



# Pandemic politics and communication crisis: How social media buzzers impaired the lockdown aspiration in Indonesia

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## ABSTRACT

This study looks at the communication on social media in the initial period of the COVID-19 pandemic in Indonesia, specifically between the aspirations of citizens wishing for a lockdown and buzzers on Twitter rejecting it. Primary data of the study were obtained via interviews with three netizens who are social media activists. They were: CPL, an influencer on Twitter with 135,000 followers; HSW, a media literacy activist; and HA, a blogger. They were selected based on their influence and activities on social media as well as accessibility. The study identified two major findings: first, the public (netizens) via conversations on Twitter wanted the government to implement a lockdown at the start of the COVID-19 pandemic. However, the government disregarded this call by utilising buzzers on social media. In practice, these buzzers cyberbullied netizens who requested for a lockdown. Consequently, netizens became polarised between those supporting and opposing a lockdown. This triggered a communication crisis as it led to loss of trust in the government as it did not meet public expectations. Secondly, the government's use of buzzers to shoot down calls for a lockdown positioned them as an apparatus in the crisis communication throughout the COVID-19 pandemic. This resulted in the emergence of "buzzer regime" and "buzzer state". Buzzers are a part of the government's informal apparatus that engage in activities on social media to repress netizens who hold opposing views against the government.

Keywords: **buzzer, crisis communication, lockdown, new media, COVID-19 pandemic**

## INTRODUCTION

During the initial COVID-19 outbreak in several countries, when Indonesia had not reported any cases, the Indonesian government displayed a strong sense of confidence. President Joko Widodo (Jokowi) even continued encouraging tourists to visit Indonesia. As part of his strategy, Jokowi had prepared a budget of 72 billion rupiahs for buzzers on social media (Sani, 2020). The fund was part of an incentive given by the government to buzzers in the tourism sector to curtail the impact of the coronavirus on the domestic economy.

Buzzer is a profession that developed and grew in the culture of new media. Both buzzers and influencers are alike yet different. According to Lim (2017), “buzzer” refers to a netizen paid by a company to disseminate information regarding promotional products or certain brands on social media. In politics, buzzers are recruited to promote issues benefiting certain candidates. They are also known as micro-celebrities with numerous followers on social media. Paramaditha (2013) described buzzers as owners of social media accounts with more than 2,000 followers, and paid to promote certain issues.

In contrast, influencers are supporters of a certain group or party who shape audience behaviour through their blogs, tweets, and use of other social media platforms (Freberg, Graham, McGaughey, & Freberg, 2011). Influencers commonly promote products or services, but some of them are engaged in discussions of contemporary issues with perspectives that deliberately diverge from the discourses of the mainstream media.

During the onset of the COVID-19 outbreak in Indonesia, people started showing concern on social media. Fahira Idris, a Regional Representative Council (DPD) senator originally from Jakarta, expressed her surprise via Twitter concerning 136 patients under observation, suspected of contracting COVID-19. The tweet referred to a news report by an online media (Azizah, 2020a). However, buzzers balked at the tweet on social media by rallying the *#tangkapfahiraidris* (*#catchfahiraidris*) hashtag into a trending topic (Pratnyawan, 2020). Meanwhile, former Coordinating Minister of Maritime Affairs, Rizal Ramli admitted that 7,000 buzzers attacked him within a week for his constant criticism of the government’s COVID-19 policy (Hadi, 2020). He had asserted that the government should momentarily halt all infrastructure projects, including the move of the capital to Borneo, and focus on tackling COVID-19 (Cahyani, 2020).

