

# The Elderly and Hoaxes within the Sphere of Indonesian Democracy in the Digital Age

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Received: 20 September 2023

Accepted: 1 October 2023

Published: 12 October 2023

## ABSTRACT

*The presence of social media has become an essential part of daily life, including for elderly people. However, the spread of hoaxes and fake news on social media can have serious consequences, particularly for the elderly who may be more vulnerable to misinformation. The article highlights the dangers of hoaxes, particularly in the context of political campaigns, and their potential impact on the elderly's voting choices. The article also discusses the importance of media literacy for the elderly, particularly in the era of digital media where it can be challenging to distinguish between fact and fiction. Through literature studies, the article highlights the real-life implications of hoaxes for the elderly and underscores the need for media literacy to combat hoaxes in the digital era.*

**Keywords:** *hoax, elderly, democracy, digital era*

## ABSTRAK

Kehadiran media sosial telah menjadi bagian penting dalam kehidupan sehari-hari, termasuk untuk orang lanjut usia. Namun, penyebaran hoaks dan berita palsu di media sosial dapat memiliki konsekuensi serius, terutama bagi orang lanjut usia yang mungkin lebih rentan terhadap informasi yang salah. Artikel ini menyoroti bahaya hoaks, terutama dalam konteks kampanye politik dan dampak potensialnya pada pilihan suara orang lanjut usia. Artikel ini juga membahas pentingnya literasi media bagi orang lanjut usia, terutama di era media digital di mana sulit untuk membedakan antara fakta dan fiksi. Melalui studi literatur, artikel ini menyoroti implikasi kehidupan nyata dari hoaks bagi orang lanjut usia dan menekankan perlunya literasi media untuk melawan hoaks di era digital.

**Kata kunci:** *hoax, lanjut usia, demokrasi, era digital*



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## 1. Introduction

Numerous studies have been conducted on hoaxes, including one by (Maulida et al., 2022) which stated that the use of WhatsApp by the elderly to communicate with family, obtain information, and express their identity. Additionally, this demographic utilizes the platform to seek information on health, culinary, and political topics. However, there is a gap in research focusing on the intersection of the elderly, hoaxes, and democracy in the digital age.

The relationship between social media and the internet with pre-existing cultures in the public sphere exacerbates this issue. This integration has led to a significant portion of the population, including the elderly, struggling to differentiate between hoaxes and credible information.

Misinformation spreads rapidly across various electronic and social media platforms like Twitter, Facebook, WhatsApp, and Instagram.

A section of the population re-circulates information without considering the subsequent impacts or consequences, leading to the direct propagation of these hoaxes. This points to an urgent need for enhancing media literacy and critical thinking skills among the elderly to mitigate the influence of misinformation in the evolving digital democratic landscape of nations like Indonesia.

According to (Buente & Robbin, 2008), there are four core utilities of the Internet: communication, information utility, transaction, and leisure/fun activities. Hoaxes originate from the deliberate dissemination of false news within social networks or communities for personal or group interests. It is from this point of view that netizens disseminate falsehoods and hoaxes to facilitate their plans and agendas.

Hoax spreaders stem from various sectors, including corporate, individual, military, community, and state institutions. They intentionally create and propagate false propaganda to ensure their interests remain protected. The deliberate dissemination of hoaxes aims to divert the public's focus from the real issues at hand. People are attracted by sensationalism, becoming entangled in bombastic distractions that steer attention away from the core problems.

(Rahadi, 2017) points out that the spreaders of hoaxes often hold highly credible positions, leading to the unquestioned acceptance and further dissemination of their misinformation without verification. This credibility facilitates the rapid spread of news containing hate provocation. Consequently, there's a pressing need to foster a culture of critical thinking and verification to counteract the spread and influence of hoaxes and maintain the integrity of information circulating on the internet.

(George, 2016) states that hate speech or "hate spin" is a manufactured outcome. He suggests posits that the twisting of hate has become a political strategy, rooted in the engineered offense, often committed in the name of another identity (such as religion). This manipulative tactic involves exploiting group identities to suppress political adversaries and mobilize support. George's insights highlight a pervasive strategy where identity and emotion are weaponized for political gains, illuminating the critical need for public awareness and discernment to mitigate the effects of such manipulations.

