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THE POTENTIAL HAZARDS OF FAKE ACCOUNTS AND BUZZER BEHAVIOUR ON DELIBERATIVE DEMOCRACY

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Abstract: The most famous political system globally is deliberative democracy, which involves the participatory engagement of free and fair citizens to achieve common interests through discussion-based reasoning and societal consensus. This system places all citizens on an equal footing in expressing their opinions and is a crucial indicator of the quality of deliberative democracy. The dynamics of deliberative democracy are also mirrored in the digital realm and often serve as indicators of public support. However, the digital sphere of democracy faces a severe threat today due to the proliferation of fake accounts and the practice of paying for *buzzer* behavior. This phenomenon necessitates stringent regulation to ensure the continued quality and authenticity of deliberative democracy. This research describes the potential dangers of using fake accounts and paying for buzzer behavior in politics concerning deliberative democracy. The researchers adopted an interpretive phenomenology approach, drawing data from various relevant sources. The research findings reveal that using fake accounts and paying for buzzer behavior undermine deliberative democracy as they generate false information, manipulate public opinion, and hinder healthy dialogue. Additionally, using fake accounts and buzzer behavior has severe psychological and social repercussions, including a decline in public trust and an increase in political polarization, all threatening the quality of democratic decision-making. The results of this research carry significant implications for designing relevant regulations to safeguard the agreed-upon and high-quality deliberative democracy, a vital asset of public governance.

Keywords: fake accounts, buzzer behavior, cyber trooper, deliberative democracy, virality,

INTRODUCTION

Currently, the practice of political communication is not only observed during meetings between politicians and the public in physical venues or open-air campaigns and political opinions through mass media, but it is also evident in the cyber or digital space. Cyberspace has become a new public arena that holds promise for politicians to influence and garner public support. Cyberspace is a digital ecosystem for storing, modifying, and exchanging data (Lippert & Cloutier, 2021). Politicians in cyberspace can communicate through social media platforms such as Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter. Politicians can deliver their messages anytime through political communication on social media without space and time constraints.

The efficacy of online media communication is also noteworthy. Extensive evidence suggests that social media communication yields favorable outcomes. Numerous studies indicate that the internet heightens the involvement of younger demographics in politics (Abdullah et al. 2021; Bakker & de Vreese, 2011; Bridges, Appel & Grossklags, 2012; Hamid, Abror, Anwar & Hartati, 2022). Additionally, Eun Yi asserts that social media increases online and offline public

participation (Eun Yi, 2015). It aids in political campaign success and the disseminating of political information (Hamid et al., 2022). Social media significantly impacts political agendas, media coverage, and public discourse (Koiranen, Koivula, Saarinen & Keipi, 2020).

Viral messages through social media have effectively addressed issues, garnering attention from elites and the public, thereby becoming a shared agenda. Virality has notably bolstered public engagement, successfully achieving communication objectives (Homssi, Abass Ali & Kurdi, 2022).

Social media has significant potential to increase public attention and mobilise popular support. This phenomenon has led many politicians and political parties to prioritise social media as their primary communication channel for political discourse. They strategically manage their social media to generate virality for all the issues they present to the public. In this effort, politicians and political parties also involve "buzzers" (Sugiono, 2020), to amplify their political communication. *Buzzer* refers to individuals who can influence others through social media (Masduki, 2021). *Buzzers* play a significant role in shaping public opinion and can serve as instruments of power and authority (Dewantara et al., 2022).

The utilisation of *buzzers* has garnered global attention. These *buzzers* fall into voluntary and paid categories (Sugiono, 2020). Voluntary *buzzers* engage in discussions or promote issues based on personal interest without expecting financial compensation (Rudyansjah & Rasidi, 2022). Conversely, paid *buzzers* operate professionally, receiving payment for promoting or generating *buzz* around specific products, services, or ideas across social media platforms (Handini & Dunan, 2021). Occasionally, the term "buzzer" is used interchangeably with "influencer," typically denoting individuals with a sizable social media following who digitally engage with their followers (Rahmawan, 2014).

Professional *buzzers* are expected to align their posts with the agenda of the paying party, even if these views differ from their personal opinions. Their role involves capturing the audience's attention, stimulating interest, and encouraging online discussion participation (Mavrin, 2022). Mavrin suggests that these individuals typically possess strong communication and writing skills to craft compelling content tailored to their target audience.