Subsequently, on 2 March 2020, Jokowi announced the first two cases of COVID-19 in Indonesia (Ihsanuddin, 2020). Cases continued to soar drastically in Jakarta, spreading to other provinces throughout Indonesia. During the early stages of the COVID-19 outbreak, Jakarta Governor, Anies Baswedan, believed that Jakarta needed a lockdown order (Azhari, 2020). Mboera et al. (2020) described lockdown as a set of measures that is compulsory and applied indiscriminately to the general population to reduce community transmission of COVID-19. By this definition, one can identify three lockdown measures that are relevant to COVID-19: (i) geographical containment; (ii) home confinement; and (iii) the closure of social, educational and economic activities, and prohibition of mass gatherings. Meanwhile, Lau et al. (2020) defined lockdown as quarantining residents at home by limiting their mobility and firmly ensuring their obedience. On social media, particularly Twitter, buzzers yet again rejected the call for lockdown.

According to the official website of the COVID-19 Mitigation Acceleration Task Force (COVID-19), at the time of writing, the number of COVID-19 cases were as many as 1,263,299. Of the total number of COVID-19 positive cases, there were as many as 34,152 deaths and 1,069,005 recoveries. These data indicate that the COVID-19 fatality rate in Indonesia was high, which led to an even greater concern among the public. Netizens

conveyed these concerns via various social media channels, ultimately culminating in an urgent plea to the government to immediately implement a lockdown to contain the pandemic. However, objections were made by other netizens against this, who assumed the call was aimed at removing Jokowi from Presidency. This was based on the notion that a lockdown policy may lead to an economic crisis due to the isolation of all economic sectors (Rambe, 2020).

*The Jakarta Post* regarded the state of communication concerning COVID-19 in the media as “pandemic politics”. This kind of communication involves buzzers endangering citizens and democracy (Hermawan, 2020). Given this background, this study aims to answer the following question: What was the state of communication on social media during the COVID-19 crisis concerning the lockdown in Indonesia? This study is of utmost significance as it aims to explicate the state of communication of netizens on social media concerning the Indonesian government’s lockdown policy in dealing with the COVID-19 crisis.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

Christensen & Lægveid (2020) argued that a government’s reputation throughout the period of the COVID-19 pandemic may be perceived as a combination of the governance capacity of relevant institutions and public legitimacy. Both are reflected in the executed crisis communication and common understanding of the crisis at hand. By using the slogan “Working Together”, the Norwegian government, in its crisis communication when dealing with the pandemic, emphasised the need for a mutually supportive and cohesive culture via a common consensus about the crisis and what should be jointly done to address it. The consensus was reached once the government communicated with the public through the media.

Communication between the government and the public during the COVID-19 pandemic, in the context of crisis, is necessary to prevent the spread of misinformation, which is one of the most crucial issues that emerge in times of disaster, particularly during pandemics (Seddighi, Salmani, & Seddighi, 2020). In crisis communication, media and public trust can be used to predict how information is processed by the public and how citizens comply with policy recommendations issued by the government (Park, Boatwright, & Johnson Avery, 2019). On 13 March 2020, the Spanish Prime Minister, Pedro Sánchez, announced a national state of emergency, prohibiting all citizens from unnecessary travel and confining them to their homes in order to flatten the curve and contain the COVID-19 pandemic. The measure taken by the Spanish government was announced via all media channels and garnered positive public response (Moreno, Fuentes-Lara, & Navarro, 2020).

In addition to the government’s communication with the public, governance and coordination among relevant government institutions are also vital during the current crisis brought about by the COVID-19 pandemic. Poor coordination among government institutions would exacerbate the crisis as we have witnessed unfold in America. The tension between the American President, Donald Trump and the federal health advisor on how to evaluate and address the COVID-19 situation had substantial effects on the increasingly convoluted crisis situation (Baker, Haberman, & Glanz, 2020; Miller, Colvin, & Superville, 2020; Skidmore, 2016). Accordingly, crisis communication during the COVID-19 pandemic is associated with risks of the plague developing progressively and reducing cases of communicable diseases (Burton-Jeangros, 2019). Thus theoretically speaking, crisis communication during the COVID-19 pandemic emphasises the need to monitor public expectations and needs, build trust, and offer timely, accurate, specific, adequate, consistent, and comprehensible information (Laajalahti, Hyvärinen, & Vos, 2016).

