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UNDERSTANDING THE ROLE OF ACTORS AND RISKS OF MISINFORMATION IN INDONESIA

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Centre for Strategic and International Studies

A Research Report by CSIS Indonesia

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Understanding the Role of Actors and Risks of Misinformation in Indonesia

Noory Okthariza[1]

Editor: Ross Tapsell[2]

I. Introduction

As a country with the fourth-largest internet users in the world and the third-largest democracy, Indonesia is bound to have a complex relationship between political participation, the internet, and social media. Elections have become routine events, with candidates increasingly recognizing the importance of social media in boosting their electoral support. The most recent 2024 election demonstrated how sophisticated social media campaigns, coupled with the use of AI-generated content, can decisively influence the election outcome. The landslide victory of president-elect Prabowo Subianto defied expectations of a competitive, two-round election—an outcome largely attributed to the execution of advanced digital strategies employed by Prabowo's camp.

When used for political campaigns, social media can drive positive impacts but also causing division and harm, as shown by lessons learned from the US, EU member states, and Latin American countries (Allcott & Gentzkow, 2017; Machado et al., 2019; Wolley & Howard, 2017). At least two key streams of research have emerged at the intersection of social media and electoral politics. The first focuses on understanding how social media platforms are used to spread manipulation and propaganda, and how they shape voters' attitudes on candidates, issues, and policies. This stream also highlights the risks associated with digital campaigns. Drawing primarily from the now-limited Twitter API, along with insights from Facebook and WhatsApp, these studies reveal how social media platforms are deliberately used to generate fake news and orchestrate manipulated interactions within various electoral contexts (Munger et al., 2022). The role of 'bots and trolls' is frequently highlighted, with many works focused on uncovering their origins and how their tactics vary across countries (Cresci, 2020; Starbird et al., 2019). However, some works also question the effectiveness of these strategies (Assenmacher et al., 2020; Pierri et al., 2020), noting that they mainly reinforce existing beliefs and deepen partisanship within already divisive electorates.

The second stream, primarily based on survey research and on-the-ground observation, aims to uncover how social media influences people's political beliefs and behaviors. This research treats digital campaigns more as mediated tools through w hich voters pick sides and learn about political issues. For example, experimental

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research has found that different exposures to social media during periods of heightened political competition increase perceived polarization among voters (Aruguete et al., 2023), widen the ideological gap between voters and the candidates they oppose (Banks et al., 2021), and influence biases and attitudes toward fact-checking activities (Wintersieck, 2017). Although it is often noted that social media has the potential to divide voters, some works also mention that social media can serve as a tool for unifying people, particularly in grassroots mobilization efforts (Lee et al., 2017; Sinpeng & Tapsell, 2020).

We situate this report within the evolving body of research on misinformation in electoral contexts. Our focus contributes more to the first-mentioned stream by outlining both political and 'situational' challenges related to misinformation in Indonesia. Specifically, we aim to explain the role of actors involved in the production of deliberately misleading information, fake news, and propaganda. Our interest lies in illuminating the inner workings of these actors – commonly referred to as 'political buzzers' in Indonesian colloquia. The data is primarily drawn from interviews with a vast network of individuals involved in this industry, including political buzzers, PR strategists, digital marketers, and (former) journalists. We supplemented our findings with content analyses from three social media platforms (X, TikTok, and Facebook), covering the period from January 2022 to June 2023.

To that end, we begin by briefly discussing the risk factors that arguably make Indonesia susceptible to misinformation. This is followed by narratives on how digital operatives in Indonesia are formed, focusing on how networks and teams are built among actors, and how they interact with 'clients.' Next, we outline three main types of services commonly offered: election-related, policy-related, and issue-related services. We then explore key issues that appear to be unique to the Indonesian context and are rarely observed elsewhere. We conclude with a summary and provide practical recommendations for addressing this issue going forward.

II. Risk Factors

Comparisons with other cases suggest that Indonesia faces at least four interconnected risk factors when political campaigns are at work on social media. While some of these factors may also be found in other countries, we argue that it is quite uncommon for all of them to occur together.

First, digital literacy in Indonesia remains a significant problem to be addressed. Although Indonesia ranked 1st among lower-middle-income economies and 47th globally in the Digital Skills Gap Index,[3] the country struggles with unequal access to digital infrastructure. Given Indonesia's vast geographic size, creating equal access to digital infrastructure is a huge challenge. We believe that relying solely on the government to meet the demand for digital infrastructure is a long shot. Significant private investment is clearly needed to close the gap and ensure widespread digital access. Despite the much improving internet penetration, the quality of basic infrastructures such as internet speed and provider choices remain uneven.

The Economist's Internet Inclusive Index shows that digital literacy is closely tied to

[3] See the Wiley's Digital Skills Gap Index ranking: https://dsgi.wiley.com/global-rankings/

education levels.[4] The country's current average length of schooling stands at 8.7 years, indicating that, on average, the population receives education below the high school level. This figure is affected by unequal access to quality education across regions, with those living outside cities likely having lower levels of schooling. Therefore, efforts to improve digital literacy must also tackle these educational inequalities to be truly effective.

Secondly, Indonesia's political environment is marked by the frequent use of ethnic and religious identities in campaigns. These identities are often exploited through polarizing and divisive narratives in both national and local elections. Such narratives can spark tensions that are easily amplified by social media propaganda. The 2017 Jakarta election, for example, is a well-known case of how digital campaigns can be used to discredit political opponents and mobilize mass support for political gain.

What we know so far is that identity-based tensions tend to be sporadic, and their intensity largely depends on the electoral landscape at the time. Before the campaign season began, there were concerns that the 2024 election would see just as much misinformation as the 2019 election. However, this did not happen, largely due to the new political alliances formed ahead of the election. The two rivals from the 2019 election—Joko Widodo and Prabowo Subianto—are now part of the same political coalition. Additionally, the 2024 presidential race featured more than two candidates, avoiding the binary competition seen in the previous two elections. This suggests that identity-based tensions, while divisive and dangerous, should be seen as a dormant threat that could reemerge depending on future political dynamics and alignments.

