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The 2019 Indonesian Presidential Election: Propaganda in Post-Truth Era

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ABSTRACT

Presidential elections often are colored by propaganda and post-truth politics in its campaign to influence public opinion. This study aimed to identify the way and forms of propaganda and post-truth communicate political messages from the 2019 presidential election in Indonesia through political communication on social media. This research employed a mixed-methods approach that combines quantitative and qualitative methods. The quantitative data were obtained from Twitter with social network analysis (SNA) from December 2018 to March 2019. Meanwhile, the qualitative data were obtained from literature searches and expert interviews. The results of this analysis indicated that presidential candidate Jokowi was widely rumored to be a liar, claimant of success, weak leader, communist, pro-China, and anti-Islam. There were also many rumors that referred to presidential candidate Prabowo as a pro caliphate, human rights violator, person with a questionable religion, bad-tempered person, inexperienced leader, and hoax spreader. These negative issues constitute propaganda in the form of stories, rumors, and myths that were manipulated to influence public opinion on social media. Some parts of society believed them based on emotional belief instead of on rationally observed facts. We conclude that even when it involves many people in a big nation, propaganda can be manipulated to influence public opinion.

Keywords: Propaganda, post-truth, social media, political communication, presidential election

ABSTRAK

Pemilihan presiden sering kali diwarnai oleh propaganda dan politik pasca-kebenaran dalam kampanyenya untuk memengaruhi opini publik. Kami mempelajari kasus pemilihan presiden di Indonesia tahun 2019. Penelitian ini bertujuan untuk mengidentifikasi bagaimana bentuk-bentuk propaganda dan post-truth mengkomunikasikan pesan politik melalui komunikasi politik di media sosial. Penelitian ini menggunakan pendekatan metode campuran, yaitu kombinasi metode kuantitatif dan kualitatif. Data kuantitatif diperoleh dari media sosial Twitter dengan analisis jejaring sosial (SNA) dari Desember 2018 hingga Maret 2019. Data kualitatif diperoleh dari penelusuran literatur dan wawancara ahli. Hasil analisis menunjukkan bahwa capres Jokowi banyak diisukan sebagai pembohong, klaim keberhasilan, pemimpin lemah, komunis, pro-China, dan anti-Islam. Banyak rumor yang menyebut calon presiden Prabowo sebagai pro khilafah, pelanggaran HAM, orang yang agamanya dipertanyakan, pemarah, pemimpin yang tidak berpengalaman, dan penyebar *hoax*. Implikasi dari penelitian ini adalah bahwa isu-isu negatif tersebut merupakan propaganda berupa cerita, rumor, dan mitos yang dimanipulasi untuk memengaruhi opini publik di media sosial. Sebagian masyarakat percaya bahwa propaganda ini sebagai kebenaran karena didasarkan pada keyakinan emosional, bukan fakta yang diamati secara rasional. Kami menyimpulkan bahwa meskipun melibatkan banyak orang di negara besar, propaganda dapat dimanipulasi untuk memengaruhi opini publik.

Kata Kunci: Propaganda, post-truth, media sosial, komunikasi politik, pemilihan presiden

INTRODUCTION

Political communication in the context of the 2019 Indonesian presidential election campaign was carried out massively in various media, including printed, electronic and social media. The forms of political communication in influencing public opinion came not only through political campaigns but also through propaganda, and *post-truth* politics. This propaganda is performed as conscious or unconscious efforts by manipulation of opinion, perceptions, and behaviors of target groups (Willcox, 2005). Meanwhile, *post-truth* politics describe the situation with regard to the state of society in which the objective facts are less influential in shaping public opinion than a person's emotions and belief (Renner & Spencer, 2018). The current post-truth era is shaped by technological developments that allow everyone to search for the truth according to their own experiences (Kempner, 2020). Even post-truth in particular is often equated with propaganda and disinformation (Boyd-Barrett, 2019) thus, *post-truth* is often used to describe campaign patterns in many general elections.

