

Fake News and Elections in Two Southeast Asian Nations: A Comparative Study of Malaysia General Election 2018 and Indonesia Presidential Election 2019

Nuurrianti Jalli

*Faculty of Communication and Media Studies
Universiti Teknologi MARA
Malaysia*

Ika Karlina Idris

*Paramadina Graduate School of Communication
Universitas Paramadina
Indonesia*

Abstract—Increasing Internet penetration across the globe and the wide distribution of false information on Internet platforms have resulted in the pressing need to study the effects of fake content on society. The advancement of technologies also had contributed to a more sophisticated false content that could be produced. Widespread use of forged images and realistic fake videos were made possible through computer-generated techniques. Several studies had been done by other scholars to study the influence of fake news during elections (see Anis & Gentzkow, 2016; Persily, 2017) however limited has been done in the Southeast Asian perspective. This research aims to look at the distribution of fake news during two elections in Southeast Asia, focusing on Malaysia 14th General Election in 2018 and Indonesia Presidential Election 2019; and how false information influenced political discourse. We employed two different methods for this study which were social network analysis (SNA) and in-depth interviews. We analyzed six different hashtags popular during these two elections and how these hashtags were used as conduits to share false information. For Malaysia, three specific hashtags were studied - #MalaysiaBaru, #PakatanHarapan, #IniKalilah, while in Indonesia #DebatPintarJokowi #PrabowoMenangDebat and #PropagandaRusia. Our findings revealed that 1) fake news not only shared by ordinary users but also as a strategic communication by cyber armies employed by political parties, 2) fake news to a certain degree had influenced political discussion on social media during election period, 3) people are more likely to find stories that favored their political parties, and 4) victims of false content are believed to have low media literacy.

Keywords: Fake news, election, social media, Malaysia, Indonesia

I. INTRODUCTION

Malaysia and Indonesia are two neighboring countries in the Malay Archipelago of Southeast Asia. Sharing many commonalities, these two countries have a colorful political scene. Indonesia has a freer political environment unlike in Malaysia. Particularly after the fall of the Suharto regime at the peak of the *Reformasi* movement in 1998, Indonesia, the world's third-largest-democracy, made remarkable democratic milestone (Erb, Sulistiyanto, & Faucher, 2005; Asia Foundation, 2019). Political hegemony was broken down, opened the door to pluralism in politics and democratization of media in the country (Kakiailatu, 2007). Unlike in Malaysia where the political environment is more restrained, in Indonesia, the right to establish political parties is respected. The political system in Indonesia allows

for competition among several major parties (Freedom House, 2018a). However, the democracy in Indonesia witnessed an interesting turn, when the election laws were amended giving ways to larger parties to contest for parliamentary and presidential candidacy. In 2014, for example, only 12 parties successfully passed the verification processes for the 2014 national elections (PEMILU), dropping from 48 in 1999, while in 2017, the General Election Law placed compulsory requirement for political parties to undergo 'fact-check' process as a precondition to compete in the 2019 elections (Freedom House, 2018b). The effort for 'fact-verification' as a part of the electoral process, displayed the seriousness of the Indonesian government in dealing with fake information that could pollute its elections.

Twenty years after the liberation of Indonesia from the Suharto regime, Malaysia witnessed its own historic moment in its political arena. 2018 became an important year in Malaysia's democracy. Barisan Nasional (BN) government that was once coined as the world's longest-serving government (Govindasamy, 2014) was successfully toppled down by its political nemesis, Pakatan Harapan (PH). The historic political upset during general election 14 (GE14) on May 2018 forced an end to almost six decades of rules by the United Malays National Organisation (UMNO) and its allies. Critics saw the loss of BN to PH was due to a few factors including the infamous corruption case involving the former prime minister, Najib Razak, economic factor due to the increased cost of living, the 'Mahathir' factors, appealing election manifesto by PH, and the aggressive use of social media platforms for political campaigns. The 'Malaysia Baru' (new Malaysia, a term often used to describe Malaysia post-GE14) is currently lead by the 94-year-old Dr. Mahathir Mohamad who was the fourth prime minister of Malaysia from 1981 until 2003. Used to be UMNO's president during his first tenure as prime minister in 1981, Dr. Mahathir broke with UMNO and the BN in 2016 over a corruption scandal focused on incumbent Prime Minister Najib Razak (Case, 2017). Dr. Mahathir Mohammad, coined as the 'father of modernization of Malaysia' (Fernandez, 2007) lead the country for 22 years. He is the longest-serving prime minister of Malaysia (Sukumaran, 2018), the oldest prime minister in the world (Stubbing, 2018) and the only person

that holds the position twice in Malaysian history (Sukumaran, 2018).

Malaysia also displayed a hostile attitude toward false information. This could be seen through the enactment of the controversial Fake News Act 2018 by BN government months leading to GE14. Although the new regulation was seen as a political tool to halt PH political campaign (Jaipragas, 2018), to some, there was a need for such regulation to oversee the spread of false information in the Malaysian public sphere (“Undang-undang anti-berita palsu tidak harus dilengahkan,” 2018). However, the Anti-Fake News Law did not last long after PH immediately repealed the law after taking office citing that the law could be used to stifle freedom of expression (Anis & Kaos, 2019) as protected in Article 10 of Malaysia’s Federal Constitution. This paper looks at the fake news in the recent elections in both countries which are the Malaysia General Election in 2018, and the Indonesian Presidential Election 2019. Through triangulation of two different methods; social media analytics and in-depth interviews, the findings are hoped to contribute to the existing knowledge portal on digital media and democracy in Southeast Asia.

A. *Internet and politics in Malaysia and Indonesia*

Before exploring the dynamic relationship between social media and politics in Malaysia and Indonesia, it is pivotal to provide an overview of social media in these two nations. The penetration of the Internet in Malaysia and Indonesia is at 80 percent (2019a) and 32.2 percent (2019b) respectively in 2018. Like in many other developing countries, the advent of the Internet became the catalyst to political changes (Groshek, 2009; Stepanova, 2011) as it provides “greater scope for freedom, autonomy, creativity, and collaboration than previous media” (Lim & Kann 2008, p. 82).