In Indonesia, at the initial stage of the pandemic, COVID-19 had generated public fear and panic, which subsequently drove the public to pressure the government to implement a lockdown policy (Tangkudung & Sugiharto, 2020). However, *The Jakarta Post* reported that President Jokowi refused a lockdown policy and issued one on social distancing instead (Gorbiano & Sutrisno, 2020). According to Fealy (2020), Jokowi consistently prioritised the economy over public health throughout the COVID-19 pandemic. To support the social distancing policy, President Jokowi, through his Twitter account @jokowi, provided various information, from policies regarding the handling of COVID-19 in Indonesia to expressing condolences to impacted patients. Photos and videos were also used by Jokowi to raise public awareness. However, such communication did not align with the public's aspiration for a lockdown policy. Jokowi's activities on social media also took place when the pandemic had already claimed numerous victims (Prayoga, 2020).

To support President Jokowi's no-lockdown policy, initial response was directed at controlling public opinion through social media influencers and "buzzers". This, in turn, might have misled the public to think that the virus was less harmful than it actually was (Sasongkojati, 2020). The phenomenon of using buzzers to control or influence public opinion is a common practice in politics in the culture of new media in Indonesia. The former Malaysian Prime Minister, Najib Razak, also made use of them for the 2018 general election (Kasmani, 2019). However, using buzzers to support a government policy that goes against the aspiration of the public in matters of health during the COVID-19 pandemic was not common.

## RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This qualitative study explicates the state of communication on social media, particularly Twitter, concerning the Indonesian government's lockdown policy in the initial period of the COVID-19 pandemic. The study period started on 2 March 2020, when President Jokowi announced that two Indonesian citizens were confirmed positive for COVID-19, and ended on 2 April 2020. This time period was selected to coincide with the initial phase of the communication crisis during the pandemic. The study was carried out in two stages. The first stage involved observing Twitter's timeline by paying particular attention to contents bearing COVID-19 related conversations. It subsequently focused on conversations leading to the Indonesian government's lockdown policy in containing the pandemic. In this stage, several Twitter accounts (both fake and authentic) which showed substantial support for or against the lockdown were identified. Twitter accounts that frequently raised objections to the lockdown were thoroughly examined to confirm their buzzer status. For this stage, data were collected automatically using a tool applied by DEA UII (DroneEmprit Academic Universitas Islam Indonesia).

The second stage entailed interviews with three informants who were each given initials to protect them from cyberbullying. They were: CPL, an influencer on Twitter with 135,000 followers; HSW, a media literacy activist; and HA, a blogger. The three sources represented netizens who are actively involved in and have considerable influence on social media. They were chosen on account of their suitability and accessibility (Stokes, 2019). For this study, access is a crucial element as it involves the process of contacting the informants and negotiating with them to obtain the data and information required to address the research question (de la Cuesta, 2014). Accordingly, access is a dynamic process that relies on the researcher's ability to convince the informants to provide the required information and to protect them (Riese, 2018). Protecting the informants is essential since not all informants are willing to be cited as an informant, for fear of being bullied by buzzers on social media.



The interviews began with general questions that are most common in qualitative studies, such as “*What is your opinion about buzzer activities on social media?*”. This then led to several more specific questions concerning objections to the lockdown policy in tackling COVID-19, for instance, “*What are your thoughts/feelings when reading that there were social media buzzers rejecting lockdown policy?*”. Other questions were developed based on the answers given by the informants.

The collected data were subsequently categorised thematically based upon information given by the interviewees. This process identified information to find significant concepts. As a qualitative research, this process was carried out even in the first stage which involved the observation of the Twitter timeline and in the second stage, which involved the preparation of interview questions. Both parts were then brought together to find a more meaningful conceptual category related to the research context (Schutt, 2019).

