

The Role of Indonesian Mainstream Media to Fight Against Covid-19 Hoaxes

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Abstract— The main focus of this research is analyzing the role of mainstream media in fighting covid-19 hoaxes in Indonesia. The research is conducted using qualitative method. Data is collected from various sources, mainly mainstream online media sites which provide fact verification canals. The study finds that mainstream media plays an important role in fighting the spread of Covid-19 hoaxes. Particularly by providing special division to verify facts, by developing fact-checking journalism. They also cooperate with Anti-Defamation Society Indonesia to fight hoaxes, including Covid-19 hoaxes.

Keywords—fact checking journalism, hoax, media, pandemic

I. INTRODUCTION

In a mediated society, the role of media is very crucial and fundamental, in a way that talks about society become less relevant without involving media [1]. During crisis, the role becomes even more crucial and fundamental, as media provides references for society to gain information. Media plays a significant role for the society during the covid-19 pandemic, since it becomes pivot communication amongst the government, health institutions, and society [2]. Media provides a window for the society, serving people who look for accurate information, scientific facts, government decisions, and public reactions. Traditionally, the role of media within crisis situation due to covid-19 pandemic is to supervise and act as source of information about covid-19.

The supervision function becomes immensely crucial because it encourages the society to be aware of the danger that threatens their lives. Therefore, the media should provide actual and accurate information on covid-19 at all times, to enable the society to take the right decision in responding the pandemic. Through their journalistic products, media provides accurate and objective information as a holly command [3] [4] that is implemented for years. Due to the social role, mass media is obliged to work professionally to serve every citizen's right at all times, as well as fighting hoaxes, despite the fact that historically, some mass media were involved in information misdirection [5]. Nevertheless, there is a continuous obligation, that mass media, through their journalistic products provide accurate information [6].

During covid-19 pandemic, to differentiate reputable media from disreputable ones that spread hoaxes [7], mainstream media is expected to play their role in fighting

against the spread of covid-19 hoaxes. Although hoaxes are not new phenomenon in Indonesia, yet covid-19 hoaxes that spread rapidly through social media [8] [9] has worsen the covid-19 pandemic [10]. Covid-19 hoaxes spread through multiple channels. However, social media remains to be the most used channel to spread hoaxes [8] [9] [11] [12]. The hoaxes are not only related directly to covid-19, but also other related fields such as business, politics (particularly related to public figures), and in some way involve other countries, mainly China [8]. Therefore, it's not exaggerated if it is said that misinformation has influenced almost all aspects of society's social life, and particularly mental health [13].

In several cases, hoaxes have led to wrong attitudes and even death [13]. During pandemic situation, quoted from [14] reveals that when inaccurate or false information reaches the public, it will trigger various responses, such as mass buying, or trying medication regimen excessively which can be harmful.

In Indonesia, there are several different terminologies that are used to conduct studies on hoaxes. A number of studies use "misinformation" and "disinformation" terminology [8] [15] [16], while others use "hoax" terminology [11] [17] [18] [19] [20] [21].

Hoax terminology dates back to 18th century, *hocus* [5], generally differentiated from fraud. The difference lies in society's reaction. Fraud becomes hoax when the reaping-financial-benefit method or "fame" purpose of the deception successfully build society's imagination, and result in an extensive public impact [5]. Since the influence of covid-19 hoaxes is almost as dangerous, and mainly are widely spread in social media, this study will focus on the role of mainstream media in fighting against covid-19 hoaxes. Although the fight against the spread of hoaxes in Indonesia is not dominated by mainstream media, yet their position is far more crucial, particularly due to their resources and professional standards. A great number of mainstream media become references for hoax verification by civilians (for instance, Mafindo).

II. METHOD

This research is conducted using qualitative approach. Data is collected through direct observation on mainstream media sites that provide special division for fact verification, such as tempo.co, liputan 6.com, tirto.id, suara.com, along

with a number of other sites dedicated to fight against hoaxes such as turnback hoax, hoaxbuster, and Kominfo. Aside from that, researcher also conducts in-depth interviews with journalists and civilian activists, to gain their perspective in relation with the role of mainstream media in fighting covid-19 hoaxes. Data is analyzed using Miles and Huberman [22] analysis pattern, where analysis is conducted in three stages: data reduction, data presentation, and drawing conclusion.

III. RESULT AND DISCUSSION

A. Hoaxes in Indonesia

Hoax is not a new phenomenon, and the history of hoax becomes a part of men's desire to manipulate other people [5]. In Indonesia, hoax phenomenon has existed since long ago, and it attracts public's attention because hoaxers had successfully deceived government officials. During post-reformation liberal era, hoax spread excessively and gain public's attention, especially in times of political rivalry like general election [5] [7], and there was a significant escalation in 2017-2019 [12]. There were three main incidents, as recorded by Lee. First, Jakarta as the capital of Indonesia conducted governor election.

