Islamist Buzzers: Message Flooding, Offline Outreach, and Astroturfing

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Based on ethnographic research on Islamist buzzers – social media political operators tasked with making particular online conversation subjects trend – in Indonesia, this article details the process of how the proliferation of insensitive message in both the online and offline realms plays a role in mobilizing those sympathetic to religious fundamentalism. As this research shows, the interviewed buzzers were one of the driving forces behind the massive success of the fundamentalist Islamic Defenders Front (*Front Pembela Islam*, FPI) as they mobilized people to participate in the organization's political rallies between 2016 and 2017. Driven by altruistic volunteerism and sense of community, these actors go beyond their duty as click-farmers. They maintain regular contact with sympathizers and convincing them to revive broken weblinks, hang banners on streets as part of astroturfing campaigns and gather masses to attend offline events. Detailing the activity and spatiality of buzzers in crafting new online and offline spaces as part of their innovative bottom-up propaganda management, this research concludes that right-wing political mobilization and radicalization are not simply the product of ideology but are catalyzed by technically and socially tedious, mediated messaging campaigns.

Keywords: Astroturfing; Hate Speech; Islam; Right-wing Politics; Social Media Buzzer

INTRODUCTION

In March 2018, two unrelated events provided evidence that the circulation of problematic social media messages – violent and derogatory remarks, online radicalization, hoaxes, hate speech, defamation, bigotry, fundamentalist expression, and fake news among numerous other forms – is no longer random but has become increasingly institutionalized. In the Global North, the Cambridge Analytica scandal, that the *New York Times* broke, highlighted how a British political consulting company was able to exploit social media users' data and behavior for the benefit of Republican Party campaigns in the United States (Rosenberg, Confessore, & Cadwalladr, 2018). In the Global South, the Indonesian government cracked down on the Indonesian Muslim Cyber Army (MCA), a cyber-jihadist network, for its role in spreading hate speech (Lindsey, 2018). While Cambridge Analytica exploits users' data without their approval to create a specific demographic data as sources for target campaigns, MCA is a network of paid click-farmers who worked for a number of political figures in Indonesia to generate hate speech and derogatory attacks on their opponents. Despite their contrasting ideologies and different operational structures, both

nonetheless share the goal of using social media as a space to shape and manipulate public opinion.

At the same time, there is a problem with our current understanding of how such circulations ought to be countered. Take the "Christchurch Call to Action", initiated by New Zealand Prime minister Jacinda Ardern and French president Emmanuel Macron, as an example. The call was signed by global leaders gathered in Paris on 15 March 2019, as a collaborative effort between governments and digital media companies to fight online radicalization (Fiegerman, 2019), two months after the streamed-live-on-Facebook right-wing terrorist attack on mosques in Christchurch, New Zealand. In response, the four tech giants Facebook, Google, Microsoft, and Twitter pledged to implement nine steps to end "violent extremist content" (Microsoft Corporate Blogs, 2019), including greater online monitoring efforts against online posts or contents that presumably are inciting hate and bigotry. These strategies are neither previously unknown nor groundbreaking. At the same time, with the enduring rise and complexity of online-based extremism (i.e., Badawy & Ferrara, 2018; Scrivens, Davies, & Frank, 2018), there is a pressing need for deeper studies on the entanglement between social media communication and the troubling developments of extremism, right-wing politics, fundamentalism, and bigotry.

The findings described in this article therefore suggest that our observation should move beyond message circulation and establish a deeper knowledge of how the actors engaged in mediated violence generate problematic messages despite censorship and, particularly, of how social media could actually animate people from online chats to take action in the offline realm. I argue in this paper that the Christchurch initiative and the use of online monitoring to tackle the widening circulation of problematic messages might not be the panacea the world is seeking, as online message circulation is not the sole driver of corporeal actions, since the opposing actors are also consolidating themselves in the offline sphere.

Observing the mass mobilization of the Indonesian right-wing fundamentalist Islamic Defenders Front (*Front Pembela Islam*, FPI) rallies in 2016 and 2017, this research reveals that discourse mobilization is the result of the technical and publicity capabilities of buzzers – social media users tasked with proliferating particular online conversation subjects across the online scape to make them trend – who operate not solely online but offline as well.[1] Drawing on ethnographic research, including participant observation and in-depth interviews with eleven interlocutors[2] conducted between February 2017 and April 2018 in Jakarta, Indonesia, this article shows that, through sockpuppeting and astroturfing campaigns before the rallies even began, FPI buzzers' activities fostered the online and offline sociability necessary for right-wing political mobilization, fundamentalism, and violent actions.

Before detailing the role of buzzers as mobilization actors, the next section provides an overview of FPI's practices to contextualize the sociability in which the

1 The FPI is not an underground organization and is also not categorized as a radical terrorist group, but it is under police surveillance (interview with AA, a police officer responsible for the surveillance, 3 January 2018). The organization advocates Sharia law in Indonesia, with a fundamentalist interpretation of Islam citing both Wahhabi and Salafi schools. In this article, FPI actors will be referred to as Islamists, conservatives, and fundamentalists.

2 The names of the interlocutors interviewed for this research have been changed to assure confidentiality.

buzzers are operating. The third section details the altruistic operation of the buzzers followed by their view of voluntarism. Taken together, the article describes how Islamist buzzers and their agenda-setting strategies craft communities on which they could then draw to garner support for their activities and organization, and how a fundamentalist political view with violent messaging could become publicly accepted in everyday life via the social media arena.

VIOLENCE AS REGULARITY

It was not yet eight in the morning when several waves of masses were pulling toward the Istiqlal Jakarta Grand Mosque on Saturday, 11 February 2017, to participate in the fourth *#aksiBelaIslam* rally. As thousands of people, spanning various ages and genders, flooded the streets, the traffic had jammed the Senen Market district where I joined one of the groups, 1.8 km away from the mosque. Several other groups had arrived on large busses that cost around IDR 4 million (USD 280) a day, which is not cheap given that the 2017 provincial minimum wage in Jakarta was IDR 3,355,750 (USD 238). Some of the busses had out-of-town license plates.

