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Peddling Secrecy in a Climate of Distrust: Buzzers, Rumours and Implications for Indonesia's 2024 Elections

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Political buzzers use social media not only to spread propaganda, but also to expose “hidden facts”, claiming to provide glimpses into the secret life of Indonesian politics. In this picture commuters using their mobile phone while travelling on public transport on 13 August 2020. Photo: Adek Berry/AFP.

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

- In Indonesia, public debates on political issues are increasingly influenced by “buzzers” or anonymous social media influencers. Undoubtedly serving as their patrons’ cyber-army, buzzers portray themselves as information brokers, claiming to serve the public interest by purportedly revealing secrets gained through their privileged access to political players behind the scenes.
- The strong appeal of the “information” spread by buzzers is rooted in longstanding public distrust of mainstream media and official sources, and it persists even when the information is exposed as fake news. Despite the easing of restrictive media policies in the post-Soeharto era, public scepticism remained strong because the media industry is largely controlled by oligarchs linked to political patrons.
- Buzzers therefore command a large audience on social media because they seem to offer more authentic facts and perspectives without the taint of official censorship. Ironically this has given them more leeway to purvey falsehoods and unverified conspiracy theories, aggravated by the deep-seated perception that political theatre is endemic in Indonesian politics, i.e., the belief that most political events reflect the hidden hands of puppet-masters.
- Responding to concerns that buzzers will wield undesirable influence over the 2024 General Elections, the General Election Supervisory Agency (BAWASLU) recently announced efforts to curb the role of buzzers. Nevertheless, it admits this will be difficult due to inadequate legal frameworks.
- Regardless of legal measures and censorship efforts, buzzers will continue to reach receptive audiences for as long as the trust deficit towards mainstream media and official sources remains unaddressed.

INTRODUCTION

The liberalisation of Indonesia's media landscape since 1998, following 32 years of Soeharto's New Order authoritarianism, has provided Indonesians with numerous channels to obtain political information.¹ However, the greater diversity in Indonesia's media ecosystem did not ease the public's distrust of the mainstream media's political news. Two developments have exacerbated the distrust: first, the conglomeration of Indonesia's main media outlets into the hands of a few "media oligarchs" with close ties to political elites;² second, the rise of social media in the late 2000s, which became a favoured site for information-seeking and free flow of political expression. In a climate of distrust, this also "contributed to the online intermingling of legitimate critical discourse with fake news and disinformation".³ Such intermingling of real and fake political commentary is increasingly being spurred by "buzzers", or anonymous social media influencers.

Political buzzers rose to prominence in Indonesia's electoral campaign industry after the victory of then-gubernatorial candidate Joko Widodo ("Jokowi") in the 2012 Jakarta election, and particularly since the 2014 presidential election, now dubbed as Indonesia's first full-fledged social media election.⁴ They are known to spread online propaganda and disinformation and to manipulate social media trends in order to influence public opinion, and promote certain political candidates and discredit others.⁵ Beyond serving as their patrons' cyber-army, buzzers also frame themselves as a new breed of citizen journalists on a mission to enlighten ignorant or misinformed audiences. In doing so, they act as information brokers who offer rare glimpses into the political backstage. By purportedly revealing secret "facts", exposing scandals and disclosing privileged political forecasts that cannot be found in mainstream media, they satiate the public's thirst for "hidden truths" in the world of politics. Furthermore, by claiming to be obtaining confidential information from inner political circles, and to be sharing this knowledge (albeit selectively) for public interest, they establish themselves as political insiders with a moral rather than a political agenda.

In this article, we discuss the political and cultural conditions that allow buzzers to thrive in their role as peddlers of secrecy. We show how social media enables buzzers to gain credibility precisely by sustaining the grey area between rumours and facts. Thereby, buzzers both sow and reap distrust towards mainstream media, causing audiences to depend yet more on "hidden truths" disseminated on social media.

This trend is especially problematic in view of the next General Elections, scheduled for 14 February 2024. Fearing a repeat of the 2019 elections during which buzzers wreaked havoc of political debate on social media,⁶ calls from civil society groups have grown louder to curb them. However, this will not be an easy task, given that buzzers are well-fitted to a political culture in which public distrust and political rumourmongering are deeply engrained.

