The Threat of Virality Manipulation in Social Media Towards Deliberative Democracy

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Abstract: Public voices that go viral on social media often succeed in influencing public policies. This phenomenon indicates the public's participation as a sign of the vitality of deliberative democracy in society. Therefore, people constantly strive to make their information on social media go viral. However, these methods tend to undermine deliberative democracy itself. This article focuses on the behaviour of individuals in seeking virality through means that undermine democracy. This topic is essential to address to maintain and enhance the quality of democratic practices. Unfortunately, there is limited attention given to this topic. Researchers uncover this issue through a qualitative approach, specifically exploratory research. The objects of this study are the social media platforms Twitter, Instagram, Facebook, and TikTok, as well as relevant documents. The researchers employ document analysis and direct observation of social media accounts. Based on the research, four methods of virality that undermine deliberative democracy are identified: the use of fake accounts, deploying bots, paying influencers for promotion, and the dissemination of misinformation. These four practices tend to violate the principles of deliberative democracy, potentially creating false public opinions, misleading policymakers, and even harming society. The researchers propose recommendations for the government, as the regulator ensuring the life of democracy through digital media, to establish rules that prevent and eliminate behaviours on social media that damage deliberative democracy.

Keywords: Social Media; Manipulation; Deliberative Democracy, Public Polecy; Virality

INTRODUCTION

Public voices through social media in Indonesia in recent years have successfully pushed public officials to respond and address issues. An example of viral information that has prompted public officials to address problems is the criticism by Bima Yudho Saputro regarding the severely damaged condition of roads in Lampung through the TikTok platform. In his post, Bima referred to the Lampung Government as "Dajjal." In Islam, Dajjal refers to the Antichrist who is believed to appear before the end of the world [1]. This message received public response and became viral. Mainstream media also reported on this criticism, further amplifying its reach. Initially, the local government responded negatively by summoning Bima's parents and asking them to reprimand their child. The actions of the Lampung Regional Government fueled the virality, prompting the central government to assist in repairing the road infrastructure.

Another viral case that has stirred responses from policymakers, aside from infrastructure issues, is related to law enforcement problems. These cases range from minor criminal offenses to serious crimes resulting in death. For example, there are cases of sexual harassment on the Jakarta-Bogor KCI Commuter Train [2], armed robbery by an individual pretending to be a police officer against an online taxi driver [3], Mario Dandy's assault on David resulting in the victim being in a coma [4], and the shooting of Brigadier Joshua in Jakarta by his superior for unclear reasons but with suspicious circumstances leading to the victim's death from multiple fatal gunshot wounds [5]. All of these cases have gone viral on social media and have prompted authorities to respond.

In the case of David's assault by Mario Dandy, the virality of the information triggered the public to engage in doxing Mario and his family's personal lives. Doxing is the act of searching for and revealing someone's personal information on the internet without their consent, usually with the intention of punishment [6]. The public engaged in doxing the personal life of Rafael Alun Trisambodo, Mario Dendy's father, who worked as a government tax official. The public suspected Rafael of various economic crimes, such as money laundering, hiding wealth, and engaging in tax consultancy practices that harmed the country. This event led the Ministry of Finance to dismiss Rafael from his position as the Head of the General Section of the Regional Office of the Directorate General of Taxes (DGT) in South Jakarta II and initiate internal rectification measures nationwide within the Ministry of Finance. Additionally, the police arrested Rafael on charges of economic crimes while also investigating the Mario Dandy case.

Prior to the Mario Dandy case, there was another shocking viral case that surprised the Indonesian public. The case involved the shooting of Joshua, a police brigadier, by his own commanding officer for unclear motives. Joshua died from gunshot wounds. According to the initial police explanation, Joshua was killed in a shootout with fellow police officers after Joshua committed a sexual offense against Putri, the wife of Joshua's superior. However, the public found the explanation suspicious and discussed it on social media. Eventually, the viral news prompted the Minister of Political, Legal, and Security Affairs, Mahfud MD, to order the National Police Chief to conduct a comprehensive investigation. After a thorough investigation, it was revealed that Joshua's death was engineered by Commissioner Sambo, Joshua's own superior. In this case, no less than 35 police personnel were sanctioned for obstruction of justice and received severe punishments.

Apart from the aforementioned cases, there are many other examples of viral cases that prompt law enforcement agencies and authorities to respond quickly, leading to the emergence of the notion "no viral, no justice" in society [7]. This notion arises because authorities typically do not act promptly unless an issue goes viral [8]. Social media activists have successfully pressured authorities to address certain cases, earning them the label of "pressure groups." Pressure groups are groups that seek to influence the government [9]. Scholars argue that interest groups and pressure groups are distinct, although some consider them to be the same [10]. Both groups aim to influence policies [11].