In the period nearly every presidential election, the dissemination of hoaxes follows a familiar pattern, a trend first noted in 2012 during Indonesia's Regional Head Elections (Pilkada) in DKI Jakarta. Hoaxes spread both online and offline. Online dissemination occurred via social media platforms like WhatsApp, Twitter, YouTube, and Facebook, while offline, it spread through brochures, pamphlets, and the like. The post-election period did not halt this trend; instead, the spread of hoaxes multiplied during the 2014 Presidential Election, marked by the emergence of print media like *Obor Rakyat*, which propagated hate speech based on ethnicity, religion, race, and intergroup relations, along with political issues.

Indonesia has been flooded with hoaxes containing hateful narratives targeted at specific communities or individuals. Consequently, Thompson argues that combating the spread of hatred is a collective responsibility that spans all societal layers in Indonesia, including both the elderly and the younger generation, to preserve national peace. The younger generation, possessing advanced digital technology knowledge (KOMINFO, 2016) has a heightened ability to filter out hoaxes, albeit not entirely immune. In contrast, the elderly, limited by their adaptability to the digital world and having ample leisure time, are more susceptible to both falling for and disseminating hoaxes (Sari, 2017).

Therefore, media literacy becomes a crucial asset to impart to the elderly, given their significant voice in Indonesian democracy. This article aims to describe the relationship between the elderly and hoaxes within the realm of democracy in the digital age. It hopes to contribute to maintaining the course of Indonesian democracy, ensuring the nation's peace.

## 2. Vulnerability of the Elderly to Hoaxes

The population of elderly individuals in Indonesia has seen a significant increase, leading to complex consequences (BPS, 2021) and serving as an indicator of the rising health needs of the Indonesian population, especially among the elderly. As a result, there is a pressing need to amplify attention and care for the elderly to ensure their happiness, well-being, and enjoyment during their later years. The rapid development of communication and information technology presents both problems and challenges for the elderly, who are expected to adapt to these advancements.

According to a survey by We Are Social (Kemp, 2019), a considerable number of elderly individuals frequently use the Internet to access social media. Out of 150 million social media users, approximately 3.2% are aged 55 and above. This demographic is comprised of 2% elderly males and 1.2% elderly females. A majority of them access YouTube and WhatsApp, with a penetration rate of about 88%. Other common online activities among the elderly include chatting, updating statuses, voice calls, video calls, and commenting on other internet users' posts.

Hoaxes continue to be persistent and have not diminished after the elections, causing the nation's fundamental unities to start separating. Initially, social media emerged as a tool for bringing people together; however, in reality, it has amplified hoaxes and perpetuated polarization. Social media has driven conflicts and exploited human desire with the logic of "the economy of attention," aiming to become the center of focus. This phenomenon has raised concerns and anxieties among both millennials and the elderly in the public sphere (Nilan et al., 2011). It sometimes results in high levels of frustration among these groups (Naafs, 2013). The uncertain and unstable status of millennials leads them to beat the drums of identity politics and claim "space" in an incredibly complex social interaction process (Hasan, 2016). This impact is also felt by the elderly, who are not tech-savvy with social media (Bayat & Herrera, 2010).

For both the elderly and millennial generations, the expansion of Islamist ideology (Bayat & Herrera, 2010) appears as a dream and hope for transformation. Various narratives are penned with fervor, delving into the romanticism of the past and fundamental bases of Islam. It illustrates the demarcation and distance between the open society and Islam mired in sin and disbelief (Massey, 1998). This is perceived as a primary reason for Islam's decline, attributed to the domination of Western secular culture, economics, and politics. People are being drawn back to the golden age of Islam, with the idea of a united Islamic leadership (caliphate) at the center of this nostalgia (Hasan, 2016). Even though it might seem like a fantasy, the ideas promoted by Islamist ideology are appealing. They provide clear and practical solutions to today's problems and give voice to those feeling treated unfairly, encouraging a strong stand against the existing power structures (Hasan et al., 2018).

