

## Conference Paper

# Patterns of Truth: Explaining Trust, Social Media and Truth in Indonesian Contemporary Politics

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### Abstract

This study analyzes the utilization of social media in political communication processes in the post-truth era. Today, the utilization of various social media has had a significant impact on the process of politics worldwide. *Facebook* and *Twitter* are the most popular social media platforms in the world, therefore, the most used in politics. Both of them directly influence the democratic process. The lack of transparency on social media platforms, however, has become a major problem. Information on social media is often misleading and ignores facts and truth. Social media users can easily disseminate unverified information to other social media users. Moreover, in the age of post-truth, people tend to disclose themselves to ideas, values, and opinions that they have already accepted, instead of the true facts. The objective of this research is to assess the usage of social media in the democratic process in the post-truth era. Therefore, the research question is: how do people use social media to seek truth and trust in politics in the age of the information overload? Using phenomenology as the method, the main focus of this study is the experience of the informants. The results of this research suggest that social media can be used as an opportunity for, as well as a challenge to democracy. Besides playing a role in the democratic process, social media can be a dangerous weapon in political discourse. That is why critical thinking is needed so that we can distinguish between true or factual information and fake news delivered through social media.

**Keywords:** social media; political communication; fake news; post-truth

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## 1. Introduction

### 1.1. Background

Nowadays, more than half of the world's population is connected to the internet. The Global Digital 2018 reports reveal that the number of people using the Internet has reached more than four billion worldwide. Based on the most recent report, in 2017 almost a quarter of a billion new users went online for the first time. Meanwhile, active social media users have reached over three billion worldwide. From the same report,

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*Facebook* dominates the social media landscape; in January 2018, the active *Facebook* users reached two thirds of the market with more than 2.17 billion users. The data also showed that India held the highest number of *Facebook* users with 250 million or had increased 12 percent that year from 219 million active users. In Indonesia alone, the number of internet users was 132.7 million in January 2018. In that period, active social media users had gone up 23 percent, equating to 24 million people since January 2017. At the point of January 2018, the total number of monthly active *Facebook* users in Indonesia was 130 million people compare with Malaysia that had only 24 million people. Based on this data, Facebook is the second highest social media accessed by Indonesians after *YouTube*.

Internet search engines and social media technology companies have completely changed the way people seek and consume information. It has made it possible for anyone to produce content and share it with a global audience. This phenomenon shows that digital has become an indispensable part of everyday life for most of us. We are utilizing that connectivity in almost every aspect of our lives, such as talking with friends, playing games, or even going online shopping. Today, the usage of various social media has important implications for political processes throughout the world. *Facebook* and *Twitter* are the most widely-used social media networks in politics. Both of them directly influence the democratic process. Thus, social media platforms that ease the interaction and collaboration in the production, dissemination, and exchange of content have become the mainstay of political campaigns. Owen (2014, p.5) notes that the utilization of Facebook and video sharing sites, such as YouTube, during the campaign and election participation, along with peer-to-peer election information exchange were the most prominent developments in 2008 in using social media for the political process. Voters from various constituencies were able to take part in the campaign because of the low impediment to access social media (Owen, 2014, p.10). They used social media for producing and disseminating content during the political campaign, spanning news stories, opinion pieces, audio and video, to independent political ads.

Information on social media, however, is often misleading and can ignore or distort the facts, becoming a major issue. Social media users can easily disseminate unverified information to other social media users. St George's House, in their report titled "Democracy in a Post-Truth Information Age" (2018, p.3) stated that:

... the Internet is a double-edged sword when it comes to the functioning of effective democratic processes. It has democratized publishing and communications; it provides instant access to vast amounts of information and knowledge; it facilitates dialogue and collaboration between individuals who

might not otherwise be able to interact with each other; and it has liberated dissenting voices in communities otherwise silenced by authoritarian censorship.

Alongside this, the report identified a number of other issues surrounding dissemination of news. One of the largest is how the source of information is becoming increasingly vague. Online users find it more difficult to judge the quality of the information they find because of the blurring boundary between verified and unreliable sources. Besides, the ability of individuals to re-post unverified information rapidly leads to the “echo-chamber” effect. This situation evokes the misleading impression that information encountered by citizens is “public” and shared, and is based on independently verified sources rather than a particular perspective’s representation. Not to mention the use of *socialbots*—a self-sufficient internet persona— that automatically produce messages appearing to come from humans. Propagandists have been exploiting *Socialbots* to create artificial support during election campaigns.