Thirdly, our behind-the-scenes look at digital propaganda revealed a complex interplay between key actors, making it difficult to fully address the problem. These actors range from political party elites and government officials to freelance media operators, journalists, PR strategists, and even college students.

This interplay may not be unique, as previous research from Bradshaw and Howard (2017) shows a similar trend. However, the involvement of key government officials in producing false information has received far less attention compared to the roles of private bots and trolls. As far as government officials are involved, this tends to occur in autocracies like Russia and China, where the state not only engages with political influencers but also hires large numbers of operators to create fake accounts and comment on social media posts.

To illustrate, two informants mentioned that they were asked to create 'online engineering' on X to facilitate the removal of two political party chairmen from Golkar (Airlangga Hartarto) and the Democrat Party (Agus Yudhoyono). Although it is acknowledged that these operations were small, sporadic, and largely ineffective, they show clear attempts by government insiders to engage in influence campaigns through social media. This underscores a major challenge in tackling misinformation, as a perverse incentive exists: the very individuals who should be responsible for addressing the problem frequently stand to gain from its perpetuation.

[4] See the report: https://impact.economist.com/projects/inclusive-internet-index/

The final risk factor pertains to the backgrounds of key social media operators themselves. We argue that understanding the complexities of social media propaganda in Indonesia requires examining the backgrounds and motivations of those providing these services. While their professions vary, most have worked in the media industry and have the ability and experience to maintain discreet relationships in support of political figures. Their proximity to political circles enables them to offer such services with ease. Additionally, the relatively low wages in the media industry, coupled with frequent interactions with party elites and government officials, create settings that make social media propaganda activities more likely to happen.

The subsequent sections will provide a more detailed analysis of the relationships among media workers – broadly defined as journalists, former journalists, PR strategists, marketing freelancers, and other communications professionals who play key roles in shaping public perception through social media.

III. Digital Operatives: The Team and How They Build Their Work

Political elites, candidates, and government agencies across Southeast Asia are increasingly leveraging online media campaigners to promote their political agendas. As noted by Sinpeng and Tapsell (2020), these campaigners are known by various local terms: 'buzzers' in Indonesia, 'cybertroopers' in Malaysia, and 'trolls' in the Philippines. The use of online propaganda in Indonesia dates back to at least 2012, when Joko "Jokowi" Widodo, running for Jakarta governor with Basuki "Ahok" Tjahaja Purnama, first employed well-organized social media campaigners (Saraswati, 2021). Since then, online campaigning has intensified, becoming particularly aggressive during the 2017 Jakarta gubernatorial election and peaking in the 2019 presidential race. Contrary to most expectations, the practice significantly declined in the 2024 election.

Before explaining the various harmful effects of misinformation, it is important to understand how social media operators themselves work. Our discussions with key informants revealed that there is no standardized method for forming a cyber team. Teams are created based on specific needs and are usually built informally through word-of-mouth. There are no clear rules or structured guidelines, and the teams operate flexibly without the rigid procedures or values typically found in formal organizations.

Digital operatives come across as ordinary individuals who view their work as just another "normal job," where services are provided, and fees are negotiated. They value their work based on two main factors: their willingness to push the boundaries of public decency in online spaces and the extensive media networks that they have. For most, this job is secondary and serves as a supplement to their primary occupations. While it does provide material benefits, there seems to be no desire to make social media manipulation their main job. This is largely due to the high level of uncertainty involved in being a "buzzer," with little job security and modest, irregular pay.

Many of our informants come from journalistic backgrounds, including both current and former media professionals working in national and local media companies. Others work as PR strategists

and digital marketing specialists, while a smaller group consists of freelancers and students. We also gathered information from individuals who had previously worked on campaign teams, served as political aides to elected officials, worked for related private companies, and academics.

Special attention is given to the connections among those working in media, PR, and digital marketing. It can sometimes be difficult to clearly distinguish individuals from these professions. This is partly because their roles often overlap when acting as social media operators, or they may hold two different jobs simultaneously. While those working in media industries are closely linked to this issue, it is important to note that it does not imply that their professions are solely responsible for the spread of misinformation. Instead, the focus should be on understanding the complex relationships between social media, new media industries, and the political environment that shape public perception.

Political buzzers are connected through fluid and non-binding ties. Most of them became acquainted through casual connections, such as sharing university backgrounds, working in the same jobs, coming from the same hometown, supporting the same candidate, or being members of the same professional associations. These connections do not imply that they are bound by any formal or enforceable agreements.

Some buzzers may use temporary offices provided by their employers or clients. However, many do not need a fixed workplace due to the informal and part-time nature of their work, which allows them to coordinate remotely. This flexibility affects how they operate. For instance, buzzers don't have to handle all aspects of content creation themselves; much of the work can be outsourced to different parties. This includes creating "account farms," commenting on social media posts, and producing infographics or memes. Other tasks, like "media operations," require collaboration with journalists across various media outlets. Additionally, specific requests—such as making sure a topic trends on X at certain times—are handled by specialized teams. This division of labor allows for distributed responsibilities, leading to a team that is fluid and lacks a permanent organizational structure.

While many tasks are shared and delegated to other parties, several strategic aspects must be managed by core team members. Decisions regarding the tone of the content, the angle, the selection of platforms, timing, types of comments, and the frequency of social media posts are typically made by the core team. Once these elements are decided, the core team then assigns tasks to the appropriate parties. Additionally, core team members are responsible for communicating with the political patrons who commission the work.

Having worked full-time in media-related industries endows operators with strong contextual sensitivity to issues. They possess the ability to effectively translate these issues into compelling narratives on social media. They are fully aware that the characteristics of social media users vary across different platforms. For instance, Facebook is particularly effective for content that leans towards narrative and persuasive communication. In keeping with its primary function, Instagram is ideally suited for disseminating memes and infographics where visual and aesthetic appeal are crucial. Twitter or X should not be seen as conducive to two-way communication; rather, it is most effective for delivering harsh and direct

criticism to political opponents. Lastly, the strategy for TikTok hinges on personal communication that is engaging, direct, concise, and characterized by a 'light' tone for its viewers. Understanding these nuances enables operators to tailor their strategies effectively, ensuring that each platform is utilized to its fullest potential to influence public opinion and achieve their communication goals.

