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Fake news practices in Indonesian newsrooms during and after the Palu earthquake: a hierarchy-of-influences approach

Febbie Austina Kwanda[a] and Trisha T. C. Lin [b,c]

[a]International Master's Program in International Communication Studies, College of Communication, National Chengchi University, Taipei, Taiwan; [b]Department of Radio & Television, College of Communication, National Chengchi University, Taipei, Taiwan; [c]Taiwan Institute for Governance and Communication Research, Taipei, Taiwan

ABSTRACT

The viral dissemination of fake news threatens news organizations in Indonesia, with many social media users exhibiting a decrease in their trust of traditional media, as well as limited digital literacy. To investigate fake news during natural disasters, this mixed-methods study examines information patterns and journalistic practices of three news organizations during the 2018 Palu earthquake and tsunami. First, online observations of disaster-related fake news cases on social media provide insights into how fake news was handled by three types of news media. The results show that when fake news concerned factual scientific evidence, news organizations unanimously used the government statements to debunk disinformation. In contrast, political or religious fake news had long lifecycles of polarized debates between pro-government groups and opponents. Using the Hierarchy-of Influences Model, in-depth interviews showed that individual-level journalistic professionalism mattered when tackling fake news reports, with some local practices differing from Western journalism approaches. At the routine level, news professionals treated the government as the authority to debunk controversial, high-risk fake news by presenting news only after official clarifications, while independent media tended to present balanced reports with diverse views. Additionally, interviewees revealed that organizational policies in relation to media types greatly influenced the handling of fake news practices in Indonesian newsrooms.

Introduction

Fake news has been growing throughout social media venues and has become a serious problem in many countries, as the fabricated contents are presented as verified newswriting or social media posts that can mislead readers to believe fictional information, resulting in negative socio-political impacts (Waisbord, 2018). In this study, fake news is seen to be similar to deliberate disinformation. Fake news is defined as false information intentionally produced by people with personal or malicious agendas that disregard or misrepresent evidence, which is then diffused unintentionally by internet users (Klein &

Wueller, 2017). Consuming fake news can steer people away from accurate information or 'truth', influence their perceptions and choices, or even result in violence (Allcott & Gentzkow, 2017; McGonagle, 2017). Alongside declining trust in news media, journalists have been facing growing challenges in dealing with an increasing level of fake news and disinformation (Pangrazio, 2018). Tandoc, Jenkins, et al. (2018) have also pointed out that widely consumed fake news content could compete with audiences' attention to professional journalism. What is worse is that journalists are sometimes accused of producing fake news when they make minor mistakes (Wishart, 2017). Furthermore, some reputable news media outlets have been criticized for, or accused of, spreading fake news (Balod & Hameleers, 2019).

Recent scholarship about fake news has made efforts to define and conceptualize fake news (Klein & Wueller, 2017; Tandoc, Lim, et al., 2018). Some have investigated the development of fake news, including the impact of social media use on fake news dissemination (Bârgăoanu & Radu, 2018). Others have analyzed fake news in political cases such as the 2016 U.S Presidential Election (Ross & Rivers, 2018). Comparatively few fake news studies have been conducted in non-Western contexts (Balmas, 2014). For example, Kaur et al. (2018) examined the misinformation ecosystem among eight Asian countries. Balod and Hameleers (2019) found that journalists in the Philippines perceived their roles to be watch dogs and 'truth crusaders' (p.8) who advocate societal reform in response to mis- and disinformation. Yet, to the best of our knowledge, there is scant mixed-methods research to examine newsroom practices to debunk or combat fake news in Asia.

With a substantial social media population of 160 million users (Datareportal, 2020), Indonesians inevitably encountered fake news problems. A 2018 survey shows that social media here have become the preferred medium for news consumption; yet more than 80% of respondents admitted to encountering fake news on social media platforms. About half of respondents could not distinguish facts from fake news (Eka, 2018). Fake news issues are complicated by low digital literacy levels and social polarization in Indonesia (Mokhtar, 2019). Indonesian media have faced a sharp decline of trust since 2015 (Kepercayaan Publik Terhadap Media, 2018), and rampant fake news and false information further increase challenges for journalists who are responsible for creating and disseminating factual information (van der Meer et al., 2017).

Constrained by decades of authoritarian regimes, Indonesian journalism faced censorship control with limited freedom of speech before the 1998 political reforms (Ekayanti & Xiaoming, 2017). Post-1998, a market-driven model has increased the numbers of media outlets and journalists, whilst new concerns emerged, such as an oligarchic media system that promotes certain interests (Hanitzsch, 2005; Steele, 2011; Tapsell, 2012). The shift from a government-controlled to a conglomerate-owned news environment has increased press freedoms as well as intervention from media owners. Western journalism emphasizes the independence of the media from the government, positioning itself as the fourth estate to overseeing socio-political issues. In contrast, the perceived 'watchdog' role of Indonesian journalism is different from its Western counterpart because journalists tend to be more cautious in news publishing practices by avoiding overly aggressive approaches (Pintak & Setiyono, 2010). Indonesian news reporting primarily publishes information verified by government or other authorities and leaves little room for critical investigative journalism (Hanitzsch & Hidayat, 2012).