Within political communication, fake accounts often function as amplifiers of content sourced from feeders (Afriyadi, 2019). The motivations driving the creation of fake accounts vary, encompassing ludic, social, political, and malevolent intentions (Al-Qurishi et al., 2018; Ferrari, 2020). While some creators engage in these actions as a form of activity or for insinuating purposes, others have more malicious intentions, such as spamming, impersonation, fraud, and other nefarious objectives (Al-Qurishi et al., 2018; Ellingson & McFarland, 2011; Ferrari, 2020).

In politics, fake accounts pose significant implications for democracy and freedom of expression (Kanagavalli & Baghavathi Priya, 2022). Scholars argue that fake accounts distort democratic political discourse, potentially swaying public opinion and undermining the integrity of the political process (Ferrari, 2020; Hassan et al., 2023). Consequently, such accounts undermine deliberative democracy, necessitating responsible and rational use (Cini & Felicetti, 2018).

This article elucidates the potential dangers of using *buzzers* and fake accounts toward deliberative democracy. A search through publications and periodicals over the last ten years using the keywords "fake accounts" and "deliberative democracy" yielded 11 conference papers, one book chapter, and 17 journal articles, none of which discussed these topics from a political communication perspective. Meanwhile, for the topic of *buzzers*, using the keywords "buzzers" and "deliberative democracy" in a similar search using the Publish or Perish application produced

one conference paper, five book chapters, and 25 journal articles. Unfortunately, among all the available articles, only 5 discussed *buzzers* from a political aspect, with none related to deliberative democracy. Therefore, this article provides significant novelty by addressing the scarcity of discussions on fake accounts and buzzers from a political perspective related to deliberative democracy.

LITERATURE REVIEW

This article examines the relationship between virality, buzzer behavior, fake accounts, and deliberative democracy. Virality refers to disseminating information from one source to another through the internet network or social media, whether online or offline (Abdullah & Azman 2019). A viral social media post is a piece of content that gets shared quickly across various social media platforms, amassing thousands of views, shares, likes, and comments due to social media users sharing it with their friends and followers. A viral social media post can take on many formats, such as video, meme, image, or post. On some social media platforms, like TikTok or Instagram, going viral can significantly impact the growth of a brand or business, leading to increased visibility, engagement, and sometimes even customers (https://buffer.com). Through this platform, social media users position themselves as pressure groups, having the ability to influence government actions (Gabriela 2015). Although some academics classify interest groups and pressure groups as distinct entities, others consider them similar (Balyer & Tabancali 2019). Nevertheless, they share the same goal: influencing policies (Lagadec 2014).

Social media has significant potential to increase public attention and mobilise popular support. This phenomenon has led many politicians and political parties to prioritise social media as their primary communication channel for political discourse. They strategically manage their social media to generate virality for all the issues they present to the public. In this effort, politicians and political parties also involve "buzzers" (Sugiono, 2020) to amplify their political communication. *Buzzer* refers to individuals who can influence others through social media (Masduki, 2021). *Buzzers* play a significant role in shaping public opinion and can serve as instruments of power and authority (Dewantara et al., 2022). Similar to an opinion leader, who is an individual or entity that significantly influences the opinions and attitudes of others within a social group. Both *buzzer* behavior and opinion leaders can impact public opinion; they operate differently. *Buzzer* behavior involves artificial attempts to manipulate perception, often through deception, while opinion leaders naturally wield influence due to their recognise expertise or social standing.

The phenomenon of using *buzzers* has garnered global attention. There are two categories of *buzzers*: voluntary and paid (Sugiono, 2020). Voluntary *buzzers* engage with issues because of their willingness, while paid *buzzers* work professionally based on compensation. Professional *buzzers* are individual specific parties paid to promote or create *buzz* around products, services, or particular ideas through social media platforms (Handini & Dunan, 2021). Their posts must align with the mission of the paying party, even if it differs from their personal opinions. They are responsible for attracting the audience's attention, interest, and engagement for online discussions and interactions. Generally, they possess strong communication and writing skills and must create compelling content that appeals to their target audience (Mavrin, 2022). On the other hand, voluntary *buzzers* promote or create *buzz* without any financial compensation.

