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DIGITAL ACTIVISM AND POLITICAL CHANGE: CHALLENGES OF SOCIAL MEDIA'S IMPACT ON POLITICAL DEVELOPMENT

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Abstract

This research investigates the influence of social media on political change and the role of digital activism, with a particular emphasis on the obstacles of disinformation and polarism. The employed approach is a qualitative research examining literature pertinent to network society, political participation, and collective action theories. The findings indicate that social media enhances and broadens political mobilization by reducing participation barriers, enabling individuals to engage in political activity more inclusively. Nonetheless, obstacles such as political polarization and the proliferation of disinformation pose substantial impediments to the efficacy of digital engagement. In Indonesia, the polarization problem is intensified by using social media in political campaigns and social movements, with echo chambers and filter bubbles amplifying ideological distinctions. Moreover, pervasive disinformation disseminated via platforms like Facebook, WhatsApp, and Twitter frequently distorts public sentiment and erodes political movements' legitimacy. In conclusion, although social media possesses significant potential to enhance political engagement and organize the populace, the obstacles presented by polarization and disinformation impede the enduring efficacy of political transformation instigated by digital activism. Consequently, enhanced digital literacy and more stringent laws are essential to tackle these challenges and ensure that social media is a potent instrument for fortifying democracy.

Keywords: Digital Activism, Social Media, Political Polarization, *Echo Chambers*,

INTRODUCTION

Digital activism encompasses the strategic use of digital media and online platforms to initiate, organize, and amplify movements for social, political, or economic change. This form of activism aims to empower individuals and communities by enabling the rapid dissemination of information, fostering online communities, and mobilizing actions across geographic boundaries (Vegh, 2003). Digital activism has become one of the most influential tools in contemporary politics. Since the emergence of social media, various political movements have flourished, driven by these platforms' ability to facilitate communication, mass mobilization and rapid information dissemination (Howard & Hussain, 2013; Tufekci, 2017). Social media such as Twitter, Facebook, and Instagram allow users to share political views, organize protests, and even influence public policy (Earl & Kimport, 2011). This phenomenon

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creates new opportunities for citizens to engage directly in politics without the need for large organizations or resources, which were previously barriers to political participation (Loader et al., 2014).

However, behind the success of digital activism in driving political change, there is also a dark side. Several studies have shown that social media can be a space for disinformation, political polarization, and mass manipulation (Bradshaw & Howard, 2018). There are concerns that the use of social media in politics results in more "clicktivism," where individuals engage only superficially with no real impact on policy or political change (Morozov, 2011).

Many studies conducted in recent years have shed light on the critical role social media plays in promoting digital activism and global political mobilization. Nonetheless, a pivotal inquiry persists concerning how social media impacts the overarching political transformation process. This inquiry is especially pertinent in poor nations, where restricted access to technology and stringent internet rules can profoundly influence the results of digital activism (Howard & Hussain, 2013; Tufekci, 2017). Although a significant portion of the current literature emphasizes social media's influence on discrete protest movements, research investigating its enduring effects on systemic political growth is limited, particularly under such limitations.

This research seeks to fill this gap by examining the capacity of social media to foster sustained political development and stability, especially in developing countries. The main aims of this study are to examine the influence of social media on political narratives, assess the efficacy of digital activism in effecting significant political change relative to traditional activism, and identify the particular challenges and constraints that digital activism encounters within broader political frameworks.

This research will concentrate on three primary questions to achieve these objectives: In what ways does social media influence political narratives in developing nations? To what degree does internet activism effectively induce concrete political change compared to traditional activism methods? What restrictions and problems does digital activism encounter, particularly in politically and technologically restricted contexts?

This study employs a qualitative desk research methodology to investigate these inquiries, engaging with a wide array of

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literature on digital activism, political development, and pertinent theoretical frameworks, including network society theory and political participation theory. This method seeks to evaluate prevailing assumptions about social media's transformational influence in politics, providing new insights into the role of digital technology in promoting lasting political change.