In Malaysia, the suppression of civil rights was particularly conspicuous before the advent of the Internet in the country. In the 1990s, citizens had no means to bypass the government’s restrictions, especially with freedom of expression, other than surreptitiously distributing limited numbers of printed materials to small audiences. However, with the Internet becoming more and more widespread in Malaysia by the late 1990s, citizens have hope. The Internet offers anonymity and the opportunity to bypass governmental restrictions (on freedom of speech and expression). Prime Minister Dr. Mahathir Mohammad during his first tenure had promised the Internet sphere would be free from censorship and restriction (Ramasamy, Chakrabarty, & Cheah, 2004) and since that time, information, including user-generated content has become accessible, especially through blogs, forums, and online bulletins. With Internet availability, Malaysia has witnessed a series of political events organized through this medium. From the street protests in the late 1990s after the firing of Anwar Ibrahim as deputy prime minister to the GE14 election upset, the Internet has become a crucial factor in Malaysian political metamorphosis. Malaysians are not only becoming better informed, but their willingness to participate in such activities is also expected to increase through contact with like-minded people who believe in the same cause. For the election, the influence of social media

towards political changes in Malaysia could be seen in the 12th general election (GE12) in 2008. Unlike decades of political monopoly by BN, in 2008, the opposition, Pakatan Rakyat (PR, the predecessor to PH) managed to break the two-thirds majority in the Parliament (Sani & Zengeni, 2010). The prime minister at that time, Abdullah Badawi publicly admitted that BN lost the two-thirds majority due to social media (Idid & Chang, 2012). The trend later continued during general election 13 (GE13) in 2013 and in 2018, BN failed to form a simple majority to form a government.

While in Indonesia, the influence of the Internet towards politics could also be traced back to the 1990s. For example, during the heat of the *Reformasi* movement in Indonesia, despite the low Internet penetration in Indonesia at that time, cybercafes (or *Warung Net*, ‘*Warnet*’) were used to disseminate information (Lim, 2003). People living in city centers used *Warnet* to send political messages across Indonesia (Lim, 2003), and these messages would later be printed out and shared with others who did not have access to the Internet. Another way of sharing content retrieved from *Warnet* at that time was also through the use of ‘traditional social network’ or words-of-mouth (Lim, 2003). The strategic use of *Warnet* complemented by the traditional means of sharing information in Indonesia at that time was crucial to the surge of the *Reformasi* movement before the defeat of Suharto in May 1998 (Lim, 2003). In a more contemporary Indonesia, Internet platforms particularly social media are utilized for various intentions including information-sharing (Hill, 2008), social activism (Lim, 2013), religious contestations, among others (Kakiailatu, 2007). Like in Malaysia, the Internet also left footprints in local politics (Hill, 2008). In the recent PILPRES 2019 and PEMILU 2019, social media platforms were actively used by politicians to share political rhetoric. With active 150 million Internet users in Indonesia with mostly identified as eligible voters (ISEAS, 2019) tapping into this online community believed to be advantageous to the candidates. Today, on average, Internet users in Indonesia spend fifty percent of their time on social media and online newsrooms (ISEAS, 2019). As the largest social media market users in Southeast Asia (Kemp, 2018) and porous media laws concerning the Internet, the pollution of Indonesia virtual sphere with false information cannot be avoided (Khan & Idris, 2018).

B. *Fake news as an information warfare tactic*

In the era of post-truth, where facts and proof superseded by emotion and personal belief, the nature of news acceptance shifted towards the emotion-based market. This situation has made social media platforms like Facebook, Twitter, WhatsApp as the unofficial political arena for political contestation. Today, these platforms have become the primary sources in which people get their news and information consumed on these sites potentially influences their political decisions. There are various information shared on social media, including fake news. Extensive distribution of fake news and the advancement of technology facilitating the development of superior fake content (such as ‘deepfake’ video) has become a global concern.

Although the term ‘fake news’ was made popular particularly during the 2016 US Presidential election (Allcott & Gentzkow, 2017), fake news has been around for hundreds of years. The sharing of disinformation as political propaganda could be seen during major wars as a tactical move to overpower war opponents (Snyder, 1997; Romerstein, 2001). Through our personal conversations with scholars like Professor Syed Arabi Idid, and Dr. Mohd. Yusof Ahmad in Malaysia, fake news was said to be one of the contemporary information warfare tactics (Idid, 2019; Ahmad, 2019). Information warfare has been described as warfare characterized by the use of information and communication technologies (ICT) (Taddeo, 2012). While the term information warfare typically associated with the use of ICT as a tool for military or intelligence mission, the term has been used in a more generic meaning by some scholars (see Erbschloe & Vacca, 2001; Macdonald, 2006) to describe the use of information to in modern war of the words. This includes the use of fake news for political gain.

With the increased penetration of Internet in Malaysia and Indonesia, social media undeniably has influencing effect on public opinion and social movement (Idid, 2018; Lim, 2003). Effective use of social media by political parties and their cyber armies (Hopkins, 2014) could be beneficial not only as information warfare technique but also as a strategic political tool to garner public support (Graham, Jackson, & Broersma, 2014). For example, social media platforms like Facebook, Twitter, Whatsapp are not only used to share campaign messages, but they also play a role as platforms assisting users to amplify messages with the intent to get these messages viraled (Larsson, 2015). With such an aim in mind, grasping the public's attention requires strategic use of social media including the use of social media influencers, bots, and fake accounts to spread false information (Benkler, Faris, & Roberts, 2018).

The use of disinformation and misinformation for political purposes were evident during the 2016 US Presidential Election. It is important to distinguish the ethos of disinformation and misinformation to help in understanding the dynamic of fake news in politics. While disinformation has been described as a deliberate action to mislead the audience or providing biased info through the use of propaganda and manipulation of facts, misinformation, on the other hand, is an act of sharing false content regardless of whether there is an intent to mislead (Stahl, 2006). Extensive networks of highly automated accounts on social media spread and promoted disinformation related to candidate Clinton (Howard, Woolley, & Calo, 2018; Benkler, Faris, & Roberts, 2018). Some scholars defined the spread of low credibility information by fake accounts as computational propaganda because or propaganda network (Benkler, Faris, & Roberts, 2018; Howard, Woolley, & Calo, 2018). Such strategies have negative consequences on society, political processes, and democracy. The spread of disinformation could create an echo-chamber environment (Barbera, 2015), strengthen polarized opinions (Pariser 2011), manipulated political discussion (Shao, Ciampaglia, Varol, Yang, Flammini, & Menczer, 2018), and threat democracy (Howard, Woolley, & Calo, 2018).

Information technologies have been seen as effective and advantageous political war technology especially in the current media landscape. Increased penetration of the Internet in Malaysia and Indonesia has impacted how citizens consume media content. The impact of fake news on the socio-political landscape of these two nations could be seen through the implementation of strict laws and the imposition of severe penalties to those that shared hoaxes and false content. In Malaysia for example, the previous BN government has implemented Anti-Fake News Act in 2018 to supposedly as an effort to curb fake news on social media. However after much retribution from the public as the implementation of the law was seen as a tactic to impale its nemesis, PH political campaign, the law was repealed. The repeal of the Anti-Fake News Act 2018 was made immediately after the new PH coalition took over the government after the general election 14 (GE14) in May 2018. While in Indonesia, immediately after the post-PILPRES 2019 results were announced, the Jokowi government decided to launch social media blackout after it was found that fake news circulated on social media led to street riots in Indonesia (Jalli, 2019). Extreme sentiment played by irresponsible people believed to be less intelligent in the news processing, eventually ending at a black spot in Indonesia's national security history. Believed as the best way to curb the dissemination of contentious content, critics saw the move by President Jokowi as a step backward for Indonesia's democracy (Idris, 2019; Dunning, 2019).