IV. Buzzer and Its Clients

In this section, we explain the nature of the working relationship between political buzzers and their clients. We will also discuss the connection between their job and any political commitments they may hold, if any. For simplicity, we propose that one can distinguish between two types of digital operatives in Indonesia: those who are more committed and ideological, and those who are more pragmatic. We suggest that the former group emerged during the early use of social media in campaigns in the 2010s, while the latter is more common today.

The primary patrons of social media manipulation are political elites such as candidates and high-ranking members of political parties. Occasionally, the clients may also include government officials who serve as representatives of their respective parties within the government. Private sector clients are the least common, and they are typically more focused on brand reputation and product marketing.

Both buzzers and their patrons typically work together without formal contracts, relying instead on informal, gentlemen's agreements. This arrangement makes it difficult to clearly establish a clear 'market price' for their services, as prices depend largely on the types and levels of informality between the operators and their patrons. If these relationships were to become more formalized, prices would likely increase significantly. Therefore, maintaining an informal approach not only reduces costs but also shapes the working relationship between operators and patrons.

The operators understand that this type of work typically has low retention rates. Some jobs may last only a few days or weeks, while others may extend to three to six months. Election-related jobs tend to last longer due to the extended campaign periods. However, once the election is over, buzzers may go without work for months or even years. When the next election cycle begins, the patrons who originally hired them might move on to other groups offering similar services.

The lack of standard pricing and low retention rates means that reciprocity, from the buzzers' point of view, is highly valued. They recognize that the ability to communicate with high-level officials can generate significant intangible benefits, at least in expectations. Although it remains uncertain, many of our informants believe that this work could lead to 'greater opportunities' in the future, thanks to the networks and connections they build with their patrons.

Digital operatives can be divided into two groups based on their political affiliations. The first group consists of dedicated individuals who see their work for patrons as part of a "political mission." These are often ideologically motivated people who share the same beliefs and values as the party or candidates they support. While they are committed, they still expect some form of reciprocity, hoping for future rewards or benefits from the elected candidate (see Ong and Tapsell, 2022).

There have been instances where committed operatives acted as extensions of intense political rivalries. This was particularly evident in 2012 with the formation of Indonesia's first recognized cyber army, JASMEV (Jokowi-Ahok Social Media Volunteers), as noted by Rakhmani and Saraswati (2021). During the Jakarta gubernatorial election, JASMEV volunteers reportedly offered their services for free, driven by their belief in Jokowi and Ahok, who were seen as a "new hope" for Jakarta. By the end of the 2012 campaign, the group had grown to around 10,000 members (Saraswati, 2021) and played a key role in Jokowi's social media campaigns during the 2014 presidential race.

The second group is more pragmatic and ideologically flexible, viewing this work purely as business as usual. They may have different political affiliations from the candidates they support, but this doesn't affect their commitment to the job. This pragmatic group has emerged over the past five years, partly due to changes in Indonesia's political dynamics, especially with Prabowo joining Jokowi's cabinet in 2019. This business has also become more accessible to new entrants who can now offer more competitive prices and targeted services. As the 'business model' evolves over time and more patrons demand for the same services, the working mechanisms of social media manipulation become increasingly understood and replicable by other parties. As a result, the landscape of the business is now becoming increasingly diverse and more professionalized.

V. The Perils of Market Logic

We contend that the relationship between buzzers and their clients can be understood through the market logic of supply and demand. The growing use of social media has spiked demand for 'online engagement', now a key measure of a candidate's popularity and online visibility. Metrics such as viewership, likes, shares, retweets, and article read have become vital for assessing the impact of various social media contents. The uncritical acceptance of these metrics can lead to complications, especially with the proliferation of non-organic engagement that makes use computational methods. This issue can be more acute in countries experiencing contentious elections (Woolley & Howard, 2017; Arnaudo, 2017) and where there is a lack of robust regulatory frameworks (Pielemeier, 2020).

It's difficult to ascertain the precise number of groups capable of providing such services. But we do know that these services are not necessarily complex to perform. Being a buzzer is more about having the courage to engage in partisan political work than possessing advanced computational or technical skills. Employing people to comment on social media posts, create click farms, memes, and generate retweets does not require exceptional technical expertise. The barrier to entry for engaging in such activities is relatively low, making them accessible to a wide array of actors.

Additionally, the tasks performed by buzzers are characterized by a high degree of repetitiveness. Their job can be as simple as using multiple fake phone numbers and email addresses to set up cloned accounts or commenting on social media posts. While examples from other countries suggest that such activities can be automated by machines, this trend has not been widely adopted in Indonesia. Our findings reveal that manual labor continues to dominate the operations. Operatives hold the belief that manual execution fosters a higher degree of

authentic engagement compared to machine reliance, which can often appear artificial.

The work involved in social media propaganda is inherently non-scalable and unlikely to make participants wealthy. However, this very characteristic could lead to new challenges. Since the barrier to entry is low, the field becomes accessible to a wide range of individuals. As more people join this "industry," market forces driven by supply and demand are likely to shape the business. An increase in labor could lead to a broader range of services being offered, potentially improving the sophistication of micro-targeting and its overall impact. Ultimately, more players mean more options, which eventually could drive down service prices. Ironically, as these prices decrease, the potential impact of misinformation could worsen.

VI. Election-related Misinformation

The rise and continued growth of cyber operatives are closely tied to electoral processes. Many believe that the shorter campaign period for the 2024 elections will likely lead to an increase in misinformation, as political elites are forced to maximize their efforts within a limited timeframe. Relying too much on in-person campaigns may not be effective, given Indonesia's large geographic size. As a result, using social media platforms becomes an unavoidable option for reaching a wider audience.

The social media data for this report were collected before the campaign period in November 2023 began. We will compare our data with previous studies conducted prior to the 2024 elections.

