

PERSPECTIVE

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Tracking the Swelling COVID-19 Vaccine Chatter on TikTok in Indonesia

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Figure 1: Member of Parliament Ribka Tjiptaning's rant about the government's COVID-19 vaccination programme becomes a trending topic on social media, fuelling anti-vaccine propaganda on TikTok. Picture : Fajar National Network, "Menolak Divaksin, Ribka Tjiptaning: Negara Tidak Boleh Berbisnis Dengan Rakyatnya", <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7iVMVG7bgYY>.

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

- On Indonesian social media, ambivalent sentiments towards the government's COVID-19 vaccination program are amplified and solidified into polarized stances, creating fierce competition between opponents and proponents of vaccination to shape public perceptions.
- These polarized stances are particularly pronounced on TikTok as its videos swiftly go viral by providing quick visual impact and instant emotional gratification to users. TikTok videos on contentious issues tend to fuel strong sentiments on an intuitive level, even if factual evidence is flimsy.
- On Indonesian TikTok, anti-vaccine messages are often mixed with global COVID-19 conspiracy theories and merged with domestic anti-government and anti-Chinese sentiments; furthermore, they are typically couched in religious discourse and spread by religious micro-influencers.
- The government tried to counter the online spread of anti-vaccine messages by pressuring social media companies to remove misinformation and block accounts that spread them, while also intensifying its vaccination campaign on TikTok and other social media by using celebrities and influencers.
- However, the silencing of anti-vaccine voices on social media does not make them disappear, and risks being interpreted as "evidence" of the government's lack of transparency and hidden agendas. Besides engaging in social media battles, the government would do well to engage in grassroots dialogue with the sceptics.

INTRODUCTION

Nine months and approximately 20,000 deaths and 750,000 cases after the first reported COVID-19 case in Indonesia, President Joko Widodo (“Jokowi”) announced on 16 December 2020 that the Indonesian government would provide free vaccinations for all.¹ On 13 January 2021, he was publicly vaccinated, kicking off the country’s mass vaccination drive.² Jokowi’s vaccination programme has received mixed reactions, both offline and online. The government aims to vaccinate 181.5 million of Indonesia’s 270 million population by March 2022.³ However, in a nationwide survey conducted in December 2020, only 37 percent of respondents stated that they were willing to be inoculated.⁴

Doubts about the vaccines are not without basis; Indonesia did experience problems with fake polio and hepatitis vaccines in 2016, which led to some deaths.⁵ Furthermore, besides facing a formidable challenge in countering vaccine hesitancy, the government has had to deal with public outrage. When they announced that those who reject the vaccine would be fined five million rupiahs and be refused financial aid, there was much uproar both within parliament and among the public.⁶ From the outset, the doubts were amplified on social media, where ambivalent sentiments on the government’s vaccination programme soon solidified into polarised stances, with opponents and proponents of vaccination vying to dominate the online discourse on the topic.

In this article, we focus on one social media platform, TikTok, whose presence on Indonesia’s digital landscape has been steadily growing in recent years. Launched in 2017 in the country,⁷ TikTok has, as of August 2020, garnered at least 22 million users.⁸ The video-sharing app has quickly evolved from a niche platform, catering to Gen Z’s notoriously short attention span with its 15-to-60-second video format, into a serious competitor in the digital marketplace of ideas—including ideas on government policy. TikTok’s influence in Indonesia became apparent during last year’s controversy over the Omnibus Law, when netizens actively used social media to mobilize public opposition against that piece of legislature; some TikTok videos of the mass protests in October 2020 gained up to 8.6 million views.⁹

The government’s policies in response to the COVID-19 pandemic further provided fodder for online agitation. Each new government announcement—from the “Large-Scale Social Restrictions” (PSBB) policy to the “New Normal” discourse—led supporters and critics to construct on social media narratives in support of or against them. However, the online battle was fought most fiercely over the government’s vaccination programme, and especially on TikTok, where the byte-sized anti-vaccine propaganda spread with remarkable speed. An analysis of the hashtag *#vaksin* (vaccine) on TikTok offers a glimpse into the anti-vaccine narratives that TikTok users have created, and into pro-vaccine responses as well.

