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FAKE NEWS DURING NATURAL DISASTER: INFORMATION FLOW, NEWS PRACTICES, AND FACT-CHECKING IN INDONESIA

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Introduction

During natural disasters, people in the past relied on the latest updates from mass media news. However, the presence of digital media had altered the way people seek and consume news and information, which challenges professional journalism (Van der Meer, Verhoeven, Beentjes & Vligenthart, 2016; Tandoc Jr., Jenkins & Craft, 2018). Unlike news media, social media lacks the gatekeeping process of messages, which is likely to increase the virally diffusion of fake news. As Indonesia is one of the largest social media countries with low digital literacy and fading media trust, rampant fake news influenced people's perceptions and attitudes. During a disaster aftermath at Palu city, Indonesia in September 2018; fake news proliferated and news media tried to curb their dissemination to avoid negative impacts on the public. In this study, fake news is defined as the intentional and unintentional production and dissemination of false information on social media (Kaur et al., 2018; Waisbord, 2018; Klein & Wueller, 2017). The aim of this study is to address existing gaps on lacking scholarly research about fake news in non-political and Asian contexts, along with examining news practices of Indonesian media when handling disaster fake news.

Conceptual Framework

The Hierarchy of Influences (HOI) model by Reese and Shoemaker (2016) was utilized as a theoretic basis to examine the individual, routine, organization, and social institutions levels of news professionals. This study examines the four levels (individual, Kwanda, F.A. & Lin, T.T.C. (2019, October 2-5). *Fake news during natural disaster: Information flow, news Ppactices and fact-checking in Indonesia*. Paper presented at AoIR 2019: The 20th Annual Conference of the Association of Internet Researchers. Brisbane, Australia: AoIR. Retrieved from <http://spir.aoir.org>.

routine, organizational, and social institutions), but the social system level was not the scope, yet relevant to provide contextual insights in Indonesia. Literature reviews show that the country is currently one of the largest social media nations, yet its people tended to have low literacy, a politically polarized nation, and a decline in media's trust (Mokhtar, 2019; "Kepercayaan Publik Terhadap Media", 2018).

Methodology

Employing a mixed-method approach (web-observation and interview), this study will answer the following RQs:

RQ 1: How were the information flows and patterns of post-Palu disaster fake news-related-information mediated by Indonesian news media?

RQ 2: How did news professionals from traditional affiliated media and independent media handled post-Palu disaster fake news through their newsroom practices?

It first observed the information flows and patterns of three types of post-Palu disaster fake news (i.e., aftershock, religion-related organization, and baby adoption) within September 28, 2018 to October 27, 2018, based on result from Google Trend analysis. Through a purposive and snowball sampling, seven respondents from three identified news media during observations (Kompas.com, Medcom.id, and Tempo.co) were selected to analyze how different media types are likely to affect fake news practices at four HOI levels. The first two media are affiliated with traditional media which are closely related to business and political forces, whereas the third is an independent media. Interview results were thematically analyzed with 10 codes and 18 sub-codes identified in the HOI model and existing literatures. The codes include individual level (i.e., personal trait and professional value), the routine level (news gathering, processing, distribution, and fact-checking), the organizational level (i.e., editorial policy and organizational culture), and social institutions (i.e., government and independent fact-checking). Some subcodes were identified through the re-examining the recurrent themes at interview data.

Results

Based on observation data, the first two cases (aftershock and religion-related) false information exhibited news media published clarifications after official statement. Both cases were considered as high-risks, the first case was linked to disaster, while the second case involved a religious organization. Only the last case (baby adoption) was standard journalism where news media went to clarify the information and reported the facts. However, information flow was only complex and lengthier when controversial (e.g. religion) was involved, corroborating the idea of a saturated beliefs-polarized nation.

Next, interview results showed that handling (non-controversial) fake news were heavily influenced by newsroom policies. Decisions on which fake news to debunk were risks-based. While low risk fake news was treated as standard journalistic processes, high-risk controversial fake news tends to be treated cautiously. Despite respondents sharing

similar individual level values as trusted and capable journalists, similar to Western journalism, under scrutinization, these values are different in practice. At a routine level, all three media exhibited a similarity of needing official statements, especially when handling high-risk fake news, even at the cost of timeliness. However, these newsrooms also had different writing angles, ranging from glossing over clarifications to educating the public.

Simultaneously, organizational characteristics (ownership and news orientation) heavily influenced how disaster fake news was handled. Online media with traditional affiliation tended to avoid from controversial fake news (i.e., political or sensitive issues). Meanwhile, independent online media exhibited a more liberal standpoint and expressed skepticism towards government's information, noting that fact-checking should only be conducted by journalists. Independent online media emphasized on fact-checking as part of their effort in combating fake news. Fact-checking was also conducted by the first two media, but was not overly emphasized by them during interviews.

Discussion

Regardless of the fake news context, clarifying or debunking fake news by Indonesian media does not necessarily equate to fact-checking. Fake news were not always handled by newsroom's own means but instead might rely on re-stating what the government had confirmed. Hence, this brings up the arguments of newsrooms extending government's agenda, and the independence of news media regardless of public preference (polarization). Another argument could also stem from the idea that fact-checking is relatively new and journalists were only introduced to it in recent years.

Additionally, the need to have official sources to legitimize news content seems to be a common practice in Indonesian newsrooms (Hanitzsch & Hidayat, 2012; Steele, 2011). Each unique approach is shaped by the media background, editorials, and promoted by their organizational culture. Despite the end goal was to debunk fake news, each newsroom has their own professional approach/interest. For example, avoidance of certain controversial issues in the name of peach journalism, promoting owner's interest in relations to providing disaster aids, and promoting coverage balance.

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