In Malaysia, a volunteer *buzzer* is called a cyber trooper. It is true that cyber troopers, often referred to as keyboard warriors, have a bad reputation; nonetheless, organisations employ paid *buzzers* to disseminate propaganda and engage in counter-information campaigns. The group of

cyber troopers started to exist around 2008 in the Malaysian 12th General Election. These individuals are not paid but instead serve voluntarily to the Democratic Action Party (DAP) (an opposition party dominated by the Chinese). They are the people who are angry with the Barisan Nasional Government (BN). This group, known as the Red Bean Army, became the front line of the DAP party to break the arguments thrown by the opposing party against DAP. They are active social media users with extensive networks (Badrul Azmier, 2019).

This started a discussion about why citizen journalists in Malaysia might want to stop being *buzzers* or cyber troopers and focus more on the positive aspects of citizen reporting and conversations about news and situations on online platforms, mainly social media (Free Malaysia Today, 2016). According to Mastura and Siti (2020), citizen journalism has the reputation of being generalised as having more negative affiliations than its potential. Many attributed citizen journalists to scepticism and cynical behavior. Qualitative research that has been conducted to find out if youth citizen journalists have the same philosophy and view about the phenomenon and if they associate themselves with keyboard warriors and cyber troopers revealed that participants had diverse views and evaluations on the separation of citizen journalists and other categories of citizen-writing in new media platforms. The researcher highlighted the emerging finding as their experience descriptions repeatedly mentioned the call for separation. However, it is not directly linked to the informant's role as citizen journalists. In answering the research questions, they separate themselves from keyboard warriors and cyber troopers in the citizen journalism landscape; the main themes that emerged were responsible, courteous, and truthful. The second ethical consideration is knowledge and application. According to the researcher, there are two main problems with citizen journalism in Malaysia: ethics and affiliation. Ethics is because many do not understand when or what to share publicly. Third, create a positive environment while keyboard warriors and cyber troopers are not.

People in Malaysia generally continued stigmatising citizen journalism and *buzzers* as belonging to the same category simply because all participants were citizens, without truly examining the distinctions between these online writers. One instance is a story that appeared in the Malaysian newspaper *Harian Metro,* which stated, The Chief Minister of Johor expressed his belief that citizen journalists and keyboard warriors were interchangeable, stating that the current state of affairs had produced a climate in which people were beginning to replace professional journalists by taking notice of and believing what they read (Berita Harian, 2015). Thus, there was still a lack of clarity and a confusing image among the general public in Malaysian society regarding the roles of citizen journalists, keyboard warriors, and cyber troopers. As a result, Malaysians must be exposed to the many citizens writing communities on internet platforms.

In addition, the problem surrounding citizen journalism from the three perspectives of keyboard warriors, cyber troopers, and citizen journalists influenced the nature and purposes of these various roles. Unfiltered social media posts and the use of martial discourse on the internet and cyber troopers by organisations to occupy the cyber war with other organisations in the Malaysian case between the opposition and the ruling party were explained by a study's findings (Hopkins, 2014). This conclusion is that high-level cyber terrorist activity has shown potential and obstacles because of how accessible and transparent the public domain is, allowing both parties to take advantage of the circumstances. The ruling coalition saw the outcome as a means of advancing their innovation and creative use of social media in the war of perception (Bradshaw & Haward, 2017; Choi, 2015). According to Weiss (2012) and Yee (2013), framing the opposition as inherently divisive, dishonest, and self-interested was the main aim of undermining other issues, such as social inequality. Thus, it is observed that somehow, the government still received a

barrage of unfavorable new media content regardless of controlling the mainstream media, signalling the continuation of the dilemma.

According to Lim (2017), many of the Malaysian and Indonesian disinformation campaigns are developed and run by political parties nationwide, which are called 'cyber troopers' or 'buzzers' that target not only political opponents but also religious minorities and dissenting individuals, with propaganda rooted in domestic divisions and prejudices. According to Tapsell (2018), most studies that have been conducted related to the spread of fake news in Malaysia and Indonesia are based on limited evidence, either qualitative data or website traffic data (Lim, 2017). Besides that, it's interesting to note that in Malaysia, between the 13th and 14th General Elections, local and international media outlets began to pay attention to the phenomena of keyboard warriors and cyber troopers.