In the 2019 election, Jalli et al., (2019) analyzed Twitter data and observed that buzzers intensified their activities during critical moments of the presidential debates. Their findings show that Jokowi's supporters prominently used the hashtag *#DebatPintarJokowi* ("Jokowi's smart debate") to self-declare his victory in these debates. This hashtag became particularly popular during and after the second debate, attracting 170,069 tweets from 9,006 distinct users, which collectively generated 33,372 interactions about Jokowi. Conversely, Prabowo's social media teams utilized the hashtag *#PrabowoMenangDebat* ("Prabowo won the debate"), which also achieved significant visibility on Twitter. This campaign resulted in 142,337 tweets from 15,579 unique users, accumulating 63,382 interactions.

When the authors conducted an analysis of clusters that included nodes engaged in inter-cluster interactions, they found that the accounts with the greatest influence for Jokowi and Prabowo were those disseminating significant amounts of fake news and deliberate misinformation. The study also revealed that interactions among these nodes were limited, suggesting potential coordination occurring at specific times. Notably, a substantial portion of the followers linked to these accounts had either been suspended by Twitter or were no longer accessible. These findings were consistent for both Jokowi and Prabowo's cyber troopers.

For comparison, we collected Twitter data from January 2022 through June 2023 and conducted a social network analysis to examine the interactions between supporters of presidential candidates and their opponents. We then used data crawling to extract articles from national and local

media covering the same period. This process involved utilizing four keywords: 'pemilu' (election) and the names of the three candidates ('Anies Baswedan', 'Ganjar Pranowo', and 'Prabowo Subianto') to analyze their representation in the media.

As illustrated below, supporters of the two candidates, Anies and Ganjar, have each formed distinct echo chambers on Twitter. In contrast, Prabowo's supporters have demonstrated a greater ability to attract support across various political spectrums. The total engagement associated with Anies is 6,954,425, while Ganjar has garnered 4,467,409 (Fig. 1). We also found that the engagement patterns for Anies and Ganjar are remarkably similar, with green color indicating significant positive interactions and red signifying substantial interactions from the candidates' critics (Fig. 2). Notably, there is also a lack of meaningful negative sentiments emanating from each echo chamber.