This study emphasized the communication process carried out on social media, especially Twitter because social media is the easiest medium to organize for low-cost information dissemination (Goel, 2011; Jungherr, 2016a). In addition, social media allows the distribution of user-generated message content on a large scale based on communication from many sources to multiple recipients (Castells, 2013). Social media has made many changes to the existing propaganda patterns in the world. Initially, propaganda was carried out in one direction with an audience that tended to be passive. Today, propaganda can be distributed to the wider masses who actively interact, and even without the presence of gatekeepers like conventional mass media (Chang & Lin, 2014).

Conversation on Twitter is currently the most analyzed object compared to that on other social media (Caldarelli et al., 2019). The reason is that Twitter opens data access through the API (*application programming interface*) provisions which researchers can use to find certain information on the Twitter platform. Research regarding propaganda, fake news, and post-truth in various presidential / political election campaigns also increased dramatically, such as the ones conducted by (Coman, 2010; Badawy et al., 2018; Bekafigo & McBride, 2013; Borondo et al., 2012; Bovet & Makse, 2019; Grinberg et al., 2019). These studies indicate that the information path in Twitter social media has the advantage to read the movement of the discourse in society, especially about propaganda.

Propaganda becomes the embodiment of political communication utilized in spreading messages that have been designed in such a way to influence public opinion in the presidential election of Indonesia in 2019. Not all of the propaganda messages designed, however, they

are in accordance with empirical facts. It often contains hoaxes or disinformation that does not match with the actual facts. This is in agreement with the understanding that the target of propaganda is basically not the audience's reasoning and arguments but the audience's emotions. Propaganda through social media is presumed as horizontal propaganda because this activity is not only dominated by the elite and large groups but it spreads to include small groups (Farkas & Neumayer, 2018).

Influencing public attitudes and behavior is carried out not only with propaganda techniques but also with the post-truth politics approach. The post-truth approach claims that facts are not important for influencing audiences and the most important thing is emotion rather than reason and argumentation (d'Ancona, 2017; Ball, 2018; Davis, 2017). The power of post-truth is considered successful in many general election cases such as the victory of the right-wing in the Brexit referendum in the U.K. (Ball, 2018), the victory of Donald Trump in the 2016 American presidential election (Barrera et al., 2017), and the victory of Jair Bolsonaro in the 2018 Brazilian presidential election (Sudibyo, 2019: 351). The post-truth era in politics contains a lot of disinformation or hoax news. This disinformation is considered detrimental to the democratic process, given that social media has an increasingly central role in political communication (Bode et al., 2015; Jungherr, 2016; Stier et al., 2018; Thorson & Wells, 2016; Vaccari, 2017).

In the 2019 Indonesian presidential election, political propaganda and post-truth politics were widely disseminated through social media. Social media has become a medium of communication for presidential candidates in the election campaign because it is efficient, massive, and effective. Platforms such as Twitter allow the candidates to directly greet and connect with potential voters or their supporters (Stier et al., 2018). This is because social media is widely used in the world, including in Indonesia. The dependence of society on social media cannot be separated from the development of digital technology which is increasingly sophisticated and personal with its extensive and fast network system (Quan-Haase, 2013). In Indonesia, social media is employed as a media platform for spreading hoax news and propaganda with a percentage of 92%, followed by WhatsApp by 62.80%, and websites by 28.20% (Mastel, 2019).

The rise of post-truth on social media in the 2019 presidential election will have implications for reducing the quality of democracy in Indonesia. A democratic party in the form of a presidential election should be a means of political communication for candidates and political parties in conveying their ideas and work programs to the public in order to build the nation. People will judge whether the candidate's ideas match the aspirations and

the needs of the community or not. This will become a consideration for the community to decide who the suitable candidate for the presidential election is. However, the rise of political messages in the form of post-truth on social media has damaged the substance of democracy itself. Because people are only treated to fallacious political messages and they will make their political choices solely based on false understanding not on real aspirations.

On the other hand, the post-truth phenomenon on social media will also affect the credibility of digital media itself, because it cannot filter content to distinguish between true news and fake news. The public will be trapped in the echo chamber effect, where they only hear what they are shouting without knowing the actual conditions. They only want to hear what they have thought, thus reinforcing their attitude. Here the concern emerges that social media only sucks people into homogeneous groups or like-minded things.

