When Lying Becomes an Ordinary Thing:
Communication Ethics in the Post-Truth Era

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Abstract

In Indonesia, the post-truth phenomenon is usually seen more often as a literacy or legal problem. In fact, when understood as new forms of political dishonesty, post-truth must be seen as an ethical problem. This study examines the post-truth phenomenon that takes place in the political reality in Indonesia using communication ethic. The study uses two methods, rhetorical analysis to analysis of Hoax spread on social media and participatory observations in WhatsApp groups. This study found that post-truth basically occurs because of the low ethics of media users in producing, consuming, and sharing social media content. They intentionally created “dishonest facts” in order to achieve their own goals. People involved in post-truth are very ideological and lack social sensitivity. They only care about the narratives they want to build and receive. So, the truth becomes less important. This research suggests that political communication in the post-truth era must be based on the ethics of communication in order to build a strong and stable democracy, and people who use social media must consider the ethics of communication.

Keywords:
post-truth, etika komunikasi, media sosial, politik, pemilihan umum
post-truth, communication ethic, social media, politics, election

INTRODUCTION

Oxford Dictionaries has awarded post-truth as ‘word of the year’ 2016. As an adjective, post-truth has reached the buzzword status for a very good reason (Gibson, 2018; Horsthemke, 2017). Oxford Dictionaries defines the term as "relating to or denoting circumstances, in which objective facts are less influential in shaping public opinion than appeals to emotion and personal belief". In post-truth, as said by Laybats and Tredinick (2016) (Gunawan & Ratmono, 2018), truth is replaced by narrative without evidence, accentuates emotionality, and is often based on fear and worry. Post-truth is also characterized by a loss of trust in the authority of truth both in the authority possessed by experts (Nichols, 2019), or the government (Tapsel, 2017).
Hoaxes is “a biological child” of post-truth (Kapolkas, 2019). Therefore, the post-truth marked by the spread of Hoax, and no longer the monopoly of a particular social entity. Nevertheless, hoaxes are not a completely new phenomenon. If only hoaxes were defined as misinformation, disinformation, and malinformation (Unesco, 2018), such phenomenon has been going on for long. Kellner (Kellner, 1992), for example, has been shown that US television involved in an information misdirection project conducted by the White House during the Gulf War. Comparing to this age, the difference of post-truth lies in the extent and actors involved. Thus, it must be recognized that the phenomenon of post-truth is not typically the era of social media, but rather its characteristics making the post-truth develop more widely than the era of conventional media. As Day point out (Day, 2003), cyberspace is different from conventional media distribution systems because cyberspace has no control and ownership center. New media users are active and relatively autonomous individuals that can produce and receive messages as well. Within this situation, hoaxes are no longer the monopoly of groups of people, elites or the mass media, but for everyone, every group, and the institution as well. In this case, Nichols said (Nichols, 2019), “Social media, websites and chat rooms turn myths, confusing stories, and rumors into “facts”. The question then emerges how can the internet and social media could sustain the massive and almost uncontrolled post-truth distribution and hoax?

The new media gives individuals the space of freedom to produce texts, and disseminates them for self-formulated goals where the boundaries between audiences and message producers are no longer clear (Kapolkas, 2019; Sudibyo, 2019; Lester, Dovey, Giddings, Grant, & Kelly, 2009). The problem is, as Nichols points out in The Death of Expertise (Indonesian edition published 2019), “freedom to share ideas is a powerful driver of democracy, but carries the risk that ignorant or evil people will abuse mass communication devices for their own interests, and spread lies and myths that cannot be dispelled by any expert.” (Nichols, 2019). Post-truths characterized by deceptive political behavior have the freedom to pursue their political goals and agendas. They do not care that what they have done destroys democratic public space (Gibson, 2018; Horsthemke, 2017). This can be seen clearly in the United States elections in 2016 and Brexit (UK) during the 2016 referendum.

The use of the term post-truth is divided into two groups (Gibson, 2018). First, groups that use a more narrow approach where post-truth is understood as modifiers to describe rhetorical strategies that sell fraud, misinformation and emotion. In this first group, post-truth is seen as a lack of political ethics of politicians who pollute public space with disinformation and emotional appeal. This understanding is closer to the old term in the world of politics, propaganda. Therefore, the offer given by this group is also not much different from that offered by scientists of the 20th century, namely the education of citizens to face misinformation. The second group sees post-truth as a broader phenomenon. Scholars in this group understand post-truth as a “broader shift toward a new political epistemological landscape - an environment where it becomes increasingly difficult for all citizens to separate truth from error, thus enabling the most predatory and deceptive forms of political persuasion” (Gibson, 2018).