The use of cyber armies like ‘cyber troopers’ in Malaysia (Hopkins, 2014) and ‘buzzers’ in Indonesia successfully shaped political discourse on the Internet domain (Lim, 2017; Tapsell, 2018). Many of the Malaysian and Indonesian disinformation campaigns are developed and run by political parties with nationwide ‘cyber troopers’ and ‘buzzers’; they target not only political opponents but also religious minorities and dissenting individuals, with propaganda rooted in domestic divisions and prejudices (Lim, 2017). Most of the studies, related to the spread of fake news in Malaysia and Indonesia is based on limited evidence, either based on qualitative data (Tapsell, 2018) or website traffic data (Lim, 2017). For this research, we extracted evidence from Twitter conversations based on the trending hashtags during GE14 and PILPRES 2019. We specifically have chosen Twitter as the focal point for our analysis as Twitter deemed not only as an optimum platform for democratization (Lim, 2013; Bessi & Ferrara, 2016), it is also viewed as a convenient space for misinformation and disinformation. We also conducted in-depth interviews with purposely selected informants to further explore how fake news had influenced politics in both countries.

II. METHOD

A. *Social Network Analysis*

Social network analysis enables researchers to analyze relationships data based on user behavior and patterns of interactions. This approach will be able to assist in understanding the visual forms of communications, the intensity of interactions, and who are the important actors in the conversation network (Scott & Carrington, 2011). Social network analysis (SNA) is one of the many analytical methods to study online interaction. In our research, SNA

was employed to analyze selected popular hashtags during the two elections. For Malaysia GE14, we decided #MalaysiaBaru, #PakatanHarapan, #IniKalilah, while for Indonesian PILPRES 2019, we had chosen #DebatPintarJokowi #PrabowoMenangDebat and #PropagandaRusia.

All the hashtags were once trending on Twitter during the two polling seasons. In the case of Indonesia, data was gathered for a period of three months, starting from February 5, 2019, until April 18, 2019. For Malaysia, since the election ended close to one year during the data collection period, we extracted data for a more extended period, from February 1, 2019, to May 30, 2019. Some hashtags that were popular during the elections are still circulated on social media. We gathered the Twitter conversation by using network visualization software Netlytic (Gruzd, 2016) and analyzed using the visualization and exploration software Gephi Version 0.9.1 (Bastian, Heyman & Jacomy, 2009).

A. *In-depth interviews*

Table 1
Informants and identifiers

Informant	Identified as
Informant #1	Political secretary
Informant #2	Political analyst
Informant #3	Political analyst
Informant #4	Diplomat
Informant #5	Buzzer
Informant #6	Cyber trooper
Informant #7	Cyber trooper
Informant #8	Political analyst
Informant #9	PH representative
Informant #10	UMNO representative

In-depth interview is one of the best methods to understand the informants' experience, knowledge, and perspective on the subject studied (Lindlof & Taylor, 2017). For this study, an in-depth interview approach served as a complementary method to provide a broader context to results obtained through SNA. Interviews began on March

10, 2019, and ended on June 5, 2019; about a year after Malaysia's GE14 and during the peak of Indonesia's PILPRES. Before the meetings, a summary of the research project and a request letter were sent to each informant seeking his or her agreement to be interviewed along with a consent form to peruse and sign. The letter stated that if the recipients agreed to participate in the research, their real names would be protected in the final report, and only a generic identifier would be added to give context to the findings. This allows the respondents to share critical feedback on the issue without putting them at risk. After respondents agreed to be interviewed with the understanding that their identities would be revealed in the final report, the interview method, time, and place were established. The informants were chosen based on predetermined characteristics: 1) the informant has in-depth knowledge of Malaysian politics, 2) the informant is a well-known media person or is involved in the Malaysian political scene, 3) the informant has an active voice in the community, and considered an opinion leader, or had experience working as a 'cyber trooper' or a 'buzzer'.

B. *Finding*

Findings from *Social Network Analysis*:

In Malaysia and Indonesia, we found that there were strategically planned interactions to spread misinformation on Twitter. Our results of SNA revealed that at least three strategies employed by Twitter users in spreading fake news in Malaysia and Indonesia. First is trying to get the attention of a prominent politician through Twitter mentions from many fake accounts. Second is utilizing groups of fake accounts to disseminate low-credibility messages. Third is promoting a hashtag to get viral by using groups of supporters, either real people, fake accounts, or bots.

In the first Malaysia's case, we could see a central cluster dominating the whole conversation (as seen in *Figure 1*). This network was a visualization from the hashtag #MalaysiaBaru that consisted of 640 users and 1,240 interactions. The pink cluster itself consisted of 64 users and 243 edges. When we checked on the accounts, most of the accounts were no longer exist on Twitter. However, the one who sent out more tweets, such as @ecf33a84a1ed443 and @mijjemije were still available on Twitter. These clusters were served as amplifiers because they wrote nothing, but the hashtag #MalaysiaBaru and mentioned all accounts in the clusters. The largest cluster formed in the conversation network consisted of 24.53% of the users in the networks and sent out misinformation and aimed to defame Dr. Mahathir Mohammad, the present Prime Minister and his political coalition, PH. Most of the accounts in this cluster were identified as fake.

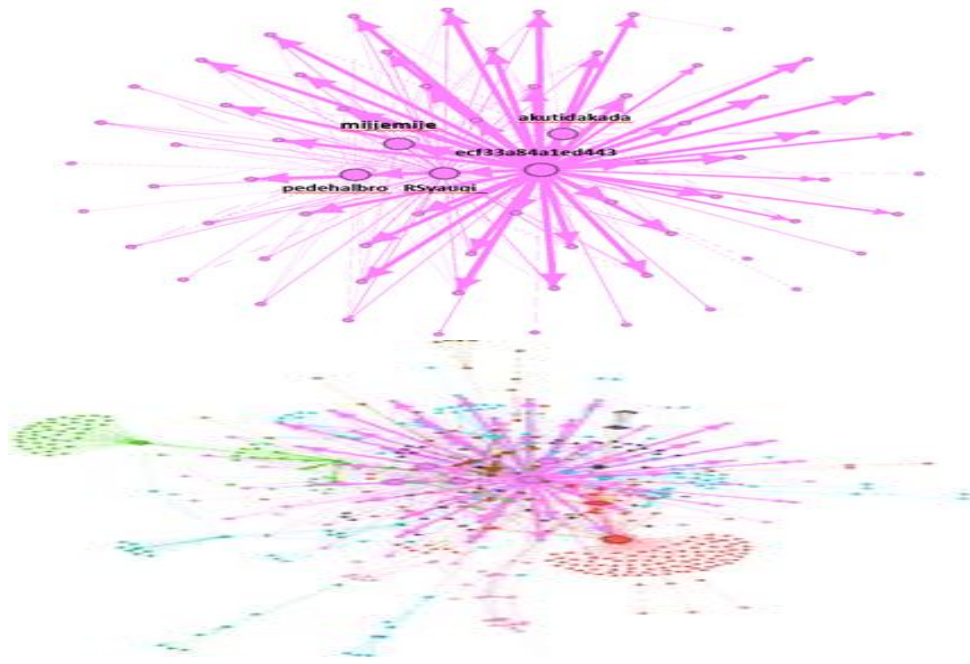


Figure 1. Network visualization of clusters that actively spread information on Twitter using hashtag #MalaysiaBaru