When crises like natural disasters occur, journalists are challenged to maintain standards under huge time pressures (van der Meer et al., 2017). The public wants quick updates from social media, which exposes them to unchecked information or fake news. This study examines non-Western journalistic practices during the disaster-related fake news that happened during the Palu earthquake and tsunami on 28 September 2018. With more than 2000 deaths and a badly damaged telecommunication infrastructure, social media were heavily utilized by the public to receive frequent updates and to locate missing people immediately afterwards. However, several varieties of fake news about the disaster were also rampant on Facebook and WhatsApp, which caused societal tension. For example, fake news content about aftershocks and a broken dam were widely circulated online (Tani, 2018). The Ministry of Communication and Information (MCI) held a Press conference on 2 October 2018 to debunk several incidents of post-disaster fake news. Indonesian news media subsequently used these official announcements to clarify information appearing in fake news reports, showing the key role that government would take to combat fake news.

To address the research gap in this area, this article examines the information patterns and flows of the post-disaster fake news reports, and investigates the practices to debunk fake news among three types of Indonesian news media organizations. The findings shed light on Indonesian fake news information patterns and newsroom practices during and after disasters. The findings provide practical insights in this rarely investigated area as well as advancing theoretical understanding.

Literature review

Asian journalism in Indonesia

According to Hanitzsch et al. (2011), Asian journalists regard themselves as interventionists who advocate values, ideas, or changes. Compared with Western journalism, Asian journalism tends to downplay a watchdog role, emphasizes harmony and supportiveness, and avoids causing conflict (Massey & Chang, 2002). Hanitzsch (2005) regarded Indonesian journalists as educated but timid watchdogs who are responsible for reporting verified, neutral, and precise information. Owing to cultural diversity and societal polarization, Indonesian journalists cautiously avoid conflict-provoking newswriting (Hanitzsch et al., 2011).

Under decades of authoritarianism, Indonesian journalists have been criticized for avoiding conflict-oriented reporting and supporting the values that the government would like to instill in society (Pintak & Setiyono, 2010). After the abolishment of state control, Indonesian journalism was reformed into a free press system in 1988. Western journalistic values (e.g., objectivity or impartiality) were introduced to local journalists and turned Indonesian journalism into a profit-oriented business (Steele, 2011) in which news media owners' political interests may indirectly shape news content (Ekayanti & Xiaoming, 2017). Most Indonesian media outlets lean toward certain political agendas. Hence, Indonesian readers consume alternative media news and social media information for cross-checking the credibility of mainstream news (Fletcher & Park, 2017).

The combination of Western values (e.g., objectivity) and Asian values (e.g., harmony) found in Indonesian journalism is further complicated by media laws. Current ambiguous

laws could put Indonesian journalists at risk. For example, journalists may be imprisoned if they are framed for 'spreading false and uncertain news' or be penalized for 'insulting or criticizing' the government (Manan, 2018). Despite shared journalistic beliefs and ethics with Western journalism, the unique culture and context where Indonesian journalists routinely practice news reflect these Western values differently, especially in fake news debunking.

Journalism in the era of fake news

With declining media trust and viral fake news, news credibility has become increasingly crucial for the public across the globe; thus, journalists ought to work hard to deliver accurate information (Richardson, 2017). Yet, journalists may sometimes compromise their professionalism due to reality constraints. For example, Balod and Hameleers (2019) found that Filipino journalists who were overwhelmed by heavy workloads to debunk fake news may omit unverified information or publish content without proper fact checking. During Hurricane Maria in Puerto Rico, radio journalists used unverified information from victims in this natural disaster when reporting the crisis (Nieves-Pizarro et al., 2019). Egelhofer and Lecheler (2019) argued that fake news was weaponized to attack journalism to decrease its credibility, due to political purposes. Even worse, journalists were labeled as fake news creators when their narratives fit that of others' interests (Balod & Hameleers, 2019).

Post-disaster news practices

News media has played an important role for the public and victims affected by disasters (Ewart & Mclean, 2018). They can reassure the public that the government or certain institutions will perform their obligations during crises (Nieves-Pizarro et al., 2019). For example, after the Great East Japan disaster, local newspapers approached the disaster by providing hope to victims (Matthews, 2017). Australian newspapers reported Queensland's flooding and performed their Fourth Estate role by employing news framing to question or place blame and failure to someone (Ewart & Mclean, 2014). These studies showed that media roles and news practices differ in the contexts of disasters.