METHOD

This study used a mixed-method approach. Mixed methods combine two forms of methods between quantitative and qualitative. This combination of research methods was useful when quantitative and qualitative methods were not accurate enough to understand the research problem. The selection of a combination of methods was intended to cover the weaknesses and disadvantages of both quantitative and qualitative methods (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2017).

The quantitative data collection was obtained by data mining on Twitter social media through Social Network Analysis (SNA) in form of images and graphics and conversations managed by Drone Emprit Academic at the Islamic University of Indonesia. This network analysis was also keen to observe the phenomena and communication structures of political actors (Eriyanto, 2014). Meanwhile, the qualitative data were obtained from literature searches and interviews. This study placed its focus on issues associated with the presidential candidates Jokowi Widodo (Fahmi, 2019a) and Prabowo Subianto (Fahmi, 2019b) on Twitter in the period of December 2018 - March 2019 before the Indonesian presidential election on April 17, 2019. During that time, there were 603,672 tweets about Joko Widodo and 960,690 tweets about Prabowo Subianto.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The political campaign leading up to the 2019 Indonesian presidential election was supplied with propaganda messages and post-truth politics. This study raised negative issues that were disseminated through Twitter social media to influence public opinion. According

to Lasswell's view, these negative issues are propaganda in the form of stories, rumors, and myths to control public opinion (Black, 2001). This kind of propaganda seems to be carried out deliberately and systematically by utilizing the whole communication media channels, especially social media.

In the context of the Indonesian presidential election, both parties were equally exposed to propaganda and post-truth messages which were always negative. The main focus of this discussion was to analyze and explain the way propaganda works in a post-truth period that is not truthful. Propaganda can occur on many issues and on many levels; hence, not all of them can be discussed in detail. Jokowi was described as a liar, which was evil propaganda. That condition, however, is not sufficient to represent the post-truth era. It is just like the issue on Prabowo that violated human rights in the past, which is also insufficient to be categorized as post-truth because the issue is related to the law which can be proven when there is political will from the law enforcement agencies.

The negative issues that attacked both presidential candidates Jokowi and Prabowo were part of the propaganda agenda carried out by other parties. One of the goals of this propaganda was to create myths in society so that many people believe in them without needing to prove it. Myth in the context of propaganda is a central aspect of political persuasion (O'Shaughnessy, 2004). For O'Shaughnessy, myth is the main key to propaganda and it is impossible to imagine propaganda without myths. This shows how propagandists play a role by manipulating stories and rumors into myths for political purposes (Baines & O'Shaughnessy, 2014).

Negative Issues on Presidential Candidates

The analysis we conducted on Twitter social media revealed issues that were central to the circulation of hoaxes, fake news, and disinformation in the context of propaganda. This issue attacked both parties, Jokowi and Prabowo. In figure 1 below, presidential candidate Joko Widodo was plagued by six negative issues to undermine his popularity and electability. These issues were anti-Islam and ulama, communist, pro-China, weak leader, liar, and claimant of success. All of these issues were categorized as political propaganda that attacked the emotions of netizens because they were not based on strong evidence.

