OF SOCIAL DISCIPLINE & CONTROL

A STUDY OF THE IMPACT OF FAKE NEWS AND DISINFORMATION ON MINORITIES IN INDONESIA

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Of social discipline and control:
The impact of fake news and disinformation on minorities in Indonesia

Executive Summary

Recent scholarship on disinformation points to a range of adverse effects on society, including its potential to fragment institutions and incite violence. Despite this, little research has looked into the stratified effects of fake news in society – particularly on how minorities are disproportionately victimized by the problem. This study sets out to analyze the qualitative impact of fake news on racial, ethnic and sexual minority communities in Indonesia. Indonesia presents an interesting case, given how the impact of disinformation in Indonesia has been particularly pronounced. Not only has the rampant spread of disinformation extensively impinged on the integrity of the Jakarta gubernatorial elections in 2017 and the presidential elections in 2019, it has also been implicated in both longstanding ethno-religious violence and discrimination against minority groups. This study investigates three research questions: first, what disinformation campaigns affecting minority groups have emerged in Indonesia? Next, how have these campaigns influenced and shaped social behavior of minorities? Lastly, how is the state implicated in the problem, and to what extent are state responses considered adequate? To address these questions, this study draws on primary data collected through interviews with Indonesian citizens belonging to major minority groups.

Key findings

1. The findings reveal the disproportionate impact fake news has on minority communities in Indonesia, including psychological stress, economic damage, sexual and physical violence and harm.

2. It sheds light on how fake news has been weaponized by hegemonic groups in society to both amass various forms of political and religious capital, as well as to socially control and discipline minority groups.

3. Furthermore, it shows how the state is implicated in the problem through biased and politicized policing of fake news.

4. Given that the proliferation of fake news is facilitated through modern social media platforms, increased state regulation towards these platforms has the potential to curb the worst effects of disinformation and create a healthier public sphere.

5. More than delegating the resolution of the problem to the government however, it is also important that ground-up solutions – especially educational efforts to both raise awareness of fake news, as well as the phenomenon of how fake new is being instrumentalized politically – are advanced.

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Fake news and misinformation refers to a type of yellow journalism composed of false information disseminated via broadcast or social media (Lazer et al., 2018). Often using sensationalist or outright fabricated headlines to increase readership, it is typically published with the aim of misleading in order to damage a person or entity, or otherwise achieve certain financial or political ends. While the issue of misinformation, disinformation and 'fake news' has historical precedence and is actually not a new phenomenon, it has emerged in contemporary times as a political issue following the 2016 US Presidential Elections (Allcott and Gentzkow, 2017)[1]. The scale in which fake news aimed at compromising the integrity of the elections was disseminated had stunned the world.

Unsurprisingly, this episode portended political implications emanating far beyond the continent. In Southeast Asia (SEA), ministers attending an Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) conference in May 2018 issued a Declaration on a Framework to Minimize the Harmful Effects of Fake News (Neo, 2019). The declaration claims that fake news can 'undermine confidence in political institutions and erode social harmony of a country' and pledges austere measures against fake news (Lema, 2018). In Singapore, a Parliamentary Select Committee convened to examine fake news concluded that it presents a 'very grave phenomenon of an unprecedented scale' for the country as it can 'damage the social fabric of the nation and exploit religious fault-lines' (Tang, 2018).

Fake news… presents a 'very grave phenomenon of an unprecedented scale as it can damage the social fabric of the nation and exploit religious fault-lines'.

Recent scholarship corroborates the potential of fake news to damage institutions, ferment societal distrust, and spur polarization. Studies focusing on the effects of fake news on political institutions and society-at-large have illuminated the disruptive impact posed by fake news on democratic processes such as the 2016 US presidential elections, the Brexit referendum and national elections across the world (Carlson, 2018; Howard et al., 2017). The existence of echo chambers on social media exacerbates the problem of fake news in society, as extreme views constantly circulated within closed communities that do not allow balanced debate or opposing viewpoints to emerge entrenches polarization and crystallizes prejudices across different groups of society (Auxier and Vitak, 2019). However, little existing research has looked into the stratified effects of fake news on

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[1] As mentioned, the issue of misinformation and disinformation – or the manipulation and dissemination of false or misleading information – has always been a longstanding issue globally and throughout the political history of SEA; however, the term 'fake news' itself became a popular and contemporarily-salient term after the 2016 US elections.

different social groups in society – particularly on how minorities can be targeted by disinformation campaigns and how they are disproportionately affected and victimized by the problem.

In that light, this study sets out to present a case analysis of the qualitative impact of fake news and disinformation on minority communities in Indonesia. Indonesia represents an interesting case, given that the impact of disinformation in Indonesia has been particularly pronounced – with it having extensively impinged on the integrity of the 2017 Jakarta gubernatorial elections in 2017 and the presidential elections in 2019, and being further implicated in both longstanding violence and discrimination against minority groups through prejudicial hate speech, rumors and misrepresentations (Azali, 2017).

This study investigates three main research questions: first, what disinformation campaigns affecting minority groups have emerged in Indonesia? Next, how have these campaigns influenced and shaped the social behavior of minorities? Lastly, how is the state implicated in the problem, and to what extent are state responses considered adequate? To study how disinformation has qualitatively affected minority communities in Indonesia, this study draws on a series of primary semi-structured interviews conducted with Indonesian citizens. Interviews were conducted in Bahasa Indonesia with twenty-four citizens belonging to key racial, ethnic and sexual minority groups in Indonesia of interest in this study – Shia Muslims, Christians, Hindus, Chinese/Buddhists, women and LGBT. To facilitate the analysis of the gendered effects of fake news and disinformation campaigns, more than half of the interviewees we engaged with are female.

This study engages with and contributes to the scholarship on 'gendered' misinformation – or research examining the differential effects of misinformation on gender minorities, extending beyond this to study the impact of fake news on other major minority groups such as ethnic and religious minorities. Drawing on the concepts of stigma and normalization, the findings from this study shed light on how fake news has disproportionately affected minorities in Indonesia. It finds that fake news has been weaponized by hegemonic groups in society to both amass various forms of political and social capital, as well as to socially control and discipline minority groups. Furthermore, it shows how the Indonesian state is implicated in the problem through biased and politicized policing of fake news as well as the selective enforcement of the law.

