



The Dynamics of Public Opinion Representation in Government Social Media Comment Columns

Mazidatus Saadah¹, Mursalim², A. Rivai Beta³

^{1,2,3}Sultan Aji Muhammad Idris State Islamic University Samarinda

e-mail: * Mazidah.sa@gmail.com¹, mursalimfuaduinsi@gmail.com², arivaibeta@gmail.com³

Abstract. This study examines the phenomenon of comment manipulation on the official Instagram account of the East Kalimantan Provincial Government (@pemprov_kaltim) by highlighting indications of the use of inauthentic accounts that have the potential to shape perceptions of public support digitally. The study aims to identify the characteristics of these accounts and analyze how inorganic comments shape public perception. The study uses a qualitative approach with content analysis methods, through data collection in the form of screenshots, profile searches, metadata recording, and direct observation of specific posts. The results show that the fake accounts have consistent patterns such as minimal activity, unclear identities, uniform comments, and close posting times. This pattern creates a simulation of support that is not rooted in actual public opinion, thus creating hyperreality according to Baudrillard's concept. This comment manipulation also functions as noise that disrupts public communication, damages deliberative space, and prevents institutions from obtaining fully authentic feedback. From the perspective of Islamic communication ethics, this practice is considered a *tadlis* act because it falsifies the impression and violates the principles of honesty and justice as emphasized in QS Al-Mā'idah verse 8. The findings of this study confirm that comment manipulation has the potential to weaken public trust and create a digital reality that does not reflect the actual social conditions.

Keywords: Comment Manipulation, Fake Accounts, Hyperreality, Public Communication, Islamic Communication Ethics.

Introduction

The development of social media has driven significant changes in communication patterns between government and the public. In the modern political context, mass media holds a central position in politics because it functions as a channel for disseminating policies and articulating public aspirations (Syobah, 2012). Instagram, as one of the most popular platforms in Indonesia, has become a crucial space for local governments to convey public information, build image, and accommodate citizen responses. In the ideal of government communication, the digital space should be a platform for transparency, open dialogue, and honest representation of the public's voice (Ghiffari, 2024). Healthy two-way communication is necessary to create a government that is inclusive, accountable, and close to the citizens.

However, the reality of social media doesn't always align with these ideals. In many digital contexts, comment sections are often filled with less-than-authentic accounts and produce inorganic comments. These inorganic accounts are often used to shape perceptions, both to shape perceptions and to influence the direction of digital conversations and distort public opinion. In the digital communication ecosystem, information can spread massively and rapidly. This widespread dissemination of information is so widespread that experts have declared information overload in the digital space. Information circulating on social media and



This situation is increasingly evident in the case of comment manipulation on the official Instagram account of the East Kalimantan Provincial Government (@pemprov_kaltim). Several posts revealed a pattern of inorganic comments, containing both excessive support and unclear criticism. This phenomenon not only impacts the dialogue between the government and the public but also creates a gap between digital representation and social reality. Comments that appear to be the voice of the public are actually artificial constructs that obscure perceptions of public opinion.

Besides demonstrating a violation of the principle of fairness in digital communication, the phenomenon of comment manipulation also contributes to a crisis of public trust in government institutions. When the public encounters a discrepancy between social reality and the digital representations presented, they become increasingly skeptical of the authenticity of information conveyed through official channels. Rather than serving as a platform for expressing their aspirations, government social media platforms risk being perceived as mere platforms for public image building. This situation clearly contradicts the principle of public communication, which positions the public as subjects and partners in dialogue, not merely recipients of information.

On the other hand, the practice of comment manipulation also demonstrates how the logic of social media algorithms can be exploited to artificially shape public perception. Repeated comments from fake accounts can increase the visibility of posts and create the impression of widespread support, thus triggering a bandwagon effect among other users. Thus, comment manipulation not only violates communication ethics but also exploits algorithmic loopholes to construct structured opinions. This impact is systemic because it can blur the line between authentic support and fabricated digital images, thereby weakening the quality of the digital democratic space.