BETWEEN CRITICISM AND CONSPIRACY

Criticism of the government’s COVID-19 response has been rife on social media, and not all of it directed against the need for health protocols and vaccination. In fact, from the outset, a prevalent sentiment expressed by Indonesian netizens (especially among the higher-educated urban middle class and civil society actors) was that the government’s response was too little, too late, too unscientific if not irrational, and too often driven by

political rather than public health interests. One year into the pandemic, such criticism has barely subsided.¹⁰ More worryingly, a more extreme type of commentary has been making its rounds on social media, questioning the legitimacy of the government's pandemic response altogether, and even dismissing any official information about COVID-19.

This type of commentary is akin to the COVID-19 conspiracy theories that had been spreading across the globe since the start of the pandemic. Based on wild rumours, misinformation and deliberate disinformation, these myths channel doubts and fears surrounding the pandemic into alarming narratives about governments' ill intentions, hidden agendas, foreign threats, or other plots kept secret from the public. In the early phases of the pandemic, such narratives had focused on the origins and nature of the virus itself, but since the global roll-out of vaccines they now mainly target the mass vaccination programmes, seeking public rejection of vaccines.¹¹ In its most extreme form, such propaganda constructs COVID-19 vaccination as an evil plot orchestrated by global elites to enslave humanity. More commonly, it fuels vaccine hesitancy by questioning the safety of vaccines developed in such a short time-span, or by appealing to the public's moral and ethical concerns.

In Indonesia too, COVID-19 misinformation has been rife since the outbreak of the pandemic, triggering panic-buying and even denial of the existence of the disease.¹² COVID-19 misinformation and anti-vaccine propaganda in Indonesia is often couched in religious terms. Anti-vaccine narratives thereby appear to represent the position of Indonesia's majority religion, Islam, and the interests of the *ummah* (Islamic community), especially when proclaimed and spread by Islamic micro-influencers with a large following on social media. Accordingly, a common theme in Indonesian anti-vaccine discourse is the claim that COVID-19 vaccines do not meet *halal* (permissible according to Islam) requirements, and speculation about vaccine ingredients being *haram* (forbidden by Islamic law) spread rapidly on social media after the announcement of the country's vaccination programme. Hence, to reassure the public, the words *halal* and *aman* (safe) were put up prominently as the backdrop at President Jokowi's public vaccination event.



Figure 2: The President receives his first jab of COVID-19 vaccination. Picture: Press Bureau of the Presidential Secretariat/Lailey Rachev.

While anti-vaccine propaganda has spread through all social media platforms, it has been particularly pronounced on TikTok due to this platform's socio-technological affordances. Designed for quick visual impact and instant emotional gratification to promote virality, the communicative interface of TikTok tends to fuel strong sentiments on an intuitive rather than cognitive level. This is because the short-form videos on TikTok generate impact not so much on the basis of individual micro-posts—or any specific information that can be fitted into 15- to 60-second videos—but rather by the mass volume created by numerous micro-posts that duplicate or mimic particular contents, which together shape a “collective affect” or broadly shared sentiments.¹³ To understand the influence of anti-vaccine messages on social media, it thus makes sense to trace how these narratives play out on TikTok.

#VAKSIN TRENDS ON TIKTOK

The top videos on TikTok with the hashtag #vaksin reveal some of the anxieties which Indonesians have about the vaccine (see Figure 3). In March 2021, the top video was an edited version of a scathing rant against Indonesia's vaccination programme, made in parliament by Ribka Tjiptaning on 13 January 2021. Tjiptaning's tirade was broadcast on mainstream television channels and had added significance because she is a member of parliament for the ruling party PDIP.¹⁴ In her speech, she stated that she would refuse the COVID-19 vaccine even though her age makes her eligible to be among the first to receive it, adding that she was willing to pay the five million rupiah fine for herself and her children and grandchildren should they also refuse. She strongly doubted the safety of the COVID-19 vaccine which had not gone through all required clinical trials (and warned of a repeat of the deadly fake vaccine debacle in 2016), and she asserted that “forcing the people to get vaccinated is a violation of human rights”. Finally, she exclaimed that the government should not be profiting off its citizens, referring to the government's business deals with pharmaceutical companies. While Tjiptaning's speech questioned vaccine safety and criticized the government's overbearing policy of “forcing” the vaccine on its citizens, her fiercely moralistic tone made it resonate with broader concerns among Indonesian netizens.