For example, the Malaysian newspaper *Kosmo* highlighted the dangers and complexities these groups face in Malaysian culture. The newspaper issued a warning on the detrimental effects that these groups may have, highlighting their propensity to disseminate false information and engage in public humiliation, which may expose people to threats to their mental health and reputation, among other things (Kosmo 2016). Research conducted by Nurrianti and Ika (2019) aimed to look at the distribution of fake news during two elections in Southeast Asia, focusing on Malaysia's 14th General Election in 2018 and Indonesia's Presidential Election in 2019 and how false information influenced political discourse. This study analyses six (6) popular hashtags during these two elections and how these hashtags were used as conduits to share false information. For Malaysia, three (3) specific hashtags were studied which first is #MalaysiaBaru, second is #pakatanharapan, and third is #Inikalilah; while in Indonesia, #DebatPintarJokowi, #PrabowoMenangDebat and #PropagandaRusia was examined. This study revealed that 1) fake news is 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 the 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.

This article explains the potential dangers of using *buzzers* and fake accounts in deliberative democracy. Deliberative democracy can be described as an ideal or approach that emphasises the role of deliberation among equals, induces reflection, and results in binding and legitimate decisions (He & Breen, 2021). Decisions should be based on the "power of reason", rather than political, economic, and military power. A deliberative democracy can use a variety of methods to reach collective decisions. The idea of deliberation is not new to Malaysia. The Malay traditionally embrace the concept of *musyawarah* (deliberation) and *muafakat* (consensus). In describing the public deliberation in Malaysia's tradition, the concept of *musyawarah* and *muafakat* must be embedded, together with the idea of mutual co-operation (gotong royong), as well as the *musyawarah* and *muafakat*, is applied not only to all communities in Malaysia, but is part of the culture in Indonesia as well. The Malay values of patience, respect, and public deliberation are applied through people's tactful action in everyday social interactions. Still, more importantly, they are also achieved through linguistic indirectness, grassroots hedges, and other "positive politeness strategies'". By avoiding disagreements, criticisms, complaints, and any other face-threatening act that might reduce the desirability of the addressee and using hedges or even white lies to prevent conflict forbearance achieves harmony and demonstrates cooperation together with *musyawarah* and *muawafakat*, thus, meeting the essential requirement of Malay etiquette. For Malays, introducing and developing public deliberation should not be too tricky because, culturally, deliberation is already part of Malaysian psyche. This traditional practice could be

brought back to the mainstream to propagate and apply deliberative democracy in Malaysia. However, in the current context, the extent of the transformation of power is more likely to determine whether or not this is such a shift (Sani, 2021). According to Sani (2021), the 2018 election (GE14) results show that the people's vote underscored that governance could no longer be elitist-oriented but must include multiple stakeholders. The new politics had emerged with the promise of more freedom, fairness, transparency, and accountability (Gartland, 2018). It is also a sign that consociational democracy has come to an end. In the new era of 'New Malaysia,' there will be the political will to embrace deliberative democracy by calling for more public deliberation in decision-making.

A search through publications and periodicals over the last ten years using the keywords "fake accounts" and "deliberative democracy" yielded 11 conference papers, one book chapter, and 17 journal articles, none of which discussed these topics from a political communication perspective. Meanwhile, for the topic of buzzers, using the keywords "buzzers" and "deliberative democracy" in a similar search using the Publish or Perish application produced one conference paper, five book chapters, and 25 journal articles. Unfortunately, among all the available articles, only 5 discussed buzzers from a political aspect, with none related to deliberative democracy. Therefore, this article provides significant novelty by addressing the scarcity of discussions on fake accounts and buzzers from a political perspective related to deliberative democracy.