Within the framework of postmodernist theory, particularly the thinking of Jean Baudrillard, this kind of reality can be understood as a form of simulation and hyperreality, a condition where representations (digital comments) no longer reflect reality but instead create a new, pseudo-reality. The manipulation of comments through fake accounts creates the illusion of support or dissatisfaction that is not rooted in a real audience, transforming the communication space into a stage for symbolic representation.

Based on the ideal of transparent and honest public communication, and the reality of social media being rife with manipulation, this study attempts to analyze the phenomenon of the use of fake accounts in the comments section of the East Kalimantan Provincial Government's Instagram account. Through a postmodernist perspective, this study aims to understand how simulated public comments are constructed, how hyperreality is created, and how this impacts public perceptions of government in the digital space.

Methods

This study used a qualitative approach with content analysis methods to examine comment manipulation patterns on the official Instagram account of the East Kalimantan Provincial Government. Data were collected from posts by the @pemprov_kaltim account, which displayed unnatural comments, such as uniform comments and minimal account activity.



The sample was purposively selected based on indicators of fake accounts, such as unclear identities, low follower counts, no posts, and accounts created close together. Data collection was conducted through screenshots, profile searches, metadata recording, and direct observation. In qualitative research, the researcher acts as the primary instrument, interpreting the data in depth (Creswell, 2016).

Data analysis was conducted through the stages of reduction, presentation, and conclusion drawing (Miles & Huberman, 2014). Comments containing indications of manipulation were selected and categorized based on interaction patterns and account characteristics. The findings were then interpreted using the concepts of simulation and hyperreality to explain how fake comments create false support in digital spaces (Baudrillard, 1994). Data validity was tested through triangulation of sources and techniques by comparing comment patterns between posts and literature related to fake accounts. The research was conducted online for three months.

Results and Discussion

The official Instagram account of the East Kalimantan Provincial Government (@pemprov_kaltim) is a public communication platform managed by the regional government to convey information, publish work programs, and document the activities of government officials. This account has a large number of followers and actively posts information related to regional development, public policy, the governor's activities, public services, and government digital campaigns. As part of the government's digital communication strategy, the @pemprov_kaltim account is designed to be a dialogue space between the government and the public. The comments feature is used as a channel for citizen feedback, ideally serving as an indicator of public aspirations, criticism, and appreciation of government performance. With its intensive number of posts and wide reach, this account should represent the state of public opinion more openly and naturally.

However, over several posting periods, an unusual comment pattern emerged that indicated manipulative activity. This was evident in the post titled "Governor Harum: APBD Not Just a Number, But a Mandate of the People" on October 20, 2025, as well as other posts highlighting the governor's activities. In these posts, several accounts were found to have written consecutive positive comments, but their profiles exhibited characteristics that suggested they were fake accounts. For example, the account @aku.raja.kamu.pafriz commented "a visionary governor, thinking about revenue and infrastructure," yet only had 8 followers, 61 followers, 30 posts, and was private. This pattern is common among accounts not used organically for personal activities, but rather for specific purposes, such as flooding the comment section with messages of support.

A similar sentiment was evident in the account @lidyapurnawati99, which wrote the praise "Cool, Mr. Harum, still leading the meeting even though he's from Jakarta." This account is also private, with 62 followers and 105 accounts following it. While it appears more "normal," its limited access and simultaneous appearance with other accounts raise suspicions of natural inactivity. The account @curangga2 even more clearly demonstrates the hallmarks of a fake account, having no posts, no followers, and only 10 accounts following. Profiles with no content and no activity are usually strong indicators that the account was recently created or used solely



for automated comments or artificial support. In another post on November 25th, related to the governor's message ahead of the end of the fiscal year, the account @crtrahayu987 appeared, writing "Great, sir," but this account has no posts, only 5 followers, follows 6 accounts, and appears to have been recently created.

The general characteristics of these accounts show a consistent pattern (Zouzou & Varol, 2023):

- Minimal activity (0–30 posts).
- Low follower count and no organic engagement.
- Private or empty profile.
- Uniform comments contain excessive support.
- Unnatural engagement levels (active only on government posts).
- New accounts were created in a short time.

