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Did the Taliban Control Indonesia's Antigraft Body?
Computational Propaganda as a Hegemonic Instrument

Ary Hermawan

COMPOSE Working Paper
compose@office.uiii.ac.id
Faculty of Social Sciences
Universitas Islam Internasional Indonesia
+62 21 778 15300
soc.uiii.ac.id

Universitas Islam Internasional Indonesia | Faculty of Social Sciences
compose CENTER OF MUSLIM POLITICS AND WORLD SOCIETY FACULTY OF SOCIAL SCIENCES UII

Table of Contents

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Abstract

This study looks into the online propaganda against 57 former employees of the Indonesian Corruption Eradication Commission, known as the KPK. The campaign, which was used to justify the firing of the antigraft fighters, showcases oligarchic attempts to extend their entrenched interests in cyberspace as an arena of political contestation. Using the Gramscian notion of hegemonic project and the Murdoch School's social conflict theory, this study frames the rise of digital disinformation as a reflection of fundamental conflicts over state power and economic resources within the spheres of civil and political society. It shows how the struggle for hegemony among different interests as represented in cyberspace helps shape forms of political control in the country, including the use of computational propaganda as a hegemonic instrument to protect the accumulation strategy of dominant groups.

Keywords: Hegemony, hegemonic project, accumulation strategy, computational propaganda, political buzzers, cybertroopers

1. Introduction

On Sept. 30, 2021, 57 employees of the Corruption Eradication Commission (KPK) in Indonesia were fired after failing a civics test, locally known as *tes wawasan kebangsaan* or the TWK, which they had to undergo to determine whether they could become civil servants and retain their employment. The civics test was mired in controversy, with graft watchdogs saying that it was riddled with irregularities and was likely designed as a tool to remove senior and credible employees from the commission, which has sent dozens of powerful politicians to jail since its establishment in 2002 (Aqil, 2021; Gorbiano, 2021; International, 2021). People on Twitter, the most influential social media platform among journalists and opinion leaders despite being the fifth largest in the country (Hutchinson, 2022; Jayani, 2020), were nevertheless divided over the issue. Some users argued that the 57 employees were victims of a political conspiracy orchestrated by the KPK's enemies as they were among the best employees who had handled high-profile graft cases implicating political big wigs and high-ranking officials. Others believed they deserved to be fired, saying that the test results confirmed rumours that certain KPK employees were "Taliban"[1] sympathizers who were against the state ideology of Pancasila and the 1945 Constitution. That latter narrative, which was first used in the campaign to weaken the agency through a revision of the 2002 KPK Law, is considered to be propaganda to discredit the KPK employees (IM57+, 2022)[2], though it continues to gain traction on social media, fuelling allegations there has been a systematic online campaign against them.[3]

This study aims to answer the questions of how disinformation works in Indonesia and how it also reflects the ongoing contestation among elites over state power and their struggle for cultural and political hegemony, which is now taking place in cyberspace. It highlights how intra-elite conflict over the control of a powerful coercive state institution, in this case the KPK, spills over into the cyberspace where elites seek public legitimacy.

It uses social network analysis (SNA) and critical discourse analysis (CDA) based on the Gramscian notion of hegemonic project developed by Jessop (1991) and the Murdoch School's social conflict theory (Hameiri & Jones, 2020; Robison, 2009; Robison & Hadiz,

[1] The Taliban led an Islamist armed insurgency in Afghanistan, and now governs the country. It is used by pro-government social media influencers in Indonesia to denigrate Islamist supporters of the opposition camp, along with other derogatory terms such as "kadrun" (dessert lizards) and *kampret* (bats).

[2] In countering the KPK-Taliban narrative, the ex-KPK employees highlighted the fact not all of them are Muslims, and one of the Muslim employees is also an active member of Nahdlatul Ulama (NU), the nation's largest Islamic group known for its religious moderation. In an interview with the author, one of the ex-KPK employees said that some of them became more religious after joining the KPK to cope with the pressure of working as antigraft fighters.

[3] "Buzzer" is the broad term used by Indonesians for paid social media influencers, particularly those hired by politicians. The term has similar meaning and connotations to those of "cyber-trooper" in Malaysia and "50-center" in China (Han, 2018; Sinpeng & Tapsell, 2021).

2004). These theoretical frameworks are useful to analyse the nature of the online disinformation campaign against the antigraft busters, and explain why it is intertwined with the interests of the elite, which have been fighting over the control of the KPK, and how it reflects a broader socio-political conflict within Indonesian civil society.

2. Theoretical framework

Jessop introduces the concept of "hegemonic project" to resolve the contradictory relations between "legitimation" and "accumulation" in capitalist societies, a condition when a dominant accumulation strategy[4] conflicts with popular interests, posing a threat to its legitimacy and thus its very own survival. Thus, Jessop argues, "'accumulation' is not just an economic issue but extends to political and ideological matters and has a crucial 'strategic' dimension" (Jessop, 1991, p. 181). In this regard, hegemonic project refers to national projects or state ideologies to resolve the conflicts within a society and is mainly used by the dominant groups to foreground the general interests of the whole population in their attempt to protect their means of accumulation. It is informed by the notion of hegemony as formulated by Gramsci, which refers to the moral, intellectual and political leadership of dominant groups within the sphere of civil society (Buttigieg, 1992; Gramsci, 2011c, 2011b, 2011a; Jessop, 2021). Gramsci defines civil society as a sphere in which the dominant groups gained the active consent of the subaltern groups to assert their control over state institutions, which are in the sphere of political society. It thus emphasizes the roles of organic intellectuals such as journalists, philosophers, scholars and, in the age of social media, influencers/buzzers — in building national or cultural projects to assert the hegemony of the dominant class. Jessop uses the term "hegemonic project" to "overcome the tendency inherent in many uses of Gramsci to reduce hegemony to a rather static consensus and/or a broadly defined common sense" ((Jessop, 1991, p. 182).

The Murdoch School's social conflict theory is a critical political economy approach developed by social scientists at Australia's Murdoch University (Carroll et al., 2020; Hewison et al., 1993; Rodan, 2004; Rodan & Jayasuriya, 2009). This approach is based on the Marxian proposition that institutions or social practices are "a product of socio-political struggle" (Carroll et al., 2020, p. 19). It focuses its analysis on the power relations among different interests within civil society, and how a certain pattern of power relations informs the design of control institutions and how they operate. In other words, "institutions are established to reinforced a specific architecture of power relations" (Robison & Hadiz, 2004, p. 27). In Indonesia, the oligarchs — "a broad and complex political class of officials and their families, political and business associates, clients and agents who fused political power with bureaucratic authority, public office with private interests" (p. 53) — have co-opted social and state institutions to maintain their political and economic ascendancy.

[4] "Accumulation strategy" is a concept coined by Jessop to describe state policies that determines the dominant pattern of accumulation representing certain "class and fractional interests and alliances" (Jessop, 1991).

This study contends that the rise of computational propaganda in Indonesia reflects oligarchic attempts to extend their entrenched interests in cyberspace as a novel terrain where the contestation for political hegemony is taking place. Fake news proliferates as conflicts between oligarchic powers over state power intensify, while at the same time digitally empowered counter-oligarchic forces pose a new challenge to the ruling elite. Such a condition necessitates the creation of various control tactics, including the use of "buzzers", which largely operate within the frameworks of the state ideologies of Pancasila and the Unitary State of Indonesian Republic (NKRI). These ideologies, whose definition is also subject to socio-political contestation, are hegemonic projects that are fundamental for the reproduction of the specific power relations that are critical for sustaining the dominant accumulation strategy (D. Bourchier, 2015; Robison & Hadiz, 2004).

3. Literature review

Many studies have sought to examine the role of social media in politics (Deibert & Rohozinski, 2010; Diamond & Plattner, 2012; King et al., 2017; Saraswati, 2016; Sinpeng & Tapsell, 2021; Woolley & Howard, 2017). Social networking sites such as Facebook, Twitter and Instagram have enabled individual citizens, politicians, governments or corporations to bypass traditional mainstream media outlets to reach out to the masses, the voters, the audience or, in today's parlance, the netizens. This technological affordance has led to the emergence of a third-generation mechanism of Internet control in which the powers that be deploy social media influencers, trolls and even bots to control political narratives on social media. Unlike the first- and second-generation Internet control tactics, which focused on denying access to Internet resources through technological and legal means, the latest control tactics focus "less on denying access than successfully competing with potential threats through effective counterinformation campaigns that overwhelm, discredit, or demoralize opponents" (Deibert & Rohozinski, 2010, p. 27). Woolley & Howard (2017) call it "computational propaganda", which they define as "the use of algorithms, automation, and human curation to purposefully distribute misleading information over social media networks" (p. 6).