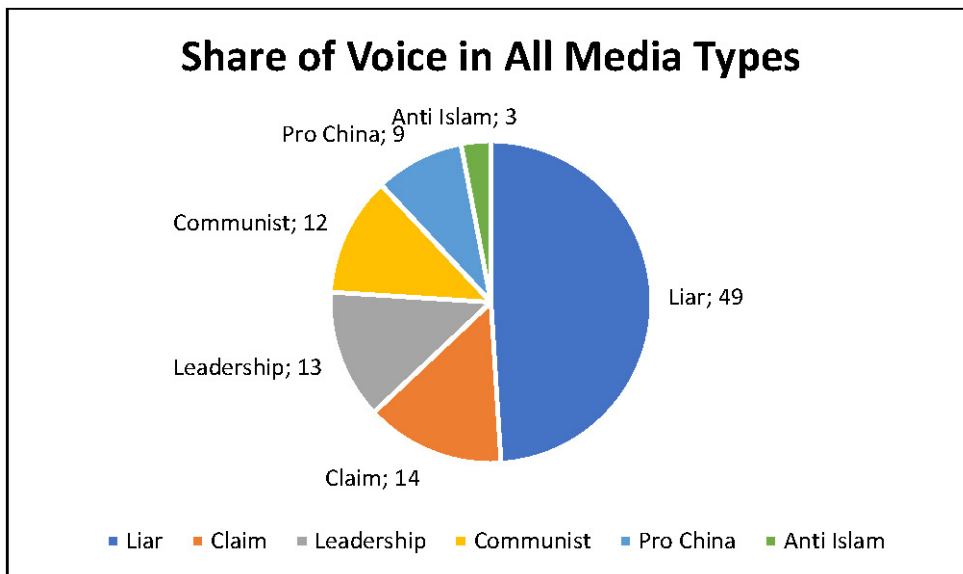


Figure 1. Distribution of Issues Concerning Jokowi
 Source: Fahmi (2019a)

The most widespread issue related to Jokowi was being a liar that occupied 49% of the total issue. This was very different from the focus of mass media reporting on the confirmation of Jokowi’s winning team on the issue of ‘anti-Islam’. This condition was indeed relevant because, at the end of Jokowi’s administration in 2019, several ulama were imprisoned. These incidents were processed to show that Jokowi was anti-Islam and his government was criminalizing ulama. In addition, it was closely related to the issue that Jokowi was a communist. This data was quite surprising considering that the mainstream mass media were also trapped with issues that apparently did not obtain a massive response in the lower class.

The issue of Jokowi being a liar reached 363,207 tweets on Twitter which were dominated by propagandists from sympathizers and propagandists from his political opponents. A tweet from @RajaPurwa account received 2,934 retweets when collecting Jokowi’s promise in Lombok Regency, West Nusa Tenggara Province (NTB). The account quoted the name of Haji Jaenudin, the land of whom was used for the construction of Lombok Airport but until 2019 he did not receive the compensation as promised by the government. Jokowi and Prabowo fought over 3 million votes in NTB which was eventually won by Prabowo. @Geloraco account, which was a new party belonging to Jokowi’s political opponent, Fahri Hamzah, also claimed Jokowi’s promise regarding sanctions for burning forests with 2,782 retweets. The same

thing was carried out by a Gerindra Party official who supported Prabowo, Dahnil A. Simanjuntak, in @dahnilanzar that received 2,469 retweets.

An interesting issue after Jokowi's broken promises was the accusation that Jokowi was a communist which obtained a share of 12% of the total issue. Among the other five issues, the issue of Jokowi being a communist was at the core of propaganda in the *post-truth* period. When traced, the issue of Jokowi as a communist has been echoed by his political opponents since the election for governor of Jakarta in 2012 and was repeated in the 2014 Indonesian presidential election. In the 2019 presidential election, this issue was still being replicated. Jokowi was considered a communist or a member of the Indonesian Communist Party. These stories or rumors were disseminated repeatedly on social media without any logical arguments or even empirical facts. This story manipulation was created not to target the audience's logic, but to target the emotions and beliefs of the propaganda targets. Stories and rumors that Jokowi was a communist can be considered as a myth since it leads to making the public believes in something without needing to prove it.

In Indonesia, communism is an ideology that is prohibited by the State. Indonesia has a past trauma since the Indonesian Communist Party revolted in 1926 before Indonesian independence, in 1948, and in 1965. In the authoritarian reign of Soeharto, the communist doctrine was prohibited by MPR Decree No. XXV of 1966. In order to call the Indonesian Communist Party's atrocities to mind, the government made a film entitled G30S PKI as an anti-communist propaganda film. This film was made because films have advantages over other media as a propaganda tool (Irawanto, 2004).

