

Media Literacy as a Strategy to Counter Political Hoaxes in the Digital Public Space

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Abstract. The spread of political hoaxes in the digital public sphere has increased sharply in the lead-up to elections and threatens democratic stability. Downstream regulatory-punitive and technical approaches are deemed insufficient without critical awareness among social media users. This study aims to analyze the effectiveness of media literacy as a primary upstream strategy in countering the spread of political hoaxes in the digital public sphere. Using a library research approach, data was collected through a comprehensive search of scientific documents, regulations, and official reports related to political disinformation. The results show that critical media literacy has successfully shifted the role of netizens from passive consumers to independent gatekeepers. Critical thinking skills, mastery of lateral verification methodologies, and awareness of platform algorithm architecture have proven effective in reducing confirmation bias and stopping the spread of false information in echo chambers. In conclusion, media literacy is an essential long-term preventative strategy for building cybercultural immunity within society. A multi-sectoral collaboration model between the government, educational institutions, and digital platforms is needed to create a healthy, rational, and dignified digital ecosystem.

Keywords: *Media Literacy, Political Hoaxes, Digital Public Sphere, Critical Thinking.*

A. INTRODUCTION

The exponential development of information and communication technology over the past two decades has shifted the sociological boundaries of human interaction, marked by the transformation of conventional public spaces into the digital public sphere. Social media and virtual communication platforms are no longer merely communication tools but have become new epicenters for political articulation, interest aggregation, and civic discourse (Susanto, 2017; Suratno et al., 2020). On the one hand, this transition has given rise to an inclusive democratization of information, where every individual has agency and equal access to voice their aspirations without hierarchical barriers. However, on the other hand, this digital landscape, characterized by decentralization and the absence of conventional curation, has also opened a Pandora's Box that threatens the stability of the social order, given that the public sphere, originally idealized as an arena for rational deliberation, is now vulnerable to distortion by various manipulative interests (Charles & Fuentes-Rohwer, 2025; Freelon & Wells, 2020).

In modern political contestation, the digital public sphere often experiences commodification and radical instrumentalization to gain or maintain power. Entering the post-truth era, the objective line between empirical fact and subjective opinion has become increasingly blurred, with personal beliefs and emotional appeals becoming more dominant in influencing public opinion than factual truth (Zheng, 2024; Verstyn, 2024). Information is no longer produced purely to educate citizens, but rather is strategically designed as an instrument of political propaganda to sway mass opinion. This phenomenon is exacerbated by the emergence of a content fabrication industry that exploits group sentiment, transforming the digital information landscape

into a labyrinth of distortions that obscure objective reality for sectarian electoral interests (Al Fatih et al., 2024).

Political hoaxes are not simply a phenomenon of accidental misinformation, but rather a form of disinformation and misinformation structured to undermine the credibility of opponents, delegitimize election-organizing institutions, and trigger horizontal polarization within society (Juditha, 2024). When public lies are continuously mass-produced, social trust, the primary foundation of national integration, will slowly erode, which in turn can trigger social conflict, mass political skepticism, and the decay of democracy itself (Nurhaipah & Ramallah, 2024).

The spread of political hoaxes in cyberspace is characterized by unprecedented speed and reach, driven by the architecture of social media technology driven by commercial algorithms. Modern digital platforms are designed to maximize user engagement by prioritizing content that triggers strong emotions, such as anger, fear, and hatred (Rachmad, 2024). This creates the phenomenon of echo chambers and filter bubbles, where users are fed only uniform information that tends to validate their pre-existing cognitive biases. As a result, a political hoax narrative can be replicated millions of times and spread virally in seconds, preempting and drowning out attempts at factual clarification by authorities (Tahir et al., 2020).

In response to these threats, the government and relevant authorities generally rely on a regulatory-punitive approach through legal instruments, as well as technocratic measures such as website blocking and content removal. While these law enforcement measures are crucial for providing a deterrent effect, this downstream approach is considered ineffective and unsustainable in curbing the dynamic and decentralized nature of hoax production (Anjani, 2024). Overly aggressive law enforcement in the digital space even risks violating the right to freedom of expression and triggering excessive fear among the public. Therefore, the limitations of this repressive and technical approach underscore the need for a paradigm shift toward an upstream strategy that emphasizes community cognitive empowerment (Van Brakel, 2020).

