

Truth, Not Fear: Countering False Information in a Conflict

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False information has always been used as a weapon in conflicts. It exacerbates existent tribalism and polarizations in social, political, and cultural milieus. This case study of a civil conflict in Ambon, Indonesia, shows how individuals on both sides of the conflict countered such false information. The study found that having a small but diverse network of friends allowed for crowdsourcing information to counter the falsehoods; information that promulgated hatred was treated with circumspection. A collective identity reenergized the Ambonese's civic spirit, seeding a common goal to keep Ambon safe. The finding suggests that it may be possible to counter false information by promoting interactions with diverse groups, fostering a civic spirit, building a collective identity, and taming individual biases.

Keywords: fake news, false information, conflict, Indonesia, counteracting strategy, collective identity

From days of yore, false information has been used as a weapon in conflict, affecting political, social, and cultural milieus and exacerbating religious and racial polarizations (Zuckerman et al., 2017). It metastasizes online, threatening democratic practices in the United States and elsewhere (Bradshaw & Howard, 2018). Through messaging apps and social media, it has added fuel to the violence in Burma, India, and Sri Lanka (Ghosh, 2018). These repercussions have led governments across the globe to look for counteracting strategies (Taylor, 2016).

Technological and humanistic approaches have been suggested as modes to counteract false information (Lazer et al., 2018). The technological approach focuses attention on using technology such as algorithms developed through machine learning to flag and filter false information (Bakir & McStay, 2018). The humanistic approach focuses on enabling users to assess truth in the information through, for example, training in accessing credible sources for verification; users are expected to be information literate (Cooke, 2017). Both technological and humanistic approaches are necessary to combat false information. The three stakeholders of government, business, and civil society need to collaborate in countering false information (Ang, 2018).

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Such a line of thinking, although strategic, has not underlined individual biases as a fundamental reason that enables false information to spread. Individuals share information, regardless of quality, to echo their beliefs, values, and worldviews (Fetzer, 2004). The biases exploit the gullibility of individuals to disseminate false information. Even if the technology limits the spread of false information and directs users to legitimate sources, biased and gullible users may still share the misinformation. The efficacy of information literacy is limited when the biases unconsciously prevent critical thinking (boyd, 2018). It is therefore important to investigate practices by which individuals deal with their biases when false information is prevalent while critical decisions need to be made.

Literature

Biases are one of the main reasons people shun facts and share false information (Bednar & Welch, 2008). Biases stem from the norms, beliefs, and values that build the worldviews on which individuals base their judgments about whether information is relevant (Gorman & Gorman, 2017). The utility of information and its potential to be shared are linked to the existent biases that govern interactions with others (Nickerson, 1998). In this sense, information is circulated regardless of quality and truth because it resonates with the disseminators' worldviews and coheres with their connections within their small world (Mercier & Sperber, 2017).

A small world is a world where everybody knows everybody (Milgram, 1967). The relationships of individuals in it are strong, providing comfort and social support for each other when needed (Wellman & Wortley, 1990). Individuals share information that is aligned with what they believe to work best for preventing intrusions into and disruptions of their small world. Dissonant information is rare because it can be deemed deviant. Trust in others is high and serves as a way of maintaining conformity (Burt, 2010). Individuals take truth in information for granted because it comes from similar others. A dense network thus arises, allowing information to spread quickly. In a small world, outside information is shunned and inside information is preferred (Chatman, 1999). Thus, tribalism develops. Individuals confirm their biases through sharing information with like-minded others, reinforcing preexistent values and beliefs for one another. Information exchange echoes worldviews rather than challenging them. If others within the small world accept the information as true, then one considers it true (Chua, 2018).

Those living in a small world expect uniformity in views because it is comfortable. Information is produced and distributed through regular interactions in which a set of social rules that contain norms, values, and beliefs are internalized to maintain the existent worldviews (Chatman, 2000). Dissent is taboo because it disrupts the stability of the social rules, which are established to differentiate insiders from outsiders. Insiders use the rules to judge the relevance and utility of information to govern everyday lives. Information is shared so that individuals internalize the rules, institutionalizing certain worldviews that define the way individuals operate within the small world (Berger & Luckmann, 1966). Insiders tend to believe that their views are more salient, a zero-sum game in which everyone thinks either "you are with us or them." Divergent views are threats to togetherness. Crossing to the outside world is shunned because doing so violates the rules. In an extremely close-knit world, such an action warrants sanctions (Merton, 1972). Living in a small world is akin to living within a pack.