The rest of the report is organized as such. The initial section reviews the contemporary phenomenon of fake news and misinformation as well as the range of adverse effects that have been documented. Scholarship on how it has affected minority communities is also reviewed. The next section sets out the methodological conduct of this study, elaborating on the selection process for the minority

groups to be interviewed. The ensuing section, which comprises the bulk of the analysis, examines the prevalence of the issue of fake news and misinformation in the Indonesian society. In the case analysis, the article focuses on documenting and unpacking the various types of disinformation campaigns targeting minority groups in Indonesia as well as importantly its effects on various minority communities. The last section reflects on the effectiveness of present state interventions on the issue, presents policy recommendations, and discusses the implications of this study's findings for the politics of fake news.

2.0 Fake news and misinformation in society

'Fake news' as a term is defined as misinformation presented as news, meaning that it has been fabricated and disseminated with the intent to mislead others into believing false information or questioning empirical facts (Gelfert, 2018). Stemming from the economically or politically motivated production of misinformation, it is thus considered a form of disinformation, although the ways audiences engage with fake news can exacerbate and amplify its effects[2]. Providing clarity to the term, Tandoc Jr et al. (2018) have drafted a typology of six forms of misinformation that the term has been used to represent in scholarly discussions which include satire, parody, fabricated content, misleading advertisement, propaganda and manipulated content. Importantly, the empirical issue of fake news – which refers to the phenomenon and effects of mis/disinformation presented in a journalistic form – is differentiated from the 'fake news label' research genre – which refers to the abuse of the term by certain actors to undermine the credibility of information that are actually factual (Egelhofer and Lecheler, 2019). While not the primary focus of this project, a separate body of literature has documented rising instances of how politicians have politically instrumentalized the fake news label to undermine media outlets reporting factual but critical developments about these politicians (Farkas and Schou, 2018; Author, 2020a).

Attention to the empirical issue of fake news has intensified lately due to heightened fears of the effects it can have on political institutions. In the US and UK, the issue has come to the fore as a result of revelations about allegations of Russian interference in democratic elections, and for misdirecting public debate by way of disinformation campaigns (Howard et al., 2017; Howard and Kollanyi, 2016). The potential impact of fake news on democratic processes is highlighted by a

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[2] For terminological clarity, misinformation refers to false or misleading information, while disinformation refers to the deliberate and malicious use of misinformation to achieve certain outcomes. Fake news is considered a form of disinformation.

Parliamentary Select Committee convened in Singapore to examine fake news, which concluded that it presents a 'very grave phenomenon of an unprecedented scale' for the country as it can 'damage the social fabric of the nation and exploit religious fault-lines' (Kwang, 2018). Alluding to research that has exposed the capacities of states to mobilize online 'troll armies' (Lesaca, 2017), a UK parliamentary report describes how fake news can be used as a 'medium for organized disinformation campaigns with the aim of destabilizing states through the subversion of societies and democratic processes including elections', and is 'most onerous given its impact on national security and social cohesion' (Vasu et al., 2018).

Beyond impacting democratic processes and national security, fake news has also been implicated in violent incidents, with adverse consequences on public order, individual security and the right to life. Empirical accounts reflect rising incidences of minority communities in society – especially religious or ethnic minorities – being systematically targeted by disinformation campaigns. In July 2019, eight people were killed by vigilante mobs in Dhaka, Bangladesh, after fake rumors about child abductions spread online (Minar and Naher, 2018). The victims, who belong to the Hindu minority in the country, were targeted after fabricated online posts alleged that children are being sacrificed as offerings to the country's Padma Bridge construction project (Rahim, 2019). An evaluation by the United Nations (UN) Human Rights Council has found that the Myanmar government has exploited fake news to justify rights violations and crackdowns against the Rohingya minority, willfully disseminating false information against the minority community on social media (OHCHR, 2018). Reports also cite the case of Ashin Wirathu, a radical monk with a large following who began preaching on Facebook after the government banned him from holding public gatherings (Anansaringkarn and Neo, 2020). Wirathu routinely posts fake anti-Rohingya material to incite violence against the community. Across in Europe, Schäfer and (Schäfer and Schadauer, 2018) research sheds light on how false narratives have statistically led to an increase in cyber hate against migrants in Austria. In accounting for the disproportionate impact of fake news on minorities, Auxier and Vitak (2019) argue that the existence of echo chambers on social media allow extreme views to be constantly circulated within closed communities, aggravating polarization and crystallizing historical prejudices across different groups of society.

> *Empirical accounts reflect rising incidences of minority communities in society – especially religious or ethnic minorities – being systematically targeted by disinformation campaigns.*

2.1 Gendered misinformation and social control

The adverse effects of fake news extend beyond these overt societal impacts. Indeed, emergent studies have begun to shed light on the existence of stratified and 'gendered' experiences as it relates to the impact of disinformation on the understudied class of sexual minorities in society. Gendered disinformation can be understood as the systematic targeting and dissemination of false or misleading information attacking women (especially political leaders, journalists and public figures), basing the attack on their identity as women (Stabile et al., 2019; Krook, 2018; Judson et al., 2020). The techniques for diffusing gendered disinformation are diverse and include misogynist comments that reinforce gender stereotypes, sexualization and the diffusion of graphic contents, online harassment and cyber-attacks. Similar to yet distinct in its own right from hate speech and libel, gendered disinformation builds on false sexist narratives and are characterized by malign intent and coordination (Lucina, 2021).

Gendered disinformation has the effect of perpetuating a negative perception of women in society: it undermines women's credibility in occupying positions of power, discourages women from participating in the public debate, and serves to silence women in general. Sessa (2020), in her report on gendered disinformation tactics during the COVID-19 pandemic, shows how the International Women's Day March (8M) in Spain offers a clear example of a campaign of gendered disinformation encountered in the European Union. As the pandemic imposed unprecedented social distancing measures, a number of outlets produced biased coverage of the 8M celebration in Spanish cities, pointing to the event as responsible for an acceleration of the pandemic. Although social gatherings are undoubtedly hot spots for the spread of the virus, she argues that disinformation was more fixated on the prejudiced portrayal of the feminist movement and its adherents as plague spreaders or law-breakers, rather than concern about health risks.

