

WhatsApp Groups and Local Democracy in Indonesia: Political Mobilization and Information Circulation in Rural Communities

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Abstract

WhatsApp has become an important communication infrastructure for Indonesian communities, particularly in rural areas where neighborhood, religious, family, and community groups use the platform for everyday communication. During electoral periods, these networks can become important spaces for political information, campaign mobilization, and political discussion. This article examines the role of WhatsApp groups in local democratic participation in rural Indonesia. Using qualitative digital ethnographic analysis, the study explores political messages, community discussions, mobilization practices, and the circulation of political information. The article argues that WhatsApp enables decentralized political communication by connecting citizens through existing social relationships. However, the same interpersonal trust that makes WhatsApp effective for communication may also facilitate the rapid spread of misleading political information. The study proposes a community-based digital literacy framework involving local leaders, civil society organizations, and electoral institutions. The article concludes that WhatsApp should be understood as an important informal political communication infrastructure whose democratic effects depend heavily on the social networks through which information circulates.

[WhatsApp telah menjadi infrastruktur komunikasi penting bagi masyarakat Indonesia, khususnya di daerah pedesaan di mana kelompok lingkungan, keagamaan, keluarga, dan komunitas menggunakan platform ini untuk komunikasi sehari-hari. Selama periode pemilihan, jaringan ini dapat menjadi ruang penting untuk informasi politik, mobilisasi kampanye, dan diskusi politik. Artikel ini mengkaji peran grup WhatsApp dalam partisipasi demokrasi lokal di pedesaan Indonesia. Dengan menggunakan analisis etnografi digital kualitatif, studi ini mengeksplorasi pesan-pesan politik, diskusi masyarakat, praktik mobilisasi, dan peredaran informasi politik. Artikel ini berpendapat bahwa WhatsApp memungkinkan komunikasi politik

yang terdesentralisasi dengan menghubungkan warga melalui hubungan sosial yang ada. Namun, kepercayaan interpersonal yang sama yang membuat WhatsApp efektif untuk komunikasi juga dapat memfasilitasi penyebaran informasi politik yang menyesatkan dengan cepat. Studi ini mengusulkan kerangka kerja literasi digital berbasis komunitas yang melibatkan pemimpin lokal, organisasi masyarakat sipil, dan lembaga pemilihan. Artikel ini menyimpulkan bahwa WhatsApp harus dipahami sebagai infrastruktur komunikasi politik informal yang penting, yang efek demokrasinya sangat bergantung pada jaringan sosial tempat informasi beredar.]

Keywords: WhatsApp, rural communities, political communication, local democracy, Indonesia

Introduction

The expansion of digital communication has altered the institutional and social environments through which citizens encounter political information and participate in democratic processes. Political communication is no longer concentrated within political parties, mass media, campaign events, and formal governmental institutions. Instead, political messages increasingly circulate through interpersonal networks in which citizens themselves become distributors, interpreters, and evaluators of political information. This transformation is particularly important in Indonesia, where social relationships remain central to political mobilization and public communication. Social media has contributed to the emergence of participatory forms of political communication since the Reform Era, while simultaneously creating new possibilities for polarization and misinformation (Septiani 2019). The significance of digital communication in Indonesia therefore cannot be assessed solely through the visibility of political discourse on open platforms. Attention must also be directed toward semi-private environments in which political information moves through existing relationships of family, neighborhood, religious affiliation, and community membership.

WhatsApp represents an especially important case because its communicative structure differs from that of highly visible platforms such as Facebook, Instagram, TikTok, or X. WhatsApp groups are organized around pre-existing social relationships and typically involve participants who have some degree of interpersonal familiarity. The platform therefore combines digital connectivity with relational trust. Gil de Zúñiga, Ardiñol-Abreu, and Casero-Ripollés (2021) demonstrate that WhatsApp political discussion can contribute to activism and other forms of political participation, while Vermeer et al. (2021) show that interpersonal political discussion through WhatsApp can generate political learning and affective responses. These findings indicate that political communication

through messaging applications is not merely an extension of public social media. Its political effects emerge through repeated interpersonal interaction, where political information becomes embedded within everyday social relations. This relational character is especially relevant to rural communities, where social proximity can influence both information credibility and political behavior.

The Indonesian literature provides evidence that WhatsApp has become integrated into local communication infrastructures. Damanik (2018), examining first-time voters in Medan during the 2018 North Sumatra gubernatorial election, found that WhatsApp was used as a space for political discussion and participation. Bafadhal (2017), meanwhile, analyzed a WhatsApp religious study group during the 2017 Jakarta gubernatorial election and demonstrated that news circulation within a relatively homogeneous group could produce uncertainty and anxiety while simultaneously reinforcing social order through interaction. At the village level, Himpong, Waleleng, and Warouw (2023) found that WhatsApp groups facilitated communication between government and citizens in Sinisir Village, South Minahasa. These studies suggest that WhatsApp should be examined as part of a broader transformation in local communication rather than simply as a technological application. Its political importance derives from its integration into relationships that already structure everyday community life.

The concept of the public sphere provides an initial theoretical framework for understanding this transformation, although WhatsApp requires a more differentiated interpretation than the classical model of an open public arena. Habermas's conception of the public sphere emphasizes spaces in which citizens can exchange arguments and form public opinion independently of state and market domination. Yet WhatsApp groups are usually bounded, selective, and relational. They therefore do not constitute a single public sphere but a constellation of smaller communicative spaces. Damanik (2018) applied the public sphere perspective to WhatsApp political discussion among first-time voters, suggesting that digital communication can facilitate political awareness and participation. The present article extends this perspective by arguing that rural WhatsApp groups are better conceptualized as localized micro-publics. Their democratic significance depends on who belongs to the group, who controls participation, which norms regulate discussion, and how information moves between digital interaction and face-to-face community life.