False Information in Violent Conflicts

Those living in conflict situations tend to want to live in a small world, where individuals uphold insider values that outsiders deem to be irrelevant. Adversarial interactions with the "outside" other are prevalent as the other is seen as capable of putting one at a disadvantage. False information in conflicts exacerbates such precarious relationships (Fujii, 2010), creates ambiguity and uncertainty in public (Dalziel, 2013), and promotes hatred for the other (Bass, 2008). Sharing information that offers adversaries the opportunity to understand each other's point of view in fact helps stimulate dialogues to find common grounds (Rohman & Pang, 2015).

Tribalism is inevitable in violent conflicts. One group plays the victim while portraying the other as perpetrator. Such a defense and offense narrative grows and persists even after the conflicts have ended (Moser & McIlwaine, 2001). Information is shared based on the adversaries' worldviews and to invalidate those adversaries. The main reason for sharing is to reinforce existent beliefs, strengthen group cohesiveness, and discredit everything that the opponent claims to be true. Even when aware of its falsity, individuals forward information to alert others to potential risks and threats that they can bring to their group. Facts that might help reconcile the conflict are ignored because individuals view them as unaligned with their worldviews or as disadvantageous. Any form of information that propagates ambiguity and uncertainty in such a precarious time can mislead the adversaries to enter into wars and cultural clashes (Huntington, 1996).

Information circulating within a group reflects the understanding of truth that is drawn from a collective belief enforced through day-to-day interactions (Putnam & Campbell, 2010). Everything coming from foes is wrong; everything coming from friends is true. Foes will always be a threat because of a preconception that they are capable of harming the group to which one belongs. Friends, on the other hand, are trustworthy people with similar values and beliefs, adhering to the applicable norms that govern within-group interactions. Information from friends mirrors a common worldview that tightly ties one with another. Fear of the other drives individuals to develop adversarial narratives to maintain group sentiments (Adetown, 2005).

The presence of new media and the Internet has made it easier to amplify worldviews during violent times. Mobile phones, for example, have been pointed out as having the potential to escalate violence by facilitating ways of organizing and sharing grievances (Bailard, 2015; Dafoe & Lyall, 2015), and social media platforms can accelerate the spread of hateful content (Kaur et al., 2018). In a divided society, the Internet accelerates the spread of hatred and fear of the other and it compels users to live within bubbles (Sunstein, 2017). Bots and other propaganda machines are used to maliciously shape divisive opinions (Howard, Woolley, & Calo, 2018). Different small worlds collide as the common ground essential for reconciling competing worldviews appears distant (Burnett, 2009). Social harmony is at stake, and stitching frayed social fabric after violent conflicts can take decades (Hall-Cathala, 1990). New media and the Internet are in part complicit in putting civic spirit in peril by allowing individual biases to be exploited irresponsibly (Persily, 2018).

With the above discussion in mind, it would be helpful to locate strategies that have successfully countered the spread of false information during conflicts and that might be applied to other contexts, as there is a global concern that false information threatens social harmony (Lazer et al., 2018). In particular, in this study, we asked two related questions: (1) How do individuals deal with their biases when false information

circulates in times of violence? (2) To what extent does such an experience guide individuals to respond to false information spread in a postviolent phase?

A "good" case to answer the questions would be one in which individuals have dealt with their biases when making decisions based on false information that could mean a risk to their lives. After having made decisions in such a critical situation, individuals realize that future information must be treated with wariness. The decision to share information stems from an assessment of the biases and the risk of sharing or not sharing. In other words, the case should allow for extracting lessons that individuals learned from dealing with their biases during turbulent times. The Ambonese violent conflict fits this context.