INTELLIGENCE IN A WORLD OF PUPPET MASTERS

During the New Order, political participation was strongly discouraged. According to the regime, politics only confused and divided the masses, therefore the role of citizens was being a “floating mass” with no need to concern themselves with politics beyond the five-yearly elections. This policy of depoliticisation created a considerable gap between ordinary citizens and political elites. In recent years this gap is widening once more, as Indonesia’s democracy appears to regress to a form of dynastic politics, with power being divided among the president’s family and closest associates.⁷ This has also revived the notion of Indonesia resembling a “theatre state”,⁸ in which the ruling elites’ frontstage performance is perceived as symbolic drama that serves to cloak political affairs behind the scenes, and to distract audiences (citizens) from the country’s real political issues and how these remain unaddressed. As one political commentator wrote, “the political elites manipulate the stage play without feeling the need to improve reality”; he added that, “in the theatre state, [elites] will continue to make use of buzzers to perpetuate the dramatisation”.⁹ However, if buzzers play a key role in buttressing a “theatre state” in Indonesia today, they also cleverly play with the notion of a political frontstage and backstage.

In line with this notion, political events are often believed to be orchestrated by a hidden puppet master or *dalang*,¹⁰ especially when the event turns sour and ends in violence. This is another legacy of the New Order, during which the regime frequently alleged that protests and riots were instigated by a hidden mastermind, also called *aktor intelektual* (“intellectual actor”). However, since these “masterminds” were rarely exposed, such allegations fed the popular rumour mill, and often the state itself was rumoured to be orchestrating political occurrences. Political rumour was therefore instrumental in the delegitimisation of Soeharto’s regime, contributing to its downfall, and rumour has since remained an intrinsic part of Indonesian political culture.¹¹ Whereas, in the past, political rumours circulated mainly in private domains, the liberalisation of the mass media after 1998 led to a mushrooming of news tabloids that thrived on sensational crime news and political rumour. Often intermingling with local rumours, tabloid rumours frequently linked local conflicts and violent events to hidden actors or hidden intentions from within the state.¹²

The arrival of social media significantly expanded the reach and currency of political rumours. Rumours spreading rapidly across online social networks exacerbated scepticism of mainstream news reports; even the tabloids could not compete with people’s growing reliance on social media for discovering the “real” stories behind the official ones. Moreover, it affected notions of reliable knowledge and expertise. In the age of social media, the role of political analyst is no longer reserved for well-known experts in the field, whose professional credentials validate their ability to distinguish fact from fiction. In contrast, new types of political commentators have emerged whose credibility derives from some sort of closeness to the subject. This includes citizen journalists who use smartphones to deliver news coverage directly from the ground to social media—or “from street to tweet”.¹³ The “rawness” of their stories, which bypass editorial interference, makes them appear more genuine. The new type of “political analyst” also includes buzzers, who similarly claim to deliver “raw” information,

although their claim to credibility derives not from closeness to events on the ground but from professed access to privileged political information.

Pseudonymised social media accounts were the precursors of today's political buzzers. Appearing around the time of the 2009 elections, these social media accounts by purported political insiders would spread political rumours online. Known as "intelligence (*intel*) accounts", they "leaked" information about alleged puppet masters behind political incidents or scandals, indirectly implicating their candidate's opponents.¹⁴ Such speculations were often conspirational in nature, giving readers the sense that they were privy to "classified" information. This method was adopted by buzzers during the 2014 and 2019 elections; and thereafter it was no longer limited to election periods. In today's polarised political climate, social media abounds with political rumours disseminated by buzzers, serving the interests of their political patrons.

One event that was rife with online rumours was the protest against the passing of the Omnibus Law on Job Creation in October 2020, which in Jakarta ended in riots after bus stops were set on fire, justifying police repression.¹⁵ Online speculations abounded about the puppet master behind the incident. On Twitter, the majority of tweets on the topic, pushed by pro-government buzzers,¹⁶ pointed to a subversive plot allegedly masterminded by the opposition. Others, however, accused the state of orchestrating the chaos. One viral tweet claimed to have proof of a state intelligence agent, caught on camera, inciting the bus-stop burning, disclosed by reliable yet confidential sources: an "A1 information", claimed the author—a phrase commonly used in Indonesian military and security agencies, evoking its "top secret" nature. Media investigations later showed that the burning was started by "unidentified people",¹⁷ and there was no evidence of the involvement of intelligence agents, nor provocateurs from the opposition's camp. Like many political events in Indonesia, the incident remained unresolved, further fanning popular beliefs about "hidden truths" being withheld from the public, and hence raising the currency of buzzers' disclosures vis-à-vis mainstream media reports.