> *Gendered disinformation it undermines women's credibility in occupying positions of power, discourages women from participating in the public debate, and serves to silence women in general.*

Gendered misinformation can be understood as a tool which reproduces and reinforces certain power structures in society when it is used to amplify stigma and negative stereotypes about a minority community (gender, sexual, ethnic or racial). Link and Phelan (2001)'s stigma framework provides a useful lens highlighting the relationship between gendered misinformation and power structures in society. They conceptualize stigma as resulting from five interrelated, sequential factors: the labeling of individual differences, the association of labeled persons with negative stereotypes, the

assignment of labeled persons to distinct groups, the creation of "in" versus "out" group members resulting in the loss of status and discrimination experienced by labeled persons, and lastly the widespread acceptance of labeling, stereotyping, separation and discrimination via social, economic or political power (Rodrigues, 2014). Gendered misinformation is most powerful in the initial phases of labelling and associating minority groups with certain falsehoods, thereby crystallizing cleavages between societal groups and segmenting "in" and "out" groups.

Such categorizations, if unchecked and left to foment in society, ultimately lead to the normalization of labeling, stereotyping, separation and discrimination via social, economic or political power. Normalization was raised by Foucault to describe the construction of a norm or conduct – for example, the way a proper citizen should behave, speak, act, and so on – and then rewarding or punishing individuals for respectively conforming to or deviating from this ideal (Foucault, 2012). Through political actions such as rhetoric, legislation and enforcement, hegemonic powers in society can foster the normalization of certain stigmas and stereotypes in society to exert social control over groups – including minorities – and achieve various political ends.

Overall, it is clear that fake news and disinformation campaigns can affect minority groups disproportionately, and that the instrumentalization of the issue to incite violence, marginalize different communities and institutionalize certain forms of social control have been prevalent across various settings. More contextualized research is needed to shed light on dynamics on the various ways fake news and misinformation impact on minority communities in society – including LGBT minorities, which previous studies have not explored – the actors behind these campaigns as well as their motives. Below, we proceed to discuss the methodological set-up of this study.

3.0 Research design and data sources

This study seeks to examine the qualitative impact of fake news and disinformation on minority communities in Indonesia. Three fundamental research question are posed:

> **RQ1**: What are the disinformation campaigns affecting minority groups that have emerged in Indonesia?
>
> **RQ2**: Next, how have these campaigns influenced and shaped social behavior of minorities?
>
> **RQ3**: How is the state implicated in the problem, and to what extent are state responses considered adequate?

This study employs semi-structured interviews to obtain primary data from individuals belonging to minority communities in Indonesia. Interviews complement a qualitative approach, emphasizing the lived experiences of the subject's perceptions and privileging agency (DiCicco-Bloom and Crabtree, 2006). Semi-structured interviews allow researchers to uncover the meaning people activate to make sense of their daily practices, making it useful for illuminating the overarching effects of fake news and disinformation on the lives of minorities.

As we are interested in the perceptions, opinions and lived experiences of minority groups in particular, the study's target population are Indonesian citizens above the age of eighteen who belong to the main religious, ethnic and gendered minority communities in the country. In terms of the ethno-religious demographics in Indonesia, native ethnic groups including the Javanese and Sundanese constitute the majority national ethnicities, while the Chinese ethnicity stands at around 1.2%; approximately 86.5% of Indonesians are Sunni Muslims, while 9% are Christians, 1.5% are Hindu, 0.5% are Shia Muslims, and 0.5% practice other faiths (Ananta et al., 2015). Outbursts of ethno-religious tensions and strife have a long history in Indonesia, notably against religious minorities such as Christians, Hindu and Shia Muslims, as well as against the Chinese minorities, who are often thought to be 'pilfers' of the country's wealth (Aspinall, 2008).

In that light, the main groups identified for this study, specifically, are Shia Muslims, Christians, Hindus, Buddhists/Chinese, LGBT, and women. Over the span of two months from May-June 2021, four subjects from each minority group, representing a total of twenty-four interviewees, were recruited for the interview through personal networks as well as NGOs in Indonesia. The interviews, which were conducted virtually and with the help of a native Bahasa speaker, took approximately thirty minutes each. The interviews sought to investigate respondents' lived experiences with the issue of fake news and misinformation, highlighting their personal encounters and exposure to various disinformation campaigns as well as the self-reported effects of these on their behavior. In addition, we explore interviewees' thoughts and opinions towards possible solutions and the adequacy of state intervention on the issue. Due to the sensitivity of the issue and potential vulnerability due to minority status, no information that can identify the respondents were retained, and all interview and study data are kept confidential.

To analyse the data, we examined and coded each interview transcript to highlight the key themes that were surfaced with regards to our main research questions. The coding was guided deductively from theoretical expectations set out from the literature review, as well as inductively and organically through the interview transcripts themselves. The NVivo 12 software was used to identify relevant themes and organize the discourse. To ensure the rigor of the data analysis, the

coding was first done separately by each author before the subsequent review and reconciliation of the coding results. An important limitation of this study relates to the causal aspect of its findings. As this is primarily a qualitative study oriented around the perspectives and lived experiences of minorities, it is unable to conclude definitively on the more statistical elements and effects of fake news on minority communities. Further studies can approach this issue from a quantitative angle to investigate the differentiated impact of fake news on minorities concerning more objective outcomes such as, amongst others, violence, income, life satisfaction and social mobility.

In addition to the interviews, secondary data for analysis was also drawn from news articles, commentary, official statements and scholarly research. The discourses advanced in these texts would be used together with the interview data to present a critical, rich and empirically-evidenced case analysis of the impact of fake news and misinformation on minority communities in Indonesia.

4.0 Fake news and disinformation campaigns in Indonesia

Overall, twenty-four respondents were recruited, with minority groups Shia Muslim, Hindu, Christian, Buddhist/Chinese, gay/lesbian, and female represented. Given the diversity and intersection of identities of the twenty-four respondents, results were categorized in accordance to the minority experience on which the respondents spoke (*e.g.* a female Shia Muslim may speak both on gendered and religious fake news campaigns and impacts). As a result of this classification scheme, the narrative distills into two interwoven parts. First, there is a shared experience of fake news across all minority groups in terms of exposure to fake news, and the impacts and expressions of disapproval towards the government. That this spans across minority groups speaks to the larger issue of pervasiveness of fake news and its generalized harmful effects towards minorities. Second, despite this overarching experience, there are still minority-specific effects in coping with the effect of fake news. As such, the analysis will consist of discussion on both the general and community-specific aspects of differentiated impact of fake news and disinformation.

