

The Negative Effects of Political Buzzers on People's Communication Intelligence: A Case Study of the 2014–2024 Era in Indonesia

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Abstract:

This study investigates the adverse impact of political buzzers on communication intelligence within Indonesian society during the 2014–2024 period. Political buzzers, typically anonymous digital actors affiliated with political elites, have emerged as powerful manipulators of public discourse through disinformation, emotional provocation, and identity-based polarization. Utilizing a qualitative case study methodology, this research employs critical discourse analysis, document analysis, and semi-structured interviews to explore how sustained exposure to buzzer-driven content degrades critical thinking, discourages dialogical tolerance, and undermines the epistemic foundations necessary for democratic engagement. The findings demonstrate that buzzers deploy binary framing, fabricate consensus, and target dissenters with delegitimizing rhetoric, resulting in weakened public reasoning and increased cynicism. These effects are unevenly distributed across regions and demographics: while urban citizens exhibit media fatigue and withdrawal, rural populations remain more susceptible to disinformation. The study situates these dynamics within broader theoretical frameworks on communicative rationality and network propaganda, extending the discussion to include the cognitive and ethical dimensions of political discourse manipulation. This research contributes to interdisciplinary scholarship on digital politics and democratic resilience by foregrounding the concept of communication intelligence – an underexplored but essential faculty for informed participation in contemporary democracies. It concludes with a call for structural and cultural reforms, including the institutionalization of media literacy, platform regulation, the promotion of ethical digital norms, and the strengthening of civil society dialogue forums. These measures are imperative to counteract the corrosive influence of political buzzers and to restore a communication environment conducive to rational, ethical, and inclusive democratic deliberation.

Keywords:

Negative effects, Buzzer, Politic, Communication, Intelligence

I. Introduction

In the last decade, Indonesian political communication has experienced a dramatic transformation, driven by the proliferation of digital platforms and the increasing involvement of politically motivated actors known as political buzzers. These actors—often anonymous or semi-anonymous accounts operating across social media platforms—play a significant role in shaping public discourse by amplifying certain political narratives, discrediting dissent, and manipulating the flow of information to benefit particular political interests. This phenomenon has garnered extensive attention from scholars, civil society, and the public due to its potential to degrade the quality of democratic engagement and weaken the citizenry's communication intelligence.

Communication intelligence, in this context, refers to an individual's ability to process information critically, engage in constructive dialogue, and make informed decisions based on rational deliberation and ethical consideration. It encompasses critical thinking, media literacy, empathy, and the capacity to distinguish between facts and misinformation. The role of communication intelligence is essential in democratic societies, where informed public deliberation forms the bedrock of legitimate governance and political accountability.

The emergence of political buzzers in Indonesia, particularly between 2014 and 2024—a period marked by two presidential elections, increased political polarization, and the expansion of social media usage—has raised concerns about their deleterious effects on public reasoning. These actors often utilize manipulative communication strategies such as disinformation, character assassination, hate speech, and identity politics. The algorithmic nature of digital platforms tends to amplify such emotionally charged content, creating echo chambers and reinforcing biases. As a result, political buzzers have not only distorted the democratic process but also contributed to the erosion of civil discourse and public reasoning.

Numerous reports and studies have indicated that political buzzers are often affiliated with political elites, campaign teams, or even state apparatuses. Their operations are typically covert, coordinated, and funded, allowing them to operate with relative impunity. The most notable manifestations occurred during the 2014 and 2019 Indonesian presidential elections, where the competition between candidates escalated into digital warfare. Buzzers engaged in smear campaigns, spread fabricated news, and attacked critics of certain candidates or policies. Similar dynamics continued during the 2024 election cycle, despite increased public awareness and government regulation attempts.