METHODS

This research uses a qualitative approach with a literature study method to explore the impact of digital activism on political change through social media. This approach was chosen because qualitative methods allow researchers to deeply examine complex social phenomena, as well as examine various perspectives in the existing literature. Qualitative research provides sufficient space for researchers to conduct in-depth interpretations of secondary data obtained from various sources, focusing on how digital activism affects political processes in various social contexts.

The desk study method used in this research involved a systematic review of academic literature relevant to the research topic. The literature selected came from journal articles, books, research reports and other academic sources published in the last ten years. The main focus of the literature search was on topics such as digital activism, the impact of social media on politics, mass mobilization through online platforms, and case studies from various countries that have experienced political change due to the influence of social media. The search process was conducted through academic databases such as Scopus, Google Scholar, and JSTOR using keywords such as "digital activism," "social media and political change," and "online mobilization." The selected literacies will then be critically reviewed to identify their contribution to this research.

The data obtained from the literature was analyzed thematically. This thematic approach allows researchers to identify patterns and themes that recur across studies, such as how social media facilitates political mobilization, the role of digital activism in influencing policy, and the challenges faced by digital activism in driving sustainable political change. We will dig deeper into these themes and connect them to relevant theories, including political participation theory and network society theory.

RESULTS AND ANALYSES

This research examines a range of literature that focuses on the role of social media in

facilitating digital activism and its impact on political change. Through analysis of the identified literature, a number of key themes emerged that provide new insights into the relationship between social media and political development. Several relevant theories are used as a foundation to understand and explain this phenomenon, including Network Society Theory, Political Participation Theory, and Collective Action Theory.

Social Media as a Space for Political Mobilization: Network Society Theory

Network Society theory introduced by (Castells, 2015) states that structural changes in modern society are caused by shifts in information and communication technology, particularly the internet, which has created a network society.

In the context of politics, digital networks have revolutionized the way individuals and groups participate in the political process. Social media, as an important part of the network society, enables rapid and massive political mobilization without the need for rigid formal organizational structures. (Castells, 2015) emphasizes that platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube function as digital public spaces that are able to bring together political actors from various layers of society in a wider network.

Political mobilization through social media was highly visible in major political events such as the Arab Spring in 2011, where social media played a major role in mobilizing mass protests in several Arab countries, including Tunisia, Egypt, and Libya. (Puspitasari, 2021). Howard & Hussain, (2013) noted that in Egypt, the protest movement demanding the resignation of President Hosni Mubarak was widely coordinated through Facebook and Twitter, where activists successfully organized massive demonstrations. The use of hashtags, digital campaigns and viral videos moved public opinion quickly and beyond the boundaries usually imposed by government censorship.

This shows that social media has an important role as an efficient mobilization tool in repressive political contexts. One of the main strengths of social media in the context of political mobilization is its ability to accelerate the dissemination of information, whether in the form of news, political messages, or calls to action.

In a decentralized network structure, individuals can easily act as nodes that serve as information dissemination points. This allows any social media user to become a

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disseminator of political messages without requiring permission from authorities or other intermediaries. (Castells, 2015). In such networks, political power is distributed horizontally, giving marginalized groups greater opportunities to be heard in the public sphere.

However, it is important to note that political mobilization through social media is not just about speed and scale. There is another dimension that involves the construction of narratives in a networked society. Social media allows users to create, spread and consolidate certain narratives that direct how political events are understood by the public. In protest movements, for example, activists often use social media to create narratives that position them as representatives of justice or civil rights against government injustice. These narratives play an important role in attracting public sympathy and support, both domestically and internationally.

However, there are limitations that need to be considered. While social media provides space for political mobilization, there is a risk of fragmentation of overly decentralized social networks, which can lead to a lack of coordination in political movements. Bennett & Segerberg, (2012) refer to this phenomenon as "the logic of connective action", where political actors engage in individual rather than collective action. While this model may be successful in mobilizing initial participation, it often fails to maintain the sustainability and consistency of more organized political action, which can ultimately hinder real policy change.