Context

The modern conflict in Ambon spanned from 1999 to 2012. It receded in 2005 and then revived in a series of major violent events from 2011 to 2012 (Braithwaite, Braithwaite, Cookson, & Dunn, 2010). It was rooted in the segregation and prejudice that the colonial Dutch sowed for economic gain in the 16th-century regional spice trade (Sholeh, 2013). The economic disparity between native Ambon and immigrants from neighboring cities also colored the conflict. Local and national politics further muddied the complexity. In 1999, Indonesia experienced a severe financial crisis that led to a regime change. All over Indonesia, from the main island of Java to Sulawesi to Maluku and Papua in the farthest east, violence broke out, apparently as elites played to sway public attention from the national turmoil (van Klinken, 2007). In Ambon alone, more than 5,000 were killed and 10,000 were displaced by the conflict (BBC, 2011).

During the conflict, rumors and misinformation propagating hatred for another community spread via pamphlets, bulletins, and brochures (Bubandt, 2008). The media depicted the conflict as a clash of Islam and Christianity (Al Qurtuby, 2016). The reports were split by religious supporters and the journalists' abilities to cross borders between Muslim and Christian areas. The result was that journalists of one faith could not report on incidents that occurred in a location of a differing faith. This led to biased, incomplete, and inaccurate reports as little balanced information could be gathered from both sides (Tunny, 2010). Websites were used to agitate religious followers (Brauchler, 2003); fax machines and radio broadcasting were deployed as tools to raise funds and religious sentiments (Lim, 2005). The Ambonese believed that the rumors were purveyed by "conflict provocateurs," street criminals who incited quarrels on religious issues and spread hateful messages on social media and mobile phones (International Crisis Group, 2012).

At the time of this writing, 2018, Ambon had entered a postconflict phase. Together with socioeconomic deprivations, neighborhoods and public places were divided based on the religion of the residents (Ansori et al., 2014). False information was still a threat that could jeopardize the peace in Ambon as the relationship between the two religious communities was still precarious. In response to such a circumstance, initiatives to reweave broken social fabrics were evident in the everyday interactions in public places (Putra, 2018), in the revitalizations of local values and traditions (Duncan, 2009), and in the efforts to encourage youngsters to participate in work that promoted collaboration, creativity, and aspiration to rebuild postconflict Ambon (*Tribun Maluku*, 2015).

Method

This research is based on data collected through fieldwork in Ambon from February to March 2015, in June 2016, and from December 2016 to January 2017. Formal and conversational interviews were carried out across these visits. A total of 54 informants (46 men, 35 Christians, 16 Muslims, and three Catholics) participated in audio-recorded interviews. Their average age was 34 years. In addition, we interviewed more than 80 informants conversationally. They were asked to share their hopes and interpretations of past and present experiences of living in violence and to recall their ways of dealing with biases and false information that circulated at that time (Flanagan, 1954). The shortest interview was 15 minutes, and the longest was four hours; most lasted between one and two hours. The interviews were conducted in Bahasa Indonesia with a substantial use of Malay-Ambon. The first author is competent in both languages.

To understand Ambonese everyday lives, we observed activity at public places such as coffeehouses, traditional markets, street food vendors, a public library, places of worship, and community and religious events (Spradley, 1980). The first author was occasionally invited to visit houses of the informants, allowing for informal interactions with their family members and relatives, who often lived in the same compound. The first author revealed his identity as a researcher, a Javanese, and a Muslim when asked about occupation, race, and religion, respectively. These three points were commonly asked to get an understanding of things that could be conversed with one another. The conversations moved from one topic to another fluidly after the second or third meeting.

Insights from the interviews were cross-checked with field notes taken during observation. If clarification was needed, relevant informants were contacted via messaging apps and phone calls. NVivo 10 was used in the analysis. Using the proposed research questions as a guide, we categorized all data into themes that reflected the informants' experiences while we iteratively consulted literature and the experience gained during fieldwork (Charmaz, 2006). The literature provided a theoretical sensitivity, and the experience ensured that the themes that emerged throughout analysis were credible to explain the situations that the informants had been through (Clarke, 2005).