4.1 Types of fake news campaigns

Overall, all participants have heard of fake news (often termed "hoaxes" in Bahasa Indonesia, with both terms used interchangeably) in some form or other. Many participants mentioned the emergence of fake news in conjunction with certain natural disasters or political events. Often, these hoaxes and fakes news stories are directed at certain minority groups.

An overwhelming majority of respondents were able to recall fake news surrounding various elections in Indonesia, paralleling the campaign trail. The rhetoric of these news items often contained slanderous remarks towards a candidate's background, with either ethnicity or religion being the sharpest dividing line. For example, in the 2017 Jakarta gubernatorial elections, several participants recall the case of Chinese Indonesian and Christian governor Basuki Tjahaja Purnama ("Ahok") being falsely accused of blasphemy and mistreating the Qur'an or insulting Muslims (*female, Muslim)* through manipulation of what he said. One participant (*Male, Christian*) also mentioned how he heard that citizens in the Riau islands were not as bothered as portrayed about statements that Ahok made, with the reaction being fabricated. Another example was the 2019 general election of Indonesia, with standing president candidate Joko Widodo ("Jokowi") defeating Prabowo Subianto Gerindra ("Prabowo"). Propaganda-style fake news was wielded on both sides, targeting mostly ethnic and religious tensions in Indonesia:

> *"News surged how if Prabowo were to win, then Chinese Indonesians would be required to flee the country or face deportation - much like in the new order regime under Suharto"*
>
> *-Female, Chinese*
>
> *"There was a lot of fake news during the 2019 Indo elections. If Jokowi won, people thought Chinese will flood economy and erode religious freedom, as Chinese are atheists."*
>
> *-Female, Muslim*

The second respondent highlighted the "dual-pronged" tensions between ethnicity and religion in Indonesia, citing both the fears of ethnic takeover ("Chinese will flood economy") and religious upheaval and prosecution ("…as Chinese are atheists.").

In addition to fake news targeting candidates' backgrounds during elections, fake news was also disseminated by candidates against groups not involved in the election. One participant (*Female, Muslim)* mentioned how both Jokowi and Prabowo camps purported falsehoods towards the LGBT minority group in an attempt to "outbid against each other to show who is more hardline." Although the contents of these campaigns against LGBT were not made clear from the participant, it shows the potential for fake news to be weaponized against minority groups to the ends of accruing political gains in a competitive context.

Another topic that surfaced was the frequency of fake news regarding COVID-19 and vaccine use. One participant (*female, Muslim, LGBT)* said that this disinformation campaign was targeted against ethnic Chinese and includes assertions that Sinovac vaccines were a "way to hurt Islamic countries

like Indonesia," that they were laced with "microchips to spy on Indonesians," and that they contained non-halal ingredients.

Not only do fake news campaigns compound during political or natural events, there are also more generic misinformation campaigns that continually circulate in the background. This false information largely taps into existing fears or stereotypes present in Indonesian consciousness (mostly along religious lines), ultimately converging into a targeted narrative that subjugates a minority group. Hindu interviewees in this study raised several false narratives targeting their religion:

> *"There was a case of expansion of Islam in Bali (a Hindu island) by building new mosques in Bali. People were saying Muslims would marry Balinese people to convert them into Islam. There was also something about poisoning dogs in Bali because they consider dogs' saliva as heinous."*
>
> *-Female, Hindu*
>
> *"People constantly say that we are devil worshippers, sinners, and godless."*
>
> *-Female, Hindu, LGBT*
>
> *"Recently, there was a case where a Hindu woman converted into Islam began accusing Hinduism as a false religion - like the act of cremating our deceased in Bali - a practice spanning over many centuries. It was made to seem as though we were doing something illegal, and she further made other degrading and fake comments."*
>
> *-Male, Hindu*

The same kind of attacks were made against Christians, largely concerning issues of "Christianization" and the need to convert people (*Male, Christian*) as well as eating dogs and pork (*Female, Christian*), and questioning the resurrection of Jesus Christ (*Female, Christian*). While these disinformation episodes largely draw on historical consciousness of Indonesians as well as religious and ethnic distrust between different groups, they also can be triggered by geopolitical events – and these in turn can ricochet further and portend an impact on society:

> *"Fake news from the Rohingya crisis in Myanmar led to many attacks on Buddhist temples in Sumatra. I believe that they do so as an act of self-defense from what's going on with Muslims in Rohingya."*
>
> *-Female, Buddhist, Chinese*

Shia Muslims were also on the receiving end of fake news. One participant had mentioned that she "practically grew up with hoaxes, growing up hearing negative opinions and misconceptions about Shias." She often recalled being denied her religion, with people commenting on how Shias are an "*ajaran sesat*" – or an astray sect. The interviewee also recalled attacks claiming that Shias "…do not deserve to be called Muslim and they're like infidels. I heard this since young, first from a religious teacher in high school." (*Female, Shia Muslim*).

One of the minority groups most frequently victimized by fake news and disinformation campaigns was the LGBT group. Many participants were quickly able to recall how LGBT groups were easy targets of fake news given their relatively weak position in society:

> *"There are LGBT banners in my neighborhood spreading fake news about LGBT. They are blamed for natural disasters, the world ending, and they also suggest that they are pedophiles"*
>
> *-Female, LGBT, Hindu*
>
> *"LGBT hoaxes are very sensitive, as not only Muslims dislike LGBT. The basis for hate for queerness can come from other religions, other sociocultural norms, etc. And so, the disinformation like how gay people are predators, are hard to combat given the different arguments people can throw."*
>
> *-Female, LGBT, Muslim*
>
> *"They said my sexual orientation was a virus that could be cured."*
>
> *-Male, LGBT*

Some other fake news items are directed towards certain groups which are not studied in this study, including notably a deluge of false narratives about the "Papuan independence movement". It is clear, overall, that there is a plethora of examples on fake news campaigns that have permeated throughout Indonesian society.