In contrast to the issue of Jokowi as a liar, the tweets from national figures and real Twitter accounts, the account that spread hoaxes of Jokowi as a communist came from a robot (bot) account. The most retweeted account was @ Ndon08back, which is currently *suspended* by Twitter based on the bot meter application. Meanwhile, the second-most retweeted account was obtained by @AndiArief_ with a total of 1,424 retweets. It contained messages that Jokowi should have announced the identity of his parents if he was offended by the accusation of being a child of the Indonesian Communist Party member. Apart from *retweets*, this *tweet* received 5,169 *likes* from Twitter members. The next most retweeted account came from @handokotjung but it did not contain propaganda of Jokowi, a communist. This account had 242,953 followers and was the largest among other *influencers* on the issue of Jokowi, a communist. *The tweet of* this account contained 'positive thinking' communists, mentioning that the people who shouted "Jokowi PKI" may stand for Jokowi, 'Presiden Kebanggaan Indonesia' (the Pride President of Indonesia).

The data above shows that the truth of the issue of Jokowi a communist or Jokowi a child of the Indonesian Communist Party member cannot be traced. Tweets and conversations on Twitter only contain accusations that attack netizens emotionally without data or facts. This is in accordance with the concept of propaganda in the *post-truth* era, which no longer cares about facts. The whole information is built on the artificial element of causality resulting in a wrong understanding of the society. Communist issues in Indonesia have indeed been repeated for political purposes even after 50 years have passed since 1965. To date, communist issues are a sensitive issue that can generate past wounds, anger, and deep sadness for both the perpetrators and the victims. Communist ideology, the Indonesian Communist Party, and everyone that has an affiliation with them are prohibited and people are hostile and threaten them with death (Bevins, 2017; Ma 'asan Mayrudin & Zulfiana, 2017).

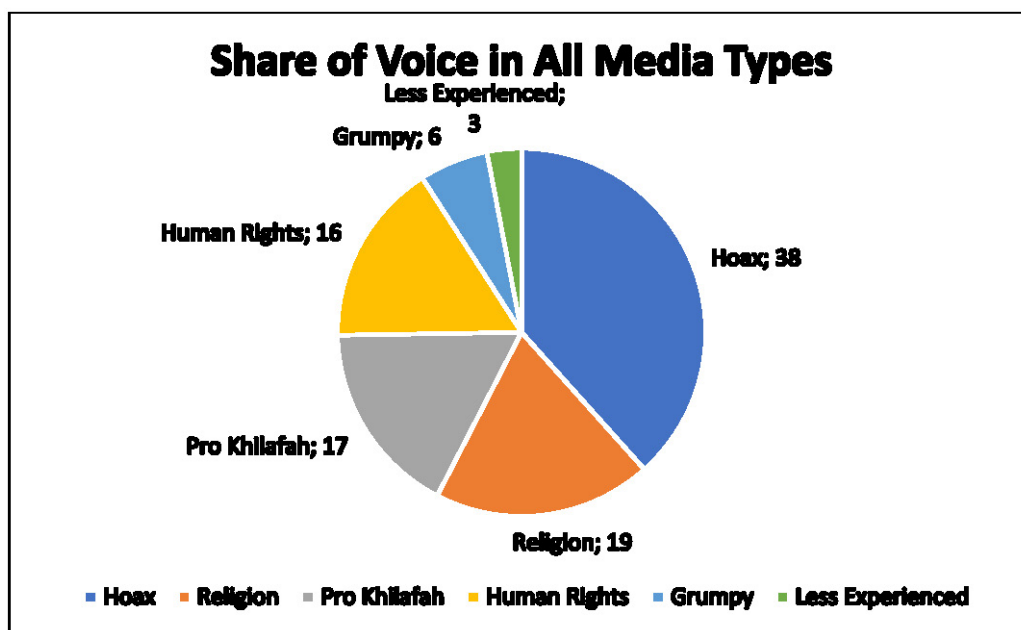


Figure 2. Distribution of Issues Related to Prabowo
Source: Fahmi (2019b)

Meanwhile, the negative issues spread by Prabowo's political opponents to ruin the image of the former president candidate Prabowo Subianto are shown in Figure 2. These negative issues included Prabowo Subianto as a human rights violator, high-tempered person, person with a questionable religion, pro-caliphate, inexperienced leader, and hoax spreader. These negative issues are also part of the propaganda carried out by political opponents on

social media. Among the six issues, most of them referred to the general propaganda that many politicians did before the *post-truth* era. The rumor that Prabowo has violated human rights during the chaos and the kidnapping of activists in 1998 is a legal case that must be decided in court, not a social media hoax. Likewise, the rumor that Prabowo frequently spreading hoaxes, occupied the largest position, around 38% of the total propaganda, had weaknesses in many Twitter conversations.