METHODOLOGY

The author adopts a qualitative and interpretive phenomenological approach to explain the phenomenon and gain new insights (Pandey, 2016; Swaraj, 2019). Data sources were obtained from various relevant references. Researchers conducted text analysis from primary research data in the research corpus using social media X (Twitter) and Instagram. Researchers also examined the authenticity of X and Instagram account profiles. Text, photos, audio-visual elements, and graphics were aspects of the content of X's social media accounts and telegrams examined. In addition, the author uses sentiment analysis to identify positive and negative expressions on the various topics discussed. Documents from online media in the form of journal article references also function as data sources to complete research analysis.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Research data shows numerous fake accounts on social media platforms, such as X (Twitter) and Instagram. Fake accounts are characterised by unclear identities, such as using aliases and non-personal profile pictures, like abstract paintings, flowers, landscapes, buildings, or even celebrity photos possibly taken online without permission. Personal and professional details are often misrepresented or omitted, concealing true identities.

The researchers encountered numerous account owners on both Media X and Instagram who use nicknames far from their real names, abbreviations, numbers, fruit or animal names, city or object names, combinations of letters and numbers, and even specific phrases, whether meaningful or not. Examples of fake accounts include @Yha2n3, @Duren___, @Cah_5010, @WongGede, @Ebe, @Pluang, and so forth.

Fake accounts have varying numbers of followers, ranging from none to less than 10, to hundreds, even thousands. Often, they deliberately lock their accounts, concealing their identities

and preventing public response to their posts. The exact count of fake accounts is challenging as it constantly fluctuates (Kerrysa & Utami, 2023). Many researchers argue that fake accounts can only be removed by digital media platform providers (Ezarfelix et al., 2022; Kerrysa & Utami, 2023).

Fake accounts often do not represent real individuals, although there are cases of fake accounts created by actual individuals (Hermawati, Setyaningsih & Nugraha, 2021). Other researchers suggest that bots can create fake accounts (Ferrara, Varol, Davis, Menczer & Flammini, 2016).

Fake accounts are associated with the phenomenon of paid endorsement behavior. "Buzzer" is a term used for individuals engaging in word-of-mouth activities on social media (Mustika, 2019), amplifying, promoting, or campaigning for a cause using social media (Fransisco, 2021) to reach a wider audience for extended periods. Initially, in marketing, the word "buzzer" referred to consumer interaction reinforcing original marketing messages (Soundararaj, Baskaran & Sivaprakkash, 2015). Now, it extends to various fields. The term originates from English, meaning bell or alarm (Mustika, 2019). According to Oxford Dictionaries, a *buzzer* emits a buzzing sound for specific signals (OUP, 2023). *Buzz* marketing is often likened to gossip spreading (Dasari & Anandakrishnan, 2010), utilising word-of-mouth information through famous endorsers (Rimenda, Warsini & Mirati, 2019). *Buzzer* activities are not limited to specific issues but extend to campaigns and disseminating information to their followers (Mustika, 2019), akin to brand ambassadors (Yuliahsari, 2016). In digital communication, "buzzer" refers to individuals influencing others on social media (Dewantara et al., 2022; Masduki, 2021), who can be volunteers, party members, or individuals paid for their services (Handini & Dunan, 2021).

Generally, *buzzers* vary widely based on their motives for posting on social media. Some operate out of altruistic motives, while economic incentives drive others. Altruistic *buzzers* voluntarily amplify messages from communicators, driven by sympathy or shared views, without seeking or caring about payment. Conversely, economically motivated *buzzers* promote specific messages to receive financial rewards.

Buzzers can operate individually or in groups. A *buzzer* group can consist of tens to hundreds of members, with individuals having at least 100 followers eligible to become *buzzers* (Handini & Dunan, 2021). Paid *buzzers* post messages according to the payer's wishes. Consequently, opinions reflected in cyberspace may not represent the people's desires but those of politicians or political parties. Politicians or parties with substantial financial capabilities can afford to pay numerous paid *buzzers*, enabling them to engineer virality per their agenda and manipulate opinions accordingly.

The content direction of paid *buzzers* depends on the paying party. In communication theory, the communicator produces and delivers messages. Paid *buzzers* are not genuine communicators; they merely relay and amplify messages from their payers. Hence, messages from paid *buzzers* do not reflect their independent thoughts. From a communication flow perspective, messages from paid *buzzers* move top-down, from elites (politicians and political parties) to the public. Such communication flow indicates that using paid *buzzers* disrupts deliberative democracy. Everyone can amplify issues based on their awareness and shared opinions. However, amplifying issues for business motives undermines inclusive deliberative democracy (Aubert, 2021).

