

## Building Democracy and Freedom of Expression by Fighting the Covid-19 Infodemic in the Digital Space Among the Younger Generation in Indonesia

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### Abstract

A research conducted by Kaspersky in early 2021 showed data in Southeast Asia that the highest percentage of respondents who spread the news without verification were actually in Gen Z (28%), followed by Gen X (21%), and Baby Boomers (19%). Sharing information without verification is very likely to cause the spread of fake news/hoaxes in online media. Indeed, Indonesia pins high hopes on Gen Z (born from 1996-2010) and Gen Y (1980-1995) that are considered part of the upcoming demographic bonus. In various discussions in the digital space, there are also often excuses for using free speech to justify the spread of the Covid-19 hoax in online media. This study aims to discover more about how the role of the younger generation can fight the Covid-19 hoax in the digital space by building democracy and free speech. Hoaxes continuously produced and disseminated by various groups indirectly become part of infodemic production. Even WHO stated that the condition of strengthening infodemics is as dangerous as the current pandemic worldwide. This research uses the method of discourse analysis and social networking analysis (SNA) using big data analysis on Twitter which Gen Z widely use. The results of this study describe how is the role of the younger generation to fight the Covid-19 hoax and find out who are the primary gatekeepers among young Indonesians in this fight against the Covid-19 hoax.

**Keywords:** Building democracy; Freedom of speech; Covid19 hoax; Infodemic; Digital space

### Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic that has hit the whole world since the end of 2019 has become a world problem that has shown no signs of abating. Information and news about this problem are also widely circulated massively in the real world and online media. However, the spread of information that cannot be accounted for is no less terrible. The Secretary-General of

the United Nations (United Nations), Antonio Guterres, on March 28, 2020, stated that the world's enemy is not only COVID-19 but also infodemics and the unusually rapidly evolving state of misinformation.

Infodemic is then understood as information overload of a problem so that its presence can interfere with efforts to find a

solution to the problem. Infodemics in Indonesia are also suspected of being very strong, especially in the form of spreading fake news and hoaxes in various online media, including social media (Nurhajati, Rahmiaji & Erika, 2020). Infodemics, generally in the form of incorrect information, can also produce false information packaged in such a way. Hoaxes can be produced as if they came from well-known news sites such as *kompas.com* and foreign sites. Thus, it also causes public confidence in the news. The speed of its spread on social media is fast in both hours and days (Juditha, 2018).

The Minister of Communication and Information officially stated that as of June 2021, there had been more than 1,670 items of Covid-19 hoax information recorded in various online media platforms. Specifically, 1,856 items of Covid-19 vaccine hoax content were found on various social media platforms (including Facebook, Twitter, Youtube, Tik Tok, and Instagram) in Indonesia. Meanwhile, we know that social media in Indonesia currently has a target market, which is dominated by young people.

Without realizing it, young people who are very active in using various social media take for granted the hoax information in social media that they consume. One study shows that it is very likely that young people, because of their minimum media literacy skills, become agents of spreading misleading information (Ningrum, 2019; Zulaiha, 2019). However, admittedly, young people can also be very active and play a role in the process of countering hoax information, being active in political participation, and carrying out various movements, including social movements and environmental issues, through social media (Fullam, 2017; Lane et al., 2019; Kamau, 2017; Zummo et al., 2020).

A research conducted by Kaspersky in early 2021 showed data in Southeast Asia that the highest percentage of respondents who spread the news without verification were actually in Gen Z (28%), followed by Gen X (21%), and Baby Boomers (19%). Meanwhile, Gen Y or Millennials saw the lowest percentage of 16%. Sharing information without verification is very likely to cause the spread of fake news/hoaxes in online media. This finding becomes interesting, especially if it is placed in the situation in Indonesia. Indeed, Indonesia pins high hopes on Gen Z (born from 1996-

2010) and Gen Y (1980-1995), which is considered part of the upcoming demographic bonus. In various discussions in the digital space, there are also often excuses for using free speech to justify the spread of the Covid-19 hoax in online media. It appears that free speech has become a double-edged knife.