Because the conflict had passed more than five years earlier, several informants reported being unable to recall their experiences, resulting in a mix of factual experiences and their interpretations. In some cases, details of facts and names involved in the experiences were missing. To overcome this limitation, related informants shared some details to help recollect the experiences. In addition, the initial findings were shared with two key informants for feedback (Heller, 1969).

Findings

Crowdsourcing Information

During the conflict, the Ambonese crowdsourced information from relatives and friends from the other religious community to deal with their biases. The information helped clarify rumors that potentially risked their lives. Cross-checking with the other religious community balanced the information received

within one's own community, minimizing the tendency to share information that echoed biases toward the other. Mas shared his experience:

A rumor that there was a burning in the downtown circulated. If I am not mistaken it was in a Sunday morning, after we went to the church. I was still in my church shirt, standing by my laptop and holding my phone tightly. Because there were some families at the church who wanted to go back home (in the downtown), I messaged Al [Muslim] and some other friends [Christians] regarding the rumor. It turned out the fire was coming from a stove explosion that burned a nearby store [not related to any violent event]. The situation was indeed safe. (Mas, 32, Christian)

Mas pointed out that biased information circulated within his circle when the rumor spread. His Christian friends said that the burning was related to religious violence. They recalled past violent events to buttress their views toward the current event. One shared how some Muslims attacked their relatives and burned down their houses, while some others fled the village for safety. Negative sentiments toward Muslims developed as everyone in the circle connected the rumor with past events and violence that might ensue following the burning. Their common past reinforced existent trauma and fear, expediting the spread of the rumor as no one seemed to be interested in finding the truth.

Concerns grew over the escalation of the burning to violence in upper Ambon, where the church was located. Many Christians were worried for their families downtown: What if the Muslims burned their neighborhood and took their valuables? They wanted to go downtown to help. Doing so, however, would have been risky if indeed there was a fire linked to religious violence because they had to pass through the boundary between Christian and Muslim areas. Most information Mas received from other Christians in such an uncertain time tended to echo fear of attack rather than providing information on what truly happened. They were inclined to remain in the church for protection until the cause of the burning was clear.

Mas' comment also shows the benefit of having a diverse group of friends. The fact that he had friends from both religious communities allowed him to obtain information from both sides, helping him make decisions to ensure safety. To minimize biased information from within, he looked for information from a circle of friends living in both areas, taking the opportunity to harness accurate information from both groups to dispel the rumor that wildly spread within their respective religious communities. Information circulating within his circle was compared with that received from the other circle, resulting in a balanced view of the burning. Mas was able to check whether the rumor was true by calling a trustworthy friend (Al), who lived near downtown.

The trust between Mas and Al developed as both learned about each other's work, interests, and worldviews. Al was known as capable of connecting people from both communities through common activities. He had been involved in facilitating interreligious interactions and had actively shared information that encouraged everyone to clarify information when ambiguity and uncertainty were rife. With this consideration in mind, Mas trusted Al as a source to moderate biased information circulating within Christian circles. Both Mas and Al found common ground in the shared belief that the violence in Ambon was not inherent in the two religious communities' adversarial relationship, but was provoked by conflict

provocateurs. Both viewed information sharing across religious communities as offering the potential to defuse violence.

The information that Al shared helped Mas decide how to respond to the rumor, based on the accuracy of the rumor and its probable consequences instead of the fear of Muslims that others within his circle echoed. He realized that in times of violence both religious communities tended to believe information from within, resulting in the spread of biased information that inflicted hatred, prejudice, and distrust. Finding out that the other community also refused to believe in the rumor made it feasible to share with others within his circle that the situation that day was safe, despite a wave of panic downtown. Mas believed that having a trusted friend from the other community was beneficial when the need to verify rumors and counteract the biases emerged. He deemed that this kind of relationship was vital to mitigate the risk of spreading false information during the conflict.

