

TIKTOK AND POLITICAL CAMPAIGN

A SPACE FOR INTERACTION, DISTORTION, AND MANIPULATION



The illustration features a central orange podium with a circular cutout. Above the podium, a light blue speech bubble with two horizontal lines and a dark blue speech bubble with the TikTok logo are positioned. To the left of the podium is a red flag on a pole, and to the right is a yellow flag on a pole. The background is a light gray grid. The entire scene is framed by a white curved shape on the left and a pink banner at the bottom.

Author

Suci Lestari Palijama

Editor

M Perdana Karim

Designer & Layouter

Laila Putri Arsanda

INTRODUCTION

Based on the We Are Social report, in October 2023, there were around 106.51 million TikTok users in Indonesia.¹ This number places Indonesia as the country with the second-most TikTok users in the world. In its development, TikTok is not only a source of entertainment content but also has a role in the distribution of the latest political information. The development of TikTok into a means of communication between politicians and their voters is inseparable from TikTok's features, which feature short videos that attract attention and the way its algorithm system works. TikTok's algorithm allows politicians to maximize the amount of engagement they need and allows their content to reach people from different partisan groups. TikTok has transformed into a new platform for ideology-building and political activism.

However, the use of TikTok as a new arena for political campaigns has several impacts that can be considered detrimental. TikTok videos about political campaigns can contain narratives that affect people's framework of thinking and weaken voters' thinking in a political contest. Partisanship towards certain political candidates and TikTok algorithms that constantly display narratives that support our political views, make the public more vulnerable to believing misinformation. This article tries to discuss how politicians use TikTok as a medium to shape their image and how TikTok impacts the public's ability to analyze certain socio-political phenomena.

WHY IS TIKTOK BECOMING A POPULAR POLITICAL CAMPAIGN TOOL?

One of the things that stands out about TikTok is the way its algorithmic system works, which makes the dissemination and virality of content unpredictable. Regardless of the number of followers a user account has, a TikTok video has an equal chance of being effectively distributed and reaching a wide audience.² TikTok also has a few important characteristics that enable political content to be directly orientated towards the personal lives and affective connections of politicians with their voters, including:³

VISIBILITY

TikTok's For You Page (FYP) feature makes it easier for users to understand and find content that suits their interests. In addition, TikTok also provides creators with information on the total views for each hashtag. This allows creators to use popular hashtags that may not be related to their content to boost the virality of their content.

EDITABILITY

TikTok has editing features that make it easy for users to create and modify content, which facilitates the flow of creative content on the platform. Its editing features allow users to capture, transform, annotate, and combine videos, sounds, and images in various ways. The variety of editing features also encourages other users to replicate and make adaptations to previous videos.

ASSOCIATION

Duet and stitch features that combine old and new content. Through these features, patterns between video entities are easily recognized and developed. Furthermore, such features can also encourage social bonding between users.

Furthermore, regarding TikTok's algorithmic system, Cotter and Kanthawala (2022) discuss the term "algorithmic conspirituality". The term refers to the phenomenon of a growing perception in society of how algorithms can provide complex and in-depth knowledge about human life and the superiority of algorithms over human reason.⁴ This perception usually can be found in platforms with a data-driven approach to optimize the work of the human mind, body, and soul, for example in fitness applications, dating applications, etc. With this perception, people then trust algorithms to tell them things that they do not know and recognize for themselves. The word "conspirituality" refers to how people are bound by the idea that nothing happens by chance, nothing is as it seems, and everything is interconnected.⁵ The term algorithmic conspirituality simply describes the spirituality of people's belief in algorithms, where they form a personal connection with the content they receive.



The FYP feature on TikTok tends to produce the same algorithmic conspirituality effect on society. The culture fostered by the FYP feature on TikTok gives people a collective understanding of how content generated by algorithms becomes an objective and trustworthy source of knowledge.⁶ Algorithms are perceived to be able to produce useful and appropriate advice for the needs of the community because of the trust in the algorithm's ability to collect and summarize available user data. This also encourages politicians to use the virality of content on the TikTok platform to push information that suits their interests and needs.

