

THE ROLE OF BUZZERS ON SOCIAL MEDIA IN SHAPING ISSUES DURING THE 2024 WEST SUMATRA (WEST SUMATRA) REGIONAL ELECTIONS

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ABSTRACT

This study aims to analyze the pattern of issue formation and narratives that developed on social media during the implementation of the West Sumatra (West Sumatra) Regional Head Election (Pilkada) in 2024. The main focus of this research is to identify how key issues are raised and processed in conversations on social media and to understand the role of key actors in shaping political narratives. Content analysis methods and social networks are used to study patterns of interaction and information distribution on various social media platforms. The results show that certain issues are more prominent in influencing public opinion and get high user engagement, especially on themes related to local identity, regional policies, and political party dynamics. This finding is expected to contribute to understanding political dynamics in the digital era and the impact of social media on the formation of public opinion during the Regional Election process. In addition, the results of this research can be a reference for the government, political practitioners, and the public in managing political issues and narratives that develop on social media.

INTRODUCTION

Social media has transformed political communication worldwide, and in Indonesia, platforms such as Facebook, X, TikTok, and Instagram are widely used for regional head election campaigns. Social media not only serves as a means of communication between politicians and voters but also as a space to shape political narratives, spread issues, and mobilize political support ((Tufekci, 2017)). In the context of the 2024 West Sumatra (West Sumatra) Regional Elections, social media is a factor that should be considered in influencing public opinion, considering the high penetration of the internet and social media among the public. Therefore, Tufekci, 2017 *influencers*, *buzzers*, and even mainstream media are often used as tools to shape public opinion.

Many studies have shown that social media can reinforce political polarization, where users tend to engage in echo chambers that confirm their own views and isolate opposing views (Medina Serrano

et al., 2020a). In addition, social media is often a tool for disseminating disinformation and post-political propaganda, further exacerbating this polarization. However, most research on political polarization on social media focuses on national or international elections. In contrast, research on its impact on local elections, such as the Regional Elections, still needs to be completed. This shows a gap in the literature related to the role of social media in the context of local elections in Indonesia.(Tucker et al., 2017)

This research will fill this gap by analyzing how social media shapes political issues and narratives during the 2024 West Sumatra Regional Elections. This research will use virtual ethnographic methods to study interactions in digital spaces and identify the dominant narratives that emerge during campaigns. As Hine explains (Hine, 2020), virtual ethnography is an effective method for understanding social dynamics in cyberspace, especially in the context of political interactions. This method allows researchers to engage directly in observation in the digital environment, providing insight into how

political issues are conveyed and accepted by the public.

Meanwhile, the study also examines how political polarization occurs on social media, identifies key actors in spreading narratives, and measures how those narratives affect public perceptions of candidates and important issues during campaigns. As Boulianne (Boulianne, 2015) stated, social media can potentially increase political participation, but it also strengthens political fragmentation if not managed properly. Therefore, this research will contribute to a better understanding of how social media influences public opinion in the context of local politics in Indonesia.

Thus, the results of this study are expected to provide new insights into the role of social media in shaping local political dynamics, as well as how polarization resulting from the use of social media affects election results. The research will also offer theoretical and practical contributions in the field of political communication studies, particularly in terms of understanding the influence of social media on polarization at the local level.

METHOD

This study uses a qualitative approach with a virtual ethnographic method to analyze the pattern of issue formation and narratives on social media during the 2024 West Sumatra (West Sumatra) Regional Elections. Virtual ethnography was chosen because this method allows researchers to observe social and political interactions in the digital space directly so that it can capture the dynamics of political communication in more depth (Hine, 2020). This approach is well suited to studying online behavior related to political polarization and the use of social media in political campaigns.

1. Data Collection

Data was collected from uploads and interactions on various social media platforms actively used during the Pilkada campaign. Purposive techniques are used to select posts that are relevant to the issues discussed during the campaign, including the use of keywords related to candidates, political parties, and dominant local issues. Previous studies by Murthy (Murthy, 2008) and Kozinets (Kozinets, 2010) have also successfully used this technique to identify communication patterns and narratives in digital spaces. The data was collected over three months

before Election Day, covering an intensive period in the campaign.

