working under the rubrics of "digital marketing" or "IT consulting" (see also Lindquist, 2022; Rasidi, 2023), is proof that (manipulative) social media business never stops.

This article also underscores the conceptual limits of "disinformation". The classic definition of disinformation as "false content intended to cause harm" (Wardle & Derakhshan, 2018) fails to capture structural reality. It hinges on proving intent, assumes individual malice, and reduces complex ecosystems to binary oppositions of true and false. It ignores facts as a political and socially negotiated constitution (Latour & Woolgar, 1986), and erases the long-standing continuum between spin, public relations, and propaganda by treating "disinformation" as an unacceptable anomaly in democracy. In actuality, those continuum has been a feature exemplified in capitalist democracy, as seen in the tobacco industry and

[1] We are, however, also cognizant of how different social media platforms form different technical relationships with fake accounts, as we will discuss below.

climate science denialism, both of which spin doubt and do not necessarily involve false information (see Noor, 2025; Oreskes & Conway, 2010). Thus, we instead frame this article under neighboring concepts of influence operations and computational propaganda (Bashyakarla et al., 2019; Woolley & Howard, 2019). This definition also better captures what buzzers actually do across politics and beyond since at least 2014 (Rasidi, in press): to shape perception and engineer consent.

This article draws from fieldwork and interviews conducted in Greater Jakarta in 2023 and 2025. Our 2025 research examined how buzzer operations changed from the early days of generative AI to its mundane widespread use in Indonesia. We focus on three buzzer groups: one tracing its roots to the 2012 Jakarta election, and two that emerged during the Covid-19 pandemic. At the centre of our article is a firm led by Rafi, a young entrepreneur from an urban poor background who groomed his operation during the pandemic. We explore the uneasy symbiosis between platforms and the intermediaries who feed them: platforms use AI to optimise content and enforce moderation; buzzers use it to simulate authenticity and steer narratives. But before diving into AI, we begin with examining the work models and its change after the pandemic.

The Post-Pandemic "Bootstrap" Buzzers

The buzzer industry originated from the advertising industry (Rudyansjah & Rasidi, 2022). The practice extends the earlier forms of “paid blogging,” where companies paid bloggers to promote products. In 2009, as Twitter gained traction among the urban middle class, many early buzzers were bloggers who shifted to social media platforms—then known as “micro-blogging.” Their task was to simulate grassroots enthusiasm, and they were organised by followers' reach. Those with the widest audience became anchors; others amplified them by commenting, retweeting or resharing, and liking. They also generate posts that flood timelines and push hashtags. Campaign coordinators manage the operation to make it appear spontaneous. The term “buzzer,” initially, referred to this work: making a “buzz” on timelines.[2] Only later did the industry develop formal classifications, classifying ones with the highest reach into “key opinion leader” and the lowest into “nano-influencer.”

[2] In 2013, even well-known figures like stand-up comedian Ernest Prakasa (@ernestprakasa) and blogger Raditya Dika (@radityadika) were known as “buzzers.” By today’s standards, based on their reach and engagement, they would be classified as “key opinion leaders,” but such a term didn't exist at the time. See Paramaditha (2013); “Rezeki buzzer di media sosial kian melimpah” (2013).

It can be argued, then, since its inception, buzzer work has always involved deception. The "buzz" was designed to appear as ordinary users' grassroot enthusiasm. Buzzers inflated engagement, manufactured visibility, and, consequently, downplayed other narratives. As the idea of buzzing operation is to maintain the appearance of authenticity, projects were typically kept secret.

Despite the relative secrecy, however, the early model was relatively straightforward. Clients hired an agency, which then managed a group of buzzers. This changed in 2012, when the model entered electoral politics during Jakarta's gubernatorial election between Joko Widodo (Jokowi) and Fauzi Bowo. Political consultants, working with advertising agencies and bloggers, treated political candidates as commercial brands (Rasidi, in press; Saraswati, 2018; Tomsa & Setijadi, 2018). Buzzers accustomed to product promotion were then involved in electoral campaigning. To mobilise wider support, Jokowi's team created JASMEV (Jokowi-Ahok Social Media Volunteers), recruiting opinionated social media users as volunteers (relawan politik). These "social media army" of volunteers were trained to use multiple accounts: they ran not only their main accounts but also sockpuppets—five to twenty each—to saturate the feed (see Rasidi forthcoming).