The rallies broke out after an edited video of the then-Jakarta Governor Basuki 'Ahok' Tjahaja Purnama's speech during an official visit on 27 September 2016 went viral. In the speech, he pleaded with the audience that they should not allow themselves "to be misled" by his political opponents who cited verse fifty-one of Al-Ma'idah as the Quranic injunction for Muslims to avoid voting for a non-Muslim leader for public office. The verse suggests that a non-Muslim might lack the competencies to administer Islam-related public affairs. Buni Yani, an independent journalist, had edited the recorded speech to create the perception that Ahok's remarks were directed at the Quran, claiming that Muslims were "being fooled by it."[3] As the edited video went viral, many Muslims, including members of FPI, declared the speech religious defamation and disregarded the transcription of the original speech.

Between October 2016 and May 2017, FPI managed to organize seven protest rallies dubbed the "action to defend Islam" (*aksi bela Islam*) as a public pressure campaign to push the state to legally prosecute Ahok for blasphemy.[4] Rally participants had created "#BelaIslam" (defend Islam) and "#aksiBelaIslam" (action to defend Islam) on Twitter, Instagram, and Facebook. They also uploaded pictures of the rallies which garnered national and international media coverage (Pamungkas & Octaviani, 2017).

It was a political time. The rallies took place just several weeks before the first round of the Jakarta gubernatorial election in February 2017. In early polls, Ahok had been leading his two opponents, Anies Baswedan and Agus Harimurti Yudhoyono. Baswedan had been appointed Minister of Education in 2014 and came from a recognized political family in Islamic communities. Agus Yudhoyono, the son of the sixth

3 Basuki was found guilty of insulting Islam by the North Jakarta district court on 9 May 2017 and was sentenced to two years in prison, despite the state prosecutor's recommendation of probation.

4 The seven rallies took place between 2016 and 2017 with the following dates: Aksi Bela Islam I on 14 October 2016; Aksi Bela Islam II on 4 November 2016; Aksi Bela Islam III, 2 December 2016; Aksi Bela Islam IV on 11 February 2017; Aksi Bela Islam V on 21 February 2017; Aksi Bela Islam VI on 31 March 2017; Aksi Bela Islam VII on 5 May 2017.

Indonesian president, Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono, had been an army major before taking early retirement.

Before the election period started, FPI had continuously objected to Ahok's gubernatorial leadership for, among others, three reasons. First, Ahok is a Christian of Indonesian-Chinese descent, and FPI leaders pushed the case that Muslims could only vote for a non-Muslim leader in exceptional circumstances, for instance, when they are the minority population (Aziza, 2017). Additionally, the Indonesian-Chinese ethnic group has long been stereotypically and historically accused of promoting the People's Republic of China's communist ideology (Purdey, 2005), which is considered to be hostile towards religion because of its preference for atheism. FPI founder and leader, Habib Rizieq Shihab, capitalized on this mistrust, diligently tweeting during the election period alleging that the Chinese ethnic group would bring Communism back to Indonesia (Redaksi Eramuslim, 2016b). Second, Ahok often accused FPI of managing local thugs and taking money from street vendors (Aisyah, 2013). Third, as part of the gentrification agenda, Ahok had conducted forced evictions against several neighborhoods of the urban poor, FPI's strong support base (Alatas, 2016). Against this background, Yani's edited viral video presented a window of opportunity for Shihab to commence a political campaign to legally block Ahok's candidacy.

Persistent in advocating for Sharia law in Indonesia and scriptural in its interpretation of the Quran, FPI had ascended out of distinct political circumstances in 1998 during the power transition after the fall of the three-decade-long Suharto authoritarian military regime and its nationalistic doctrine (Hasan, 2006, pp. 14-16; Hasani & Naipospos, 2010; Wilson, 2008, 2014). In 1998, as a result of the growing severity of the economic crisis, students began to publicly express their objections to Suharto's nepotism and his corrupt government. In May, protests-turned-riots and mass violence took place in different cities alongside increased civil aggression towards the military and the police in response to the shooting deaths of several activists. The chaos resulted in Suharto's resignation.

Following his resignation, the People's Consultative Assembly of the Republic of Indonesia (*Majelis Permusyawaratan Rakyat Republik Indonesia*, MPR-RI) immediately arranged a special session (*Sidang Istimewa*) in order to organize a non-scheduled presidential election and to make the necessary political decisions to secure a functioning governing state until the election. To secure the session and avoid further direct confrontation between the military and civilians, the military began to recruit civilians, including those from Islamic groups, as security volunteers organized under Voluntary Security Forces (*Pasukan Pengamanan Swakarsa*, Pam Swakarsa). To counter the left-leaning student protesters who demanded that all Suharto's appointed politicians resign, the volunteers acted as a paramilitary group and human barricades during the special session between 10 and 13 November 1998 (Beittinger-Lee, 2009, pp. 170-173; Hasan, 2006, p. 16; Sidel, 2006, p. 139). Some proposed *jihad* to fight the student protesters who were accused of destabilizing the government (Hasan, 2006, p. 100; Jahroni, 2008; Sidel, 2006, p. 139).[5]

With the declining popularity of Suharto's nationalist doctrine, Pam Swakarsa

5 See also reports from Tempo Magazine ("Berjihad Mendukung Sidang", 1998; "Kivlan Zen Tantang Wiranto", 2004).

eventually marked the consolidation of various Islamic groups in the post-Suharto era and emerged as a "petri dish" for those advocating a Salafi ideology (Hasan, 2006, pp. 100-101). It also incubated various pious Islamic circles' transformation into paramilitary groups (Schröter, 2003, pp. 39-41). Misbahul Anam and Rizieq Shihab, two fundamentalist Islamic leaders whose followers had participated in Pam Swakarsa (Hasan, 2006, pp. 14-16), founded FPI on 17 August 1998 as an organization to bring scriptural Islamic values to public life (Amal & Panggabean, 2004; Yunanto, 2003).