4.2 Self-reported impact on minorities

In general, participants are concerned about the pervasiveness and the potential larger-level effects resulting from fake news. One participant (*Male, Gay)* had said that these campaigns are "influential

and have been used to shape perceptions of the elderly", suggesting that not only are the targeted groups affected, but also the perceptions of them in other groups – groups that are not directly involved in the spreading of fake news. Another participant added to this sentiment, saying that "Such fake news echoes, disinformation of this sort becomes more and more normalized, especially in the absence of no one being able to counteract these claims.*" (Female, LGBT, Muslim).* These spillover effects as a result of the "echo" can "amplify the prejudices existing already in society" *(Female, Muslim)*, a point made earlier about fake news items arising from certain salient topics in the public's consciousness. Some people are concerned about the larger scale "conflicts that can arise, such as ethnic and religious conflicts" *(Female, Hindu).* In addition, there is a sense of hopelessness as well among some participants:

> *"Minorities are forced to accommodate and accept this [ostracism, condemnation by society] as a reality of life."*
>
> *-Female, Christian*

In parallel, there is also an assortment of minority-specific impacts and effects of fake news. For Hindus, since their religion is not as widely understood outside of Balinese communities, they get "awkward questioning on god worship and social pressure, leading Hindus to have self-doubt on their religion" *(Male, Hindu)*. However, the same respondent's reaction was to "be patient and give them as much information as possible." The response through education and patience on religion seems to be echoed at least by some Christians:

> *"People often ask me to verify whether what they've heard [regarding Christianity] is true. I will take that as an opportunity to rectify. The Christian community doesn't often look to confront who is behind fake news."*
>
> *-Male, Christian*
>
> *"Fake news against Christians, we will usually just accept it and stay quiet. I'll possibly collect information and use it to counter/attack the fake news spreaders, but I'm not sure if that leads to an escalation of conflict."*
>
> *-Male, Christian*

This speaks to a larger docility and non-confrontation of certain religious groups (largely observed through the interview results with Christians and Buddhists in this study) when faced with items of fake news. However, if this fake news counters the beliefs of a participant, they will speak up. One

participant said that he was "personally affected by the fake news that Christianity supports gay marriage. This led to a heated quarrel and debates, with both sides being very stubborn." (*Male, Christian).* This statement speaks on the complexity of *how* these fake news items are "rectified" when an opportunity presents itself. The viewpoint on enduring the pressures of fake news, or remediation through education, however, is not shared by all respondents. Another Hindu respondent said that "Some Hindus are forced to convert to other religions to avoid persecution" with "conversion pressures seem to be strongest among economic minorities who think converting to Islam can give them more jobs etc." *(Female, Hindu).*

Among the Chinese, most reactions have manifested in making alternative plans to either leave, or to "lay low" and not get into any trouble. These reflect the broader story of the Chinese experience in Indonesia:

> *"Our past experience in this country shapes our behavior. If we are targeted, we will try our best to blend in, and 'hide' by changing our behavior in order to survive. I'm self-conscious of my ethnic minority status when interacting in Indonesian society. I'm cautious outside of my community, and sometimes awkward/tense when interacting with other ethnic/religious groups"*
>
> *-Female, Chinese*

This sentiment is shared with at least one other participant:

> *"Chinese in Indonesia learn to keep a low profile to avoid trouble. Sometimes, if we are asked to donate to a fund pool for a broken item in the neighborhood, we would just give more since that is their expectation of us. I grew up with the mindset that we should not talk too much in the public sphere because we were Chinese."*
>
> *-Female, Buddhist, Chinese*

Interestingly, lying low and avoiding conflict was also mentioned by the sole Shia Muslim participant, saying that she tended to "ignore targeted attacks/fake news to avoid trouble." (*Female, Shia Muslim).*

For gendered minorities (female, LGBT), the impacts and responses generally revolve around fear, violence, and self-censorship. This tends to spiral around whereby the perpetrators are empowered by their attempts to suppress minorities, and the minority groups either do not speak up or "hide" themselves in everyday society.

> *"Fake news around LGBT resulted in hate crimes and cyberbullying, among others. They [gay men] are bullied for being feminine, and it seems that trans-women have it the worst. This has resulted in us being discreet. And, since visibility of queer people is very low, we get prejudice. It's a vicious cycle."*
>
> > *-Male, Gay*

> *"LGBT victims facing fake news and other discrimination are usually very scared, since they fear being beaten up (violence), and facing social ostracism. This is a negative spiral: you're scared, you don't speak up, and this emboldens perpetuators to do more violence and discrimination."*
>
> > *-Female, LGBT, Hindu*

> *"A lot of these fake news against LGBT and attacks led to many cases of families disowning them. I know friends who ran away from their homes during their teenage years to avoid being forced to attend conversion therapies, and fear of having to be exorcised."*
>
> > *-Female, LGBT*

A Hindu female shared these same thoughts about the fear of violence perpetrated against women:

> *"Sandiago Uno, Vice Presidential Candidate for Prabowo Subianto in the 2019 elections, said that sites in Bali will be made as Muslim friendly travel destinations. Prabowo's followers understood this as saying that Hindu women should dress in a Muslim way (covering hair and other parts of the body) and would not be allowed to wear the Balinese Kebaya (that is more revealing). And, if they did, these women are allowed to be raped. This was to me one of the scariest moments in my life, because Prabowo could have won, even if the chances were small. These threats of violence against women keep me in fear. I fear my life; I fear my way of life."*
>
> > *-Female, Hindu*

These fake news campaigns are sometimes thought to be exacerbated by the deep religious ties that run through the country, again highlighting the intersectionality at which these fake news campaigns operate:

> *"There are Islamic extremists trying to establish an Islamic caliphate in Indo, forcing women to wear hijabs through fake news campaigns that pressure minorities."*
>
> > *-Female, Buddhist, Chinese*

4.3 Platforms, actors and reasons for perpetuation

Across all participants, media is seen as largely responsible for the dissemination of fake news. Many participants refer to familial networks linked together through WhatsApp which are often internal transmission chains of fake news items. Other participants mention that platforms such as Twitter and Instagram are perfect, as one participant puts it, "amplification stations" (*Male, Gay)* that can project prejudices into a wider audience and gain traction. The same participant commented that the "online space is a projection of the offline space" which can be interpreted as these social media platforms being the vessel in which fake news surfaces, revealing the underlying perceptions of publics which are shaped by history.

