Digital Democracy in the Era of TikTok: An Analysis of Social Media's Influence on Contemporary Political and Social Dynamics

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ABSTRACT

This study examines the role of TikTok in digital democracy, particularly its impact on political and social dynamics. Using a descriptive qualitative method, the study analyzes how TikTok, through features like the "for your page" algorithm and two-way interactions, influences the spread of political information and the formation of public opinion. Through literature reviews, interviews with experts, and content analysis of TikTok, this research highlights how the platform can be used for political and radical propaganda, as well as how it addresses content oversight issues. The findings indicate both opportunities and challenges in using social media for politics, offering recommendations for digital media literacy and strategies to confront disinformation, and contribute to the understanding of the interaction between technology, politics, and society in an evolving context.

Keywords: digital democracy; social media's influence, tiktok, political

ABSTRAK

Studi ini mengkaji peran TikTok dalam demokrasi digital, khususnya dampaknya terhadap dinamika politik dan sosial. Menggunakan metode kualitatif deskriptif, studi ini menganalisis bagaimana TikTok, melalui fitur seperti algoritme "untuk halaman Anda" dan interaksi dua arah, memengaruhi penyebaran informasi politik dan pembentukan opini publik. Melalui tinjauan literatur, wawancara dengan para ahli, dan analisis konten TikTok, penelitian ini menyoroti bagaimana platform dapat digunakan untuk propaganda politik dan radikal, serta bagaimana platform tersebut mengatasi masalah pengawasan konten. Temuan ini menunjukkan peluang dan tantangan dalam menggunakan media sosial untuk politik, menawarkan rekomendasi untuk literasi media digital dan strategi untuk menghadapi disinformasi, dan berkontribusi pada pemahaman tentang interaksi antara teknologi, politik, dan masyarakat dalam konteks yang berkembang.

Kata kunci: demokrasi digital; pengaruh media sosial, tiktok, politik

INTRODUCTION

Social media is currently believed to play a significant role in politics. Recent studies have been conducted to determine the impact of social media in political fields such as political efficacy (Baccini et al., 2021; Walker, 2006), political knowledge (Balogun, 2011;

Rose & Miller, 2017), and political participation (Kusmanto, 2014; Lee, 2020; Rajagukguk et al., 2021; Zhang et al., 2010). Political efficacy refers to the feeling that a citizen can play a role in bringing about political and social change. Meanwhile, political knowledge refers to the array of actual political information stored in long-term memory (Fatkhuria & Syarbaini, 2019; Monforti & Marichal, 2014).

Additionally, political participation refers to "behavior that can influence government actions – either directly by influencing the public policies that are implemented or indirectly by influencing the selection of political actors who make those policies" (Hallaj, 2017; Jayasuriya & Rodan, 2007; Tabarcia, 2009). Furthermore, political efficacy and political knowledge are considered strong predictors of political participation (Gil de Zúñiga, Homero & Sebastián Valenzuela, 2012; Newhagen, 1994). Kenski and Stroud (2006) argue that a healthy democracy consists of citizens who have high levels of political success, political knowledge, and political participation.

However, the impact of social media has not yet been studied within the political environment of Indonesia. Indonesia is a country with 73.19 million internet users – with the youth as the majority of internet users – (APJII, 2014) and had general elections in 2014. Therefore, it is thought-provoking to investigate the impact of social media on the political efficacy of young adults, their political knowledge, and political participation in the 2014 Indonesian Elections (General Election 2014/Pemilu 2014).

Furthermore, this research will focus on Indonesia for three additional reasons. First, as the most democratic country in Southeast Asia (Ufen, 2010), Indonesia's democratic system is still in a growth phase (Nugroho, 2011; Nugroho & Syarief, 2012). For more than three decades, Indonesia was under the New Order regime of Soeharto. There was little freedom in all aspects of social, economic, and political life. At that time, only three political parties could participate in the general elections: the Indonesian Democratic Party (Partai Demokrasi Indonesia/PDI), the United Development Party (PPP), and the Golkar Party. Golkar always won the elections, subsequently appointing Soeharto as President for 32 years.

The fall of Soeharto's authoritarian regime in 1998 marked the point where Indonesia embarked on a new democracy, namely reformasi (Nugroho & Syarief, 2012). Young adults played a significant role at that time. Currently, Indonesia has successfully conducted three general elections: in 1999, 2004, and 2009. In 2014, Indonesia will again hold general elections. Specifically, the 2014 Elections will be the last election to separate the Parliamentary Elections (Legislative Election/Pileg) and the Presidential Election (Presidential Election/Pilpres). The Pileg will be held on April 9, 2014, while the Pilpres will be held on

July 9, 2014. Since the Constitutional Court has decided on the judicial review of the Republic of Indonesia Law No. 42 of 2008 on the Presidential and Vice Presidential Elections, Pileg and Pilpres will be held simultaneously for the upcoming general elections.