In this context, media literacy finds its theoretical and practical urgency as the most essential long-term preventative strategy in the digital ecosystem. The urgency of media literacy should no longer be reduced to merely instrumental technical skills in operating digital devices or reading text on a computer screen (Sari et al., 2021). More deeply, media literacy is an emancipatory competency that encompasses the critical ability to consciously access, analyze, evaluate, and produce media messages. This concept positions digital citizens not as passive consumers vulnerable to manipulation by the flow of information, but as active actors with the independent cognitive capacity to filter and deconstruct every political narrative they receive (Taryadi & Yunianto, 2022).

The most fundamental aspect of the media literacy movement is cultivating a culture of critical thinking and healthy skepticism at the individual level before distributing information content. Mature media literacy skills train individuals to be able to identify authorial bias, verify the validity of data sources, distinguish between facts and propaganda, and recognize logical fallacies deliberately inserted in political hoax narratives (Sabrina, 2018). By internalizing the principle of "think before sharing," society will collectively develop cyber immunity, automatically breaking the chain of transmission of false information. This critical awareness ultimately becomes the most effective psychological defense against the emotional manipulation strategies commonly employed by hoax producers (Van Brakel, 2020).

Departing from the complexity of this problem, this research focuses on a comprehensive analysis of the effectiveness of media literacy as an upstream strategy in countering political

hoaxes in the digital public sphere. The novelty of this study lies in its formulation of a media literacy model that adapts to the psychosocial characteristics of Indonesian netizens and the dynamics of contemporary social media algorithm architecture. Through an in-depth analytical approach, this research is expected to provide theoretical contributions to the development of digital political communication studies, while also providing applicable policy recommendations for the government, educational institutions, and civil society to realize a healthy, rational, and dignified digital ecosystem.

B. METHOD

This study uses a qualitative approach with a library research design to in-depth examine the effectiveness of media literacy in countering political hoaxes. This method was chosen because the study focuses on the conceptual and theoretical levels, as well as critical analysis of written documents relevant to the phenomenon of disinformation in the digital public sphere. The data sources in this study are entirely secondary, obtained through a comprehensive search of scientific literature. The library data includes reputable journal articles (national and international), political communication textbooks, legal regulations related to cyberspace, and official reports from independent hoax monitoring institutions and relevant ministries (Anggito & Setiawan, 2018). Data collection techniques were carried out through a documentation method by applying a specific keyword-based search strategy in digital scientific databases. The collected data were then rigorously filtered through source criticism (external and internal) to ensure authenticity, credibility, and relevance to the research topic. The data, then, synthesizes by comparing, contrasting, and integrating various media literacy theories with the latest political hoax trend data, thus producing a new insight, relevant strategy and conceptualization.

C. RESULT AND DISCUSSION

1. Trends, Characteristics, and Typology of Political Hoax Proliferation in the Digital Public Sphere

Analysis of literature data shows that the dynamics of political communication in Indonesia have undergone a structural shift along with the massive penetration of the internet and the adoption of social media (Hafel, 2023). Initially projected as a catalyst for the democratization of information, the digital public sphere has instead transformed into a fertile ground for the growth of information disorder. Based on a compilation of reports from various disinformation monitoring institutions, the trend in the spread of political hoaxes shows an exponential increase each election cycle (Hui, 2020). This phenomenon is no longer simply a seasonal communication anomaly, but has become a planned political strategy deeply embedded in the digital culture of contemporary society.

Quantitatively, data from the Ministry of Communication and Digital and fact-checking communities such as Mafindo confirm a significant spike in the volume of hoaxes leading up to election years (Gushevinalti et al., 2024). This pattern suggests that the digital public sphere is deliberately flooded with false information to divert public focus from the substance of candidates' visions and missions to artificial and provocative narratives. This increase in volume did not occur organically, but rather was driven by the high demand in the political market for content that could quickly undermine the credibility of political opponents (Okthariza, 2024). As a result, the flow of healthy information is being drowned out by millions of pieces of digital junk mass-produced daily.

Examining the typology of information disruption, scientific literature confirms that political hoaxes in Indonesia are dominated by disinformation and misinformation. Political disinformation is intentionally created with content that is completely manipulated or fabricated for the purpose of harming certain political actors. Meanwhile, misinformation operates in a grayer area, where real facts or events from the past are deliberately reclaimed and twisted out of their original context to attack opponents. The combination of these two forms creates acute information disorientation among netizens, making it extremely difficult for the general public to distinguish between empirical reality and narrative fabrication (Masduki, 2021; Dewi et al., 2023).