Computational propaganda takes different forms in different countries. In Russia and the United States, for example, politicians rely more on bots than on people to promote themselves or to smear their opponents (Sanovich, 2017; Woolley et al., 2016; Woolley & Guilbeault, 2017). Bots were widely known to have played a significant role in shaping Twitter conversations during the 2016 US presidential election, by creating an "illusion of online popularity" and enabling anyone to engage in partisan propaganda (Woolley & Guilbeault, 2017, p. 3). The Russian government reportedly deployed its own bots to influence the US elections, as it relies on computational propaganda to support its foreign policy against its enemies (Sanovich, 2017). But the most effective use of computational propaganda usually involves the use of both bots and trolls, automation and human curation (Woolley & Howard, 2017, p. 5). A case in point is the heavily coordinated information control strategy launched by the Chinese government. An extensive study by King, Pan and Roberts (2017), who analysed hundreds of millions of social media posts in the Chinese cyberspace, found that at least 2 million people were hired by the Chinese government to distract the public from salient issues.

They argue that those cybertroopers, known as 50-centers, were deployed to stop "discussions that can generate collective action on the ground" (King et al., 2017, p. 484).

Computational propaganda is commonly used in Southeast Asia, too. In Malaysia, the use of cybertroopers or "cyber-activists" goes back to the 1990s. They were initially deployed to defend the government from political attacks from the opposition, mostly in chat forums and mailing lists (Cheong, 2020). The rise of online propaganda in Malaysia was inevitable as the government promised to keep the Internet free as stipulated in the Bill of Guarantee, enacted in 1996 primarily to attract foreign investors. Malaysian cyberspace subsequently became the "playground" of the opposition to challenge the long-time ruling party, the United Malays National Organization (UMNO), which has now lost its grip on power. After years of relying on the traditional media to control the population, UMNO started to rely on the power of social media in affecting and shaping public opinion. It not only uses cybertroopers to defend itself, but also to attack the opposition. In her study, Cheong claimed to have found instruction emails from the Barisan Nasional coalition-led by UMNO between 2012 and 2014 encouraging cybertroopers to launch coordinated social media attacks on opposition leaders of the Pakatan Harapan coalition (Cheong, 2020, p. 71). Such a political tactic continued until the 2018 general election, when the social media sphere became increasingly anti-UMNO, particularly on closed text messaging services such as WhatsApp.

In Indonesia, the use of computational propaganda for narrative control emerged along with the rise of the social media campaign industry during the 2012 Jakarta gubernatorial election that saw the victory of then Surakarta mayor Joko "Jokowi" Widodo. Jokowi won the gubernatorial race on the back of a strong online campaign strategy led by volunteer groups and paid social media consultants (Saraswati, 2020). While Jokowi is by no means the only Indonesian politician to have used paid social media consultants for a political campaign, he is arguably the one to have used it most effectively. After winning Jakarta, he won the presidential elections in 2014 and 2019. His social media campaign team continued to work with him at the State Palace after the elections were over, resulting in what appears to be the first coordinated post-election online propaganda strategy in Indonesia (Saraswati, 2020). It is safe to say the emergence of the social media campaign industry, as contended by Saraswati, paved the way for the rise of disinformation politics in Indonesia.

Yet, further studies are needed to understand the nature of disinformation politics in Indonesia and Southeast Asia in general, with many scholars focusing their attention on countries like China, the US and Russia. Saraswati (2020) examines the rise of disinformation control and political "buzzers" in Indonesia, but pays little attention to how computational propaganda works, focusing mostly on the actors instead. Ariel Bogle, Hillary Mansour and Albert Zhang wrote a chapter on the use of computational propaganda by the Indonesian palm oil industry in a policy brief issued by the Australian Strategic Policy Institute (ASPI) (Wallis et al., 2021). Their study looks closely at how the "influencers for hire" work but stops short of delving into the political-economic aspects of the "buzzing" industry. Ross Tapsell contributed another chapter on Indonesia in the policy brief, offering an overview of Jokowi's authoritarian turn and Indonesia's democratic setbacks in cyberspace.

Yatun and Wijayanto (2022), meanwhile, studied how social media propaganda was used to mobilize public consensus for the 2019 revisions of the KPK Law, the 2020 passage of the

Omnibus Law and the government's handling of the pandemic. They argue that political "buzzing" is a form of "authoritarian innovation" by powerful actors within Indonesian society. While their study provides a detailed description of how cybertroopers operate, it stops short of explaining why computational propaganda was chosen as a control strategy beyond the argument that it is highly effective. Such an emphasis on digital affordances can lead us into the trap of techno-centrism (Lim, 2022). After all, as argued by Bogle et al (2021) and McRae et al., (2022), disinformation politics in Indonesia lack sophistication and appear to have relied more on real people paid to send messages online than high-tech.

This study aims to contribute to the current literature on digital disinformation by looking at it from a broader perspective: i.e. the relationship between society and technology. It intends to go beyond describing how computational propaganda works.

4. Methodology

4.1. Methods

This study uses social network analysis (SNA) and critical discourse analysis (CDA) to answer my research question. SNA, initially developed to examine the nature of relationship among individual actors within a community, is commonly applied to analyse social media conversations (Himelboim et al., 2017; Idris, 2018). It primarily aims to identify the main actors and top influencers within a specific conversation on social media. SNA examines "a collection of ties among a population and creates measurements that describe the location of each person or entity within the structure of all relationships in the network" (Hansen, Derek et al., 2010, p. 32). This method is useful to identify networks or "communities" of social media users within the conversation about the fired KPK employees on Twitter and also to analyse the platform's affordances and constraints to further examine its discursive structure. This was primarily done by measuring the modularity of the bigger network — along with its clusters, smaller sub-networks — and the centrality of its individual nodes, particularly their "betweenness centrality". The latter concept measures "how important a node is to the shortest paths through the network" (Golbeck, 2013, p. 30) and "the extent to which an agent can play the part of 'broker' or 'gate- keeper', with a potential for control over others" (Scott, 2017, p. 99).

Critical discourse analysis, meanwhile, is a study of how language/text produces or is produced by power or ideology. It is a type of discourse analysis that examines texts primarily as a social practice, a norm that determines what is "thinkable" and "sayable" (Fairclough, 1995). While CDA is commonly used to analyse centralised communication of traditional news media, scholars have begun to apply it to analyse decentralised communication in social media as well (Bouvier & Machin, 2018; KhosraviNik, 2017). The macro and political notions of power, KhosraviNik argues, are still at play on social media, even though its democratic features may appear to have "eroded the power of/behind the discourse" (KhosraviNik, 2017, p. 583). Consequently, as suggested by Bouvier and Machin, social media posts "should be thought of not merely as text, but as situated actions used to achieve particular ends" (Bouvier & Machin, 2018, p. 184).

Thus, after finding the major clusters within the data set, I select the tweets/Twitter users with the highest centrality values for text analysis. I then use NVIVO to produce a word-cloud to find the most commonly used keywords in my dataset and a word tree to understand the context of the most frequently used keywords. With a CDA approach, I analyse the tweets by placing them within a larger discourse of Indonesian politics, particularly the hegemonic projects used by successive regimes in the country, and by examining their offline and historical contexts as well as their intertextuality.

I then apply Jessop's Gramscian notion of hegemonic project and the Murdoch School's social conflict approach to analyse the SNA and CDA data to make sense of the role of computational propaganda in Indonesian civil society as an arena of contestation among competing social forces. Such mixed methods are required to unravel the power relations behind tweets, whose interests they represent and the specific outcome they were trying to achieve, the answers of which are useful to understand why a horde of political buzzers have been deployed to legitimize the controversial firing of the KPK employees.

4.2. Data collection

I use the Twitter API V2 and the command line tool and Python library Twarc2 to scrape tweets from Twitter using the following search query ("Tes Wawasan Kebangsaan" OR TWK). The search was limited to Indonesian language tweets only to filter the use of the acronym TWK in other languages. I have been granted academic access to Twitter API V2 and was able to scrape the historical tweets about the TWK controversy. With the said search query, I collect 2,869,949 tweets (about 2.8 gigabytes) on TWK posted between March 1 and December 31, 2021. As Twarc2 requests "the highest fidelity representation of a tweet by requesting all the available data for tweets", the Twitter API returns include mentions, hashtags, referenced tweets, number of retweets, links and embedded media. I then clean the JSON files using the programming language Python for analysis, including creating CSV files for social network analysis using the SNA tool Gephi. The programming language is used here to make clear the ties among the collected tweets, with ties being represented by mentions that include replies and retweets.