This pattern strongly indicates the practice of comment manipulation through fake accounts, both human-generated and automated accounts (bots), which have the potential to create the impression that the post has received widespread support. This practice creates an inauthentic simulation of public opinion. From the perspective of Baudrillard's concept of hyperreality, these comments present "digital support" that appears real but is not rooted in real society. This phenomenon creates a distortion in the digital public communication space, where interactions between the government and the public no longer take place in an honest and open space, but in a space filled with pseudo-representations. Comments from these inauthentic accounts create the public perception of widespread public support, when in fact, this opinion is a digital construct.

Furthermore, this practice of comment manipulation not only serves to create an image of support but also serves as a digital mechanism with the potential to influence the direction of public conversation. These accounts are often used to modify the atmosphere of conversations in the comments section, so that other users who see similar comments tend to follow the flow of opinion. Thus, these inorganic comments serve not only as a pseudo-representation but also as a tool to influence collective perception and reduce the visibility of diverse opinions through the dominance of inauthentic positive messages. This practice further reinforces the distortion of reality because the public can be encouraged to interpret such support as dominant when in reality it is not.

Furthermore, the pattern of comment manipulation also demonstrates how social media algorithms magnify the effects of these simulations. When similar comments are generated close together, the Instagram algorithm tends to place these posts higher in feeds or recommendations, thus expanding the spread of positive images that are not actually organic. In other words, algorithms become part of the process of producing simulacra, reinforcing representations that lack any reference to reality. This is a form of contemporary hyperreality, where artificial digital support is legitimized by algorithmic systems, making them appear true and believable. When the public accepts these representations without verification, the digital space transforms into an arena of symbolic hegemony that is difficult to disentangle between fact, fabrication, and perception.



This phenomenon demonstrates how digital space has become an arena for the production of images that do not always represent reality. In Baudrillard's concept, this condition is related to simulation and simulacra, namely a situation where representation no longer simply depicts reality, but replaces and creates a new reality. Comments in the form of praise or support produced by accounts with minimal activity, no clear identity, and seemingly newly created, are a form of simulacra that lacks reference to social reality, namely authentic public opinion.

These accounts do not reflect the existence of individuals or citizens who genuinely support the government. Instead, they become "copyless copies," artificial endorsements that have no basis in societal reality. In other words, these comments no longer represent public aspirations, but rather a deliberately manufactured image to project a certain impression, such as that the government is receiving a broadly positive response.

When comments like these are read by the public, they can easily assume they represent the general public's view. This is what Baudrillard calls hyperreality, a condition where representations (fake digital support) feel more real and more powerful than actual social reality. Yet, this support is merely a digital construct with no direct connection to the facts on the ground. This hyperreality creates the illusion that the government is positively received by the public, when the actual reality can be very different. This phenomenon demonstrates how social media can shape a false reality through the production of engineered digital symbols.

When analyzed from a public communication perspective, the phenomenon of fake comments is considered a form of noise that disrupts the process of information delivery between the government and the public. Ismail et al. (2024) noted that in negative contexts, communication on social media can lead to the spread of controversial views and misinformation, potentially threatening social harmony. The manipulation of comments on the @pemprov_kaltim account falls into this category, as the fake comments create information distortions that obscure genuine public feedback. In line with this, Shannon & Weaver (1949) showed that noise can distort messages and impact communication effectiveness. In this context, fake comments constitute distortions that obscure genuine public feedback. As a result, the government no longer receives authentic criticism or appreciation, but only false interpretations of manipulated digital activity.

Furthermore, this situation can be understood through Habermas's concept of the public sphere, which idealizes rational, honest, and undistorted discussion. The public sphere should be a forum for the public to express their opinions openly, while also serving as a means for the government to understand the people's aspirations. When comment sections are filled with fake accounts offering automatic or uniform support, the digital public sphere loses its deliberative nature. Discussions become unhealthy, dishonest, and no longer based on dialogue between citizens and the government.

Thus, this phenomenon of manipulated comment representation indicates the failure of public communication spaces to uphold the values of transparency and accountability. Public communication actors may receive images that do not fully reflect public opinion. Ultimately, the public no longer feels they have a space to express their true aspirations, as the comment section is dominated by inauthentic representations.