Incumbent governor, Basuki Tjahaja Purnama was accused of blasphemy. However, the root of the accusation was not on religion only, but also on ethnicity. Basuki is a Chinese descent, whereas relation between Chinese descent and native Indonesian has its own ups and downs. This had triggered excessive spread of hoaxes, and even created social disintegration within the society. The second context was the discussion about presidential and vice presidential election in 2019. The candidates reflect community groups based on political choice. Most of the supporters of Joko Widodo, the former governor of Jakarta, are also supporters of Basuki Tjahaja Purnama. On the contrary, the competitor, Prabowo Subianto, is a supporter of Anies Baswedan, a strong competitor of Basuki Tjahaja Purnama. For the sake of political goals, all supporter groups were trying to manipulate voters by spreading misleading information. Therefore, the spread of hoaxes increased significantly, before, during, and after the presidential election [23]. The third context is the expansion of post-truth on the global scale, mainly after USA presidential election in 2016 [24]. Since then, post-truth becomes an interesting, widely discussed word. During presidential and vice presidential election in 2014 and 2019, Indonesia was not free of this phenomenon [25].

Apart from the three contexts above, there is a context which also plays an important role to spread hoaxes in Indonesia. Social media. Indonesia is one of the largest social media user in the world. Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, and Whatsapp. Unfortunately, the level of Indonesian online activity is not accompanied by proper literacy. On the other hand, political view and value are also influential. Study of Utami [26], during the Jakarta governor election, hoaxes spread easily because the hoaxes are in line with community values. Hoax creators use mimikri by manipulating the news to create similarities with the social reality and value in many forms, such as videos, texts, and pictures.

They usually manipulate news from the mainstream media platform. Study of Rianto [25] in Whatsapp group in

2019 presidential election period, found that the spreading of hoaxes was not only due to the lack of literacy, but also because of political affiliation.

Hoaxes keep spreading in various media platforms in Indonesia, and continuously reproduced for many motives. Some motives are for economic and political advantages [7], and some are for the sake popularity. Mastel Studi said that political hoaxes is the highest rank, followed by racial and religious issues (SARA), government issues, and health issues. In Indonesian contemporary context, hoaxes are not only threatening individual life, but also social integration.

B. Fighting Hoaxes in Mainstream Media

Covid-19 pandemic has impacted all of Indonesians' everyday life, including information consumption. Uncertain situation and worries increase information consumption through social media [27]. Yet, for mainstream media, the situation becomes a paradox. Covid-19 pandemic decreases the oplah and circulation of printed media. Consequently, some media companies have to withhold their journalists' salary, and some even face bankruptcy. A survey conducted by Imogen Communication Institute (IGI) to 140 medias in 10 big cities of Indonesia revealed, 70,2% media acknowledged that covid-19 pandemic has impacted them, especially in terms of their income, due to 39% earning decrease from sponsors and advertisements (Febrianto, 2020). This trend also hit mainstream online media.

The survey conducted by Asosiasi Media Siber Indonesia (AMSI) revealed that media income has decreased 40%-80% [28]. Consequently, some media do termination of employment or withholding salary for the journalists. In this situation, the journalists face double limitations. The first one is the social distancing policy and second one is demotivation because of the reduced welfare.

The decrease of printed mainstream media circulation is followed by the increase of online mainstream media visit, such as detik.com, tempo.co, kumparan.com, tirto.id, kompas.com, suara.com, liputan6.com, and so on, although it doesn't necessarily have a positive correlation with the increase of advertising. Thus, mainstream online media have to compete with social media creators to seize the ad [29]. It is ironic, because during the Covid-19 pandemic, social media is the most accessed media, with the worst credibility [30]. Unfortunately ad has no correlation with credibility. It correlates only with the number of visit. Therefore, social media have lower credibility as an information source, but it get higher ad compared to mainstream media. Commenting in this, Bambang Muryanto [31] uttered that Covid-19 pandemic momentum can increase public trust to mass media. In the other hand this pandemic hit the media industry badly. Mass media coverage practice is also affected because the ad decrease impacts the reward for the journalists.

Economic crisis caused by Covid-19 pandemic that is being experienced by Indonesian media as well as media around the world is something real. But this is also the moment to rise the trust level of media. At least Indonesian media experience show that when the society feel anxious and need a trustworthy information, they would go back to mainstream media. It means that our society appreciate journalism work system that uphold ethics and verification discipline. So when hoaxes spread out through social media,

our society still rely on printed and online mainstream media as Covid-19 media resources. In the other hand, fact checking institutions established by some communities (turnbackhoax) and government (Kominfo) still rely to mainstream media for data verification, because some mainstream media have their own fact checking unit.