As time evolves, so does Islamist ideology - it is in constant shift and motion (Bayat & Herrera, 2010). The collapse of Islamism as a political ideology is attributed to disappointments and the constraints of secular politics (Roy, 2012). Hence, post-Islamism emerges as an alternative for social media users, including Facebook, where discussions aren't centered around the Islamic State. Instead, they are responsive to the global discourse on pluralist society and freedom (Roy, 2013). This shift emphasizes a dynamic and evolving engagement with Islamist ideology, influenced by global narratives and the immediacy of social media platforms, shaping perspectives across generations, including the elderly and millennials.

Responses to global discourses are often misunderstood by the public, especially by the millennial and elderly generations, who are notably the most active users of social media (Nursahid, 2019). A Daily Social survey (2018) of 2,032 internet users in Indonesia revealed that 81.25% of respondents encountered hoaxes on Facebook, 56.55% on WhatsApp, 29.48% on Instagram, and 32.97% on Telegram. Other social media platforms like Twitter are also flooded with hoaxes, although less than 30%. Three popular applications—Facebook, WhatsApp, and Instagram—are the primary channels for hoax dissemination in Indonesia (Nursahid, 2019).

In Indonesia, the emergence of hate speech is often triggered by feelings of offense over insults. Protestors ask the government to step in or take matters into their own hands because their religious feelings have been hurt. Experts describe these conflicts as deep-seated and traditional, often tied to old beliefs and social rankings, and made worse by speeches that intentionally escalate trouble.

These findings underline the pervasive spread and impact of hoaxes and hate speech in the digital space, raising concerns about misinformation and its potential to inflame societal tensions. They emphasize the need for enhanced media literacy and critical thinking skills among social media users, especially within vulnerable groups like the millennials and the elderly, to navigate this complex information environment safely.

In both offline and online domains, the essence of hate messages remains consistent, but specific characteristics are amplified in the digital sphere, garnering public attention (Gagliardone et al., 2015). First is the aspect of anonymity or the use of false names. People feel secure in spreading hate messages under the cover of fake identities.

The second characteristic is the permanence of messages. In the online domain, various formats of messages can endure across platforms and links. Platforms like Facebook significantly contribute to the persistence of these messages. The third is the mobility of messages. Online deleted messages can resurface on the same platform under different names or in different online spaces. Fourth is transnationality, where messages crossing international borders present unique challenges, including legal mechanisms to address them.

In "Common Hoaxes and Chain Letters," (Harley, 2008) elaborates on the nature of hoaxes. Firstly, hoaxes often resemble chain letters, for example, "Spread this to everyone you know, or something unpleasant will happen." This tactic particularly affects the elderly. Secondly, hoaxes typically lack verifiable event dates, exemplified by vague statements like "issued by..." without clarity. Thirdly, hoaxes lack expiration dates for the information, although even the presence of a date doesn't verify anything. Additionally, two factors make netizens particularly susceptible to hoaxes: information that aligns with their attitudes and opinions.

This reflection highlights the challenges presented by hate messages and hoaxes in the digital age, highlighting the need for comprehensive strategies to address misinformation and promote digital literacy among all internet users, including the vulnerable elderly population.

Here are the reasons why the elderly are vulnerable to hoaxes

1. Lack of Digital Literacy:  
Many older adults are not accustomed to technology and social media, meaning they might lack the knowledge to distinguish between true information and hoaxes. Their limited understanding of how to use and verify online information can increase their vulnerability to misinformation.
2. High Trust in Received Information:  
Older adults tend to have a high level of trust in the information they receive. They might be more vulnerable to believing unverified information or content from unreliable sources. A lack of skills in recognizing signs of hoaxes or information manipulation can make them more susceptible to the spread of misinformation.
3. Susceptibility to Confusion and Fear:  
The elderly are also prone to confusion and fear when confronted with false or manipulative information. In many cases, political hoaxes or fake news designed to incite fear can negatively affect older adults' emotions. The psychological impact of hoaxes, like anxiety and stress, can affect their overall well-being.
4. Influence of Social Environment:  
Older adults often rely on their social environments, including family and friends, for information. However, if these social circles are also susceptible to hoaxes or lack adequate media literacy, the elderly can become trapped in a cycle of spreading false information unknowingly. Dependence on information from their social environment can increase their vulnerability to hoaxes.
5. Inability to Verify Information:  
Older adults might face difficulties in verifying the authenticity of the information they encounter on social media or the internet. Limited technical abilities or lack of accessibility to verified information sources hinder their capability to validate the truth of information and distinguish between hoaxes and facts.