Although framing itself as a *dawah*[6] organization, FPI is also publicly known for its organized and violent "sweeping operations", in which establishments considered to provide lewd services, such as those involving unlicensed alcohol sales, drugs, prostitution, and gambling, are raided, vandalized, and their owners are intimidated (Lukens-Bull, 2013, p. 128; Prajuli, 2012; Rahman & Dja'far, 2009; Syaefudin, 2014). Shihab stated that such businesses ensure only social deviance which are the product of Western secularism (*sekularisme*), pluralism (*pluralisme*), and liberalism (*liberalisme*), shortened as "*sepilis*". The acronym is a homophone to syphilis, which is intended to mock and to draw an equivalency between sexually transmitted diseases and Western culture and capitalism – which has been blamed as the culprit of economic crisis in 1997 and 1998 (Gunadha & Sari, 2018). Accordingly, over the years FPI claimed that such vigilantism is an expected outcome of upholding the Muslim duty to promote good and prevent evil (*amar ma'ruf nahi mungkar*, commanding virtue and forbidding vice, see Wilson, 2008, p. 202).

In its raids and acts of vigilantism, FPI is not hesitant to incur casualties. Only three months after its initiation, it launched a raid against illegal gambling in the Ketapang area of Jakarta on 22 November 1998. The raid became an uncontrollable riot after rumors circulated that the Christian Ambonese ethnic-based gang, which had been suspected of having backed illegal gambling in the city, had launched a counter attack and burned down mosques (Azca, 2006; van Klinken, 2007). The riot ended with 14 people killed, some of whom were even burned alive (Azca, 2006), while 13 churches were torched (Azca, 2006; van Klinken, 2006, p. 130).

On 24 May 1999, FPI took a university student hostage for taking down its street banner which stated: "Alert! Zionism and Communism penetrate all aspects of life!" (Indarti, 2012). The banner's location was not random since it was hung in front of Tarumanegara University, where many of the students are of visible Chinese descent.[7] FPI also injured two police officers in April 2006, when it ransacked the Playboy Magazine office for the magazine's pornographic contents, injured several participants of the National Alliance for Religious and Belief Freedom parade (*Aliansi*

6 *Dawah* literary means "call". It is a practice of conveying the message of Islam to non-Muslims, or calling Muslims to return to the purer form of Islam practiced by Muhammad and his early followers (Hasan 2006, pp. 32, 141).

7 As mentioned earlier, the Chinese-Indonesian ethnic group has been accused of being the ideological agent of the People's Republic of China's Communism since 1960s. In 1966, General Suharto took over the presidency by ousting President Sukarno and blamed the Indonesian Communist Party for economic crisis, political instability, and a coup attempt against Sukarno. The event was followed by a great purge against the communists and stigmatization of people of Chinese-descent being related to the Chinese government's Communism (Purdey, 2005). Many Indonesian Muslims view their fellow Palestinian Muslims as victims of the State of Israel, which occupies Palestinian land. FPI vies that both communist and nationalistic/Zionist movement to establish a Jewish state are the enemy of Islam.

Kebangsaan untuk Kebebasan Beragama dan Berkeyakinan) (Indarti, 2012), killed three members of the Ahmadiyya community in West Java in February 2011 (Bush, 2015, p. 242),[8] and injured eleven police officers during a protest in October 2014 (Awaludin, 2014). In organizing their raids, FPI often invites the masses to join, and it is difficult for the police to charge the organization with crimes since the perpetrators are simply members of masses sympathetic to FPI, often unidentified persons.

The FPI maintains its organizational growth by diligently recruiting the urban poor and unemployed young men to its ranks (Hasan, 2006; Mudhoffir, 2017; Wilson, 2008, p. 202, 2010, 2014, 2015). In 2014, it claimed to have seven million registered members nationally (Megiza, 2014). With its growing members and sympathizers (*simpatisan*), FPI has tapped into the informal economy by operating as a hoodlum organization that is suspected of having patron-client relationships with both politicians and corrupt police officers in the racketeering business (Petrů, 2015; Sidel, 2006, p. 139; Wilson, 2008, p. 202, 2015). Such claims of religious vigilantism, along with its political and underground business networks that employ many of the urban poor, and the organization's general mass popularity (Budiman, 2017) makes prosecuting FPI politically treacherous as any prosecutor or investigator will appear to be anti-Islamic. At the same time, they would also have to answer to various political elites (Petrů, 2015, p. 71). Accordingly, when Hizbut Tahrir Indonesia was banned in May 2018 as part of a government crackdown on Islamist organizations, FPI was spared (Hariyanto, 2018).

Regardless of the dark side of FPI activities, the organization is still religiously meaningful for its members and sympathizers. Beyond economic and political reasons, some repentant thugs actually found atonement in FPI's activities (Bamualim, 2011). During the #aksiBelaIslam rallies, I also observed that, contrary to the depiction of FPI as an urban poor-based hoodlum organization, many participants came from the middle class and were not the financially precarious. The FPI's Red Crescent medical team, for example, consisted of volunteer doctors and nurses.

Some FPI supporters had also organized themselves as a collective with their own resources, such as those involved in the FPI Women Group who had organized the soup kitchens for almost every single rally in the series. Tasya, a mother of three who works in finance and was in charge of cooking for one of the kitchens to support the 11 February rally, explained to me that she and her friends had taken the initiative to raise money, collect donations, and cook for the rally participants. She alluded that providing meals for her fellow protesters has given her a sense of belonging to the Islamic community (*ummah*).

She had also brought her children to the rally that day to "teach them about Islamic values" and to stand by a leader of society (*pemimpin masyarakat*) – in this context Shihab – who "defends Islamic values" (interview, 11 February 2017). On our way home from the rally, my group was stopped by an elderly couple riding a motorcycle who offered us spring rolls from a street food cart.[9] "Please take as much as you like", said the couple who ended up paying a not insignificant USD 17,60 for all

8 FPI believes that the Ahmadiyya community is deviating from Islamic teachings (International Crisis Group, 2008).

9 On 11 February 2017, I joined the rally with the interlocutors' peer group from the local mosque where I stayed in Jakarta.

the rolls. Moved by the couple's altruism, the food vendor gave us each a free cup of mineral water.