The dominant characteristics of contemporary political hoaxes are their high level of technical sophistication and the use of visual manipulation. Literature studies show a shift from purely text-based hoaxes, such as WhatsApp chain messages, to multimedia hoaxes that combine video clips, fake infographics, and provocative satirical memes. These manipulations often employ sophisticated editing techniques to partially truncate statements by public figures, resulting in a meaning that contradicts the original statement (Mutmainnah et al., 2024). This engaging visual packaging is deliberately chosen because digital audiences tend to trust visual stimuli more readily than lengthy narrative text.

Recent developments in artificial intelligence technology have also given rise to a new threat in the form of the use of deepfakes in political hoaxes. Through AI-based audio and video synthesis, disinformation actors are now able to fake the faces and voices of national political figures to fabricate controversial speeches or statements that never occurred. This characteristic of AI-based hoaxes poses a far more damaging level of danger due to its ability to directly deceive human senses. The presence of this technology radically lowers the standards for verifying truth in cyberspace, creating a situation where the public can easily doubt the authenticity of videos and believe fake ones (Bontcheva et al., 2024).

From a narrative perspective, political hoaxes in Indonesia consistently exploit sensitive issues related to ethnicity, religion, race, and intergroup relations (SARA). Identity politics is used as the primary ingredient in hoax creation due to its ability to instantly evoke deep emotions such as anger, fear, and collective hatred. Hoax narratives are often designed to pit religious or ethnic groups against each other by spreading false rumors about existential threats from one group to another (Kuntarto & Chamadi, 2021). This emotional exploitation is deliberately carried out to disable netizens' cognitive logic functions, so they act impulsively without verifying information.

In addition to targeting candidates' personal figures, the trend of political hoaxes is also systematically directed at delegitimizing democratic institutions and processes themselves. The literature notes the rise of hoaxes attacking the credibility of election-managing bodies (such as the General Elections Commission (KPU) and the Elections Supervisory Agency (Bawaslu) through rumors of voter data manipulation, fraud in digital vote counting systems, and accusations of bias by security forces (Khalyubi & Perdana, 2021). The characteristics of this type of hoax are not merely aimed at winning one candidate over another; they have a more fundamentally destructive effect: undermining public trust in the democratic system, which, at its most extreme, can trigger mass rejection of formal election results.

The accelerated proliferation of political hoaxes is inextricably linked to the technological architecture of social media platforms, which employ surveillance capitalism algorithms. Platforms like TikTok, Instagram, Facebook, and X rely on user engagement metrics to maximize their advertising revenue. Platform algorithms automatically promote and circulate content that generates high engagement, regardless of whether the content is valid or false. This algorithmic

characteristic, which prioritizes sensationalism over accuracy, is the primary driver behind political hoaxes' ability to spread virally and organically within minutes (Metzler & Garcia, 2024).

Lin & Tsai (2022) stated that the direct impact of this algorithmic architecture is the formation of echo chambers and filter bubbles among netizens. Social media users are consistently fed only information and opinions that align with their own political preferences, while dissenting alternative views are filtered and omitted from their timelines. Within these echo chambers, political hoaxes that benefit one's own group or harm the opposing group are accepted as absolute truth without any internal correction mechanism. This cognitive polarization exacerbates group political fanaticism and stifles the possibility of healthy and deliberative public discussion.

Literature research also reveals that the circulation of political hoaxes in the digital public sphere is not simply the whims of amateur netizens, but is driven by an organized public opinion industry (Caled & Silva, 2022). The emergence of political buzzers, paid content creators, and professionally managed networks of bot accounts is evidence of the structured mobilization of disinformation. These digital actors work under political contracts to condition public opinion in cyberspace through simultaneous hoax amplification techniques, making these fabricated opinions appear to be the genuine aspirations of the wider public (astroturfing) (García-Orosa, 2021).

Besides open social media, instant messaging apps like WhatsApp play a crucial role as the primary channel for the spread of political hoaxes in the private digital space. The end-to-end encryption of private messaging apps creates a "dark social" that cannot be monitored by public authorities or fact-checking algorithms. In this private space, political hoaxes spread in a chain from one family group or sociological community to another. The high level of trust among WhatsApp group members means that false information shared by close friends tends to be accepted without the slightest suspicion (Setyawan, 2020).

Psychosocially, intense and continuous exposure to political hoaxes has a detrimental effect on society's collective critical thinking capacity. When netizens are bombarded with hundreds of pieces of disinformation daily, they experience cognitive fatigue. This fatigue encourages individuals to take mental shortcuts (cognitive heuristics) in processing information, believing only information that aligns with their current emotions. At the macro level, this results in a cynical society, apathetic toward substantive politics, and easily ignited by trivial digital provocations (Dancey, 2012).