From the introduction above, this study aims to discover more about how the role of the younger generation fight the Covid-19 hoax in the digital space and how they build and use democracy and freedom of speech in Indonesia.

### Theoretical Framework

Various previous studies have shown how infodemics are a severe problem that many parties worldwide must address. The World Health Organization (WHO), since the beginning of the Covid-19 pandemic, has stated publicly that the dangers of infodemics (this misleading information) are as dangerous as the Covid-19 virus pandemic itself.

Sylvie Briand, director of Infectious Hazard Management at WHO's Health Emergencies Programme and architect of WHO's a strategy to counter infodemic risk, said, "We know that every outbreak will be accompanied by a kind of tsunami of information, massive yet highly problematic information. You always have misinformation, rumors, etc. We know that even in the Middle Ages, there was this phenomenon". Such is the severity of this infodemic situation; even WHO made a framework for handling this Covid-19 infodemic specifically (Zaroscostas, 2020; Eysenbach, 2020).

"We are not just fighting the pandemic; we are fighting infodemics," said Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus, WHO director-general, at the 2020 Munich Security Conference. Fake news, misinformation, and conspiracy theories have become prevalent in the age of social media and have skyrocketed since the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic. This situation is particularly concerning because it undermines trust in health institutions and programs; on June 29, WHO officially started talks on global effects and infodemic management with the 1st Infodeemiological Conference, which gathered international experts from various scientific and political backgrounds (Diseases, 2020).

#### *Cohort Generation Y and Z*

In the development of the current generation, grouping is not traditionally defined

and refers to a group of people born in the same range but is seen sociologically compared to biologically alone. According to Putra (2016), generation is a social construct with a group of people of similar age, experience, and social dimensions. This opinion is also in line with Ryder (1965), who said generations are a group of individuals who jointly experience the same event and experience simultaneously.

Howe & Staruss (2000) conveys that at least three attributes can identify generational differences compared to the year of birth of each generation; namely (1) perceived membership is the perception of a person in a group to which the person belongs; (2) Shared beliefs and behaviors are attitudes in interacting with family, running a career, personal life, politics, religion, work, health, and other issues; (3) Common location in history, changes in political views, events that are considered historic, such as experiences in adolescence to adulthood, as well as natural and historical events.

However, there are many opinions and studies in calculating the grouping of cohorts generation, which makes a variety of calculations. The researchers come from different countries, so the schemes used are also different. This study focuses on generation Y and generation Z, who use digital media on Twitter and Instagram. Referring to McCrindle and Wolfinger (2010), generation Y is the one born in 1980 – 1994. According to Lyons (Putra, 2010), generation Y is a generation known as the millennial generation who are familiar with early generations and use a lot of communication technology. The characteristics of generation Y are also considered more open than previous generations, including political and economic views, which allows this generation Y to pay attention to the changes around it

Meanwhile, generation Z was born in 1996-2010, known as the digital generation. Z generation was born in the era of technological development and innovation, so it directly makes generation Z rely on technology in their activities (Wolfinger, 2017). According to Spears (2015), generation Z has characteristics that are more familiar with technology, including consuming every information and news from digital media, because it was born where the presence of the internet always accompanies.

Digital media is used as a place for generation z to share information and provide comments and opinions on media accounts. In each generation, of course, the media used is changing. So, between generations, there is no equal adaptation in media technology (Starubhaar, Larose, and Daevenport, 2010). Generations Y and Z are the generations considered to have relied on technology, including the use of digital media, because the year of its birth has begun to enter the era of communication technology. The generation close to this technology makes generations Y and Z tend to be active in interacting in the digital space, so looking at these characteristics, this research focuses on generation Y and generation Z, who build democracy and free speech in the digital space.

#### *Hoaxes on Socia Media*

Hoaxes have the meaning of being falsified information. They are carried out in various ways, such as by distorting facts or obscuring information so that the actual message cannot be received (Nursahid et al., 2019). Hoaxes in Indonesia grew rapidly during the 2019 elections, even though hoaxes existed far before that time. The Indonesian public recognizes hoaxes as untrue, inaccurate, and unverified information. Hoaxes can be in the form of writings, photos, and videos. During the 2019 elections, Indonesian citizens received and disseminated much back-and-forth information. Information is spread massively both online and offline. The information overload condition causes the recipient of the message to be unable to analyze the truth or accuracy of the message (Sitepu, Harahap & Trimurni, 2021).