INFORMATION WARRIORS

According to a Reuters Institute report, Indonesians' overall trust in mainstream news in 2021 was as low as 39 per cent.¹⁸ This was partly due to citizens' awareness of media conglomeration, with powerful media tycoons thought to have replaced state censorship with their strict editorial processes. Interestingly, our interviews with pro-government and pro-opposition buzzers point out that both share the same distrust of mainstream media, albeit that they frame things differently. Those supporting the opposition reinforce the belief that news outlets are either closely affiliated to the state or strongly pressured by it. "Mainstream media are fabricated", said one pro-opposition influencer, insinuating that the editors-in-chief are "contaminated by the authorities". Meanwhile, pro-government buzzers tend to lament the declining quality of journalism. As one of them put it, "We are no longer in the era of ethical journalism", claiming that journalists transgress the ethics of journalism by publishing sensationalist and misleading news stories.

Thus, on either side, many buzzers take their role as information brokers quite seriously, framing themselves as a new brand of citizen journalists filling the information gap in a “corrupted” media landscape. A pro-government buzzer saw himself as having a moral obligation to actively support the government in fighting “evil”, including “extremists” in the opposition. Pro-opposition buzzers similarly frame their cyber-actions as a moral crusade—even “jihad” as one of them said—against the “evil” government. On both sides, this “moral struggle” appears to justify immoral tactics, and being vindicated by the “truth” claim.

Buzzers use three types of tactics to position themselves as brokers of “truth”. *First*, they “expose” information spread by their opponents as “hoaxes” (fake news), and accuse those disseminating it as hoax spreaders. This serves not only to neutralise these opponents—if possible, by getting them arrested for violating anti-disinformation laws (hence, buzzers often tag law enforcers’ accounts to draw their attention to the violation)¹⁹—but also to substantiate their own credibility as “non-hoax”, or “real fact” spreaders. However, this tactic can backfire when accounts targeted as hoax spreaders nonetheless retain their online reputation as reliable information brokers. Those are the accounts that consistently carry out the *second* tactic of exposing secret “facts”—notably “open secrets” about powerful institutions rather than personal scandals about individual politicians—although this is typically presented in the form of a series of clues and hints, which makes readers return repeatedly for more.

One such account is @Lockedon (pseudonymised), whose reputation for exposing state corruption has gained it tens of thousands of followers on Twitter. One of its posts from 2021 exposes corruption in the recruitment process of civil servants, alleging that those candidates paying the highest bribes received the highest test scores (Figure 1). While this is a long-rumoured problem in Indonesia’s bureaucracy,²⁰ the details exposed in @Lockedon’s post offer readers a rare glimpse into the mechanisms of the rumoured corruption. Furthermore, by tagging the accounts of the Civil Service Agency, the Corruption Eradication Commission, the National Police and the Attorney General, @Lockedon signals that his post is not merely intended to perpetuate the rumour but to expose a truth that must be acted upon.



Figure 1. A tweet from @Lockedon, exposing value manipulation in a civil servant selection test.

@Lockedon’s disclosures are usually not limited to single tweets. Following up on the civil servant exam case, it posted a long thread of about 50 tweets, exposing the institutionalised nature of the corruption and holding specific officials accountable (Figure 2). Due to @Lockedon’s unverifiable claims—making him a frequent target of pro-government buzzers’ “hoax” labelling—the account has been suspended more than 15 times. Yet it always returns with loyal followers. If anything, the frequent suspension reinforces followers’ conviction that @Lockedon is honestly exposing the hidden corruption of elites. Each time the account gets suspended, its followers eagerly await its return on social media—keen on getting more glimpses into political reality, albeit in the form of fragmentary tweets.



Figure 2. Part of @Lockedon’s long tweet thread, disclosing more snippets of information on the alleged corruption at the Civil Service Agency.