A review of sociological literature indicates differences in demographic susceptibility to political hoaxes. Contrary to the common assumption that digitally savvy younger generations are immune to hoaxes, data actually shows that the ability to recognize political disinformation is not directly related to technical skills. Older age groups are often vulnerable to hoaxes due to their lack of digital culture, while younger generations are vulnerable to spreading hoaxes due to the impulsive urge to share viral content to gain social recognition in their communities, without considering the impact of the content's veracity (Martínez-Costa et al., 2023).

The nature of this political hoax siege is exacerbated by structural barriers to mitigation efforts undertaken thus far. The debunking approach or the creation of fact-checking articles employed by trusted media outlets often lags behind the speed of the original hoax's spread. Fact-checking articles tend to be written in formal and lengthy language, making them less appealing to netizens accustomed to consuming short, instant, and entertaining content in their digital public spaces (Rúas-Araújo et al., 2020).

Positive legal approaches, such as imposing criminal sanctions through the Electronic Information and Transactions Law (UU ITE), also face a dead end in addressing the root causes of

disinformation. Legal mitigation is reactive, with action only taken after the damaging social impact of political hoaxes has already spread widely. Furthermore, misdirected law enforcement often gives rise to new controversies regarding restrictions on citizens' freedom of expression, which in turn undermines the fundamental democratic values that hoaxes are intended to protect (Ghofur, 2024).

2. Deconstructing the Media Literacy Model as an Upstream Strategy and Netizen's Cognitive Fortress

Facing the complexities of the spread of entrenched disinformation, the paradigm for handling hoaxes must shift from a repressive downstream approach to an emancipatory upstream approach. Literature review confirms that media literacy is no longer merely a supplementary program, but rather a primary defense instrument in maintaining society's cognitive sovereignty in the digital age. As an upstream strategy, media literacy operates in the preventive realm by targeting users' critical awareness before they interact with distorted political messages. This approach fundamentally seeks to cut off the audience's supply of information that is easily manipulated by the cyber hoax fabrication industry.

In Potter's theoretical context, the media literacy needed to counter political hoaxes transcends the boundaries of instrumental technical skills (functional literacy). The public should not simply be trained on how to operate devices or filter trends but should be encouraged to attain a level of critical media literacy. This critical competency involves high-level cognitive abilities to deconstruct media texts, analyze media ownership structures, and understand the hidden political-economic motives behind information. With this understanding, netizens no longer view digital information as a neutral reflection of reality, but rather as a social construct fraught with vested interests (Karanfiloğlu & Sağlam, 2023).

One practical pillar of the critical media literacy model is each individual's mastery of self-verification methodology. Media literacy equips netizens with the skills of lateral reading, the habit of verifying the veracity of a claim by opening a new tab and checking the source's reputation from various authoritative perspectives, rather than solely focusing on the original site. Technical-analytical skills, such as tracing the authenticity of an image through a reverse image search or verifying video metadata, are essential competencies that society must possess (Aprin et al., 2022). Internalizing these habits gradually undermines the effectiveness of clickbait tactics commonly used by hoax producers.

The nature of political hoaxes, which always exploit audience emotions, requires media literacy to address the psychological management aspects of netizens. The cognitive maturity taught in media literacy trains individuals to recognize their own emotional reactions when receiving bombastic news or news that aligns with personal political biases. Netizens are taught to take a cognitive pause—a moment of rational reflection before deciding to believe or share content. The ability to control these impulsive urges is key to curbing the spread of manipulative content deliberately designed to incite public anger or fear.

Sociologically, media literacy serves as a tool to deconstruct the echo chamber phenomenon that confines netizens to a uniform falsehood. Through structured education, media users are taught to be aware of the platform algorithms that actively shape their information preferences. Awareness of the filter bubble encourages people to deliberately seek alternative perspectives outside their own political circles to gain an objective and balanced understanding.

This step effectively breaks the cognitive isolation that has exacerbated political polarization in the digital public sphere (Bleyer-Simon et al., 2024).

For this upstream strategy to have a massive and sustainable impact, media literacy must be structurally integrated into the formal education curriculum, from elementary school through university. Documentation studies indicate that sporadic approaches such as one-day seminars or workshops are insufficient to foster a robust literacy culture. Educational institutions must position digital literacy not as a rigid information technology subject, but as a cross-disciplinary critical thinking competency. Through these formal channels, the younger generation, who demographically dominate cyberspace, can grow into critical, ethical digital citizens with strong cyber-immunity.