The reasons for perpetuating fake news are closely linked to the perceived actors involved. For example, one major perceived "at-fault" group were "authorities" that spread fake news for political gain and to win elections:

> *"Authorities spread fake news to win elections. When they spread fake news about a topic in order to get support, or support for a particular law. Fake news is very influential in influencing opinion. They may want to also maintain the status quo."*
>
> *-Female, Muslim*
>
> *"During election season, [fake news is] used to gain votes from a group at expense of other groups. Gain favor of large group versus lose favor of small group (for example, LGBT vs Muslims)."*
>
> *-Male, Christian*
>
> *"The government seems to be involved at least in the region of Bali. Trying to use fake news to gain political power and support. Government amplifies prejudices of the majority as they want the support of the majority - they cannot go against these majority views because they will lose support."*
>
> *-Female, Hindu*

Other narratives describe how fake news is "weaponized by politicians who benefit from using it to attack opposition, or fracturing relations between different communities" (*Female, Chinese, Buddhist)* as well as "Push certain agendas, although unsure of which agenda" (*Female, Hindu, LGBT)*. They are also used to "steer people away from actual problems and pit them against each other, with the people in power benefitting" (*Female, Shia Muslim)*. This linking of political gain

perhaps is not so surprising, as most participants also noticed the proliferation of fake news to parallel major events, including that of elections.

Another major reason for the perpetuation of fake news is the potential "religious capital" that one stands to gain from it, once again intertwining religion. One participant claimed:

> *"Religious actors and leaders spread fake news. They need 'religious capital'. And so in order to be a more prominent, say, Muslim Preacher, then they need to take more 'extreme' stances in order to compete/differentiate themselves from the rest of the competition. "*
>
> *-Female, LGBT, Muslim*

Another participant discussed the sensitivities of religion in Indonesia, and how the motivation of religion and political power can also sometimes have synergistic effects:

> *"Muslim supremacists sometimes are behind many of these campaigns - maybe they are trying to build an Islamic caliphate. They want Islam to be the dominant religion in Indonesia, and so are motivated by religious and political power."*
>
> *-Female, Hindu*

This same sentiment on religion and politics is shared by another Hindu participant:

> *"I think fake news against minorities and Hindus seems to be spread mostly by Islamic extremists who are pushing for an Islamic caliphate in Indonesia. Fake news seems to be weaponized and used to influence the poorer majority of Muslims, to mobilize them against (secular) government ideology and force them to adopt a more Islamic ideology. Such fake news campaigns promise the Muslim people access to heaven (religious credit), encouraging them to attack minorities to gain favor from God."*
>
> *-Male, Hindu*

This intersection of religion and politics affects other minority groups, making them "by-stander" casualties:

> *"Majority groups like to condemn minority groups such as LGBT, claiming their own Muslim faith as 'holier than thou', uplifting themselves by putting others down. This results in a lot of social pressure and judgment on us.'*
>
> *-Female, LGBT*

Indeed, this process of maintaining political and religious power has mutually reinforcing effects, as noted by some participants. The perpetuation of fake news reasserts their beliefs and preaching about how either certain candidates or religious persons are "better" than the groups which fake news campaigns hope to suppress. This ends up preserving the so-called status-quo whereby the "threats" of other religions are kept at bay, and the chaos sown by "those with power allows them to structure society and ultimately benefit themselves." (*Male, Gay).*

4.3 Current government responses

In response to the fake news crisis, the Indonesian government has taken a series of measures to deal with the problem. Early efforts largely involved more collaborative initiatives, such as a website to allow the public to report fake news content, a fact-checking 'hoax-buster' website (Fitrianingrum, 2021). It also cracked down on perpetuators of fake news on an ad-hoc basis using longstanding communication laws[3]. In that light, a natural extension of the fake news dilemma among minorities is the question of how the government does (or does not) aim to counter it. Most participants believe that the government has not done enough to combat the issue – worse, some believe that they are the perpetrators of fake news themselves, such as with the case during political campaigns. Where the government has done something, participants question the motives and approaches to doing so as being self-serving:

> *"The government response is inadequate, and there's not enough outreach or channels to combat it"*
>
> > *-Female, Christian*
>
> *"The cyber police are not doing enough, they are just using it as a PR campaign for the government, and since it is run by leaders anyway it is potentially biased."*
>
> > *-Male, Gay*

The cyber police, per one respondent, is a "joint collaboration between the Indonesian Military (TNI) and the National Police (POLRI). This organization has been thought by another respondent to have been established just to "put on a show" (*Female, LGBT).* One participant also accused the "UU

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[3] However more recently in August 2021, it passed Ministerial Regulation No.5 (MR5), which enables the government to order all 'prohibited' materials be removed within twenty-four hours of posting. It also requires companies to provide sensitive information to the authorities, including personal data, which critics worry may comprise financial, health, and biometric data, as well as users' political views and sexual orientation.

ITE" – Indonesia's "Law on Information and Electronic Transactions" of being abused to restrict freedom of expression rather than target fake news." -*Female, Shia Muslim*

One participant also believes that "other government-related actors may also be involved in spreading fake news (such as the militia)", although the explanation of how this happens is unclear (*Female, Christian*). This belief, for another participant, comes from the "telltale signs from the types of responses tweeted by bots on various topics such as the Papua conflict" (*Female, Shia Muslim*).

Not all comments were distrusting or disheartened by the government. Some participants support the government effort, indicating a "fairly decent response." However, most of the participants also equate the existence of a "hoax-buster program" as the only step necessary to counter fake news:

> *"The government is probably not involved. The government has a hoax-buster programme, has a social media team to deal with fake news."*
>
> *-Female, Muslim*
>
> *"The government seems united and effective. The Ministry of Communication and Information Technology (KOMINFO) takes swift action to communicate via social media."*
>
> *-Male, Christian*

This overarching criticism of the government can show the immense potential role that the government has in combating fake news; an important point given the government's (or state representatives) apparent complicity in the spread of fake news. The participants also provide prescriptive suggestions on what the government should be improving on in regards to fake news. These fall into some general themes: specifying that institutions should cooperate, ministries should be strengthened, all the while promoting open dialogue and continued preservation of democracy.

One participant states that there is a "need to employ more technological tools to address fake news, as the government response seems inadequate" (*Female, Chinese*). This concept of technological tool is captured by another participant who believes an "algorithmic approach to cut down on fake news can be more anticipatory rather than reactive." (*Female, Muslim*). Several participants comment on "expanding the channels in which fake news is addressed, since it is neglected to be addressed in familial or friend groups, especially among middle-aged women." (*Female, Muslim),* indicating that the issue should consider more broadly the channels which propagate fake news, and how to quash them.

Participants also point to education as a large component in the fight against fake news:

> *"Education is important, so topics become less taboo. Most of this is a visibility issue, and people need to be exposed to information about minorities."*
>
> *-Male, Gay*

A large part of education does not only focus on visibility, but expanding current curricula to include that of digital literacy. Participants are quick to categorize this as a suite of "preventive measures" that would be more effective, as opposed to "enforcement and punishment" (*Male, Christian*).