In the early stages of democracy's development, it was rooted in face-to-face personal communication. In this form of democracy, citizens were actively involved in the political process. Later, political scholars referred to it as deliberative democracy. Deliberative democracy involves

the participatory engagement of citizens freely and fairly to achieve common interests through discussion-based reasoning and consensus-building across society (Abdullah & Abdul Rahman, 2017). Generally, the public defines deliberative democracy as governance of the people, by the people, and for the people. Therefore, deliberative democracy emphasises active citizen participation, collaboration, and the formation of public opinion based on meaningful dialogue and discussion (OECD, 2020). Citizen participation and equality are indicators of the quality of deliberative democracy. Deliberative democracy is highly beneficial for governance in a country as it provides strong legitimacy for the government to make decisions that bind all parties (Abdullah & Abdul Rahman, 2017).

In the modern era, deliberative democracy extends to the digital realm, where citizens interact, communicate, exchange ideas, and provide comments in the form of suggestions and criticism through various digital channels, such as social media, websites, and blogs, unrestricted by space and time (Mulyono, Affandi, Suryadi, & Darmawan, 2022). In digital democracy, society often interprets the level of support through social media as reflecting its virality. Many researchers provide diverse definitions for 'viral,' though fundamentally sharing the exact meaning of information spreading rapidly compared to other information. Aroja-Martin et al. (2020) describe 'viral' as a message disseminated globally, while other researchers refer to it as information spreading from one source to another via the internet, both online and offline (Abdullah & Azman, 2019). Virality on social media depends on the number of hashtags or accounts involved and how quickly and widely the content spreads on the platform (Boppolige & Gurtoo, 2017; Denisova, 2020).

Virality on social media is reflected in the number of accounts using specific hashtag symbols (#). Hashtags help categorise and facilitate users to discover content and engage with specific topics or discussions (Chang, 2010). A word or phrase preceded by the "#" symbol becomes a clickable link leading to other posts' feeds using the same hashtag. Therefore, the number of hashtags determines the virality of an issue. The more accounts using the same hashtag, the higher the public's attention to that issue.

Hashtags have become widespread on social media platforms, particularly on Twitter and Instagram (Ferrara, Interdonato, & Tagarelli, 2014). Overall, the "#" symbol on social media represents a hashtag to categorise and organise content on these platforms. Hashtags serve various purposes, including joining conversations, promoting events or campaigns, expressing emotions, and mobilising support for social or political causes (Jackson & Foucault Welles, 2015). For example, hashtags are used to draw attention to social or political issues and mobilise support (Yang, 2016) and for marketing promotions (Saxton et al., 2015). Social media posts use hashtags to express emotions, humor, or sarcasm (Rho & Mazmanian, 2019).

Virality remains a mystery, as it is challenging to explain why a particular issue gains popularity while other high-quality content does not (Al-Rawi, 2019). Content sometimes follows different creation paths (Jekins, Ford, & Green, 2013). Besides humor, social media information can go viral if it carries inherent social value. Researchers claim that information can go viral if informative or practical (Berger & Milkman, 2012; Rudat & Buder, 2015). Emotions also play a role in content virality. Information that triggers strong emotions tends to go viral more than less emotionally engaging content (Nelson-Field, Riebe, & Newstead, 2013). Other researchers refer to shared fantasy, humor, parody, mystery, controversy, and rumors as factors contributing to content virality (Al-Rawi, 2019).

Viral content can be categorised into two types: positive viral and harmful viral (Abdullah & Azman, 2019). Positive viral content is social media content that spreads widely and elicits

positive user responses. Examples of positive viral content include expressions of admiration, happiness, or entertainment. On the other hand, harmful viral content triggers negative emotions such as anger, anxiety, or fear. Negative viral content can spread harmful messages, such as hoaxes or content denigrating others.

In the digital era, the public deliberately creates virality for various purposes, including politics, as politicians and political parties seek public support; in constructing virality, politicians and political parties engineer communication, often resulting in messages reflected on social media that do not arise naturally. One such manipulation is through the use of buzzers.