In these instances, it seems unavoidable to take account of the dimension of altruism and sense of community at FPI events. The possibility of having the experience of being in the community becomes FPI's pull factor for the masses. It is, as the following section details, engineered through multi-layered activities organized by mobilizing actors, who at the same time continually maintain the delivery of scripturalist and fundamentalist Islamic messages.

THE ROLE OF SOCIAL MEDIA BUZZERS

The Pancoran Barat sub-district in South Jakarta is one of the loyal bases of FPI support. The three km^2 area is just a few hundred meters away from the Gatot Subroto economic district's skyscrapers. On the Pasar Minggu Street side, there are two prominent central mosques (*masjid jami*): Jami Al Munawwar Mosque and Jami Ikhwanul Muslimin Mosque. Both regularly host local and Middle Eastern Wahhabi guest preachers, although some members of the *ummah* also come from Salafi study circles.[10] Both mosques regularly organize religious events, such as recitation circles and public sermons, with participants flooding to the street. On the west side of the neighborhood is Mampang Prapatan Street, and on one of its corners is the Islamic and Arabic College (*Lembaga Ilmu Pengetahuan Islam dan Arab*/LIPIA), a Saudi sponsored college that has played a major role in the spread of Wahhabism in Indonesia and where Shihab also studied (Hasan, 2006, pp. 47-49).[11]

Like typical aged urban middle-class neighborhoods in Jakarta, it is filled with conjoining houses in the 1970s architectural style with a garage, a small garden, and three bedrooms. Going deeper into the neighborhood, there are alleys where smaller row houses are located. The alleys are around 1.5-meter-wide, cramped with parked motorcycles during the day. People know each other in this neighborhood. In these alleys, it is common to hear prayers played from YouTube and blasted from one of the houses' speakers.

Outside the alleys, several street corners had been adorned with PVC banners that declared the community's support for FPI. Some banners warned Muslims to only vote for Muslim governors. The banners varied in size. The largest banner I spotted was 6x4 meters, which would cost about USD 335 (IDR 4.8 million), again, an amount above the minimum wage in Jakarta. According to the local neighborhood watch (*Ketua Rukun Tangga*), the neighborhood youngsters (*pemuda*) had put the banner up.

It was Andika, 27, who had printed the banner. He has a bachelor's degree in economics from a nearby private university. He works in a human resource department in a private electricity maintenance company and earns about USD 279 (IDR 4 million) a month. His parents moved to this neighborhood from central Java in the 1970s. He and his siblings went to a secular public school a few hundred meters from their house. He prays five times a day and has been participating regularly in the

10 Interview with Andika, 20 April 2018. For the difference between the Wahhabi and the Salafi schools, particularly in social media representation, see Ammar & Xu (2018, pp. 51-56).

11 Habib Rizieq Shihab later continued his studies at Dirasah Islamiyah Department, Tarbiyah Faculty, King Saud University (Hasan, 2006, pp. 15, 47).

neighborhood's Quran recitation and study circle (*pengajian*) since he was a child. For the youngsters in Pancoran Barat, religiosity is part of their socialization and routine. They go to the mosque together and during their childhood had played soccer in its parking lot. For them, the mosque is also a community center.

"Well, it is a good organization, why not join it", he answered when I asked about his motive for joining the FPI. When asked how he defined "good", he pointed to how FPI manages to "act fast" (*gerak cepat*) in tackling vice and practices that are "contradictory to Islamic teaching" (interview, 9 February 2017). He rejected the view that FPI is a vigilante group since most of the time it coordinates its raids with the police, something FPI has also claimed.[12] He also underscored that FPI regularly ran blood drives and other charity events at his mosque.

"Joining" is an ambiguous term of membership in FPI. Events like rallies, organized public prayers, public talks, or learning circles (*majlis taklim*) are open to the public and no ID card is required. Many regular participants and FPI sympathizers at these activities are not registered. For organizational meetings, however, an ID card must be worn as a nametag, which also determines if a person will be allowed to enter the mosque or the meeting place. As a volunteer with the FPI's Media Team, a working group under the FPI's Struggle Wing (*Sayap Juang*), Andika has to be registered as a member.

His designated task as a member of the Media Team is to make viral FPI's online posts. "Each neighborhood has somebody like me", he claims. During the rally on 11 February 2017, I met with six of his friends: Bahar, Candra, Dilman, Ersha, Fahrul, and Gege, each of whom operates in a different geographical area in Andika's neighboring districts. Besides Ersha, they are young men in their twenties. Candra and Dilman graduated from polytechnic high schools, and the rest have bachelor's degrees. All of them have permanent jobs.

Andika and several of his friends from the Media Team are examples of "buzzers" who volunteer with FPI. Buzzer is the Indonesian popular term for the machinery of political social media influencers. The term derives from Yahoo!Messenger, a digital instant messaging client that was popular in Indonesia in the 1990s and early 2000s. Among users, buzzing was a convention that was used to start a conversation by sending an emoji or graphic message to capture the attention of the person with whom a conversation starter wanted to chat. It is similar to a "wave" in Facebook messenger or a "nudge" in Microsoft Messenger.

Buzzers have two significant roles in FPI operations. First, as the name hints, they have to create buzz around a certain subject by making its hashtag go viral across various social media platforms. Second, buzzers are informally expected to convey the messages circulating in the online scape to the public in the offline realm while mobilizing those sympathetic to FPI's cause to participate in the organization's activities.

Viral Buzzing

A social media influencer is a micro-celebrity who has a large number of media followers through whom s/he can ensure that a certain topic of online conversation with

12 As an illustration, the FPI Depok branch leader, Idrus Al Gadri, once stated that FPI prefers to engage in peaceful activity, but the law and the police department are failing in eliminating illegal alcohol trade and prostitution (Rahman & Dja'far, 2009, p. 3).

a specific generated hashtag will trend. A buzzer could be a social media influencer[13], or a sockpuppeteer. As a sockpuppeteer, the buzzer's task is to create the perception that there are people in the online public space who are interested in and convinced of FPI's posts or narratives. FPI leaders, such as Shihab and Anam, are the face of the organization with the authority to speak on behalf of the organization and to interpret Islamic teaching within a certain discourse. A buzzer is the person who ensures their messages are being discussed by the online public. Similar to "buzz marketing" (Thomas, 2004), they keep FPI messaging accessible to the general public and afloat.