Despite different roles and journalistic practices, Tandoc and Takahashi (2017) noted that journalists can be distressed by having to cope with the aftereffects caused by natural disasters. News media have to compromise certain aspects of news quality while dealing with pressure from deadlines (Ewart & Mclean, 2018). During crises, journalists experience stress from news making and increasing demands to provide timely updates (van der Meer et al., 2017). The growing trend of post-disaster fake news have become complex challenges for newsroom practices (Tandoc & Takahashi, 2017).

Newsroom fact-checking

Fact-checking, which is defined as the act of checking the factuality of claims and clarifying misperceptions (Pingree et al., 2018; Vizoso & Vázqez-Herrero, 2019), has become routine practice in newsrooms to curb fake news. According to Graves (2016), five stages of traditional news fact-checking include choosing claims to check, contacting speakers, tracing false claims, dealing with experts, and showing news work. When fact-checkers question

original sources, they seek information to triangulate and ask experts for clarifications (Haigh et al., 2018; Vizoso & Vázqez-Herrero, 2019), and then publish accountable claims. Nowadays, fact-checking for fake news has become a critical task that require digital skill-sets and increased workload. Past studies emphasized fact-checking practices of political fake news (Vizoso & Vázqez-Herrero, 2019). Yet, there is little scholarly examination of fact-checking in Indonesian newsrooms, which is not limited to political fake news but includes news on natural disasters.

Methodology

This mixed-method study employed web observations and expert interviews to explore the post-Palu disaster's fake news phenomenon in Indonesia. This study aimed to answer the following research questions.

> RQ1: What kinds of information flow(s) and pattern(s) of disaster-related fake news mediated by online news could be identified during the Palu disaster?

> RQ2: How did news professionals in different types of media organizations handle post-Palu disaster fake news?

First, web observations were used to identify the information flow and patterns of Indonesian fake news during the Palu disasters by examining two salient cases to understand newsroom fact-checking practices. Observational results were later triangulated with self-reported interview data to strengthen the findings.

Next, in-depth interviews were utilized to investigate fake news practices during disasters in terms of news workers' individual characteristics, routine practices, and organizational influences within three types of news organizations (traditionally affiliated media, partially traditionally affiliated media, and independent, web-only organizations). This study adopted the hierarchy of influences (HOI) framework (Reese & Shoemaker, 2016) to examine the interview data, which were shaped by various internal and external influences (individual, routine, organizational, social institutions, and social system) (Ferrucci, 2018; Xu & Jin, 2017).

Study 1: web observation

Data collection and analysis

Web observations in this study identified key news media and salient fake news cases to understand information patterns and flow of the Palu disaster's fake news trajectories. As many Indonesian news media reported on the post-Palu disaster's fake news, we selected three major online news organizations on the basis of their varying affiliated relationships with traditional media. The observational results showed their fake news practices during disasters as well as their relationship between the parent companies.

The Indonesian media landscape is significantly dominated by media conglomerates (12 privately owned and one state-owned brands). Online news media affiliated or partially affiliated with traditional media dominate Indonesian media landscape. Known for peace journalism, *Kompas.com*, the first case categorized as traditional affiliated media, has a close relationship with its parent company *Kompas Gramedia,* the largest

conglomeration in the nation. Its videos on the website are derived directly from the affiliated TV station. *Medcom.id*, classified as partially affiliated with traditional media, is the second case under the media conglomerate *Media Group* owned by a politician. Its operation is relatively independent with in-house video production. Finally, *Tempo.co* is an independent, web-only news media without business or political ownership characterized by investigative journalism. Table 1 shows the observed news organizations' media types, background, ownership, and web ranking. Owing to readership and online traffic, *Kompas.com* was ranked higher than *Tempo.co.* in the top 13 media concentrations (Lim, 2012). Launched in 2017, *Medcom.id* has a relatively weak readership.

Based on web observations of three news organizations during and after the Palu disasters, two salient fake news cases which are a fake fact-based aftershock news item that originated on WhatsApp, and a story generated by the political organization *Front Pembela Islam* (FPI) were selected to analyze newsrooms' approaches to disaster fake news and to compare information patterns.

In the first case, an aftershock fake news item first circulated on WhatsApp, warning that another wave of earthquake and tsunami would strike shortly after the original Palu disaster, resulting in public panic. To increase content credibility, the WhatsApp author fabricated the story that a friend from the Indonesian National Board for Disaster Management had confirmed this aftershock prediction. For this study, we analyzed eight related news articles related to this fabricated story on *Kompas.com* (3), *Medcom.id* (2), and *Tempo.co* (3).

In the second case, a photo of volunteers from the politically active FPI organization in assisting evacuation procedure was posted on Facebook and was later debunked as fake news by the government. This incident caused disputes among people with polarized religious beliefs and partisan ideologies. After FPI claimed to be one of the first to provide aid at the disaster sites, the government argued that its Facebook photo was a hoax. As a result of the controversy, the pro-government and pro-FPI narrative disputes rapidly went viral. The independent media outlet *Tempo.co*-wrote (7) articles, followed by the partially traditionally affiliated *Medcom.id* (3) and *Kompas.com* (1). This case suggests that politically sensitive fake news information may be less frequently published in conservative, traditionally affiliated news media outlets than in independent media focusing on investigative journalism in Indonesia.

