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Public Information Literacy in Online News Media Comments: Qualitative Research on the Role and Influence of Buzzers on Narratives and Information

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Abstract

This study examines the role of buzzers in comments on online news media and their impact on the narratives and information conveyed to the public. Using a qualitative approach, the research employs content analysis and interviews to explore the interaction dynamics between buzzers and other users in the comment sections. The findings indicate that buzzers often dominate the comment space, creating an illusion of public support for specific issues and influencing public perception. Additionally, this study identifies the strategies buzzers employ to promote specific agendas and the responses of news media in managing these comments. These findings highlight the importance of understanding the presence of buzzers in online news, particularly in maintaining the quality of information and public discourse. With the increasing use of digital platforms, the public is expected to become more critical in filtering the information they receive. This research contributes to the literature on communication and media, offering recommendations for news media to take greater responsibility in moderating comments. Ultimately, the results aim to raise public awareness regarding the influence of buzzers and the importance of media literacy in the digital age.

Keywords: information literacy, public information literacy, online news media, buzzer.

1. Introduction

Online news media has become one of the main sources of information in today's digital era (Sultan, Amir, 2023). These platforms are increasingly popular due to their ease of access and speed of information dissemination (Wang, 2024). However, behind this progress, there are major challenges related to public information literacy, which is the ability of individuals to search, understand, evaluate and use information critically (Rusdiyanti et al., 2023). One aspect that has become a major concern in the context of public information literacy is how people interact with news, especially in online media comment spaces (Gjerazi, 2024; Tayie, 2022).

Comments that appear in online news columns often reflect diverse views (Ivanova, 2023; Kolhatkar et al., 2020). However, it is not uncommon for these comments to be dominated by buzzers with a particular agenda (Fitria, 2023; Sholihah, 2023). The use of buzzers in online news commentary raises questions about the authenticity and objectivity of the information (Budiana, 2024). Buzzers, who often favour certain opinions, can influence the way information is communicated and received by the Public (Rahim et al., 2024).

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Buzzers often work in an organised way to promote a particular agenda, be it political, social or economic (Budiana, 2024). They can quickly create public opinion in favour of or against a particular issue. In the context of online news, the presence of buzzers can change the way information is presented, creating a narrative that may not be objective. This has the potential to undermine the integrity of the information presented to the public. (Dewantara et al., 2022; Fitria, 2023; Rahim et al., 2024; Sholihah, 2023).

In addition, buzzers can also create the illusion of public support for an issue. With a large number of comments that look positive, the public can be influenced to follow the flow (Dewantara et al., 2022; Widyatama, Mahbob, 2024). This phenomenon raises questions about the ethics of using buzzers. Is this considered opinion manipulation or simply a marketing strategy?

Kohnen McGrew (McGrew, Kohnen, 2024) in recent decades have strengthened online information literacy so that people are more critical in consuming news and more resistant to information manipulation. Kanozia et al (Kanozia et al., 2022) offer a solution that the government needs to make regulations to limit the spread of fake news. The first country that was aware of limiting the spread of fake news that disturbed public peace was France, which in 1881 issued the Freedom of Press Law. The German government was more assertive by issuing the Network Enforcement Act which fines all media sites up to 50 million for those who refuse to remove fake and illegal content.

Public information literacy is increasingly recognized as critical to fostering informed citizenship and democratic governance, especially in the digital age. It encompasses the skills necessary for individuals to access, evaluate and utilise information effectively, thereby enhancing their ability to engage with public services and counter misinformation. Based on this, the role of media and information literacy is crucial to combat disinformation and increase public trust in institutions. It empowers citizens to critically assess media content, encouraging a more informed public capable of engaging in the democratic process (Jaakkola et al., 2023). In addition, empowering the public in young people in particular can use appropriate communication strategies to improve digital literacy. Young people can identify valid information and counteract misleading hoaxes and negative content (Rullah et al., 2025).