Another arising narrative is *who* the education should be geared towards. Although not directly explored in our research questions, several participants mentioned who is most vulnerable when it comes to fake news. These usually revolve around those who are less educated, or those who did not grow up in a digital era, echoing the points of increasing education, visibility, and digital literacy. Several people believe the less educated and middle-aged people are the most vulnerable, with these comments arising across different groups:

> *"Fake news affects lower education people more, and those who lack parental guidance."*
>
> *-Female, Muslim*
>
> *"'Boomers[4]' are typically the victims of these fake news campaigns, as they're easier to trigger through WhatsApp groups."*
>
> *-Female, Hindu*
>
> *"Many fake news on Hindus are disseminated by people due to ignorance on a personal basis. This probably has to do with where I grew up, where a majority of the people are not educated."*
>
> *-Male, Hindu*
>
> *"Elders are vulnerable, and they get a lot of fake news through TV and newspaper. This should be addressed in some way."*
>
> *-Male, Christian*

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[4] Boomer is an informal term that refers to people from the older generations who are considered close-minded, resistant to change, and generally out of touch with how their behaviors affect other people.

Two respondents focus on legal approaches to combating fake news. "The government can consider strengthening the Electronic Technology Law (UU ITE), and ban fake news accounts and content more actively." (*Male, Christian*). This speaks to the use of top-down approaches in enforcement on fake news. Another respondent gave a more nebulous answer in relation to what law to use: "The Government should strengthen various laws, then wield these laws on fake news more impartially, and use this law fairly rather than be biased against minorities." (*Male, Hindu*).

Most of the recommendations given to the government are about cooperation within the current infrastructure, meanwhile promoting democratic concepts and ideas. One respondent mentioned how the government should expand fact-checking, and to do so they should "collaborate with the private sector." (*Female, Muslim*). Another participant echoes this sentiment, in that more education should be done by the "private sector in order to give back to society" (*Male, Gay*). On developing the curricula for digital literacy, one participant believes that this should be done through NGOs (*Female, Muslim*). This is also believed to be the best type of organization to help counter fake news. One female, Chinese participant stated that the government should collaborate with civil organizations such as the Indonesian Anti Hoax Community (MAFINDO) – a fact checking organization – to help the government in understanding what news is fake or not. One participant highlighted the different ministries that should be called on to aid in the process, making it an intra-governmental effort:

> *"The Ministry of Education should begin education on fake news from young, striving for a gender-equal education curriculum. The Tech ministries should give more guidance on online conduct and constantly revise regulations. And, the Ministry of Communications should educate more on how to use these platforms positively."*
>
> *-Male, Gay*

In this process of managing fake news, participants have a strong sense of justice and equality when it comes to freedom of expression. One participant said that "equal space should be provided to those with positive attitudes. Currently, this space is monopolized by anti-gay sentiments." (*Male, Gay*). This is echoed by a call for "…neutrality. For example, the Ministry of Religion should care for all groups. Society needs more spaces where different minorities can interact, communicate, and learn about each other." (*Male, Hindu*). This is paralleled with a strong democratic drive, saying the need to "balance freedom of expression versus tackling fake news" (*Female, Muslim*)*,* and the belief that "freedom of expression should not be criminalized, so perhaps there should be more education on how to use these platforms more responsibly." (*Male, Gay*).

One area of contention among the participants is *how* the approaches towards fake news should be handled. There are participants who believe in 'targeting the root cause of fake news rather than crack down on individual users, with a balance achieved so freedom of expression is protected." (F*emale, Chinese, Buddhist)*. This is echoed by another Christian, suggesting that the government "take more preventive measures (education) rather than enforcement and punishment (repression). Some take a more hard-lined approach, believing that the government "should protect women rights more – crackdown against rape threats. This would assure minority groups that their safety is protected" (*Female, Hindu*). Another participant shares a similar opinion, believing that stronger "penalties and enforcements should be made against culprits" (*Female, LGBT*).

Another participant says that the government should be 'clearer in communicating laws/regulations/information, because unclear info spreads fake news." (*Female, Muslim*). From this section, it is clear that the government's role in fake news is both one of complicity in its spread, but also potential redemption through combating fake news.

5.0 Discussion and broader implications

Through primary interviews with members of minority communities in Indonesia as well as a case examination of related discourses and developments, this study sought out to examine the issue of fake news and disinformation within the Indonesian context, specifically focusing on the differentiated impact of fake news on ethnic, religious and gendered minorities in Indonesia. Its findings give rise to a number of important observations and implications.

Disinformation campaigns appear to be associated with political power – it has been weaponized by hegemonic political actors as an instrument to amass various forms of political and social capital

To begin with, fake news and disinformation campaigns appear foremost to be associated with political power – it has been weaponized by hegemonic political actors as an instrument to amass various forms of political and social capital. This is most apparent in how the largest scale disinformation campaigns that have afflicted Indonesia have centered on the hotly contested 2017 Jakarta governor elections (BBC, 2017) and 2019 Presidential elections (Hui, 2020), which have seen the rife dissemination of fake news smearing various candidates. These disinformation campaigns reproduce and surface aspects of national consciousness such as historic religious and ethnic tensions, abusing these existing identity fault-lines, cleavages and distrust between

various societal groups to turn public opinion against the targeted victims.

It is also notable how political capital and religious capital intersect in a highly religious society like Indonesia, whereby appealing to the religious beliefs of the majority social group (Sunni Muslims), politicians can appear more pious, acquiring religious capital from the group and subsequently garnering their support – and thus, political capital. Thus, it has become politically expedient to discriminate against a minority group stigmatized by the wider society, in order to gain favor and political capital from the more powerful majority groups. To that end, it would appear that LGBT groups and other more stigmatized ethnicities/religions in society are the lowest hanging fruit and are, thus, more easily victimized in this way. This politicization of religious divisions for political gain inevitably gives rise to perpetual spiral of outbidding in which contending parties, in a bid to gain popular support and legitimacy, continue to become more radical and extreme in appealing to religious sentiments (Toft, 2007). They would hence be spurred into a vicious cycle of escalating discrimination, stigma and even violence against the minority group.