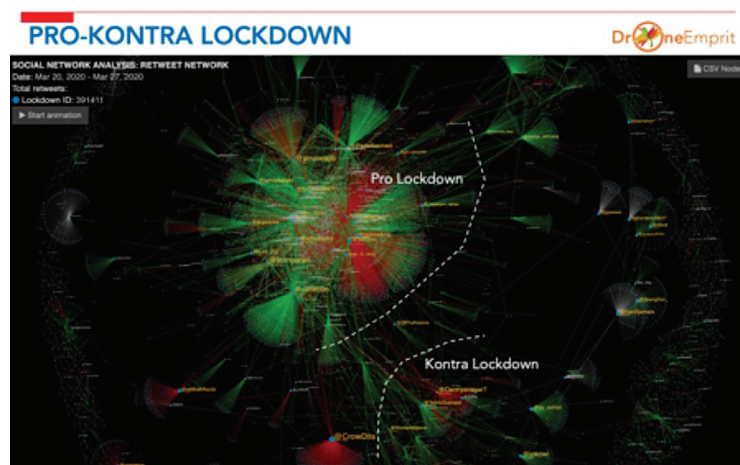
The data that had been conceptually categorised were then analysed and presented in an interpretative and descriptive manner. The descriptive presentation was done using an emic focus to represent terms stated by the informants or their perspectives on the issue being studied. Meanwhile, the interpretative presentation was done with an etic focus to represent terms that emerged from the researchers’ perspectives concerning Twitter’s timeline activities regarding lockdown and the information given by the informants.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

### *Lockdown as an aspiration and polarisation of netizens*

In the context of the COVID-19 outbreak in Indonesia, the researchers defined lockdown as a quarantine measure implemented to prevent or halt COVID-19 from spreading among the population by closing or locking down certain areas. Residents going in or out of these areas self-regulate themselves through a general agreement to abide by rules such as physical distancing, use of mask and no-touching. Given such definition, some areas in Indonesia have implemented partial lockdowns, as several media outlets had reported that residents in some regions initiated lockdowns (Dzulfaroh, 2020; Setiawan, 2020).

Meanwhile, the communication and conversations on social media also showed similar indications. However, some netizen groups were rejecting the lockdown. Research data showed two clusters for and against the lockdown based on netizen conversations on Twitter (DroneEmprit Academic, 2020).



Source: DroneEmprit Academic, 2020

Figure 1. Pro- and anti-lockdown clusters on Twitter

The two conversation clusters shown in Figure 1 indicate that netizens asking for a lockdown far outnumbered those against it. In the conversations, several Twitter accounts posing as opinion leaders and influencers supported a lockdown to avoid greater fatalities. The Board of Professors of the Faculty of Medicine, Universitas Indonesia also suggested that the government implement a lockdown policy (Kumparan, 2020). Meanwhile, the smaller cluster objected to a lockdown policy as it was deemed incompatible with Indonesia's culture of openness. However instead, the government decided social distancing as the appropriate means to control the outbreak.

The two clusters of netizen conversations in Figure 1 clearly illustrates that the COVID-19 pandemic shows the significant impact of the new information environment. Cinelli et al. (2020) contended that information dissemination on the social media may influence public behaviour and can be effective in generating a positive response towards government measures against COVID-19. In monitoring the conversations on social media, Cinelli et al. (2020) found 8 million comments and postings about COVID-19 in Italy within 45 days. Monitoring conversations on social media, particularly Twitter, during crises allows institutions (in this case, governments) to listen, interpret, and respond to what people are saying online and the public reactions during a crisis (Rush, 2015). Basically, social media enables an effective two-way communication between the government and public during crisis situations. When netizen conversations on social media concerning COVID-19 intensify, the public expects the government's online response to heighten as well. This means that the government can use social media to communicate with the public about the problems they face, and the means employed to resolve them.

According to the Social Network Analysis (SNA) data provided by DEA UII, netizen conversations about the lockdown did increase. However, the conversations did not involve any official government organisation. CPL regarded the netizens' debates on social media as unproductive because the government used buzzers instead of official communication channels.