In the realm of social media trends, buzzers understand that a one-man-show would be unlikely to gain enough public attention. There are three steps to deal with this challenge. First, a buzzer's facile responsibility is to "farm clicks", that is, to give "heart" to FPI's Instagram posts, to "like" them on Facebook, and to share Twitter comments from Shihab or other members of the organization's leadership. Andika explained that one buzzer could easily operate at least four different Facebook accounts on one smartphone, with the first logged-in on the regular Facebook app, the second on Facebook Lite, and the other two on different browsers. Shihab or FPI would then only need 25 buzzers to get 100 likes on a post. A buzzer, in his experience, could administer at least ten accounts on the same platform.

The accumulative count of hearts, likes, or re-shares will push the post into the social media platforms' top-trending lists, since Instagram, Twitter, and Facebook regularly suggest popular trending posts for their users to read. Without the initial like farming, a post will be considered by the platform's algorithm as unattractive for users and will not appear among the trending topics. Accumulating hearts, likes, and retweets therefore acts as a hack against the platforms' algorithms by giving the impression that there is a large number of users discussing or indicating interest in the post, even if these users might be the same person. Making the post trend, therefore, is the initial step for FPI leaders to buzz their message to gain public attention and convey their message to a larger audience.

As it would be time consuming, buzzers actually hardly read the posts they like or share. They also rarely write their own posts, comments, or opinions as they take turns in creating memes or posting content. If they do, and this is the second regular task of a buzzer, it will be short just to keep the post updated with a good response count. One buzzer will write a certain post, while the rest of the group is tasked with commenting on the post to ensure that it continues to trend because of its high comment frequency. Similar to accumulating likes, the goal is to trick the platforms' algorithm and to manipulate public perception by creating the impression that people are actively discussing a certain hashtag on social media.

Buzzers typically have a list of comments and memes saved on their phone in case they need to post a comment quickly. Copying and pasting a comment is a time-saving practice when a buzzer needs to type a comment for ten different accounts. For example, on one occasion during our interview, Fahrul pasted the following comment on a post from another fellow buzzer: "voice of the people, justice will side with Muslims [*suara rakyat, keadilan akan memenangkan umat Islam*]". The comment then acts as pseudo-chat providing visual evidence or impression for others that they are not alone

13 For example, @mas__piyuuu with his more than 60,000 Twitter followers, as of 6 November 2019.

in reading the post and that there are other people who are agreeing with the opinion expressed in the post. In internet culture, such practice is known as "sock-puppeting" (Bu, Xia, & Wang, 2013). As such, buzzers as post commentators have been working as an initial pseudo-public for FPI to attract attention from other social media users. The role of buzzers in maintaining such regular chat flow on social media becomes significant as the FPI's prominent leaders, because of their already demanding schedules, might not be able to be active in online chat themselves. Such effort is a strategy to keep FPI's discourse continuously present in the public's everyday life.

Consequently, maintaining FPI's constant online public presence becomes the third online task of a buzzer; this is to ensure that FPI's posts stay viral to enact the space for FPI sympathizers. Andika mentioned the term "flooding the timeline" (*membanjiri* timeline) to denote what in economic or communication studies is understood as viral marketing. The goal of this task is to keep any online material related to FPI messages available to the public while avoiding censorship or broken weblinks. Keeping FPI's social media post trending and alive is a strategy to make FPI's discourse constantly accessible to the public.

For example, Andika and his networks regularly posted *dawah* videos from Bahar 'Smith' Sumayit and Abdul Somad, who are controversial Islamic preachers and FPI loyalists. Both are prominent FPI-affiliated preachers who travel extensively around Indonesia, record their speeches, sermons, and public Q&A, and upload their videos to YouTube. Besides actively participating in FPI raids, Smith is popularly known for using crass language in describing religious deviance while verbally defaming those whom he considers less pious as they have contrasting opinions. During a public talk on 17 November 2018, for example, he blatantly said that Joko Widodo, the Indonesian president and his political opponent, is "a traitor of the people" who "menstruates like a sissy" (Sutrisno, 2018). Somad is well known in the FPI circle for endorsing jihadism. In one of his speeches, he stated that "suicide bombers are not suicidal, but martyrs" (Pratama, 2018). He also stated in 2016 that "Satan dwells in every crucifix" (Paat & Yasmin, 2019).

Andika explained that although Smith and Somad often deliver symbolically violent messages or derogatory speeches, they are popular among Muslim audience because of their humorous sermons, including their amusing mockery of those who are not in line with their values. Nevertheless, since their statements often violate YouTube's or Instagram's policies, their videos are regularly banned from these platforms. To counter such censorship, Andika and his friends will upload the same video with different titles, at different times and occasions. "When one [online video link] is dead, we will already have another copy to upload", he explained (interview, 9 February 2017). That way, the same video will always be on the internet.

The large circulation of such problematic religious posts is possible since Islamic fundamentalist buzzers such as Andika and his peers are persistent in their work. As a buzzer might not always be on stand-by to monitor the link, the work has to be collective. "If one video goes down, one of us will upload the other. Whoever has a free hand has to do so. Then we will have the video streaming for another day. If that one is taken down, we will continue to do the same. But we have other ways [read: channels] too, there is WhatsApp and Telegram. Then our team could just circulate it to other chat groups", Fahrul said (interview, 9 February 2017). With such intensity to maintain

the chat flow and content circulation, the task of being a member of FPI Media Team has become a labor-intensive routine. In our interviews, my interlocutors checked their phones regularly within minutes, an embodied habitus they could not resist.