As buzzer campaigning became more entrenched in electoral politics when Jokowi ran for presidency in 2014, the work model became more complex as well. Agencies no longer coordinated buzzers directly. Employment became layered and subcontracted. New models emerged: political parties grooming their own teams and campaigns building informal hierarchies. Ong and Tapsell (2022) outlined typology of four production models for disinformation campaigns: (1) state-sponsored, (2) in-house staff, (3) outsourced advertising and public relations, and (4) clickbait-driven. While their typology focuses on disinformation campaigns, we find it useful as a starting ground to explain the work model of buzzer campaigns—or influence operations more broadly—as defined earlier.

In light of shifts that have taken place since the Covid-19 pandemic, here we expand the third model, the advertising and public relations model. The buzzer industry expanded rapidly during the pandemic, as public life centred online (Rasidi & Wijayanto, 2021). Coming after Jokowi's 2019 re-election—when the mobilisation of buzzers drew public attention—the pandemic opened up even broader opportunities. Many newcomers, often with no prior ties to political volunteerism or professional advertising, entered the field. But they saw the growing need for digital messaging. Unlike the earlier buzzers, many of these new buzzer entrepreneurs are young and came from lower-middle-class backgrounds, learning

technology as "autodidakt" (see also Lindquist, 2022) through inexpensive all-night sessions in internet cafes or individual smartphones.

This model, that we call the bootstrap model, follows the advertising and public relations model, where they serve as outsourced contractors. As with their more middle-class peers, they operate multiple accounts, and may collaborate, or manage their own, homeless media accounts (Riyanto, 2024), that is, accounts posing as news outlets but without legible legal entities or identities, often with hyperlocal content and context.

But, unlike those embedded in elite networks, these newcomers lack the political-economic access, and are unable to wield collegial relationships (*relasi*) with business and politicians. They rely instead on tactics of online visibility to attract clients and secure contracts: from search engine optimised (SEO) websites—where they brand themselves as "digital marketing," "IT consulting," or, more explicitly, "buzzer services"—to sponsored ads on social media. For recruitment, while they similarly tap into kinship or friendship networks as in earlier buzzer organisations, they may also scale it through Telegram or WhatsApp blasts. One of us (Michelle Anindya) even received a random message from an unknown number via WhatsApp, which turned out to be a buzzer job offer.

	Features
Elite model	Composed of middle-class, highly educated individuals with access to business, politics, or both. Emerged from two roots that converged in past electoral cycles: (1) veteran advertisers and bloggers from the early days of Indonesian internet, and (2) political volunteers who built patronage networks with elites in parties, government, and/or media conglomerates. Their access to these networks is central to securing contracts.
Bootstrap model	Founded by lower-middle class entrepreneurs with limited or no prior experience in advertising or buzzer work, and lacking the social and financial capital to maintain connection with established elites. Most formed their operations between 2019 and 2020, during the election buzzer boom and Covid-19. They gain clients through technical tactics: SEO, sponsored ads, and mass recruitment via WhatsApp or Telegram blasts.

Table 1. Post-pandemic work models of the buzzer industry.

As they rely on technical tactics of visibility, they may deal directly with clients—such as local government staff or small brands seeking to boost their reach. They may also be

subcontracted through second, third, or even lower tiers by other agencies, including those in the earlier advertising model. Like other forms of digital cottage industry in Indonesia such as fake follower services (Lindquist, 2022), many operate from home offices. Some convert parts of their house into workspaces; others repurpose entire homes in low-to-middle income residential areas as offices. In some cases, like Rafi's, they maintain in-house "troopers" on site with regular salaries. Others coordinate their operators remotely through WhatsApp or Telegram groups, paid only per task basis. Workforce-wise, their operators are similarly lower-middle class, previously working as ride-hailing drivers, internet cafe attendants, or truck drivers; young stay-at-home mothers, with spare time and experience growing their social media visibility, have also become an increasingly significant part of the bootstrap model's remote workforce (Alfajri et al., 2025; Rasidi, 2023). Buzzing work has become so normalised in an economy that has produced a large demographic of precarious young workers, many of whom now turn to buzzer work in droves.