In this context, information literacy is not only related to an individual's ability to understand news content, but also includes critical skills in recognising propaganda, bias, hoaxes and communication strategies used by buzzers (Adhikari, Joshi, 2024; Rusdiyanti et al., 2023). Lack of information literacy can cause people to be easily influenced by engineered narratives, resulting in social polarisation, increased misinformation, and reduced quality of public discussion in digital spaces (Kurniasih et al., 2024).

Overall, this research is expected to gain a more comprehensive understanding of how buzzers influence public opinion in online news media and information literacy can be an important tool to protect the public from information manipulation. This research aims to explore the comments that appear on online news media, particularly those influenced by buzzers, shaping the narratives and information received by the public. In addition, the results of this study can provide insights for policy makers, academics, and media practitioners in designing strategies to improve public information literacy in order to create a healthier and higher quality digital ecosystem.

2. Materials and methods

The research method used is using qualitative methods. Qualitative research is a subjective method that reveals rich data and reality in a naturalistic context. It is reflexive, communicative, and rigorous, focusing on various realities to improve quality in social and educational research, especially in teaching and learning (Pandey, 2024). Qualitative research involves various designs such as case study, ethnography, phenomenology, grounded theory, and narrative enquiry. It focuses on understanding complex human and social phenomena through subjective interpretation, utilising diverse sampling methods and data collection tools (Regmi, 2024).

The research stage carried out in this research is using a case study. The method used is by using several stages including: (a) content analysis of buzzer comments, (b) in-depth interviews, (c) analysing key themes using data visualisation tools and triangulating data. Detailed informant information is shown in the Table 1 below.

Table 1. The Source of the Research

No	Initial Name	The Position
1	NB	<i>Kapanlagi Youniverse</i> Journalist
2	DZM	<i>Kapanlagi Youniverse</i> Journalist
3	OS	Content creator
4	EM	<i>Fimela.com</i> Journalist
5	AAK	Head of <i>Beautynesia.id</i>
6	EM	<i>Kapanlagi.com</i> Journalist
7	DW	Buzzer

3. Discussion

The existence of buzzers in the digital ecosystem not only acts as a disseminator of information, but also as an effective narrative change agent. This is in accordance with the opinion of Budiana (Budiana, 2024) which states that buzzers actively shape narratives, influence perceptions and have the potential to change outcomes. Through qualitative analysis of the various comments they produce, it can be seen that buzzers have a systematic communication strategy in shaping public opinion. They do not simply convey information, but also utilise various persuasion techniques to direct perceptions, create polarisation and distort information circulating in the digital space (Ivanova, 2023; Kolhatkar et al., 2020).

In the context of digital information literacy, the buzzer phenomenon is a serious challenge for the community in sorting and understanding information critically (Gjerazi, 2024). Digital information literacy includes the ability to access, evaluate and use information ethically and responsibly (Kurniasih et al., 2024). However, with the presence of buzzers who often reframe issues in a biased manner, the public is faced with a situation where the information circulating does not always reflect the truth, but has been packaged with a specific purpose (Facciani et al., 2024; Kurniasih et al., 2024).

In practice, buzzers use various techniques to influence readers' perceptions. One of them is astroturfing (Arce-García et al., 2022; Badade, Dhanaraj, 2024; Weber, Neumann, 2021), which is the creation of the impression of organic support for an idea or character, when in fact it has been controlled in an organized manner. Astroturfing involves creating fake online personas and accounts to simulate grassroots support for a particular agenda. This organised strategy manipulates public opinion by giving the false impression of widespread and genuine enthusiasm for a cause, product or individual.

In addition, buzzers also often utilize echo chamber techniques, where they reproduce and repeat certain narratives to make them sound more credible and accepted by a wide audience. Yin (Yin, 2023) suggests that influential users, or hardliners, play an important role in reinforcing certain narratives. Echo chambers are formed through selective exposure and interaction with like-minded individuals (Nguyen, 2020; Williams, 2023) and contribute to the polarisation of opinions, the spread of misinformation and the erosion of trust in institutions (Müller et al., 2022).