### 3. Strategies to Enhance Media Literacy Among the Elderly

Most elderly people use WhatsApp for communication. WhatsApp users can be categorized into two groups: status creators and communication users (Dhiatama, 2020). Status creators are those who post and comment on others' statuses, utilizing the app beyond its communication features. In contrast, communication users primarily use WhatsApp for messaging, voice calls, and video calls. Data indicates that the elderly predominantly fall into the communication user category, utilizing WhatsApp for voice calls, chatting, and video calls.

About 78% of the elderly use WhatsApp for chatting, 54% utilize it for voice calls, while another 54% use it for video calls. This indicates that the elderly are actively engaging in virtual interactions without the need for face-to-face meetings (Maulida et al., 2022).

Often, the elderly are viewed as objects, presumed incapable of significant contributions and silenced, merely seen as supplementary. However, they indeed have the capacity to be subjects in development and can empower their surrounding community. The elderly need space to express their aspirations and strengthen each other. Hence, the approach towards them should be rights-based, recognizing the elderly as actors with roles in empowerment (Kesbang, 2022). In political activities, the elderly should be allowed to exercise their voting rights without intimidation, as their voices can influence the political policies enacted by the government in administration.

The attention from the Indonesian government towards the widespread culture of violence and hatred targeted at local communities is severely lacking (Human Rights Watch, 2013). This issue is a concern for Sidney Jones, who stated, "The biggest problem for democracy is not terrorism, but the continuous spread of intolerance from radical groups to the mainstream" (Jones, 2013). This is evident when Indonesia is criticized for its inability to protect minority groups (United Nations, n.d.).

The Indonesian National Police (Polri) have issued a special circular threatening perpetrators who spread hate. In the Police Chief Circular Number SE/06/X/2015, it is explained that with the increasing concern for human rights protection, the issue of hate speech is receiving more attention both nationally and internationally. This is reinforced by Circular Number 2 letter (f), which explains that "hate speech can be considered a criminal act regulated in the Criminal Code (KUHP) and other criminal provisions outside the KUHP."

Protection from discrimination and violence is also guaranteed under Law No. 40/2008 on the Elimination of Racial and Ethnic Discrimination in Indonesia. This law prohibits the spread of hoaxes and incitement of hatred, with a prison sentence of up to four years for hate speech based on race, religion, and group affiliations. However, there is a notable bias in law enforcement, often siding with the majority group opposing minorities.

Regulatory aspects are crucial in controlling hoaxes and incitement of hatred. Legal sanctions will ensnare those who produce and spread hoaxes and hate speech. Employing the "supply and demand" logic, producers exist because there is a significant number of people consuming such content. Therefore, cultural efforts are needed to raise awareness among social media users, especially the elderly. This awareness-raising is part of enhancing media literacy. Media literacy is not emerging in a vacuum but is a response to the massive spread of disinformation.

Here are the five elements of media literacy explained by Silverblatt (Potter, 2018):

1. Mass Communication Process:  
Understanding the mechanisms and dynamics of how information is disseminated on a large scale.
2. Development of Analysis Strategies:  
Cultivating methods to explore and evaluate media messages critically.
3. Awareness of Media Impact:  
Recognizing the effects of media on individuals and society as a whole.
4. Appreciation and Understanding of Media Content:  
Gaining insights into the substance and context of media messages.
5. Media Content as "Text":

Recognizing media content as texts that offer insights into contemporary cultural discourse and knowledge.

A strategic emphasis is placed on individuals in the context of online media since the main communicators are individual netizens. For instance, in WhatsApp, account owners hold the key to discourse. UNESCO (Gagliardone et al., 2015) promotes media literacy as an effort to combat hoaxes through citizenship education and digital citizenship (Mudjiyanto, 2013). Citizenship education should focus on preparing both millennials and the elderly to be media literate and responsible, especially in societies prone to violent conflicts (Santoso, 2016).

Through citizenship education programs, it is hoped that awareness regarding the social, political, and cultural rights of individuals and groups will be heightened. This can minimize and prevent violent conflicts resulting from disinformation or hoaxes.