Other strategies found were misinformation on GE14 and at the same time attempting to get attention from influential politicians themselves through the use of hashtags like #PakatanHarapan. This hashtag was trending during the election period and mostly used by users to discuss Pakatan Harapan and its manifesto. In this study, we collected 1,640 tweets that consisted of 612 users and 2,132 interactions. In Figure 2, the two largest clusters apparently sent misinformation from supporters of former Prime

Minister Najib Razak and Dr. Mahathir Mohamad. Most of the accounts when we checked were not using human pictures on the profiles (as avatars) or suspended by Twitter. Most retweeted messages using this hashtag contain defamation content against Dr. Mahathir Mohammad (positing that Dr. Mahathir and PH leaders as masterminds behind 1MDB) and a tweet criticizing the crown prince of Johor Bahru as ‘spoilt mouthed individual’ for criticizing Dr. Mahathir Mohammad.

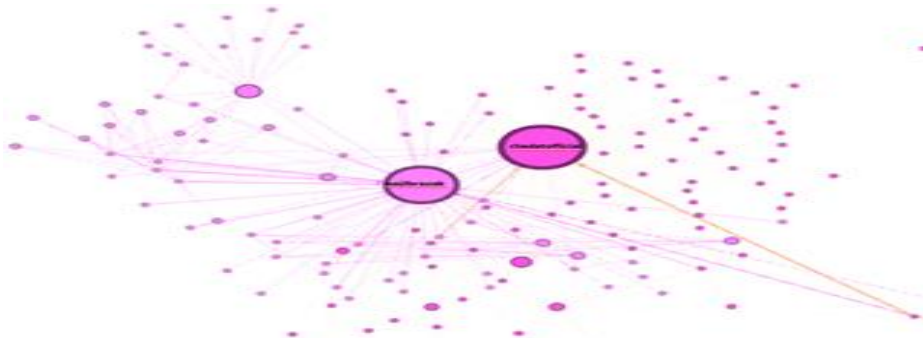


Figure 2. Network visualization of clusters that actively spread misinformation on Twitter using hashtag #PakatanHarapan

Based on these results, we concluded that there were bots or cyber armies were employed to retweet these messages to amplify the message, by supporters of both political parties. The third conversation network we gathered was conversation using the hashtag #inikalilah (which means ‘perhaps this time’). This hashtag was famous as a catchphrase insinuating a potential change of government in GE14. This catchphrase was popular in Malaysia and became a movie title on Netflix describing civil movement during GE14. However, during our data collection, we could only extract 70 tweets. Due to the small number of data, we were not able to analyze further to see the spread of fake news through this hashtag. This

perhaps due to the fluctuating popularity of different hashtags for tweets related to GE14 throughout the lobbying season.

For Indonesia, we found larger conversation network due to data collection time during the election time. Figure 3 is the network visualization from one of the clusters found in the conversation with hashtag #PropagandaRusia (Russian propaganda). This hashtag was popular on February 6, 2019, after the incumbent President Joko Widodo, said in his political speech that some political parties were using similar propaganda strategies implemented by the Russian (Sapiie, 2019). The Russian propaganda, he continued, disinformation or what he

coined as the 'firehose of falsehood.' The speech instantly became viral on Twitter. With this hashtag, we collected 33,845 tweets, and eventually, the conversation network consisted of 9,133 users (nodes) and 23,067 interactions (edges). There were 194 communities formed in the networks, and the average tweets were 2.526.

Figure 3 shows a cluster of accounts in which they actively countering President Jokowi's statement on Russian propaganda. After we randomly checked on some accounts, most of them were no longer active or suspended by Twitter. All accounts in this cluster just amplified a message from the largest node, named @JokSusi2019, who sent out seven messages and got retweeted from 140 times. This node connected to 604 nodes which sent 2,912 messages in total. In other words, this cluster of fake

accounts was not only efficacious in amplifying messages, but also dominating the conversation related to #PropagandaRusia.

The next strategy found in this study was the utilization of social media troops to amplify messages. This strategy showed in the conversation network related to #DebatPintarJokowi (translates as 'smart debate') by Jokowi. This hashtag went viral on Twitter during and after the second presidential debate and aimed to celebrate the success of Jokowi in the debate. We collected 170,069 tweets using this hashtag and after we analyzed them, the conversation networks consisted of 9,006 users (nodes) who sent 33,272 tweets (edges). On average each user sent 3.694 tweets.

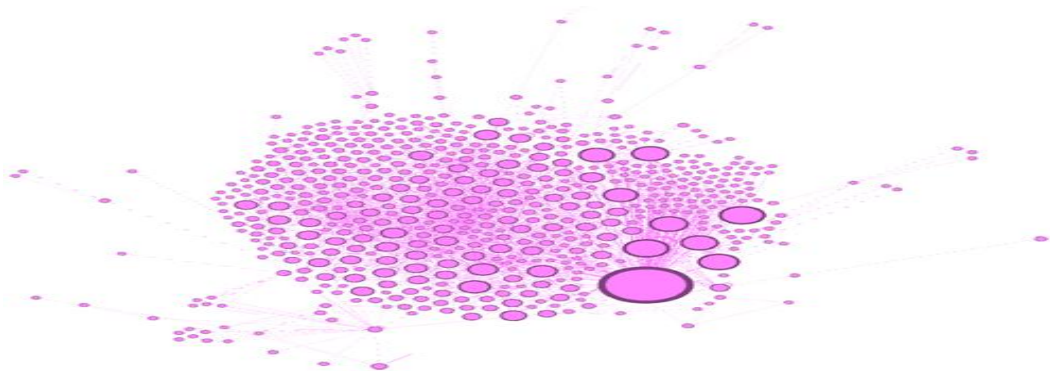


Figure 3. Network visualization of fake accounts' cluster from "Propaganda Rusia" Twitter conversation

The network visualization in Figure 4 shows the formation of many clusters; however, our calculation on Gephi revealed that only 66 clusters were found. In SNA, clusters are formed based on nodes' pattern of interactions. If we compare the cluster of #DebatPintarJokowi with the previous #PropagandaRusia network, this cluster had more interactions but formed a smaller number of clusters. When a smaller number of interaction patterns occurred within a large number of users and interaction, it means there were

coordinated activities. The network visualization also supports the data. In figure 2, we see that clusters that functioned as amplifiers dominated the conversation network. During significant political events such as the presidential debate, public opinion toward candidates must be favorable so that it can also shape the news media. Thus, clusters of amplifiers are needed to get the message viral on social media.