The demand for fair and honest elections is increasingly proven with the stronger formal legal establishment of the Election Supervisory Agency (Bawaslu) from the Central, Provincial to the Establishment of the Election Supervisory Agency at the Regency/City level, which was initially just a committee, proposed to become a permanent body. However, there is a dark side in Indonesian democracy where sometimes campaign violations to obtain power inappropriately are still committed by campaign teams in each election, making the democracy, which was originally from the people, by the people, and for the people, often lead to negative occurrences that result in the birth of premature leaders, hence the importance of clean democracy will be discussed. Related to the determination of the future of the Nation and State, in theory, it is very good, but in the implementation of our elections, there are still many problems and violations that often occur during elections.

The development of technology, which forms the basis of print and electronic mass media, has now also created a new media known as electronic social media, such as Tik Tok. A virtual space that can connect people from all over the world. It is then used as a means to conduct election campaigns, considering the wide reach of electronic social media. However, it is currently found that candidates and their campaign teams conduct campaigns during the quiet period on social media like Tik Tok, especially with algorithms that cannot be managed and can appear at any time, this is an impact of technological developments, where humans cannot fully regulate. The purpose of this paper is to know and understand the influence of social media (tik tok) on the implementation of election law in this modern era.

RESEARCH METHOD

To examine the phenomenon of digital democracy, particularly the role of TikTok in politics and social change, this study will employ a descriptive qualitative approach with a focus on triangulation as the analysis model. The primary objective is to understand how TikTok is utilized in a political context and its consequent impact on society. The study will gather data through an extensive literature review, encompassing articles, journals, and related publications. In addition to this, the research will involve in-depth interviews with social media experts, politicians, and activists who are active TikTok users. A content analysis of TikTok posts will be conducted to discern the types of narratives and political messages being conveyed. The triangulation model will be used to cross-verify and strengthen the validity of

the findings by integrating data from these diverse sources, ensuring a comprehensive understanding of the role of TikTok in digital democracy.

RESULT AND DICUSSION

This section contains the data characteristic of subject/object/sample/ research respondent, data analysis result, testing instrument and hypothesis (if any), answer of research question, findings and findings interpretation. This section, if possible, can be graphed for each research variable. Furthermore, the descriptive statistic value was presented (Eg; Mean, SD, Maximum, Minimum) with its inter-pretation. In the end of thie section showed the hypothesis research result and its discussion com-pletely.

The use of the internet has led to the emergence of a new form of democracy, known as digital democracy. Digital democracy represents a collection of efforts to practice democracy without the constraints of time, space, and other physical conditions, utilizing information technology as a substitute for traditional "analog" political practices. This practice of digital democracy employs digital media for communication, both online and offline. The distinction between online and offline needs to be added because political activities do not only take place on the internet but also must have an impact in the real world. The development of technology, which forms the foundation of print and electronic mass media, has also created a new medium known as electronic social media, like TikTok. This virtual space unites people from all over the world and is used as a means to conduct election campaigns, given the wide reach of electronic social media. This is because social media can play a communicative role, ensuring that all marketing activities or campaign promotions produce a uniform or consistent image. Social media represents a new paradigm of traditional media such as TV, radio, and newspapers, which facilitate communication or direction, while social media offers two-way communication by allowing everyone to publish and contribute through online conversations.

Social media, particularly TikTok, plays a crucial role in the process of social change in society. Social change is a process experienced by society members, along with all elements of culture and the national system, where all layers of society voluntarily or under the influence of external elements leave old life patterns, cultures, and social systems, and then adapt to or adopt new patterns of life, culture, and social systems. Campaign activities are a strategic method of political strategy to win elections, which should provide political education to the public and be carried out responsibly.

How does TikTok Influence the Public?

TikTok, as an innovative social media platform, offers unique features that facilitate propagandists to reach a broader audience, a concept different from other social media platforms. TikTok's special characteristic lies in its content-sharing model, which focuses not only on the number of followers but more on the quality of the content itself. Thus, TikTok creates an environment where everyone, regardless of their follower count, has an equal opportunity to gain public attention, as long as they can produce interesting or "sufficiently interesting" content.