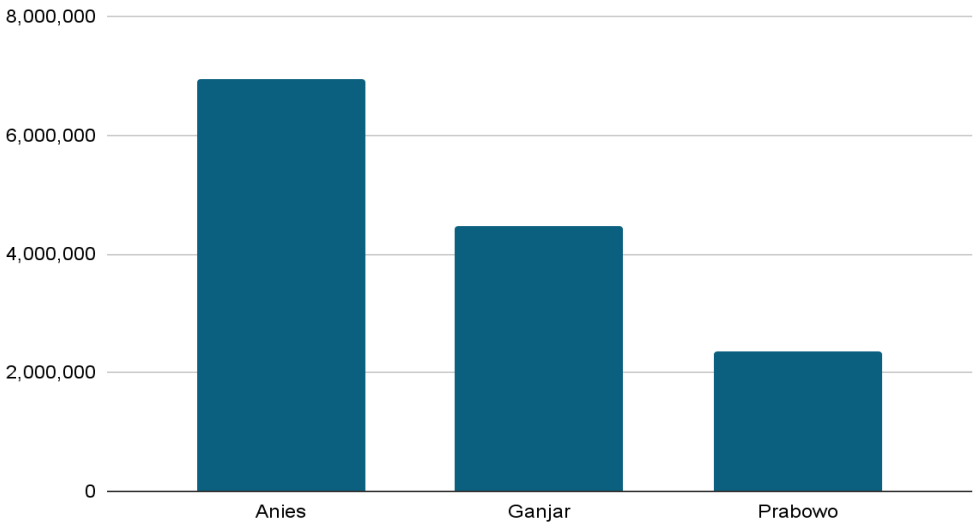

Fig. 1 Twitter Engagement Comparisons for Presidential Candidates

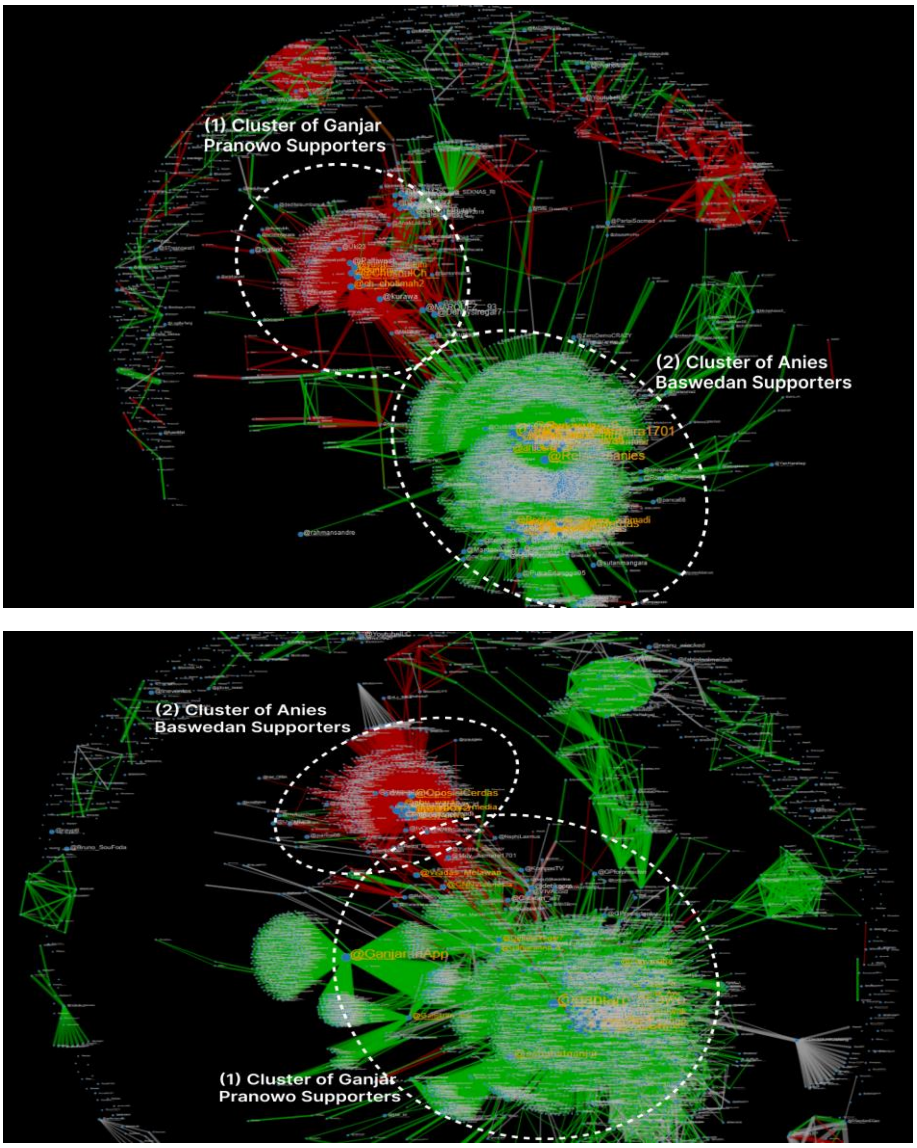

Fig. 2 Social Media Network Analysis of Anies Baswedan and Ganjar Pranowo on Twitter

The data suggest that remnants of rivalries from Jakarta's election and the 2019 election may still be influencing the 2024 election. Ganjar's affiliation with the ruling party PDIP and Anies' reputation as an opposition leader supported by Muslim voters are still seen as mutually exclusive. Supporters of both candidates appear to regard each other as sworn enemies, leaving little room for mutual interactions. This dynamic was observed before Prabowo's subsequent surge in the polls, which occurred after the data had been collected. Anies' popularity on Twitter may have been amplified by the announcement of his candidacy by the Nasdem Party, which happened during our data collection period, while Ganjar's nomination was only made in April 2023.

The findings of Twitter data can be corroborated through a descriptive analysis of online media coverage (Fig. 3). It reveals that both Anies and Ganjar received a roughly similar number of mentions (around 750,000) and were featured in approximately 220,000 articles each, underscoring their status as media darlings at that time. In contrast, Prabowo has garnered significantly less media attention, despite soon taking the lead in the polls.

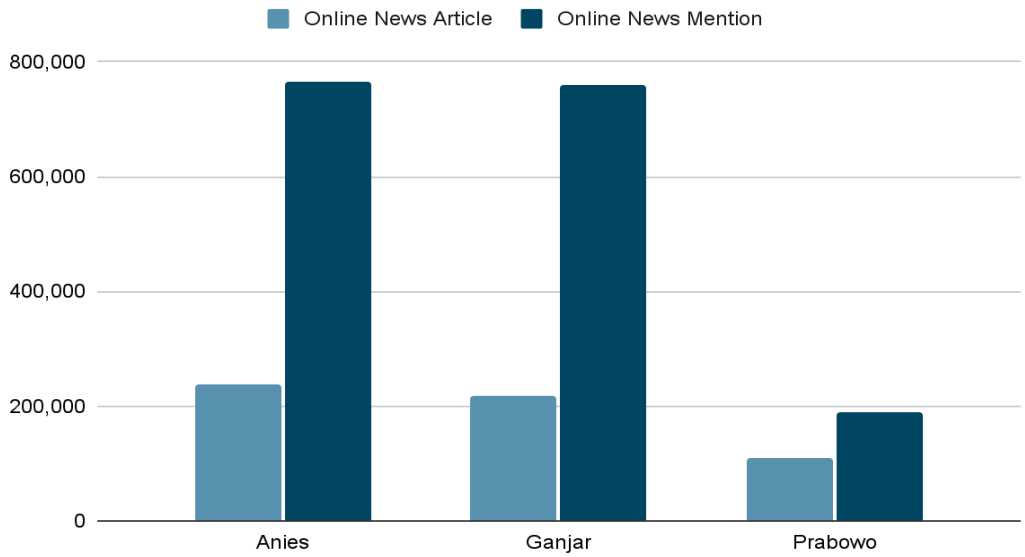

Fig. 3 Online News Articles and Mentions for Anies, Ganjar, and Prabowo

Prabowo's total engagement on Twitter, although significantly lower at 2,370,529 compared to the other two contenders, reflects a more inclusive supporter base (Fig. 4). In addition to his core followers, it shows that Prabowo has attracted support from accounts associated with Erick Thohir, the Minister of State-Owned Enterprises, and Muhaimin Iskandar, the Chairperson of the PKB party. This was taken prior to Muhaimin's decision to become Anies' running mate. Prabowo has also succeeded in creating a larger number of clusters than Anies and Ganjar, drawing support from prominent figures outside of political parties. Our analysis also revealed no discernible negative clusters expressing harsh sentiments toward Prabowo.

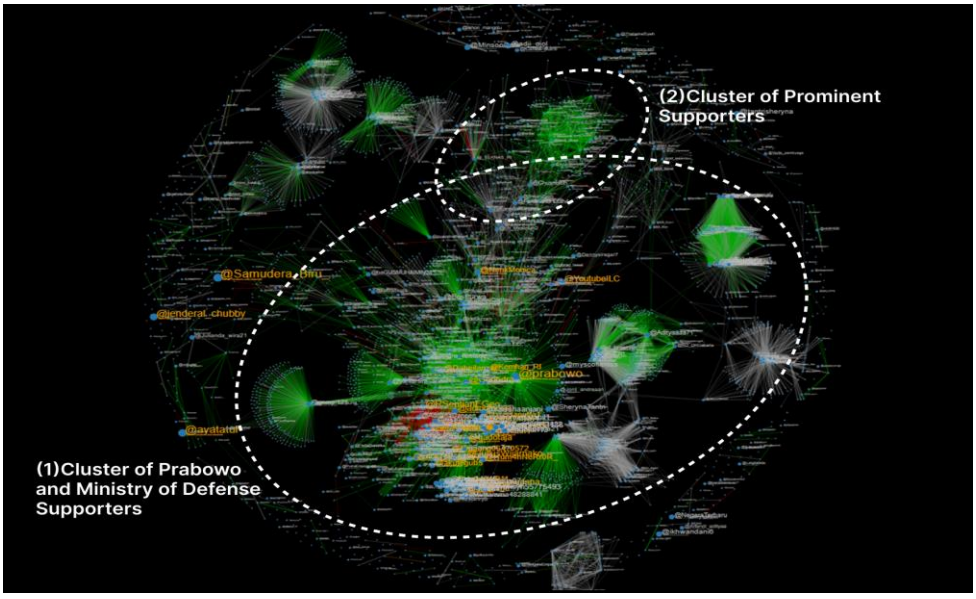

Fig. 4 Social Media Network Analysis of Prabowo Subianto on Twitter

We conclude by suggesting that remnants of fierce political identities could have materialized, primarily driven by the supporters of Anies and Ganjar. It appears that a significant factor in the decreased rate of misinformation in the 2024 election is the lack of intense competition between Anies and Ganjar, contrary to many prior expectations. Had it occurred, this scenario was anticipated to mirror the fierce competition observed in the last two elections. However, these potential dynamics have been overshadowed by Prabowo's emerging lead in the polls.