This research adopts the first idea by placing the view that post-truth arises as a result of the lack of political ethics and communication between politicians and social media users. Politicians contribute to post-truth because lies are as common as the Donald Trump Campaign in 2016. Lying is an unethical act. Lying violates universal moral values.

As a political discourse in the 21st century, post-truth has become a lot of social research. Gibson (Gibson, 2018), for example, examines post-truth in the context of political debate. Horsthemke (Horsthemke, 2017) examines post-truths associated with educational challenges. Other scholars such as Lewandowsky et al (Lewandowsky et al., 2017), study post-truth as a current phenomenon, and relate it to its social impacts on society. Audiences are also a concern for many social scientists in studies related to the theme (Ilahi, 2019; Leeder, 2019; Park & Rim, 2019). There are also scholars who conduct post-truth studies by relating it to religion or religiosity (Lee, 2018). Political post-truth in Indonesia was elaborated by some researchers (Ilahi, 2019; Jatmiko, 2019; Ulya, 2018; Utami, 2019). Jatmiko’s study (Jatmiko, 2019), for example, concluded that political post-truth in the presidential election in Indonesia created a particularity of narratives that allowed lies to arise. It was also facilitated by the presence of new media. Utami (Utami, 2019) conducted a study of political Hoax in the Jakarta regional elections, which emphasized hoax as a mimetic practice. Studies conducted by Ilahi (Ilahi, 2019) on women related to child abduction hoax concluded that many women check the information only through peripheral lines. Despite of their strong motivation, many women do not make enough efforts to verify the diversity of information.

In contrast to studies mentioned above, this study examines post-truth with perspective of an ethical communication. This is a continuation of my previous study (Rianto, 2019) of conversation groups. I did a participatory observation on the participation of WhatsApp conversation groups during the 2019 Presidential Election from March-June 2019. My study concluded that the participants who spread the Hoax were not literate problem. The issue is more on the lack of communication ethics. It is defeated by ideological factors which cover it from rational consider-
The phenomenon of communication is the whole of human relations which involves the mediation process (Siregar, 2008). With this perspective, hoaxes are communication phenomena that involve interwoven communication processes, namely moral agents, particular motives, actions (both verbal and nonverbal) in a specific context and directed at specific audiences and with certain consequences (Day, 2003, p. 4). Hoax, in the context of this study, is seen as an act of communication (spreading verbal lies verbally through language and images) carried out by moral agents, aimed at specific audiences with the aim of manipulating thoughts (motives) to fit the attitude or views of the agent (consequences). With this argument, hoaxes will be seen as acts of communication (both verbal and nonverbal) and perpetrators of actions, namely moral agents (communicators). It is hoped that this study will contribute to the study and discussion of ethics of communication in social media. As stated Sudibyo (2019, p. 362), in the context of communication ethics, social media contains ambiguity between private or public space making it difficult to choose ethical standards used. Although hoaxes and post-truth are not unique to Indonesia, the Indonesian context is very different. Emergence of excitement in Islam among the middle class (Heryanto, 2012) presumably contributing to political post-truth in Indonesia which has begun to echo since 2014. Cebong vs Kampret case must be read in terms of political flow, moderate Islam vs. Traditional Islam or Islam vs. Nationalism.

METHODS
This study includes two elements of communication; they are message (hoax) as a form of communication and agent action. So that, it uses two research methods, namely participatory observation and textual analysis. Participatory observations were made of one of the WhatsApp groups in which the writer has been a member of the group for a long time (more than ten years). Group members come from diverse backgrounds, and especially religion and political preferences, making it the most dynamic group. This group tends to be harmonious in normal situations and becomes a medium to bind memories of the past, but becomes divided when there is an election political event. This has implications for information choices shared in groups. The experience in 2014 then encouraged the writer to make observations involved in the group in more depth. The observation model used is complete observer so that the participants do not know if observed (Creswell, 2015, p. 342). That way, the communication process takes place more naturally. The main purpose of this observation participation is to see the extent to which post-truth develops in group conversation. Therefore, observations are mainly made to see what information is shared in the group, who shares it, and how other members respond to the information shared.