The "for your page" concept on TikTok is an important aspect here. This page acts as a gateway for content to reach a wider audience, independent of the existing follower network. This opens up significant opportunities for political opportunists to utilize it to promote their political agenda and narrative. They can do this by creating audio-visual content that not only attracts attention but also effectively communicates their political message. Through this approach, TikTok provides a platform that can be exploited by political actors to disseminate information, ideas, or their political propaganda quickly and efficiently, reaching a broader and more diverse audience while influencing public opinion.

These features of TikTok mark a significant shift in how information and political content are disseminated on social media. The openness and simplicity of this platform in displaying content based on its appeal, rather than follower count, provide a digital arena for political strategists to explore and optimize their presence on social media in ways that have never existed before.

The system adopted by TikTok can play a significant role in spreading radical propaganda messages, potentially triggering the emergence of fanatic follower groups. This occurs because TikTok's algorithm is designed to continuously present similar content to users, based on their interaction with previous content. Thus, if a user shows interest in a particular type of content, including content with radical propaganda, TikTok tends to present more similar content, which can reinforce the user's views and beliefs.

Such a model has the potential to create what is known as an "information bubble" or echo chamber, where users are only exposed to information or ideas that align with their existing views or beliefs. In this context, users exposed to radical propaganda content will continue to receive similar information, reinforcing their beliefs without exposure to alternative or differing views. This phenomenon can lead to polarization of views and encourage fanaticism among users.

Furthermore, TikTok's system of continuously 'feeding' users content they like or interact with might not directly encourage criticism or diverse thinking. This can result in users not realizing that they are in a homogeneous information bubble. Consequently, users can become more susceptible to manipulation and influence from radical propaganda content, which can significantly affect their perspectives.

In a digital environment like this, it is crucial for social media users to develop critical awareness of the information they receive. This awareness is important to protect oneself from the negative influences that may arise from propaganda content circulating on social media platforms, including TikTok, which in many cases tends to promote content aligned with user preferences, without providing diverse or differing insights.

Political Propaganda on TikTok

The rampant political propaganda on TikTok demonstrates a unique dynamic compared to other, longer-established social media such as Facebook, Twitter, and Google. These social media have taken proactive and serious steps in combating the misuse of their platforms by propagandists, by establishing strict policies and oversight mechanisms. Conversely, TikTok, which has recently gained popularity after being downloaded by many people, does not have policies as strict as its competitors in this regard.

TikTok, which has received sharp criticism from researchers and media for its handling of extremism content on its platform, has strived to make changes by formulating better policies. This criticism focuses on the fact that TikTok allows extreme and radical views to emerge on its platform. In response, the owners of TikTok have tried to develop and implement updated community guidelines to prevent misuse of the platform by certain individuals.
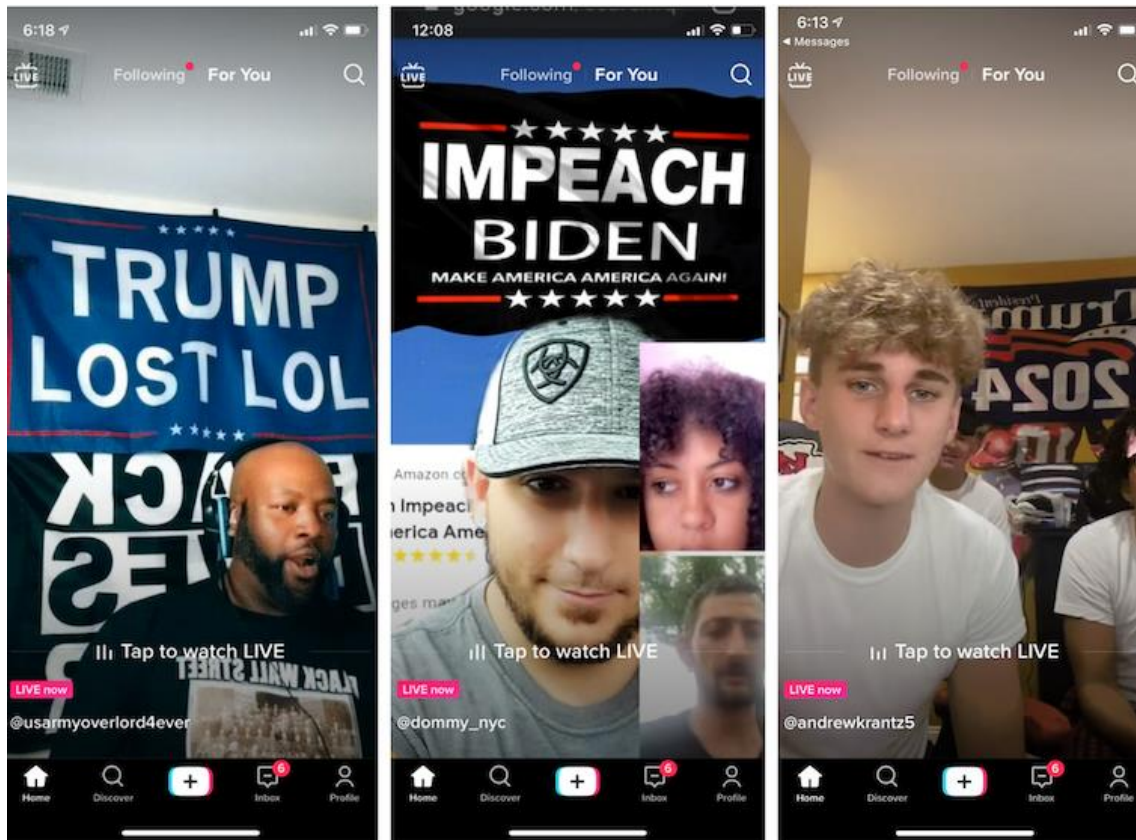
Figure 1. A Screenshot of a TikTok Live Video Focusing on U.S. Politics