In addition, there is also the phenomenon of "slacktivism" or "clicktivism" which refers to superficial political engagement through social media, where users only show political support by "liking" or sharing content without actually engaging in real action in the physical world. (Morozov, 2011).

This suggests that while social media can mobilize millions of users, its impact on political change is often more symbolic than substantial. Case studies of the Arab Spring, the Occupy Wall Street movement, and the protests in Hong Kong over the past few years highlight the importance of understanding the role of social media as a space for political mobilization. These movements have successfully utilized social media to expand their networks of supporters and amplify their narratives.

However, the challenges facing digital activism remain significant, especially when it comes to maintaining movement

momentum and achieving sustainable policy change. In many cases, after the initial phase of mobilization, these movements experience a decline in intensity, often due to a lack of organization and a more coordinated strategy beyond cyberspace.

The findings from this analysis underscore that social media creates a dynamic and accessible space for rapid and large-scale political mobilization in the digital era. However, the effectiveness of this mobilization is contingent upon the strategic coordination of collective actions that extend beyond digital interactions. Beyond merely serving as a mobilization platform, social media plays a pivotal role in constructing and disseminating political narratives, which can either empower or destabilize political movements depending on the framing and reach of these narratives.

While Network Society theory provides a valuable framework for understanding digital activism's structural and networked nature, this study offers a novel perspective by emphasizing the importance of integrating traditional elements—such as centralized leadership and coordinated offline strategies—with digital tactics. This integration could enhance the sustainability of political movements by combining the flexibility of digital mobilization with the structure necessary for consistent, real-world action. This refinement of Network Society theory highlights that the sustainability of political change requires networked connections and a deliberate blend of digital coordination with leadership and strategic planning, paving the way for more robust and enduring political transformation.

Digital Activism and Political Participation: Political Participation Theory

Political participation theory has been one of the foundations in the study of citizen engagement in the political process, emphasizing on various forms and intensities of participation, ranging from electoral activities such as voting to involvement in demonstrations and petitions. With the advent of digital technology, especially social media, the ways of political participation have changed significantly. Social media provides a space for political participation that is more inclusive and accessible to various groups of people, including those who previously may not have had access to traditional political channels.

In the literature reviewed, the use of social media for digital activism is growing as a new form of political participation. Traditional

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political participation theory emphasizes the importance of direct involvement of citizens in the political decision-making process, whether through elections, campaigns or demonstrations. However, with the advent of social media, the concept of political participation has become more complex and includes actions such as commenting on online forums, disseminating political information, participating in online petitions, and providing support in the form of "likes" or "shares" on social media. (Loader et al., 2014)

One aspect that has been debated is whether digital participation can actually translate into real political action or whether it is limited to "slacktivism" or "clicktivism." Slacktivism refers to a superficial form of political participation, where individuals engage only symbolically, for example by clicking a "like" button or sharing a link without taking concrete action for change (Morozov, 2011). (Morozov, 2011). On the one hand, social media makes political participation easier and more accessible to the general public. Citizens can easily voice their opinions and engage in political campaigns with just a few clicks. However, on the other hand, this kind of engagement is often not accompanied by more substantive actions, such as attending demonstrations or writing to political representatives, which were previously considered more traditional and tangible forms of political participation.

However, some studies have also shown that although slacktivism is often perceived as superficial political participation, it can still have a positive impact. In this context, social media can act as an important starting point to raise political awareness and facilitate further engagement. A study by Vaccari et al. (2015) found that while actions such as sharing political information online are often perceived as slacktivism, individuals who engage in these activities tend to be more motivated to engage in more traditional forms of political participation in the future, such as attending political meetings or taking part in protests.

Political participation theory also highlights how social media creates more inclusive forms of participation. Before the digital age, political participation was often limited by factors such as education, economic status and access to information. Individuals with higher educational backgrounds or access to political resources were typically more engaged in the political process. However, with the advent of social media, political participation has become more decentralized and inclusive, allowing people from different

backgrounds to participate in political discussions (Gil de Zúñiga et al., 2012). This opens up new spaces for political participation that no longer rely on traditional hierarchies or structural barriers.