Pressure groups and interest groups are modern phenomena in democracy [12]. They can emerge from organizations or individuals in society who share common interests [13]. There are several categories of interest groups, including anomie groups, non-associational groups, institutional groups, and associational groups [14]. Anomie groups are spontaneous, limited interest groups that arise suddenly. Non-associational groups are informally organized interest groups with loosely connected membership whose activities depend on specific issues. Institutional groups are formally institutionalized interest groups with routine activities, strong organizational networks, and official memberships.

Pressure groups are often temporary in nature. They focus attention on specific issues, making them go viral, pressuring policymakers to take action, and ensuring the proper handling of the issues by authorities. They exert pressure on the government, primarily through social media, inviting various parties to express their opinions, thereby making the issue go viral. Researchers define viral as a form of globally spreading message [15] or a message that spreads widely and rapidly [16]. Virality becomes massive pressure on the government to address the problem. Once the issue is addressed as desired, the pressure from interest groups subsides. They then resume their role as pressure groups through new and different issues.

The problem-solving based on virality has become a recurring pattern. In fact, people intentionally create virality to obtain what they want. Virality no longer occurs naturally based on conscience but through social media manipulation. Virality has evolved into a sophisticated industry with manipulative tendencies [17]. Particularly in society, new techniques are being developed to spread disinformation or manipulate narratives, including the use of algorithms, deepfakes, bots, and other confusing and misleading strategies. Some viral cases are politically motivated, involving hoaxes, such as the case of Ratna Sarumpaet's assault misinformation [18]; the hoax about seven containers of ballot papers in the 2019 elections [19], and so on. Additionally, there are attempts to create virality using fake accounts and buzzers, as seen in the case of the Muslim Cyber Army [20]. It seems that many cases of viral attempts in online media will occur in the future, especially with the development of artificial intelligence, enabling the creation of deepfakes, which are manipulations of audiovisual content that can deceive the general public [21].

This article aims to explain virality in societal life, which undermines deliberative democracy. Research conducted through published and peer-reviewed articles using keywords such as "social media," "manipulation," "deliberative democracy," "public policy," and "virality" on Google Scholar over the past five years indicates that this topic is still underexplored. Therefore, this article holds a crucial position and makes a significant contribution to the field of knowledge, particularly in the study of virality in social media and deliberative democracy.

METHOD

The author employs a qualitative approach through exploratory research, which aims to describe phenomena and generate new insights [22], [23]. The primary data collection method used in this study is document analysis, which involves a systematic procedure of reviewing or evaluating documents, both in print and electronic formats, including computer-based and internet-based documents [24]. To complement the research data, the author utilizes the method of observation, which involves directly observing the research subject. The research subject includes conversation-based social media platforms encompassing text, photos, audiovisual content, and graphics. The researcher examines the content of messages using sentiment analysis to identify and recognize positive or negative expressions on various topics. The social media platforms under study include Twitter, Instagram, Facebook, and TikTok, as they are dynamic platforms that contain various public opinions and expressions. These social media platforms were chosen for study because they provide users with the opportunity to express their opinions through uploading information, commenting, liking, and freely sharing information.

DISCUSSION

The public often defines deliberative democracy as a government of the people, by the people, and for the people. Deliberative democracy emphasizes active citizen participation, collaboration, and the formation of public opinion based on meaningful dialogue and discussion

[25]. Deliberative democracy is a form of democracy that prioritizes equality, participatory decision-making that is free and fair, and the common interest; it is based on thoughtful discussion and agreement among the entire society [26].

In the past, democracy relied on face-to-face interpersonal communication, but in the digital era, deliberative democracy extends into digital spaces, where citizens interact, communicate, exchange ideas, and provide comments as suggestions and criticisms through digital information channels (social media, websites, blogs, etc.) without spatial and temporal limitations [27]. Deliberative democracy provides legitimacy for authorities to make binding decisions that involve all parties [26]. In digital democracy, the public can learn about emerging aspirations and popular opinion trends through virality, reflected in the number of likes, shares, and comments received on a particular issue. The public categorizes each issue with hashtags (#) to easily find related posts. The number of social media users using the same hashtag indicates that the topic has garnered significant attention from the public.

Researchers have various interpretations of viral content, but fundamentally, it carries the same meaning, which is information that spreads rapidly compared to others. Aroja-Martin et al. [15] refer to virality as a message that goes global. Other researchers describe viral content as information that is disseminated from one source to another through the internet network, both online and offline [28]. Virality on social media is not determined by the number of accounts involved but rather by how quickly and widely the content spreads on the platform [16], [29].