Deceptive by design

In Indonesia, there is a common phrase for posts seen as controversial, bizarre, or exaggeratedly entertaining: "simply a content" (*cuma konten*). This seemingly cynical shorthand for something emotionally enticing captures not only Indonesian style of reflective browsing, but also perfectly describes what Merlyna Lim (2024) calls the "algorithmic marketing culture." Our first argument is that buzzers exploit, or game (Cotter, 2019), the logic of visibility that defines social media publics. To understand how AI operates within this principal logic, we must first understand how these publics are shaped by the everyday experience of platform mediation.

Critiquing early techno-optimism that saw social media as a tool for crowd wisdom, Lim argues that social media algorithms are engineered with the intention to serve the demands of revenue generation through targeted advertising. They are constantly recalibrated to fit the logic of marketing: maximising reach, engagement, and ad performance. In this imperative, users are not simply consumers but also raw material—packaged and sold to advertisers and third parties. The core function of social media, in other words, is to incentivise users to generate data, extract user data, use it to deliver ads, and generate more data to sustain the cycle (Doctorow, 2023; Hwang, 2020).

For that revenue generating purpose, Lim notes that "algorithms make no distinction between content produced and circulated by commercial brands and ordinary users" (Lim, 2024, p. 8). This argument is important. It is reflected in the Indonesian expression "simply a

content": the self that is represented on social media is both a personage and a result of labor of production, created to be circulated and consumed. Behind each post, there isn't only the labor of creation, but also a secondary labour that sustains its reach, makes it visible, and keeps it circulating. That is the work of the buzzer industry, and it is precisely this work that AI technologies are built to optimise.

When AI enters buzzer operations, it supports work already structured around automation. Buzzing has long relied on tools that schedule posts, sync screens, and manage engagement. AI is simply an upgrade—streamlining, scaling, and refining tasks that were already semi-automated. Its use is not primarily to produce disinformation. As many buzzers themselves note, disinformation is only a tactic, not a goal. One can argue that researchers' and activists' focus on disinformation reflects more of a moral panic on the changing structure of media practices (Altay et al., 2023; Carlson, 2020; Rasidi, 2021), thus treating disinformation as exceptional, rather than seeing it as embedded in the everyday logic of algorithmic marketing culture where falsity is simply an attention capture by other means.

As such, to thrive in this public structure is to deceive by design: to capture attention, hold it, and convert it into visibility. The first victim of such deception is the users; second, the infrastructure.

AI-Powered Workflow

During Indonesia's 2024 Presidential election–just one year after Open AI released its revolutionary generative AI tools, activists and journalists fear that generative AI will completely alter how disinformation is packaged, bringing it to its most extreme level, producing information chaos that threatens democracy. To an extent, several generative AI posts, which are blatantly apparent in its deceiving intent, did raise concern. This includes an image of Indonesia's deceased authoritarian President Soeharto criticizing President Jokowi's administration.

Netizens, however, were quick to point out the technical quirks–such as the animated lips or flat voice–within the videos, and a realisation that generative AI can be used to produce content that is borderline bizarre and absurd, even in the political context, soon follows. The comment sections are quickly filled with netizens calling out that this is a blatant false content. In other words, netizens today are not easily deceived.

It's a different scenario with Prabowo-Gibran's cutesy avatars, where the politicians are portrayed like cuddly dolls, to impress the younger generation and to steer Prabowo's image

away from a military strongman. This 'toxic positivity' approach (Tapsell, 2024) isn't quite a dis- or misinformation. Like marketing, it is a bold rebranding strategy that visualises the desired public image of both politicians–then takes them to the extreme. Even though their avatars are obviously made by generative AI, it wasn't because of the use of generative AI that makes this rebranding successful. The visualisation could have been made by human illustrators with pen and pencil, and it would still yield the same result. It was the thinking and strategizing effort that carried most of the load in its act to deceive.