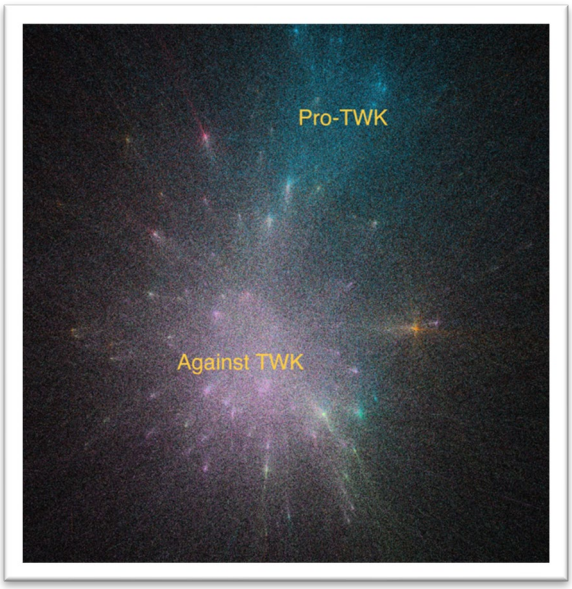
To further understand the workings of disinformation, I use the *coordination network toolkit* developed by the Queensland University of Technology to identify tweets that may indicate an organic or non-organic online mobilisation. I use this software to "detect coordinated activity on social media and to generate networks that map the actors and their relationships" (Graham, 2020). It does so by identifying tweets that are posted within a short time window (60 seconds, for this study). The functionality used in this study includes *co-post* (accounts posting any kinds of message within the same time window), *co-retweet* (accounts reposting the same tweets), *co-similarity* (accounts posting similar tweets) and *co-link* (accounts posting the same URLs repeatedly).

5. SNA Findings

5.1. Twitter as a site of struggle

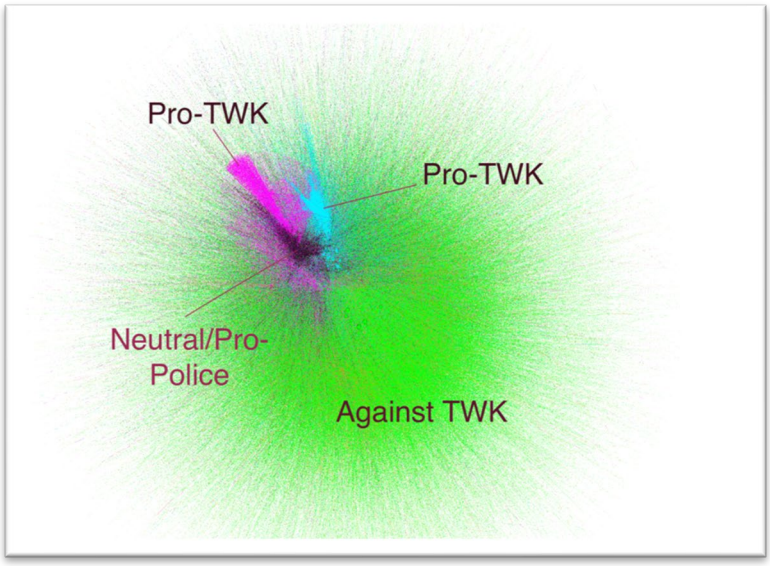
A social network analysis using Gephi results in a network of 105,297 nodes and 2,959,977 edges, showcasing the intensity of social media conversation on the TWK controversy from March 1 to December 31, 2021. At a glance, the conversation looks innocuous as it reflects the vibrancy of Indonesian cyberspace, particularly on Twitter. The graph shows a modularity of 0.415, with 509 modules or clusters, including the three major clusters (see Figure 1). The first two largest clusters, which tend to overlap, group together social media users who are against the TWK and supportive of the fired antigraft busters, while the third-largest cluster represents those who are critical of them and consider the civics test as legitimate. The graph shows that the majority of Internet users still supported the ex-KPK investigators, even though it was clear the online community was divided on the issue.

Figure 1. The conflict between supporters and detractors of TWK



A closer look at the online mobilisation over the issue shows an even greater support for the graft-busters, with nearly 70 percent of the Twitter users belonging to the community that stood behind them (see Figure 2). That said, the other two clusters (both TWK supporters) are still large enough to create the impression of a divided community, though the networks indicate that their mobilisation is non-organic, suggesting that computational propaganda was at work to disorganise the online community. The first pro-TWK cluster is more aggressive in its attacks on the KPK employees, while the second is more diplomatic by stressing on the legality of the civics test. This may indicate that they originate from different communities of buzzers, which may represent different clients who happen to have similar interests. The black nodes in the network, for instance, are supportive of the KPK employees, but they are not part of the larger anti-TWK community. The main message of the tweets, featuring the hashtag #Save56exKPKBravoKapolri, indicate that they are likely paid "buzzers" who were meant to polish the image of the current police chief — Listyo Sigit Prabowo — who offered new jobs to the sacked KPK employees.

Figure 2. The online mobilization over the TWK controversy



The following section will further explain why the pro-TWK campaign was driven by social media manipulation, mainly by examining the nature of its mobilisation.

5.2. Organic versus non-organic online mobilisation

5.2.1. Organic and non-organic influencers

The long-term conversation on the TWK controversy may show, at first glance, a relatively healthy debate between two groups of social media influencers. The first group consists of the fired antigraft employees themselves, mainly Novel Baswedan with his Twitter handle *@nazaqistsha*, Tata Khoiriyah (*@tatakhoiriyah*), Giri Suprapdiono (*@girisuprapdiono*), their outspoken spokesman, Febridiansyah (*@febridiansyah*), prodemocracy activists and political dissidents. The rival group includes hard-line supporters of the Joko "Jokowi" Widodo government, widely known as "buzzers istana" (palace buzzers), such as Denny Siregar (*@Dennysiregar7*) – the only pro-TWK Twitter user and outspoken critic of Novel and his colleagues on the list of top 20 influential nodes. Denny has produced at least three videos published on Cokro TV to argue that there are "Talibans" in KPK. CokroTV is a Youtube platform for pro-Jokowi and anti-radical Islam social media personalities to share their views in a visual form. Denny is perhaps the most influential pro-government social media user with 1.4 million followers on Twitter and 825 followers on Instagram. CokroTV co-founder Nong Darol Mahmada said that she hired Deny as regular contributor to the Youtube platform because of his large following on various social media platforms. He is not officially affiliated with any political parties, but CokroTV is linked to at least two political parties. It is co-owned by Geomedia Group, which is partly owned by politician and businessman Jeffri Geovanie, the chief patron of the Indonesian Solidarity Party (PSI), whose members also serve as hosts on CokroTV. Jeffri provided CokroTV with a decent office space in the affluent Menteng area. Jeffri's brother, Rommy Adams, is the CEO of Geomedia Group and a member of the Indonesian Democratic Party of Struggle (PDI-P).

The media, mainly Tempo group, also has influence in the network. This shows the traditional media are keeping their clout in shaping public opinion, mainly by serving as one of the main sources of news on social media platforms, including Twitter.

The debate those Twitter users have mainly revolves over the legality of the TWK, as well as the integrity of the fired KPK employees (on whether they are patriotic and Pancasilaist enough to work for the antigraft body). Regardless of whether the buzzers *istana* such as Deny Siregar were paid by the government, the debate appears to be a legitimate discursive contest on social media as a marketplace of ideas. Top Twitter users from the opposing clusters of network seem to have organic followers.

However, when it comes to mobilization, these influencers are not the most important nodes in the network. Using the QT coordination network toolkit for identifying networked coordination, the networks show different actors with higher betweenness and eigenvector centrality scores[5], which indicate their levels of connectedness within their respective network/cluster. This study found that anti-TWK Twitter users mainly used retweets to amplify their messages, which may indicate a spontaneous reaction to an interesting or important tweet, while the pro-TWK Twitter users relied on coordinated actions such as posting a large number of links and hashtags within a short period of time.

Thus, unlike the long-term conversation on the issue, which was dominated by anti-TWK influencers, the list of the top influencers for coordinated social media actions categorised as co-link and co-similarity was dominated by pro-TWK Twitter users, many of them tweeted anonymously or were followed by what appear to be fake accounts.