Therefore, this study selected the issue of Prabowo a pro caliphate as part of political propaganda in the 2019 presidential election. The pro-caliphate issue that attacked Prabowo was stigmatized by his political opponents to image Prabowo as part of a radical Islamic group such as Hizbut Tahrir Indonesia (HTI) which aims to make Indonesia an Islamic state and join the global caliphate (Ward, 2009). Just like the Indonesian Communist Party, Hizbut Tahrir Indonesia is also prohibited in Indonesia because it contradicts the ideology of Pancasila with the issuance of Government Regulation in Lieu of Law Number 2 of 2017.

As it is known, in the 2019 Indonesian presidential election, Prabowo was promoted by two Islamic parties; the Prosperous Justice Party (PKS) and the National Mandate Party (PAN). Apart from those Islamic parties, Prabowo was also supported by social organizations such as the Islamic Defenders Front (FPI) and the Islamic Community Forum (FUI). The community often identifies these two organizations as radical Islamic organizations. FPI and FUI have purpose to enforce the Sharia-based Unitary State of the Republic of Indonesia (NKRI) in Indonesia. In realizing the objectives, FPI and FUI are often involved in street protests by mobilizing large masses sometimes accompanied by acts of violence, vigilantism, and aggressive advocacy around certain issues to generate maximum publicity (Wilson, 2018).

The tweets that were frequently retweeted belonged to @BangPino_ account is currently blocked by Twitter. It was possibly because the account was a robot or *real account* but it spread hatred so it was reported and then blocked. This account was viral twice and received the highest response to the caliphate issues. On March 21, 2019, @BangPino_ made a *tweet* confirming that Habib Rizieq Shihab, who is the leader of FPI, supported Prabowo, so he asked all Prabowo's sympathizers to spread the information. On March 25, 2019, @BangPino_'s tweet went viral again with 3,271 *retweets* when criticizing the results of Denny JA's LSI survey in @DennyJA_World account which mentioned Prabowo was supported by radicals. What @BangPino_ account did was not propaganda to overthrow Prabowo, but instead supported Prabowo and refused that Prabowo was supported by radicals. Therefore, it is strange that the viral tweets about Prabowo being used by a person/organization that will establish a caliphate are more defensive than the propaganda from the opposing side. There was only @fornkri account that raised the issue of the FPI's arrogance so he was

worried that if Prabowo wins, the same ferocity would emerge. This account was also a robot account; thus, the war occurred between robots.

Actors Behind the Negative Issues of Presidential Candidates

In order to view the conversations about negative issues in social media, this research opted for the communist issue for Jokowi and the pro-caliphate issue for Prabowo. The monitoring results of social network analysis showed dynamic movements in addressing issues that considered Jokowi a communist or a member of the Communist Party of Indonesia. In Figure 3 you can see the green color as a sign of positive sentiment, while the red color is a negative sentiment. With Social Network Analysis, we can click on to browse to the actor's account with the values and attributes calculated from the actor (Arianto, 2019).

The top influencers in conversations about the Jokowi, a communist issue were dominated by @Ferdinand_Haeen account with 2,499 engagements, @AndiArief account with 2,400 engagements, @ApriliaLin account with 1,857 engagements, @eae18 account with 1,714 engagements, and @Ndon08Back account with 1,644 engagements.