In this context, social media can be seen as a more inclusive extension of the public sphere, where anyone with internet access can participate in political debates. That way, political participation is no longer only monopolized by a handful of elites or those with access to formal political resources, but is also open to ordinary citizens who may have previously been marginalized from the political arena. This theory is closely related to what Habermas calls the public sphere, where political discussions take place openly and equally among citizens (Habermas et al., 2014). (Habermas et al., in Singh, 2012)

However, despite the inclusivity offered by social media, there are also challenges that need to be considered. One of the main issues is the emergence of echo chambers or filter bubbles on social media, where individuals are only exposed to information that supports their own political views, thus reducing interaction with different ideas (Sunstein, 2018). In this situation, political participation through social media may not create a healthy dialogue between different political groups, but rather reinforce political polarization. Echo chambers can limit one's worldview and reinforce confirmation bias, where individuals tend to only seek out and validate information that matches their own political beliefs.

One clear example of this challenge is the political polarization that occurred in the United States during the 2016 presidential election. Social media played an important role in disseminating information and mobilizing political participation, but it also reinforced political polarization between supporters of different candidates. Bradshaw and Howard (2018) point out that during this election, social media was used by political actors to spread disinformation and manipulate public opinion, which ultimately exacerbated political fragmentation among citizens.

Furthermore, while social media provides a platform for more inclusive political participation, it does not necessarily guarantee that all these forms of participation translate into real policy change.

Loader et al. (2014) suggest that while social media can increase the level of political participation among youth, there is a gap between digital actions and real political outcomes. Many political movements started

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on social media fail to lead to substantive policy changes due to a lack of coordination and clear strategies after the initial mobilization.

Thus, while political participation theory underscores the potential of social media as a new arena for digital activism, structural and conceptual challenges must be addressed to ensure that this participation moves beyond symbolic gestures and contributes to sustainable political change. For instance, movements such as the Arab Spring and the Occupy Wall Street protests illustrate how social media can initially mobilize large numbers of people and create a heightened sense of political engagement. However, despite the rapid mobilization enabled by social media, these movements struggled to achieve lasting policy transformation or deep political engagement without sustained offline organization and coordination.

These cases show that while social media can facilitate mass mobilization, it does not necessarily lead to significant political outcomes. Political participation via social media should be understood as part of a broader spectrum, where digital technologies can raise political awareness but often require complementary offline actions and strategic coordination to achieve tangible political change. In this context, social media catalyzes engagement, but sustainable political transformation relies on continuously integrating online and offline efforts.

Collective Action and Political Change: Collective Action Theory

The theory of collective action, first developed by Mancur Olson (1965) in his book The Logic of Collective Action, explains how individuals in large groups often have difficulty coordinating to achieve a common goal. According to Olson Jr, (1971)collective action requires significant effort and resources, and there is a tendency for individuals to "free ride" on the efforts of others without making a real contribution. In the context of political change, this theory suggests that collective efforts to achieve policy change are often hampered by coordination problems, apathy, or reliance on the contributions of a few motivated individuals.

However, with the advent of digital technology and social media, many of these barriers are beginning to erode. Social media allows individuals to participate in collective action more easily, quickly and cheaply. Platforms such as Twitter, Facebook and Instagram have revolutionized the way

collective action takes place, especially in the political context. Protests, demonstrations, and political campaigns that used to require large organizations and physical resources can now be organized and executed on a wider scale and in less time. Collective action theory is transformed in the digital world, where social media plays an important role in connecting individuals who share the same political goals and facilitating collective action.

In the context of social media, collective action can occur through two main mechanisms: network mobilization and online coordination. Network mobilization refers to the ability of social media to bring together people from different backgrounds, geographic locations and social groups into a unified movement. Social media allows individuals who initially had no political access or influence to become directly involved in political movements. For example, in the #MeToo movement that began in 2017, social media played a key role in uniting the voices of women around the world who spoke out about their experiences with sexual violence. The campaign quickly became a global collective action that had a real impact on public awareness and policy, including changes to laws in several countries related to sexual harassment and violence.