In similar fragmentary fashion, the *third* tactic is to expose a puppet master, indicating the buzzer’s familiarity with the political backstage. While this is risky, buzzers often find ways to dodge legal ramifications. One example is @James77 (pseudonymised). Frequently hinting at the confidential sources of his information, he usually uses coded language in his posts, intelligible only to readers familiar with his writing style. It was his tweet that purportedly exposed the hidden actor behind the riots during the anti-Omnibus Law protest, based on “A1 info” (Figure 3). While accusing the State Intelligence Agency, nowhere in this tweet was this literally stated. @James77 instead wrote “3 letters without recycle”. The phrase refers to “recycle bin”, but denotes the State Intelligence Agency (Badan Intelijen Negara, or BIN), as the “3 letters” (BIN) without the “recycle” in “recycle bin”. Similarly, “uwu.uwu.auntiebuslaw” is a code for Omnibus Law; while “uwu.uwu” denotes *undang-undang* or “law”, @James77 plays with the word “om” in “Omnibus Law”, literally meaning “uncle”, which he gender-swapped to the word “auntie”.

Through this tweet, which received more than 2,200 likes and 670 retweets, @James77 confirmed popular beliefs about puppet masters orchestrating schemes behind the scene. While @James77 is a pro-opposition buzzer, pro-government buzzers similarly disseminate truth claims about hidden puppet masters. One viral post insinuated that the Democratic Party (the largest opposition party) orchestrated riots during the Omnibus Law protest (Figure 4). It used doctored images that could not be verified, just as @James77’s “A1 info”, or @Lockedon’s incriminating screenshot, could not be proven true or false. However, as with conspiracy theories generally, the credibility of a truth claim does not depend on its verifiability. In a “post-truth” climate—which in Indonesia long preceded the advent of social media—buzzers are perceived to be no less credible than the “fabricated news” produced by mainstream media, if not more credible for confirming the public’s suspicions.

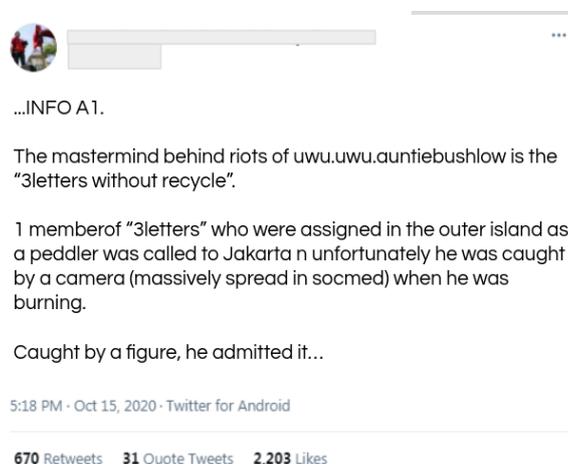


Figure 3. Using code language to expose “top secret” information on a supposed conspiracy by the State Intelligence Agency during the anti-Omnibus Law protest.



Figure 4: A viral image alleging the Democratic Party masterminded a protest-turned-riot.

PREPARING FOR ELECTIONS

The currency of buzzers has many observers worried about their potential influence on the 2024 elections. In the shadows of the pre-election negotiations occurring on the political frontstage and backstage, buzzers are set on social media to sway the public to support one or the other candidate. They do so not by discussing their patrons’ political standpoints, but by peddling rumours about their opponents and attacking critics, thus further impoverishing Indonesia’s already weak climate for political debate.

Acknowledging the risk of buzzers’ influence, on 14 June 2022 the General Election Supervisory Agency, or BAWASLU (Badan Pengawas Pemilu), announced that it was committed to monitoring and countering buzzers ahead of the elections. According to BAWASLU, buzzers are a major threat to Indonesia’s democracy, alongside “money politics” and “identity politics”. Therefore, BAWASLU intends to work closely with the Communications and Information Ministry, National Police and social media platforms to counter disinformation spread by buzzers. But BAWASLU’s chairperson Rahmat Bagja admits that this is easier said than done, since the legal framework for monitoring social media allows them to do no more than suspend suspected accounts and take down posts—while, “once we take one down, ten more appear”. Furthermore, he doubted that the “intellectual actor” behind these buzzer operations can be exposed.²¹

By hinting at the “hidden hand” behind buzzers, without specifying whether this are political parties or other actors, BAWASLU too perpetuates the popular discourse of Indonesian politics being characterised by puppet-mastery. However, Bagja’s estimation that mere censorship will not be effective in countering buzzers does point out the need to take broader conditions into account. As long as there is public demand for political information thought to be kept hidden from ordinary citizens—if not by the state, then by corrupted media—buzzers will continue to thrive. Hence, to counter the influence of buzzers, or online disinformation generally, Indonesia’s media ecosystem needs to be strengthened and further democratised in order to raise the credibility of political news provision, and thereby take the wind out of buzzers’ sails. The trust deficit towards mainstream media and official sources cannot remain unaddressed.