Another culture that is also formed through TikTok is how the platform introduces the power of memes (memetic text) in digital culture. This encourages the participation of TikTok users in shaping the dynamics of political discourse and movements.⁷ The facilities



and interactive aspect of TikTok content creation make the platform familiar to the community. This encourages discussion of political and social justice issues that are more performative, satirical, and sensitive.⁸ The audiovisual model of TikTok content makes the political communication process much more interactive than other application platforms such as YouTube or Instagram.⁹

As mentioned in the previous section, TikTok has also become an increasingly common way for politicians to connect with voters. It is used by politicians to promote their authenticity as individuals who always appear and interact spontaneously, intimately, and consistently regarding their efforts to gain support from potential voters. Regarding this, Luebke (2021) introduced the concept of "political authenticity" as a multidimensional social construction that politicians often perform and perceive in several aspects of their social media, including:

CONSISTENCY

- a. Consistency can be related to the performance of the politician (performed consistency). Performed consistency refers to a political narrative that is consistent with the actions of the politician. Authentic politicians are defined as politicians who are consistent with their political stance, consistent with their principles and morality, and consistent with their values and actions.
- b. Consistency is also related to how politicians adjust their actions to the expectations of society (expectation consistency).

The distinction between these two forms of consistency is important to recognize the possibility that inconsistencies between politicians' narratives and actions can still be understood as a form of authenticity when they are in line with the expectations of society. As a result, even when politicians explain unsynchronized political narratives or lie to the public, this can still meet expectations of consistency and be considered authentic behavior from the politician.

INTIMACY

The public tends to study the personalities of politicians behind the public personas they build (appearances in non-public contexts) to predict their behavior after gaining power. Intimacy is built by the sharing or voluntary disclosure of personal information, thoughts, and feelings by politicians. Social media, such as TikTok, plays an important role in providing a platform that shows the vulnerability and closeness of politicians to potential voters.



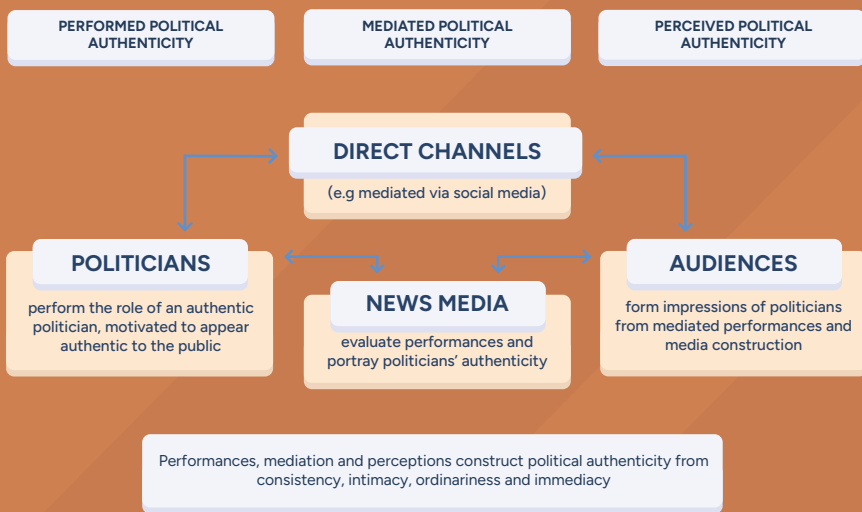
ORDINARIES

People expect politicians to act as statesmen and ordinary people at the same time to illustrate their closeness to the people, willingness to learn, imperfections, and humility to understand the real conditions of people's lives. Politicians use social media to emphasize the "commoner" dimension of their character.

IMMEDIACY

Politicians are expected to demonstrate political communication by communicating directly with the public, which reflects the spontaneous thoughts of a politician without any excessive preparation process. This shows how impoliteness and politically incorrect speech give the impression of a politician's authenticity. In addition, politicians' efforts to show their emotions organically also give the impression of authenticity to a politician.