An effective AI, then, like algorithms, is subtle. It can be very much buried in the process, supplementing the existing mechanism to sway public opinion. To assume that generative AI is the primary machine behind misinformation, as many feared, is to oversimply the logic of how buzzers think about misinformation–or perhaps, more precisely, influence.

So how do buzzers use AI? There are three processes where buzzers primarily use AI: for content creation, content production, and narrative circulation and amplification.

First, AI streamlines content production. An effective content on social media doesn't solely rely on visual information, but must be supplanted by audio information and text to make it even easier and quicker to digest. Bite-sized content often comes with audio narration and text that mirrors the script. Traditionally, this process would involve script-making, script-recording, scouting the voice actor, and mixing and editing. It can take a whole day to generate a single video that is less than a minute long. Using tools such as ElevanLabs, buzzers could simply submit their written script to the software, which would then transform it into an AI-generated audio recording. The whole process can take mere minutes.

Platforms such as TikTok or YouTube have also experimented with auto-generated subtitles to accompany the video. YouTube has even launched a feature where videos are automatically translated into the language based on the user's location. The translation appears as audio and subtitles. All-in-one video editor CapCut, which has become an essential tool for marketers and buzzers, also advertises itself as powered by AI.

Second, AI streamlines narrative circulation and amplification. The same AI-generated tools can also be used for outright deceit in the purpose of skewing public perception on certain subjects. One of the simplest use cases of this is using AI to translate Indonesian into local language. This is a critical advantage as the ease to hyperlocalise content can not only make the narrative more convincing to the local people, but also insulate the narrative from the broader public discourse that doesn't have the linguistic access to that narrative. The story is less likely to travel outside the region that uses that language, and even if it travels, average

Jakartans won't have the immediate knowledge to unpack the content. In this scenario, the use of AI to translate language into local dialect can greatly assist buzzers to intercept any issues at a remote location.

Some of the buzzers at Rafi's office were working on exactly this project. Even though none of the buzzers were born or grew up in the area they were working on, they were confident to use AI tools to produce content in that local dialect. The buzzers rely on the clients' judgement to assess its accuracy before it's posted to the public.

The same group of buzzers also make their own clips from the clients' vast collection of footage, which some of them are simply recorded by smartphones, to create their own montage or collage to push a certain narrative. By completely omitting the context into which the footage was produced, then stitching different parts of footage together to make content, buzzers are producing a new narrative. The vast resources of tools in the AI toolbox allow more possibilities and variations that buzzers can create from the same pool of content.

Third, AI speeds up the creative process to produce new accounts. At Rafi's office, each buzzer needs to make new accounts everyday to offset those that are banned. Not only is this a time-intensive process, it is also creatively draining. Buzzers should come up with, not just a series of photos, but a simple backstory and some characterisation that will allow the fake accounts to appear real.

This is getting harder to do each day. Netizens can now triangulate fake accounts quickly: if it's a private account, follows a large number of people, has very few to zero posts, has very few followers, then it's most likely a fake profile. This is a simple rule that a marketing manager uses to quickly assess whether the buzzers they hire use real or fake accounts.

But building a fake account takes more than showing what appears on the profile. One buzzer used ChatGPT to help him generate profile names along with an 'aesthetic' (a Gen Z term for something appealing or stylish) bio line that fits the demographic of urban youngsters in Jakarta. ChatGPT then gives various alternatives, from a contemplative young man who spends late nights ruminating to a young street racer who loves the thrill of life. These tidbits become the inspiration for buzzers to seek photos or videos relevant to the personalisation of the fake profile. Afterall, buzzers would need to make the account appear active by sharing Instagram stories or posts so the profile doesn't look fake. But even that would take time as social media could flag behaviors, such as following people at scale, as suspicious.

Making profiles come alive, then, takes patience and creativity. In this case, ChatGPT is indispensable as a buzzer's creative companion.

Outsmarting the Bots

In responding to buzzers' operation, companies such as Meta and TikTok have adopted distinct but converging strategies to detect and remove inauthentic accounts. Meta, for example, focused on third-party fact-checking collaborations before it shut down the program worldwide starting in 2025 (Bauder, 2025). TikTok, meanwhile, has invested in internal AI-driven moderation tools aimed at identifying manipulated content and bot-like behavior (Genc, 2025).