There are some online media which have become global fact checking institution network, for example tirta.id, liputan6.com, and suara.com. Although these fact checking units are not specially dedicated to fight against Covid-19 hoaxes, yet they have very important rule to become a good reference in social media. Altogether they make fact checking sites, in collaboration with MAFINDO, Masyarakat Anti Fitnah Indonesia (Indonesia Anti Fitna Community).



Fig. 1. Example of fact checking channel tempo.co, suara.com, tirta.id

The establishment of fact-finding unit in mainstream online media has established a new journalism practice in Indonesia, called “fact checking journalism”. Basically, the character of fact checking journalism is similar to the general journalism; hypertextuality, interactivity, non-linearity, multimedia, convergence, and personal [32]. Fact checking journalism, however, has been useful in fighting the Covid 19 hoax [33].

C. The Public Service Broadcasting Which Is Left Behind

Since the reformation era, based on Act no. 32 of 2002, Radio Republik Indonesia (Radio of the Republic of Indonesia, abbreviated RRI) and Televisi Republik Indonesia (Television of the Republic of Indonesia, abbreviated TVRI) were appointed as public service broadcasting. This has changed the two institutions’ working procedure, paradigmatically. Prior to the reformation era, they served as government’s instruments, yet after the reformation era, they have to serve the public. It is not easy, due to several factors. First, some government bureaucracy elements still hope that RRI and TVRI keep playing their role as government broadcasting institutions. It hinders their independence and their efforts to serve as public service broadcasting.

Second, there is a problem in terms of work habits and human resources. For more or less three decades, the two institutions had worked to serve the government. It has caused difficulties to the transformation of RRI and TVRI to be strong and reliable public service broadcasting. Their work habits is still under great influence of government broadcasting service. Some of the employees are over forty years old.

Third, the stakeholders, including the parliament, has low understanding about public service broadcasting and its importance in a democratic country.

Several factors mentioned above have hindered RRI and TVRI in playing their role maximally as public service broadcasting. Including their role in fighting the massively spread covid-19 hoaxes in social media. RRI and TVRI have provided special broadcasting programs to fight hoaxes, but it’s still far from being adequate. Both RRI and TVRI don’t have a separate division to do fact checking, as an effort to apply fact-checking journalism.

RRI provides special broadcasting program on Saturdays to verify facts, cooperates with Mafindo through Programa 3 broadcast (Pro 3) once a week. This channel only broadcasts national news. RRI has four channels (Pro 1, Pro 2, Pro 3, Pro 4) for local broadcasts. Yet the four channels haven’t been maximized to be fact verification programs to fight covid-19 hoaxes. RRI also has online media (rri.co.id), but unfortunately, unlike other mainstream online media, it provides no fact verification division.

Actually, RRI can maximize their online based application, RRIplay Go. On this online application, the public can access various RRI services; terrestrial radio broadcast, magazine, disaster broadcast, and international broadcast. With such facilities, the application can be used to fight covid-19 hoaxes, by providing “special channel”.

Compared to RRI, TVRI is even more left behind. TVRI provides special broadcast to verify facts, but unfortunately it’s not developed from fact-checking journalism. They produce talk show in terrestrial broadcast using a peculiar title “Viral Verification”. The public might question the meaning of viral verification, for viral news on social media are not necessarily hoaxes. Therefore, as a title of a program, “Viral Verification” is not appropriate, because they should be verifying facts, not viral news.

IV. CONCLUSION

Covid-19 hoaxes have become a great problem, not only in Indonesia, but also in the global scale. It has become a new problem which is as threatening as the covid-19 pandemic itself. Therefore, significant efforts are needed to fight covid-19 hoaxes.

In Indonesia, attempts to fight hoaxes, including covid-19 hoaxes, are conducted by various actors; such as government, civilians, and mainstream media. This research found that mainstream media, mainly online based mainstream media like tempo.co, tirto.id, and many more play a very significant role in fighting against covid-19 hoaxes. They provide special channels for fact verification. They also cooperate with other parties and with other online media, to provide sites for fact verification in internet.

Mainstream media play a significant role in fighting hoaxes, whereas RRI and TVRI which play role as public service broadcasting are still left behind. In spite the fact that they provide fact verification broadcast, yet they don't have fact verification division based on fact-checking journalism. Moreover, they haven't maximize their channels, even though they have great potential. RRI network, for instance, is able to reach 90% of Indonesia's territory.

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