VII. Policy-related misinformation

Apart from elections, another notable area where misinformation is observable involves policy issues. When policies become highly contentious or controversial, policymakers may engage digital operatives to conduct online 'advocacy.' Previous research has highlighted how buzzers have served as amplifiers, assisting the government in promoting various policies. Notable examples include the 'new normal' initiative during the COVID-19 pandemic,[5] the 'omnibus law' on job creation,[6] and the revision of the KPK (the anti-corruption agency) law (Sastramidjaja, 2022).

Several journalists and activists have been subjected to doxing by anonymous social media accounts, ostensibly due to their reporting on contentious issues. These issues include controversies over the government's plan to domestically produced COVID-19 vaccines, the newly revised bill for the KPK, and allegations linking the ruling party PDIP to the Indonesian Communist Party (PKI). Additionally, hackers managed to infiltrate the content of the news portal, *tirto.id*, and deleted seven controversial articles. Notably, one of the deleted articles related to the alleged involvement of BIN (the State Intelligence Agency) and TNI (the Indonesian military) in the production of COVID-19 medication.[7]

Students, activists, and academics have also fallen victim to hacking attacks targeting their WhatsApp, emails, and social media accounts,[8] often in response to their criticism of certain policies. Despite these incidents, no legal proceedings have been initiated in any of these cases.

In addition to their involvement in major policy-related campaigns, influencers also offer services to assist individuals, often public officials, in managing their public image, especially when facing criminal charges. For instance, our informants described scenarios where they supported a high-ranking law enforcement official seeking positive media coverage during his own criminal proceedings. Another instance involved helping a member of parliament (DPR) apprehended by the KPK. We also had one informant who explained his role in aiding an entrepreneur embroiled in a corruption scandal with a top-ranking ministry official.

We also received testimony from someone who was approached by a representative of

[5] Pradipa P. Rasidi & Wijanto (2021) https://www.insideindonesia.org/normalising-the-new-normal#:~:text=The%20New%20Normal%20policy%20was,work%20places%20at%20half%20capacity.

[6] Lailuddin Mufti and Pradipa P. Rasidi (2021) https://www.insideindonesia.org/selling-the-omnibus-law-on-job-creation

[7] see https://aji.or.id/read/press-release/1142/catatan-akhir-tahun-aji-2020-tahun-kelam-bagi-jurnalis-indonesia.html.

[8] See https://www.kompas.id/baca/polhuk/2020/02/17/revisi-praktik-doxing-korban-mengalami-tekanan-serius.

Mabes Polri (the Indonesian National Police Headquarters) to assist in promoting an anti-radicalization program. This program has been contentious as it involves defining 'correct' and 'legitimate' religious interpretations. The focus of the program is on the formerly conflict-ridden areas of Poso and Ambon, where dozens of former combatants participate in government-sponsored deradicalization workshops. This initiative aims to foster community resilience and prevent the resurgence of extremist ideologies in these vulnerable regions. The expected outcomes include the publication of online media articles and active engagement on social media platforms to promote specific religious teachings.

VIII. Sectoral-issues Misinformation

In early 2023, the possibility of postponing the 2024 elections emerged as one of the most widely discussed topics on social media. The news stemmed from the state court of Jakarta decision in granting a petition to postpone the 2024 elections on account of administrative errors committed by the election commission. This decision sparked significant criticism, with many arguing that a state-level court should not have the authority to make rulings affecting national electoral processes.

Although the high court of Jakarta later annulled the state court's decision, the perception remains that the initial ruling was part of an 'orchestrated attempt' to not only postpone the elections but also to extend President Jokowi's tenure in office.

Establishing evidence for the allegation is challenging, and we do not aim to verify the accuracy of such claims. Nevertheless, this issue has been a major topic on X for over a year. Our data shows it has generated in total 128,799 engagements. Accounts associated with the opposition have been particularly active. Leading the charge is @msaid_didu, the former Secretary of the Ministry of State-Owned Enterprises, with 9,540 engagements. He is followed by @OposisiCerdas with 8,730 engagements, @keuangannews_id with 4,682 engagements, @geloraco with 4,464 engagements, and @democrazymedia with 3,827 engagements.

The second most widely discussed issue concerns allegations about President Jokowi's college diploma, as depicted in Fig. 5. Doubts persist about whether Jokowi really graduated from college, despite his alma mater, Gadjah Mada University, asserting otherwise. Bambang Tri Mulyono, a prominent advocate of these claims, was prosecuted and sentenced to six years in prison for disseminating fake news. Overall, this controversy has garnered 72,570 engagements on X.