Social and individual norms and expectations for the role of politicians

Gambar 1. Bagan cara kerja political authenticity dengan media sosial
Source: Luebke, S.M. (2020) "Political authenticity: Conceptualization of a popular term"

The theory wants to explain how the political authenticity that a politician tries to display, both directly or through news channels, can be mediated through social media platforms. Then, the behavior, personality, and political narrative of a politician will be understood and interpreted by the public as audiences of politicians' content on social media. In simple terms, an authentic impression is expected to create a public perception that a politician: (1) appears credible, which in turn will show the strength of the authority of the politician; (2) reliable and sincere; (3) open or transparent with his personality and political agenda; and (4) open to interaction and engagement with voters in political contestation.¹¹



HOW DOES TIKTOK AS A NEW ARENA FOR DIGITAL POLITICAL COMMUNICATION INFLUENCE SOCIETY?

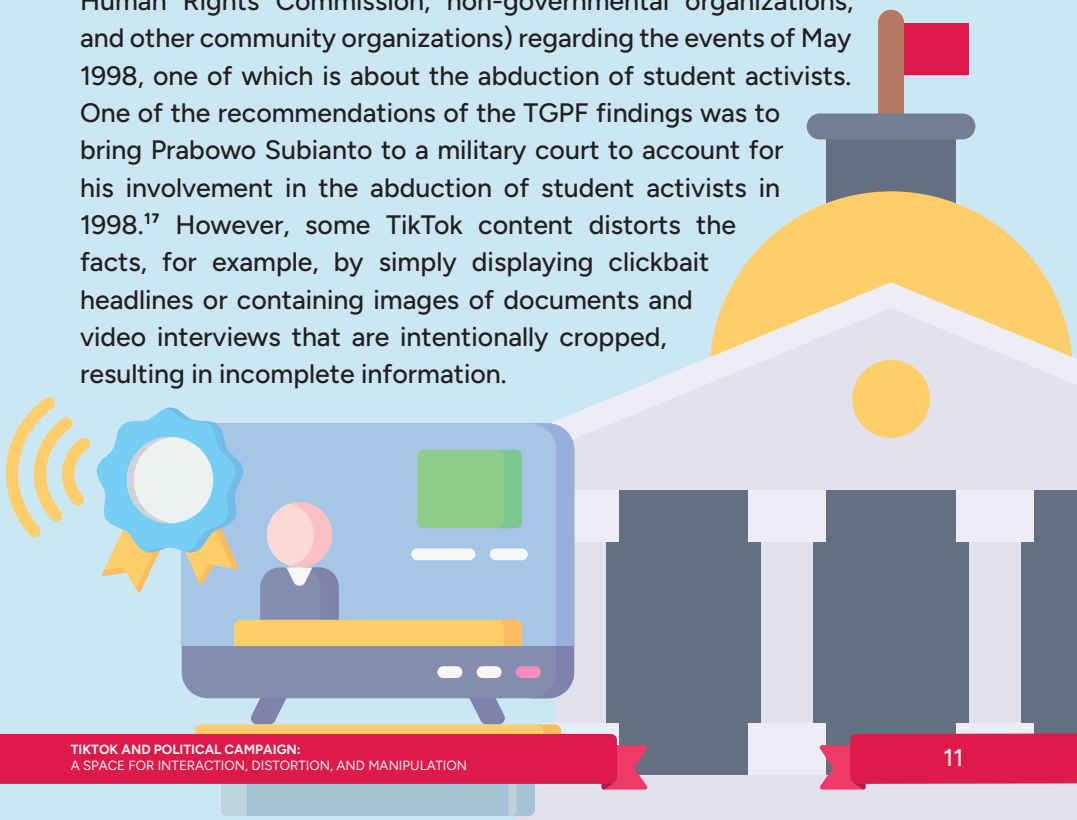
The Post-Truth Phenomenon and the Death of Expertise in Political Discourse in the 2024 Election TikTok Content