[5] Eigenvector centrality, according to (Golbeck, 2013), is used to measure a node's influence in the network. It does so by measuring "a node's importance while giving consideration to the importance of its neighbors". It is based on the idea that people with fewer friends who are popular are more influential than those with more friends who are unpopular

Figure 1

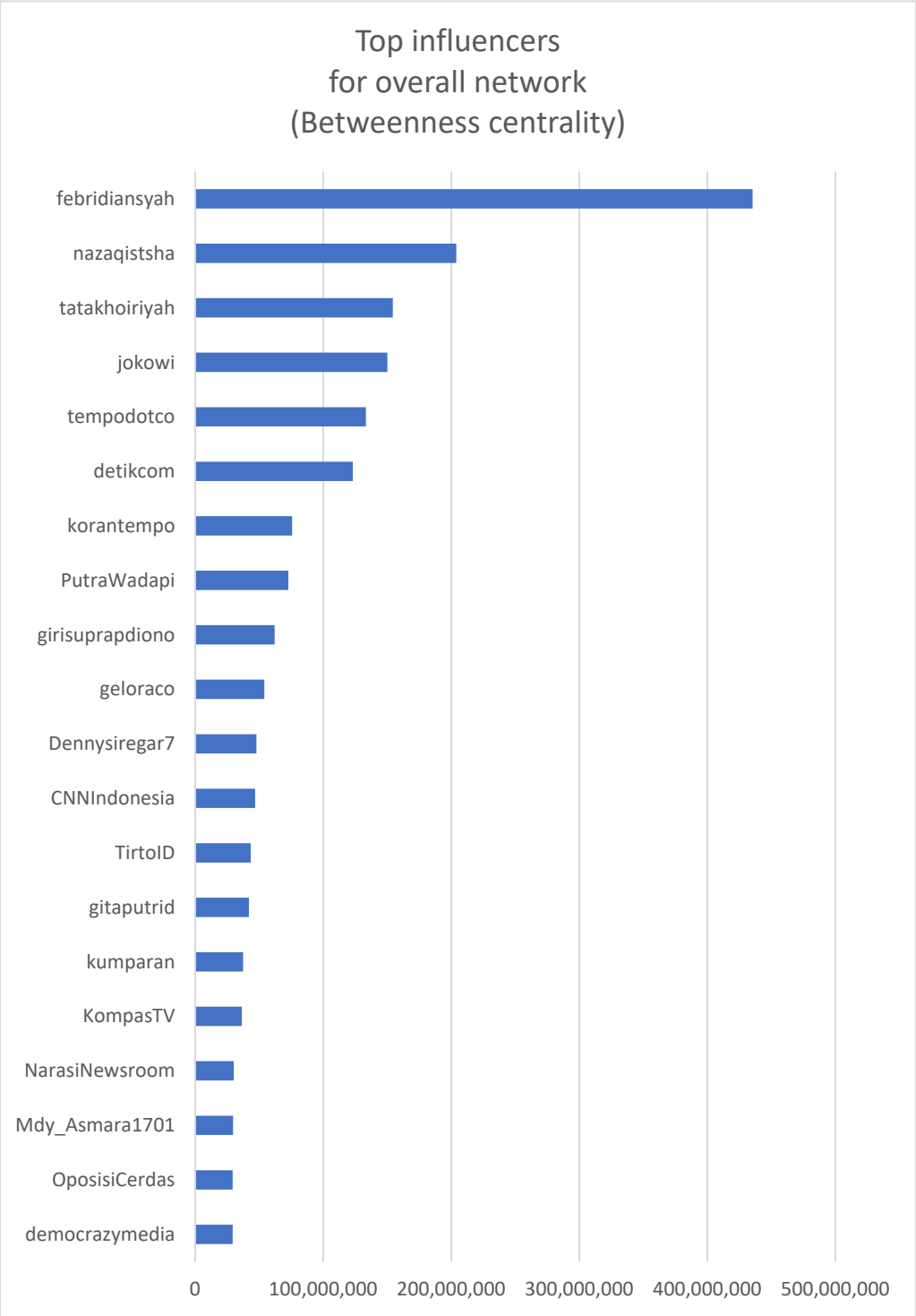
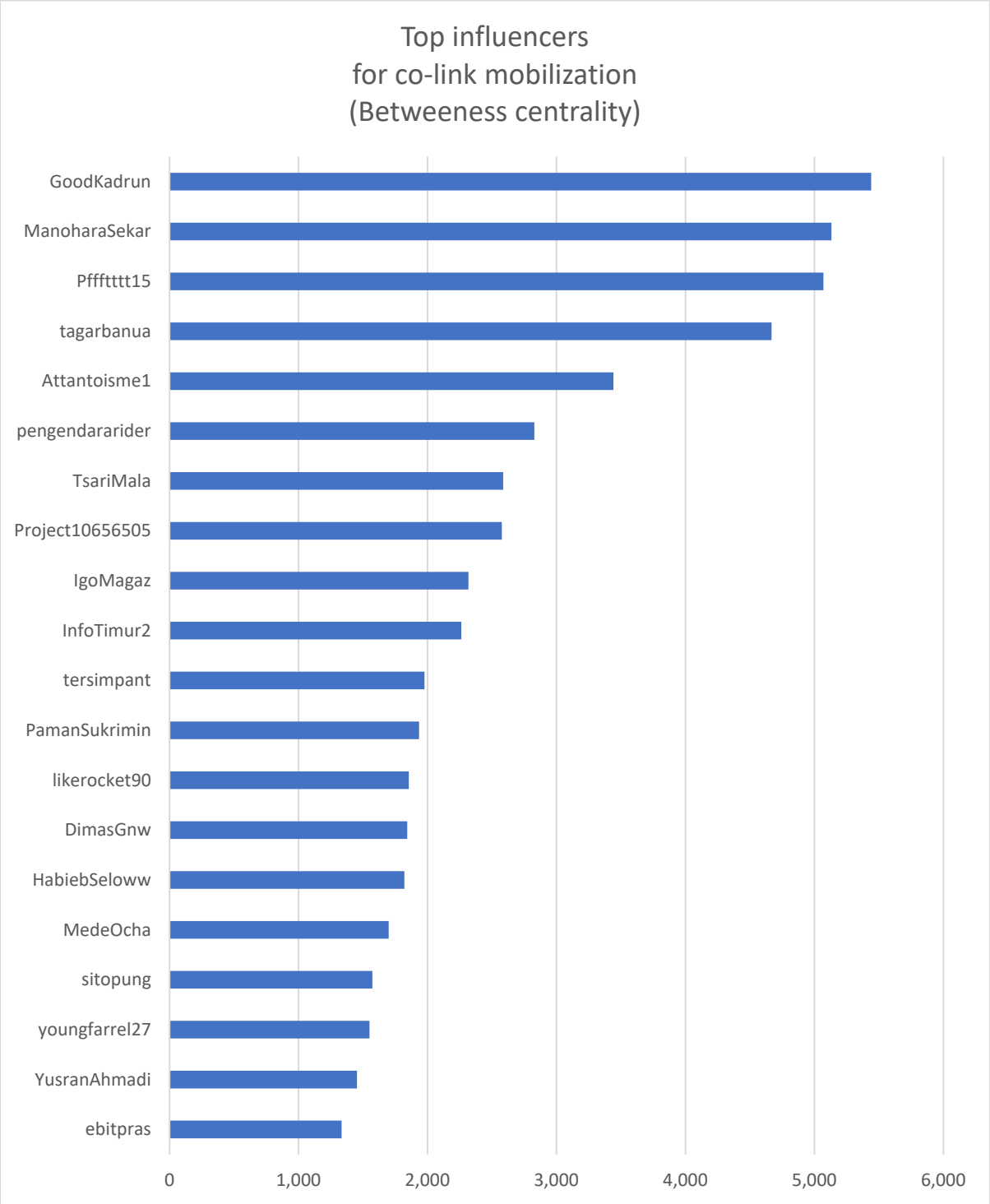

Top influencers
for overall network
(Betweenness centrality)
febridiansyah
nazaqistsha
tatakhoiriyah
jokowi
tempodotco
detikcom
korantempo
PutraWadapi
girisuprapdiono
geloraco
Dennysiregar7
CNNIndonesia
TirtoID
gitaputrid
kumparan
KompasTV
NarasiNewsroom
Mdy_Asmara1701
OposisiCerdas
democrazymedia
0
100,000,000
200,000,000
300,000,000
400,000,000
500,000,000

Figure 2



The SNA findings show that top social media users such as Febridiansyah and Denny Siregar, who can be classified as organic intellectuals, dominate the overall conversations on the TWK. However, it is important to note that while the most influential users for the overall Twitter conversations on the TWK could be those who are organic to either progressive civil society forces or the government's power bloc, it may not be the case with the most important nodes in the many instances of online mobilisation for the TWK. Saraswati (2020) and Sastramidjaja

& Wijayanto (2022) have made the case that many of the buzzers working for state/non-state actors claim to be professionals and just doing their jobs.