A main news-story account entitled “Social Media’s Threat to Democracy” which was published by *The Economist* magazine on November 4, 2017 reminded us that social media could have a double face (Sulistyo, 2017). It means that social media can be useful not only for enlightening and promoting democracy, but also can be misused. Tapsell (2017) in an article entitled “Post-truth Politics in Southeast Asia” explained that post-truth had been dubbed the Oxford Dictionary’s 2016 word of the year. Post-truth has been called to explain the changing the landscape of politic since Brexit and Trump’s election. According to Tapsell (2017), in the age of post-truth, millions of individuals are producing and disseminating their posts on the internet. People who are the readers or viewers of this content do not believe in mainstream media and have shifted to online societies that scaffold their opinions and beliefs. Regarding to this post-truth politics, Tapsell highlighted two political events in Southeast Asia. In his view, the Philippines’ presidential election in 2016 revealed that post-truth in the context of media and politics are found not only in the western world but also in Southeast Asia. The phenomenon of post-truth politics appeared in the election for the Governor of Jakarta in 2017. This began on September 27, 2017, where Ahok—the incumbent candidate for Jakarta’s Governor election—made a speech during a work visit on Pramuka Island, in the Thousand Islands Regency, which was then considered insulting religion. On October 6, 2017, Buni Yani uploaded that recorded video of Ahok’s speech to his *Facebook* account, titled “Blasphemy against Religion?” along with the transcript of Ahok’s speech but the word “use” was omitted. Shortly afterwards, Front Pembela Islam (the Islam Defenders Front), and the Indonesian Ulema Council (MUI) of

South Sumatera reported Ahok to the police. After being named as a suspect by the police on November 16, 2017, Ahok stressed that he would not resign from the governor election on February 2017.

The dissemination of information through social networking sites and messenger applications—both well-known as social media platforms—is increasingly resonating in the age of post-truth. To pick one example among many, Indonesians use *WhatsApp* to spread information to others. Related to the governor elections in Jakarta in 2017, a brief excerpt of Ahok's speech was widely circulated via this messenger application besides Facebook and other social media platforms. As we all know, most people today are in numerous *WhatsApp* groups so that it was easy for them to share information—both verified and unauthenticated. So, as we've seen in the case of Ahok, it can be demolishing when facts are either altered or questioned, and voters have lost their trust in mainstream media because they have already accepted a narrative which fits their world view. The mainstream media, which used to be considered as the single source of truth, must accept the reality of the thinning boundary between truth and lies, honesty and deception, fictitious and non-fictitious. Facts are competing with hoaxes and lies to be trusted by public. This situation is in line with what Viner's (2016) argument that it is less challenging to spread fake news in the era of digital. Undoubtedly, in the age of post-truth, people tend to expose themselves to ideas, values, and opinions they have already align with, instead of true facts.

The purpose of this phenomenology study is to assess the living experiences of active social media users in utilizing social media in the democracy process amid the post-truth era. Therefore, the research question is: how do people use social media to seek truth and trust in politics in the age of information overload? The focus is on the active social media users' memories and their experience of how they use social media to seek truth and trust in politics in the age of information overload.

## 1.2. The literature review

Social media reflects a significant change in the democratic process worldwide. Johansson (2016, p. 4) states that this situation applies not only in Western democracies, but also in Indonesia. Among social media platforms, Facebook and Twitter are the most well-known networking sites around the world that directly affect democratic processes because both are increasingly misused to manipulate public opinion.

One of the main outcomes of the International Seminar on “Debate over the emergence of the post-truth era” (which carried the theme of Post-Truth: Politics and Communication) held in Spain, November 2017, revealed that “people usually consider some information as true when they believe in that information even though that information may be fake”. Therefore, they propose that “only critical thinking and information literacy may effectively fight against the spread of disinformation” (Ciefova, 2017). We also need to be more thorough in using social media platforms, as the information spread through these means are yet to be sufficiently regulated and controlled. Parties invest their money to hire “expert” individuals to disseminate messages that contain rumours or misinformation with deliberate manipulation. Back in August 2017, Indonesian Police arrested three central figures in the hoax business syndicate and hate speech called *Saracen* (Sohuturon, 2017). This incident affirmed that the post-truth phenomenon is increasingly occurring in Indonesia. As one of the countries with the largest number of internet users in the world, Indonesia has the potential to become a huge target of post-truth, especially for political purposes.