To complete the observation participation, the researcher strengthens it with rhetorical analysis (Berger, 2011). This rhetorical analysis uses six devices, namely pathos (character of the speaker), logos (proof based on reason, logical argument), pathos (appeal to emotions in listener), aim (purpose of discourse), and mode (medium used like talk, and radio movie TV). The choice of rhetorical analysis method is based on the argument that hoax is basically an effort to convince others. This is in line with the goals of rhetoric. The difference lies in ethical principles. The hoaxes that were the subjects of the study came from the turnbackhoax.id, which were collected from March-June 2019. The main objective is to find out the hoax practices in general. In the initial stages, I sorted out the hoaxes based on the forms, for example, articles, pictures, or a combination of both. With descriptive generalizations, after I have selected the materials and classified them based on patterns and forms. Conclusions will emerge in accordance with the analysis patterns found.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION
In this part, the author attempt to explain two main points to this study, how the forms of hoaxes on social media through rhetorical analysis? Exposure continued with observations on social media groups.

Rhetorical Analysis of Hoax in Circulating on Social Media
There are many forms of hoaxes in circulation, the most of which is a combination of writing and image (caption). The picture will appear more real because “seeing is believing” (Rianto, et al., 2019). Some hoaxes appear in the form of news articles such as online news channels, captioned videos, status on Facebook or uploads on Twitter/Instagram, and also WhatsApp conversations. In the WhatsApp conversation, articles written with the names of famous and influential people, testimonial articles accompanied by data, also circulated a lot. In group conversations, this might be even the most.

Of the various forms and formats, the characteristics are the same, namely convincing the audience. In other words, the hoax that is produced must copy as much as possible the actual reality so that it is easily accepted as a “fact of truth” by
the public. That way, the recipient of the message will not criticize. Ultimately, this will make it easier for hoax producers to influence public perception and opinion. Their aim is to manipulate people’s perceptions, opinions, attitudes and actions in the electoral political process.

Hoax producers also have high skills in using all data and facts for the purpose of disseminating misleading information (disinformation). The series of images below are the most widely used forms of hoax. In figure 1, the WhatsApp number of Yunarto Wijaya, Director of Charta Political Indonesia, was hacked. Then, the hoax maker manipulated the conversation as if Yunarto had done it with another party, represented as the “General”. The conversation seemed real because it “copied” the reality of the conversation on WhatsApp so that by presenting the conversation, it seemed convincing that the surveys conducted by Charta Political Indonesia were not worthy of trust because of other people’s requests. In other words, the survey is a survey of orders so the results depend on the customer. The method is biased and cannot be justified.

![Figure 1. Hoax in the form of WhatsApp Conversation](image)

From figure 1, we can see the rhetorical elements. In terms of ethos, the speaker is a social media user like most people. However, in terms of pathos, he tries to attract the emotions of the audience through the caption, “Do you still believe in the Charta Political survey?” This caption then continue with “tadpoles” (another expression of the tadpole) needing oxygen. From the rhetorical side, the interesting thing is precisely the logos element. It becomes the most important element to build its rhetorical element to convince the public. By presenting Yunarto Wijaya’s conversation with army officials, the speaker would like to present the reason for the public not to believe, because the Charta Political survey was an order. Thus, the surveys conducted by Charta Political are not worthy of trust. This is the main purpose of the speaker. The medium used is social media.

Figure 2 is another example of a hoax that circulates on a site. So that, those who actually disseminate the information do not appear if only at a glance. However, its spreaders trying to make a convincing by displaying it on the official news site (Syafitrah, turnbackhoax, 2019), in KabarToday. The official news site is an effort to increase credibility (ethos). From this false news, the disseminator wantto encourage O2 supporters, Prabowo, as the winner of the election while creating doubts about O1 supporters. The ultimate goal (aim) is to create distrust among O1 supporters regarding the holding of elections. To convince the reader, this hoax news disseminator uses various elements that are considered logical and convincing, the news site itself (KabarToday), citing a trusted national news network, Antara, and a quote from the UN Secretary General. In addition, The articles are packaged in a standard way of writing mainstream media news. So that, they are worthy of trust. By using the medium of online news sites, this news hoax seem to convincing to those who do not have a critical thought in reading news, and easily trusted by Prabowo’s supporters.

![Figure 2: Hoax in the form of news](image)

Another form of hoax is a manipulated video with an editing process (fig. 3). The figure below can be found in YouTube. Its viewers has reached the total number of 51,142 when the picture was taken (Syafitrah, turnbackhoax, 2019). The original version of the video is of Primetime News by Metro TV, streamed on 06 May 2014. It was then edited as if it streamed for the 2019 election.