5.2.2. The mechanics of computational propaganda

Using the four criteria of networked coordination set out by the toolkit — co-link, co-retweet, co-similarity and co-post — this study has found that the mobilisation of Twitter users to support a certain narrative on the issue of the TWK was mostly carried out by its supporters using two major tactics: *co-link* (accounts posting the same URLs repeatedly) and *co-similarity* (accounts posting similar but not duplicate tweets). These tactics were used to amplify pro-TWK hashtags and news articles, and to gaslight the public with the false narrative that the sacked KPK investigators are radical Muslims.

Using the co-link function to identify the activity of accounts posting similar links within a short period of time, this study finds the coordinated activity of thousands of social media users posting links to news articles affirming the legitimacy of the TWK. One of them is a news report that the Supreme Court had turned down the legal challenge against the test and declared it to be lawful. The tweets mostly contain such hashtags as #MAsahkanTWKdiKPK (The Supreme Court sanctions TWK at KPK) or TWKSahKPKBersih (TWK is Legal, KPK is Clean) to assert their key message: that the TWK is lawful and should in no way be interpreted as a plot to purge the KPK of its best people. Some tweets also contain professionally made images, one of which features a picture of Novel Baswedan with captions depicting him as "Taliban". Other tweets post links to news articles quoting political pundits or experts supportive of the TWK and critical of the KPK employees who failed it, some of which are published in obscure, if not questionable, news sites. The sites in question published slanderous articles that presented op-ed pieces as news items, showcasing the deep web of disinformation surrounding the TWK controversy. The tweets were posted by different accounts but contained similarities to give away that they were part of a coordinated action.

Figure 3. An example of a Twitter post detected by the co-link function. The Twitter account in question was created in August 2020 and has only nine followers, with its last tweet dated on August 17, 2021.

These tweets were posted in a large number within one to three hours in a day or two. Of the top five hashtags on the TWK, three of them were supportive of it, and were only posted sparingly, suggesting non-organic online mobilisation. (see Figure 6). The #MAsahkanTWKdiKPK was posted 25,226 times, with around 19,600 posts using the hashtag tweeted on July 2, 2021, at 2 am and another 5,200 at 3 am. #TWKsahKPKbersih was posted 22,034 times, with the largest number of tweets (21,226) posted within three hours (from 11 am to 1 pm) on July 29, 2021. The hashtag #ASNdiKPKwajibTWK was posted 19,890 times, with the largest number of tweets (19,506) posted on June 30, 2021, also between 11 am and 1 pm. This is in stark contrast with the more organic hashtags such as #75PegawaiKPK (75 KPK employees), #BeraniJujurPecat (being brave honest gets you fired) or TempoNasional, the first and second most popular hashtags. It is important to note that some anti-TWK hashtags, largely organic, could be as short-lived as the non-organic ones, as the graph shows. However, most of these hashtags were not posted in a large quantity and within a short window of time, two of the indications of coordinated activity. It is clear that some of the anti-TWK hashtags do show some features of a coordinated activity. A case in point is the anti-TWK hashtag #Save56exKPKBravoKapolri, which were only posted two times despite its being one of the top hashtags in the overall network.

Figure 6. The number of times the hashtag was posted, and not its volume.

Date Hour for each Hashtag. The view is filtered on Hashtag, which keeps 30 of 4.879 members.

Figure 4. How this particular pro-TWK hashtag was posted sparringly between 2 am and 6 am on July 2, 2021. The largest countb was at 2 am.

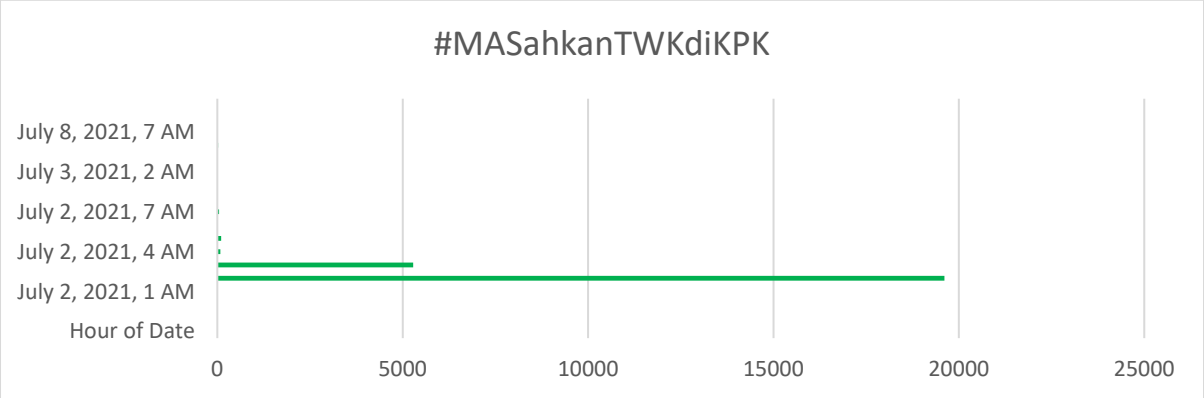


Figure 5. How this particular pro-TWK hashtag was posted at least within five short periods of time on July 30, 2021, with the largest number of postings taking place at 11 am.

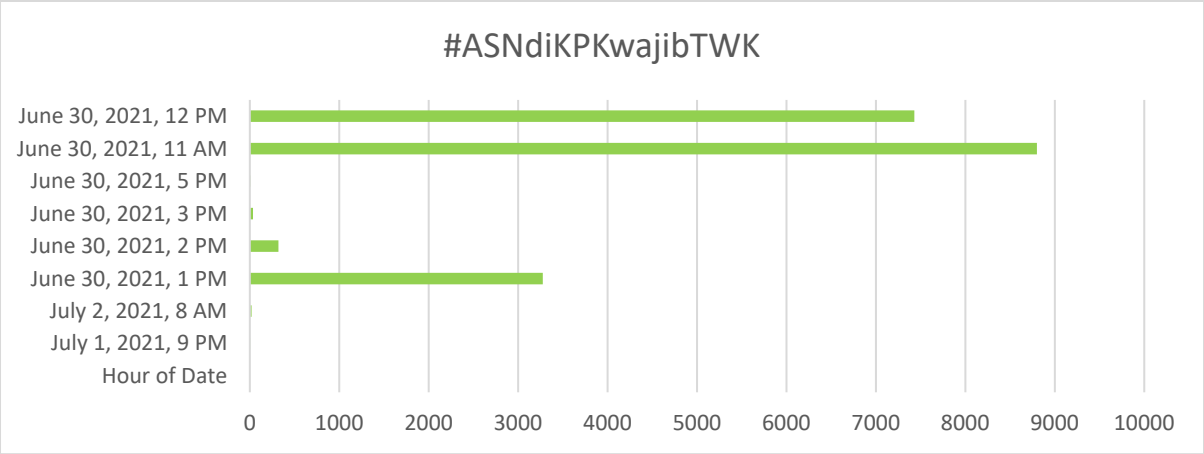


Figure 6. How this particular hashtag was posted sparringly within an hour at 1 am on July 29, 2021.