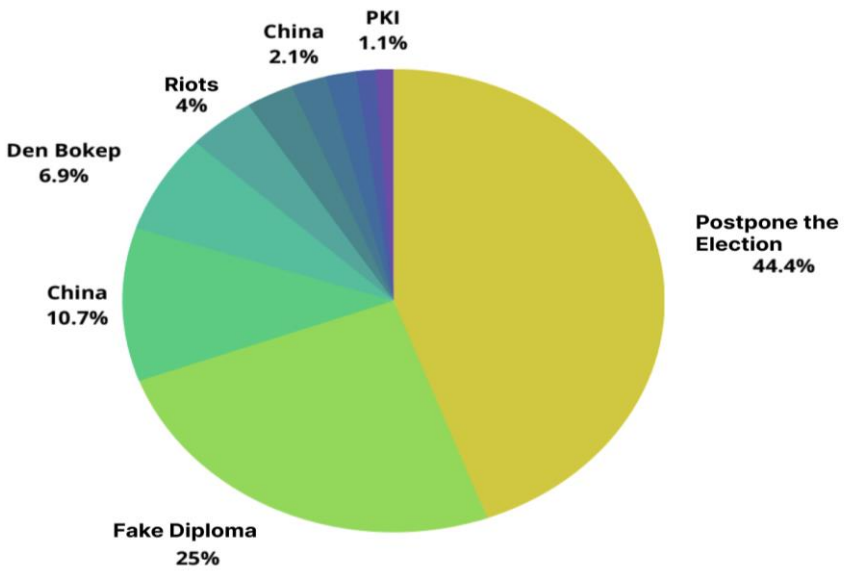

Fig. 5 Top Misinformation on Twitter

The third most discussed issue on social media was the influx of Chinese workers, which garnered a total of 31,036 engagements. As China's investment in Indonesia grows, many Chinese-sponsored projects tend to deploy their own workers to leverage technological and labor expertise. Public reactions varied widely, ranging from fears of displacing domestic labor to allegations that these Chinese workers contributed to the spread of COVID-19. There were also rumors that the workers were provided with national IDs to vote in Indonesian elections.

We also explored the patterns of misinformation on TikTok. As Indonesia ranks as the second-largest user base of TikTok, the platform presents a compelling case for examining its influence manipulation.

The types of issues that gain traction on TikTok tend to be more sensational than those on X. For instance, one of the most viewed topics on TikTok was the rumored plan by PDIP to pair Ganjar with Ahok. Despite its improbability, this 'gossip' garnered a significantly higher level of engagement, accumulating 1,486,054 interactions. This surpasses the engagement levels of other popular issues, such as 'Nasdem cancels supporting Anies' with 757,061 interactions, 'Prabowo becomes the vice-presidential candidate' with 641,188 interactions, and 'Nasdem supports Ganjar for president' with 562,994 interactions.

We also collected data on the most influential TikTok users based on their political affiliations (Fig. 6). It shows that each candidate has their own TikTok 'army,' with Ganjar leading the way in terms of the level of engagement. Four out of the top five accounts are affiliated with Ganjar. There were considerable interactions focused on criticizing Prabowo, along with one account dedicated to supporting the nomination of Mahfud MD, the then-Coordinating Minister of Politics, Law, and Security. Similar to Prabowo, Anies' supporters have been much less active on TikTok compared to X. This data occurred before Prabowo's dramatic surge in popularity on TikTok, which began in late 2023. Reports suggest that, in addition to celebratory gimmicks such as dances and songs featured in his campaign, Prabowo greatly benefited from AI-generated content portraying him as

a 'gemoy' (a bubbly, cuddly personality) candidate.[9] This image was warmly received by young voters, who constitute the majority in the 2024 elections. The effectiveness of this strategy highlights the growing influence of AI-generated media in shaping public perception and voter behavior.

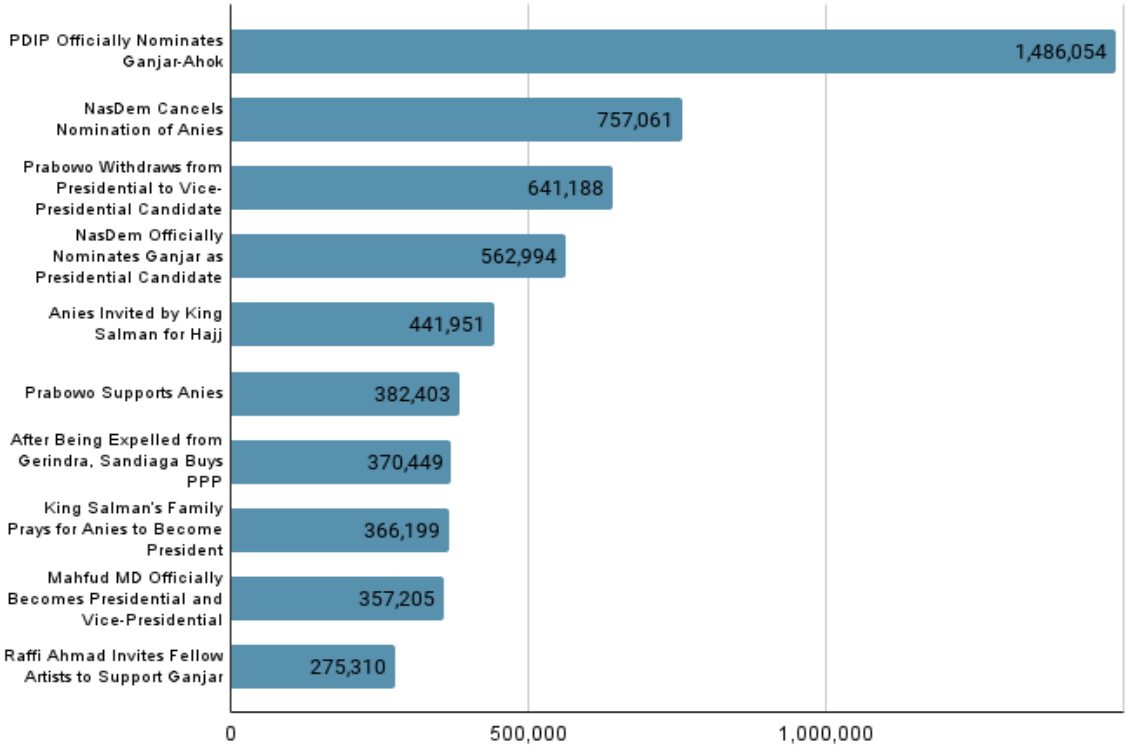

Fig. 6 Top Misinformation on TikTok

IX. Inclusivity of New Media

Misinformation can be seen as an inevitable problem inherent in new media. This field is marked by the massive amount of user-generated content, where anyone can publish information regardless of its accuracy or credibility. New media also increases anonymity, which eliminates accountability, making it easier for individuals to spread misinformation without facing consequences. Unlike traditional media, new media often lacks, or is entirely absent of, an editorial process, allowing much information to go unchecked.