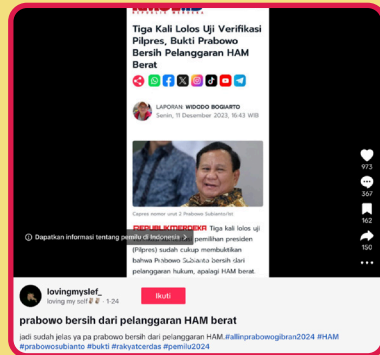
The Oxford Dictionary simply defines the post-truth phenomenon as a condition in which objective facts are less influential in shaping public opinion than appeals to emotions and personal beliefs.¹² The post-truth phenomenon is different from simply telling a lie. A person lies when they know the empirical facts of a matter but decides to convey things differently and distortedly. Post-truth, on the other hand, does not simply deny facts but rather undermines the theoretical infrastructure that allows society to have conversations about truth, values, and knowledge. Post-truth also has different characteristics from bullshit. Bullshit focuses on persuasion and indifference to empirical circumstances, whereas in post-truth, the truth threatens certain parties, therefore they try to delegitimize empirical facts, science, or research to undermine the truth.

Post-truth places society in a situation where it is impossible to interpret a current social event. As a result, those in positions of power in society frequently encourage the post-truth phenomenon to get access to and control truth. The existing power dynamics in society will help delegitimize the truth. Politicians are one party that wields such influence. According to Mair (2017, as referenced in Rianto, 2019), one aspect of the post-truth period is politicians' dishonesty in fabricating information to support any political narrative they deliver.¹³

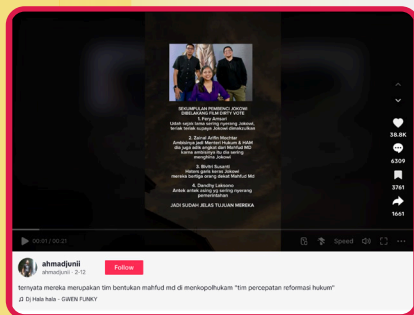
John Berger stated that the media should be a way of seeing reality through how the subject is represented.¹⁴ However, in the 2024 elections, the media—in this context, social media and digital media—have become one of the channels that amplify the post-truth phenomenon. Lewandowski (2017) argues that one of the consequences of biased media exposure to certain ideologies is that people will form inaccurate beliefs even when relevant evidence has been presented.¹⁵ The existence of social media can affect the social and political systems of a society, including how people manipulate information. The emotional element of the narrative with post-truth causes people to easily ignore data and facts, prioritize the virality of content without adequate verification and literacy processes, easily believe in conspiracies, easily mobilized by fictitious narratives about certain figures or events, bring dishonesty to building opinions to strengthen their personal biases, etc.¹⁶

TikTok has also become one of the media that is widely used by the public to amplify the post-truth phenomenon. This can be seen in TikTok content that tries to delegitimize the findings of the Fact-Finding Team or Tim Gabungan Pencari Fakta (TGPf consisting of elements of the government, the National Human Rights Commission, non-governmental organizations, and other community organizations) regarding the events of May 1998, one of which is about the abduction of student activists. One of the recommendations of the TGPf findings was to bring Prabowo Subianto to a military court to account for his involvement in the abduction of student activists in 1998.¹⁷ However, some TikTok content distorts the facts, for example, by simply displaying clickbait headlines or containing images of documents and video interviews that are intentionally cropped, resulting in incomplete information.



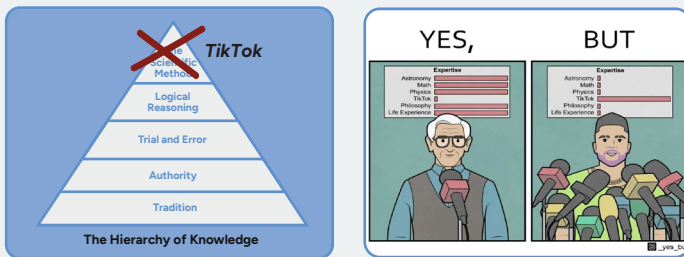


Another example can be found in some TikTok content attacking the declarations of professors and academics from several universities who demanded the implementation of elections with honest and fair principles. Some TikTok accounts raised allegations about the lack of neutrality in academics and how their declarations were part of their role as partisans of one of the candidates in the 2024 elections. In addition to these examples, there was also some content to delegitimize a film called "Dirty Vote" directed by Dandhy Laksono. The film contains findings regarding data collection and analysis of the 2024 election fraud presented by three experts in the field of constitutional law from various universities in Indonesia. However, some TikTok content attempted to delegitimize these findings with partisan narratives or by denigrating these experts using ultranationalist expressions.