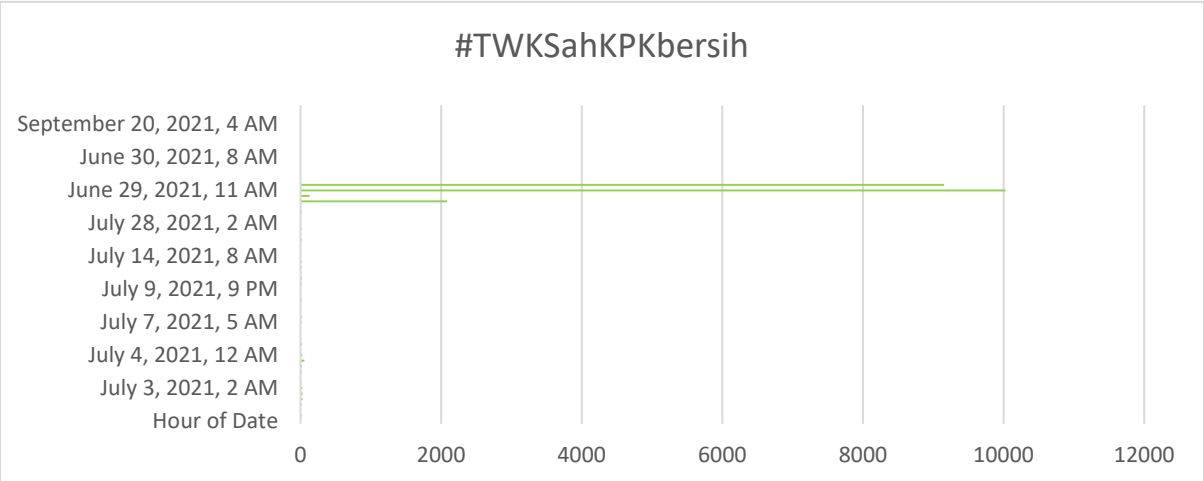
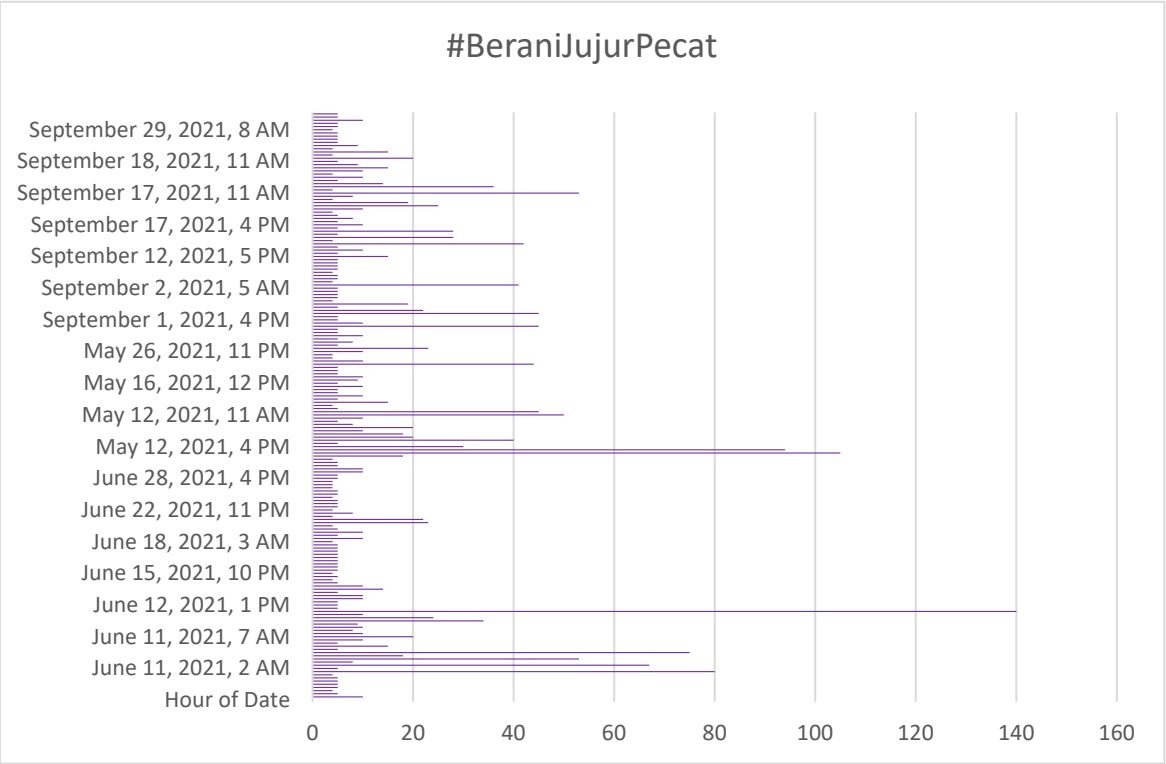


Figure 7. How this anti-TWK and pro-KPK employees hashtag was posted frequently between May 31, 2021 and July 3, 2021, indicating organic mobilization.



These findings confirm previous studies describing how computational propaganda operates, particularly on the alleged use of paid "buzzers" (Wallis et al., 2021). The following section further expands the analysis on the SNA findings by critically examining the key messages conveyed by each discursive community/network.

6. A discourse analysis on the SNA findings

6.1. Computational propaganda as a hegemonic instrument

It is instructive to understand computational propaganda as another hegemonic instrument of the dominant groups to maintain the status quo. While the Internet is fundamentally different from previous technologies, in that it blurs the distinction between the broadcasters/publishers and the audience/readers, creating a space for conflict and cooperation among different social forces, it can still function as a consent-manufacturing instrument, like other, older technological artifacts.

Studies have shown how the media have been used to protect the interests of the elite (Hill, 1992; Hill & Sen, 2005; Kitley, 1994; O. H. Lee, 1971; Yamamoto, 2019), and different political regimes have used national ideologies as hegemonic projects to resolve the apparent contradiction between "accumulation" and "legitimation" (Jessop, 1991). Organic intellectuals — journalists, philosophers, scholars and, in the age of social media, influencers/buzzers — are the key social category in designing and maintaining these hegemonic projects (Gramsci, 2011a; Jessop, 1991). Indonesia presents an interesting case of

how the elite have used hegemonic projects to organize their information control tactics in different political and technological settings. The colonial government relied on the Ethical Policy and its main ideological apparatus, Balai Poestaka, to marginalise the radical publications of the communists (Farid & Razif, 2008; Fitzpatrick, 2008; Jedamski, 1992; Yamamoto, 2019). Sukarno's Guided Democracy invoked the Manipol-USDEK to discipline "liberal" newspapers (O. H. Lee, 1971; Maiddin, 2015). The New Order weaponised the state ideology of Pancasila to crush critics and depoliticize civil society (D. Bourchier, 2015; V. B. Lee, 2009; Robison & Hadiz, 2004), including its press institutions (Dhakidae, 1991; Kitley, 2000; Sen & Hill, 2007).

The information control strategies used by the elite throughout the ages indeed vary depending the nature of the technological artifacts and the socio-political configurations underpinning the existing political order (the rise of media capital was game changing), but they were largely conservative and inimical to popular changes, and were organised within a specific hegemonic project. Digital control is no exception. It, too, reflects the struggle for hegemony within the increasingly digital sphere of civil society. The TWK controversy presents a case of how social media is used as a hegemonic instrument.

To make this argument, it is critical that we first outline the political-economic backdrop of the whole controversy involving the KPK, one of the key legacies of *reformasi*.

It is worth emphasising here that the campaign against the ex-KPK employees came following the systematic attempt to weaken the antigraft agency by the executive and legislative branches of the government (Lindsey, 2019; Mudhoffir, 2022; Taufiqurrahman, 2021). The Indonesian Democratic Party of Struggle (PDI-P), the leading party in the ruling coalition and of which President Jokowi and the law minster, Yasonna Laoly, are members, is believed to have spearheaded the legislative attempt to emasculate the KPK ("Mengapa PDI-P Ngotot Revisi UU KPK?," 2015; "PDI-P Yang Terus Ngotot Revisi UU KPK," 2019). The party's spat with the agency began after the latter charged police general Budi Gunawan with corruption shortly after President Jokowi tapped him as the new police chief. Budi is known to be a close ally of PDI-P matriarch Megawati Soekarnoputri and thus an influential figure in the party. Budi challenged his case at the South Jakarta District Court, which ruled in his favour. He was later appointed as the head of the State Intelligence Agency (BIN), the second police official to helm one of the most powerful state institutions in the country.

Several ex-KPK investigators that the author interviewed for this paper suggested that certain PDI-P elites might have been behind the online campaign against them.[6] The propaganda operation was carried out after the KPK charged several PDI-P members in a high-profile

[6] One of the dismissed KPK employees who declined to be named told me during the interview that a group of people who frequently held demonstrations against them in front of the KPK building usually gathered at the PDI-P's headquarters prior to the rallies. However, he stresses that the PDI-P is not the only political faction hostile to the KPK, and that other political elite factions, including those within the National Police, which had been involved in conflicts with the KPK, had also launched similar attacks against them and the institution of KPK before. (Personal communication, Jakarta, October 17, 2022)

bribery case involving a member of the General Elections Commission (KPU). The antigraft commission made the arrests even after the legislative body had curtailed its powers and appointed Firli Bahuri — widely known as a Budi Gunawan ally in the police force — as its chairman. PDI-P politicians Harun Masiku and Saiful Bahri were accused of bribing then-KPU commissioner Wahyu Setiawan Rp 1.5 billion to secure a seat at the House of Representatives that was left vacant by a deceased member of the party. Saiful was convicted in the case, while Harun remains at large. Harun is believed to be the key witness that could implicate senior PDI-P members, including Hasto Kristiyanto, in the case.