The video of Tjiptaning's speech quickly went viral on social media. While mainstream media stressed the irresponsibility of Tjiptaning's rejection of the vaccine, on social media she was often lauded for her “bravery”. Although some netizens gave a nuanced interpretation, arguing that Tjiptaning did not oppose vaccination per se but rather called for caution, her speech was exploited for anti-vaccine propaganda, especially on TikTok. In the weeks after her speech, the original clip of her parliamentary rant were among the top ten TikTok videos with the hashtag #tolakvaksin (reject the vaccine); the top video on that list garnered 9000 likes, 388 comments and 2,085 shares. This number pales, however, in comparison to the immense reach of an edited version of Tjiptaning's speech, which topped Indonesian TikTok in a second phase of viral circulation. In this edited video, paired with the hashtag #vaksin, Tjiptaning's message acquired distinctly religious overtones.

In February, when the controversy over Tjiptaning's speech had subsided in mainstream media, this edited video was uploaded on TikTok by an account named @adab.ulama, which translates as “the ulama's (religious scholar) conduct”. The length of the original video was cropped, a filter was added to it, and a dramatic Islamic song was embedded into the background; furthermore, the edited video only featured Tjiptaning's bolder claims. By 25 February 2021, the video was the top trending video on TikTok with the hashtag #vaksin,

recording 1.6 million likes, 577,000 comments and 51,600 shares. The video’s popularity, however, cannot be solely attributed to @adab.ulama’s editing skills. It was the appropriation of Tjiptaning’s speech into a larger discourse of Islamic opposition that made this video so compelling.