This research aims to investigate the negative impacts of political buzzers on communication intelligence among Indonesian citizens over the 2014–2024 period. Specifically, it examines how exposure to politically motivated content by buzzers affects individuals' critical thinking, tolerance for differing views, ability to discern truth from misinformation, and participation in constructive public debate. Through a case study approach, this paper integrates discourse analysis, media studies, and socio-political perspectives to evaluate the mechanisms through which buzzers undermine democratic communication.

This study is significant for several reasons. First, it contributes to the growing body of interdisciplinary research that links digital communication behavior with democratic competencies. While existing literature has addressed the issue of fake news, digital polarization, and political manipulation, fewer studies have directly addressed the broader implications for communication intelligence—a crucial yet under-theorized aspect of political participation. Second, by focusing on the Indonesian context, the study highlights the unique sociopolitical dynamics of a post-authoritarian democracy navigating digital modernization, identity pluralism, and institutional fragility. Finally, it provides empirical evidence and theoretical insights to inform policy recommendations on media literacy, digital governance, and democratic strengthening.

In sum, this paper addresses an urgent and complex problem that lies at the intersection of technology, politics, and human cognition. Understanding the corrosive role of political buzzers is not merely about regulating speech on social media but about safeguarding the communicative rationality essential for democratic life. As Indonesia and other democracies face increasing challenges from digital manipulation, critical inquiry into the phenomenon of political buzzers is imperative.

II. Review of Literature

The proliferation of political buzzers within digital political ecosystems has sparked a growing body of literature, particularly within communication studies, political science, and media sociology. These actors are understood as strategic digital operatives—either individuals or coordinated networks—tasked with promoting specific political agendas through engineered online narratives. Their activity is characterized by rapid dissemination of information, use of aggressive rhetoric, and exploitation of digital affordances for visibility and virality (Lim, 2017; Nugroho & Siregar, 2020).

Research on political buzzers in Indonesia gained prominence following the 2014 and 2019 presidential elections, where several studies confirmed the existence of organized social media campaigns aimed at manipulating public opinion (Sastramidjaja & Hiariej, 2021). These buzzers, often funded by political parties or affiliated entities, employed techniques such as astroturfing, fake account generation, and disinformation propagation to shape the political landscape (Tapsell, 2020). Their presence signals not merely a new form of political campaigning but an emerging information regime that actively contests truth, trust, and democratic engagement.

In parallel, the concept of communication intelligence has been explored in education, cognitive psychology, and communication ethics, although rarely integrated with political discourse analysis. Communication intelligence can be broadly defined as the capacity to engage in meaningful, ethical, and critical communication in both interpersonal and public spheres (Habermas, 1984; Paul & Elder, 2006). It incorporates skills such as critical media literacy, reflective thinking, open-mindedness, and dialogical sensitivity—factors essential for healthy democratic participation.

Several studies suggest that exposure to manipulative digital content negatively affects these competencies. Pennycook and Rand (2019) show how repeated exposure to disinformation diminishes people's ability to differentiate between accurate and false claims. Similarly, Vosoughi, Roy, and Aral (2018) demonstrate that falsehoods spread more rapidly and widely than truthful information on social media, reinforcing affective polarization and epistemic fragmentation. These dynamics contribute to what Sunstein (2018) terms “epistemic closure,” where individuals become trapped in information bubbles that hinder critical thinking.

In the Indonesian context, media scholars have noted how political buzzers contribute to public confusion, moral disengagement, and the normalization of hate speech (Anam, 2019; Kurnia & Wulandari, 2022). Despite these insights, limited research has specifically analyzed how buzzers impact the communication intelligence of the broader public over a sustained period. Most existing studies focus on short-term political effects or campaign dynamics rather than long-term cognitive-communicative consequences.

This study positions itself within this emerging research gap by investigating the erosion of communicative rationality under the influence of political buzzers in Indonesia from 2014 to 2024. It seeks to build on the work of digital democracy theorists (Benkler, Faris, & Roberts, 2018) and Indonesian scholars, while extending the conversation into the realm of public cognition, ethical communication, and democratic literacy.