We collected relevant news reports and social media posts from the three selected news media. We then analyzed the numbers of published items, published dates, content presentation, and their similarities and differences. All of these analyses were conducted within a one-month period. According to search results using keywords for the Palu disaster's fake news (Palu earthquake hoax and Palu hoax) on Google Trends, the volume of online discussions peaked during the first week of the disaster (28 September 2018–2 October 2018),

Table 1. News organizations observed.

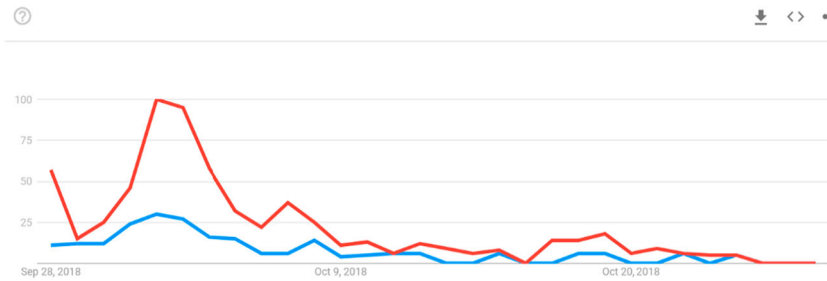| Category	News brands	Year launched	Ownership (Parent company)	Web ranking
Traditional media affiliated	Kompas.com	1995	Media conglomerate	8
Partially traditional media affiliated	Medcom.id	2017	Media conglomerate, political affiliation	>50
Independent web-only	Tempo.co	1995	Founded by a group of journalists	26

Figure 1. Online interests on post-Palu disaster fake news (Data source: Google Trends). Legends: Bottom line presents 'hoax gempa Palu' (Palu earthquake's hoax); Upper line represents 'hoax Palu' (Palu's hoax).

gradually declined afterwards, and diminished around 27 October 2018. 'Hoax' was used as the keyword due to it being the common term in Indonesia for fake news and both mis- and disinformation (Kaur et al., 2018). Figure 1 indicates search interest over time for Palu fake news as a proportion of all searches on all topics on Google at that time in Indonesia. The vertical axis represents popularity of the searched terms in response to all online searches. It shows that heated online searches and discussions of the Palu disaster's fake news took place in the first ten days after the fake news reports; the peaks on October 2 are congruent with the government's first debunking of the fake news, followed by news media reporting. The two keyword search results reflected similar patterns and spikes.

Findings of web-observations

Our web observations showed that the two fake news cases in three types of newsrooms had distinct patterns of fake news practices, in response to government debunking. We first analyzed the aftershock fake news originating from a WhatsApp message that fabricated authorities' forecast about next waves of destructive earthquake and tsunami. After the government officially tweeted to debunk this fake news, the three media published news that cited the official statement. *Kompas.com* (traditional affiliated media) and *Tempo.co* (independent media) elaborated on the mechanics of earthquakes and explained that no technologies could precisely predict when exactly an earthquake would occur.

The FPI case was closely tied to an active Islamic organization in Indonesia's political landscape. Although the MCI press conference labeled FPI's decision to place a photo in a fake context as a hoax, FPI representatives felt upset and tweeted that MCI was treating its visual aids as fake news. The issue went viral, when a post using misleading narratives positioned the government as the 'bad guy' in defaming FPI. FPI sympathizers regarded this incident as a serious accusation and disputed it, which led to spreading myriad versions of disinformation about the government's claim. To calm down the public, a second press conference was held to reaffirm the statement that the MCI criticism only targeted the incorrect photo.

As politics and religion are two sensitive issues for Indonesians, the public is regularly vocal in expressing opinions using social media features (e.g., share, tag, and comment) to spread their political or religious beliefs. Under censorship and regulations, news professionals tend to take extra caution in handling such topics. Observation results showed

that *Kompas.com* only had one conservative post that cited the government's statement. *Medcom.id* posted three reports: one elaborated on what the government had to say, and one statement was headlined with the ambiguous title of 'Hoaxes related to Palu earthquake.' In comparison, *Tempo.co*, an independent media, produced many related news items, including several FPI statements to balance reporting.

Given that disaster-related fake news can potentially cause societal unrest, news media seem more cautious in their reporting. Waiting for official confirmation was common practice across the three news media outlets. The public was left with no clarifications regarding the aftershock hoax until the government broke its silence and news media reported the government position to ease the people's panic. When the politically and religiously sensitive FPI case occurred, the government became part of the news. News media consistently restated the official clarifications, but independent media made an effort to balance their reporting to elaborate the controversies.