From the perspective of Islamic communication ethics, which emphasizes the principles of honesty, justice, and trustworthiness in all forms of information dissemination, manipulating comments through fake accounts clearly contradicts these principles. From the perspective of communication jurisprudence, this action falls under the category of *tadlis*, namely the falsification or disguising of information to create false perceptions. Islam strictly prohibits all forms of deception, including in conveying messages to the public.

The principle of *qaulan sadida* (truthful and honest speech) is an important guideline in communication ethics, as is *qaulan ma'rufa*, namely speech that brings goodness and does not cause misunderstanding. Comments or information originating from inauthentic accounts have the potential to violate both principles because they present a distorted reality. In the context of public communication, the use of comments that do not reflect the actual situation can be understood as *taghyir al-haqiqah* (change of the truth), which risks creating inaccurate perceptions among the public. If this practice persists, the digital public sphere could lose its function as an arena for healthy and open dialogue, shifting into a space that does not reflect the dynamics of authentic communication.

Verse 8 of the Quran emphasizes the obligation to be fair in conveying testimony. In the digital context, false comments constitute a form of *shahadah az-zur* (false testimony) because they construct a narrative that appears to have widespread public support when such support never exists. False testimony is a grave sin because it can cause social damage, conceal the truth, and harm others. When comments from inorganic accounts are used to strengthen an institution's image, it not only misleads the public but also violates the values of trustworthiness that are the foundation of leadership and public communication according to Islamic teachings.

Thus, comment manipulation is not merely a technical issue in the world of digital communication, but a serious moral violation from an Islamic perspective. This practice undermines the integrity of the public sphere, can affect public trust in institutional communication channels, and undermines the principles of justice and honesty that every Muslim should uphold, both in face-to-face interactions and in the digital realm. Therefore, the application of Islamic communication ethics needs to be upheld in online activities, so that social media remains a transparent, honest space that reflects the principles of truth as taught in the Quran and Sunnah.

Conclusion

The phenomenon of inauthentic public comments on the official Instagram account of the East Kalimantan Provincial Government demonstrates that digital communication does not fully align with the ideals of transparency, honesty, and two-way dialogue. The presence of inorganic accounts generating uniformly positive and negative comments demonstrates that the representation of public opinion on social media can be manipulated, thus obscuring the public's true voice. This practice marks a shift from aspiration-oriented public communication to a digital space filled with artificial symbols and imagery.

Through Baudrillard's postmodernist perspective, this phenomenon can be understood as a form of simulation and hyperreality, where digital comments no longer reflect social reality but instead create a pseudo-reality that shapes public perception. The support seen in the comments



section is not public expression, but rather an artificial construct that serves to create the illusion of legitimacy for the government. This digital representation becomes "more real" than reality itself, making it difficult for the public to distinguish between the voice of the people and the product of manipulation.

From a public communication theory perspective, these inauthentic comments can be categorized as noise that disrupts the flow of communication between the government and the public. Fake comments undermine the function of the public sphere as idealized by Habermas, because the discussions that occur are no longer the result of honest interaction, but rather an arena distorted by digital manipulation. As a result, the government loses credible feedback, while the public loses a space for healthy deliberation.

From the perspective of Islamic communication ethics, the practice of comment manipulation is a form of moral violation because it contradicts the principles of honesty (*qaulan sadida*), justice, and trustworthiness. Fake comments fall into the category of *tadlis* (falsification), which is directly condemned by the Qur'an, particularly in Surah Al-Māidah verse 8, which emphasizes the obligation to act justly and prohibits misleading testimony. Thus, comment manipulation is not only a technical issue on social media, but also a violation of the ethical values that should be the basis of institutional and public communication.

Overall, the results of this study confirm that inauthentic comment patterns have the potential to degrade the quality of public communication, impact public trust in institutional communication channels, and create a digital reality that does not reflect true social conditions. Therefore, digital literacy, stricter oversight, and an ethical commitment from the government are needed to ensure that digital communication remains a forum for honest, transparent, and truth-based aspirations.