This has spelled troubles for buzzers. At Rafi's firm, staff reported that dozens of accounts are banned daily, particularly on TikTok. "There were no warnings. All of a sudden, we couldn't get into the account," one buzzer recounted, eyes fixed on the screen as he began setting up replacements. As account turnover becomes a routine, the operational cost of running a buzzer company increases.

This situation has prompted Rafi to envision an AI-powered workflow where he would 'feed' ChatGPT with a guidebook–consisting of his ethics, principles, case studies, and frameworks on how Rafi solves problems, so that his staff could simply ask 'RafiGPT' for business issues. It's certainly a lofty vision. But it shows how platforms' strategy to remove accounts with bot-like activities has made companies like Rafi reliant even more towards AI's potentials to reduce costs.

To analyze the interplay between platform's measures and buzzers, it might be useful to borrow a framework from criminology. Paul Ekblom and Ken Pease (2014), in his decades long research looking at criminal activity, adopts the arms race framework to describe the tension between offenders and preventers. Ekblom and Pease explain that offenders would make tactical countermoves in situ, turn crime prevention devices to their own advantage, or develop tools to defeat the mechanisms of protection. Preventers respond, and offenders adjust again. As such, understanding buzzer work requires attention to the push-and-pull between buzzers and the platform.

Much of buzzer labor involves infrastructural maintenance. While some buzzers operate with real-name accounts, others who operate with sockpuppets buy accounts from vendors, and some, like Rafi, maintain their own. Buzzers are required to submit daily reports to Rafi documenting the number of active, banned, and newly created accounts. On their laptops, each operator maintains a meticulously organised archive of sockpuppet profiles, each stored within clearly labeled folders. These folders contain the digital assets—names and profile photos—required to produce a convincing persona.

Fabrication of online personas is a craft. Buzzers frequently begin by sourcing real photographs from social media platforms, usually stolen from user profiles based in other Southeast Asia countries. These photos are then altered using generative AI tools to avoid detection by the actual user, while still appearing like an actual human. Such a tactic also evades reverse image searches—a standard method in fact-checking used to verify identity—as it would yield no exact match in search results. The intense awareness of how platforms function, in turn, causes buzzers to take exhaustive and cautious measures to avoid automated bans.

For the buzzers we met, beating the system is the primary pursuit–a goal more novel than merely steering narratives or influencing the public. This can mean to 'soften' a certain message to avoid bans, to not insult a person, or to use less-suspicious hashtags. This technical skill is the real value of buzzers, whose sole task is to disseminate information at scale without alarming the platform.

This techno-centric view is also notable in how buzzers perceive platforms–and the rules that govern these platforms. While activists and researchers tend to ascribe certain ideologies to tech platforms, such as the patriarchal and white nature of tech platforms (see e.g. Kpakima, 2023), none of these vocabularies are used by buzzers. They see the technical challenges as a 'constantly changing algorithm updates' (*"algoritmenya ganti terus"),* further asserting how buzzers' main confrontation is the platforms' technical challenges.

Because algorithms are intentionally opaque, much of the practices on trying to understand its mechanism shapes and is shaped by what Pohjonen (2024) calls "algorithmic folklore"—a mix of beliefs, rumours, and shared assumptions about how content moderation and visibility work. Some believe that others succeed because they have "insider secrets" or direct connections to platform staff (Lindquist, 2022). Others, especially those working for political opposition, may interpret a sudden drop in virality as evidence of state interference.

Deceiving (or gaming) the platform, then, is learned through trial and error. Tricks of the trade circulate among practitioners. Buzzer coordinators share tips, strategies, and updates during both casual conversations and work meetings. Self-taught practitioners join Facebook and Telegram groups under rubrics such as "digital marketing." Tech platforms themselves feed into this process. Meta, for instance, regularly hosts the Meta Marketing Summit, which is attended by both marketers and buzzer coordinators looking to sharpen their tactics.