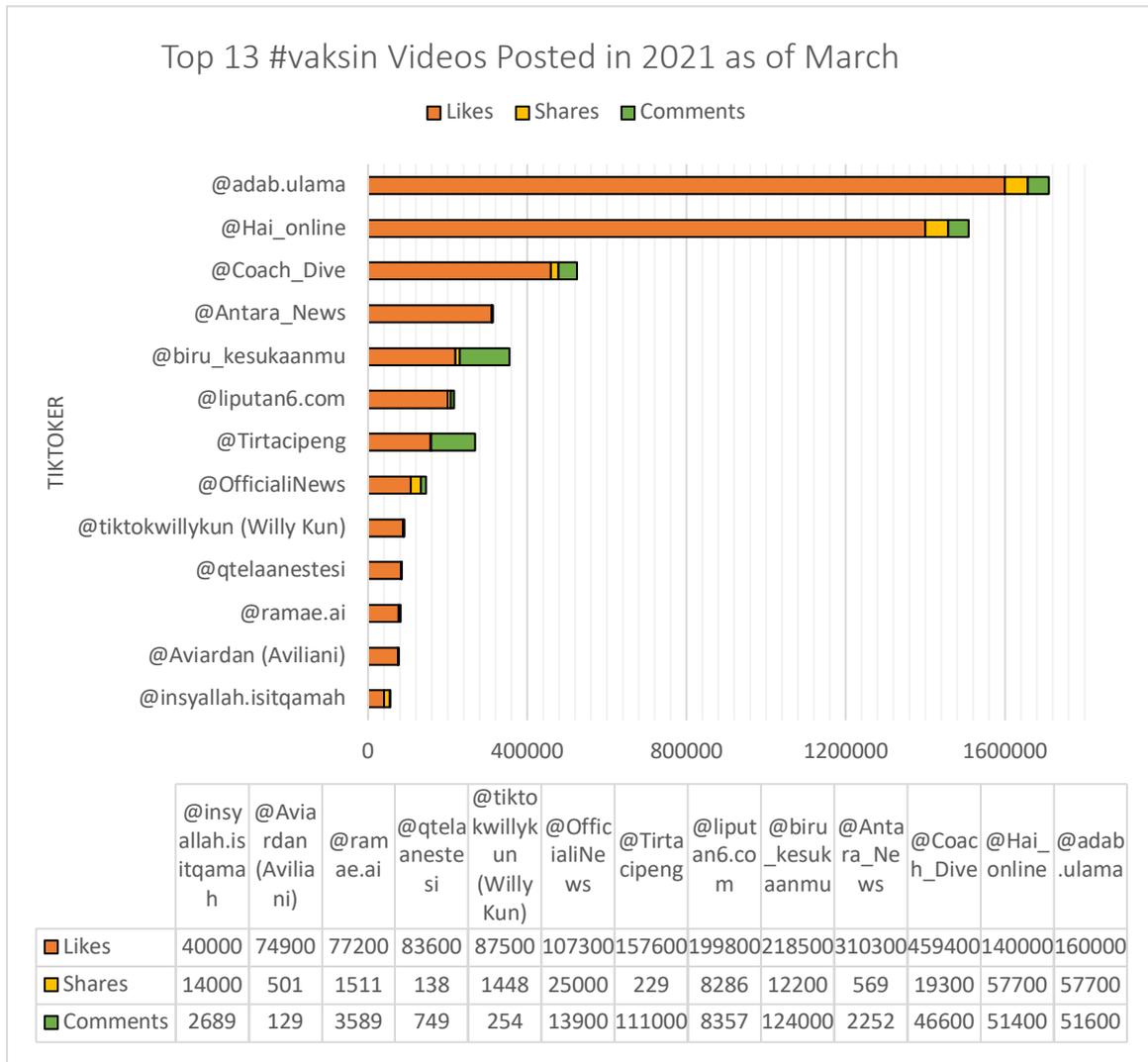


Figure 3: The top #vaksin videos on TikTok in March 2021 ranked by engagement, including number of received likes, shares and comments.

The Islamic element is a common theme in Indonesia’s anti-vaccine discourse. A considerable number of TikTok videos that express anti-vaccine sentiments have been made by religious micro-influencers. In March 2021, the third most popular TikTok video with the hashtag #vaksin was a video by @coach_dive, a religious teacher and motivational speaker who calls himself “Coach”. Boasting 86,800 followers on TikTok, Coach presents himself as a fatherly, wise and pious character whose words are to be trusted. In his video on the vaccine, he echoed Tjiptaning’s criticism of the government for fining those who refuse the vaccine. Captioned “Sanction? Or stealing the citizens’ money?”, the video garnered 459,300 likes, 19,400 comments and 46,600 shares.

The next religiously-tinted top video is by @insyaAllah.istiqomah, a TikTok micro-influencer with 14,000 followers, who posts her own religious commentaries on edited clips of others' religious sermons. Her #vaksin video features a preacher named Ustaz Ihsan denouncing the vaccine, claiming that it changes a recipient's DNA. Like @adab.ulama's edited video of Tjiptaning's speech, @insyaAllah.istiqomah's video employs visual effects and dramatic music to stimulate viewers' emotional engagement. The video received 41,700 thousand likes, 2708 comments and 14,700 shares. The bottom part of the video contains the word "Part 1", signalling a sequel. "Part 2", however, cannot be found on @insyaAllah.istiqomah's page. In a later video, she explains that "Part 2" was deleted by TikTok and her account temporarily suspended because of it. She also shares that the deleted video had received hundreds of likes and several comments before its removal, and hoped that users would be open-minded and only take the video's *hikmah* (wisdom) about the vaccine. We learn that "Part 2" was a continuation of Ustaz Ihsan's sermon where he reasoned that the vaccine was part of a Big Tech conspiracy to implant microchips into people. This claim comes straight out of the "anti-vaxxer" repertoire, indicating how seamlessly global conspiracy theories combine with local religious sensibilities on TikTok. Still, it remains unclear why "Part 2" has been removed from TikTok while "Part 1" remains untouched. It indicates an inconsistency in TikTok's censorship policy.

CENSORING ANTI-VACCINE MESSAGES

To curb anti-vaccine propaganda, TikTok applies direct and indirect censorship. The video by @adab.ulama, featuring Tjiptaning's rant, was removed soon after topping the #vaksin list. The third top video by @coach.dive was temporarily shadowbanned. This is a strategy used by TikTok and other social media platforms to curate users' feeds and conceal certain content according to a particular algorithm, making it less likely for users to come across these targeted videos. Shadowbanning is a controversial measure because nobody really knows the extent to which an algorithm, combined with human moderation, can manipulate one's feed and block a video. Furthermore, it happens discreetly, without warning, and no one is sure how long the ban will last. Coach's video was discovered to have been shadowbanned when it did not appear on the feed in early March 2021 during the present research process, while it was still available on his user page. By late April, Coach's account was found to be fully banned altogether.