*"Netizens argued about the lockdown, while casualties continue to rise. Their debate is unproductive. The problem is that government used buzzers. How can you fight COVID-19 pandemic using hashtags? So, buzzers were used to oppose lockdown because a lockdown policy is tough on the government. It involves ensuring living cost for residents."* (29 March 2020)

In addition, HSW mentioned that during the onset of the crisis, the government had no policy whatsoever, including lockdown. The government only issued the Large-Scale Social Restrictions (PSBB) on 31 March 2020 as an official policy response to the COVID-19 outbreak. HWS also stated that buzzers refusing lockdown were also unclear in their reasoning for opposing it.

*"Lockdown is understood as a regional quarantine. In Indonesia, lockdown was initially suggested by Jakarta Governor, Anies Baswedan, to the central government. Because Jakarta had several Corona cases. When Anies requested for a lockdown, he meant Jakarta not the entire Indonesian region. Meanwhile, the central government at the time had no policy to tackle Corona outbreak. The lockdown suggestion was then rejected by buzzers. But their rejection remained without any other solutions or suggestions. They are not experts, so they have no valid points for rejecting lockdown. But, despite not having any reasoning and solution, they unintentionally popularized the term lockdown among netizens and*

*the public. Whereas Anies' suggestion for Jakarta lockdown was supported by experts from Medical Science Association, Indonesian National Nurse Union, Indonesian Medical Association, they're all experts". (4 April 2020)*

Subsequently, pressure from several other medical groups such as the Medical Science Association, Indonesian National Nurse Union, Indonesian Medical Association, Medical Faculty Professors at Universitas Indonesia (Asmara, 2020), as a third party (other than the government and the public), urging the government to implement a lockdown became the talk of netizens on social media. This conversation on social media intensified as it aligned with their hopes and aspirations. This demonstrates that people use the social media during the crisis to find relevance in the issues they face while exchanging information and finding emotional support. Other than social media, these third-party voices were also picked up and reposted or reported by online or printed mass media, television, and radio. According to Liu, Austin, & Jin (2011), when an organisation (government) responds to a crisis in a defensive manner, the public would more easily accept the message coming from traditional media, like television or online news, instead of by word of mouth or social media.

Netizen conversations on the social media involving buzzers and experts who advised the government to implement the lockdown were then reported via the mass media and subsequently, this development encouraged some regions to initiate lockdown (Dzulfaroh, 2020; Setiawan, 2020). The residents' initiative to implement lockdown as a response to the government's sluggish crisis communication with regions that had confirmed COVID-19 cases is commendable. According to Jin, Liu, & Austin (2014), this situation showed that the lockdown, a vital measure that the public expected, may generate negative reactions when advocated by a third party (in this case, netizens and experts) via social media, instead of the government. Ultimately, the government did not choose a lockdown as a means to contain the outbreak (Azizah, 2020b).

All the informants agreed that the government refused to implement lockdown to avoid having to fund residents and livestock in quarantined areas, as provisioned in verse 1 article 55 Law No. 6/2018 in Health Quarantine: "During Regional Quarantine, the Central Government is responsible for people's basic necessities and livestock feed in the quarantined region".

CPL added that although many people wanted a lockdown, the government continued to refuse it. This was due to the financial responsibility the government must bear.

*"Had the central government opted for lockdown, residents' living cost must be paid for. We calculated for Jakarta with 9 million residents, each one requiring 25 thousand daily during lockdown, merely 14 days would require 4 trillion. That's why a partial lockdown policy should be implemented, only in regions with significant outbreak, implement restricted lockdown". (29 March 2020)*

HWS concurred that the government wanted to avoid the resulting financial burden from a lockdown policy. HWS also stated that the government seemed intent on preventing the spread of COVID-19 with as little cost as possible. Given its large population and vast reach, a total lockdown in Indonesia would put a strain on the state funding. However, HWS contended that the government should have sought other ways of meeting those needs, such as social solidarity from Indonesians.