Sukmayadi and Effendi (2017, p.6) in their study titled “Social Media Emotion in Politics: An Indonesian Case Study of Political Environment on Facebook” revealed that 22 percent out of 100 percent *Facebook* users like seeing political posts on Facebook even though many Facebook users assume the content of political posts on Facebook can offend on the grounds of ethnicity, religion, and race issues. Meanwhile, only a small number of Facebook users absorb political content and are involve with other users who have different opinions. The results also claim that social media are still believed to be more compelling in involving activities such as political issues, news, and so on.

Another result shows that *Facebook* users feel confident posting inappropriate content which they would not express face-to-face so as to disclose their true colors when conveying their views and opinions. This fact is in line with Sukmayadi and Effendi (2017, p.5) who emphasized that *Facebook* is still widely used for personal motives. This causes them not responding in good manners. As Louw (2005, p.125) also noted, the technology of new media and an increasing volume of information does not alter people to become more considerate, vigilant, and informative seekers because—in reality—the information overload escalates the possibilities for manipulation, as the audiences is swamped and overwhelmed.

Viner (2016) introduced the term “information cascade”, to describe how people spread information despite it being fake and misleading; this process then repeats and the information cascade gains unstoppable momentum—even before we realize it. Johansson (2016, pp.4-5) stated that political actors and parties are enabled to form

content as desired on social media without facing the publication process applied to the mainstream media. Social media also allows citizens to choose content which support their beliefs and produce and disseminate their content with low costs and enabling them to connect directly with political actors.

Mavridis (2018, pp.14-15) asserts that fake news is not a new phenomenon yet the way it is spread has altered—which social media platforms, including Facebook and Twitter, are the most fertile means for the fast spreading of fake news. Urmeneta (2017)—journalist and lecturer in Communication at the University of Catalonia—cited in Ciefova (2017, p.4) also notes that “*Facebook* is a breeding ground for easy broadcasting and spreading of unverified, misleading, and fake information”. Undoubtedly, technology aids content producers to create various content including fake news spanning from text; photos; videos; memes; to gif, and to circulate it promptly and universally. Therefore, *only critical thinking*—as asserted by Juan Maria Atutxa (2017) cited in Ciefova (2017, p.1)—“may [work] effectively against the spread of disinformation and misleading news across media and social media channels”. Furthermore, Atutxa states that people should enhance their critical thinking skills at first and assess the information they read gravely. As Yee (2017) also notes in his article titled “Post-truth politics and fake news in Asia”, netizens “have an ethos of responsibility and healthy scepticism toward information that might not be properly fact-checked”.

### 1.3. Methodology

This research uses the phenomenology method. The research of phenomenology investigates the lived experience of informants participating in research in relation to a phenomenon. As noted by Titchen and Hobson (2005, p.121), phenomenology is the study of living, human phenomena in the social context from the perspective of those who experience them.

They developed two distinct approaches in researching phenomena: direct and indirect. This research uses the direct approach by exploring human knowing and accessing the consciousness of the informants participating in the research. Titchen and Hobson (2005, p.122) noted that using the direct approach, the researcher shines light on the foreground of phenomenon which is accessed through the informants’ consciousness. The researcher asks the informants to reflect on, and talk about, their subjective experiences of phenomenon in an interview. Hence, the major data in this research was collected through in-depth interviews with the informants focusing on the member’s perspective and experiences (Neuman, 2006, p.407).

Marshall & Rossman (2006), cited in Yuksel & Yildirim (2015, p.9), stated that an in-depth phenomenological interview is to delineate the meaning of a phenomenon shared by the informants. In regards to participants, Creswell (2007) cited in Yuksel & Yildirim (2015, p.9) emphasized that phenomenological research requires homogenous group of participants who should have experience with the same phenomenon. The researcher should use purposive sampling and select the informants as a sample based on judgements related to the objective in the research (Groenewald, 2004, p.45). Thus, in this research, informants selected to be interviewed were the active users of social media and accessing political contents frequently. Four active social media users with various background were selected to be informants based on their experience in using social media related to political content. The selected informants in this research were Eka Wenats, an academic; Sari Handayani Musdar, a political actor who was a candidate of Regional People's Representative Council; Manunggal Sukendro, an employee of Sea Current Power Plant Company who lives abroad; and Taufan Haryadi, a journalist who has experienced covering political news for more than five years. The researcher, then, transforms the subjective experiences of the informants through interpretation to represent them as objective constructions (Titchen and Hobson, 2005, p. 122).