Another challenge is the ability of buzzers to widely spread disinformation and misinformation. Disinformation refers to information that is deliberately manipulated to mislead, while misinformation is the unintentional spread of incorrect information (Krotoszynski, 2024). In many cases, buzzers employ both strategies to shape public opinion in favor of certain parties or to weaken others. This further blurs the line between facts and opinions, making it difficult for the public to distinguish valid information from manipulated content. The impact of buzzer activities is not limited to shaping public opinion but also contributes to social polarization. By reinforcing a particular viewpoint and suppressing opposing perspectives, buzzers create divisions within society (Widyatama. Mahbob, 2024). Furthermore, they have the potential to distort circulating information by subtly mixing facts with opinions, making it challenging for the general audience to differentiate truth from manipulation (Dewantara et al., 2022).

The rise of the buzzer phenomenon and the spread of disinformation demand solutions beyond merely raising awareness. Digital information literacy, which includes critical thinking skills, source evaluation, and information verification, serves as a crucial foundation. Society needs to be trained to develop critical thinking skills, assess the credibility of sources, and verify information before sharing it. The ability to recognize buzzer strategies, understand information manipulation techniques, and utilize credible information sources are essential steps in

maintaining a healthy information ecosystem. Additionally, the involvement of educational institutions and libraries in providing digital literacy education is a key factor in building a more informed society that is not easily influenced by narratives controlled by buzzers. (Dewantara et al., 2022; Rahim et al., 2024; Widyatama, Mahbob, 2024)

With increasing awareness of the importance of digital information literacy, society is expected to become more discerning and critical consumers of information. This ability includes not only recognizing hoaxes and disinformation but also analyzing information sources, understanding potential biases, and evaluating content credibility. As a result, people will be less susceptible to propaganda, better able to filter relevant information, and capable of participating more wisely and responsibly in public discussions in digital spaces.

4. Results

This research found that online news media has become one of the main sources of information for Indonesians in this digital era. The increasing use of digital platforms is a new challenge in public information literacy. The existence of buzzers not only serves as a disseminator of information, but also as a modifier of existing narratives. Through qualitative analysis of the comments generated, it is seen that buzzers often direct public opinion in a strategic way. They utilise certain techniques to influence readers' perceptions, create polarisation, and distort the information conveyed.

Public information literacy

NB, Journalist of *Kapanlagi Youniverse* explained that public information literacy in the context of online news and social media is the ability of public to use tools and or information sources in order to critically understand what they get from news sources and or social media that they use in their daily life: *"The public must know how to identify their needs related to information, then use various sources to find this information, to test the accuracy and relevance of information. If it is at the 'advanced' level, the public is able to use the information in the decision-making dimension of what information it gets."*

DZM, a journalist from *Kapanlagi Youniverse*, stated that public information literacy is the foundation to build a critical society. Therefore, journalist has a duty not only to deliver news, but also to educate the public to be a smart information reader and responsible netizen: *"The rapidly growing social media, including the presence of many homeless media, is also a big challenge in the digital era, where the boundaries between facts and hoax news are increasingly blurred."*

Buzzer

The role of buzzers according to OS, Content creator, criticises politics that buzzers are very influential and more predictable in the narratives they convey: *"Their presence is very clear and felt. The context itself varies. It can be for business purposes (enhancing the image/enlivening a brand's campaign), or political interests (raising issues, reducing issues, or attacking political opponents)."* OS has experience in dealing with online buzzers: *"Yes, often in the comments or DMs, comments that fall into the category of CIB (Coordinated Inauthentic Behaviour) according to META's definition. What is very clear is that it is coordinated, the key messages are similar, and at the same time"*. All buzzer-influenced content is very often found in every post he posted, OS added that almost every mainstream news post is present, especially in certain topics (for example: Jokowi/Prabowo/Anies/IKN/Free Nutritious Meals). Both are broadcast on Youtube, Instagram, Tiktok, and X.