*“Surely when regional quarantine or city lockdown applies, the government is obligated to bear livestock and residents’ expenses during quarantine. Yet, in practice, those being taken care of would be the poor, not all residents. Moreover, Indonesians also have high solidarity to help one another. It seems the social solidarity potential was not considered by the government.”* (4 April 2020)

In this context, the government could utilise buzzers and influencers to encourage solidarity among residents. For instance, buzzers and influencers on social media can encourage the wealthy to assist the affected poor during the lockdown or carry out public health promotion to control the spread of COVID-19. We argue that the social panic during the COVID-19 pandemic was not only due to the extremely dangerous nature of the virus, but also be due to the “infodemic” on social media. The term “infodemic” (Larson, 2018; McCauley, Minsky & Viswanath, 2013) was introduced to describe the dangers of misinformation on social media in handling the outbreak (Atlani-Duault, Ward, Andrew, & Morin, 2020), wherein panic on social media may spread even faster than the virus itself (Wilson & Chen, 2020).

Yet, during the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic in Indonesia, Jokowi invited buzzers and influencers to promote tourism instead. Subsequently, when COVID-19 began to spread with increased number of cases, buzzers on social media were still rejecting a lockdown (Hertanto, 2020). The practice of using buzzers presents a new context of political communication. According to Tchubykalo, Manfredi-Sánchez, & Sánchez-Giménez (2019), this new context of political communication utilises emerging trends in communication strategy by embracing social media’s dissemination capacity, and is used by political think tanks for agenda-setting and goal-setting by disseminating discourses throughout social media.

### ***Buzzers as an apparatus in the COVID-19 crisis communication***

Using buzzers to reject lockdown via social media, with the political objective of shaping public opinion to fight anyone opposing the government’s policy in handling COVID-19, deviates from the role of crisis communication. According to Avnet & Laufer (2015), both pre-crisis or during crisis, the communication behaviour of state organisations is scrutinised along with the message delivered. Hence, in the context of crisis communication, message management is critical. Message management in crisis communication includes what messages are delivered, who delivers the message, what channels are used to deliver the message, who are the target audience, and what are the intended impacts once the message is delivered; all of which are serious considerations during a crisis.

In the case of the COVID-19 pandemic in Indonesia, the public wanted a lockdown which the government refused. The message of refusal was then disseminated via buzzers on social media. These buzzers emerged and developed within the culture of identity politics or polarised politics during the 2019 Presidential and 2017 Jakarta elections. HA stated that buzzer activities in the COVID-19 crisis were similar to those that took place during the confrontation with political opponents in the previous elections.

*“The buzzers working model remains unchanged like the time of the presidential and regional elections. Anyone who has a different political stand is attacked, bullied massively. Currently, the government still uses this model. So, we can sense or guess that what buzzers convey on social media is government policy. Because, before making the policy the President invited these buzzers and influencers to the Palace”.* (8 April 2020)



Using buzzers and influencers during the early stage of the pandemic to boost tourist visits to Indonesia was a smart move by the government in taking advantage of the global situation. But, continuing to use buzzers when Indonesia had been hit by the pandemic is not a good crisis communication strategy. Using active buzzers on social media to raise social solidarity may be beneficial, but not for political ends. Yet, according to all the informants, the use of buzzers during the COVID-19 crisis in Indonesia was clearly political. HWS highlighted:

*“In Indonesia, the lockdown was first suggested by Jakarta Governor, Anies Baswedan to the central government. But buzzers rejected the suggestion. While the central government at the time had no policy in confronting the corona outbreak”. (4 April 2020)*

Meanwhile, CPL stated:

*“Jakarta Governor, Anies announced 284 deaths were buried as corona victims. This information or data differs with central government data. Anies was then bullied by buzzers. This is messed up. Anies’ data is official data he is the Jakarta Governor”. (29 March 2020)*

HA had this to add:

*“Buzzers initially started the debate about lockdown when Jakarta Governor, Anies Baswedan suggested it to the central government. They consider Anies as their political adversary who disagrees with the central government. Then they bullied anyone disagreeing with central government or supporting the lockdown”. (8 April 2020)*