Meanwhile, online coordination refers to the way social media is used to organize and coordinate action efficiently without the need for formal organizational structures that are usually required in traditional political action. Bennett and Segerberg (2012) explain that social media provides flexibility in the form of what they call the "logic of connective action", where individuals can engage in political action independently without the need for rigid hierarchical structures. In this logic, individuals can act independently, but remain connected through digital networks, creating coordinated yet flexible collective action.

The most prominent example of this phenomenon can be seen in the Occupy Wall Street (OWS) protest movement in the United States in 2011. The movement used social media to coordinate thousands of people who gathered in Zuccotti Park in New York City to protest against economic injustice and corporate power. Although the movement had no formal leader or clear organizational structure, the coordination of actions and dissemination of messages took place organically through Twitter, Facebook and blogs. Although OWS ultimately failed to achieve major policy changes, the movement demonstrated that social media can facilitate large-scale collective action without the need

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to follow traditional models of political organization.

However, there are also significant challenges that arise from using social media in collective action. One of these is the fragmentation that can occur within the movement itself. While social media allows for rapid and broad mobilization, it can also hinder deeper and more strategic coordination. Without formal organizational structures, movements tend to be more prone to internal divisions, as each individual or small group can push a different agenda. This is seen in many movements that started on social media, where after a strong initial mobilization, momentum is often lost due to a lack of long-term vision and coordination. This was reflected in the Arab Spring movement, where although social media was instrumental in mobilizing the masses to overthrow authoritarian regimes, many countries struggled to maintain political stability after the initial protests. (Howard & Hussain, 2013).

Another challenge is dependence on technology. While social media allows collective action to take place quickly and without geographical restrictions, reliance on these technological platforms also creates new vulnerabilities. Political actors or government authorities can manipulate or control access to social media to stop or undermine collective action. For example, during protests in Iran and Turkey, governments used internet cuts or censorship of digital content as a way to silence protests and hinder coordination between activists (Tufekci, 2017).

This shows that while social media provides a powerful tool for collective action, it can also easily become a target for political repression through surveillance and technological control.

From the perspective of collective action theory, social media has overcome some of the traditional barriers faced by political groups in coordinating collective action. In traditional political action, the biggest challenge is often overcoming transaction costs and motivating individuals to get involved, especially if the benefits of the action can be collectively enjoyed by everyone, including those who do not contribute directly. Social media reduces these transaction costs by providing efficient, cheap and fast communication tools, allowing individuals to participate in collective action with relatively low levels of commitment. For example, using only a cell phone or computer, one can participate in a

global protest or political campaign without needing to be physically present at the protest site.

However, while social media facilitates collective action in a more efficient way, there is a risk that the long-term commitment of participants is weakened. Actions that start with digital mobilization often lose momentum if there are no physical actions or concrete results in a relatively short period of time. Tufekci (2017) argues that while movements such as the Arab Spring, Occupy Wall Street, and the Hong Kong protests were successful in mobilizing the masses through social media, many of them failed to produce sustainable policy changes due to the lack of continuity between digital and real-world actions.

The analysis shows that social media has provided a new platform for collective action in the political context, facilitating mass mobilization and coordination of action quickly and widely. However, challenges such as fragmentation, government control of technology, and the difficulty of maintaining long-term momentum show that collective action through social media still faces many obstacles. Collective action theory offers important insights into how political action in the digital age can succeed, but also warns us about the limits that political movements that rely on digital technologies may face.

The Challenge of Digital Activism: Polarization and Disinformation

In Indonesia, digital activism faces significant challenges in the form of political polarization and the widespread dissemination of disinformation. A prominent example is the 2019 Indonesian presidential election, where social media platforms like Facebook, WhatsApp, and Twitter became arenas for intense ideological divides. Supporters of different candidates were often isolated within echo chambers, where algorithm-driven content reinforced pre-existing biases, leading to heightened political polarization. Additionally, a significant volume of disinformation circulated across these platforms, frequently targeting sensitive issues such as religion and nationalism, which further inflamed societal divisions.