Thus, this literature review underscores the importance of interdisciplinary analysis—combining political communication, digital media studies, and theories of rational discourse—to fully understand the threat posed by political buzzers to the democratic communicative environment in Indonesia and beyond.

III. Research Method

This research adopts a qualitative case study design to explore the negative effects of political buzzers on people's communication intelligence in Indonesia during the period 2014–2024. The case study method is selected due to its strength in providing an in-depth and contextualized understanding of a complex socio-political phenomenon (Yin, 2018). By focusing on Indonesia as a bounded system, this study aims to investigate both the structural mechanisms and communicative consequences of political buzzer activity over time.

3.1 Research Approach

The study employs a qualitative exploratory-descriptive approach, emphasizing interpretation, contextual richness, and meaning-making processes (Creswell & Poth, 2018). This approach is well-suited for analyzing how political buzzers influence discourse, cognition, and communication behavior among the public. It integrates techniques from critical discourse analysis (CDA), media ethnography, and semi-structured interviews, offering a triangulated understanding of the phenomena under investigation.

3.2 Data Collection Methods

- a. Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA): CDA is used to examine social media content, particularly Twitter and Facebook posts generated by known political buzzer accounts between 2014 and 2024. Texts are selected based on keyword searches (e.g., “cebong,” “kampret,” “buzzerRp,” “oposisi radikal,” etc.) and verified against timelines of political events such as elections, policy debates, and public controversies. The analysis focuses on rhetorical strategies, linguistic patterns, framing devices, and the underlying ideologies conveyed in the discourse (Fairclough, 1995).
- b. Document Analysis: Archival data, including media reports, political campaign materials, governmental responses, and third-party digital forensics reports, are analyzed to trace the development of political buzzer networks and their influence on public discourse. Publicly available databases from watchdog organizations such as SAFEnet, Amnesty International Indonesia, and the Indonesian Anti-Slander Society (MAFINDO) are utilized to cross-check claims and incidents.
- c. Semi-Structured Interviews: A purposive sample of 20 participants is selected, comprising communication scholars, media literacy activists, digital media users, and former political campaign strategists. The interviews are conducted to elicit insights on public perception, behavioral impact, and cognitive changes resulting from prolonged exposure to buzzer activity. Interviews are transcribed, coded, and thematically analyzed using NVivo software to identify recurring patterns and divergences.

3.3 Sampling Strategy

This study applies purposive and theoretical sampling to ensure the selection of data sources that are most relevant to the research questions. Social media content is sampled across three election cycles (2014, 2019, 2024) and major political events. Interview participants are chosen based on their expertise, experience, or affectedness by political communication during this period. The sample reflects geographic diversity within Indonesia, with participants from Java, Sumatra, Kalimantan, and Eastern Indonesia.

3.4 Data Analysis Procedure

All data sources are subjected to a multi-phase analytical process:

1. Initial coding to identify dominant themes and strategies used by political buzzers.

2. Axial coding to connect themes to broader categories of communication intelligence (e.g., critical thinking, media discernment, dialogical tolerance).
3. Discourse mapping to reveal networks of influence and dissemination patterns.
4. Cross-case synthesis to compare the findings across different years and regional contexts.

3.5 Ethical Considerations

All interview participants are provided with informed consent forms, and their identities are anonymized to protect privacy. Social media data, while publicly accessible, is handled with sensitivity to avoid harm to individuals involved, especially where pseudonyms or fake identities are used. Ethical clearance is obtained from the Institutional Research Ethics Committee at Universitas Nasional.

3.6 Limitations

This study acknowledges limitations related to the evolving nature of digital platforms, the difficulty in conclusively identifying all political buzzers, and the subjectivity inherent in qualitative interpretation. However, through triangulation and reflexive rigor, these limitations are addressed to maintain validity and reliability.

IV. Results and Discussion

This chapter presents and interprets the findings obtained from critical discourse analysis, document analysis, and semi-structured interviews. The goal is to elucidate how political buzzers have contributed to the degradation of communication intelligence among Indonesian citizens across three electoral cycles—2014, 2019, and 2024—while also examining how this has affected public reasoning, media discernment, and the quality of democratic participation.