Some researchers consider virality as one of the mysteries of the internet because it is difficult to explain why certain songs, films, video clips, or news articles suddenly and widely gain popularity, while other content with better quality does not go viral [30]. Content does not achieve the same level of success [31].

In addition to humor, information on social media can go viral if it contains social value. Researchers suggest that information can go viral if it has informational utility or practical value [32], [33]. Emotion is also a factor that causes content to go viral. Information that elicits higher emotional engagement tends to be more viral than information with less emotional engagement [34]. Berger and Milkman [32] found that positive emotions are more likely to drive virality than negative emotions. Other researchers suggest that content can go viral due to the use of shared fantasies, humor, parody, mystery, controversy, and rumors [30].

Viral content can be divided into two categories: positive and negative virality [28]. Positive viral content refers to content on social media that spreads virally and elicits positive responses from users. Examples of positive viral content include admiration, happiness, or entertainment. On the other hand, negative viral content is content that triggers negative emotions such as anger, anxiety, or fear. Negative viral content can spread unhealthy or harmful messages, such as hoaxes or content that demeans others.

Currently, many people intentionally create virality to achieve what they want. One example of intentionally created virality is viral marketing. Viral marketing is a form of marketing that occurs when buzz marketing generates word-of-mouth communication among consumers, particularly on the internet [35]. Viral marketing has become an electronic activity where marketing messages related to a company, brand, or product are transmitted exponentially, often through the use of social media applications [36]. Viral marketing has become increasingly relevant in the past decade with the rise of social media networks like Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube [35].

The term "viral marketing" originated from Jeffrey F. Rayport, who wrote an article titled "The Virus of Marketing" [37]. In his article, Jeffrey F. Rayport explains how to use viral strategies in marketing programs with limited time and budget but expecting a broad impact.

Viral marketing is capable of creating explosive growth in a short period, reaching a wide audience [38].

Viral marketing has a positive impact, which is why people strive for it. However, the use of virality is not limited to economic marketing but extends to broader fields. For example, in politics and social issues, viral marketing is used to gain public support through social media. Building virality involves engineering by various parties, creating social media messages that appear unnatural. The intentional building of virality through social media is not only done by individuals but also by organizations and government institutions.

Examples of engineered virality can be seen on Twitter, where hundreds of accounts suddenly publish about certain political figures and public officials simultaneously with uniform messages, even though previously very few accounts paid attention to such matters. Some public figures who often go viral on social media include Eric Tohir, Anies Baswedan, Prabowo Subianto, Ganjar Pranowo, and others. These social media accounts even post messages with the exact same wording. The similarity in the wording of these social media posts is clearly not a coincidence. This phenomenon proves the existence of efforts to build virality as an act of communication engineering.

In Indonesia, communication engineering to build virality through social media is strongly felt in the political field. Many political figures, public officials, and political parties involve multiple social media accounts to create specific virality in the digital world. In elections, both at the regional level (electing members of local legislative councils or regional leaders) and at the national level (electing members of the national legislature, regional representatives, the People's Consultative Assembly, and the president-vice president), engineering virality has become a promising business opportunity. Within society, there are individuals intentionally helping to influence voters through social media. They help build images through social media with various motivations, whether voluntarily due to political alignment or for business purposes.

Based on field findings, there are five unethical actions in attempting to create virality. First, creating fake accounts that serve as buzzers responsible for amplifying content from the feeders [39]. Fake accounts are social media accounts intentionally created using false identities [40]. Other researchers refer to fake accounts as anonymous, fictional, or other ambiguous accounts used by individuals to express themselves, exploit social media, and engage in various activities in the online world without revealing their true identity to others [41]. The creators of fake accounts use fake names, profile pictures taken from the internet, and provide false personal information. Researchers have revealed that social media owners use fake accounts in various forms of cyber attacks, information-psychological operations, and social opinion manipulation [42]. Fake accounts often have specific goals, such as spreading false messages or information, influencing public opinion, attacking or defaming individuals, or gaining certain benefits. Posting inappropriate and nonsensical content, making crude and hate-filled comments (racial, sexual, religious, gender, etc.), sharing violent messages, damaging someone's reputation, being offensive, embarrassing, and tarnishing the image of opposition parties, including making money by supporting and making false claims, are common reasons why someone uses a fake identity [43]. These irrational behaviors undermine deliberative democracy because discussions in deliberative democracy emphasize rationality [44].