This example illustrates how polarization and disinformation can undermine the effectiveness of digital activism in Indonesia by creating fragmented audiences and fostering distrust. Applying Network Society and Political Participation theories, it becomes clear that while social media has the potential to democratize information and

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engage a wider audience, the challenges posed by echo chambers and misinformation significantly hinder these outcomes. For digital activism to promote constructive political discourse in Indonesia, there must be strategies to address disinformation and mitigate polarization effects, such as promoting digital literacy and implementing more robust content moderation policies.

These two issues are often major obstacles for political movements that rely on social media, as they can undermine healthy political dialog and exacerbate social conflicts. In some cases, instead of strengthening democracy, social media widens the gap between ideologically different groups and spreads false information that undermines the credibility of political movements.

One of the most troubling phenomena in the use of social media for political purposes is the rise of political polarization. Political polarization refers to the process by which society splits into ideologically opposed groups, and interactions between them become less and less hostile. This polarization is often reinforced by social media through *echo chambers* and *filter bubbles*. *Echo chambers* are online environments where individuals are only exposed to ideas and opinions that match their own political beliefs, while *filter bubbles* occur when social media platform algorithms filter the information users see based on their preferences, thus reinforcing existing biases. (Sunstein, 2018). Both phenomena reduce the possibility of dialog across different political groups and increase the level of suspicion and hatred between opposing camps.

Research by Barberá (2015) shows that social media accelerates polarization by grouping users by political affiliation. In a study of Twitter users in the United States during the 2012 presidential election, it was found that interactions among users with different political views were very limited, with most discussions occurring only among those with similar beliefs. This suggests that social media is more likely to reinforce pre-established groups than encourage open dialog between different political perspectives.

This polarization is not only happening in the United States, but also in other countries experiencing sharp political conflicts. In Brazil, for example, political polarization through social media peaked during the 2018 presidential election, where platforms such as Facebook and WhatsApp were used by

supporters of different candidates to spread political narratives that further deepened ideological divisions among the public (Resende et al., 2019). (Resende et al., 2019). This polarization is often not just limited to political debates, but also extends into social relationships, where families, friends and communities are divided based on different political views.

Besides polarization, another major challenge in digital activism is disinformation, or the spread of false information designed to mislead the public. Disinformation is often used by political actors to manipulate public opinion, destroy the reputation of political opponents and confuse voters. Social media provides an ideal platform for the spread of disinformation because it is fast, viral and difficult to control. (Bradshaw & Howard, 2018) in their study of social media manipulation around the world noted that strategically organized disinformation has become a highly effective political weapon, especially during elections and political campaigns.

One of the most high-profile examples of far-reaching disinformation is Russia's involvement in the 2016 United States presidential election. Through platforms like Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube, Russian-linked actors spread thousands of ads and posts designed to fuel polarization and create distrust of the electoral process. Much of the content disseminated contained misinformation or was deliberately distorted, aiming to divide American society based on sensitive issues such as race, immigration and human rights. (Bradshaw & Howard, 2018).

Disinformation is also often used to stifle digital activism movements. For example, during the pro-democracy protests in Hong Kong, the Chinese government and pro-Beijing actors used social media to spread false narratives that undermined the legitimacy of the demonstrators. The disinformation spread included false claims of violence by the protesters, as well as narratives that the movement was supported by foreign powers seeking to destabilize China. (Frenkel, S., Mozur, P., & Conger, 2019). This shows that disinformation is not only used to influence elections, but also to undermine social movements demanding political change.

The impact of disinformation on the political process is serious. In the short term, disinformation can confuse voters and undermine the legitimacy of election results. In the long term, it can undermine public trust

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in democratic institutions themselves. When the public is constantly bombarded with conflicting and unreliable information, they may lose trust in the media, politicians and even the political system as a whole. This can lead to political apathy, where people feel that there is no reliable information, making them reluctant to engage in the political process.