## 2. Results and Discussion

The phenomenological approach focuses on human subjective experiences. This study revealed that the experience of research subjects in utilizing social media to seek truth and trust in political content in the age of post-truth are as follows:

### 2.1. Seeking truth: The significance of information verification in consuming political content

Social media, in fact, has constructive functions in developing democracy and strengthening national politics. Unfortunately, recently lots of political information circulating in social media has a tendency to lead the public into a pattern of ignoring truth and facts surrounding certain issues. This condition has been one of the major problems in the circulation of information on social media. The active social media users can easily disseminate unverified information to other social media users. Thus, critical thinking is obligatory when consuming information related to political issues on social media. Verifying the information through mainstream mass media is one of the easiest ways when users consume information on social media. Technically, users could not control



information circulating on social media as they need to be mature enough to understand it, which can involve the checking of sources, pondering the credibility of the information, and comparing with other sources. Therefore, critical thinking is a critical capability in the information society.

One of the means of thinking critically is verification of information, which can be done by tracing the truth of the information to other sources such as online news media that have been verified by the Press Council (Dewan Pers) or reliable and valid literature. This information verification applies when using and sharing political content on social media. As stated by an informant, Eka Wenats:

”As an active social media user, when I consume political content on social media. My belief departs from doubt. So, when I have a proposition and want to post political content, I always make sure that it is correct and has valid data. When the content has been posted, do not let other users provide more powerful comments from our content.”

Before uploading and sharing political content, social media users should make sure that the information which will be shared is correct and the source is credible. Furthermore, Eka Wenats stated that he tries to be objective and rational when assessing political content on social media by looking at the contents of the information and not just assessing who delivers the message.

The process of verifying information by social media users while consuming political content can also refer to the nine elements of journalism formulated by Bill Kovach and Tom Rossentiel. One informant, Manunggal Sukendro, commented that if the information on social media he read did not meet the requirements of these elements, he would be skeptical about the content. The principle of journalism can also be used as a reference when producing political content by emphasizing the facts and objectivity. Informant Sari Handayani who is also a political actor stated as follows:

”Basically, for me, I should give facts –like the journalist do. Even though I am only a social media users yet I have to provide true information. I write content on social media from my point of view. Write it objectively and based on true facts, check to the valid source. But I only write for subjects that I master well. ”

Once verification of information has been completed, social media users do not always share that information to other social media users. There are times when information that has been verified is only used privately by social media users. Informant Taufan Haryadi, a journalist for television media, explained that:



"... if there is new information post on social media, I won't immediately comment on the post. But I find out the truth by verification. If the information is true, then I consume it privately –just for the knowledge of my heart and mind. If the information is untrue, I just know that the person (who uploaded the related content) is wrong. "

Oftentimes, people forward the content on their social media timelines right away even though the information in the content is false or misleading. Viner (2016) called it an "information cascade". This is why it is significant to have critical thinking skill when consuming and before sharing or forwarding political content in the realm of social media.

Furthermore, Taufan Haryadi emphasized that sharing political content on social media should have a strong fundamental, so he has to carry out literacy checks. He argues that the literacy of a number of his friends on social media who share political content is low so that he does not share the content directly. In his view, finding out the truth with verification is the first and most important thing to do.

We cannot deny that the presence of new technologies and the revolution of social media platforms have contributed to the rise of post-truth information phenomenon that has greatly influenced the current political discourse. So, in order to not slip up with misguided information, critical thinking, particularly when consuming political content on social media with a high level of complexity, is absolutely necessary.

Undoubtedly, verifying information is significant when consuming information—including political content—on social media. This fact is in line with Juan Maria Atutxa (2017) cited in Ciefova (2017, p.1) who asserted that "only critical thinking may be effectively against the spread of disinformation and misleading news across media and social media channels". According to Tapsell (2017) in the age of post-truth a great number of people are producing and disseminating their information through the internet. Therefore, people should enhance their critical thinking skills at first and assess the information they read gravely.

## 2.2. Layers of trust in political content

The study by Sukmayadi and Effendi (2017, p.6) revealed that people believe that social media offers a compelling atmosphere to engage with information and discussion about political matters, including with other users who have different opinions, and this discussion can lead to a escalated situations with other social media users. Whereas Johansson (2016, p.11) noted that one of the main features of social media is that it

enables users of the most recent post to involve in the creation and dissemination of the post. Furthermore, users of social media can interact directly with other users—a feature that is unique to social media.