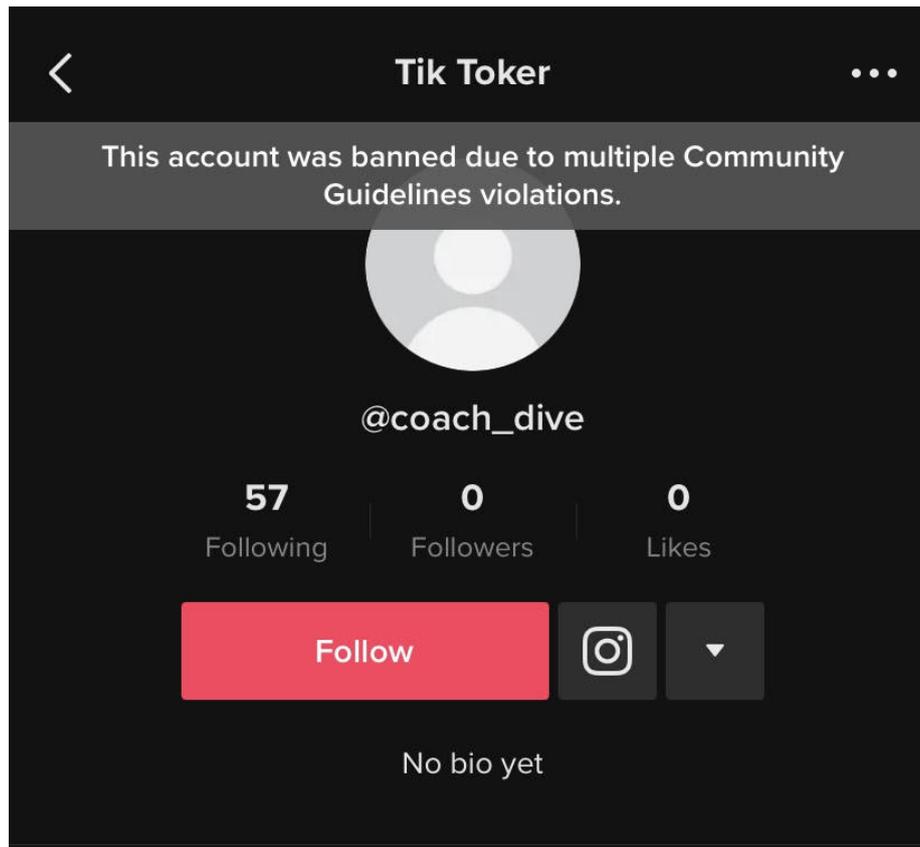


Figure 4: Screenshot of the banned TikTok account of @coach_dive, after being shadowbanned.

Although TikTok has released statements explaining its recommendation system,¹⁵ its decision-making process regarding whom to ban and block, or which videos to remove, downgrade or shadowban, remains shrouded in mystery. The cases discussed above indicate that censorship of anti-vaccine videos occurs systematically on TikTok. Like other social media platforms, TikTok has publicly committed itself to combatting “misinformation related to COVID-19, vaccines, and anti-vaccine disinformation more broadly”.¹⁶ Besides adding new features to help with the reporting of suspicious videos, the platform has announced “multiple approaches to make anti-vaccine and COVID-19 misinformation harder to find”, including removing content and redirecting “searches associated with vaccine or COVID-19 disinformation to our Community Guidelines”.¹⁷ Still, TikTok’s mechanisms regarding COVID-19 misinformation have largely been inconsistent.

Clearly, not all videos containing COVID-19 misinformation are being removed. Anti-vaccine videos with the hashtag #vaksin, particularly the top video showcasing Tjiptaning’s rant, might have been removed because of the large engagement it received. But similar videos showcasing the same rant with the hashtag #tolakvaksin continue to circulate on TikTok. Such inconsistency is likely to encourage TikTok users to tread more carefully, for instance by adding disclaimers without altering their message. Thus, @insyaAllah.istiqomah states that her videos are “for informative purposes only” rather than claiming to be arbiters of the truth. Rather than actually countering misinformation, the lack of consistency and transparency in censorship policies may deepen distrust in

“authorized” or officially permissible information and information channels, which is the very fodder for conspiracy thinking.

POLARIZED COLLECTIVE AFFECTS

According to the Anti-Slander Society (MAFINDO), a group working to fight misinformation in Indonesia, Indonesian anti-vaxxers can be categorized into three groups: firstly, religious groups; secondly, the group with an anti-West bias; and lastly, the anti-Chinese group.¹⁸ In the fluid and fast-paced information ecology of social media, however, those categories tend to overlap.