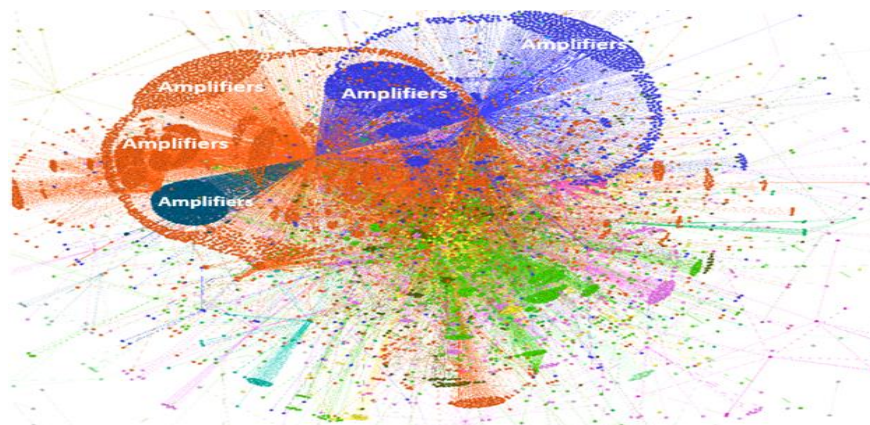


Figure 4. Network visualization of amplifiers' clusters from "Debat Pintar Jokowi" Twitter Conversation

To understand what messages these clusters were promoting, we looked at the nodes with the most significant values of betweenness centrality or the nodes which have the shortest path through the networks (Golbeck, 2013). In simple words, betweenness centrality value tells which node function as bridges between clusters. If we understand what kind of messages these bridges are sending, then we can understand what kind of messages that were amplified. Evidently,

nodes with the highest values were nodes who promoted fake news. The first one was @R_GUN4W4N who promoted positive messages toward Jokowi. When we checked on @R_GUN4W4N clusters, most of the members were suspended by Twitter or no longer available. The second highest betweenness centrality was @phinjaya who also promoted positive message toward Jokowi and a negative message toward Prabowo. Twitter has already suspended this account.

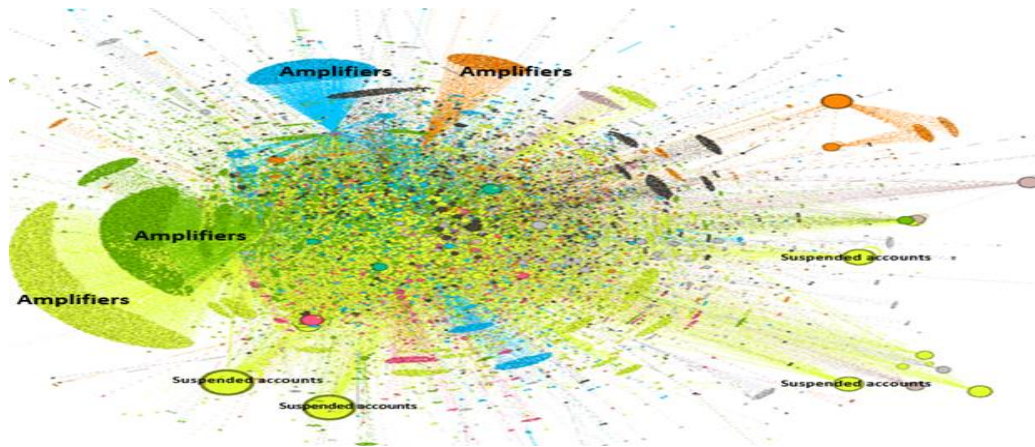


Figure 5. Network visualization of #PrabowoMenangDebat

The same strategies found in the third hashtag #PrabowoMenangDebat (translates as Prabowo wins the debate). This hashtag was famous during and after the second presidential debate, the same time with #DebatPintarJokowi. During the data collection time, Netlytic gathered 142,337 tweets that formed 15,579 nodes and 63,382 interactions. In this conversation network, each user sent 4.068 tweets, and there were 107 communities found. If we compare it to #DebatPintarJokowi’s network, this one had a smaller number of tweets but had more users involved in the conversation, more active, and more various communities. However, when we looked at the network visualization in Figure 5 we could see clusters that functioned as amplifiers. We looked carefully to each large cluster; apparently, not all of them promoted only positive messages toward Prabowo.

first theme we found was how all informants deemed the proliferation of fake news is a severe threat to democracy in Malaysia and Indonesia. Disinformation and misinformation are becoming the scourge of information in modern times, and worse where both countries do not have precise instrumentation to mitigate the threat. One of the informants, who is a political analyst said :

"Fake news is a global problem, and many countries introducing some sorts of policies to handle fake news. However, for Malaysia and Indonesia, the right instrumentation has yet to be developed. Therefore there are loopholes for irresponsible parties to penetrate the social media with misinformation." (Informant #1)

Highlighting how fake news could play with human emotions, another informant echoed the same theme. "When you tap into people's feelings, or when people feel uncertain about things, fake news will spread like wildfire. The feeling of uncertainty, and sometimes, the human ego to be the first to share new information feed to this disease," said Informant #2. Informant #6 who used to be a cyber trooper for BN said any online troop should know the key rule to winning online support; give the audience their 'truth';

"*Senang (Easy)* really, you give people what they want to hear if you want support from BN crowd. Even if their truth is not your truth, who cares? People believe good things about their political party, and reject whatever doesn't match their truth. Or you say *crap* (bad things) about PH. If you know how to play with that, then you'll make a good trooper. Indonesia also the same tactic, I followed a few accounts on Twitter who are obviously armies like me, played the same game (technique)." Informant #6

Another emerging theme that we found was how cyber armies like cyber troopers and buzzers had shaped public

Emerging themes: Fake news and democracy in Malaysia and Indonesia

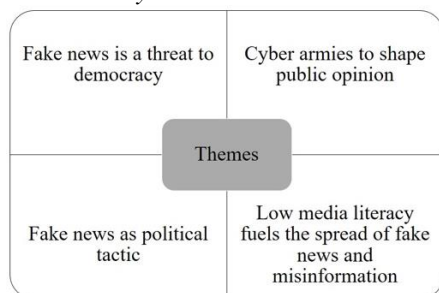


Figure 6. Themes found post thematic analysis

Four dominant themes were found post thematic analysis of the transcribed audio files, as illustrated in Figure 1. The

opinion during the polling seasons in both countries. This theme was supported by our results generated from our SNA in the previous section. One of the former cybertroopers highlighted that their roles as online armies were to influence public discourse. Informant #7 said :

“Our role (as cybertrooper) was to come up with rhetoric attacking Pakatan Harapan and to make sure people talk about issues we put forward. We also have to act fast. Say, for example, if there is one news related to Najib Razak that potentially caused an uproar, we have to come up with good stories to back him up immediately. If it were too late, people would believe in whatever said by the opposition (referring to PH)”.