Opinion engineering by paid buzzers has the potential to undermine deliberative democracy. Paid buzzers operate within a business context, where business interests often overshadow social responsibility (Dimitriades, 2007). Exploratory research by Juliadi revealed that buzzers receive significant compensation depending on the mission and objectives (Juliadi, 2017). Kompas and CNN reported that the costs of paying buzzers vary but are substantial (Anwar, 2021; Patrick, 2019). Detikfinance reported that buzzer costs are relative and have no official benchmark, ranging from 1-50 million Indonesian Rupiah (Nurrahman, 2022). Other sources mention that buzzer costs for the 2017 Jakarta gubernatorial election reached 3 billion Rupiah (Patrick, 2019). In Indonesia, buzzers can earn between 3.5-5 million Rupiah for team members, while coordinators can earn around 6 million Rupiah (Novika, 2021). Internationally, buzzer costs are also significant, reaching up to US$ 71,691 per year or approximately 1 billion Rupiah per year (at an exchange rate of Rp 14,000/US$), or roughly 83.6 million Rupiah per month. Professional buzzers can earn up to US$ 159,023 annually, equivalent to 2.22 billion Rupiah or 185.5 million Rupiah monthly.

The substantial cost of paid buzzers undermines the principle of citizen equality in shaping opinions. Those with significant financial means (in this case, politicians and political parties) can exert more significant influence in opinion-building than financially disadvantaged citizens. Financial resources enable politicians and political parties to pay buzzers to disseminate messages daily. Handini & Dunan (2021) revealed that paid buzzers can spread 300 messages daily. Consequently, public opinions in the media may be overshadowed as buzzer opinions outnumber them. In deliberative democracy, inclusivity should be paramount (Aubert, 2021), where everyone can express their opinions based on equality and personal consciousness, not economic motives. Therefore, paid buzzers manipulate opinions. This phenomenon undermines deliberative democracy, which places importance on the equal rights of citizens to express themselves freely and fairly. Citizen participation and equality are crucial indicators of quality deliberative democracy. In a deliberative democracy, messages should be multi-directional, allowing citizens to be independent and free-thinking.

Opinion engineering by politicians and political parties through paid buzzers is particularly evident in the lead-up to Indonesia's 2024 political year. Public figures often go viral on social media, including political figures such as Anies Baswedan, Prabowo Subianto, Ganjar Pranowo, Muhamimin Iskandar, Eric Tohir, etc. Meanwhile, strong opinions also emanate from major Indonesian political parties such as the Indonesian Democratic Party of Struggle (PDIP), Gerindra, the National Awakening Party (PKB), and so forth. These issues constantly change, resembling a battle of opinions on social media.

From a business perspective, paid buzzers have become an intriguing social phenomenon. This is because professional buzzer work is an option open to anyone. Someone with a minimum of 100 followers can become a buzzer (Handini & Dunan, 2021). Since the number of followers can determine the payment value, it is no wonder that people always strive to increase their

followers. Therefore, gaining as many followers as possible often becomes the goal of individuals entering the world of social media. The more followers a buzzer has, the more valued they are by users, as the cost of using their services becomes higher. Many methods are employed, ranging from manipulative and unethical practices to illegal activities, including creating fake accounts.

Additionally, there are services available to increase followers, such as Fastwoor.id, Jasaallsosmed.co.id, and others. Some service providers claim their followers are real accounts, but others may be fake. The creation of fake accounts can be done independently by individuals. A person can create tens or even hundreds of fake accounts, so the number of fake accounts does not necessarily reflect the actual population. Therefore, opinions from fake accounts do not fully represent public opinion. Online democracy and real-world democracy can differ. Fake accounts manipulate opinions and hijack democracy (Olaniran & Williams, 2020). In a healthy democracy, those involved in deliberative democracy should be real individuals. Democracy in the digital media realm is often noisier than in the real world.

The phenomenon of paid buzzers is closely related to fake accounts. Fake accounts refer to accounts that use false information or impersonate someone else's identity (Hassan et al., 2023). Typically, fake accounts use incorrect identities (Kareem & Bhaya, 2018). As they use false identities, the number of social media accounts does not reflect the actual population. Andre Ludwina mentioned that, on average, Indonesians have 10-11 social media accounts (Lidwina, 2020). Owning multiple social media accounts is unique to Indonesia and occurs in various countries. According to Global Demographic 2023 data, on average, Indians have 11-12 accounts, Americans have 7-8 accounts, Britons have 6-7 accounts, Canadians have 6-7 accounts, and Japanese citizens have 3-4 accounts (Shewale, 2023).