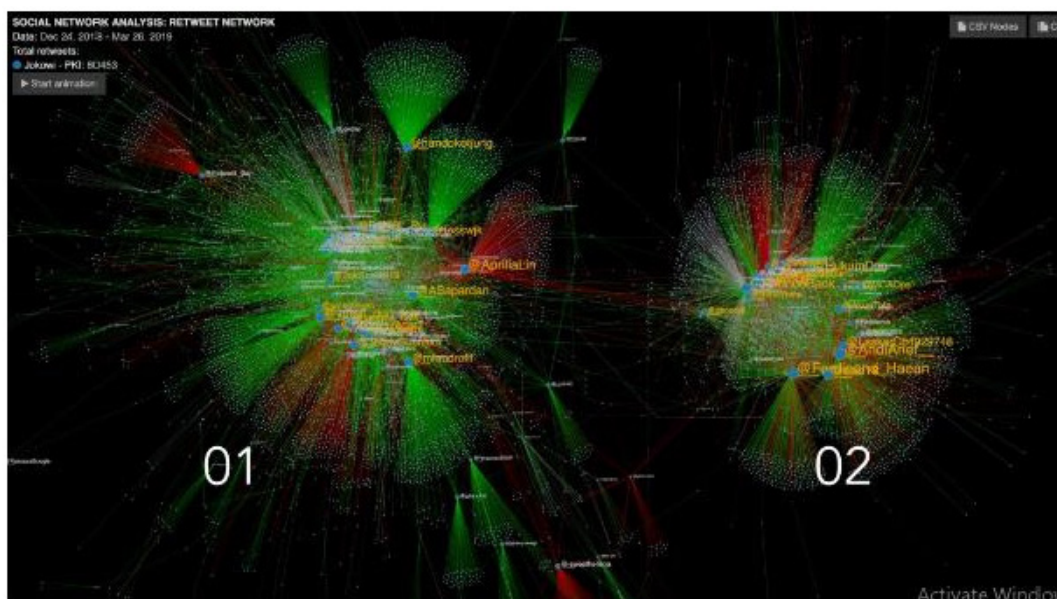


Figure 3. Social Network Analysis of Jokowi a Communist
Source: Fahmi (2019a)

The top influencers as in Figure 3 are propagandists who have the influence to influence public opinion on social media. They have a lot of followers on twitter, so any political

messages that are tweeted have the potential to be commented and retweeted by their followers. They are the political actors behind the discourse on the Jokowi, a communist issue on social media. They deliberately echoed this discourse massively on social media to maintain public memory of the relationship between Jokowi and the communists until the presidential election on 17 April 2019.

The results of the monitoring of social network analysis on issues that talked about Prabowo a pro-caliphate also showed dynamic conversations on the Indonesian Twitter social media. In Figure 4, it can be seen that the green color as a sign of positive sentiment, while the red color is a negative sentiment.

The top influencers in the discussion on the issue of Prabowo a pro caliphate were dominated by @BangPino account with 11,626 engagements, @PartaiSocmed account with 9,691 engagements, @JackVardan account with 6,709 engagements, @marierteman account with 6,383 engagements, and @ekowBoy account with 6,323 engagements.