Study 2: in-depth interviews

Data collection and analysis

Through purposive and snowball sampling, we targeted key informants in each news organization, which took several months, to complete seven expert interviews in three news media (*Kompas.com*, *Medcom.id*, and *Tempo.co*). The small interview size resulted from difficulties in recruiting relevant and willing respondents for the sensitive topic. Those we interviewed worked closely with post-Palu disaster fake news, including reporters, editorials, and news decision makers, which provided saturated and quality answers with depth and breadth (Table 2).

Conceptual framework: hierarchy of influences model

The HOI model has been widely applied in past studies to examine news practices of environmental journalists (Figueroa, 2017), journalists in the Chinese model (Xu & Jin, 2017), and the production process of news on social media (Ferrucci, 2018). To examine Indonesian newsrooms' post-Palu fake news practices, this study used it as the conceptual framework in interviews and zoomed in on three levels (individual, routine, and organizational) for analyzing codes identified from literature review, research questions, and recurrent themes emerging from the data. The individual level focuses on the professionalism of news practitioners including role perceptions and journalistic values; the routine level involves technical or day-to-day news procedures (Ferrucci, 2018); the organizational level refers to the influences exerted by the managerial or editorial teams who decide the

Table 2. Interviewee list.

Code name	Media category	Position	Age	Gender
J1	Traditional media affiliated	Assistant managing editor	40	Female
J2	Traditional media affiliated	Assistant editor	26	Male
J3	Partially traditional media affiliated	Coordinator for news coverage	35	Male
J4	Partially traditional media affiliated	Regional editor	32	Male
J5	Partially traditional media affiliated	Regional editor	33	Male
J6	Independent, web-only	Editor-in-chief	40	Male
J7	Independent, web-only	Newsroom Fact-checker	35	Female

approaches to process and present news stories (Milojević & Krstić, 2018; Reese & Shoemaker, 2016). External influences of social institutions and system levels were not included because they were beyond the research scope.

Code scheme and data analysis

Table 3 summarizes the code scheme and their definitions. The individual level represents news professionalism with sub-codes of role perception and journalistic value (Reese & Shoemaker, 2016). Four codes are included at the routine level (information gathering, processing, distribution, and fact-checking) along with ten associated subcodes. The organizational level codes include editorial policy (Vergeer, 2018) and organizational culture (Idowu, 2017). Thematic analysis was applied to analyze the rich interview data, which were later triangulated with observation results.

Findings: interviews with news professionals

Thematic analyses of expert interviews reveal how factors at three HOI dimensions (individual, routine, and organizational levels) shape disaster fake news practices in the three newsrooms.

Table 3. Code scheme.

Code	Sub-code	Definition
Individual Level		
News professionalism		Perceived news professionals' principles, code of conduct and ethics as the fourth estate
	Role Perception	What news professionals believe about their occupation
	Journalistic Value	Value related to becoming a good news professional
Routine Level		
Information Gathering		Process of gathering raw materials to produce content
	Source Credibility	Sources that can account for their claims
	Timeliness	Ability to provide and publish relevant information in a timely manner
	Source Knowledge	Sources that possess relevant information related to an issue
Information Processing		Process of transforming information gathered into news
	Constructing	Ascribing newsworthiness to news content by emphasizing certain aspects of the information
	Correcting	Process of revising information by having content checked, rewritten, and/or editing errors
Fact-Checking		Act of correcting false claims and providing clarifications
	Choosing claims to check	Act of checking suspicious information
	Tracing false claims	Media footprint of suspicious information content
	Referring to Experts	Seeking experts' assistance to verify information
	Showing Results	Communicate findings through news content
Information Distribution		Using platforms (e.g., website and social media) to disseminate news to audiences
Organizational Level		
Editorial Policy		Organizational ideologies and rules that guide reports to produce and present news
Organizational Culture		Shared beliefs, philosophies, and norms among people working in an organization.

Individual level

In terms of professionalism, respondents regarded themselves as capable and trusted experts who were responsible for transmitting factual information by abiding to journalistic ideals. They emphasized the significance of verifying and delivering factual information. 'Our objective at that time (Palu disaster) was to ensure that all information was correct,' said J3, a news coordinator at *Medcom.id.*

Respondents' role perception was highly influenced by their journalistic values. Although respondents did not explicitly mention Western journalism as their benchmark, their remarks suggest that these values circulate widely in Indonesian newsrooms. For example, J4 stated that his newsroom (*Medcom.id*) emphasized news values such as objectivity. J6, the editor-in-chief at the independent media, stressed the importance of standing firm for journalistic values. Interestingly, J2 specified Western journalism as the standard journalism learned during his university years and stated that 'regardless of what nature the fake news is, my [journalistic] values remain unchanged … just like what I was taught in school, [the] values of Western journalism.'

In handling post-disaster fake news, some respondents followed other news making principles of Western journalism (e.g., transparency and non-partisanship), even if their routine practices may be different. In terms of debunking fake news, these values were further corroborated by their association with the International Fact-Checking Network (IFCN). Through certification (*Kompas.com* and *Tempo.co*) and training (all three media), IFCN's foundation for fact-checking included themes from Western journalism, such as non-partisanship or objectivity. Additionally, the interview data showed that they sacrifice news timeliness and independent surveillance by waiting for and believing in the government's position on fake news, as seen in our web observations.