Researchers refer to fake accounts as anonymous, fictitious, or ambiguous accounts used to express oneself, utilise social media, and engage in other activities in the virtual world without revealing their true identities to others (Wanda, Hiswati, Diqi, & Herlinda, 2021). In political communication, fake accounts often serve as buzzers to amplify content from feeders (Afriyadi, 2019). In Indonesia, fake accounts are considered a legal violation (Rezky & Ibrahim, 2022).

Various countries pay special attention to the issue of fake accounts on social media due to their potential negative impact on society. Fake accounts often have specific objectives, such as spreading false information, influencing public opinion, attacking or defaming individuals, or gaining profit. Posting inappropriate content, making crude and hateful comments (racial, sexual, religious, gender-based, 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 (Wani Ahmad et al., 2017). Fake accounts also often have harmful purposes, including spreading misinformation, manipulating public opinion, engaging in fraudulent activities, and influencing online interactions (Hassan et al., 2023). Attacking or defaming individuals, making crude and hateful comments, violence, 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 (Wani Ahmad et al., 2017).

In political communication, fake accounts often serve as buzzers to amplify content from feeders (Afriyadi, 2019). Some researchers argue that fake accounts can distort democratic political discourse, potentially altering public opinion and compromising the integrity of the political process (Ferrari, 2020; Hassan et al., 2023). Grinberg et al. found in their study in the United States that in the context of political events such as elections, fake accounts often aim to deceive, manipulate, or influence political discourse, including spreading misinformation,

promoting fake news, perpetuating disinformation, and shaping public opinion (Grinberg, Joseph, Friedland, Swire-Thompson, & Lazer, 2019). Fake accounts have significant implications for democracy and freedom of expression (Kanagavalli & Baghavathi Priya, 2022). Therefore, fake accounts undermine deliberative democracy because deliberative democracy requires responsibility and rational use (Cini & Felicetti, 2018).

CONCLUSION

Fake accounts and paid buzzers threaten deliberative democracy, yet democracy remains the most suitable modern system for accommodating the interests of all individuals within society. Deliberative democracy is founded on several principles, including "of the people, by the people, and for the people" (Becker & Raveloson, 2008), inclusivity (Aubert, 2021), rational argumentation in discussion (Cini & Felicetti, 2018), and equality of voice (White, 2022). In the principles of deliberative democracy lies the meaning that all citizens receive recognition and respect without discrimination. The principles of recognition and respect also imply upholding the fundamental human rights of each individual as the most basic principle universal to humanity. Therefore, deliberative democracy must consistently occur as part of efforts to respect human rights. Consistent implementation of deliberative democracy will build a healthy and civilised society.

One form of recognition and respect in deliberative democracy is the guarantee of freedom of expression. In expressing opinions, there should be no manipulative attempts so that the final decision-making at the highest level differs from the grassroots aspirations. Fake accounts and paid buzzers tend to manipulate individual opinions, thus undermining the implementation of deliberative democracy. Information and communication technology advancement should help individuals express their freedom more effectively and qualitatively. Therefore, the progress in information and communication technology today should better realise the principles of democracy, namely "of the people, by the people, and for the people" (Becker & Raveloson, 2008), in a tangible way. Hence, the emergence of fake accounts and paid buzzers needs to be addressed so that the negative impacts do not escalate, ultimately contributing to a better and higher-quality deliberative democracy. As the regulator of the digital media realm, the government needs to formulate regulations that can prevent the misuse of social media users that undermine and threaten deliberative democracy.

The phenomenon of fake accounts and paying buzzers remains an intriguing topic that will continue to attract attention in the coming years. Although this research concludes that fake accounts and paid buzzers can distort deliberative democracy in society, it leaves other questions to be explored by researchers in the future in the field of social media use in democracy. For example, what are the actual attitudes of politicians, the public, and the government towards fake accounts and paid buzzers? Empirically, besides providing ease and speed in conducting political campaigns and gaining public support for the government, fake accounts and the phenomenon of paid buzzers have been commodified in such a way that they can generate significant economic profits for those involved. Therefore, such research would likely benefit the body of knowledge and formulate regulations to preserve deliberative democracy.

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