Figure 3. Hoax in the form of sound editing
In accordance to the figure 2, figure 3 relies on official news in the mainstream media. This video uploader with the initials King Kabowo, it means, the uploader concluded as a supporter 01. By presenting themselves as one of the supporters, the uploader’s ethos depends on which audience will see it. Particularly for supporters 01, it will be seen as credible, while for 02 vice versa. The public’s emotion tries to be provoked through the text, “Finally, there is a member of the KPU who is converted, claims to be paid 250 million and promised 12 billion”. For the audience, this report will incite anger for two reasons, they are KPU member corruption and election fraud. Emotions will increase the level of trust in the message delivered. To be more convincing, communicators rely on images from mainstream news TV through dubbing so that the news becomes convincing. The aim is to convince the public that the election is full of fraud. The mode used is the YouTube channel.

Through the display of some hoaxes and rhetorical analysis above, it obviously that how hoax as a post-truth product works in society. It displays as much as possible the reality that is realistic with the original version. In other words, to lead the public to trust the information that emerges, hoax producers present or even copy as closely as possible the existing social reality. The fake reality then becomes as if it were real so that people can easily trust the information. Meeting the emotion of the audience, even the false facts are believed to be the truth. In other words, post-truth occurs when manufacturing truths meet people’s emotionality.

**Emotion and the Loss of Critical Thinking**

By analyzing hoaxes uploaded on social media and observing WhatsApp groups, I find that hoaxes appeared because of political interests. From the public side, hoaxes are easy to spread because they precisely target the ideological side of society. Critical reason disappears or decreases when faced with facts that support political choice. This can be seen from the writings uploaded on Twitter or Facebook. Rumors or facts that have not been tested for validity are simply used to assess a person’s situation. In other cases, the critical power of social media users is also lost when getting information in accordance with expectations or desires. For example, a video uploaded by Mustapha Nahrawardaya’s Twitter account. The video is based on CompassTV coverage and was shared on April 23, 2019. This video has been retweeted 553 times (when captured) and received 923 likes. The video about the voting did indeed happen because it came from a reliable source, Compass TV. However, the incident occurred in 2017. Some responses (replies) to this post include “torture them, O God! so that it can be a lesson for other rulers, “The media should say” win 01 “not” one of the paslon (candidate pair),” “destroy those who commit this election fraud, Rabb. “ Interestingly, when someone reminded with a loud tone, “Please arrest this person ... This is a 2017 video. This is an extraordinary provocation,” immediately get a rebuttal, “Wow, that’s clearly a KPU cardboard box and you say this happened in 2017?”. These responses indicate strong emotionality in responding to political communication messages on social media. Emotionality occurs in both supporters.

The video uploaded by Mustapha’s account above did occur. Compass TV reported the violation incident on 16 February 2017 in the context of the Regional General Elections in Central Halmahera Regency, North Maluku. This video may have been intentionally uploaded to lead to wrong conclusions (disinformation). It is also possible that the uploader did not know that the video was wrong-placed. However, the response to the tweet shared by more than 500 users and the comments that appeared reflected the loss of critical reasoning of social media users. Political choice and ideology plunged them to prioritize emotionality, rather than rationality.

In the conversation group I observed, the dissemination of information without the crosscheck stage has led to protests from other parties. During the period of 22 February 2019 to 5 May 2019, there were 485 conversation pages in the WhatsApp’s group. The intensity of political conversation tends to rise. There were several actors in the conversation who were at the extreme point of supporters 01 and 02, and often involved attempts to attack each other violently. The climax of heated political conversation took place in the seconds leading up to the election and afterwards. Hoax in this period also increased significantly (Rianto, et al., 2019). In the span of 16-20 April 2019, there were 115 pages of conversation. The analysis will focus on this timeframe because the intensity of political conversation is high, even during periods of pause.

There are more than 50 members in this group, but around 10-15% are active. Most are silent majority. However, of those active, there was one participant who intensively shared information. Information sharing themes are carried out in accordance with the sequence of election events. One day before the election, shared theme themes are those that elevate 02 or bring down 01 as if 02 loses then China will invade Indonesia, warning Al-Qur’an, including the results of Istikharah Ulama to support 02. The aim
is to influence perceptions of group members, and maybe change their candidate. On the other hand, supporters of 01 are more reactive as revealed in the following response, “satisfaction share and debate in this group while still not voting. After voting there is nothing that can be tempered” (+62 812-3590-xxxx, conversation on April 16, 2019 at 14:17).

After the election, there is a difference in information divided into groups. Those in same group share information intensively with the narrative that elections cannot be trusted because they are full of fraud. Therefore, When the quick count begins to release, information shared in the group is the doubts credibility of the quick count agency. The intended news site never verified because of the assumption that the mainstream media had become part of 01. This was done by the same person, causing a reaction for supporters of 01, and continued to heat up. Objections were made because information shared in the conversation group according to others was never checked. Instead, all information relating to efforts to delegitimize the quick count institution that won group 01 continues. This is what triggers a heated conversation in the group, and makes other group members try to reconcile the atmosphere.