2. Content Analysis

Once the data is collected, content analysis is carried out to identify the key themes that emerged during the campaign. This qualitative content analysis is carried out by manual coding, where the content is categorized based on political issues, candidate narratives, and public responses. This analytical technique has been used extensively in political and social media research to uncover how narratives are framed and disseminated on digital (Krippendorff, 2018) platforms. The results of this content analysis are expected to identify dominant topics and reveal how political narratives are formed on social media.

3. Sentiment Analysis

In addition to content analysis, sentiment analysis is also carried out to measure the emotions in campaign-related uploads. Using the lexicon-based sentiment analysis approach, positive, negative, or neutral sentiment in each upload is analyzed. This approach has proven effective in social media-related research, such as those used by Tumasjan et al (Tumasjan et al., 2010), which show that sentiment analysis can predict public responses to political candidates during campaign periods. In this way, the study will evaluate how the evolving narrative triggers an emotional reaction from social media users.

4. Validity and Reliability

To ensure validity and reliability, this study applies data triangulation by comparing results from various social media platforms and local news sources. In addition, an intercoder reliability test was carried out to ensure consistency in the data encoding process, following recommendations from Lombard, Snyder-Duch, and Bracken (Lombard et al., 2002) to improve the accuracy of content analysis. The validity of sentiment analysis was also tested using software extensively tested in similar studies (Liu, 2022).

By using virtual ethnography as well as content and sentiment analysis, this research is expected to provide more comprehensive insights into how social media is used to shape political narratives in the context of the 2024 West Sumatra Regional Elections, as well as how polarization occurs in the digital space.

Research Location

This research was conducted in West Sumatra, especially in the context of the 2024 West Sumatra Regional Elections. This location was chosen because it has a unique local political dynamic, combining regional and national issues often dominating public debate. West Sumatra also has cultural solid characteristics, where Minangkabau traditional values are often influential in local politics, which makes social media the primary means of articulating and framing political narratives.

When comparing these findings with similar studies in various locations, there is a consistent pattern in using social media to shape political narratives. A Barberá (Barberá, 2015) study that examined elections in Spain, for example, found that social media is used intensively to disseminate information and reinforce polarization among voters. Likewise, Tufekci's research shows that social media tends to expand the reach of political narratives in the context of global politics, but also increases the risk of polarization and echo chambers. Although cultural and geographical contexts are different, the pattern of social media use in shaping political narratives seems to have similarities in various regions, including West Sumatra.(Tufekci, 2017)

However, the local context in West Sumatra shows that issues based on cultural identity and development have a more substantial influence than research in other locations, such as those found in Boulianne's study in Canada, where economic-based issues dominate. (Boulianne, 2015)

One of the informants from the professional buzzer said that the development issue is the most discussed issue, considering the slow development in West Sumatra in recent years.

These differences suggest that although patterns of polarization and use of social media for political campaigns are similar globally, local contexts play an important role in determining the dominant issues and how narratives are shaped on social media, especially for economic and development issues considered underdeveloped in West Sumatra.

Another relevant study was conducted by Serrano et al. in the United States which identified the use of bots and troll accounts in reinforcing polarization during elections. In this study, similar accounts were also found to play a role in spreading disinformation

related to the West Sumatra Regional Elections, adding a layer of complexity to the polarization that occurred. Comparisons between these study locations and other locations show that while each place has unique characteristics, the use of social media for political purposes shows a relatively consistent trend worldwide.(Medina Serrano et al., 2020b)

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

This research produced several significant findings related to the issue formation and narrative pattern on social media during the 2024 West Sumatra (West Sumatra) Regional Elections. Different categories of buzzers, so are the pattern of forming issues. Using content and sentiment analysis, data collected from TikTok, X, Instagram, YouTube, and Facebook showed significant political polarization.

The findings of this study show that political buzzers in West Sumatra are categorized into two major groups. First, it is a buzzer that is affiliated with certain candidates and parties. They do their activities voluntarily. The reason for this category of buzzers to act is usually based on religious similarities, one region, tribe, or organization, or he has personally met the person and is amazed by his authority. Second are professional buzzers, those who work with an orientation to get material.

