Written Representation 61

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The phenomenon of using digital technology to deliberately spread falsehoods online

The rise of Internet users and the heavy use of social media bring the people both the positive and negative impacts. Some of the negative impacts related to online frauds, and recently the high rise of disinformation/misinformation through social media and chat apps.

The disinformation ecosystem exploits the state of Internet and social media that are friendly to anonymous account. Many people also still have false impressions that they are free to speak anything on social media without consequences.

We are also entering the post truth era, that people with different political affiliations, different ethnics, different religions, tend to have more distrust to others. People are easy to believe any information that suits their initial position, regardless true or false, but in other hand, very difficult to accept even facts, if different with personal position, and we call this confirmation bias.

In country with low literacy level like Indonesia, this situation is quite worrying. Falsehoods information have already taken a toll. In 2016, there was a mob in North Sumatera driven by disinfomation spread in chat apps that destroy several holy places. In 2017, in West Kalimantan, a father that actually sending rice to his children was beaten to death by a mob that suspected him a child kidnapper, because at the time, there was a false information spread to social media and chat apps, that people shoud be careful because there is now a massive child kidnapping around the nation. We also heard the similar situation in India, a disinformation can lead to 26 death at single occasion.

Falsehoods in health area is also very dangerous, we have received several reports that people can be lead to death after using false procedure on health issues that can be found in Internet and social media. We met also people from Indonesian Doctor Association and Indonesian Cancer Foundation, they also quite worry on this situation.

There also falsehoods in financial area, mostly some rogue businesses with ponzi scheme that are also using social media and chatapps to get their members. The Authority of Financial Services in Indonesia has also reported that tenth of trillion rupiahs were lost by this ponzi scheme since the eve of the Internet.

There was a report from an expert in Indonesian linguistic that happens to be expert witness on several cases at Indonesian Police. The suspects that spreading the disinformations he dealt with are people with high education and having a very good job. So we have a disconnection between people with high education and how they behave on social media and chatapps.

We believe that the causes of why Indonesian people are easy to spread misinformation are not only of the low literacy problem, but also because polarization between people with different ethnics, religion, political affiliations and other interests. The partisanship of several mainstream media also further fuels this situation, some people leaving mainstream media, but unfortunately went into using rogue websites (clickbait) as source of information.

The motivations and reasons for the spreading of such falsehoods, and the types of individuals and entities, both local and foreign, which engage in such activity

We think that there are few motivations of people creating and/or spreading falsehoods online.

The first one is economical reason. We were guest at Mata Najwa's live TV show on March 2017, and at the opening scene, there was a confession video from a person behind several rogue websites. He claimed to gather 300-500 million rupiahs (20-35 thousand USD) monthly from ads on his websites. He confessed that he doesn't care about the nature of the information on his websites, as long as he can clickbait the people, he would produce any informations including the falsehoods.

The second is political/ideological reason. Social media and chat apps are becoming the major place of public opinion's debate, even more than on the mainstream media. Some political power or ideological group try to influence the social media with disinformations.

But we have also seen some combinations between those, for example Indonesian Police last year apprehended a group called Saracen that being paid to spread political/ideological disinformations.

In Indonesia, what we are seeing until now, the type of individuals engaging in such activity are locals, we haven't seen situation like in United States that disinformation created by people living in East Europe. Maybe because Indonesia uses Bahasa, and not every people have time to invest to jump into the language. But countries with major shared language as the main language (like English, French, etc) should be prepared.

The consequences that the spread of online falsehoods can have on Singapore society, including to our institutions and democratic processes

The consequences of the falsehoods online can be similar from Indonesia to Singapore sociecty, with some possible differences.

In Indonesia, every elections would create a big wave of disinformations. Our factchecking platform recorded a high spike of disinformations on every major elections. We started to see this phenomenon on Jakarta governor election on 2012, but the number was increased significanty at presidential election on 2014 and also Jakarta governor election on 2017. We expect to see this trend also in this simultanous elections at 171 locations in 2018 and general and presidential election next year.

Distrust of the society also leads to continuous spread of disinformations. People that are losing their candicate at presidential election at 2014, still trying to attack the government, many of them with disinformation, and in many cases would create trouble in the government. Even some of the disinformation are quite silly, but it can make the government very busy to clarify the disinformation, hence wasting resources to do so.