Cyber armies interviewed for this study also noted that they were paid a handsome amount of fee as puppeteers of public discourse. Like Informant #7, he claimed that he was paid RM10, 000 (about USD 2390) per month for about a year leading to GE14. He said that he was paid an exorbitant fee for his expertise in social media marketing, although not all cyber troopers in Malaysia were paid that much. An Indonesian buzzer also noted that he was paid ahead of the election season and the primary role of a buzzer is to spread political propaganda.

“As a buzzer, my main job is to push for the propaganda of all kinds (referring to white, gray, and black propaganda tactics). I was recruited on social media by someone and was offered a USD1000 per month. This is pretty normal for social media influencers in Indonesia because I know a few of my acquaintances were recruited the same way. I was told that my social media presence would help a lot with the political campaign, and I will get easy money.” (Informant #5)

However, not all cyber armies were paid. Informant #6 made a point that she was not paid for her aggressive social media campaign against PH during GE14. She admitted that she was indoctrinated with BN political ideology since she was in high-school.

“The funny thing was, I was not even paid, I totally believed in the political rhetoric of our former government (referring to BN). I would do anything on social media to degrade PH. I would use racist comments; I play with religious sentiment; in the end, people got angry; I got the attention I wanted.” Informant #6

Deemed as a dirty political trick by Informant #4 (diplomat), he asserted that the tactical use of disinformation for political gain in Malaysia and Indonesia is old propaganda method facilitated by new technology. He said, “Fake news is an old propaganda tactic. You can see this during World Wars. Today what we have is nothing new, except that social media catalyze fake news, spread by irresponsible people, and believed by illiterate media users.” Another informant also made an important point that social media is the new warzone for political contestation, and users are more likely to stumble into fake content on their social media feed. By consuming false information, users’ political decision could be influenced by the content they consumed:

“We have to accept the reality that people spent more time on social media on several issues, social or gossip news. When we spend so much time on Facebook or Twitter, for example, we are likely to stumble upon fake news shared by cyber troopers or random people. If we have a lack of knowledge on that topic, and not wise enough, we will share the false content and it will spread like wildfire. It will then, influence your political decision, or people that read the info you just shared.” #Informant 1 (Political secretary).

Another informant highlighted on the advantage of mastering the art of creating fake news in the digital world.

“The only difference today is that it has become more important for propagandists to master it. And the environment has encouraged it further with technology and more inevitable to discard. In the Malaysian context, in the open economy, technology has come in, making it more difficult to control it. When you can’t control it, it will become poison to our democracy and definitely influence public discourse on politics. More importantly, it can influence your vote” Informant #3 (Political analyst).

Another dominant theme that we found was that, low media literacy fuels the dissemination of fake news on social media. With the increasing penetration of Internet in both countries, and the growing number of social media users, seven of the informants stressed on the need of better media literacy. When asked about ways to improve literacy in Malaysia and Indonesia, most informants came up with similar answers; Google to verify. For example, Informant #9 who is a PH representative said :

“Exactly. All (social media users) are targeted by fake news. For the receiver, on the other hand, they might just change their perception. That’s why you should always check, Google, always verify. Some people they share first then they check. By that time, it was already too late, the damage has been done. So, propaganda is not only that, therefore you must always check your sources. So, it’s not necessary it happens only during the election, but also every day.” Informant #9 (PH representative).

Ironically, the same sentiment was echoed by a representative of PH political rival, she said :

“People need to know how to differentiate real news or fake news. If the headlines (of news) look weird, too sensationalized, do not waste your time to read it. If you read messages shared to you on Whatsapp sound too *berapi-api* (contentious), always check on the Internet to verify. Google (check) it before you share to somebody else.” Informant #10 (UMNO representative. UMNO is the leading political party in BN coalition).

III. CONCLUSIONS

In the wired world that we have today, political information warfare tactics involved the use of fake news to shape public opinion and to influence voters’ behaviors during the election period. Most of the research done on fake news and election were centralized in the case of the US Presidential Election in 2016. In the context of Southeast Asian politics, this study is the first research that provides evidence in terms of social media conversation on fake news and misinformation during major elections. By analyzing

conversations on Twitter, our results revealed that fake news was prevalent during GE14 and PILPRES 2019.

At least in the case of Malaysia and Indonesia, three main strategies were found to be most dominant for fake news distribution. First, the utilization of fake accounts to spread and amplify fake news and disinformation through Twitter mentions. This method we found to be prominent in Malaysia. Not only aiming to attract prominent politicians' attention, through our conversation with cyber armies during this study, controversial content also shared to stir the public's political sentiment. However, the specific hashtag we analyzed captured only the former intent.

Nevertheless, through our conversation, we managed to delve deeper into how cybertroopers work in Malaysia at least during GE14. One of the cybertroopers admitted that she and her team ran thousands of fake social media accounts on Facebook and Twitter. By pushing political propaganda on different social media platforms, cybertroopers were able to capture different sets of audiences. While Facebook has mature voters, other platforms like Twitter and Instagram reached to a much younger group. The cybertroopers we spoke to also mentioned that WhatsApp was another ideal platform for fake news. Due to the encrypted feature of the platform, government and authorities were not able to disrupt the spread of disinformation and misinformation on the platform. The origin of the fake news was also not able to be ascertained, allowing rooms for anonymity of the cybertrooper. All fake messages pushed by cybertroopers aim to undermine all BN's opposition. By pushing propaganda to BN supporters and led them posting racist comments or offensive statements would then create plunder on social media. She asserted that controversial content would garner backlashes from BN's oppositions and causing even worse polarization on social media.

Undeniably, with the increasing number of social media users, and the public's migration for media consumption from traditional outlets to Internet media (Jalli, 2016), effectively tapping into this new political playing field is pertinent for political parties. The second method we found was using groups of fake accounts to disseminate low-credible messages and followed by the third tactic; using groups of social media supporters either real people, fake accounts, or bots to amplify a hashtag and make it viral. These last two strategies found in Indonesia' conversation networks on Twitter and used by both camps of Jokowi and Prabowo. In Benkler, Faris, and Roberts's study (2018), these networks of misinformation and manipulation were termed as propaganda networks.