According to DailySocial.id, social media is Indonesia's most widespread and effective hoax-spreading platform. The results of their survey found that 53.25% of respondents said they often received hoaxes, and 81.25% said they received hoaxes through WhatsApp and Instagram (Dailysocial.id, 2018). In addition, more time spent using social media is also considered a factor influencing the increasing spread of hoaxes (Wibowo, Rahmawan & Maryani, 2019). The longer someone communicates on a digital platform, the more likely they will spread a hoax.

Taylor Nelson Sofres (Kantar TNS) - one of research company, concluded that 61% of digital platform consumers in Indonesia are

happy to trust the information they obtain. They also appeared to more readily accept the online content provided. This is one of the causes of hoax news that easily spread in Indonesia (Juditha, 2018).

In communication, not all information is accurate. Some of the factors that influence the occurrence of hoaxes include (Meinarni & Iswara, 2018): (1) Ideology. Ideology is those theories that are not oriented to the truth but in the interests of the initiator. Ideology is also seen as a means by which a particular class or social group has the power to legitimize its power. In this case, hoaxes can be used as a medium of spreading ideology (Asshiddiqie, 2006); (2) Political affiliation/interest. Political interests are one of the promising "commodities" for hoax proponents. Through hoaxes, political propaganda can be carried out efficiently, effectively, and massively; (3) Economy. Nowadays, the mass media tends to focus on the economic side. Ideology becomes the entrance to analyzing how mass media is produced and reproduced. It is widely found that the message that was circulating and was a hoax turned out to be nothing more than a publicity maneuver; (4) Popularity. Popularity as a motive for spreading hoaxes is also widely carried out in the context of politics or celebrities. As many politicians do when political elections draw nearer, we often know as 'imaging'.

### **Material and Methodology**

The method used in this study is conducted by analyzing the content of statistical networks using Social Network Analysis (SNA). Big data processing is carried out using data crawling tools through Analytics Astramaya.id, which is quantitative. To find and identify the spread of conversations about democracy, free speech, and the COVID-19 pandemic carried out by the public on Twitter, the Social Network Analysis method is used to analyze patterns of information distribution. SNA is a method that is increasingly being used in social media and has been used in areas such as psychology, health, business organization and electronic communication. It is widely used to identify individuals, teams, and units that have a central role in communication network. It can also be used to indicate break points, seals, base holes, as well as individuals, teams and units and also strengthen the effectiveness

and efficiency of formal communication channels (Serat, 2017).

In this case, the SNA is used to identify and search for groups or individuals that are the center of the network and reveal information hidden from more complex networks. SNA research was also conducted to see the level of perception of word groups based on the number of words typed in tweets and sorted into several categories (Sucipto, 2016). In addition, it can also be used to assess and improve communication collaboration, as well as to find alternative actors who can play a role as solutions in communication collaboration (Latupeirrisa, 2019).

The keywords used in this big data are "infodemic covid-19", "Democracy and Freedom of expression". The conversations that take place were specifically those in Indonesia and those who spoke Indonesian. Conversations are to be tracked in July – September 2021 (three months). The analysis will be carried out after data are found in terms of the number of conversations (mentions), engagement, sentiment (positive, negative and neutral), potential achievements (potential reach), as well as top 10 influencers/gate keepers, and networking degree.

### **Result and Discussion**

After the two keyword groups "infodemic Covid-19" and "Democracy and Freedom of Expression" were input into the machine for scrawling data on Twitter, the number of mentions was finally found. In discussion about Covid-19 infodemics, there were a total of 18,890 mentions, while for issues of democracy and freedom of expression that related to pandemic issues, there were 516,151. It seems clear that the issue of democracy and freedom of expression was discussed more by Twitter users in those three months (July-September 2021) because on August 17, Indonesia is celebrating its Independence Day, so the topics on "infodemic Covid-19" and "Democracy and Freedom of Expression" are assumed to be high. However, interestingly, the data shows that the trend of talks seems to be similar, from July to September, there have been several conversations with the two issues that have decreased in trend, as can be seen in the Table 1 below.