Outside the political agenda assigned to them, buzzers lack moral pursuit akin to 'hacker ethics' that serves as unifying glue among the workers. Instead, part of the thrill of being a

buzzer is the opportunity to play (Rasidi, in press), achieved by both deceiving the platform and the public.

Some buzzers constantly 'play' with their online personas and spend an enormous time each day posting stories relevant to their personas so that the accounts don't become dormant and raise suspicions from the platforms. While each buzzer can operate multiple accounts, a few of these accounts become favorites–and buzzers can grow attachment to their own made up personas.

For instance, Rafi's favorite bot account is based on his wife. He stole female photos online, then would use Gen AI to greatly alter the photo so it resembles his wife. "I could spend hours just fixing these photos," said Rafi. The task is far from easy, even with the help of generative AI, as each photo would show different features of the face and body, and Rafi would need to make these photos strictly consistent. His fantasy doesn't stop at these photos. He also claimed that he has built an extensive background story of this character, including how she is a daughter of a diplomat who is starting an import business of products from China, which Rafi uses as a bait to make connections with foreign businessmen.

"I studied psychology," he said. "I know how to think like a woman." The obsession over making this character appear alive was so great that he made a Youtube account where this woman, voiced by Rafi's coworker, would play as a host. Rafi claimed that this persona had brought in actual deals, in turn supporting Rafi's online shop business.

Another buzzer we talked to was also deeply invested in caring and maintaining one of his bot accounts, which was inspired by his wife. When this account was banned, he was devastated.

Of course, not all buzzers treat their job as an opportunity to 'play'. Others intentionally distance themselves from their job, avoiding contacts and messages after working hours (Rasidi, in press). For them, this job is simply their source of income, not a venue for entertainment or politics.

But for buzzers who are deeply engaged in the work, the emotional value of being a buzzer is, then, real. Whether this value comes from deceiving the public, the bots, or even, dare we say–themselves, this is a line of work where a sense of play becomes a main appeal at attracting and sustaining the workforce.

In that sense, the role of generative AI increases the room to 'play'. Generative AI has become an indispensable tool for buzzers to brainstorm different personalities, generate images, and

craft new personas. But it's merely existing within an established system to deceive the public. Being a buzzer is still very much a laborious, time-intensive work that demands creativity, imagination, and discipline. And the stricter the policy that platforms implement, the greater the challenge to outsmart the platform, the bigger the emotional reward.

The relationship between buzzers and platforms are, then, deeply entangled. The vast network of buzzers exist by feeding off of platforms' traffic and algorithmic design, while platforms rely on buzzers to generate content, engagement, and activity. The two sustain each other in nearly equal power, together creating a digital reality based on traffic, algorithms, and virality.

Is 'Platform Accountability' a Solution?

The remedy for disinformation and other forms of "coordinated inauthentic behavior" is by holding platforms accountable, critics often argue. This legalistic argument stands upon the assumption that the relationship between platform companies and the inflation industry, such as the buzzer industry, is adversarial, and an algorithmic publics afforded by platform is acceptable.

We argue this is mistaken. While Big Tech platforms do put an effort to combat fake engagement and disinformation, their business model is built on inflated metrics. What appears as manipulation from below is, in practice, a mechanism sustaining what Lim (2024) calls algorithmic marketing culture—a system where value is abstracted from user interaction, commodified, and reinvested into the platform to generate profit and perpetuate its own logic. As Doctorow (2025) puts it, "platforms sit between buyers and sellers, hold each hostage to the other, raking off an ever-larger share of the value that passes between them."

To understand the crux of this mechanism is to start with advertising. Advertisers sell ads through platforms—instead of other media like news outlets—because platforms claim to offer precise measurement of attention. However, as Hwang (2020) argues, this promise is bogus. The value of user attention that advertisers can rely on is actually based on proxies: impressions, clicks, follower counts. Such proxies actually are easy to inflate, hard to verify.