Second, using bots to support the virality of certain information. The term "bot" (short for robots) is used to describe software systems that engage in conversations with humans [45]. Bot accounts are social media accounts where the content and behavior are controlled by specific software programs to influence specific opinions [46]. These software robots operate hundreds to thousands of accounts simultaneously, generating buzz around specific issues and creating

virality. Bot accounts can shape public opinion and manipulate public discourse as if it is a topic widely discussed by the public, thus undermining deliberative democracy [46]. Deliberative democracy emphasizes equality, participatory and fair decision-making, shared interests, and reasoned discussions for the entire society [26]. Research from the Oxford Internet Institute states that social media bot accounts tend to be active only when there are specific interests, including during elections [47]. A study by the University of Southern California and Indiana University estimated that in 2020, 9-15% of Twitter users were bot accounts [46]. Using bots to create virality undermines deliberative democracy as it distorts the equality of voices. The dominant voices are driven by controlled and fabricated software robots.

Third, achieving virality by paying buzzers. Buzzer refers to individuals on social media who engage in word-of-mouth activities [48]. Researchers also describe buzzers as accounts that amplify, promote, or campaign for certain issues using social media [49], aiming to make the echo longer and reach a wider audience. Initially, the term "buzzer" originated from buzz marketing, which refers to consumer interactions and product or service users that reinforce the original marketing message [50]. Currently, buzzers have expanded to other fields as well. The term "buzzer" itself comes from English, meaning a bell or alarm [48]. According to the Oxford Dictionaries, buzzer refers to an electrical device that emits a buzzing sound to signal something specific [51]. Buzz marketing is often referred to as the spread of gossip [52]. Buzz is information passed from mouth to mouth, often involving popular endorsers [53]. Buzzers are not limited to promoting specific issues but also engage in campaigns and disseminate information to their followers [48]. Therefore, buzzers are similar to brand ambassadors [54]. The use of paid buzzers has the potential to manipulate deliberative democracy as issues go viral by paying buzzers to promote them based on business interests. Business interests tend to prioritize profits over social responsibility [55]. Exploratory research by Juliadi revealed that buzzers receive significant compensation depending on the mission and objectives [56]. Buzzers can be volunteers, party members, or individuals intentionally paid for their services [57]. While individuals have the right to promote issues based on their own awareness and shared opinions, promoting issues for business motives undermines the inclusive nature of deliberative democracy [58].

Fourth, achieving virality through the creation of hoaxes. Simply put, a hoax refers to false information or news spread through the digital world with specific motives that can be predicted or unpredictable [59]. The term "hoax" itself means false information, news, or deception. Hoaxes aim to create public opinion, manipulate perceptions, or simply for amusement [60], alongside altruism, which means caring for the welfare of others without revealing oneself [61], but unfortunately using inaccurate information. Therefore, the creation of hoaxes is an attempt to manipulate public opinion and undermines deliberative democracy, which emphasizes the use of rational arguments in discussions [44]. Hoaxes are a global issue that has become more prevalent with the emergence of social media. Hoax phenomena occur worldwide [62], [63], including in Indonesia [64], [65]. Hoaxes infiltrate public space through various social media platforms. Hoaxes have a widespread negative impact on the public [66], posing risks to society, even leading to deaths [67]. Research has shown that even educated individuals struggle to identify fake news [68]. Other researchers argue that education does not guarantee people's ability to distinguish between scientific and non-scientific information about COVID-19 [69].

CONLUSION

Fake accounts, bots, paying buzzers, and hoaxes pose a threat to deliberative democracy, which is considered the most suitable modern system for accommodating the interests of all individuals in society. Deliberative democracy encompasses several principles,

namely "of the people, by the people, and for the people" [70], inclusivity [58], rational use of arguments in discussions [44], and equality of voices [71]. Within the principles of deliberative democracy, there is the meaning that all citizens should receive recognition and respect without discrimination. The principle of recognition and respect also implies upholding the human rights of each individual, which is the most fundamental principle universally. Therefore, the implementation of deliberative democracy must consistently serve as part of efforts to respect human rights. Consistent implementation of deliberative democracy will build a healthy and civilized society.

One form of recognition and respect in deliberative democracy is the guarantee of freedom of expression. In expressing opinions, manipulative efforts should not exist so that the final decisions at the highest level do not differ from the grassroots aspirations of individuals. Fake accounts, bots, paying buzzers, and hoaxes tend to manipulate individual opinions, thus undermining the implementation of deliberative democracy. The development of information and communication technology should assist individuals in expressing their freedom more effectively and qualitatively. Therefore, the progress in information and communication technology should ideally realize the principles of a healthy democracy, which are "of the people, by the people, and for the people" [70], in a tangible way. Consequently, addressing the emergence of fake accounts, bots, paying buzzers, and the use of hoaxes needs to find solutions to prevent the escalating negative impacts and ultimately contribute to building a better and higher-quality deliberative democracy. As the regulator responsible for the functioning of democracy through digital media, the government needs to formulate regulations that can prevent the misuse of social media users that undermine and threaten deliberative democracy.

2.1 Acknowledgements

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