As the largest social media users and democracy in the region, the spread of fake news in Indonesia was different from other democratic countries, such as the US. Networks of fake accounts, social media buzzers, and political influencers on social media was a threat to the country. Even though not all of buzzers and influencers spread hoaxes, their interactions on social media fall into the category of pseudo interactions. Instead of genuine real-time conversation, the information shared by them is "ordered" (promoted information). In other words, they are hired by those who wanted to capture public attention. Through the

manipulation of information dissemination on social media, messages shared are aimed to become viral and to reach more audiences. In contrast with fake news driven by algorithms and bots, human-driven hoaxes distribution networks would be harder to detect. They have significantly smaller chances to be suspended by social media platforms.

Our data and interactions with informants concluded that fake news is undeniably a major threat in the modern world. Uncontrolled proliferation could potentially threaten national security. In Indonesia, May 2019 witnessed the aftermath of uncontrolled dissemination of fake news related to the post-PILPRES results, which led to a bloody confrontation in the heart of Jakarta. The re-elected President Jokowi had to take an extreme measure by imposing social media censorship, which critics deemed as undemocratic (Idris, 2019), but through the lens of Indonesia's administration as necessary. Echoing responses from all of our informants, due to the underdeveloped instrumentations to contain fake news distribution in Malaysia and Indonesia, a lot has to be done to come up with proper solutions. What we found through our study, efforts to curb the spread of fake news and misinformation always clashed with the freedom of expression. Some would argue the implementation of laws like the Fake News Act 2018 in Malaysia and media censorship in Indonesia as undemocratic, and there has to be a way to contain the current epidemic of fake news and disinformation.

Fake news not only shared by people with personal interests, cyber armies, or bots, ordinary people are also a part of this new social illness. A recent study by Guess, Nagler, and Tucker (2019) revealed that low media literacy, particularly among baby boomers, contributed to the spread of fake news on Facebook. People tend to share content that is similar to their personal opinion (Guess, Nyhan, & Reifler, 2018) and avoid content that is clashing with their political belief (Mullainathan & Washington, 2009). Therefore, this provides an opportunity for cyber armies to play with public sentiment. Low media literacy, paired with strong political support towards certain parties, has become the vantage point for political parties to advance in information warfare on social media. Thus, by logic, the best way to combat fake news is to increase media literacy among social media users. Our findings revealed an intriguing perspective of how fake news has influenced politics in these two Southeast Asian nations. The data from our research is hoped to be able to open doors for interested scholars to explore the same topic further.

ACKNOWLEDGMENT

This paper has been presented in International Conference on Democratisation in Southeast Asia

REFERENCES

- [1] "Undang-undang anti-berita palsu tidak harus dilengahkan" (2018, March 23). Retrieved from <https://www.utusan.com.my/berita/nasional/undang-undang-anti-berita-palsu-tidak-harus-dilengahkan-1.633460>
- [2] Ahmad, M.Y. (2019, May 5). Personal communication.
- [3] Allcott, H., & Gentzkow, M. (2017). Social media and fake news in the 2016 election. *Journal of economic perspectives*, 31(2), 211-36.
- [4] Anis, N. M., & Kaos, J. (2019, April 9). Dr M: Malaysia stands firm over repeal of Anti-Fake News Act. *The Star Online*. Retrieved from