Bolstering the anti-vaccine claims of religious micro-influencers is the fact that Indonesia’s vaccination programme has relied predominantly on the Sinovac vaccine from China. This allows anti-vaccine propagandists to exploit the anti-Chinese sentiments traditionally nurtured among Indonesia’s conservative Muslims, embellish fears about the “foreign threat” posed by China to Indonesia’s geopolitical and economic interests, and question the quality of “second-rate” products made in China. Furthermore, the “foreign threat” argument is easily linked to anti-Western sentiments, as epitomized by the narrative about Western Big Tech giants such as Bill Gates seeking to control humanity. On TikTok, where different anti-vaccine mini-stories and master-narratives converge under a single hashtag into an endless stream of emotionally evocative videos, the net result is not so much about users’ belief in one or another particular COVID-19 conspiracy theory. Rather, it is the collective effect of deepening distrust in official information and policies, especially when this distrust is intimately tied to one’s religious identity.

However, the collective effect also works the other way, as demonstrated by the equally strong presence of pro-vaccine videos on TikTok. While three of the top videos with the hashtag #vaksin in March 2021 were anti-vaccine, the other seven supported vaccination. After the removal of @adab.ulama’s edited video of Tjiptaning’s rant, the new top video in April 2021 was by Hai Online, a popular teenage magazine, featuring a cropped YouTube clip of President Jokowi’s vaccination, edited with a localized *dangdut* remix of the hit single “How You Like That” by Korean pop group Blackpink. This video garnered 1.4 million likes, 50,600 comments and 57,800 shares. Other top trending videos similarly depicted the president’s jab.

The top users promoting vaccination with the hashtag #vaksin included a significant share of national celebrities. One of them was Willy Kun (@tiktokwillykun), a badminton athlete and Southeast Asian Games medallist, who documented his whole vaccination experience. Other top videos—such as the ones uploaded by the news broadcaster @liputan6.com and by radio DJ Aviliani (@Aviardan)—also spotlighted celebrities receiving the vaccine. Such videos tap into Indonesians’ sense of national pride, which engenders a positive collective effect based on trust in the nation’s capabilities, as opposed to the anti-vaxxers’ prevailing sentiment of distrust.