This emerging field also put strong importance on engagement-increasing activities. This has created ample opportunities for the emergence of political buzzers or digital operatives as a new profession in the digital age. As we have discussed, these jobs are predominantly informal and part-time, often supplementing rather than replacing the primary jobs of those involved. The backgrounds of these actors are varied, mainly from media industries such as current and former journalists, PR strategists, digital marketers, and freelancers. These roles also attract individuals with and without political backgrounds, including political staffers, members of political parties, members of a

[9] https://www.indopacifica.com/p/the-prabowo-campaigns-cute-aggression

candidate's campaign team ('tim sukses'), and students.

The non-scalable and accessible nature of these jobs implies that the labor supply for social media manipulation activities will always be readily available. As mentioned, this could drive down the costs of social media manipulation services. Ironically, the lower the price, the more detrimental the impact could become.

Emphasis should be placed on the interaction between journalists and digital operatives. Journalists posses a greater set of skills and networks compared to other professions, putting them in a better position to engage in this business. While skills such as news writing and videography can be acquired by non-media specialists, establishing an extensive network of media contacts at both national and local levels, and effectively collaborating on commissioned work across various media outlets, can only be achieved through real immersion in the media industry.

The networks among journalists are forged through their frequent interactions during news coverage. Although they work for their respective companies, in practice, media workers often collaborate and assist each other during news-making activities in the field. This collaborative environment strengthens their connections and enhances their ability to operate effectively when needed.

The active engagement of media workers can also be attributed to the uneven and relatively low salaries of the industry in Indonesia. Big media companies in Jakarta can provide higher remuneration than smaller media organizations, especially those working in local news companies. For many, the supplementary earnings from buzzer activities can offer a financial cushion, allowing actors to continue pursuing their primary jobs and maintain a reasonable standard of living.

X. Identify Politics

To fully grasp the challenges of misinformation, it is also important to consider Indonesia's deep historical interplay between identity and politics. Religious and ethnic identities have long been selling points in Indonesian politics. The politicization of Islam stands out as the most prevalent manifestation of this, while ethnicity has also played an increasingly significant role in shaping voter behavior. Cyber troopers exploit the provocative elements of these differences in an efficient manner, enabling their rapid dissemination beyond control.

Jakarta's elections have often been noted as pivotal moments in the repositioning of identity-based politics. Nonetheless, the use of identity in politics has roots dating back to the early years of independence. The political atmosphere of the 1950s, for instance, was highly polarized, with political parties split along extreme left and right lines. The first election in 1955 witnessed the triumph of three ideologically polarizing parties in the top four positions: the Islamic parties Masyumi and Nahdlatul Ulama, and the communist party PKI. The winning party at that time, the Indonesian Nationalist Party (PNI), was also provocative, as it was largely portrayed as the right-wing nationalist carrier. These deep-seated ideological and identity differences contributed to the government's inability to form an effective cabinet, as evidenced by the rapid turnover of parliamentary governments during the 1950s.

During the New Order era (1967–1998), the potential for ethnic and religious political participation was repressed, making this period dormant in terms of identity contest.

Continuous repression may have been successful in restraining large-scale mobilization, but the underlying ideological fervor remained and ready to manifest. Islamic politics during this era were largely socialized underground and operated more within the community sphere, without necessarily manifesting within the formal realm of party politics. Upon the collapse of the New Order regime and the significant transformations of the political and electoral systems that took place after 1999, identity politics in the form of mobilization of religious and ethnic groups became one of the defining features of Indonesian politics. Being sensitive to the complexities of identity's role in Indonesian politics is crucial for taking steps in addressing the ongoing challenges of misinformation.

XI. Concluding Notes

This report outlines the structure and inner mechanisms of digital operatives in Indonesia. It explains the processes involved in building buzzer networks, the composition of their teams, their interactions with clients, and the types of work they typically undertake. A greater emphasis is placed on the intersection between misinformation and electoral politics. We also provide examples of misinformation related to policies and sectoral issues. In the subsequent sections, we delve into the pertinent issues surrounding misinformation, particularly exploring the nexus between identity politics and new media.

Misinformation is a relatively recent phenomenon, and efforts by stakeholders to determine the most effective approaches for addressing it are still in the early stages. As the landscape of digital communication continues to evolve, the challenge of combating misinformation may become increasingly complex, necessitating adaptive and innovative strategies.

It falls outside our scope to propose specific solutions to this issue. Nonetheless, upon reflecting on the research process, the following actions may be beneficial: First, it is crucial for the Indonesian government to initiate steps through the existing legal framework. A clear and coherent signal from the government, indicating a stance of non-tolerance towards detrimental activities related to social media manipulation, is imperative. Additionally, rigorous discussions to define 'manipulation' and to delineate the boundaries of such activities are essential. While we acknowledge that these discussions are likely to be contentious, having clear and established guidelines is still preferable to having none.

Secondly, platform companies should consider consulting with and establishing networks that include various credible organizations, academics, and activists dedicated to addressing misinformation. Building effective networks is a long-term endeavor. While such networks already exist in Indonesia, their effectiveness has not been thoroughly evaluated. It might be advantageous to maintain various independent networks that engage in diverse aspects of misinformation, rather than consolidating them into a single coalition, to ensure a broader and more nuanced approach. This approach allows for specialization and tailored strategies in different areas of misinformation. Additionally, engaging directly with specific media companies or journalists' associations to gather insights on misinformation-related issues from the perspective of professional organizations could prove invaluable.

Thirdly, since misinformation is inherently a tech-driven problem, part of the solutions

should also be tech-centric. The level of social media engagement has become a highly valued commodity on online platforms. The rapid spread and popularity of videos, images, and social media posts are now measured by numerous metrics such as reads, subscriptions, views, retweets, comments, likes, and shares. These metrics have blurred the lines between normative assessments of 'worthiness' and 'attractiveness.' When these metrics are leveraged in the context of polarizing elections, the potential for misinformation to spiral out of control increases significantly. Therefore, developing technological strategies that can discern and mitigate the undue influence of these engagement metrics on the spread of misinformation is critical.

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