Treating Information With Prudence

After the conflict ended, the Ambonese treated information with prudence. They realized that they had fallen for false information purveyed by the conflict provocateurs, resulting in almost a decade of violence that had frayed the social fabric. The Ambonese saw for themselves that sharing false information would only exacerbate the two religious communities' precarious relationship. Although the violence had subsided for more than five years (at the time of this writing), the conflict provocateurs could always have ways to disrupt peace by spreading false information through various platforms. Ros, who had witnessed the conflict from the beginning, said,

We should be more careful with information. It could be true or false. . . . Violent conflicts often occurred because of mobile phones. People realized that the conflicts would not happen again because they now know when suspicious things appear. However, the [conflict] provocateurs can always use new methods [to provoke violence]. (Ros, 52, Christian)

Ros pointed out that the Ambonese had learned to deal with false information after witnessing how it spread rapidly via mobile phones, misleading one community to fight the other. As Ambon entered a postconflict phase, peace was maintained by treating any SMS messages that had the potential to elicit violence on the other community with prudence. Mobile phones, as well as social media platforms, had expedited the spread of false information as much as small talks at motor bike taxi stations and coffeehouses had. Preventing it from metastasizing was crucial to mitigate potential violence.

When uncertain about the veracity of a message, the Ambonese shared it within their circle of family, friends, and relatives. An SMS from an unknown source containing unverified information was likely to be shared with relatives, families, and friends to check that they had also received it. In this circumstance, forwarding the SMS was to alert each other that they needed to be vigilant because efforts to provoke violence remained. Macy, a ticketing lady at the Gong Perdamaian (Peace Gong), said,

I did not truly bother [with any rumor], [because I] did not want to get a headache. I only looked around and listened. If it [an incident] actually happened, then I believed it [the rumor]. Otherwise, I did my routine as usual. (Macy, 33, Christian)

During the conflict, Macy saw that many Ambonese tended to believe rumors that could be determined to be untrue. Hence, violent events escalated easily as the rumors agitated members of both religious communities. Such an experience shaped the way she dealt with unverified information after the conflict ended. Some of her relatives forwarded an SMS that the street from Salobar, where she lived, to downtown, where she worked, was blockaded by a mass concentration that could escalate into a riot. Being at the location allowed her to determine that everything in the area was normal when the SMS circulated. She discredited the accuracy of the SMS and told her relatives that there was no mass concentration, who then shared it with other SMS receivers. Macy refused to believe any rumors unless she could verify their veracity first hand.

When certain about the falsity of information and when they knew the sharers, the Ambonese corrected them. Noel, a journalist who was also a peace activist, shared his experience correcting a person who said that religion was the root of regular fights between two villages:

Your focus on differences could lead to something bad. Yes, the two villages have different interpretations about the tradition, but today they celebrated it together. They used to have a small friction, but since last year they have lived in peace. (Noel, 31, Christian)

To Noel, correcting false information immediately was essential to prevent it from metastasizing. Because of competing traditions, Malala and Morella villages were renowned for regular sword fights, which had been falsely reported as related to the religion of the residents. Spreading news that such isolated violent incidents occurred could create panic in other parts of Ambon. In fact, both villages had looked for ways to reconcile their differences. Therefore, Noel deemed that correcting the sharer on the spot was the right thing to do. He admitted that it discomforted both the sharer and himself, but the stake for letting false information spread was higher. He believed that sharing verified information was important to keeping peace in Ambon. The Ambonese's inability to verify information had misled them into war in the past. Ensuring that everyone had the audacity to correct false information sharers protected Ambon from being shaken by the conflict provocateurs.

Reenergizing Civic Spirit

The most substantial lesson that the Ambonese learned to safeguard the peace was how to reenergize their civic spirit to deal with individual biases. Every Ambonese became aware of the repercussions of sharing false information. They lived in deep segregation after the conflict ended, which motivated them to foster contacts with those from the other religious community. The Ambonese believed that this helped dispel false information purveyed by unknown sources while restitching the fraying social fabric in postconflict Ambon. Jim, a former peace activist, reflected,

We happened to become enemies of each other. Because of being poorly informed, we turned into a criminal for one another. Today we won because we had woken up. Fighting for the life of our people is our collective moral responsibility. . . . Our dignity had been taken away and our stories had been twisted upside down [by the conflict provocateurs]. This [awareness] makes us more resilient in finding solutions and getting back up after falling. (Jim, 32, Christian)