**Table 1.** Total Data Monthly About Infodemic Covid-19; Democracy and Freedom of Expression

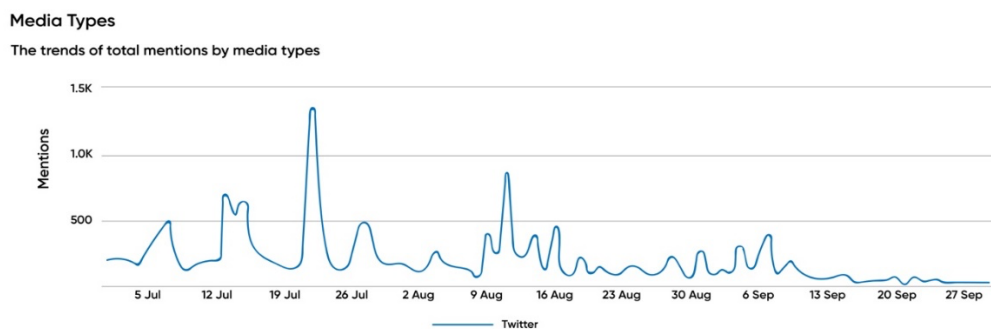
Month	Infodemic Covid-19	Democracy and Freedom of Expression
July 2021	9.740	234.554
August 2021	6.224	143.253
September 2021	2.926	137.854
<b>Total Data</b>	<b>18.890</b>	<b>516.151</b>

Source: Data processed by researcher

The increasing number of conversations from month to month shows how much the issue is getting more interesting to discuss. According to Pendegrass (2015), any issue related to politics tends to last for quite a long time, especially when the problems that occur

in society have not been resolved in a short time.

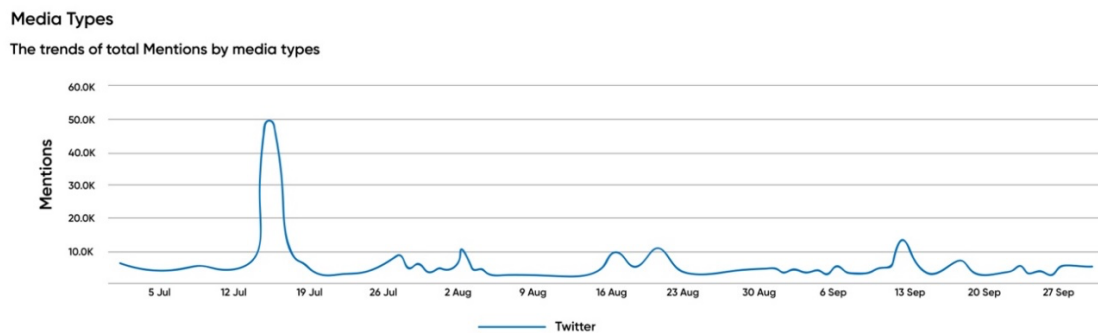
Each conversation's trend movements are interesting to see because more details will look up and down, fluctuating. We can see this in the following chart.



**Figure 1.** The trends of total mentions on Infodemic Covid-19 July-September 2021

Related to the soaring conversation about the Covid-19 infodemic, it increased sharply on July 20, 2021, due to distorted information about the Covid-19 variant. At that time, the

Covid-19 Delta variant was on a sharp increase, but WHO had also informed the possibility of the presence of other new variants.