However, challenges still remain, especially in content oversight. TikTok currently relies heavily on its internal system and artificial intelligence (AI) to monitor content generated by its users, but this has proven to face challenges in identifying and regulating the produced content. Specifically, the 'live' feature on TikTok becomes a more complex issue. This feature has been misused to spread political narratives in several countries, including the United States and Russia, with the real-time streaming nature making AI monitoring less effective.

Relying on human surveillance to continuously monitor videos 24 hours a day is considered unrealistic and uneconomical, given the vast amount of content uploaded to TikTok every day. Therefore, an alternative solution proposed is to involve the TikTok user community itself by developing a more efficient and effective reporting system. This system would allow users to help identify and report content that violates rules, thus aiding the platform in better regulating and overseeing its content. This community approach is expected to be an effective way to handle the issue of rampant political propaganda on TikTok.

What Could Happen?

With the approaching general elections in countries like the Philippines, Malaysia, and Indonesia, special attention needs to be given to TikTok as a potential battleground for political information warfare. Based on real examples from Russia, where influencers were paid to spread pro-Kremlin propaganda through TikTok, it is highly likely that similar trends will occur in Southeast Asian countries. Considering the increased popularity of TikTok in the Southeast Asian region in the last three years, it is expected that the digital propaganda strategies we have seen on other social media platforms, such as the use of paid influencers, cybertroopers, and bots, will be replicated on TikTok during the election period in Southeast Asia.

In the context of these elections, it is very likely that information chaos caused by disinformation campaigns will occur. One way to address this is by increasing media and information literacy efforts among citizens. Although fact-checkers play a vital role in this process, it is essential for citizens to have the ability to examine and evaluate information independently.

Unfortunately, in the Southeast Asian region, media and information literacy education is still lagging compared to other countries in the world. This situation becomes more complicated considering the prevalence of misinformation and disinformation in the region. Although it is highly unlikely that misinformation and disinformation will completely disappear, empowering citizens with the right literacy skills can help reduce the spread and negative impact. Therefore, there is an urgent need to increase awareness and media literacy skills among the Southeast Asian population, as part of a collective effort to combat misinformation and disinformation in the current digital era.

CONCLUSION

This study has extensively explored the role of TikTok in the context of digital democracy, revealing how this social media platform influences contemporary political and social dynamics. TikTok, with unique features like the "for your page" algorithm and two-way interaction, has proven to be a crucial tool in the dissemination of political information, enabling broader and more interactive digital political campaigns. However, the research also found that TikTok can facilitate the formation of "information bubbles" that reinforce homogenous political views, potentially impacting public opinion significantly.

Moreover, the study identifies how TikTok becomes a channel for political and radical propaganda, raising concerns about content oversight and policies to prevent platform misuse.

Although TikTok has made efforts to address these issues, challenges remain, particularly in effectively monitoring content. Overall, this research indicates that the use of TikTok in politics offers opportunities for broader and more inclusive political participation, but also brings significant challenges, especially related to disinformation and polarization. Therefore, the recommendations generated include enhancing digital media literacy and proactive strategies to confront disinformation. This research contributes to a broader understanding of how social media, particularly TikTok, interacts with politics and society, highlighting the importance of continued research in this field to maintain the health of digital democracy.

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