4.1 Discourse Patterns and Manipulative Strategies

The discourse analysis revealed five dominant communication strategies employed by political buzzers across the examined time frame:

1. Binary Framing and Identity Polarization: Political buzzers often framed issues in stark dichotomies such as "us vs. them," "pro-government vs. anti-nationalist," or "true Muslims vs. liberals." These framings were especially visible during presidential campaigns, when hashtags like #CebongVsKampret or #NKRIHargaMati became trending topics. This method exploited religious, ethnic, and ideological sentiments to foster antagonism, thereby eroding the public's ability to view complex issues with nuance and rational deliberation.
2. Disinformation and Emotional Triggers: Many posts included misleading or fabricated information about political figures, policies, and social issues. These messages were highly emotive, aiming to provoke fear, anger, or disgust. For example, during the 2019 election, buzzers circulated manipulated videos falsely showing candidates engaging in anti-Islamic behavior. The viral nature of these emotionally charged messages often bypassed critical scrutiny, leading to impulsive reactions and spreading misinformation rapidly.
3. Delegitimization of Critics: Journalists, academics, and activists who challenged dominant narratives were labeled as "kadrun," "komunis," or "asing-aseng." These derogatory terms were used to undermine the credibility of alternative voices and create social pressure against dissent. The prevalence of such strategies was found to significantly reduce the diversity of viewpoints accessible to the public and discourage reasoned debate.
4. Echo Chamber Formation via Hashtag Clustering: Political buzzers repeatedly used coordinated hashtags that resulted in algorithmic clustering on social media platforms, particularly Twitter and TikTok. This practice created digital echo chambers that amplified certain narratives while filtering out opposing ones. As a result, users were frequently exposed

to homogeneous viewpoints that reinforced existing beliefs—a process that weakens communication intelligence through selective exposure and confirmation bias.

5. **Astroturfing and Manufactured Consensus:** Buzzers frequently posed as grassroots citizens to simulate widespread public support for particular policies or candidates. By posting from thousands of cloned accounts, they manufactured a false sense of consensus. This simulation not only confused actual public sentiment but also disincentivized independent thought and authentic public engagement.

4.2 Public Cognitive and Behavioral Effects

Thematic analysis of the interview data revealed several key insights into the cognitive and behavioral impact of sustained exposure to buzzer discourse.

- a. **Reduced Critical Thinking:** Respondents reported increasing difficulty in distinguishing between factual reporting and partisan narratives, especially on platforms like Facebook, where buzzer activity was most intense. Many acknowledged that they often “scroll past” conflicting views due to fatigue or distrust, reflecting a cognitive shift toward disengagement and passivity.
- b. **Intolerance Toward Dissent:** Several interviewees, particularly among university students and young professionals, admitted to blocking or unfriending peers who held opposing political views. This trend of digital segregation undermines the foundational democratic principle of open dialogue and impairs the cultivation of empathic communication skills.
- c. **Erosion of Rational Discourse Norms:** Language used in online debates became increasingly informal, sarcastic, and aggressive. Respondents noted that even news commentary threads were dominated by ridicule and personal attacks rather than evidence-based arguments. This environment discouraged civil discourse and further diminished the expectation of intellectual rigor in public discussions.

4.3 Regional Variation and Temporal Dynamics

A comparative synthesis of data from urban and rural regions revealed interesting contrasts:

- a. **Urban Respondents (e.g., Jakarta, Surabaya):** Urban users tended to be more digitally literate and aware of the existence of political buzzers. However, their increased exposure also made them more cynical, adopting a generalized skepticism toward all media. While some became more cautious in sharing information, others withdrew altogether from political conversations to avoid conflict.
- b. **Rural Respondents (e.g., parts of Central Java, Kalimantan):** In contrast, rural users were less aware of the mechanisms of buzzer operations and more likely to believe sensational content. In several cases, disinformation led to offline conflict within communities, particularly during the election seasons. Traditional trust networks (e.g., religious leaders or local elites) played a major role in either mitigating or exacerbating the effects.