The first group of buzzers usually comes from party members or party sympathizers who support a particular candidate. The narrative they built came from the party supporting the cabin, which was passed on many times. This repeated narrative forms a pattern of social media user interaction in the form of "echo chambers", groups with similar political affiliations dominating the discussion and reinforcing existing views without involvement with opposing opinions. These findings are consistent with the research of Serrano, Papakyriakopoulos, and Hegelich, who stated that social media tends to reinforce polarization by facilitating the formation of homogeneous discussion spaces (Medina Serrano et al., 2020b)

1. Key Issues Formed

Based on content analysis and interviews with informants, the main issues during the 2024 West Sumatra Regional Election campaign revolved around the personal characteristics of regional head

candidates, the local economy, employment, infrastructure, and cultural identity. Meanwhile, the narrative about religion, which is usually very dominant in other regions, is not a significant issue in West Sumatra. This is because, regarding social structure, the people of West Sumatra are more homogeneous in their religion.

Social media platforms are used to amplify the narrative about the issues they are building; the narrative directly affects voters' perception of these issues. For example, the issue of road infrastructure development, which has suffered much damage due to disasters in West Sumatra, has received significant attention, with narratives driven by both candidate camps regarding the development programs they offer.

In addition to the issue of damaged roads, the construction of toll roads that have never been completed has also received attention in the narrative that has been formed. This was also revealed by one of the informants named UT.

"One of these candidates is trying to attack because it is seen as stagnant in development, especially the construction of toll roads," said UT, one of the informants in this study.

Another main issue often used as a narrative by buzzers is the development in West Sumatra. This province is considered a province that lags behind other provinces in West Sumatra. There are almost no new investments that have invested in West Sumatra.

In addition, the issue of the personalities of the two gubernatorial candidates is also the main topic that is used as a buzzer to create a narrative on social media. According to the PI informant, the narrative about the candidate's personality is always engaging, not only for the election of regional heads but also for the presidential election.

Findings like this have also been echoed by Tufecti's study, which states that social media plays an important role in the dissemination of political information and the formation of political agendas.(Tufekci, 2017)

2. Polarizing Narratives and Social Media Sentiments

Sentiment analysis reveals that two sentiments are

always produced by buzzers. Both are positive sentiments that are usually in favor and negative sentiments opposed to certain candidates. Both show a sharp difference in sentiment.

The group of supporters of one of the candidates will consistently produce the campaign narrative carried, while the opposing group expresses negative sentiments.

According to the admission of the UT informant, the buzzers will be given a data bank in the form of a drive. In the data bank, there are two categories, there is a category of positive information and negative information. The buzzers will create a narrative to be spread on social media based on the direction of the top leaders coordinating them.

This sharp difference in sentiment reinforces the polarization theory that states that social media accelerates the separation of political opinions. In addition to using narratives, negative sentiment towards candidates is also carried out by making political memes and sarcastic uploads, the goal is to further muddy the atmosphere of the debate on social media.(Barberá, 2015)

The buzzer team will be divided into two categories. Some specifically make narratives, and some buzzers specifically make memes and videos to share on social media. This phenomenon was also found in the research of Tucker et al., which highlighted that digital campaigns tend to increase negative emotions in political content on social media.(Tucker et al., 2017)

3. Actors in Spreading Narratives

In addition to buzzers, other findings show that accounts with large followers, such as national political figures, religious figures, influencers, and news agencies/mass media, play a key role in spreading political narratives.

The candidates for regional heads deliberately cooperate with the mass media to cover the news for specific candidates. The output is a campaign narrative disguised as news that will be redistributed to social media and other mass media that are their partners.

It is also interesting to see that the role of religious leaders is quite significant in this year's regional head election. Religious leaders are considered to have a large following, both directly and on social media.

Religious leaders' significant influence has received serious attention from West Sumatra's Indonesian Ulama Council (MUI). The West Sumatra MUI issued a circular prohibiting religious leaders from outside West Sumatra from being invited to political events during the regional head election process.