Buzzers are diligent viral marketers. Their pseudo conversation with the public and their efforts to keep the related online visual material afloat could be regarded as classical agenda-setting strategies (see, McCombs, Shaw, & Weaver, 2014; Yang, Chen, Maity, & Ferrara, 2016). By keeping FPI's posts "up trending", they propagate obtrusive hate speech, social exclusion, and other problematic messages to acquaint the public with symbolic violence and various forms of othering.[14] Mocking the opposition as "sepilis", or "sissies", or connoting jihadism as heroism, becomes a regular media content for those sympathetic to FPI's cause. As a normalization of problematic social media messages, the regular circulation incites a familiarization of the bigotry expressions among FPI's audience. Studies (e.g., Archetti, 2015) on radicalism and fundamentalism show that the effort to counter the movement by overwriting the fundamentalists' narrative is fruitless since they are loyal to their own. To counter such challenges, several studies suggest that scholars should detail the actors' online and offline sociability (Ducol, 2015) and look at how such actors form community identity (Archetti, 2015; Lim, 2005) as a configuration of radicalism and fundamentalism. If identity and sociability are to be taken into account as dimensions of radicalization or fundamentalism, then it is important to identify the actors who shape and manage collective identity on daily basis. In such formations, buzzers should no longer be viewed simply as digital mercenaries, but as actors who craft the community's reference group in maintaining fundamentalist's online sociability by soliciting the public's attention through their regular chats and comments. As operators, FPI buzzers are the guardians of the formation of fundamentalist Islamic associative norms which eventually make the presence of FPI in the public relevant.

When he could not have his hand on the action, Andika would ask some of his friends, although they are not FPI members, for help (*minta tolong*) to revive the broken link with another, live, video link. Such practice is possible because friends perceive that they are in a common fellowship under Islam, or simply just because they are friends and ought to help. Such decentralized network management, which relies on individual capability-based contribution and solidarity, actually echoed what Bennett and Segerberg (2013) denote as "connective action". Although dealing with a completely different case study – Bennet and Segerberg's actors were involved in pro-democratic campaigns – Andika's network applies similar modes of operation through which they accomplish their "movement's" goal by engaging with their personal networks while executing bottom-up contributions. They make sure that FPI's posts and videos are always available for the online public, with the person who executes the task not necessarily having to be a member of the organization and without needing direct operational guidance from the organization. As a daily operation, keeping the video viral does not need oversight from FPI's Media Team.

A by-product of such collective media practice is a sense of collectivity that strengthens the feeling of solidarity among buzzers and their peers. The sense of collectivity plays a crucial role in forming solidarity among FPI buzzers to the degree

14 On agenda setting and obtrusiveness, see Shafi (2017).

that they do not consider themselves to be buzzers since the term is connotatively related to a paid job. Instead, they view themselves simply as "persons helping around [*bantu-bantu*] to spread the information" (interview with Bahar, Andika, Gege, and Fahrul, 5 March 2017). Andika and his network are not members of the Muslim Cyber Army (MCA), a group of paid buzzers from whom they seek to distance themselves (interview with Bahar, Andika, Gege, and Fahrul, 5 March 2017). While justifying their activities as a materialization of the spiritual call, they look down on those who do the same for economic reasons, like those working with the MCA network. Such pride became very apparent after MCA members were arrested for hate speech in late March 2018. "They got paid. [That is why they got caught]. We do this from the heart [*dibayar sih, kalau kita kan pakai hati*]", Fahrul commented on the arrest of MCA members (interview, 20 April 2018). This sense of collectivity and group solidarity has also encouraged buzzers to go offline as will be shown in the following section.

Astroturfing and Banner Spatiality

The second role of FPI's buzzers is to independently organize community outreach. "Most of us [the people] have handphones [read: smartphones], but sometimes they do not really read or people have limited internet data quotas, so we need to disseminate the information when we meet the person", explained Andika about the role of buzzers in offline space (interview, 18 August 2017). For them, making online news go viral does not make offline persuasion irrelevant. Similar to Bode's (2016) findings in the US that there is a discrepancy between "learning politics" from social media and actualization, in the FPI buzzers' experience, news or post updates alone cannot mobilize people.

The first #aksiBelaIslam rally took place on 14 October 2016. It was symbolically initiated after a Friday prayer as a religious movement. The third rally was even organized as a mass Friday prayer in Jakarta's National Square on 2 December 2016, which was later claimed by Islamic fundamentalist media outlets as the world's largest Friday prayer (Redaksi Eramuslim, 2016a). Before these rallies, several *khatib* (preachers) sympathetic to FPI's cause had urged the *ummah* to join the rally in their Friday service sermons (interview with Habib Muchsin Alatas, 17 February 2017). It was the buzzers' role to persuade the preacher in their neighborhood face-to-face to support the rallies. When encountering a disagreement, or when the preacher refused to endorse FPI's rallies, FPI buzzers would ask the preacher to simply announce the upcoming rally to the *ummah.* Rather than it being the preacher's responsibility to urge people to participate, it would then become the *ummah's* decision as to whether they would join the rally. Having the rallies on Fridays is not only symbolic, but also organizationally advantageous since buzzers can effectively mobilize masses which have already flocked in mosques. Fahrul explained, "It is not difficult [to gather masses], we do not even use megaphone. We simply ask them directly [face-to-face] after the prayer, who wants to come should go together" (interview, 5 March 2017).

The FPI buzzers interviewed for this study stated that FPI has no definite "rules" (*aturan*) or "guidance" (*arahan*) advising them to organize offline initiatives to gather people to join FPI events, but such practices were already common when they joined FPI (interview with Bahar, Andika, Candra, Dilman and Ersha, Fahrul, and Gege, 5 March 2017). Fahrul recounted that the discipline as a field operator to mobilize

masses, or in his expression to "gather fellow Muslims", was actually "activated" (*mulai*) through the regularities of his online chats when he invited his followers to join FPI events (interview, 18 August 2017).[15] Before any of the events, fellow media officers would share information about how many people would come with them to the event. This information was shared initially simply for organizational reasons in order to calculate how many people would be in attendance. Over the course of time, however, the numbers became status symbols. The more people a buzzer could gather to participate in the event, the higher the recognition and respect s/he will receive from other FPI members.