Temporally, the 2019 election marked a high point in buzzer activity, with a noticeable shift from crude attack campaigns in 2014 to more sophisticated meme-based content in 2024. By 2024, buzzers were increasingly using video-based platforms like TikTok and YouTube Shorts, which made content more accessible to younger demographics.

4.4 Comparison with Existing Theories and Literature

The findings corroborate previous research on digital manipulation and political communication. For instance, Vosoughi et al. (2018) identified that false news spreads faster than true news due to its novelty and emotional appeal—a pattern mirrored in the Indonesian context. Similarly, Pennycook and Rand (2019) found that repeated exposure to disinformation

leads to “truth illusory effects,” aligning with the observed decline in critical thinking reported by participants.

From a theoretical standpoint, the research supports Habermas’ (1984) claim that the colonization of the lifeworld by systemic forces—here, digital political machinery—erodes communicative rationality. Political buzzers, as agents of instrumental reason, undermine the public sphere by replacing argument with amplification, reason with repetition.

Moreover, Benkler et al. (2018) highlighted the role of “network propaganda” in weakening epistemic foundations of democracy. This study affirms their thesis within a Southeast Asian context, emphasizing how informal networks and digital patronage systems simulate legitimacy and create pseudo-public opinion.

However, this study extends the discourse by specifically linking these effects to communication intelligence, a concept that has been under-theorized in empirical political communication research. It adds a cognitive and ethical dimension to existing frameworks by showing that the damage is not only institutional or discursive, but also psychological and behavioral.

4.5 Broader Implications

The degradation of communication intelligence through buzzer activity has profound implications for democratic resilience:

- a. **Democratic Fatigue:** The constant exposure to manipulative discourse creates emotional burnout among citizens. Many respondents expressed feelings of helplessness, distrust, and alienation from the political process—hallmarks of democratic disengagement.
- b. **Manipulated Public Opinion:** When the majority of political discourse is shaped by actors with strategic intentions rather than genuine civic participation, the legitimacy of public opinion becomes questionable. This poses a serious challenge to representative democracy, which relies on informed and deliberative consent.
- c. **Ethical Decline in Digital Culture:** The normalization of ad hominem attacks, ridicule, and misrepresentation reshapes communicative norms. Younger users, in particular, may grow up equating political discourse with confrontation rather than cooperation, impeding the development of future civic-minded generations.
- d. **Policy and Educational Gaps:** The absence of comprehensive digital literacy programs in Indonesia exacerbates the problem. While some efforts have been made by NGOs and civil society, there is a lack of institutional policy that embeds critical media education in formal education systems.

4.6 Mitigation Strategies and Recommendations

Based on the findings, several strategies can be proposed to mitigate the adverse effects of political buzzers on communication intelligence:

- a. **Media Literacy Education:** Incorporate communication intelligence modules into school and university curricula, emphasizing critical analysis, ethical reasoning, and digital citizenship.
- b. **Platform Accountability:** Enforce transparency from social media platforms regarding political content, coordinated campaigns, and algorithmic bias. Encourage partnerships between local fact-checkers and global tech companies.
- c. **Public Awareness Campaigns:** Engage cultural influencers, religious figures, and community leaders in nationwide campaigns that promote respectful communication and critical information consumption.

- d. Legal and Policy Frameworks: The government should create independent bodies that monitor digital political behavior without infringing on free speech. Existing anti-hoax laws must be reformed to protect against misuse while enabling action against malicious coordination.
- e. Strengthening Civil Society: Support grassroots organizations and journalistic initiatives that promote participatory media, counter-narratives, and civic dialogue.