However, the journalists' idealized values were not necessarily practiced as daily routines in Indonesian newsrooms. When dealing with politics-related post-disaster fake news, carefully handling news reporting to maintain a non-partisan and bias-free outlook and keep them from legal problems became complicated for journalists. Furthermore, only respondents from the independent media emphasized the significance of public education and media literacy to debunk disaster fake news. For example, J7 thought that several post-Palu disaster fake news became viral due to the public's insufficient knowledge and capabilities to appraise information truthfulness.

Routine level

Information gathering. Indonesian news professionals relied heavily on the government as a fake news authority. Respondents from three media acknowledged the government as a key source while debunking post-Palu disaster fake news. J2, an assistant editor of *Kompas.com* said, 'the government … had the access and rights to speak about this matter; of course, if it was a political fake news, we would source our information from other (relevant) sources.' Respondents further elaborated that aside from official statements, they utilized other verification means including sending on-site reporters. However, web observations found little to no support of this practice.

To avoid worsening fake news situations, J3, the news coordinator in the partially affiliated news media reminded reporters to always include official sources, especially in disaster fake news. Similarly, J1, *Kompas.com*'s assistant managing editor, trusted government sources for fake news checking as they had access to information that

journalists could not possess. Comparatively, *Tempo.co* admitted to the importance of the government as an information source yet remained skeptical of the government's agenda.

> There was a case (of Palu disaster) about supermarket raid that the government tried their best to cover this issue … turns out, due to imbalanced distribution of relief aids, some people had to resort to raiding the supermarket in order to survive. (J7, fact-checker, *Tempo.co*)

Only the independent media raised doubts about the government's agenda, which is similar to the fourth estate or watchdog concepts in Western journalism.

Although the inclusion of an official statement to debunk fake news might impede journalists' ability to provide timely information, most respondents thought that time was not necessarily an issue, compared with correctness. *Medcom.id*'s regional editor J5 said, 'accuracy is always prioritized,' whereas *Kompas.com*'s assistant editor, J2 said, 'being late is better than being wrong.' However, it would be hypocritical to suggest that time is not an important factor. In fact, Indonesian news professionals, when debunking fake news, might hold back information from the public because of routine practices of waiting for official clarifications and cautiousness in news reporting.

Information processing. After gathering relevant information, each newsroom had their own unique reporting approach. Articles on *Kompas.com* emphasized the recovery of Palu and not on debunking fake news. Assistant editor J2 said, 'journalists have been trained to report about the factuality of information and to enlighten the public,' and further added that journalists mostly limited themselves to clarifying information and minimizing sensational coverage of sensitive issues.

Respondents from *Medcom.id* stated that debunking post-Palu disaster fake news was one of their top priorities. This media outlet took a generalized approach in handling disaster fake news. In web observation results, *Medcom.id* mostly clustered several fake news articles into a single report without a defined angle or contextual background that could help readers make sense of news content.

Tempo.co's approach for post-Palu disaster fake news focused on balanced reporting and educating the public. Aside from providing factual information, respondents were aware that several post-Palu disaster fake news items could potentially mislead readers. For example, J7 mentioned that conflict-provoking fake news could agitate the public to believe that Palu's disasters resulted from God's punishment due to the current government. *Tempo.co* also emphasized the significance of providing contextual information, although our observations found discrepancies in practice, such as Tempo.co's own brief fake news reporting incident.

Fact-checking. Although fact-checking is a journalistic tradition, in the age of fake news, respondents at the three newsrooms stressed the necessity to learn to use digital tools (e.g., Google images) and upgrade fact-checking skills. Newsrooms put an emphasis on clarifying fake news, but their digital fact-checking practices were not mentioned in interviews, perhaps due to their novelty or lack of training. Across the three newsrooms, the selection of fake news to be fact-checked was based on editorial decisions to evaluate its virality and importance. J2 acknowledged that *Kompas.com*'s newsroom would debunk fake news, but also that different themes may carry different editorial weights.

Our observation results found that news media restated what the government had debunked (e.g., aftershock) or clarified the government's statements (e.g., FPI case) instead of examining facts and compiling evidence. Respondents in traditionally affiliated or partially traditionally affiliated media companies did not track false claims or contact the disinformation creator. Instead, when debunking post-Palu disaster fake news, no experts other than government officials were referenced. According to J6, *Tempo.co*'s editor-in-chief, experts were employed for fact checking of political news to provide balanced views. However, this approach was not applicable for post-Palu disaster fake news, as observations found no expert quotations or citations in the items challenging the fake news.