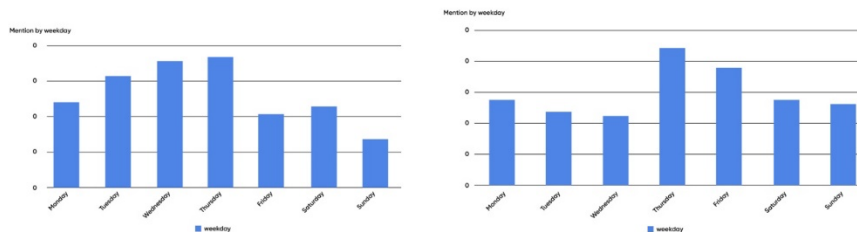


**Figure 2.** The trends of total mention on Democracy and Freedom of Expression July-September 2021

On the issue of democracy and freedom of opinion, we can see it in Figure 2 that the position of the discussion is relatively high on July 15, 2021, because on that day, there is a commemoration of Democracy Day in Turkey, which is indirectly also discussed by the people in Indonesia. Moreover, there is a note that the number of Covid-19 sufferers in Jakarta increased significantly on that date. So democracy and freedom of expression in the pandemic context are still relevant in this case. However, studying sentiment on Twitter becomes significant because by knowing this

sentiment, we can predict the situation that will happen next. So that decision-makers can be more precise in making decisions on a situation that will occur (Bose, Dey, Roy, & Sarddar, 2019).

Another unique data that can be studied is that on each issue of conversation on Twitter, there seems to be a pattern that Thursday is the day when most people make mentions, tweets, and retweets; this can be seen in both issues, which have the same pattern in the following graphic data:

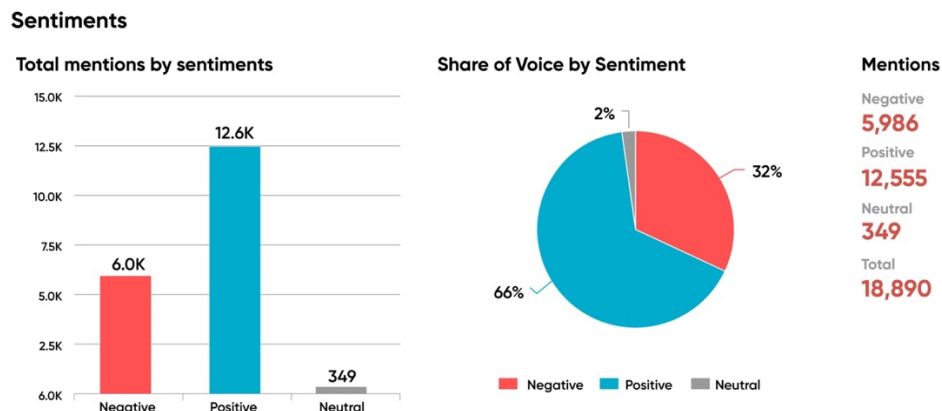


**Figure 3.** Mentions by weekday about Infodemic Covid-19, Democracy and Freedom of Expression

The Figure 3 above shows that Thursday is the peak of mention time but it is different from the lowest mention side. On the Covid 19 infodemic issue, Sunday is the lowest mention time. On the other hand, the lowest point is Wednesday regarding democratization and freedom of expression in the pandemic context, a day ahead of its highest peak. The peak of the aforementioned issue is very diverse; some reach their peak in 1 day, five

days, or even in months, especially if the issue is related to the interests of the general public (Jalali, Sherbino, Frank, & Sutherland, 2015). This situation is also the actual case for both issues being studied. Thus, the similarity of the days was the peak period of mention; although it became interesting to study, it could be just a coincidence.

Meanwhile, if we discuss sentiment on each of those issues, see in the Figure 4 below.



**Figure 4.** Sentiment Infodemic Covid-19 July-September 2021

Sentiment on the Covid-19 infodemic issue showed positive sentiments had the highest percentage of mentions at 66% with 12,555 mentions, negative sentiments at 32% with 5,986 mentions, and neutral sentiments at

2% with 349 mentions. From this, we can see that the general public is starting to realize how infodemic Covid-19 needs to be a common concern and watched out.