Reawakening the civic spirit was a way to deal with individual biases and to counteract false information. It lay within Ambonese values such as *pela* and *gandong*. *Pela* was a treaty made by the ancestors during the tribal wars to avoid harming one another. *Gandong* referred to the belief that the Ambonese came from one set of parents. In addition, there were the community values of *ale rasa beta rasa* (you feel I feel) and *kitorang basudara* (we are all relatives). Both community values taught empathy for other's situations and worldviews when facing differences. These values were revitalized to guide everyday interactions with all Ambonese regardless of religion and race. When false information circulated, the values directed one religious community to cross-check the trustworthiness of the information with the other. Put simply, one community needed to become a keeper for the other to maintain the state of peace in Ambon over time.

"Ambonese identity" arose from the revitalization of values. This identity stemmed from a shared history, culture, and geography. It tightened the Ambonese's interpersonal relationships with one another and grew a collective view that false information was detrimental to the identity. The provocateurs were deemed a common enemy. They would always find ways to twist information, but would be unable to elicit hatred so long as the Ambonese held on to their identity. In other words, the provocateurs would fail in purveying false information as the Ambonese managed to strengthen their civic spirit. Identity became a uniting factor that facilitated communal efforts to maintain trust in each other when dealing with false information.

The Ambonese perceived the provocateurs as outsiders capable of tearing the unity of their society apart, something they had been unaware of previously. As Jim indicated, after the conflict ended, the Ambonese realized that trusting in each other as one community was key to fighting false information that could possibly fracture their unity. A civic spirit that originated from such a realization made it easier to gather and trust crowdsourced information. Because it was provocateurs and not religion that was the cause of the conflict, the Ambonese were able to look inward to their norms, values, and common past and reunite after the conflict had ended. These norms and values embraced the existent differences in the Ambonese society. The common past offered a collective start to counter false information. A Christian maintaining friendship with other Christians could be comfortable, but reaching out to the Muslim community would help strengthen their bond as Ambonese. Long term, it helped dismantle the threat that false information brought to the society as the Ambonese were able to challenge individual biases.

Discussion

Crowdsourcing information and reenergizing civic spirit were ways to deal with individual biases and counteracting false information. Diversity in social networks allowed for crowdsourcing information as within-circle biases were rife. Having a network of Muslim and Christian friends was beneficial when the need to verify information emerged in the 2011 Ambon violence. Seeking information from within was likely

to confirm individual biases, reinforcing prejudice and distrust in the other religious community. Conversely, contacts with the other religious community provided alternatives to cross-check the truth in information, assess its completeness, and add new information. Therefore, the diversity helped reduce the growth of tribalism, providing individuals with the ability to see the benefit of having a diverse network.

Establishing a common ground that is aligned with the norms and values of the networks is strategic to creating diversity in the small world. The Ambonese revitalized existent norms and values to reweave their torn social fabric after the conflict ended. Constructing a collective identity as "the Ambonese" facilitated the ability to see the benefit of living in diversity. Thus, when the provocateurs promulgated false information to elicit hatred for the other religious community, the Ambonese galvanized their collective identity to dispel it. Put in a broader context, the Ambonese created an environment in which everybody could find a collective goal to keep the society united, a move crucial to counteracting false information. It fostered a commonality that individuals could extrapolate when the need appeared to put into perspective their biases on certain subjects or groups.

Living in a small world that is diverse helps neutralize existent biases that lead individuals to share false information. A homogenous small world brings polarization and tribalism because the information shared within the circle is likely to confirm the biases. The information echoes everything that the individuals deem true and aligns with their values, beliefs, and worldviews. On the other hand, a heterogeneous small world offers individuals the opportunity to deconstruct their biases through exchanging polychromatic worldviews, to seek truth in information, and to confront fears of dissonant views.