The involvement in a discussion on social media usually manifests in the form of leaving comments regarding certain political phenomenon, uploading self-made political content, or resharing political content shared by other social media users. Informant Eka Wenats stated:

”Sometimes I create long political content with thread (kultwit) by responding to certain phenomenon with relevant theories. Responses from followers more in the form of approving or confirming the statement or retweeting my tweet. In terms of political discussion on this social media I will disclaim: please comment but be rational, it should be based on valid data and strong argumentation, and no hard-feeling. ”

When commenting on social media, Eka Wenats emphasized that there was no tendency to take side with one party. In principle, political discussion on social media is done by avoiding debates. However, if there are other users who provide comments that attack him personally, then the comment will be removed from the comments column. The same thing was confirmed by informant Sari Handayani Musdar who chose not to argue. Information submission is in the form of personal opinions on the private wall on her social media, and she does not attack different opinions on the walls of other social media users. If there is a comment that attacks her personally, she explicitly said, the users will be blocked or unfriend if she does not know them in the real world. This was also true for the informant Taufan Haryadi, who prefers to avoid political debates on their personal social media pages.

Different groupings of opinions were also carried out. It does not matter if there are different opinions if it is based on strong arguments and credible sources; however, it becomes a problem if the difference of opinion only leads to blasphemy, coachman debate, and poor literacy. The saturation of political debate in the realm of social media has also lead some people to choose not to involve anymore in political discussions, either in the form of posting on their personal timelines, or commenting on content posted by other social media users.

Political discussions on social media are inevitable. Moreover, people have ultimate freedom to choose which content they agree with, or to avoid the content if they disagree. The social media domain also allows people to form content as desired with

low cost and enable them to connect directly with political actors (Johansson, 2016, pp.4-5).

As an open platform, social media allows two-way communication, causing political discussion on social media. The fact that there is involvement in discussions related to political content on social media shows that information on social media is still trusted by users; however, the level of trust varies. At some point users trust political content on social media because of the nature of its immediacy and spontaneity—or first impression—of the attitude of social media users when giving comments. In general, the spontaneous attitude of social media users reveals who they really are and that their subconscious emotions are easily provoked. Social media users on Facebook, to choose one among many, dare to post abusive content and disrupt other users because they do not meet face to face, thus acting with bravado when revealing opinions on social media. The motivation of those who express themselves on social media is more for egocentric reasons as stated by Sukmayadi and Effendi (2017, p.5).

Even though people continue to believe in political content on social media, the content cannot be trusted one hundred percent because more content is the personal opinion of the users. Frequently, these opinions are not accompanied by accurate data from credible sources. For this reason, verification of information—one of them with mainstream media—should absolutely be done before deciding to believe in political content on social media. It means, social media does give people freedom to produce and disseminate content; however, the lack of control in social media allows false news and hoaxes to spread, rumors to circulate, and even politician to lie. When responding to news, both true and false, people are affected by emotions (Tapsell, 2017) so that true information is less effective in forming thought or opinion than the appeal of emotions and personal believes. This condition describes the post-truth.

### 3. Conclusion

The platforms of social media, for instance Facebook and Twitter, are still prominent among many other digital means in regards to consuming content and engaging in discussion related to political matters. The active users of Facebook and Twitter in Indonesia discuss various political topics spanning public policy to campaigns and elections. It cannot be denied that social media has a pivotal role in the democratic process in Indonesia. Thus, social media can be used as an opportunity as well as a challenge for democracy. Social media allows everyone to create political content and share it with a global audience. On the other hand, social media also has other

undesirable consequences—the spreading of false information that leads to two types of information: misinformation and disinformation. Misinformation contains inaccurate or misleading information and is disseminated without those spreading realizing that it is incorrect, while disinformation is false or misleading information and is deliberately disseminated to deceive the target audience. Social media can be a dangerous weapon in political discourse besides playing a role in the democratic process. That is why critical thinking is needed so that we can distinguish between true or factual information and fake news delivered through social media. Information verification is absolutely necessary as it is one of the ways to find the truth regarding political information circulating on social media.

The influence of the opinions, views, or personal beliefs of social media users may arise when consuming political content on social media. However, objectivity remains important. Engaging in political discussion without arguing can lead to the pros and cons of one party. Comments made by social media users should be based on arguments and data from valid sources so that they do not aggravate the situation. This involvement of users in a discussion on social media shows that they still trust information with a political context spread on social media even though the layers of their trust vary.

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