Indonesian democracy has provided an opportunity for social media to promote specific agendas and short-term interests. The centrifugal effects of such media need to be minimized by various stakeholders to protect broader public interests. Attention to disinformation or hoaxes and hatred in the virtual world has prevailed in media literacy campaigns across various sectors. The goal is to raise netizens' awareness of existing issues and encourage resistance against hate speech and hoaxes for the unity and peace of the Indonesian nation. These campaigns are crucial to ensure the informational ecosystem is conducive and supportive of democratic values, public interest, and societal harmony.

Enhancing the media literacy of the elderly is a crucial step in counteracting the influence of hoaxes and fake news on their political participation. Here are some strategies that can be employed to boost media literacy among the elderly:

1. **Education and Training Programs:**  
Develop specialized education and training programs for the elderly focusing on media literacy. These should include introductions to social media, identifying hoaxes, and skills for verifying information authenticity. These can be delivered through workshops, seminars, or easily accessible online training sessions.
2. **Building Partnerships**  
Foster collaborations between the government, community organizations, and educational institutions to provide resources and support in enhancing the elderly's media literacy. Partnerships can involve healthcare providers, hospitals, senior activity centers, and adult education institutions.
3. **Creating Understandable Educational Material:**  
Develop media literacy educational materials that are easily comprehensible for the elderly. These should be presented in simple language, incorporate images, and consider special needs like declining vision or hearing difficulties. Materials can be in the form of guidebooks, brochures, or short videos, accessible both online and offline.
4. **Encouraging Discussion and Information Exchange:**  
Promote the elderly's participation in discussions and information exchange on media literacy. This can be facilitated through discussion groups or online forums specially designed for them. These platforms can aid the elderly in sharing experiences, tips, and strategies to tackle hoaxes and fake news.
5. **Providing Accessible Resources:**  
Offer easily accessible resources for the elderly to acquire accurate information. This can include websites, blogs, or apps that provide the latest facts, tips on verifying information, and guides on safely using social media. These resources should be specifically tailored to the elderly's needs and abilities in accessing and understanding information.
6. **Involving Family and Community:**  
Involve families and communities in supporting the elderly's media literacy. Families can offer guidance and support to the elderly in using social media and verifying information. Communities can also organize social and educational activities that prioritize media literacy, like workshops or discussion meetings.

Hatred provocation can pose a global threat that has the potential to destroy Indonesia's diversity (Bhinneka Tunggal Ika). Therefore, it is a collective responsibility to strengthen national unity by restricting the spread of hoaxes. Implementing media literacy for every societal layer without exception is expected to mitigate the dissemination of hoaxes. Media literacy cannot be executed partially; it must be comprehensive across all sectors. With media literacy, the public will be equipped with knowledge on how to analyze disinformation or hoaxes and be taught the responsibility of responding to information and news circulating in the community.

#### 4. Conclusion

The rapid advancement of the digital era has also fueled the spread of hoaxes. The impact of hoax dissemination affects both the elderly and millennial generations' political participation. The elderly are particularly vulnerable to hoaxes due to their high level of trust in received information, susceptibility to confusion and fear, the influence of their social environment, and difficulties in verifying information. The influence of hoaxes on the elderly's political participation includes altered political perceptions, the formation of misguided political preferences, the reinforcement of stereotypes and prejudices, decreased trust in the political process, and strengthened identity politics.

To address this issue, it's crucial to enhance the media literacy of the elderly. Strategies to improve media literacy involve special education and training programs, building partnerships between the government and community organizations, providing easily understood educational materials, encouraging discussions and information exchange, making accessible resources available, and involving family and communities in supporting the elderly's media literacy.

The importance of media literacy in combating hoaxes in the digital age cannot be overstated. With a better understanding of media, the elderly can be more cautious and critical in filtering the information they receive from social media. Efforts to increase media literacy among the elderly must be supported by the government, educational institutions, and society at large, so they can avoid the negative impacts of hoaxes and make smarter, more rational decisions.

By enhancing media literacy, the elderly can gain the skills to distinguish accurate information. This will motivate them to actively participate in the political process with a strong knowledge foundation. In a democracy in the digital age, the media literacy of the elderly is key to maintaining information integrity and ensuring intelligent, fact-based political participation.

#### Declaration of Conflict of Interest

The authors declare that there are no potential conflicts of interest related to the research, writing, and/or publication of this article.

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