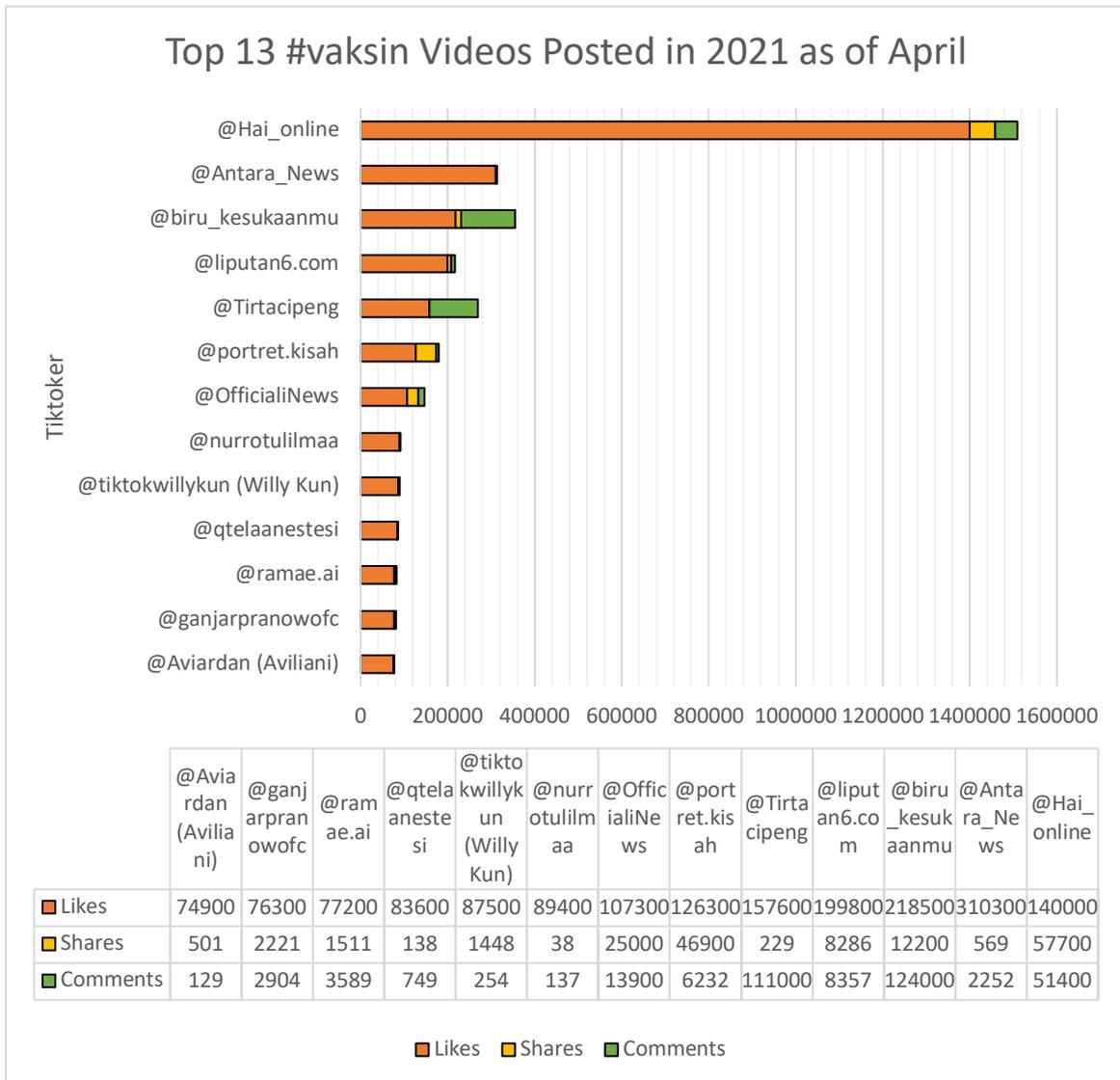


Figure 5: The top #vaksin videos on TikTok in April 2021 ranked by engagement, including number of received likes, shares and comment.

CONCLUSION

TikTok’s troubles with COVID-19 misinformation has highlighted the role of religious micro-influencers in driving anti-vaccine propaganda. They have the platform, the reach and the content-creating ability to spread their message to a large support base of faithful followers, whose trust in religious role models remains unshaken by censorship. Amidst the social media-driven COVID-19 infodemic, their influence in propagating anti-vaccine narratives is a worrying trend. Like TikTok and other social media platforms, the Indonesian government responds to COVID-19 misinformation by means of censorship and repression, declaring “war” on fake news with the objective to hunt down and silence those spreading COVID-19 hoaxes.

But this heavy-handed approach does little to overcome vaccine hesitancy and leaves little room for addressing people’s concerns.¹⁹ By marginalizing or silencing anti-vaccine sentiments on social media, the government risks further alienating not only anti-vaxxer

propagandists but also significant parts of the population that have these concerns. If the online battle against misinformation is largely a matter of nurturing trust and minimizing distrust, then the government would do well to focus on earning people's trust—not only by providing accurate information, but also by facilitating grassroots dialogue with, and earnestly listening to, those in doubt.

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³ Ibid.

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¹⁰ Ika Krismantari, "After a Year of Living with Coronavirus, Indonesia is Going Backward", *The Conversation*, 5 March 2021, <https://theconversation.com/after-a-year-of-living-with-coronavirus-indonesia-is-going-backward-156382>.

¹¹ Center for Countering Digital Hate, *The Anti-Vaxx Playbook* (2020), <https://www.counterhate.com/playbook>.

¹² Ika Ningtyas, "Indonesia battles spread of vaccine misinformation", *AA*, <https://www.aa.com.tr/en/asia-pacific/indonesia-battles-spread-of-vaccine-misinformation/2124319>.

¹³ Clare Sutherland (University of New South Wales, Sydney), "TikTok Methods", Breaking Methods Webinar Series, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cts7BDyoH9E>.

¹⁴ CNN Indonesia, "Politikus PDIP Ribka Tjiptaning Tolak Divaksin Covid-19", 12 January 2021, <https://www.cnnindonesia.com/nasional/20210112182608-32-592818/politikus-pdip-ribka-tjiptaning-tolak-divaksin-covid-19>.

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