Apart from the post-truth narrative, those TikTok content substances can also be an example of the phenomenon of the death of expertise. The death of expertise can be seen as a rejection of knowledge, as well as the process by which people gain knowledge and rationality.¹⁸ This happens when society begins to disrespect or devalue the opinions of experts and when debates in the public sphere are dominated by "fake experts". Tom Nichols, in his book entitled "The Death of Expertise" states several factors that encourage this phenomenon, such as (1) human belief in confirmation bias, fiction, and conspiracy; (2) the declining quality of public education; (3) the prioritization of emotional elements over facts and logic; (4) the lack of diversified knowledge available on the internet; (5) journalism that breeds fake experts; (6) public distrust of media; and (7) past incidents where experts voiced fallacious arguments.¹⁹

According to Nichols, the death of expertise not only makes people lose access to correct information (truth) but also accepts and defends misinformation.²⁰ The digital age makes people distort the concept of truth and ultimately rely on persuasive arguments or reasons to justify rather than seeking the pure truth.²¹ TikTok content that disrupts factual and empirical information ultimately results in the disruption of users' ability to think critically about socio-political phenomena that occur in society.



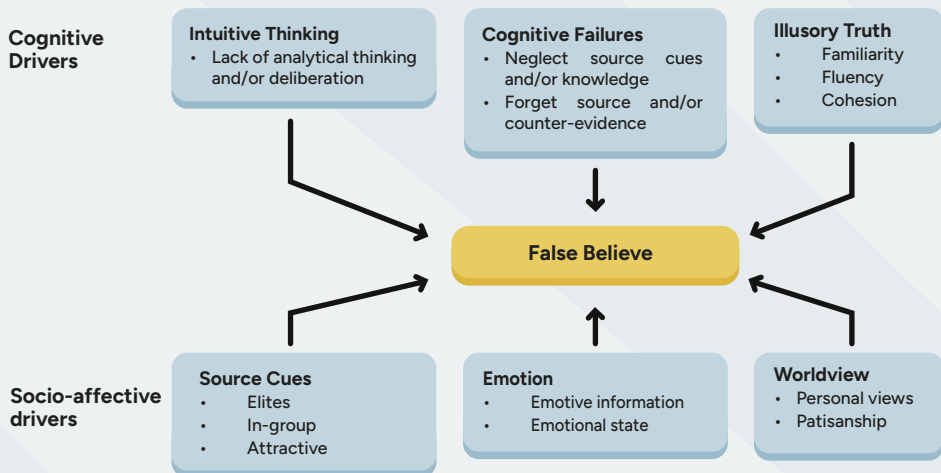
Gambar 2. Meme ilustrasi TikTok yang dianggap sebagai pusat pengetahuan

The Backfire Effect and the Difficulty of Preventing Misinformation Distribution on TikTok

In simpler terms, misinformation is any form of information that is proven to be false or untrue.²² There are at least two locuses that drive a person's belief in information. First, some cognitive drivers can result from:²³

- 01 a lack of analytical thinking skills;
- 02 a cognitive failure that occurs when a person denies the knowledge presented or overlooks the counter-evidence of a narrative that they believe;
- 03 the illusory truth caused by familiarity with the misinformation narrative, that it becomes easier to believe the narrative;
- 04 the fluency of processing a message containing misinformation; and
- 05 the repeated acceptance of misinformation narratives (cohesion) so that such consistency eventually makes individuals gradually believe the narrative.

