

Examining Algorithm Threats Concerning Political Campaigns in the Context of Indonesia's Presidential Election and How the Threats Shape New Realities

In the study of media and culture, the relationship between technology and culture has long been a topic of discussion. However, the currently growing computational laws, which are algorithms, pose threats to our society. This paper will argue that the buzzers of political campaigns on social media illustrate the dangers that algorithms bring. The article will use Indonesia's 2019 presidential election campaign to analyse the alteration of social realities due to the algorithm system. The significant attention from the media and the public and how it shapes political narratives can be seen from the big Indonesian media company covering the story and how extensive the discussion was on a social media platform, such as Twitter, making them a notable media event. Using the algorithmic culture concept can explain how media can become the foundation for shaping the world towards a better or a worse world. This paper focuses on the threats and becomes the basis for calls towards law and social changes.

Technology, specifically algorithms, has significantly shifted to become more advanced, where culture has played a significant role. Historically, social scientists and academics have dominated conversations about culture. But as technology has advanced and had different effects on every aspect of life, the people who create algorithms have come to dominate cultural conversation. Engineers have the technical expertise and knowledge to create the platforms, algorithms, and systems that define and influence culture. Their involvement in the conception and creation of these technologies impacts how people perceive, access, and interact with culture in the modern era. The phenomenon that is occurring is known as algorithmic culture. Algorithmic culture is a concept defined as "the use of computational processes to sort, classify, and hierarchise people, places, objects, and ideas, and also the habits of thought, conduct, and expression that arise in relationship to those processes (Striphas 2012 as cited in Hallinan and Striphas 2016). In simpler terms, this means algorithms, as one of the computational processes, are used to organise and prioritise different things. That is, to help people effectively understand specific information from the vast amount of information and data available in the digital realm. For instance, when we continuously engage with a particular type of content on social media, the content shown to us will be similar to the one we engaged with. In addition, the quote also suggests that algorithms have a broader impact on people's behaviour and thinking and do not just affect how information is organised. It is that way because of humans' interaction with the systems, and as the exchange goes on, humans start to adapt their habits of thought, conduct, and expression to fit into the structures created by the algorithms. When one posts on Instagram, for example, and realise that a certain kind of post is the one that gets the most attention on their page, it might change the way they post or express themselves to make it more recognisable and valuable by the algorithm systems, and that explains the claim of the algorithm may change one's habits.

In general, algorithmic culture proposes that media produce social reality by creating and spreading content that affects our perception of and understanding of the world. Media can prioritise and filter the information, news, and entertainment that people consume through the use of algorithms. The algorithms are made to analyse user interactions and activity to gather

and offer content tailored to the user's preferences and interests. As a result, the content people see, the news being fed to each person's timeline, and the opinions they encounter are filtered and influenced by algorithms.

On the one hand, it benefited users as they would not need to search for what they wanted to see but have it presented immediately. On the other hand, that system raises new problems of how algorithms not only that it changes individual preferences and impacts collective perceptions but also shape the trends, discussions, and narratives that dominate the online space, thereby shaping the broader social discourse. When that occurs, two options present themselves. One is that technology can support pre-existing ideas; the other is that it may produce echo chambers, filter bubbles, or amplify certain viewpoints while muting others. Echo chambers are an environment where information lacks diversity because of restricted information sources. In that environment, individuals are exposed exclusively to data from people who share the same or similar beliefs to their own beliefs (Bakshy et al. 2015:1130), confirming their pre-existing opinions (Shore et al. 2018:850) and excluding alternative points of view (Garret 2009:279). As for filter bubbles, Bakshy et al. (2015:1130) define that as where content selection is based on a user's past behaviours, resulting in the absence of content that challenges their existing beliefs. That means the algorithm may exacerbate people's confirmation bias as the system reduces information and confirm whatever the user believes. The fact that an algorithm may boost one viewpoint and bury the others also implies that there are injustices within the system. The content people consume through media platforms is not a mere reflection of the world but an active construction of reality. That selective exposure to information can shape people's beliefs, behaviours, and attitudes, ultimately contributing to the construction of a shared social reality.

As an example of that, Werner (2020) discusses how the music platform's algorithm creates playlists based on the user's past listening experience, which can potentially lead to gender bias. The reason is that if the algorithms are trained on data biased towards specific genres or artists, it can perpetuate inequalities and underrepresent certain musical styles of small artists. And suppose a particular genre is preferred by one gender and is recommended more often because of biased data. In that case, it can reinforce gender inequalities and create a filter bubble where the wide range of music styles for people to listen to is restricted.

By analysing the interactions between algorithms, digital platforms, and user behaviour, scholars have shown the importance of algorithmic culture in the study of media influence. There are some notable journal articles regarding that topic that provide insights into how algorithms shape people's values and behaviour because features on social media (Hallinan and Brubaker 2021), influence the making and interpreting of culture (Natale and Guzman 2022), may bring threats such as trauma (Pinchevski 2023), have stereotypes and biases, even in the context of a music platform (Werner 2020), and alters the culture that is understood and practised (Wood 2021). Following these studies, this paper will analyse how algorithms drive internet political campaigns in Indonesia and how that creates a new culture.