While there is no tangible evidence suggesting that the political buzzers spreading pro-TWK campaign on social media were paid by the PDI-P, the party's elites and their allies played key roles in the controversial civics test and were supportive of the "Taliban is controlling the KPK" narratives that they pushed. Firli, who is a close Budi Gunawan ally as mentioned earlier, is said to be the initiator of the controversial civics test (Tempo.co, 2021). *Tempo.co* and other members of collaborative journalism initiative Indoleaks reported that Firli insisted on holding the test, telling other KPK commissioners during a meeting on January 5, 2021, "You forgot. There's a lot of Taliban here" (Desk, 2021; Tempo.co, 2021). PDI-P politician Kapitra Ampera even claimed to have seen the results of the TWK and confirmed that there were "Taliban" within the antigraft body (*Orang PDIP Lihat Jawaban Peserta TWK, Tak Disangka Tak Diduga, Isinya: Ada Taliban Di KPK*, 2021). He made the statement during a streamed interview with Najwa Shihab (Najwa, 2021).

This study does not suggest that the KPK had always been free of political interests, or that it had always represented popular interests before. The executive and the legislative bodies played a key role in selecting and shaping its leadership. While its investigators may have been able to insulate themselves from the agenda of the elite, its leaders may not. From time to time, the KPK has been accused of cherry-picking its targets and of being used, perhaps unwittingly, as a political weapon by different parties in intra-elite conflicts. In 2011, the Golkar Party led the legislative initiative to push he KPK to probe the 2008 illegal bailout of Bank Century in a clear attempt to undermine then-president Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono (Sijabat & Parlina, 2011). Soon after the PDI-P took power in 2014, speculations were rife that the KPK would pursue the Bank Indonesia Liquidity Assistance (BLBI) case that could implicate the PDI-P leader, Megawati, who approved the policy. The scandal, which revolved around the Rp 702 trillion of Bank Indonesia bailout funds, cost the state hundreds of trillions of rupiah ("KPK to Summon Megawati," 2014). The KPK dropped the case in April 2021, just a few months after the appointment of Firli as its new chief.[7]

Nor does this study suggest that the PDI-P is the only elite faction linked to the pro-TWK propaganda. The SNA findings show the campaign involved other factions within the ruling coalition, such those infamously known as "buzzers istana", who represents the interests of the President, and not the parties supporting him, even though the Youtube platform they use

[7] The KPK said that they did not find sufficient evidence to suspect the occurrence of corruption in the disbursement of the BLBI fund.

to create content is co-owned by a PDI-P politician. It is safe to say that the alleged attempt by the PDI-P to defang the Indonesian antigraft commission and keep it under its sphere of influence is part of the ongoing contestation among oligarchic and non-oligarchic powers over state coercive power. It is perhaps no coincidence that the online attacks on the KPK investigators partly stems from the allegation that one of its top investigators, Novel Baswedan, is biased against the ruling coalition as he is related to former Jakarta governor Anies Baswedan. Anies, who has reportedly gained the backing of political big wigs such as former Golkar chairman Jusuf Kalla, former Democratic Party chairman Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono and NasDem Party chairman and powerful media mogul Surya Paloh to contest the 2024 presidential election, is currently seen as the strongest contender from the opposition camp. In a sign of partisan move by KPK leadership, Firli reportedly pushed the KPK investigators to launch a full-blown corruption investigation into the Formula-E electric motorsport race, one of Anies' flagship program, and name the former governor a suspect (Adyatama, 2022). It is within this context that the pro-TWK campaign was launched on social media.

The online propaganda against KPK employees as anti-Pancasila radical Muslims is a perfect example of how the Internet has been co-opted by the current power bloc to prop-up its hegemonic project, which this study refers to the notions of Indonesia as a unitary state and Pancasila as the official state ideology. As a powerful institution, the KPK can pose a challenge to accumulation strategy of the dominant group in Indonesian society. It is the source of tensions between the dominant accumulation pattern — which is reliant on various forms of political corruption — and public demands for accountability. The weaponization of Pancasila as a hegemonic project is required to resolve this friction.

It is worth emphasizing here that the institutional appropriation of Pancasila intensified after the PDI-P leader, Megawati, was appointed the head of the Agency for Pancasila Ideology Education (BPIP) in 2018. The agency, which serves as the ideological apparatus and sole interpreter of Pancasila, had expressed its support for the TWK as an ideological test for civil servants in its public statements (Zulfiqar, 2021).

The link between elite interests and the buzzers can thus be established by analysing the narratives they peddled on social media. The notion that a "Taliban group" had infiltrated the KPK started in 2019, as part of the public campaigns to justify the legislative attempt to "reform" the antigraft institution (Lindsey, 2019; Sastramidjaja & Wijayanto, 2022). The campaign has been largely effective, mainly aided by the deepening ideological polarisation among Indonesian communities, which is arguably driven by the expansion of Indonesian cyberspace as a new site of struggle among competing interests. With hyper-nationalism being the dominant ideology of the ruling elite (D. M. Bourchier, 2019), and with the Islamists now filling the void left by the left (Hadiz, 2020), which has been long effectively crushed, the green spectre of Islamism became the staple of elite fearmongering (Grealy, 2019), resulting

in a deeply divided online community of *kadrun* and *cebong* (Heriyanto, 2019).[8] The case in point being the online propaganda against the KPK investigators.

6.2. Taliban, kadrun and radicals

A text analysis on the tweets using NVIVO's word frequency tool has found that the word "Taliban" is used 59,471 times, followed by "radikal" 13,902 times, and "kadrun" 13,735 times. While these words were not exclusively used by the pro-TWK Internet users to discredit the antigraft busters (some activists may have used these words to quash the allegations), its use in any context helped amplify the disinformation project. Studies have shown disinformation is effective even when it is framed as a clarification that denies its validity and factuality (Borel, 2017). These loaded and derogatory words are effective buzzwords that gained immediately traction online, being commonly used to discredit and delegitimise the mostly Islamist opposition groups. Of the three words, *kadrun* has now even become an umbrella term for anyone critical of the government (Nathaniel, 2020).

It is the contention of this study that the use of these loaded words reflect an ongoing contestation in the spheres of civil society among different social interests, including between the power holders, who bank on the notions of Pancasila and NKRI to rally popular support, and their rival elite who choose to pander to the Islamists and conservative urban Muslims as an increasingly assertive and powerful social force (Hadiz, 2018). In short, it is part of the hegemonic project of Pancasila, which is now mainly interpreted as an antithesis rather than an amalgam of both Islamism and communism. It is no surprise, then, that the word Pancasila was mentioned 101,532 times, asserting the hegemonic nature of the national ideology in the whole TWK discourse within all the Twitter networks.

The words Taliban and *kadrun* — both loosely defined as an expression of Islam that is incompatible with the ideals of Pancasila — did not just randomly emerge on the Internet. The word Taliban was first mentioned by Indonesia Police Watch (IPW) chairman Neta S. Pane, who suggested that there was a conflict within the KPK between "polisi India" (Indian police) and "polisi Taliban" (Taliban police"). The former refers to National Police members seconded to the KPK, led by Firli, while the latter those grouped under the KPK workers union that at the time was led by Novel Baswedan, who are seen as the radical element within the agency. He made the remark to comment on the brewing tensions between the two KPK factions after Firli was accused of an ethics breach for meeting a graft suspect. The term "Taliban" was later used to label Novel and his allies as Muslim radicals, which fit the grand narrative that those critical of the government are radical *kadruns*. These two words were frequently mentioned in the computational propaganda that this study has identified using the coordination network toolkit, suggesting that it is part of a grand scheme to sow doubts among the population on the ideological "fitness" of the KPK employees who failed the controversial test, which was

[8] Kadrun (short for *kadal gurun*, dessert lizard) that has been widely used as a pejorative, and racist, term for the Islamist opposition by supporters of the Jokowi government, while cebong or tadpole is the term used by the opposition groups to describe their rivals.

aimed to assess their loyalty to Pancasila. In addition to posting hashtags claiming the TWK was legitimate, the pro-TWK Twitter users had no qualms of posting harsher hashtags such as #PecatGrupTalibanSekarangJuga (fire the Taliban group now) and #Pecat52KPKAntiPancasila (fire the 52 anti-Pancasila KPK staff).

Most of the pro-TWK Twitter users are either organic to the power bloc or are paid by them in a purely transactional process as part of a the growing "buzzing" industry on social media, while those on the receiving end of these slurs are either activists or members of the opposition groups, including supporters of former Jakarta governor Anies Baswedan, a distant relative of Novel Baswedan, who was arguably the main target of the KPK-Taliban campaign. As mentioned earlier, Anies is perceived as a key opposition figure by the Jokowi government and has become increasingly popular among conservative Muslims. This shows how the online propaganda against the ex-KPK employees was intertwined with the deepening conflict among the oligarchs over political and economic resources.