In summary, the findings of this study indicate that political buzzers have played a central role in degrading the communication intelligence of Indonesian society during the 2014–2024 era. By weaponizing language, exploiting affective triggers, and manipulating digital spaces, these actors have altered the nature of political engagement, public reasoning, and social cohesion. As the boundary between real and manipulated discourse becomes increasingly blurred, the ability of citizens to engage in democratic deliberation is critically threatened.

Addressing this challenge requires a multi-layered response that combines policy innovation, educational reform, ethical media practices, and public engagement. At stake is not only the quality of political discourse, but the very capacity of the public to think, speak, and act freely in a democratic society.

V. Conclusion

This study has explored the detrimental impact of political buzzers on the communication intelligence of Indonesian citizens during the period from 2014 to 2024. Through a triangulated methodology—critical discourse analysis, document analysis, and semi-structured interviews—the research has demonstrated how the sustained presence and strategic operations of political buzzers have undermined rational public discourse, eroded media discernment, and diminished the public’s capacity for critical thinking and ethical communication.

The findings reveal that political buzzers utilize manipulative strategies including binary framing, emotional disinformation, character assassination, and manufactured consensus. These tactics not only distort political realities but also create a hostile communicative environment that rewards emotional reactivity over reflective dialogue. The consequences are profound: citizens grow increasingly intolerant of dissent, withdraw from political conversations, and lose trust in both media and democratic processes.

The degradation of communication intelligence observed in this study is not an isolated phenomenon but a systemic threat that intersects with broader issues such as algorithmic amplification, digital literacy deficits, and political polarization. Particularly concerning is the normalization of uncivil communication norms, especially among younger demographics who are socialized into digital cultures where ad hominem attacks and misinformation are routine.

Importantly, the study also identifies regional disparities in awareness and susceptibility to buzzer manipulation. Urban populations, though more media literate, often respond with cynicism and disengagement, while rural populations may be more vulnerable to believing and spreading disinformation due to limited access to balanced information. The temporal analysis further shows that buzzer strategies have evolved to become more sophisticated, platform-specific, and demographically targeted over time.

In sum, political buzzers represent a new form of political agency that disrupts the conditions necessary for communicative rationality—a cornerstone of deliberative democracy.

Their unchecked proliferation poses a serious risk to civic cohesion, informed political participation, and the long-term resilience of democratic life in Indonesia.

To address the deterioration of communication intelligence caused by the rise of political buzzers, this study recommends a series of coordinated efforts that target both structural reform and cultural transformation. A crucial first step involves embedding media and communication literacy into the national education system at all levels. Such curricula should train students to critically evaluate sources, develop ethical reasoning skills, and practice dialogical engagement. Universities, in particular, can offer specialized modules on the sociopolitical dimensions of digital discourse, enabling future generations to recognize manipulative communication strategies and participate more thoughtfully in democratic life.

Beyond educational reform, institutional regulations are needed to govern the digital political landscape. Government bodies, in collaboration with civil society and independent regulators, should enact transparent policies for political campaigns on digital platforms. These must include the disclosure of paid political endorsements, penalties for disinformation campaigns, and oversight of platform algorithms that shape public discourse. At the same time, fostering an ethical digital culture is imperative. Influencers, media figures, and public intellectuals should champion respectful and evidence-based discourse, setting standards of accountability and reinforcing norms of civil engagement. This cultural shift would help normalize rational, empathetic, and inclusive communication practices, counterbalancing the antagonism amplified by buzzer activity.

Complementary to these efforts is the urgent need to strengthen fact-checking institutions and create inclusive forums for civic dialogue. Independent fact-checking initiatives should be well-resourced and supported through cross-sector collaborations to counter misinformation swiftly and reliably. Meanwhile, the promotion of local and national dialogue spaces—both online and offline—can facilitate empathy, critical listening, and democratic participation. Collectively, these recommendations provide a roadmap for rebuilding a communication environment where intelligence, integrity, and inclusivity become the foundation of Indonesia's democratic resilience.

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