Moreover, the challenges related to disinformation are exacerbated by the fact that social media platforms are often slow or ineffective in addressing the spread of false information. While some tech companies such as Facebook and Twitter have taken steps to combat disinformation, such as introducing fact-checking and removing content that violates rules, these efforts are often not enough to prevent disinformation from spreading quickly. In some cases, these measures actually reinforce the narrative that these social media platforms favor one particular political group, thus exacerbating existing political polarization (Tufekci, 2017).

The 2017 Jakarta gubernatorial election is a prime example of how digital activism can drive political mobilization while intensifying societal polarization. Social media platforms such as Twitter, Facebook, and WhatsApp played central roles in the election, becoming spaces where supporters of different candidates engaged in polarized debates and amplified divisive narratives. These platforms enabled various political actors to leverage digital tools to promote their agendas, often through disseminating biased information and, at times, disinformation. This environment of 'algorithmic enclaves,' where users are primarily exposed to content that aligns with their pre-existing beliefs, significantly contributed to the rise of echo chambers, reinforcing ideological divides.

To illustrate the types of narratives and platforms involved in this digital polarization, Table 1 categorizes critical instances from the 2017 election. The table outlines the primary platforms used; the main narratives pushed, and the impact of these narratives on societal polarization. These examples highlight the double-edged nature of social media in digital activism. While it facilitates mass mobilization, it also serves as a medium for disinformation and ideological fragmentation, posing challenges to constructive political engagement.

Tabel 1

Case	Platfrom	Main Narrative	Polarization

Aksi Bela Islam #212	Twitter, Facebook, WhatsApp	Religion and Nationalism	Triggered large protests with Islamic identity and anti-government sentiments, intensifying religious-based polarization
Support for Ahok	Facebook, Instagram, Seword.com	Nationalism and Pluralism	Created conflict between Ahok supporters and conservative religious groups, fostering inclusive nationalism narratives
Use of "Buzzers"	Twitter, Facebook	Negative Campaigning vs. Positive Branding	Engaged political influencers to spread negative information against opponents, leading to hostility among supporter groups
Pro- and Anti-Ahok Websites	Seword.com (pro), portal-islam.co.id (anti)	Biased News, Hoaxes, and Fake Content	Deepened polarization by disseminating one-sided information reinforcing each group's prejudice

In the context of digital activism, polarization and disinformation create serious challenges for the success of political movements aiming for social change. While social media makes mass mobilization easier, it also creates a highly complex information battleground, where interested actors can leverage these technologies to undermine or divide political movements. (Gladwell, 2010) criticizes that while social media can accelerate initial mobilization, challenges such as disinformation and internal fragmentation often hinder the long-term success of digitally-initiated political movements.

In conclusion, the challenges of polarization and disinformation show that social media, while serving as an important tool for digital activism, is not without its drawbacks.

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Patterns of interaction on digital platforms tend to reinforce polarization, while rapidly spreading disinformation can undermine the credibility of political movements. Therefore, digital activists and policymakers need to develop more effective strategies to address these challenges, including improved digital literacy, stricter regulations against the spread of disinformation, and efforts to encourage more inclusive and open political dialogue on social media platforms. In a situation where polarization and disinformation increasingly dominate the digital landscape, it is important to ensure that social media can still serve as a space conducive to healthy and sustainable political participation.

Digital Activism and the Socio-Political Dynamics of Indonesia

Indonesia, as one of the countries with the largest population of social media users in the world, has become a hotbed of digital activism, utilizing platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, WhatsApp, and Instagram to spread political messages, mobilize support, and conduct social protests. Since the 2017 Jakarta elections and the 2019 presidential elections, social media has become a dominant arena in Indonesian politics, both as a means of mobilization and as a space for narrative battles between different political groups.

One of the unique characteristics of digital activism in Indonesia is the widespread engagement of the public in political discussion and mobilization through social media. Study by(Lim, 2017) shows that social media such as Twitter has become an important platform for political participation in Indonesia, especially in disseminating information and building political solidarity among urban communities. This phenomenon was clearly seen in the case of Aksi Bela Islam (ABI) 212, where social media was used effectively to coordinate the millions of people who took to the streets in protest against Basuki Tjahaja Purnama (Ahok) on blasphemy charges. This movement shows how digital activism can accelerate mass mobilization in Indonesia in an unprecedented way.