ENDNOTES

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⁵ Yatun Sastramidjaja and Wijayanto, *Cyber Troops, Online Manipulation of Public Opinion and Co-optation of Indonesia’s Cybersphere*. Trends in Southeast Asia, no. 7/2022 (Singapore: ISEAS–Yusof Ishak Institute), https://www.iseas.edu.sg/wp-content/uploads/2022/03/TRS7_22.pdf; Yatun Sastramidjaja, Ward Berenschot, Wijayanto and Ismail Fahmi, “The Threat of Cyber Troops”, *Inside Indonesia*, Edition 146 (Oct–Dec 2021), <https://www.insideindonesia.org/the-threat-of-cyber-troops>.

⁶ Jennifer Yang Hui, “Social Media and the 2019 Indonesian Elections: Hoax Takes Centre Stage”, *Southeast Asian Affairs* (2020): 155–172.

⁷ Yanuar Nugroho, Yoes C. Kenawas and Sofie S. Syarief, “How the 2020 Pilkada Reflected Major Structural Flaws in Indonesian Politics”, *ISEAS Perspective*, no. 2021/5, 25 January 2021, <https://www.iseas.edu.sg/articles-commentaries/iseas-perspective/iseas-perspective-2021-5-how-the-2020-pilkada-reflected-major-structural-flaws-in-indonesian-politics-by-yanuar-nugroho-yoes-c-kenawas-and-sofie-s-syarief/>.

⁸ The notion that Indonesian politics resembles a “theatre” was introduced by Clifford Geertz in his book *Negara: The Theatre State in Nineteenth-Century Bali* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1980); it has been frequently used by Indonesia observers to characterise the New Order state.

⁹ Catatanmap, “Negeri Panggung: Di antara Democracy, Simulakra dan Korupsi Kebijakan”, 12 January 2022, <https://catatanmap.wordpress.com/2022/01/12/negeri-panggung-di-antara-democracy-simulakra-dan-korupsi-kebijakan/>. The author is M. Arief Pranoto, a former police officer and member of the Global Futures Institute, a geopolitical thinktank in Jakarta.

¹⁰ *Dalang* refers to the puppet master in Javanese wayang shadow plays, who remains invisible behind his screen.

¹¹ Dedy N. Hidayat, “‘Don’t Worry, Clinton is Megawati’s Brother’: The Mass Media, Rumours, Economic Structural Transformation and Delegitimization of Suharto’s New Order”, *Gazette: The International Journal for Communication Studies* 64 (2002): 157–181; Patricia Spyer, “Fire without Smoke and Other Phantoms of Ambon’s Violence: Media Effects, Agency, and the Work of Imagination,” *Indonesia* 74 (2002): 21–36.

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¹³ Rajab Ritonga and Iswandi Syahputra, “Citizen Journalism and Public Participation in the Era of New Media in Indonesia: From Street to Tweet”, *Media and Communication* 23 (2019): 79–90.

¹⁴ According to two senior buzzers that we interviewed, such accounts emerged as an outflow of the election campaign for then-president Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono, whose campaign team was among the first to use online marketing techniques (although Yudhoyono’s official Twitter account was created only in 2013).

¹⁵ Yatun Sastramidjaja and Pradipa P. Rasidi, “The Hashtag Battle over Indonesia’s Omnibus Law: From Digital Resistance to Cyber-Control,” *ISEAS Perspective*, no. 2021/95, 21 July 2021, <https://www.iseas.edu.sg/articles-commentaries/iseas-perspective/2021-95-the-hashtag-battle-over-indonesias-omnibus-law-from-digital-resistance-to-cyber-control-by-yatun-sastramidjaja-and-pradipa-p-rasidi/>.

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¹⁹ The label “hoax” has been increasingly used to silence critics and imprison opponents. SAFEnet, *Bangkitnya Otoritarian Digital: Laporan Situasi Hak-Hak Digital Indonesia 2019* (Denpasar: SAFEnet, 2020).

²⁰ Stein Kristiansen and Muhid Ramli, “Buying an Income: The Market for Civil Service Positions in Indonesia”, *Contemporary Southeast Asia* 28 (2006): 207–233.

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