The study found that the accounts of elite figures and religious leaders are often the main source for other users to obtain information and spread political narratives. This is in line with a study conducted by Smith et al., which found that social media strengthens the role of political elites in shaping public narratives through massive information distribution.(Smith & Anderson, 2018)

In addition, these findings also show the mobilization of young users who are more tech-savvy to become key actors in supporting candidates' digital campaigns. TikTok, Instagram, youtube, and X platforms are the primary targets for this generation to spread narratives. These users utilize various social media apps as a tool to mobilize support. This trend has been observed in the context

of global politics, such as in research conducted by Boulianne (Boulianne, 2015), which states that social media has significantly influenced political participation among young voters.

This finding was also confirmed by UT informants. According to him, the spread of narratives on Tiktok, Youtube, and X has a significant and massive impact in shaping narratives.

4. The Effect of Polarization on Public Perception

The effects of polarization in Indonesia are evident in follow-up surveys conducted after the election. In fact, the 2019 election is still left in the 2024 election, where most respondents reported that they tend to trust information that matches their political beliefs and tend to ignore or doubt information from different sources of political affiliation. The same condition is also felt in the election of regional heads in West Sumatra. Supporting polarization cannot be eliminated. This confirms Barberá's findings that social media, while providing a space for political discussion, often reinforces social and political divisions (Barberá, 2015)

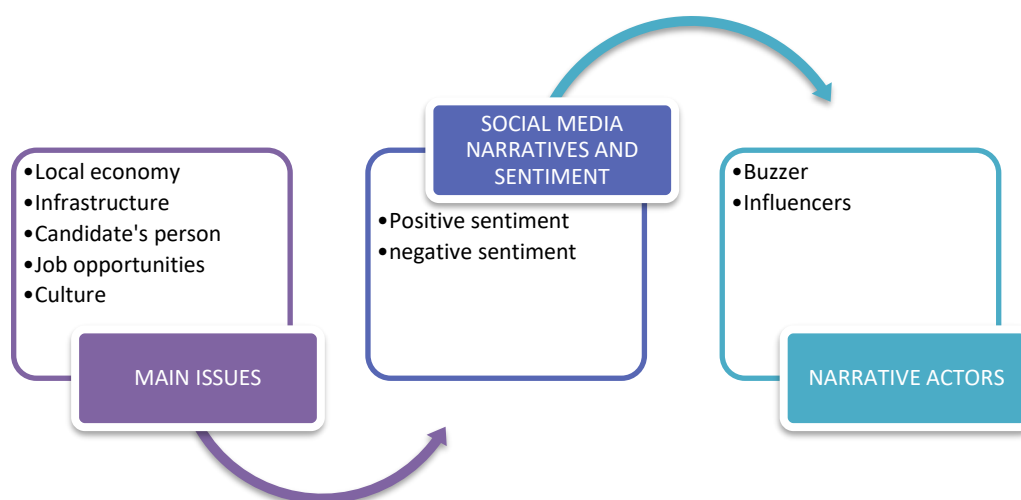


Figure 1. Buzzer Narrative Pattern in the 2024 West Sumatra Regional Election

Discussion

These findings reinforce the argument that social media has become important in local politics, influencing public perception of campaign issues. The political polarization resulting from the use of social media, as found in this study, is in line with a global trend where the digital space is further reinforcing political divisions among voters (;). (Carlos et al., 2020)(Tufekci, 2017)

However, this study also highlights the gaps that exist in the study of the influence of social media in local contexts, particularly in Indonesia. Most of the existing research focuses on national or international elections, while the influence of social media in local elections is still poorly explored. This research contributes to the growing literature by offering deeper contextual insights into the role of social media in local politics.

In addition, this study also shows the need for a more critical approach to using social media in political campaigns, especially in mitigating the negative impact of political polarization. More effective interventions, both from social media platforms and public policy, must be considered to prevent further political divisions.

CONCLUSION

Based on the findings in the field, for the context of the regional elections in West Sumatra, the practice of using political buzzers in building narratives on social media is going very well and neatly.

Regional head candidates use all resources to win the regional elections, including using buzzers, both professional payers and voluntary buzzers.

Their activities in shaping narratives greatly influence shaping polarization in society.

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