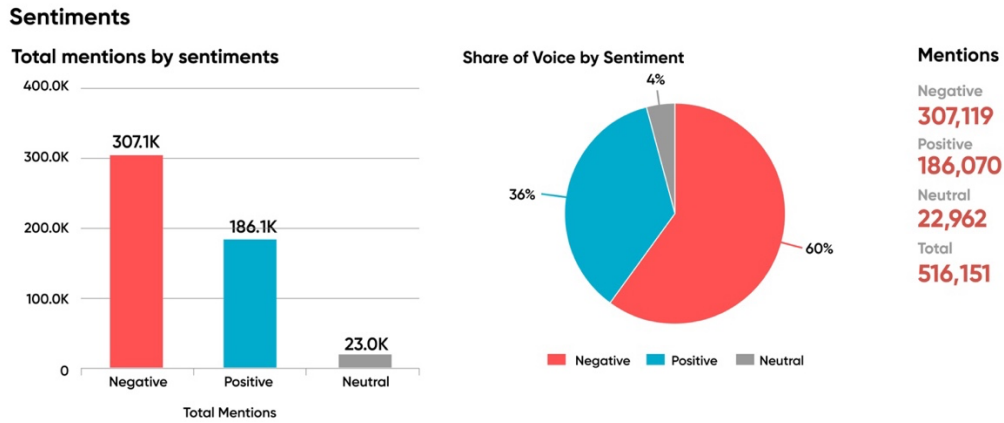


Figure 5. Sentiment Democracy and Freedom of Expression July-September 2021

Meanwhile, on the issue of democracy and freedom of expression, it can be seen that negative sentiments had the highest percentage of mentions at 60% with 307,119 mentions, positive sentiments at 36%, with 186,070 mentions, and neutral sentiments at 4% with 22,962 mentions. From this, we can see that the general public continues to judge democracy and freedom of expression in the issue of the Covid-19 pandemic. They have not fully felt it. Dissent and arguments are still limited by the possibility of legal sanctions from the authorities. Understanding the meaning of democracy, freedom of expression, and producing positive content, it is hoped that the

younger generation will be able to fight the gluts of hoax information in online media.

Another thing that is also unique is that we can see the peak of the discussion of the issue judging by the hour, including the type of sentiment, whether positive, negative, or neutral. On the infodemic issue of Covid-19, the average peak occurs at 10 o'clock or 12 am. Meanwhile, the discussion on democracy and freedom of expression more varies from 2-3 am and 3-4 pm. This situation is in line with the calculation of the intensity of the conversation, which is indeed more dominated by issues of democracy and freedom of expression than the infodemic discussion of Covid-19. It can be seen in Figure 6.



Figure 6. Mentions by hours about Infodemic Covid-19, Democracy and Freedom of Expression

Regarding how young people are involved in the Covid-19 infodemic issue, ten accounts from Indonesia have more retweets and replies than other accounts in Indonesia (see table 2). Although when viewed from the

order of engagement, these 9 accounts are in the order of 100 with higher engagement, but only one account made it to the top 10. Then we examine the ten accounts in more depth, including the owner's whereabouts.

**Table 2.** Profile Top 10 Tweepers for Infodemic Covid-19 issue

No	Name / Username	Retweet	Reply + RT	Followers
1	Mbupch	1394	53	2.881
2	1802_Kimmi	22	41	33.878
3	Myozhyme	12	13	12.360
4	anggita_lung	16	16	1.988
5	DianaAurora96	11	11	2.392
6	efi_sh	11	11	1.060
7	Suaramuda98	11	11	3.088
8	Febiautiy	11	11	1.671
9	Bangcan12	2	2	153
10	Rain60D	4	4	673

Source: Data processed by researcher

The account @mbupch, although she had relatively few followers, many have tweeted her post stating: "It has been from the beginning of the pandemic that once I took care of the provincial Covid data, that is where I have no confidence in the country. Every recap of the data and hearing the data announced my response, "huh? how come?" there, I have also implemented that life in Indonesia during the pandemic is the survival of the fittest." This account created a thread related to the infodemic-19 issue. A thread on Twitter is a series of Tweets connected by someone. The person whom tweets can provide additional context, updates, or points with a thread by linking multiple Tweets together. This account is in the top 10 accounts with high scores on the issue of the Covid-19 pandemic.

Both the @1802\_Kimmi Twitter and @myozhyme accounts tend to be "buzzers." There is no transparent background. However,

all the tweets and retweets are closely related to various political issues in Indonesia. Then on @anggita\_lung account, when this research was conducted, his account was suspended by Twitter. The account @DianaAurora96, does not indicate the profile of the account owner. . However, most of the links he tweeted and retweeted were affiliated with Indonesia's Ministry of Communications and Information.