Beyond formal channels, the media literacy movement relies heavily on civil society agencies and non-governmental organizations as driving forces at the grassroots level. Volunteer fact-checking communities play a strategic role in bridging the gap in access to education for groups excluded from the formal education system, such as the elderly or those in suburban areas. Community-based educational approaches, using simple language, and leveraging local wisdom have proven more effective in fostering collective awareness to reject political hoaxes than formalistic, bureaucratic campaigns.

The success of media literacy as a long-term countermeasure strategy requires a multi-sectoral collaboration model involving government, academics, civil society, and social media platform providers. The government, through its regulatory function, must support funding and facilitate literacy infrastructure, while academics contribute to the development of adaptive literacy index modules and measurement tools. Meanwhile, technology platforms are required to provide algorithmic transparency and contextual features that make it easier for users to identify the veracity of content, thereby supporting a cohesive cyber education ecosystem (Edwards et al., 2023).

A comprehensive conceptualization of media literacy essentially leads to the establishment of a digital citizenship ethic. This ethic emphasizes that every activity in cyberspace, including pressing the share button has real social and legal consequences for the life of the nation. Media literacy fosters a sense of social responsibility in netizens, preventing them from becoming agents of hatred or falsehood (Salleh et al., 2023). Once this ethical awareness has crystallized, the digital public sphere will no longer be viewed as a no-man's land free from morality, but rather as a shared space whose discourse quality must be maintained.

In the long term, consistently cultivating media literacy will foster what is known as cultural immunity against the onslaught of political disinformation. This immunity works similarly to the body's immune system, where people are automatically able to recognize, ignore, and isolate political hoax narratives that attempt to infiltrate their discussions. With this cultural immunity, social and political stability in the lead-up to elections can be maintained, as provocations based on identity politics or digital slander will no longer find a place in public cognition.

While the media literacy model offers a promising upstream solution, literature studies do not deny the existence of significant structural barriers to its implementation in Indonesia. One of the biggest challenges is the wide digital disparity, both in terms of technological infrastructure and the quality of general literacy across regions. Communities in remote areas that have recently gained internet access are often easy targets for political hoaxes because they lack adequate digital cultural understanding (Akbar & Wijaya, 2023). This situation demands an equitable distribution

of literacy strategies to prevent imbalances in cyber immunity that can be exploited by certain political actors.

Another challenge that needs to be anticipated is the dynamic nature of digital technology and the modus operandi of hoax producers. The media literacy model taught today could become obsolete in the future as AI-driven disinformation technology becomes more sophisticated (Sarkar, 2024). Therefore, the media literacy curriculum and strategies must be periodically evaluated and adaptive. Strengthening this cognitive adaptability aspect is crucial so that the public is not only prepared to face conventional hoaxes but also ready to detect information manipulation using future technology.

Ultimately, optimizing media literacy as an upstream strategy is truly a collective effort to reconstruct the digital public sphere to approach Habermas's ideal model of a deliberative public sphere. Through media-literate netizens, the digital public sphere can be restored to its function as a forum for the exchange of rational, objective ideas oriented toward the common good. When logical arguments overcome emotional false narratives, the public policymaking process and political contestation can proceed within the corridors of a healthy and dignified democracy.

D. CONCLUSION

The proliferation of political hoaxes in Indonesia's digital public sphere is no longer a mere communication anomaly, but rather a structured, systemic threat that exploits emotional sensitivities and identity polarization for sectarian electoral gain. The limitations of downstream approaches that are regulative-punitive and reactive demand a radical paradigm shift toward upstream strategies that focus on strengthening the cognitive agency of media users. In this context, critical media literacy is deconstructed not merely as instrumental technical skills, but as emancipatory competencies and psychological defenses for netizens. Through internalizing a culture of critical thinking, mastering self-verification methodologies, and being aware of the architecture of echo chamber algorithms, society can collectively build a cybercultural immunity capable of independently breaking the chain of disinformation transmission and reconstructing a healthy and deliberative digital public sphere.

Based on these findings, the sustainability of this upstream strategy requires integrated commitment and collaborative action from various stakeholder sectors. Practically, the government and educational institutions must immediately adopt a critical media literacy model into the formal, cross-disciplinary curriculum, while civil society communities need to expand the reach of inclusive education at the grassroots level to reduce digital disparities. On the other hand, technology platform providers are required to optimize algorithm transparency and provide adaptive disinformation detection features. For future academic development, researchers are advised to conduct empirical-experimental studies focused on formulating media literacy mitigation models in the face of escalating AI-driven disinformation, such as the deepfake phenomenon, which is projected to become a major commodity for future political manipulation.

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