Finally, after fact-checking, news professionals would publish the results. According to respondents, they mostly relied on the official statement and the media outlet's reputation to convince the audience. Readers tended not to be concerned by affiliated fact-checking activities with these nationwide mainstream newsrooms, according to J4, *Medcom.id*'s regional editor, who noted, 'we have our own audience and they believe in our content quality.'

Information distribution. In addition to using news websites to distribute disavowals of fake news information, all respondents agreed that social media was the main vehicle of high audience engagement to combat disinformation. Interviewees such as assistant editor J2 or news coordinator J3 explained that since Indonesians are highly active on social media, harnessing the trend to expand their outlets' online presence was sensible for newsrooms. Given that post-Palu disaster fake news primarily emerged from social media (e.g., Facebook and WhatsApp), news media could address and correct fake news by being present on both platforms.

Organizational level

The interview data showed that editorial policy is the organizational factor that primarily shaped the approaches to handle disaster fake news in three newsrooms, and that organizational culture may help bolster certain news practices. With varying affiliation relationships and organizational characteristics, we next outline distinct differences among the media outlets.

Kompas.com is well-known for its 'peace-making' journalism, or content that 'inspires' audiences instead of sensationalizing the news or stirring up conflicts. Respondents recalled that editors had requested that journalists take a humane approach to write about Palu's recovery instead of destruction or death tolls. J2, assistant editor in this traditionally affiliated newsroom, could not recall specific policies to address post-Palu disaster fake news, but followed in-house editorial policy to minimize overblown coverage. Avoiding sensationalism was essential to responding to political or religious fake news, as in the FPI case, in the context of the Palu disaster.

> For FPI, we decided not to write much about them unless it is necessary or very important … in the case of Palu, it wasn't really necessary to bring up the topic as there were other more relevant issues, so we try to minimize content about them. (J1, Assistant Managing Editor, *Kompas.com*)

The editorial policy at *Kompas.com* had a clear stance of downplaying disaster-related fake news associated with politically sensitive elements, so as not to agitate audiences with polarized views and beliefs.

Medcom.id, the partially traditionally affiliated news media outlet, acknowledged the importance of debunking fake news. Its editorial policy for disaster news reporting emphasized a humanitarian approach, such as post-disaster recovery. Respondents stated that editorial policy was used to evaluate the selection of fake news to be debunked. J3 stated that political news tended to be heavily weighted.

> We did put more coverage weight on issues such as politics (not necessarily fake news) as it has larger impacts, [e.g.,] cases like corruption … because these politicians are civil servants and what they do might be impactful. (J3, news coverage coordinator, *Medcom.id*)

Such statements suggest that organizational interest(s) such as promoting a company's image may compete with needs to debunk fake news.

Lastly, the editorial policy at *Tempo.co* of preserving balance shaped the journalistic practices of the Palu disaster fake news, reflecting the newsroom emphasis on news impartiality. J6 and J7 acknowledged that the newsroom 'takes pride in investigative journalism' and its independence. With this ingrained culture, the newsroom strove to reflect values such as impartiality, transparency, and accuracy. During the post-Palu disaster period, this newsroom tried to cover arguments from all involved stakeholders for balanced reporting. Fact-checker J7 thought that this treatment minimized the risks of being accused of taking sides.

Discussion and conclusion

This study examined fake news as disinformation that is fabricated intentionally by people with personal or malicious agenda and diffused unintentionally by netizens with insufficient digital literacy. The mixed method results showed that disaster fake news in Indonesia that originated from social media (e.g., Facebook and WhatsApp) and was then disseminated virally among a large number of users, resulted in public panic and societal conflicts. The independent levels of news media and the nature of disaster fake news (seemingly fact-based or politically sensitive) can influence the amount of news reporting and the treatment of fake news within different Indonesian newsrooms. Owing to polarized social and structural constraints on journalism, although Indonesian news professionals believe in Western journalism values (e.g., objectivity, impartiality, and transparency), their routine practice of using editorial policies to investigate fake news relied heavily on the government's actions, which compromised their watchdog role as members of the fourth estate.

Indeed, the three newsrooms shared similarities in the approaches to report and combat fake news, such as waiting for and including the government's statements on fake news as a credible source. Findings also showed that the three-news media were highly influenced by editorial policies that shaped journalistic practices in handling fake news. Indonesian news media tend to take cautious approaches to deal with risky hoaxes such as the aftershock and FPI cases discussed in this article and editors determine the selection of fake news to be debunked and their newswriting angles. Steele (2011) has previously investigated Indonesian journalistic practices during a natural disaster and identified

official sources as a crucial component of news content. This present study also supports the notion that news outlets need to include official sources as a longstanding tradition in Indonesian journalism. Despite the dismissal of this idea by most of the respondents (all vested in the media system), arguably, most post-Palu disaster fake news were built on the government's statements, specifically the aftershock fake news that left the pubic suspended for days without verified information.