By critically examining the power relations behind this narrative, and by framing the use of these three loaded words as situated action "to achieve particular ends" (Bouvier & Machin, 2018, p. 184), it is clear that the pro-TWK campaign is not entirely a reflection of a simmering culture war pitting the Islamists and the nationalists/the moderate Muslims. It is in fact an unvarnished display of political machination by the elites, which are now engaged in an ideological contestation over the meaning of Pancasila — whether it is exclusive to or inclusive of Islamist expressions — in their attempt to gain public support.

Figure 8. A screenshot of a tweet with an image featuring a Taliban fighter and the writing "Don't turn KPK into a Taliban hotbed! Just fire them!"

6.3. Online resistance and the limits of social media activism

The narrative contestation over the TWK controversy exemplifies the contested nature of cyberspace, particularly in Indonesia where its civil society can be understood through the Gramscian framework of conflict (Alagappa, 2004). The online attacks on the antigraft busters did not go unchallenged. They faced opposition not only from civil society groups, but also from the opposition camp — the Democratic Party and the Prosperous Justice Party (PKS) — and their Islamist allies, as well as the political faction within the police force that is reportedly wary of the growing clout of the Budi Gunawan faction within the KPK.[9]

The SNA findings, however, show they were only connected to each other by their opposition to the controversial civics test, and there are no indications of coordination among them. Their alliance is far from robust online, let alone offline. Their shared activism does create an impression of one major online force, but one that does not have a clear strategy on how to challenge the pro-TWK propaganda, let alone have the power to create a strong offline movement to put pressure on the government.

The opposition parties rode the wave of criticism against the government for the controversial TWK test, and are possibly concerned by the co-option of the KPK. However, they hardly took meaningful actions to defend the sacked KPK employees. This is hardly surprising, as both the Democratic Party and the PKS have had some of their top leaders jailed by the KPK and have been critical of the antigraft body ever since. The Islamists and civil society groups — described as progressives for their support of democratic and human rights values — can hardly describe themselves as allies. The group of buzzers representing the interests of the police chief Sigit, who leads a rival faction of Budi's within the police force, are largely detached from the anti-TWK cluster. Their hashtag — #Save56exKPKBravoKapolri — is only an indirect criticism of the civic test.

The main counternarrative used by the antigraft investigators and their defenders is the hashtag #BeraniJujurPecat (being fearless and honest gets you fired). This hashtag, or the use of the words "berani" (fearless) and "jujur" (honest), can hardly compete with the more combative campaign portraying them as radical, anti-Pancasila Muslims. The word "berani" appears 32,640 times, while the word "jujur" 6,965 times. It is likely that the word "berani" appears in different contexts, and not necessarily as part of the counternarrative launched by the antigraft busters. To put things in perspective, the hashtag #BeraniJujurPecat itself actually only appeared 2,644 times, slightly higher than the overtly non-organic hashtag #PecatGrupTalibanSekarangJuga (fire the Taliban group now), which was tweeted 1659

[9] Sigit, a close ally of President Jokowi, is believed to be wary of the growing influence of Budi Gunawan, a PDI-P powerbroker and head of the State Intelligence Agency, in KPK. This is said to be main reason why he chooses to hire the ex-KPK employees. Budi, which has controlled BIN and has had an outsized influence within the KPK, is believed to have made attempts to undermine Sigit in a bid to tighten his grip on the police force in the lead up to the 2024 general elections (Baker, 2022).

times. While the firing of the KPK investigators showcases one of the most blatant attempts by the ruling elite to defang the antigraft body, using rhetoric that can easily be dismissed as hoax or disinformation, the elite within the opposition camp and their Islamist allies as well as civil society groups failed to collect enough grassroots support to put political pressure on the power bloc to back down on its assault on the KPK.

Figure 9: A tweet showing solidarity for then 75 KPK employees who were on the brink of losing their jobs after failing the controversial civics test known as TWK.

Considering the nature of the alliance among the social forces critical of the TWK, which can be considered as having "weak ties" (Gladwell, 2010), it is no surprise that the online mobilization against the TWK failed to save the ex-KPK employees. Regardless of the efficacy of the KPK-Taliban propaganda, the progressive forces within the online community were devoid of strong social and political capital to mount a challenge, mainly as a result of decades of depoliticization of civil society and anti-left policy by the New Order.

That said, suggesting that the negative campaign against the KPK employees was effective is also not off the mark. The propaganda may not have been loud and massive enough to drown out or silence the anti-TWK twitter users' voices, but it may have been successful in preventing them from raising enough support to incite public outrage. In the past, the online community was unified in defending the KPK from the assaults of the politico-economic elite. While it may not be the only factor deterring the elites from achieving their goal of weakening the KPK, the unanimous support for the antigraft agency — particularly the 2009 gecko-versus-crocodile controversy[10] — may have played a role in protecting the agency. However, it is important to

[10] The Gecko-Crocodile controversy refers to the first conflict between the KPK and the National Police. It was triggered by the KPK's wiretapping of then police chief detective Susno Duadji over his alleged involvement in the

note that Indonesian cyberspace was less crowded and more cohesive back then — in 2009, when Internet users rallied behind the KPK leaders who were unfairly criminalised, only 7 percent of Indonesians were connected to the Internet, according to the World Bank. In 2021, when the TWK controversy broke out, the figure stood at 62 percent (*Individuals Using the Internet (% Population) - Indonesia*, 2022).

With the rise of computational propaganda, as exemplified by the campaign against the KPK employees, the expanding online community has become disorganised and more prone to polarisation by competing elites, effectively rendering them powerless.

Conclusion

This study has found that the Twitter conversation about the controversial civics tests for KPK employees has produced a number of competing narratives promoted by a few social media influencers and a group of Twitter users allegedly paid to amplify certain messages to affirm the legitimacy of the TWK. Those messages are apparently meant to portray the sacked KPK employees who failed the civics test as radical Muslims. The computational propaganda, while lacking sophistication, has been seen as largely effective, though it is worth noting that the online community was already too disorganised to defend the ex-KPK employees. A critical discourse analysis examining the core messages of the disinformation campaign against the ex-KPK employees, meanwhile, has found a connection linking the systematic digital operation with the interests of the power bloc, who have used the notions of Pancasila and NKRI as the hegemonic project to sustain its accumulation strategy.

The mobilisation of pro-TWK buzzers cannot be detached from the political-economic interests of the ruling elite, which were under serious threat when the KPK was stronger and prone to political co-option by the oppositional elite or easily swayed by public opinions. This element of intra-elite conflict changes the nature of the narrative contestation over the fate of the former KPK employees who failed the civics tests — that it is more than just a conflict between elite versus digitally empowered pro-democracy activists. It is more of a power struggle between elites to gain the support of the online popular masses.

While this study does not attempt to empirically measure the efficacy of the computational propaganda against the KPK employees, it does show how hegemonic ideas such as Pancasila and NKRI, through SNA and CDA on the debate over the TWK on Twitter, have been used to frame certain actions as either the norm or an aberration. The result was a divided online community incapable of mobilizing a massive, unified social power, with the KPK employees finally shown the door without serious public repercussions.

This study further concludes that the use of computational propaganda is more than just an "authoritarian innovation", as argued by Sastramidjaja & Wijayanto (2022). Such a

Bank Century case. Susno was furious about the KPK move and retaliated by charging two KPK commissioners — Bibit Samad Riyanto and Chandra Martha Hamzah — with abuse of power. He boasted that the KPK was just "a gecko" and could not defeat the National Police, which he described as "crocodile", fueling a deluge of online support for the KPK as the powerful "gecko".

proposition implies that the rise of online disinformation is contingent on the nature of the state, which is becoming increasingly authoritarian and adaptive to technological advances, an argument that supports the regime type/state adaptability theory of digital repression (Feldstein, 2021; Kalathil & Boas, 2007). This study argues that the use of political buzzers to justify the expropriation of the KPK by the elites is the result of the broader political-economic and ideological conflict in Indonesian society, which has now extended into cyberspace as a new site of struggle for both political and cultural hegemony. The new digital technology has provided elites with a new hegemonic instrument to protect their access to political and economic resources. With their vast material resources, the oligarchs have tapped into the growing buzzing industry to co-opt certain interests within the increasingly digital civil society in their attempt to neutralize its revolutionary potentials.

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