Second, some socio-affective drivers can come from certain sources, such as political elites, internal groups with which individuals identify themselves, intriguing sources that attract a large audience, belief in misinformation due to certain emotional drives, individual views on world conditions, and partisan behavior.²⁴



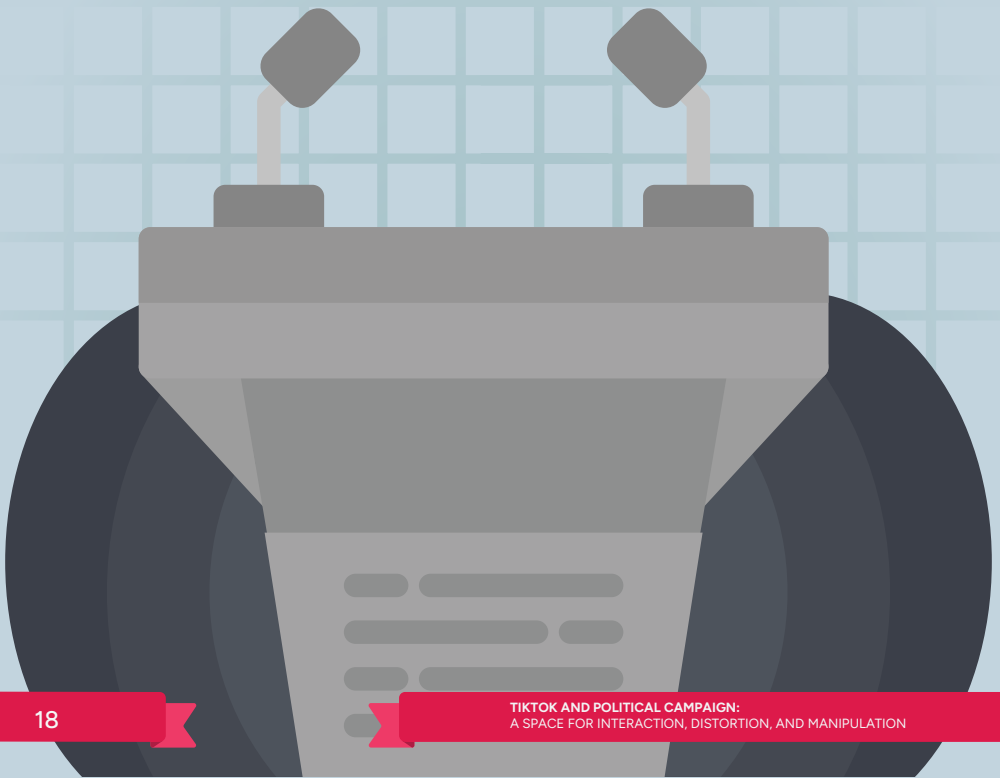
Gambar 3. Faktor yang menyebabkan kepercayaan terhadap misinformation
 Source: Ecker, U.K.H., Lewandowsky, S., Cook, J. et al. (2022) "The psychological drivers of misinformation belief and its resistance to correction"

As explained in the previous section, misinformation also cannot be easily avoided by providing empirical facts to the misinformation producers and disseminators. Misinformation can continue to influence a person's mind, even after receiving facts. This is related to what Nyhan and Reifler (2010) call the backfire effect.²⁵ The backfire effect occurs when individuals are presented with empirical facts that correct their misperceptions; however, when these facts are inconsistent with their ideology or beliefs, they will respond to the corrective action by expressing their false beliefs more strongly.²⁶

One of the things that causes the backfire effect is how individuals will show a strong preference for content (media) that matches their ideological preferences.²⁷ On the TikTok platform, we often see correction videos that aim to educate people about certain misinformation spread on TikTok. However, the effectiveness of these videos in counteracting misinformation is difficult to measure. This is because exposure to the evidence provided in the correction video will lead to the polarization of people's attitudes and opinions, which will tend to filter out the information that is consistent with their ideological preferences and those that are not.²⁸



When an individual attempts to verify their existing knowledge or belief, there are at least two competing motives that influence the action: (1) accuracy goals, which motivate individuals to gain a factually accurate understanding; and (2) partisan goals, which motivate individuals to seek information and form a self-image that matches their political preferences.²⁹ Accuracy goals are used to reach the best conclusions, but partisan goals are used solely to defend preconceived conclusions.³⁰ Individuals have the potential to suffer greater consequences when adopting views that are inconsistent with their ideology, rather than enduring and maintaining an inaccurate understanding of their political beliefs. This makes partisan goals more likely to dominate.³¹ As a result, the creation of correction videos for the misinformation spread on TikTok cannot function optimally to improve public perceptions that have been shaped by the misinformation.