This is because the mechanism that underlies the process of ads delivery, from its design to how it is received by users, relies on what Hwang calls the "dark pool" of digital advertising: a space where ads are sold through automated, real-time auctions with little transparency and no meaningful third-party oversight. Platforms both operate and measure the

marketplace, using their own panels to provide advertisers with data. As such, platforms retain full control over what is seen, counted, and sold, and thus, they are able to exaggerate their reach. For example, at one point, Facebook promised advertising access to more American youth than existed in the census (Hern & Sweney, 2017). Yet, despite such opacity, there is no mechanism able to audit the underlying principles of ads delivery. As such, big tech ads, according to Hwang, are built on speculation, overcounting, and trust in numbers.

This is where the buzzer industry slots in. Buzzers don't simply exploit loopholes, but help sustain how platforms work. In such easily inflatable metrics, buzzers manufacture the value creation: diverting attention, inflating engagement, and sustain social media celebrities and influencers that take benefit from similarly gaming the system. Crucial in this work of buzzer is the parallel economy of fake accounts. While buzzer firms like Rafi may create and manage their own sockpuppet accounts, others rely on "vendors" whose task is to manage and sustain fake accounts through Social Media Manager Panels (SMM Panels) (Lindquist, 2022). These tools automate the sale of ready-made personas, followers, and engagement. Vendors engage in the labour of upkeep—building accounts, tracking platform updates, and balancing automation with manual work to avoid bans. These accounts are reused, resold, or repurposed. Some are used for simple "injection" (*disuntik*) for aspiring influencers and small businesses; others, like the accounts used in the buzzer industry, are further maintained for more sophisticated deception.

Weltevrede and Lindquist (2024) describe this as a "paraplatform" industry: informal, often illicit infrastructures that orbit around platforms. They rely on APIs and algorithmic affordances, yet remain outside the formal economy of platforms. Paraplatform is a replication of a familiar system of interwoven networks across various enterprises, politics, and finances to make the most out of the platform. These industries are tolerated because they do not pose immediate reputational risk, where only under sustained regulatory pressure do platforms act. The result is a paradoxical push-and-pull, that is not quite an arms race where the goal is to beat the other players, but a calibrated tension that is "good enough" (Weltevrede & Lindquist, 2024) to sustain both social media platforms and the inflation industry that keep them running. Events like Meta's marketing summits, where buzzers and marketers share their tricks of the trades to inflate metrics, make this point clearer: they reveal not just the rules of the game, but the fact that a game exists, and how to exploit it.

In a sense, this is itself a (deceptive) play. Platforms perform accountability through periodic crackdowns, while paraplatform actors game their way to inflate metrics that sustain the lives of platforms, and adopt the professional language of marketing. Both sides engage in a

managed theatre of conflict where visibility is regulated not to eliminate manipulation, but to keep it at tolerable levels. The performance allows the system to sustain itself: platforms maintain credibility with advertisers and regulators, while buzzers and fake account vendors continue operating within the boundaries of plausible deniability. Rather a war of eradication, perhaps it can be said as a choreography of coexistence.

Concluding Remarks

Advanced technology such as generative AI is often framed as a tool to accelerate misinformation. While we do not discount its capability to produce convincing fakes, it doesn't negate the fact that the underlying principle of public deceit, along with the relevant actors who execute the deceit, is nothing new. Ekblom and Pease (2014), drawing on Derek Cornish's concept of the "crime script," reminds us that even in its digital form, deception follows a familiar pattern: preparation, execution, concealment, reward. This is to postulate that online deception very much has a long, historical root.

The problem, we posit, is not AI per se. It is the social world into which AI is deployed. At the core is how publics are structured by social media platforms—specifically, by the recommender systems that produce algorithmic marketing culture (Lim, 2024).

In these publics, what gets talked about is what becomes content. What becomes content is what gets visibility. "No viral, no justice," is another Indonesian saying that poignantly illustrates the logic of algorithmic market capture. Rather than diverting attention to the most viral, a society committed to democratic ideals should have paid attention to the most vulnerable and how their needs can be addressed. There is already a problem in representative democracy which prioritises liberal ideals of the "greater good" that privileges consensus and often slides into majoritarianism (Mouffe, 2000). In social media publics, one can perhaps go further that this argument of "greater good" worsens into "viral good." The logic of the feed doesn't ask: who is silenced, displaced, or excluded? It asks: what performs well? The public life more broadly, is reduced to performance, stripped of its obligation to the marginal and redefined by metrics.