Meanwhile, @efi\_sh is an account owned by Efi Sri Handayani, an activist. Efi who is an artist with the medium of comics and watercolor sketches was involved in movements that fight for human rights, such as The Kamisan Action, social justice and freedom of expression, such as Gema Demokrasi, and the movement along with farmers and residents of Kendeng to protest against the construction of a cement factory. Although she did not have a formal position in these movements, she was actively involved in



determining the movement's strategy using her artwork. She is the Space Manager of Feminist Reading, Hacking, and Making Space, owned by PurpleCode Collective, Jakarta. @efi\_sh, on her Twitter, discussed various social, political, and cultural issues related to Indonesia.

Then the account @Suaramuda98 does not show any clarity on the background of the account owner. It is likely that this account is also a "buzzer," as the account owner appeared to be active only in 2021 in the discussion of the Covid-19 vaccine. In addition, he shared many of the affiliate links from the Indonesian Ministry of Communication and Information. Even it was not until September 2022 that this account has been only twice retweeted, not tweeted at all. @Febiautiy, admittedly it had been suspended by Twitter.

For the @Bangcan12 account, although we can trace the name of the owner, Muhammad Hasan, his background is not known. However, until this research was carried out, the account owner appeared to be active in commenting on various issues in Indonesia. He is very active and random on various issues that he twitted and retweeted. The account @Rain60D is no longer found on Twitter. It was likely deleted by the account owner.

From the above situation, it seems clear that two accounts only precede the involvement of young people (Gen Z) in the infodemic-19 issues. The two accounts, namely @mbupeh and @efi\_sh, are pretty open and dare to show their different views on various parties that they think to deserve criticism. Meanwhile, two of the other eight accounts have been suspended on Twitter, and the other six have shown patterns of communication and engagement like a "buzzer."

Meanwhile, when we discussed the issue of Democracy and Freedom of Expression, none of the young people of Generation Z entered the conversation as gatekeepers. There were so many accounts from Malaysia, which in July-September 2021, dominated the conversation on twitter regarding the issue of democracy. Media Twitter accounts such as @korantempo and @tirtoID have been covered several times. Several other accounts of Indonesian politicians were also present, such as @rizalramli (former Indonesian minister), @emilsalim2010 (former Indonesian minister), @PutraWadapi (Papuan figure), @febridiansyah (former KPK spokesperson),

@GeiszChalifah (Commissioner of PT. Jaya Ancol Development (Tbk)). In addition, in the top 100 in this discussion, there are @felixsiauw account that Twitter has suspended, and @indomyfess account automated by @laporidm (boot).

## Conclusions

Based on the results of the research referred to above, we come up with several conclusions.. The two issues studied, namely Covid-19 Infodemic and Democracy and Freedom of Expression, are pretty far away from the young people's interests and discussion, especially generation Z. There is no significant engagement of young people in the conversation.

On the Covid-19 Infodemic issue, there are only two Gen Z people who can be the gatekeepers of their peers. The first is Amelia with @mbupeh account and the second is Efi Sri Handayani with @efi\_sh account. Meanwhile, on the Democracy and Freedom of Expression issue, there are absolutely no young Indonesians who are in the top 100 influencers.

For the Covid-19 Infodemic issue, more "buzzers" are players in Twitter uploads or Twitter. This issue includes two accounts closely related to Indonesia's communications and informatics ministry. Democracy and Freedom of Expression issue in July-September 2021 was dominated by accounts from Malaysia. Meanwhile, accounts from Indonesia are dominated by politicians and the media, plus one bot.

Based on the conclusions of this study, our recommendations are that various parties, including the government, must pay more serious attention to the involvement of young people in the Covid-19 infodemic discussion, as well as the issue of Democracy and Freedom of Expression. This current situation needs to be solved so that young people are not easily exposed to hoaxes on issues related to the Covid pandemic. However, it will be easier to provide understanding to generation Z if they have a process of discussion and interaction with their peers. The use of "buzzers" and Boots could be minimized if all stakeholders work together to stop the spread of hoaxes and fake news.

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