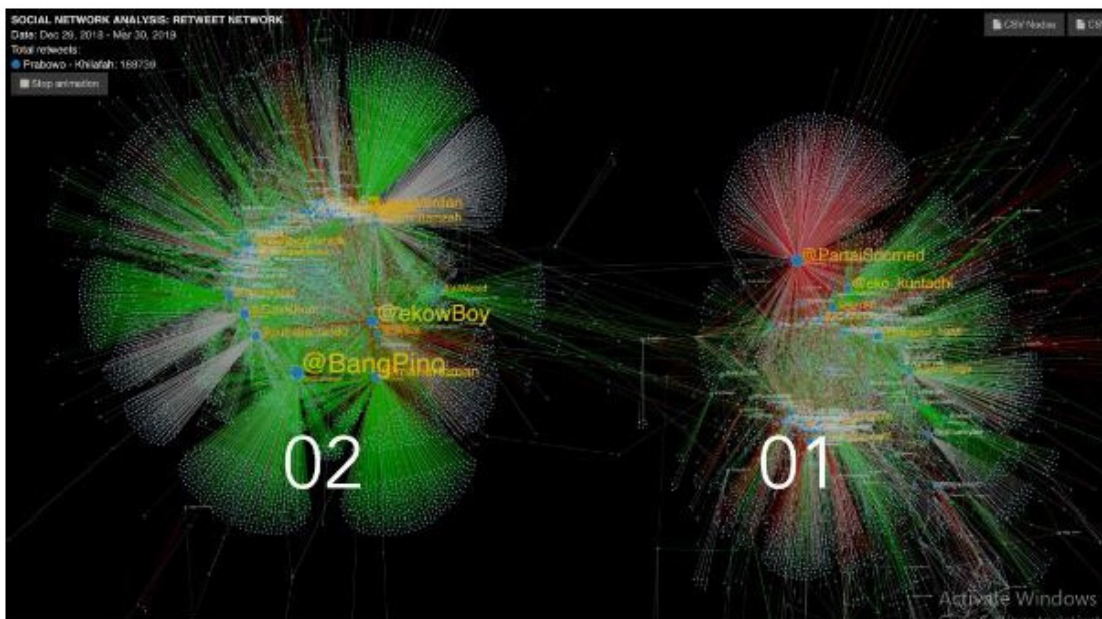


Figure 4. Social Network Analysis of Prabowo a Pro Caliphate

Source: Fahmi (2019b)

Like the top influencers in the discourse on the Jokowi, a communist, the top influencers in Figure 4 are also propagandists whose job is to undermine Prabowo Subianto's credibility. They propagated the discourse that Prabowo was pro-caliphate. This discourse was echoed by accounts that were pro with Jokowi to balance pro-Prabowo accounts with the Jokowi, a communist hashtag.

The political actors behind the propaganda of negative issues about presidential candidates, both Jokowi and Prabowo, can be regarded as political buzzers. A political buzzer is a figure who has an account on social media, either anonymous or in a real name, who is always buzzing, disseminating, and campaigning for political information or messages to form a public opinion (Arianto, 2019). The political buzzers in the 2019 presidential election contest were divided into two, namely independent and volunteer. An independent buzzer has the characteristic of being free and unbound by any group or political affiliation. On the contrary, a volunteer buzzer is a buzzer that has certain political preferences, such as having a relationship with certain political parties and politicians in order to win the candidates he supports.

Apart from being divided into independent and volunteer buzzers, propagandists can also be divided into two other versions; they are bot buzzer and human buzzer. The use of bot accounts in political propaganda often occurs in various contestations of public leaders in the world (Caldarelli et al., 2019). These bot accounts also injure public participation in the online platform because they do not present a real account that can communicate interactively and it can lead to information manipulation (Boberg et al., 2019; Leber & Abrahams, 2019).

Political buzzers who used both bot and real accounts were the political actors on social media in the 2019 Indonesian presidential election. These actors were actually propagandists who played sensitive issues in the society as propaganda narratives to influence public opinion.

CONCLUSION

Twitter as a new public space was used to spread propaganda and post-truth messages related to presidential candidates, both Jokowi and Prabowo. Jokowi was hit by negative issues such as an anti-Islam and ulama, communists, pro-China, weak leader, liar, and claimant of success so that his popularity would decline. Among those six issues, the issue of Jokowi being a communist is the most critical example in describing *post-truth* propaganda because this propaganda is not balanced with data and facts. Prabowo Subianto was also

hit by six negative issues such as a human rights violator, bad-tempered person, and person with a questionable religion, pro-caliphate, an inexperienced leader, and a *hoax* spreader. Prabowo, who was rumored to be pro-caliphate, is the most crucial example of propaganda using the netizen's emotion (post-truth). From this propaganda pattern, it can be concluded that the two presidential candidates were exposed to the issue of being involved with banned organizations in Indonesia. The phenomenon of rampant propaganda with political messages full of lies but believed to be the truth is considered as the post-truth era.

Propaganda spreaders on this issue were political buzzers consisting of accounts of volunteers or sympathizers who had links to the presidential candidates and political parties. Among the propagandist accounts, there were independent buzzers who are not affiliated with a political party or sympathizers of the two presidential candidates. Also, propagandist accounts can be further divided into two broad categories; the real accounts, which refer to Twitter accounts owned by real humans, whether they are volunteer buzzers or independent buzzers, and the bot accounts, which refer to robot accounts that are not controlled by real humans so that they are free to spread negative issues.

This study concludes that even when it involves many people in a big nation, propaganda can be manipulated to influence public opinion. Beliefs, religion, and ideology are the best topics to use for moving the sentiment of the people.

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