CONCLUSION

It is undeniable that TikTok's features do make it a lot more convenient for politicians to build authenticity and organic chemistry with their potential voters. The TikTok algorithm allows politicians to capture the interest of people from diverse backgrounds in an easier, cheaper, and more practical way. However, on the other hand, the campaign using TikTok content, both by politicians and their supporters, may result in some detrimental impacts on society.

First, the potential distribution of post-truth narratives makes it difficult for people to digest empirical facts about the socio-political conditions that are happening. Politicians, as one of the parties holding power and resources in society, can be one of the agents that delegitimize truth. In the end, TikTok is vulnerable to political manipulation. The emotional element in the post-truth narrative causes people to ignore facts and see the viral nature of content as a measure of truth. Second, the phenomenon of the death of expertise emerges when the rise of TikTok content degrades the value of expert opinion. Such content can reduce the power of rationality and the ability of the public to absorb relevant knowledge and political discourse. Third, there is a backfire effect where the presentation of empirical facts will encourage those who believe in misinformation to express their false beliefs more intensely. This makes the distribution of misinformation on TikTok relatively difficult to control. In the end, the interaction between politicians and the public through TikTok has the potential to be misused as a new medium to disrupt the ongoing political discourse.

REFERENCE

- ¹ Annur, C. (2023) Indonesia Punya Pengguna Tiktok Terbanyak ke-2 di Dunia. Databoks. Available at: <https://databoks.katadata.co.id/datapublish/2023/11/22/indonesia-punya-pengguna-tiktok-terbanyak-ke-2-di-dunia>.
- ² Umansky, N. and Pipal, C. (2023). Dances, Duets, and Debates: Analyzing political communication and viewer engagement on TikTok. OSF Preprints. doi: 10.31219/osf.io/g8dbu.
- ³ Hautea, S., Parks, P., Takahashi, B., & Zeng, J. (2021). Showing They Care (Or Don't): Affective Publics and Ambivalent Climate Activism on TikTok. *Social Media + Society*, pp. 1–14. doi: <https://doi.org/10.1177/20563051211012344>.
- ⁴ Cotter, K., Julia R. DeCook, and Shaheen Kanthawala. (2022) 'In FYP We Trust: The Divine Force of Algorithmic Conspiratorship', *International Journal of Communication* 16. https://www.researchgate.net/publication/360627664_In_FYP_We_Trust_The_Divine_Force_of_Algorithmic_Conspiratorship.
- ⁵ Ward, C., Voas, D. and Ward, C. (2011) 'The emergence of conspiratorship', *Journal of Contemporary Religion*, 26(1), pp. 103–121. doi:10.1080/13537903.2011.539846.
- ⁶ Ward, C., 'The emergence of conspiratorship'.
- ⁷ Moir, A. (2023) 'The use of TikTok for political campaigning in Canada: The case of Jagmeet Singh', *Social Media + Society*, 9(1), pp. 1–12. doi:10.1177/20563051231157604.
- ⁸ Ibid.
- ⁹ Ibid.
- ¹⁰ Luebke, S.M. (2020) 'Political authenticity: Conceptualization of a popular term', *The International Journal of Press/Politics*, 26(3), pp. 635–653. doi:10.1177/1940161220948013.
- ¹¹ Barta, K. and Andalibi, N. (2021) 'Constructing authenticity on TikTok: Social Norms and social support on the "fun" platform', *Proceedings of the ACM on Human-Computer Interaction*, 5(CSCW2), pp. 1–29. doi:10.1145/3479574.
- ¹² Bufacchi, V. (2020) 'Truth, lies and tweets: A consensus theory of Post-Truth', *Philosophy & Social Criticism*, 47(3), pp. 347–361. doi:10.1177/0191453719896382.
- ¹³ Rianto, Puji. (2019) 'Literasi Digital dan Etika Media Sosial Di Era Post-Truth', *Interaksi: Jurnal Ilmu Komunikasi*, 8(2), pp. 24–35. <https://ejournal.undip.ac.id/index.php/interaksi/article/view/26567/16308>.