What is observed in this conversation group will confirm that the problem is not whether it is right or wrong, but whether the information benefits his political position. The spread of this hoax seems to be closer to the psychological warfare effort (Aldwairi & Alwahedi, 2018). Participatory observation in this conversation group confirmed what was said by Aldwairi and Alwahedi above. Hoax is part of the effort for psychological warfare so that the truth is not laid on facts, but beliefs about the facts themselves. Interestingly, the post-election period, both supporters 01 and supporters 02 were far more active in sharing information. They use various information from various web pages to convince or break opponents’ arguments. Here, the patterns of information seeking seem to be very much influenced by their political preferences. News that supports his political choices will be shared, while those that will not be discarded.

**Freedom and responsibility**

We can conclude two things after closely reading all the data. First, hoaxes occur because of the meeting of “fake reality” or “fake news” with an ideological and emotional audience. The public prefers emotionality rather than rationality. On the other hand, it appears that the more ideological a person is, the less critical the person is when dealing with messages that are in accordance with their ideological values and choices. Accordingly, ethical issues arise that can be seen from two points of view, namely the producer and recipient of the message. However, in fact in the world of social media it cannot be separated explicitly.

From the producer point of view, problems arise because freedom to produce messages in new media is not accompanied by responsibility. Freedom is interpreted as “free from anything to do anything,” resulting in negating the rights and freedoms of others. Referring to Alvin Day’s conceptual framework (Day, 2003), communicators are unable to carry out the ethical communication in social media because of particular motives to support their political preferences. Election context in which people are involved sharply in political ideology battles mainly based on religion, makes these moral agents not to consider the consequences of communication actions taken. In fact, communication ethics is related to dialogue between diverse perspectives (Arnett, 2011). Instead of dialogue among the various perspectives, the actors in the conversation group are often unable to analyze the situation, consider various competing values, before taking action in communication. In this case, sharing information. These moral agents do not seem to reflect moral choices. so that, those who take this decision never considers the consequences of the act of communication or in a deontological perspective its conformity to universal moral obligations. As a result, post-truth is easily spread in the conversation group.

Second, from the recipient’s perspective, ethical problems arise due to the lack of what is referred to as called tabayyun (to search). People are not willing to crosscheck news sources and correct information. This is because people are more likely to seek information that confirms their beliefs. Wrapped with emotionality, the recipients of this message become uncritical. This is due to the strong influence of ideology as the main framework in assessing reality. Ideology, in this case, functions to structure actions, including communication actions (Haryatmoko, 2015). In fact, the more ideological a person is, the more irrational that person is when dealing with political hoaxes. In addition, the lack of an open minded attitude makes the user only rely on one side information. In the end, they lacked a plural awareness. In fact, plural awareness is a prerequisite for capturing the plural reality that exists in society. Plural awareness will help one to capture diverse perspectives in seeing reality (Takwin, 2015). This lack of ethical awareness makes them easily trapped into post-truth.

The results of this study confirm the results of the study of post-truth. In the era of political post-truth, the media is used as a mouthpiece to spread false news and ‘alternative facts’ with the intention of spreading fear and hatred for others. Thus, discriminatory policies are endorsed regardless that truth is essential in politics (Pashkova & Pashkov, 2018).

This study adds an ethical aspect, and at the same time confirms that post-truth cannot be simply related to the digital literacy of citizens as has been often articulated so far (Kurnia & Astuti, 2017; Lin et al., 2013; Park & Rim, 2019; Supratman, 2018). This study rather relates that post-
truth as an ethical issue of communication. It is due to the fact that post-truth is basically closely related to dishonesty. It was conducted massively by politicians such as in cases in the United States and Britain (Sudibyo, 2019), amid an uncritical, emotional, and ideological audience. This study adds that post-truth develops due to the low ethics of communication in both public officials and society.

CONCLUSION

This research concludes that the low ethics of communication among social media users allows post-truth to occur. Hoax producers are people who normalize lies and at the same time violate the ethical principles of communication. Freedom of social media is not interpreted as freedom with responsibility, but as “free from anything to do anything”. Regarding with this study, it would be free to communicate, including lying. On the other hand, the users do not cross check and do not have an open mind, making it easier to get caught up in hoaxes and post-truths.

This research suggests that ethics of social media become a movement, as was the case in digital literacy. Thus, the ethical awareness of communication will be stronger. The communication ethics must also be more frequently involved in communication research on social media so that the discourse on social media ethics develops, and even becomes the dominant discourse in society.

Bibliography