- <https://www.thestar.com.my/news/nation/2019/04/09/dr-m-malaysia-stands-firm-over-repeal-of-anti-fake-news-act#76yBAPOrTZsWqAjy.99>
- [5] Barbera, P. (2015). Birds of the Same Feather Tweet Together: Bayesian Ideal Point Estimation Using Twitter Data. *Political Analysis*, 23, 76–91. DOI:10.1093/pan/mpu01
- [6] Bastian M., Heymann S., & Jacomy M. (2009). Gephi: An open source software for exploring and manipulating networks. International AAAI Conference on Weblogs and Social Media.
- [7] Benkler, Y., Faris, R., & Roberts, H. (2018). *Network Propaganda: Manipulation, Disinformation, and Radicalization in American Politics*. New York, NY: Oxford University Press.
- [8] Bessi, A., & Ferrara, E. (2016). Social bots distort the 2016 US Presidential election online discussion. *First Monday*, 21(11-7).
- [9] Case, W. (2017). Stress testing leadership in Malaysia: the IMDB scandal and Najib Tun Razak. *The Pacific Review*, 30(5), 633-654.
- [10] Conover, M. D., Bruno, G., Flammini, A., & Menczer, F. (2012). Partisan asymmetries in online political activity. *EPJ Data Science*, 1(1), 1–19.
- [11] Dunning, B. (2019, June 12). Indonesia: Government moves to block social media as fake images lead to violent clashes. *The Journal*. Retrieved from <https://www.thejournal.ie/readme/opinion-governments-block-social-media-due-to-fake-images-causing-violent-clashes-4677179-Jun2019/>
- [12] Erb, M., Sulistiyanto, P., & Faucher, C. (Eds.). (2005). *Regionalism in Post-Suharto Indonesia* (Vol. 4). Psychology Press.
- [13] Erbschloe, M., & Vacca, J. R. (2001). *Information warfare: How to survive cyber attacks*. McGraw-Hill Professional.
- [14] Fernandez, T. (2007, July 31). Tun Dr. Mahathir Mohamad (1981-2003): Father of Modernisation. *The Malaysian Bar*. Retrieved from http://www.malaysianbar.org.my/echoes_of_the_past/tun_dr_mahathir_mohamad_1981_2003_father_of_modernisation.html
- [15] Freedom House (2018b). *Freedom in the world 2014: The annual survey of political rights and civil liberties*. Rowman & Littlefield.
- [16] Freedom House (2019a). Freedom of the world: Indonesia. *Freedom House*. Retrieved from <https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-world/2019/indonesia>
- [17] Freedom House (2019a). Freedom on the net: Malaysia. *Freedom House*. Retrieved from <https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-net/2018/malaysia>
- [18] Freedom House (2019b). Freedom on the net: Indonesia. *Freedom House*. Retrieved from <https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-net/2018/indonesia>
- [19] Govindasamy, A. R. (2014). Social movements in contemporary Malaysia: The cases of BERSIH, HINDRAF and Perkasa. In *Routledge Handbook of Contemporary Malaysia*(pp. 116-126). Routledge.
- [20] Graham, T., Jackson, D., & Broersma, M. (2018). New platform, old habits? Candidates' use of Twitter during 2010 British and Dutch general election campaigns. *New Media & Society*. DOI: 10.1177/1461444814546728
- [21] Groshek, J. (2009). The democratic effects of the Internet, 1994—2003: A cross-national inquiry of 152 countries. *International Communication Gazette*, 71(3), 115-136.
- [22] Gruzd, A. (2016). Netlytic: Software for automated text and social network analysis. [Software]. Available at <http://Netlytic.org>
- [23] Güera, D., & Delp, E. J. (2018, November). Deepfake video detection using recurrent neural networks. In *2018 15th IEEE International Conference on Advanced Video and Signal Based Surveillance (AVSS)* (pp. 1-6). IEEE.
- [24] Guess, A., Nagler, J., & Tucker, J. (2019). Less than you think: Prevalence and predictors of fake news dissemination on Facebook. *Science advances*, 5(1), eaau4586.
- [25] Guess, A., Nyhan, B., & Reifler, J. (2018). Selective exposure to misinformation: Evidence from the consumption of fake news during the 2016 US presidential campaign. *European Research Council*, 9.
- [26] Hill, D. T. (2008). Indonesia: Electoral politics and the Internet. *Making a difference: A comparative view of the role of the Internet in election politics*, 75-92.
- [27] Hopkins, J. (2014). Cybertroopers and tea parties: government use of the Internet in Malaysia. *Asian Journal of Communication*, 24(1), 5-24.
- [28] Howard, P.N., Woolley, S., & Calo, R. (2018). Algorithms, bots, and political communication in the US 2016 election: The challenge of automated political communication for election law and administration. *Journal of Information Technology & Politics*, DOI: 10.1080/19331681.2018.1448735
- [29] Idris, S. A., & Chang, P. K. (2012). The media and public agenda among the Malay and Chinese communities during the 2008 Malaysian General Elections. *Asian Social Science*, 8(5), 107-115.
- [30] Idris, S.A. (2019, May 5). Personal communication.
- [31] Idris, I. K. (2019, May 24). More responsive journalism – not social media ban – is needed to fight disinformation in Indonesia. *The Conversation*. Retrieved from <https://theconversation.com/more-responsive-journalism-not-social-media-ban-is-needed-to-fight-disinformation-in-indonesia-117604>
- [32] ISEAS (2019, March 18). Social Media and Indonesia's 2019 Elections. *Yusof Ishak Institute*. Retrieved from <https://www.iseas.edu.sg/medias/event-highlights/item/9277-social-media-and-indonesias-2019-elections>
- [33] Jaipragas, B. (2018, March 11). Why is Najib pushing fake news laws before Malaysia election? *The South China Post*. Retrieved from <https://www.scmp.com/week-asia/politics/article/2136601/why-najib-pushing-fake-news-laws-malaysia-election>
- [34] Jalli, N. B. (2016). The effectiveness of social media in assisting opinion leaders to disseminate political ideologies in developing countries: the case of Malaysia. *Jurnal Komunikasi: Malaysian Journal of Communication*, 32(1).
- [35] Jalli, N. (2019, June 19). Memerangi disinformasi dan berita palsu. *Berita Harian*. Retrieved from <https://www.bharian.com.my/kolumnis/2019/06/575761/memerangi-disinformasi-dan-berita-palsu>
- [36] Kakialatu, T. (2007). Media in Indonesia: Forum for political change and critical assessment. *Asia Pacific Viewpoint*, 48(1), 60-71.
- [37] Khan, M.L., & Idris, I.K. (2018). Recognise misinformation and verify before sharing: a reasoned action and information literacy perspective. *Behaviour & Information Technology*, DOI: 10.1080/0144929X.2019.1578828
- [38] Larrson, A. O. (2015). Going viral? Comparing parties on social media during the 2014 Swedish election. *Convergence: The International Journal of Research into New Media Technologies*, 23(2), 117–131. DOI: 10.1177/1354856515577891
- [39] Lim, M. (2003). The Internet, social networks, and reform in Indonesia. *Contesting media power: Alternative media in a networked world*, 273-288.
- [40] Lim, M. (2013). Many clicks but little sticks: Social media activism in Indonesia. *Journal of contemporary asia*, 43(4), 636-657.
- [41] Lim, M. (2017). Freedom to hate: Social media, algorithmic enclaves, and the rise of tribal nationalism in Indonesia. *Critical Asian Studies*, 49(3), 411-427, DOI: 10.1080/14672715.2017.1341188
- [42] Lim, M., & Kann, M. E. (2008). Politics: Deliberation, mobilization and networked practices of agitation.
- [43] Macdonald, S. (2006). *Propaganda and Information Warfare in the Twenty-First Century: Altered images and deception operations*. Routledge.
- [44] Mullainathan, S., & Washington, E. (2009). Sticking with your vote: Cognitive dissonance and political attitudes. *American Economic Journal: Applied Economics*, 1(1), 86-111.
- [45] Romerstein, H. (2001). Disinformation as a KGB Weapon in the Cold War. *Journal of Intelligence History*, 1(1), 54-67.
- [46] Sani, M. A. M., & Zengeni, K. T. (2010, July). Democratisation in Malaysia: The impact of social media in the 2008 general election. In *the 18th Biennial Conference of the Asian Studies Association of Australia in Adelaide* (pp. 1-16).
- [47] Shao, C., Ciampaglia, Varol, G.L., Varol, O., Yang, K., Flammini, A., & Menczer, F. (2018). The spread of low-credibility content by social bots.
- [48] Snyder, A. A. (1997). *Warriors of disinformation: American propaganda, Soviet lies, and the winning of the Cold War: an insider's account*. Arcade Publishing.
- [49] Stahl, B. C. (2006). On the Difference or Equality of Information, Misinformation, and Disinformation: A Critical Research Perspective. *Informing Science*, 9.
- [50] Stepanova, E. (2011). The role of information communication technologies in the “Arab Spring”. *Ponars Eurasia*, 15(1), 1-6.
- [51] Stubbing, D. (2018, May 11). Oldest Prime Minister records as Mahathir bin Mohamad becomes Malaysia's leader aged 92. *World Guinness Records*. Retrieved from <https://www.guinnessworldrecords.com/news/2018/5/oldest-prime->

- minister-records-as-mahathir-bin-mohamad-becomes-malaysias-leader-a-525206
- [52] Sukumaran, T. (2018, May 10). Mahathir, the Malaysian dictator who became a giant killer. *The South China Post*. Retrieved from <https://www.scmp.com/week-asia/politics/article/2145596/mahathir-malaysian-dictator-who-became-giant-killer>
- [53] Taddeo, M. (2012). Information warfare: A philosophical perspective. *Philosophy & Technology*, 25(1), 105-120.
- [54] Tapsell, R. (2018, January 12). Disinformation and Democracy in Indonesia. *New Mandala*. Retrieved from: <http://www.newmandala.org/disinformationdemocracy-indonesia/>