¹⁴Ibid.

¹⁵Lewandowsky, S., Ecker, U. K., & Cook, J. (2017) 'Beyond Misinformation: Understanding and Coping with the "Post-Truth" Era', *Journal of Applied Research in Memory and Cognition*, 6(4), pp. 353-369. doi: <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jarmac.2017.07.008>.

¹⁶Rahman, M. et. al. (2022) 'Kredibilitas Informasi Di Era Post-Truth Dikalahkan Kecepatan Informasi: Pengabaian Undang-Undang Informasi dan Transaksi Elektronik', *Jejaring Administrasi Publik*, 14(2), pp. 151-173. <https://e-journal.unair.ac.id/JAP/article/download/46677/25854>.

¹⁷Nichols, T. (2014) The death of expertise, *The Federalist*. Available at: <https://thefederalist.com/2014/01/17/the-death-of-expertise/> (Accessed: 30 February 2024).

¹⁸Yoo, H. (2018) 'The death of expertise: The campaign against established knowledge and why it matters', *Journal of the Korean Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry*, 29(4), pp. 185-186. doi:10.5765/jkacap.180021.

¹⁹Yoo, H. (2018) 'The death of expertise: The campaign against established knowledge and why it matters', *Journal of the Korean Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry*, 29(4), pp. 185-186. doi:10.5765/jkacap.180021.

²⁰Ibid.

²¹Ecker, U.K.H., Lewandowsky, S., Cook, J. et al. (2022) 'The psychological drivers of misinformation belief and its resistance to correction', *Nat Rev Psychol*, 1, pp. 13-29. doi: <https://doi.org/10.1038/s44159-021-00006-y>.

²²Ibid.

²³Ibid.

²⁴Nyhan, B. and Reifler, J. (2010) 'When corrections fail: The persistence of political misperceptions', *Political Behavior*, 32(2), pp. 303-330. doi:10.1007/s11109-010-9112-2.

²⁵Wood, T. and Porter, E. (2018) 'The elusive backfire effect: Mass attitudes' steadfast factual adherence', *Political Behavior*, 41(1), pp. 135-163. doi:10.1007/s11109-018-9443-y.

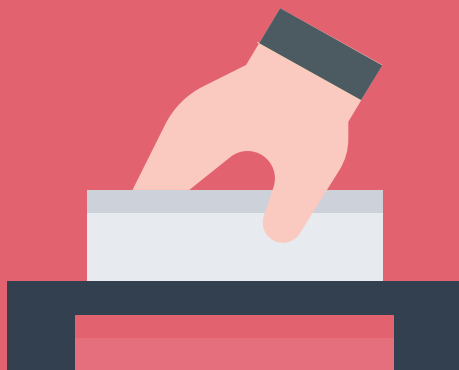
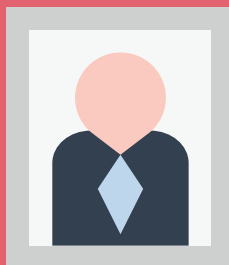
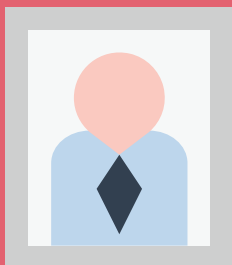
²⁶Ibid.

²⁷Ibid.

²⁸Ibid.

²⁹Taber, C.S. and Lodge, M. (2006) 'Motivated skepticism in the evaluation of political beliefs', *American Journal of Political Science*, 50(3), pp. 755-769. doi:10.1111/j.1540-5907.2006.00214.x.

³⁰Wood, T., 'The elusive backfire effect.'



Center for Digital Society

Fakultas Ilmu Sosial dan Ilmu Politik
Universitas Gadjah Mada
Gedung BC Lt. 2, Ruang BC 201-203
Jalan Socio Yustisia 1
Bulaksumur, Yogyakarta, 55281, Indonesia

Telepon: (0274) 563362, Ext. 116
Email: cfds.fisipol@ugm.ac.id
Situs Web: cfds.fisipol.ugm.ac.id