Besides sharing the information about the number of expected participants, buzzers will also send a picture of a banner from the local neighborhood stating that the local neighborhood is supporting or participating in an FPI event. During the time of the #aksiBelaIslam rallies, banners with statements such as "We, the community of [name of the neighborhood] supports FPI and Habib Rizieq Shihab" were commonly found in Pancoran Barat area and its neighboring districts. Such banners were hardly the products of a community effort, but rather attributable to the buzzers themselves. During the early years, there was indeed a coordinated effort by the FPI Media Team to hang banners; today, most buzzers carry out the initiatives on their own which includes designing, collecting donations from the local community to print the banner, and hanging the banner themselves.

Beyond its role as a physical artifact of the ideology, offline banners and their digital versions are generated representations of claims to source legitimation that there are public supports for FPI's actions. For example, one of the banners Andika had printed states: "The steward and congregation of Jami' Baiturrahim Mosque is supporting Habib Rizieq Shyihab's [*sic*] struggle [*Pengurus dan Jamaah Masjid Jami' Mendukung Perjuangan Habib Rizieq Syihab* [sic]]" (Figure 1). A sentence in smaller font above the line as a header says: "Defending the Ulama until we die [*Bela Ulama Harga Mati*]".[16] Thus, hanging banners is important for two reasons. First, the banner works internally as a sign of visual solidarity for FPI sympathizers, signifying that they are not alone, and that expressing sympathy for FPI activities is not an isolated phenomenon. As such, it creates an impression among those who are already sympathetic to FPI's cause that the organization is gaining collective support. Second, the banners function as public awareness campaigns, representing the continual presence of the organization and its fundamentalist discourse in the offline space. Taken together, since the banners are very visible on the street and pictures of them will be posted on FPI-related social media accounts, they become a signifier of a claim that seeks to influence public perception in obtrusive messaging that there is a local initiative to support FPI and that there is a growing number of neighborhoods supporting it. Among political and communication strategists, these sets of constructed visual evidence and claims of mass support are known as astroturfing.

Astroturfing is an effort to manipulate public perception by fabricating visual evidence, like the FPI banners or high-traffic online chats, as a signifier that there is an

15 "*Dimulainya dari situlah, kita sudah sering chat. Kan mengajak ke jalan Islam agama kita* [It was started from that (online practices), we had already chatted regularly, and invited people to the path of Islam, our religion]."

16 The literal translation is "Defending Ulama costs life".

emerging or growing grassroots support – the product of bottom-up aspirations – for a certain organization, individual, cause, discourse, policy, or product, where in reality such support is actually minimal or non-existent. The visual sign is expected to attract larger public awareness to the issue. As grassroots movements frequently claim to represent people's aspirations, such messaging, which hides the identity of the actual sponsor or organization, is more appealing to a public that could have directly rejected the propagation. Because such operations fake the existence of grassroots aspirations, the actions are referred to as "astroturfing" after AstroTurf, a brand of artificial grass. With its symbolic meaning of grassroots presence, taking down an FPI banner, therefore, is considered to be an act against the presence of the Islamic community. This is also why one of the FPI's very first acts of violence, described in the previous section above, occurred only after one of their banners was taken down.

Figure 1. One of Andika's banners. (Own documentation, Jalan Mampang Prapatan XIV, Jakarta, 18 August 2017).

Andika's banner was raised about 800 meters away from his mosque.[17] Deciding on the location for a banner requires careful calculation.[18] Since a mosque normally has other banners related to its regular activities, it would be counter-productive to

17 The banner is situated between point 3 and point 6 on Figure 2 (calculated with OpenStreeMap. GPS Data Source: https://osm.li/5yB).

18 Interviews with Bahar, Andika, Candra, Dilman and Ersha, Fahrul, and Gege, 11 February 2017; with Andika and Fahrul, 19 February and 18 August 2017; with Ersha, 19 and 20 February 2017.

hang FPI banner nearby. Too many banners will only result in information overload and confusion for the readers. Thus, the FPI banner should stand alone to attract public attention, but still ought to be near the mosque. A common location is public space that people frequently pass, such as at the nearest street corner. Buzzers will also check this spot from time to time to see whether a new banner has been raised near their own. If that was the case, the other banner would need to be taken down, since the presence of another banner is considered to distract the reader's focus from the FPI banner.

1: Location of several vertical banners (*umbul-umbul*) from Andika's Islamic study club.
2: Location of a banner advertising an event organized by Andika's Islamic study club.
3: Grand Mosque Sub-districts (Masjid Raya), Andika's mosque for Friday prayers.
4: Location of the first banner which signifies that a person is entering a community.
5: Location of the second banner that declares the community's support for FPI.
6: Community mosque, Andika's daily mosque.
: Other mosques.

Figure 2. The location of the banners and the related mosques. (Own mapping, drawn with Maperitive).[19]

19 The map covers an area of around 2 x 1 km (calculated with OpenStreetMap).

To increase the emotional connections, banners are best positioned between two mosques to mark a connecting route between them. Accordingly, as virtual corridors, they act as "availability heuristics" (Fuller, 2004) which become constant reminders of the FPI's current public engagements and the narrative it circulates on social media. Although these mosques might have different schools of thought, the banners denote the commonalities between the *ummah* as fellow Muslims. They create an offline path that forms urban street corridors (Figure 2) or a religious mental alley that leads the *ummah* from one mosque to another within FPI's labyrinth of mosques. In short, the role of banners is important for the FPI not only as a signifier of public presence, but also to show how the masses will be physically moved and mobilized.