However, as in other countries, a major challenge for digital activism in Indonesia is the increasing political polarization. According to a study by(Aspinall & Mietzner, 2019)(Aspinall & Mietzner, 2019), religious and ethnic-based polarization intensified during the 2017 DKI regional elections and the 2019 general elections, with social media playing a significant role in

exacerbating these tensions. Social media, especially Facebook and WhatsApp, are often used to spread narratives that divide Indonesians into opposing political groups, especially in the context of religion. Echo chambers and filter bubbles further reinforce this tendency, where social media platform algorithms promote content that aligns with users' beliefs, thereby reducing dialogue between groups with divergent views. (Syahputra et al., 2024).

This polarization is also exacerbated by the spread of disinformation or hoaxes, which has become a serious problem in Indonesia, especially during political campaigns.(Bünte & Thompson, 2023). Research by (Belinda et al., n.d.) (Belinda et al., n.d.) noted that political hoaxes became particularly prevalent during the 2019 elections, with disinformation content spread on platforms such as WhatsApp and Facebook often relating to sensitive issues such as religion and nationalism. This disinformation not only affected public perception of political candidates, but also exacerbated social polarization by generating sentiments of hatred and distrust between groups.

A concrete example of this phenomenon is the spread of hoaxes related to COVID-19 vaccinations during the pandemic. A study by Lee et al. (2022) found that disinformation about the COVID-19 vaccine was widespread on Indonesian social media, which affected public trust in the government's efforts to deal with the pandemic. Social media, particularly WhatsApp, was used as the main tool to spread false narratives related to vaccine side effects, conspiracy theories, and false claims that undermine the credibility of the government and health institutions.

The challenge of disinformation in Indonesia was also highlighted in a study by (Yunita, 2019)which shows that the Indonesian government's efforts through the Ministry of Communication and Information Technology (Kominfo) to combat hoaxes are often ineffective as the speed at which false information spreads on social media is much faster than efforts to regulate or verify facts. While the government has worked with social media platforms to remove content containing disinformation, the challenge remains significant, given the scale and volume of content spread.

In addition, polarization and disinformation also impact political participation in Indonesia. Study by Syahputra et al, (2024) shows that while social media facilitates broader political engagement, especially

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among youth, the polarization that results from interactions on social media often narrows the space for healthy political dialogue. This leads to deepening political fragmentation, where citizens tend to only engage with political narratives that align with their own views, without considering different viewpoints.

In Indonesia, one of the primary challenges for digital activism is finding effective ways to counteract the harmful effects of polarization and disinformation while still leveraging social media's capacity to engage large audiences and enhance political participation. To achieve this, improving digital literacy across the population is essential, empowering citizens to assess online information and avoid falling into echo chambers critically. Additionally, stronger regulations are required to combat the spread of disinformation on social media platforms, ensuring that these spaces can contribute positively to democratic processes rather than deepen social and political divides. By addressing these issues, social media can become a more constructive tool for democracy, promoting informed political engagement rather than intensifying societal conflicts

CONCLUSION

The findings of this study indicate that digital activism via social media holds significant potential to drive political change by mobilizing large groups and creating more inclusive opportunities for political engagement. However, the capacity of digital activism to bring about substantial policy change still needs to be improved, mainly due to the persistent challenges of disinformation and political polarization. These factors illustrate that while social media can serve as a powerful tool for engagement, it also has the potential to destabilize political discourse.

This study further emphasizes that frameworks such as Network Society, Political Participation, and Collective Action provide valuable insights into the complex interactions between social media, digital activism, and political transformation. Nevertheless, understanding the sustained impact of digital activism on political systems requires further research, particularly in developing countries where unique mediamedia'sal and technological conditions shape social media's role. Such in-depth studies are essential to fully comprehend how digital activism can be harnessed to foster resilient and constructive political change over the long term.

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