With 276.4 million people, Indonesia has the fourth-highest population in the world, and 60.4% of its citizens use social media regularly (Meltwater, 2023). In the recent decade, the term ‘buzzer’ became popular in Indonesia due to the buzzers for political campaigns. The term ‘buzzer’ is sometimes used interchangeably with ‘cyber troops’ which has the meaning of “government or political party actors tasked with manipulating public opinion online” (Bradshaw and Howard 2017 as cited in Bradshaw and Howard, 2019). ‘Buzzer’ is commonly understood by Indonesian as people who “spread online propaganda and disinformation and manipulate social media trends in order to influence public opinion and promote certain political candidates and discredit others” (Sastramidjaja 2022:3). Whether they are financially compensated, volunteers, bots, or whether non-anonymous users should also be included; has yet to be confirmed. Therefore, this paper will take a broad approach and include all of them.

Nearing Indonesia’s presidential election next year in 2024, public discussion regarding the following potential rulers and which candidate is best to choose can already be seen online. In the past, most people believed in mainstream media as they mostly took the public side (KOMINFO 2017). However, as mainstream media are deemed to not aware enough of the public’s aspirations and tend to side with the owner of the press (KOMINFO 2017), People’s distrust of mainstream news reports grew as the public began to rely more on social media as a source of information and for identifying “real” stories hidden beneath official ones. (Sastramidjaja 2022a:2). That is where the opportunity for buzzers comes in. Buzzers use technology to spread certain information, either supporting one party or dragging down another. A group of buzzers would engage in specific activities, including liking, sharing, retweeting, and commenting, to promote a particular political agenda by boosting its visibility and reach. For instance, in Indonesia’s 2019 presidential election, which had Joko Widodo and Prabowo Subianto as the candidates, both received hate speech, and disinformation and manipulated content were shared. Mr Widodo was accused of wearing an earpiece during an election debate so his staff could feed him answers, while his opponent General Prabowo was said to be cheating by wearing smart glasses (Barker, 2019). Starting with a group of buzzers, the disinformation spread to many more people by utilising the algorithm system on social media that trended content with much engagement and thus drove public discussions and opinions. As a result, online discussions are skewed to give the impression of a majority view and quieten those who disagree with the popular opinion.

This event illustrates the idea of algorithmic culture in that political campaigns on the internet, specifically social media, make use of how the algorithm functions to draw the public into echo chambers where the discussions become more divisive and may affect the public’s behaviour and, in this case, the election’s outcome. Meaning that algorithms do pose risks and have the potential to alter the way humans think and behave.

By examining the case study and the definition provided in the first few paragraphs, the representation of algorithmic culture becomes evident because the existence of buzzers artificially inflating the visibility and reach of a specific message, skewing the popularity of topics by making use of the algorithm proves the threats that algorithm brings. It distorts public discourse and “effectively drowned out oppositional discourses on social media and neutralised

dissent, especially as mainstream media simultaneously echoes the cyber troops' narratives" (Sastramidjaja 2022b), posing threats to justice. That is when people got into the echo chambers, strengthening polarisation through filter bubbles, and creating a fragmented reality. Secondly, the use of algorithms by buzzers to boost the agenda they have can contribute to the amplification of existing biases and inequalities. They may target certain demographics, such as young people and individuals with low incomes, who are more prone to misinformation (Knuutila et al. 2022). Lastly, algorithms also may restrict individuals' freedom in that the system may drown out diverse voices and create an environment where individuals may be hesitant to express their voices, undermining freedom of speech.

Therefore, the potential for the algorithm to foster injustice, inequality, and undercut freedom—specifically in this paper, freedom of speech in the context of political discourse—as well as the fact that what happened in 2019 is currently happening as the presidential election of 2024 approaches—show how significant a media event this presidential election itself and the online campaigns that changed what and how the general public discussed the topic are. The distinction is not particularly detrimental. However, the risks associated with how buzzers use the algorithmic system are worth noting. Therefore, it is essential for individuals to understand the digital environment, take advantage of its potential to promote positive social change and protect the public's values of democracy.

The concept of algorithmic culture provides a valuable framework for understanding the intricate relationship between media, technology, and society. Using buzzers in political campaigns exemplifies how algorithmic manipulations can threaten justice, equality, and freedom by distorting public discourse and amplifying biases. This, in turn, contributes to the emergence of a new social reality characterised by filter bubbles, transparency, accountability, and media literacy while advocating for the ethical and regulated use of algorithms. By critically engaging with algorithmic culture, humans can navigate the algorithm system better in online digital media and push the potential for the positive changes that the algorithm may bring.

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