As a consequence, people—rendered as "users"—are produced as content, just as the relationships and expressions they generate on social media. To be influential is to be quantifiably desirable. The buzzer industry is thus not an anomaly; it is a direct consequence of this terrain that structures inequality through the market principle of social ordering. If recognition demands that individuals compete through metrics that are inflatable, then why

not inflate it? AI did not invent this glitch. It merely automates its logic. Politics is reduced into election cycles, and politics becomes branding. Even in the spaces of reform, through the notion of "digital democracy," activism is measured by virality where civil society adopts the metrics of ad agencies, and organisations pursue engagement KPIs.

This market mechanism that structures these publics is the primary problem—those with more capital will capture more audience. Social media did not invent the marketisation of public conversation, but it transformed its scale, pace, and unit of competition. It is within this terrain that AI enters. The use of generative AI among buzzers, as we have found, may still be rudimentary, but we can anticipate that it will generate new waves of disinformation and false narratives. Yet these are symptoms, not the root cause. It's merely capitalizing on existing issues that are more fundamental—the social media algorithm itself.

It is not sufficient to critique the use of AI in isolation. We need to critique the marketisation enabled by social media's algorithm as a whole. The real impact of AI, then, might lie in how it will be used to further optimise their recommendation systems.

Hence, we argue it is imperative to return to "propaganda" as a conceptual apparatus. Marketing, in its truest sense, is propaganda. After World War II, as propaganda became associated with authoritarian control, American communication specialists repackaged it with softer terms—"marketing" and "public relations"—to make it palatable to liberal publics (Ewen, 1976). But the logic persisted: the goal was never dialogue, but persuasion.

Today, the same conceptual laundering occurs with "disinformation." Rather than recognising disinformation as a structural outcome of a public that demands lives to be rendered into content that perform, activists and researchers fixate on whether a piece of information is true or false. The problem isn't simply disinformation. Disinformation thrives not because it's false, but because the entire information economy is structured to reward what's engaging, not what's accurate. The crux of the problem is the marketing logic that makes it profitable, viral, and ambient. The question, then, is not simply what is false, but what kinds of truths are allowed to circulate, and what structural incentives shape them.

What, then, is to be done? As we've argued throughout, the problem lies in the opacity of existing social media platforms, where recommender system algorithms and the inflated advertising industry that funds them sustain the entire operation. Bogost (2022) points to the problem of scale: that social media platforms as we know it allows a transformation of users into broadcasters. We extend this argument. The deeper issue is the logic of timeline feeds, where people we follow are treated as content producers and are shown to us through

algorithmic curation. A curation that exists to serve ads, and, above all, to reap the most profit for platforms themselves.

Before social media took its current form, internet forum boards structured the internet publics differently. Forum boards, such as Kaskus in Indonesia or Something Awful in the United States, were organised around topics, not curated appearances of people. Influence was earned through participation and co-presence among human users, not metrics in which visibility is governed. The thread—not the user—was the primary unit of visibility. There was no algorithm to game, no feed optimised for engagement. Dissensus was built into the design.

This is not nostalgia. It is about recognising that internet publics can be structured differently. As activists and developers begin to imagine alternative platform models, the question is not just about infrastructure decentralisation or personal algorithmic customisation. Platforms like Bluesky and Mastodon may offer these, but they remain tethered to the same algorithmic market logic: users as content, curated visibility as currency. We need to go further, and we already have a working example: Plurk, a Taiwan-developed social media platform. In this under-researched platform, feeds are chronological. Content lives or dies by participation, not inflated engagement. Nothing is algorithmically pushed. Threads are revived through replies, not reach. The system is simple: it serves people, not its own.

The root problem is marketisation of the public. Algorithms as we know it today are not built for human flourishing; they are built to optimise Big Tech profit, that even the platforms deceive their own advertisers. Until we dismantle the metrics that define visibility itself, AI will only sharpen what already exists. Forms of activism that rely on such metric does little to affect that structure, as political visibility is never a threat to an oppressive power, but a feature of it.

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