As shown in Figure 2, the three media outlets handled aftershock fake news similarly, but dealt with seemingly political fake news differently. Virally diffused false information created by social media users frequently turned into news media reports. Newsrooms with a higher degree of independence tended to cover multiple sources to balance reports when facing complex fake news-debunking involving several stakeholders and sensitive issues such as politics or religions. Even when interviewees claimed to utilize other verification methods for fact checking of (disaster) fake news, it was not visible through online observations.

Our web observations showed that low-risk fake news-debunking reports primarily restated the government's clarifications concisely without contextual information or other sources. As for high-risk fake news, the results showed that independent newsrooms made more efforts to report multi-stakeholders' perspectives for balanced news than traditionally affiliated or partially traditionally affiliated news media. Due to the nature of high-risk fake news, certain news media opted to minimize coverage or to gloss over the issue. The larger context of the case (i.e., disaster) somehow became irrelevant when politics and religion were thrown into the mix. This also echoed with how news media types and editorial policies shaped Indonesian journalists' fake news practices. In this milieu, social media proliferation among low literacy audiences coupled with declining media trust and societal polarization could further complicate newsrooms' practices dealing with post-disaster fake news. Although fact-checking has been a norm in verifying facts and sources to uphold the truthfulness of news reporting, in an era of rampant disinformation, respondents agree that newsrooms need to develop new capabilities and skills to use digital tools for checking complex online hoaxes and disinformation especially on social media. Several respondents regarded fact-checking as a way to combat post-Palu disaster fake news. While fact-checking acts were not observable on their websites or social media, they are not generally observable in published items. This makes it more difficult to assess whether and how fact-checking takes place. Furthermore, fake news fact-checking is a new practice in Indonesian newsrooms that may not yet have been put in practice during the post-Palu disaster reporting. Additionally, the term 'debunking' may not refer to investigative fact-checking, but, instead, to simply echoing the government's statements.
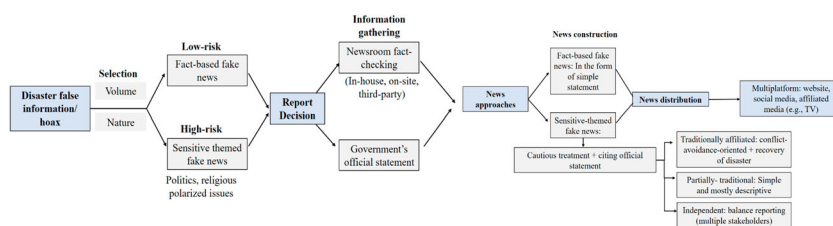

Figure 2. Newsroom practice when handling disaster fake news.

Lastly, the type of media outlet influenced the approaches in handling disaster fake news. Values of Western journalism evidently serve as standards for Indonesian journalists; yet, our findings suggest these values only go as far as what the newsrooms' editorial policies allow. As shown in our research, Indonesian journalists are inclined to cooperate with the government instead of being aggressive watchdogs. Traditionally affiliated media tend to be chained to their affiliation(s) or news orientation(s); news professionals maintain the status quo or promote certain interests even in the event of fake news. Independent media outlets appear to have a more liberal stance; they understand the need to have official sources, but do not simply rephrase official statements into news articles. Independent media present unique perspectives on Indonesian news media when they attempt to deviate from traditional news practices, such as not avoiding sensitive issues, covering parties involved in disaster-related fake news, and admitting to the existence of government bias. Unlike Western journalism, which aims to question government, Indonesian journalism tends to have an amicable relationship with the government.

Overall, this study sheds light on the Asian disaster news practices in the fake news context by examining Indonesian journalistic practices to discredit fake news, uncovering that most journalists simply rephrase official statements without further fact-checking by local correspondents. While handling post-disaster fake news, newsrooms are highly influenced by editorial decisions (e.g., topic selection) on a day-to-day basis. Moreover, the researchers note that disaster-based fake news can be multifaceted and complicated in ways that are similar to politically fake news. Disaster fake news can scare people with false information but can also serve as a 'mask' to serve individual interests. With respect to the practical contributions, this study could be a reference for news professionals to evaluate fake news practices. As for limitations, the web observations covered only a small portion of post-Palu disaster fake news, and our selection of news media concentrated on nationwide mainstream media. There is much more analysis that can be conducted in this field, and our research can continue to play a part.

Disclosure statement

Notes on contributors

Febbie Austina Kwanda is a graduate student that majored in International Communications. Her research interests include new communication & media trends, the social media, and journalism.

Trisha T.C. Lin (Ph.D., University of Hawaii, Manoa) is the Professor and Associate Dean (Research) at College of Communication and Chair of Dept. of Radio & Television, National Chengchi University, Taiwan. She is also the researcher of Taiwan Institute for Governance and Communication Research. With media professional experiences, Dr. Lin previously worked at Nanyang Technological University. Her research focuses on using mixed-method approaches to examine emerging media's socio-technical systems, socio-psychological user adoption, and human-machine interactions with social impacts.

ORCID

Trisha T. C. Lin http://orcid.org/0000-0002-7287-1150

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