Displaying a banner in Indonesia is actually regulated by law.[20] However, state monitoring is rather a form of cherry-picking as it applies only to business advertisements and party-based political campaigns. While advertising banners are taxable and regulated provincially,[21] party-based political campaign banners are regulated by the National Election Commission (*Komisi Pemilihan Umum*)[22]. FPI banners and posters are neither advertising nor political campaigns and fall under the category of informational public displays of a civil society organization, which is hardly regulated.[23]

Visually seeing a banner seems mundane, but the unregulated display provides flexibility for buzzers to expand their propaganda spatiality. This was also evident during the 2017 Jakarta gubernatorial campaign, when some banners claimed that those who voted for Ahok would be denied an Islamic funeral (Batubara, 2017). Such banners conveyed messages of exclusion and acted as a form of symbolic violence in the public space against those who supported the democratic freedom to vote. What threatens democracy, then, is not the #aksiBelaIslam rallies, but the continual presence of FPI messages in public space that conveys violent models of religious interpretation. With their chats, comments, post circulations, and banners, buzzers function as a machinery of violent actors while ensuring the normalization of anti-social behavior among the public through which a radical mind and sociability is shaped.

CONCLUSION

Recent studies suggest that there is a relationship between the rise of right-wing

20 The main legal reference for displaying a banner in public space is the *Undang-Undang Republik Indonesia Nomor 40 Tahun 1999 tentang Pers* (Law No.40/1999 on Press), particularly articles 5 and 13, which stipulate that any commercial displays or mass communication shall refrain from offending people of different religions, ethnicities, and races.

21 For example, *Peraturan Daerah Khusus Ibukota Jakarta Nomor 9 Tahun 2014 tentang Penyelenggaraan Reklame* (Provincial Regulation for the Special Capital Region of Jakarta No. 9/2014 on Billboards).

22 See *Peraturan Komisi Pemilihan Umum Nomor 23 Tahun 2018 tentang Kampanye Pemilihan Umum* (General Elections Commission Regulation No. 23/2018 concerning General Election Campaigns).

23 There is no specific regulation for civil society organization's mass communications. The main legal reference to regulate the matter is the *Peraturan Pemerintah Pengganti Undang-Undang Republik Indonesia Nomor 2 Tahun 2017 tentang Perubahan atas Undang-Undang Nomor 17 Tahun 2013 tentang Organisasi Kemasyarakatan* (*Interim Emergency Law* [literally: Government Regulation in Lieu of Statue] No.2/2017, Concerning the Amendment to the Law No. 17/2013 on Civil Society Organization), particularly article 59, which states a general provision that civil organizations are forbidden from engaging in "hostile activities towards tribes, religions, races or classes".

politics, be it conservatism or religious fundamentalism, and identity construction (Lim, 2009), community (Archetti, 2015), actors' sociability (Ducol, 2015; Huey, 2015), patron-client relations in political economy (Mudhoffir, 2017; Petrů, 2015; Wilson, 2015), the operation of charismatic leadership (Gendron, 2017), and mobilization through social media (Howard & Hussain, 2011; Messing & Westwood, 2014; Timberg, 2016). These are calls to detail the operations of right-wing and fundamentalist online machinery associated with how the radical mind and violence take shape. The continuity of FPI's raids over the course of its twenty-year history and the series of #aksiBelaIslam rallies underscore how the organization has mastered mass mobilization and has acquired the resources necessary to manage a regular show of force. This paper, accordingly, details the role of buzzers as social media influencers who normalize anti-social behavior in the online scape and mobilize people by transforming online narratives into offline spaces. This, in turn, establishes the ecology for FPI's expansion.

Although FPI leaders play the role of the charismatic leaders at the center, their persona is crafted through continuous labor of publicity that relies on the technically capable buzzers as the supporting actors who also shape and mobilize the community of supporters. FPI buzzers are innovative in creating from-below initiatives through which knowledge of mass communication becomes part of the organizational culture, such as was the case with the printing of banners as astroturfing and regularly approach the potential *ummah* after Friday prayers. Detailing the technicalities of the presence of FPI's online-to-offline messages, such as reviving broken weblinks to raising banners, is crucial to understanding the agency of FPI actors and their capacity to expand their media spatiality.

The regular activities of FPI buzzers in the everyday life also exemplify that it is also necessary to reconsider the popular assumption that buzzers are simply paid digital mercenaries in the service of a master but not a message. Beyond the scope of political and economic motives, operators like Andika and his fellows did not receive any salary from the organization and perform their duty as a collective with the confidence that their actions are a representation of Islamic voices. Their personal gain is a spiritual one – may that be religious altruism or a secure feeling of having a stable Islamic community. Altruism as an experience becomes stronger since in return, as a result of their effort, there is an emerging presence of public support, which in their view justifies their actions.

Assessing such experience, they also believe that the events around the series of rallies took place within the norms of political communication, and that violent content and othering posts were acceptable within that frame. Telling them that their established practices are anti-democratic is confusing to them. In sum, rather than taking the path to determine whether FPI success in mass mobilization is the outcome of ideology or politics, this paper argues that although the development of Islamist solidarity and political Islam among the sympathizers might be ideological, it most certainly emerges from technical procedures and organizational management. The practice is neither emotional nor impulsive; it requires discipline and integrity.

The activities of FPI buzzers as part of fundamentalist agenda setting, albeit from-below, detailed in this study could raise the concern of echoing the positivistic approach of cultivation theory (Morgan, Shanahan, & Signorielli, 2015) as this article

has not discussed the audience's agency in decoding the messages. The ability of FPI buzzers in gathering new participants through strategies of publicity and persuasion in the offline space, however, undeniably shows such a tendency. The crucial issue to highlight here is to understand the technical role of buzzers as the machinery of violence in mundane everyday life as it precipitates mobilization and how the masses can be threaded together.

Consequently, the counter action to wide-spreading religious fundamentalism should also be organizational. Promoting secularism or the offering of a counter ideological narrative would be fruitless since FPI buzzers are already convinced that they are speaking on behalf of the greater good of all Muslims. It is then crucial for democratic actors to counter fundamentalism by contesting FPI's mediated charisma by offering Islamic communities new charismatic leaders who promote democratic values using hip tropes, like Somad and Smith, while providing an equally strong buzzer network. Democratic discourses need more space making activists; and those activists need the discipline and integrity of buzzers like Andika and his networks.

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