Next, beyond amassing political capital and support in the context of political competition, certain powerful groups in society – such as influential Islamist groups – have also instrumentalized fake news as a means to corral and socially discipline fringe communities perceived as errant. Condoned or at least tolerated to an extent by the state, such institutionalized discrimination perpetuates a discursive 'othering' and social stratification of these citizens (see for example Olsson, 2017; Author, 2020b). Crucially, it also facilitates the 'social normalization' of discrimination and violence against citizens of racial, religious and ethnic minority. As discussed, social normalization is the process through which ideas and behaviors that may fall outside of social norms come to be regarded as 'normal' (Foucault, 2012). Normalization is considered a key tactic for exerting the maximum social control with the minimum expenditure of force, and it is clear from the interviews – in how minorities are forced to self-censor, alter their behavior and conform in order to lie low and avoid abuse – that such dynamics are prevalent aspects of social structure in modern Indonesian society. Furthermore, that respondents in this study have repeatedly associated the issue of fake news with discrimination/hate speech throughout the interviews indeed speaks to how fake news can be understood as a contemporary tool of oppression via which hegemonic social groups in society wield control over minority, less powerful groups.

As a result, it is clear that gendered, religious and ethnic minority communities have suffered immensely from the differentiated and adverse impact of fake news and disinformation in Indonesia. As evident in this study and from the wider literature, these effects encompass psychological stress, economic damage, to sexual and physical violence and harm (Banaji et al., 2019; Gómez, 2019).

While most minorities victimized by such disinformation campaigns seem to respond by keeping a low profile, self-censoring and conforming to the social pressure, this extent of self-repression can sustain long-term psychological harm and trauma, with the docility potentially emboldening the perpetuators and encouraging further violence. On the flip side, others who respond to disinformation campaigns by actively pushing back through verbal/physical confrontations and the use of the legal system, as in the case of ex-Hindu lady Desak Made who converted to Islam and started spreading misinformation about Hindus (NewsDesk, 2021), can inadvertently entrench deeper diversions and trigger more severe counter-responses. Thus, while minority groups can be seen to be unwitting casualties of political competition, the adverse societal consequences portended on these communities are very real, but are only beginning to be understood and studied. This study contributes to this cause.

It is clear that gendered, religious and ethnic minority communities have suffered immensely from the differentiated and adverse impact of fake news and disinformation in Indonesia.

Lastly, the findings also shed light on the possible actors and motivation behind the dissemination of disinformation campaigns in Indonesia. Although most interview subjects do not believe that the government is directly involved and have instead raised the possible involvement of fringe Islamic fundamentalist groups in society, it is clear that the government is implicated in the problem by being complicit in a number of avenues. Firstly, as a result of the biased and politicized policing of fake news as well as the selective enforcement of the law, the government is signaling to the wider society that it condones, to an extent, attacks against minority groups. In addition to this discernible reluctance of authorities to prosecute fake news and disinformation targeted against minority communities vis-à-vis those affecting the majority Sunni Muslims, Tapsell (2019) also shows how legal instruments have been used by the ruling government to specifically target opposition politicians and groups. Furthermore, societal militias and fundamentalist religious groups have been linked to various disinformation campaigns that have targeted minority groups – groups that Indonesian political elites have a historical close relations with (Facal, 2020; Wilson and Nugroho, 2012). While there is little evidence that the state has directly sanctioned the dissemination of fake news and disinformation by these groups, it is possible – and indeed likely – that certain state officials do have some knowledge of these activities.

Overall, this study contributes to the literature on the effects of fake news, shedding light on the differentiated impact of fake news and disinformation on minority groups in Indonesia. Due to the scale and extent of the issue, it is clear that no simple solutions exist. In the study, many interviewees

have proposed increased top-down regulations involving the government such as unbiased enforcement and collaborative initiatives across different sectors. In particular, given that the proliferation of fake news and disinformation is facilitated through modern platforms such as Facebook, Twitter and WhatsApp, increased state regulation towards social media platforms has the potential to curb the worst effects of disinformation and create a healthier public sphere. However, as Anansaringkarn and Neo (2020) argue, a purely legal approach is itself fraught with potential pitfalls as over-regulation from the state can stifle innovation, infringe on privacy, and open up draconian efforts to consolidate power and crackdown on civil liberties, while on the flipside leaving companies to freely self-regulate neglects the fact that they as private entities have their own varied incentives to moderate content in a way that may not be in the public interest.

Therefore, to put the control of information and knowledge back to the social media users and civil society, a crucial step is to focus on imposing transparency and accountability mechanisms requiring technology companies to disclose their content management practices and be more open about how platforms function. Such an approach allow users and other stakeholders to understand how platforms are implicated in the spread of fake news, as well as allow society to navigate the maze of competing interests at stake such as business incentives and users' rights to strike a balance that keeps the constraints on free speech at a minimum.

If these are successfully implemented, they would likely set a precedent and go a long way in addressing the problem of fake news in Indonesian society. Yet, given how intertwined the problem is with political agendas and societal structures, advancing such expansive changes from the upper echelon would demand a larger amount of political will and capacity than is likely to be available. Thus, even more than delegating the resolution of the problem to the government, it is more important that ground-up solutions – especially educational efforts to both raise awareness of the problem of fake news, as well as the phenomenon of how fake new is being instrumentalized politically – are advanced and targeted towards the most vulnerable groups of society. It is only through the sustained raising of awareness, educational campaigns and increased dialogue between different ethnic, religious and minority groups can the issue of fake news begin to be resolved.

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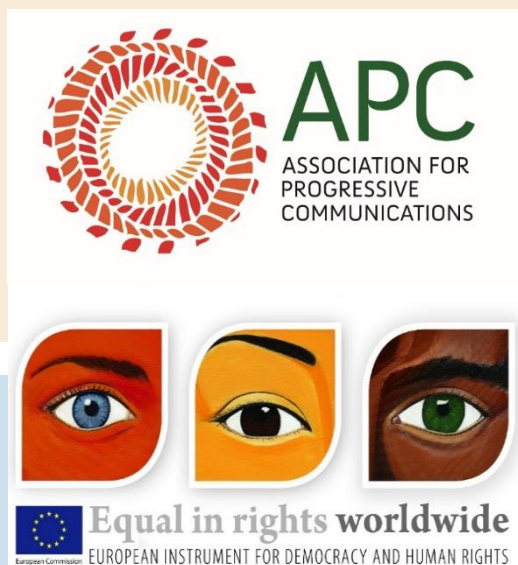
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