Some radical communities also using disinformation to discredit others, to gain followers.Especially community with ideological agendas, they are very strong to defend their position even if is factually false, and very difficult to persuade with facts. Indonesia is getting very serious to combat fake news that can lead to more radicalizations.

How Singapore can prevent and combat online falsehoods

We can tell the situation in Indonesia, that maybe some of the would be beneficial for Singapore. In Indonesia, several efforst are on going to combat disinformations.

The Indonesian government, the Ministry of Communication and Information has just recently been mandating every mobile phone users, especially the prepaid card, to be registered, the latest at Februari 2018 or, the number will be denied on the network. The ministry also recently just upgraded their hardware infrastructure and adding system to filter negative content. They also initiate a national movement of digital literacy called Siberkreasi, that many digital literacy communities joining, including Mafindo.

Indonesia also already has a law that prohibit creating/sharing fake informations (UU ITE), but we think many updates should be done. Indonesian Police has already captured more than 20 suspects over the nations on the charge of spreading serious fake informations. The police also upgrades their personnel to be more involved in cyberpatrol, so they formed cybertroops.

Mafindo is a part of the ecosystem to combat online falsehoods. Since the beginning, we started factchecking at http://facebook.com/groups/fafhh, that are open to anybody interested to voluntarily factcheck any mis/disinformations, to ensure transparency. Since August 2017, Mafindo had started an office comprising of 6 fulltime factcheckers and 1 programmer. We published our results on our website TurnBackHoax.ID. This website also acts as the central database of mis/disinformations in Bahasa. We are also creating an API called Yudistira, so that we can interact our database to Google Fact Check Tag, Facebook, and online medias, not only manually, but automatically by machine to machine. At the moment we are registering to be part of International Fact Checker Network, so we would be legitimate to factcheck on Facebook. At the moment two big online medias are already collaborating with TurnBackHoax.ID via Yudistra, Tempo dan Kompas, and more than 15 medias are going to follow. We have just recently launched an Android apps, Hoax Buster Tools to make easy common people to search for hoax, and to have an interface to hoax-free search engine. The more advanced factcheckers can also use the tool to verify images and videos.

We are collaborating closely with journalists. We are also part of Google News Lab Training Network to train 1800 journalists this year on verification information. We are also active to advocate the issues to the government and to the social media enterprises (Google, Facebook, Tweeter, etc), on how to improve the regulations, the system, so that the social media and chat apps can be more safer for everyone.

Since one of the major problem is low literacy, we also engage significantly on literacy education, especially on digital sphere. We have our volunteers at 15 cities to enter the schools, the mosque, the church, to deliver the message how to be more wise dan responsible when using social media, and how to avoid falsehoods and how to detect them. In this efforts we are collaborating with other communities that are grouped in Siberkreasi. We are also urging leaders of religious community, ethnic community, public figures to speak about this issue. Several organizations already made statement on this issue, including Indonesian Cleric Council (MUI) that passed fatawa of Guidance on Interacting in Social Media. Other religous groups also on the process making the similar statement. We believe the family is the forefront on this issue, so educating the children, the parents, are very crucial.

We understand the problem about spreading online falsehoods not only because of low literacy, but also polarization between different political powers, different religions, different ethnics, different economy status. We think that one of the solution is to create more gatherings, convening. We already start this movement on several cities. Basically we gathered leaders of influential groups from different religions and ethnics, to have discussion and some agreements, that we may compete in this democracy, but without using falsehoods, since it would direcly negate our foundation values.

This year, 2018, is the starting of political year, more than 170 cities and provinces are helding their elections. And next year, 2019, Indonesia is going to have general election and presidential election. To maintain the quality of public debates during this moment, Mafindo is initiating Hoax Crisis Center in three Provinces : Central Java, West Java and West Kalimantan. Hoax Crisis Center is the place where people could ask the clarification of the issues, and also the command center to seek the fact if there is a disputed information arises. We gathers the stakeholders, the government, the police, the election supervisory board, netizens/bloggers, community/religious leaders, academics to form an antihoax ecosystem, so that we could beat any online falsehoods in more quicker and efficient fashions.