Living in a small but diverse world also facilitates crowdsourcing information from various individuals that are tied by high trust. False information is shared not to confirm the biases, but to determine truth. The source, content, and consequence of sharing the information widely are assessed collectively. Will the information put life at risk, disrupt the society, or improve the situation? The trust innate in their small world makes it feasible for individuals who believe that there is no intention to harm each other to counter false information. Such trust results from a continuous interaction that mandates a strong consistency between everything that one says to another and their actions. The trust is built on sanction and reciprocity. Violating the trust that operates in this manner is detrimental to countering the biases because the trust established is the norm by which the biases are counteracted and false information is checked.

Worth noting is that the identity of the provocateurs remains unknown at the time of writing this article. The Ambonese were unable to identify from where and who originated false information despite its ramifications to their lives. The provocateurs chose sensitive and controversial issues such as religion and ethnicity to stir up emotions of the two religious communities. At the height of the conflict, the Ambonese tended to share information that contained the issues to echo their biases and to alert others within their circle. Hence, it seemed that everybody was complicit in spreading or allowing false information to spread. This finding can be equated to the way that bots are used to spread false information online. The propaganda machine exploits the vulnerability of humans to search for a sense of belonging and to confirm biases. The machine promulgates divisive issues such as race, religion, and politics to widen social cleavages. The actors

behind the machine understand well that humans are tribal creatures who tend to align themselves with others with shared traits and views.

To date, bots are still difficult to identify, yet their ramifications for social, cultural, and political milieus are vivid. Although the technology and algorithms are capable of identifying false information, in the eyes of nonexperts, nonsavvy users, and nonusers, the efficacy of such a counteracting strategy is limited, considering the method that the purveyors employ to disseminate false information can advance tremendously. False information materializes in many forms and can be purveyed by known sources such as mass media, social media influencers, significant others, and acquaintances, or by unknown entities such as political entrepreneurs, provocateurs, bots, and algorithmic spin machines. The purveyors exploit individuals' tendency to share information that echoes biases. Looking for counteracting strategies that touch on the fundamental reason for false information to be shared is more sustainable than an ad hoc technological strategy.

Countering false information requires that human recipients deal with their biases and be able to identify false information. A deliberate action to seek firsthand information from within and outside social circles allows for taming individual biases that potentially lead to poor decisions based on false information. Checking with others who are in the users' circle can reinforce the biases, as the individuals select what supports their predispositions. In comparison, making contacts with outsiders helps double-check whether the information received contains truth or echoes the biases. Briefly, crowdsourcing information and diversifying networks are necessary conditions for deconstructing individual biases and for preventing false information from metastasizing.

Conclusion

This study shows how individuals living in a violent situation dealt with their biases by crowdsourcing information from inside and outside their networks. Although both types of information seeking aimed to determine the veracity of the message, the internal search assessed the consequences of sharing or not sharing. The external search allowed for double-checking with the other religious community about whether information was credible. Muslims verified information about threats to Christians, and vice versa. Crowdsourcing information from groups with different beliefs and values was essential when uncertainty was high and making decisions based on false information could exacerbate precarious situations.

After the conflict ended, the Ambonese still tended to treat information with prudence and to look for firsthand information. Their experience had taught them how to deal with individual biases and to counteract false information purveyed by the provocateurs, who remained unidentified even though the conflict ended more than a decade ago. The Ambonese reenergized their civic spirit to prevent false information from fraying social fabrics. Norms and values originating from Ambonese culture were revitalized to strengthen social cohesiveness and thus mitigate the risk that false information could bring to the current state of peace. A substantial lesson that can be drawn from this study is the importance of reenergizing civic spirit to counteract false information when individual biases potentially lead to tribalism and polarizations. In Ambon, the civic spirit manifested in looking back on the existent norms and values that help develop a

collective identity as Ambonese. This drove the emergence of communal efforts to search common ground for reconciling preexisting religious and ethnic differences, which could be easily misused by the provocateurs to invoke conflicts. Strengthening the civic spirit has the potential to prevent divisive content and false information from sparking conflicts and shattering the society. The civic spirit teaches individuals to develop and use crowdsourced information from the other to keep biases in check through everyday interactions online and offline.

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