Furthermore, EM, a journalist at *Fimela.com*, stated that she often finds buzzer content, especially on content related to sensitive information: *"Often, especially on content related to sensitive information, for example related to politics, government, economy, social, even in the entertainment world (especially Korea and its fanatical fans) as well as football."*

Buzzers influence the narratives that develop in online news/social media. OS responded that the buzzer process in influencing the narratives that develop on social media is in two ways, the first through active campaigning and the last through critical comments: *"In two ways: (1) active campaigns filling timelines and algorithms with certain content, thus making some of the public think it is the truth; or (2) through massively attacking critical comments and content, thus making people lazy to speak out and assume the truth is something wrong."*

According to DZM, the way buzzers influence the narratives that develop in online news/social media is by creating opinions that have been planned with their service providers: *"Mobilising a very large number of buzzers, hoping that it will be considered a general opinion"*

that represents netizens. The narratives used tend to be provocative and play on the emotions of netizens even if they have to use false information or do not match the facts."

Narratives on online media

EM added that the way buzzers influence the narrative that develops on social media is aimed at people who lack literacy, especially in digital information literacy: *"For Indonesian internet users, buzzers are still very capable of influencing opinions, especially for those who lack digital literacy (usually boomers/X generation). But for millennials, Z and alpha generations, they are already much more sceptical and intelligent in consuming information, and can even quickly tell which are buzzers and which are organic users."*

In contrast to the view of AAK, head of *Beautynesia.id* that in trusted online news media, buzzers are not influenced because there are other more valid sources: *"In credible news media, it is not because there will usually be other valid sources to balance the news."*

The language style used by these buzzers tends to be provocative, as stated by EM: *"The style of language tends to be provocative, opinionated, justifying certain parties, blaming other parties, not having a strong basis/evidence, daring to argue with the opposing party and even being long and offensive. Often the language or sentences used are uniform/ almost similar to other buzzers."*

DZM added that *"doing massive posts targeting certain keywords so that the desired topic can become a trending topic, including by utilizing bots. The language style is usually adjusted to the target audience you want to influence. But the pattern is the same, for manipulative language styles, provoking emotions, provocative, sarcasm, or using contexts that cause polarisation in netizens. For content, they usually use clickbait themes or titles. This is done to increase the engagement of the content they post. In addition, the content will also have a uniform narrative with a slight difference in the cover to be reposted by other buzzers."*

ME, a journalist at *Kapanlagi.com*, adds that there are 5 important points in the language style used by buzzers: *"As far as I observed, the first one shares the news link that supports their opinion. The news could have been prepared to build an argument. The second debates the opinions of opposing netizens. The third uses quotes from famous figures. Next, using a story that he has personal experience of the topic being discussed with his statement: 'According to my experience' and finally flooding the comment section."*

DW, a former buzzer, stated that the style of language used was very provocative and in close proximity: *"1000 contents with the same language arrangement in close proximity, they are buzzing something, right?"* She also added that the change in the way information is conveyed influenced by buzzers has had a bad influence on the public and for her as a former buzzer *"It makes you annoyed because the comments of people who are really interested are covered by silly template comments"*. DW continued that the main challenge in public information literacy today is that many people are increasingly triggered and believe in the narratives given. *"People are more easily triggered by bad comments and are happy to respond without thinking."*

NB added, *"Internet penetration and access to information with various platforms, especially the existence of VPNs. This condition allows the public to get a variety of information from various cyberspace channels. The level of public awareness of the various information around them is still not good. This means that it is a never-ending challenge for the public to increase their level of literacy. Social media platform channels that have freedom of access and expression. Lack of understanding about cyber ethics, despite the existence of the ITE Law and similar derivative regulations. The spread of misinformation, dis-information and mal-information. Unfortunately, the public does not all know and have the capability to use tools to avoid being ensnared by the three types of hoaxes, which are usually perpetrated by the buzzers."*

DZM did not disagree: *"The main challenges in public information literacy today are the flood of information, misinformation or hoaxes, and the lack of digital literacy skills. The government should be able to provide regulations related to the media, by regulating unlicensed media homelessness. In addition, online media itself must remain committed to presenting quality, accurate and balanced information. Social media platforms should also be responsible for moderating hoax content and prioritising verified information."*

EM added that: *"User background (related to education level/access to digital information, especially for the older generation and people in remote areas who cannot access digital information all the time to develop themselves related to literacy. There is no support from the government to educate the nation, even certain parties/government personnel use buzzers to*

control public opinion. Digital literacy is not the main focus of the state/society, because it is still a luxury/secondary/tertiary item) in everyday life (under developing country problem)."