The descriptions and explanation provided by the various sources above indicate that these various acts of cyberbullying by buzzers originated in the political context. Cyberbullying is, in essence, intimidation in the form of personal insult(s) directed toward an individual via social media. While these insults are often ignored as they occur in cyberspace, the impact may be more severe than direct face-to-face insults since insults through social media have a more extensive reach and are virtually permanent as they are accessible to anyone at any given time. According to Hua, So’od and Hamid (2019), the central feature of cyberbullying are insults pertaining to intelligence, physical appearance, and adequacy. Cyberbullying is also frequently experienced by older individuals and it occurs in the political context. Such perspective was also observed to exist in the context of Indonesian politics.

Anies Baswedan is a central figure in Indonesia’s COVID-19 crisis, on account of his stance for a lockdown for Jakarta, Indonesia’s capital. His request to the central government to lock Jakarta down was shot down by buzzers not only because he disagreed with the central government’s objection to lockdown, but also because he represented the politically disparate group and the continued polarisation from the 2019 presidential election and his political opponents in the 2017 Jakarta election (Lim, 2017; Lestari, 2019; Nasrudin & Nurdin, 2018; Syahputra, 2017).

As the Jakarta Governor, Anies is currently the personification of the political polarisation during the 2019 Presidential election and 2017 Jakarta election. The same political polarisation was observed in the use of buzzers for handling the social media discourse concerning COVID-19 in Indonesia. As a result, netizen conversations on social media may reinforce the groups bearing similar or different views. The process of mutual

reinforcement through conversations was described by Grömping (2014) as an echo chamber unfolding on social media. The polarisation can become stronger as netizens tend to seek and utilise information and opinions that conform to and support their perspective (Bessi et al., 2015; Syahputra, 2019) while simultaneously ignoring other opposing information (Zollo et al., 2017; Baronchelli, 2018). With increased polarisation, misinformation is easily accepted and spread more (Vicario et al., 2016).

Buzzers first emerged and developed within the context of netizen polarisation, established by political differences during the 2017 Jakarta election and 2019 presidential election. Buzzers who were paid to spread propaganda, maintain a work culture, which exist continuously within the context of fierce political competition (Lipson, 2018). CPL believed that the phenomenon of using buzzers to reject the lockdown proposal as indicative of the current government being a buzzer regime, since all government policies utilise buzzers, including the no-lockdown policy in tackling COVID-19.

*“This phenomenon indicates a buzzer regime. Because they use buzzers to bully things like Anies and Fahira Idris”. (29 March 2020)*

Meanwhile, a similar perspective was shared by HA. He considered the government lacked good public communication in handling the COVID-19 crisis. When the public cannot understand properly the priorities set by the government in preventing the spread of COVID-19, they can refer to buzzers. This implies that the things buzzers discuss on social media may reflect the government’s policies.

*“Government communication during COVID-19 crisis is unclear. Initially, the public was never aware how the government intends to tackle the pandemic. But, to understand the government’s policies, the public can refer to buzzers’ opinions on social media. Because, the opinions they convey are always similar to government policies. So, this phenomenon, I call it buzzer state”. (8 April 2020)*

The rise of the terms, “buzzer regime” and “buzzer state” indicates that buzzers in the context of social media communication in the era of new media, is currently a vital element of the Indonesian government. This demonstrates that buzzers are part of the government’s informal apparatus that are not formally institutionalised but active on the social media to repress netizens who disagree with the government. We propose the concept of buzzers as an informal government apparatus because their emergence in the new media culture requires no professionalism as anyone can create content and produce messages. Initially, this was considered as freedom of speech and the opportunity for improving democracy. However, with more contributions and more information, the situation has become an obstacle in obtaining reliable knowledge. In fact, buzzers active on social media make it more difficult for the public to obtain reliable information.