References

- Aginta, MH. *An Introductory Guide to Understanding Poststructuralism and Postmodernism*. Yogyakarta: Jalasutra Post, 2008.
- Agustina, TP, RM Piouli, VV Sununianti, Istiqoma, and DA Kurniawan. "Jean Baudrillard's Simulation and Simulacra in the Dynamics of Excessive Consumption Culture in Postmodern Society." *An-Nas: Jurnal Humaniora* 9, no. 1 (2025).
- Arianto, B. "Misunderstandings About Buzzers: An Analysis of Netizen Conversations on Social Media." *JIP: Scientific Journal of Government Science* 5, no. 1 (2020). <https://doi.org/10.14710/jiip.v5i1.7287>.
- Asharudin, R. *Analysis of Jean Baudrillard's Thoughts on Simulation and Reality in the Context of the Digital Era*. Bandung: Gunung Djati Conference Series, 2023.
- Azwar, M. "Jean Baudrillard's Simulacrum Theory and Effort." *Khizanah Al-Hikmah* 2, no. 1 (2014).
- Baudrillard, Jean. *Simulations*. New York: Semiotext(e), 1983.
- . *Simulacra and Simulation*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1995.
- Creswell, John W. *Research Design: Qualitative, Quantitative, and Mixed Methods Approaches*. 4th Edition. Yogyakarta: Pustaka Pelajar, 2016.



- Habermas, Jürgen. *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere: An Inquiry into a Category of Bourgeois Society*. Cambridge: MIT Press, 1989.
- Ismail, M. Abzar Duraesa, Ida Suryani Wijaya, and Sitti Syahar Inayah. "Analysis of Forms of Islamic Communication: Tradition, Innovation, and Their Impact in Contemporary Society." *JSIM: Journal of Social Sciences and Education* 5, no. 1 (2024): 140–147. <https://doi.org/10.36418/syntax-imperatif.v5i1.352>.
- Jauhari, M. "Social Media: Hyperreality and Simulacra of the Development of Modern Society in the Thoughts of Jean Baudrillard." *Jurnal Al-'Adalah* 20, no. 1 (2017).
- Kellner, Douglas. *Media Culture: Cultural Studies, Identity and Politics Between the Modern and the Postmodern*. New York: Routledge, 1995.
- Malone, M. *Information Technology and Society: A Sociological Perspective*. London: Routledge, 1997.
- Miles, Matthew B., and A. Michael Huberman. *Qualitative Data Analysis: A Methods Sourcebook*. 3rd Edition. Thousand Oaks: Sage Publications, 2014.
- Muhlisin. "Postmodernism and the Critique of Modern Scientific Ideology." *Okarra Journal II* 1, no. 1 (2000).
- Nurhajati, Lestari, Rudi Sukandar, Rani Chandra Oktaviani, and Xenia Angelica Wijayanto. *Big Data Analysis: Discussions on the Corona (COVID-19) Issue in Indonesian Online and Social Media*. 2020.
- Saumantri, T. "Hyper Religiosity in the Digital Era: An Analysis of Jean Baudrillard's Postmodernist Paradigm on Religious Phenomena in Social Media." *Al-Mutharahah: Journal of Religious Social Research and Studies* 20, no. 1 (2023).
- Saumantri, T., and A. Zikrillah. "Jean Baudrillard's Simulacra Theory in the World of Mass Media Communication." *ORASI: Journal of Da'wah and Communication* 11, no. 2 (2020): 247–260.
- Setiawan, J., and A. Sudrajat. "Postmodernist Thought and Its Views on Science." *Journal of Philosophy* 28, no. 1 (2018): 25–46. <https://doi.org/10.22146/jf.33296>
- Syobah, Hj. Sy. Nurul. "The Role of Mass Media in Political Communication." *Journal of Communication and Social Religion* 15, no. 1 (2012): 13–24.
- Zouzou, Y., and O. Varol. "Unsupervised Detection of Coordinated Fake-Follower Campaigns on Social Media." *arXiv Electronic Preprint* (2023). <https://arxiv.org/abs/2310.20407>