The Role of Education in Improving Public Information Literacy

The role of education in improving public information literacy in online news media is very little, especially in developing information literacy. EM stated that education still uses conventional methods: "There is not much effect because digital literacy is not the main focus of educational institutions. The government and many educational institutions are still very conventional/old-fashioned and even tend to limit the curriculum to focus on the 'essentials' which unfortunately is very outdated. Younger generations (Z and Alpha) get knowledge about digital literacy from their parents who are millennials and privileged enough to understand the importance of this, not from schools that still consider it unimportant. The provision of information related to digital literacy from millennial parents/home environment is limited to those who are in urban areas and have good knowledge capital. The rest, for those who do not have this privilege, have no opportunity at all to develop their literacy."

DZM added that education should play a more dominant role in improving public information literacy: "Education plays an important role in improving public information literacy related to online news. Digital literacy and ethics in digital interaction should be included in the school curriculum. This can make people have verification skills, critical thinking, and good information sharing ethics during the information flood in the current digital era."

NB adds: "that when it comes to the broad term education, of course it is very important. The spectrum of education that can reach all levels of society, from age to public education, is crucial. In this segment, education can provide very high nutrition on how the public behaves towards all the information that enters around them. The ideal goal, of course, is to create a tradition of critiquing what information comes in from various platforms, so that the negative elements of information will not occur. If we look at the role of education narrowly, especially in specialised zones such as schools or campuses, it is also very important. Socialization or lessons on information literacy in formal zones can be a strong fortress for students, from elementary, junior high, high school to university level. The benefit of this zone is that those who have received information literacy knowledge, students, will apply it in their social life, including the closest one, namely the family."

The hope for the future of public information literacy in the context of news media and online social media is to improve the credibility of news and clear regulations. As stated by OS that "it is hoped that there will be clearer regulations and ease of reporting buzzers." In addition, comprehensive improvements are expected as stated by EM: "Comprehensive and fundamental improvements starting from the Indonesian government to the lowest level and evenly distributed throughout Indonesia. This cannot be done by only a small number of people/groups because it will be useless when most of the other people, especially the government, do not care or even deliberately misuse or use the inability of people's literacy to benefit certain parties."

ME added that in order to prioritize ethics in journalism: "Not only online media, but also social media creators, need to prioritize journalistic ethics in delivering news or content. Do not be tempted or blinded by the desire for profit (traffic)." A similar hope was expressed by NB: "The hope for public information literacy in the context of online news media is to increase the credibility of a media. Whatever information that uses online news channels, everything comes from elements that have credibility, so that it does not cause doubts, doubts and confusion in the community/public. In addition, stakeholders must constantly give attention to increasing the level of information literacy, so that the public will be more critical and able to fortify themselves against information from online news. In addition, there must be interaction or dialogue between the public and the source of online news, so that intensive discussions will create constructive conditions."

5. Conclusion

This study found that public information literacy plays a crucial role in navigating the dynamics of online news comments, particularly in identifying the influence of buzzers on opinion and narrative formation. The findings indicate that buzzers employ various manipulative strategies, such as information framing, disinformation dissemination, and attacks on individuals with differing views, often leading to polarization in online discussions. However, various levels of public information literacy result in some individuals being easily influenced by controlled narratives, while others can identify and counter disinformation with fact-based arguments and

credible sources. The lack of awareness regarding these information manipulation techniques highlights the need to strengthen digital education so that society can be more critical in processing information in online spaces.

The implications of this study affirm that improving public information literacy must be a priority for various stakeholders, including the media, academics, and the government, to create a healthier digital environment free from manipulative influences. More systematic digital education is needed to raise public awareness in recognizing propaganda and bias in information, while policies for managing online media platforms can help mitigate the negative impact of buzzers. This study also opens opportunities for further research to explore in greater depth how buzzer interaction patterns influence public trust in the media and their impact on social and political stability in the digital era.

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