In various political events throughout Indonesia, buzzers were often used for such purposes (Syahni, 2014). To enhance the effect of a tweet on Twitter, buzzers often used robot accounts to form opinions so that they are accepted as truth. According to a report by the Oxford Internet Institute (Bradshaw & Howard, 2019), the capacity of buzzer troops in Indonesia remains low but, buzzer activities working for particular interest groups can significantly heighten public polarisation. These groups utilise cybertroopers and buzzers to experiment by using bot accounts to amplify disinformation and manipulate truth.

Although buzzers emerged in the new media culture, we argue that buzzers are an informal government (state) apparatus that impose netizen obedience using a bully system

on social media. CPL contended that buzzers were prepared to bully anyone opposing the government. That is why he thinks netizens should not make any mistake when criticising government policies concerning the COVID-19 crisis if they do not want to be bullied by buzzers on social media.

*“Although the buzzer regime reigns, there are netizens who resist (on social media-Researcher). But the resistance (criticism against government policies concerning COVID-19 pandemic-Researcher) put up by the public or netizens should be flawless. If it weren’t, we will be utterly bullied by buzzers”.*  
(29 March 2020)

The concept of buzzers as an informal government apparatus is referenced to Althusser (2020), who posited that the existence of state and the apparatus it maintains bears no meaning other than as a function of authority. To defend (political) authority, the idea of Repressive State Apparatus (RSA) and Ideological State Apparatus (ISA) was introduced by Althusser as ideological tools of state authority. RSA represents the state’s formal authority like military, police, court, and other institutions, while ISA represents the state’s informal authority in the form of education, art, entertainment, mass media including social media.

Louis Althusser has significantly contributed to the development of ideology, specifically with regard to the relationship between communication and freedom (Brennen, 2000). In the current study, Althusser’s argument on ISA can be recognised in the relationship between communication in the COVID-19 pandemic and freedom of speech in the context of democracy within the culture of new media. Freedom of speech as an ideological creation in the new media culture is complicated because it is utilised by government buzzers to refuse the public’s plea for a lockdown. The relationship between the government, citizens, and freedom of speech in the new media culture can be perceived as a new reality. Essentially, this means that while on one hand, freedom of expression in the context of new media is retained, on the other hand, it can also be utilised by the government to repress dissenting citizens by means of cyberbullying carried out by buzzers. This is an example of buzzers functioning as an ideological state apparatus to represent the authority of the government at the forefront of netizen activities on social media.

## CONCLUSION

In summary, the current study found that communication amongst netizens on Twitter during the initial period of the COVID-19 pandemic in Indonesia was polarised between those supporting and those rejecting a lockdown. The polarisation involved buzzers used by the government to reject a lockdown. Consequently, in the handling of the COVID-19 pandemic, the lockdown, was perceived as contradicting the government even though it was a public aspiration. This recent episode of buzzers on social media, who created polarisation among netizens during the COVID-19 pandemic, was an extension of their earlier usage during the 2017 Jakarta Gubernatorial Election and the 2019 Indonesian Presidential Election.

To tamp down on the calls for a lockdown, buzzers cyberbullied netizens who voiced their support for it. Using buzzers during the COVID-19 pandemic reflects a communication crisis as this may result in the loss of trust in the government due to its policies during the COVID-19 pandemic not being in line with public expectations. The repressive activities of buzzers on Twitter against netizens who oppose the government,

position them as an ideological state apparatus. Such phenomenon is described as “buzzer regime” and “buzzer state”.

The study has significant implications for state administrators in choosing an appropriate communication strategy during times of crisis. However, this study is limited to the initial period of the COVID-19 pandemic. Nevertheless, crisis communication during the COVID-19 pandemic should be oriented towards reducing risks of virus transmission and growth. This underlines the importance of fulfilling public aspirations and expectations, and maintaining their trust by providing accurate, specific, consistent, and comprehensible information directly from official government sources.

This study also contributes to the theories of democracy in the era of new media, the relationship between social media and the public sphere or social media and crisis communication management. The use of buzzers by democratic governments or states, like Indonesia, may consequently kill the public’s freedom to express their opinions or criticisms on social media as a public sphere within the climate of democracy. As such, further validation of this study’s insights is a potential topic for future research.

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