Social capital theory offers another important lens because rural WhatsApp groups are embedded within networks of interpersonal trust. Putnam (2000) distinguishes between bonding and bridging forms of social capital, a distinction that is particularly useful for examining political communication in community groups. Bonding social capital can strengthen solidarity among people who share identities, interests, or social backgrounds, whereas bridging social capital connects individuals across social boundaries. WhatsApp groups can reinforce both forms. A neighborhood group may strengthen local solidarity, while a village-wide group can connect residents with village officials, community organizations, religious

leaders, and other institutions. However, strong bonding ties can also reduce exposure to alternative perspectives. Kuru et al. (2023) demonstrate that smaller, closer, and more homogeneous WhatsApp groups tend to exhibit stronger trust, while trust influences perceptions of misinformation and social correction. Trust is therefore simultaneously a democratic resource and an epistemic vulnerability.

Political mobilization is another dimension that distinguishes WhatsApp from conventional community communication. Political mobilization requires not only the dissemination of information but also the activation of social relationships. Messages about campaign meetings, candidate visits, voting procedures, transportation, community gatherings, or political events can move quickly through groups because recipients already recognize the people transmitting them. This creates a relational form of mobilization in which political action is facilitated through interpersonal credibility. Milan and Barbosa (2020) describe WhatsApp as a discursive opportunity structure that can support new forms of digital activism, while Gil de Zúñiga, Ardivol-Abreu, and Casero-Ripollés (2021) demonstrate that political discussion through WhatsApp is connected to political activism. In rural Indonesia, such dynamics may be particularly consequential because digital communication does not replace community organization but potentially increases the speed and continuity of existing mobilization networks.

The political economy of WhatsApp communication also deserves attention because seemingly organic political discussion may be strategically produced. Baulch, Matamoros-Fernández, and Suwana (2024) demonstrate that during Indonesia's 2019 presidential election, political elites used meme production and WhatsApp infrastructure to create forms of political persuasion resembling astroturfing. This finding complicates the assumption that WhatsApp groups represent purely bottom-up political communication. Content appearing to originate from ordinary citizens may sometimes be connected to organized campaign networks. The distinction between citizen communication and campaign communication consequently becomes difficult to maintain within semi-private environments. In rural settings, this issue may be amplified because political messages transmitted by respected local actors can acquire credibility independently of their original source. Political communication can therefore become simultaneously interpersonal and strategically coordinated.

Information circulation represents the second major problem. Unlike public social media, WhatsApp groups generally provide limited visibility into the broader circulation history of a message. Users may know who forwarded a message to them but not where the message originated or how many times it has been reproduced elsewhere. Rahmawan, Ganesia, and Hartanto (2024) found that politics was among the most prominent categories of WhatsApp-related misinformation verified by MAFINDO in Indonesia between 2015 and 2020. Wendratama et al. (2023) further showed that politically motivated misinformation and hate speech were significant concerns in Indonesian WhatsApp groups during the 2019 election. The epistemic challenge is intensified when political claims are

transmitted through trusted relationships. Citizens may accept information not because its source is verifiable but because the sender is socially credible. This distinction between interpersonal trust and informational credibility is central to understanding WhatsApp's democratic consequences.

Against this background, the present study examines WhatsApp groups as a form of informal political infrastructure within rural Indonesian communities. The study adopts qualitative digital ethnographic analysis to interpret political messages, interpersonal discussions, mobilization practices, information-sharing routines, and mechanisms of informal verification. The analysis is theoretically informed by the digital public sphere, social capital, communicative infrastructure, and platform affordance perspectives. Rather than treating WhatsApp as either inherently democratizing or inherently harmful, the article asks how its social architecture interacts with rural political relationships. Particular attention is given to the relationship between communication and mobilization, the role of trusted intermediaries, the circulation of political information, and the tension between social cohesion and informational closure. The central argument is that WhatsApp contributes to local democracy most effectively when digital communication complements rather than substitutes for face-to-face deliberation and when communities possess social norms capable of correcting misleading information.

WhatsApp Groups as Localized Public Spheres and Communicative Infrastructure

WhatsApp groups should not be conceptualized simply as digital versions of conventional public forums because their communicative boundaries are defined by membership, interpersonal relationships, and group norms. Habermas's public sphere model emphasizes openness, accessibility, and rational-critical debate, whereas WhatsApp groups are typically selective and relational. Nevertheless, this difference does not eliminate their democratic significance. Instead, it suggests the emergence of localized micro-publics in which citizens exchange information relevant to their immediate political environment. Damanik's (2018) study of WhatsApp use among first-time voters demonstrates that political discussion can occur within messaging groups and contribute to political participation. In rural communities, this localized character may be particularly important because political issues are often interpreted through concrete concerns such as village development, public services, agricultural assistance, infrastructure, social welfare, and local leadership. WhatsApp enables these issues to remain continuously discussable rather than being confined to periodic meetings.

The concept of communicative infrastructure provides a more appropriate framework for understanding this continuity. A communication infrastructure consists not merely of technological devices but of the social arrangements through which people maintain relationships and exchange information. WhatsApp becomes politically meaningful when it is incorporated into existing networks of

neighborhood associations, religious communities, family groups, farmer organizations, youth groups, and village administration. Kartikawati (2021), studying communal WhatsApp communication in Jakarta, demonstrates how group chats can facilitate participatory communication by allowing residents to exchange information and coordinate collective responses. Similarly, Himpong, Waleleng, and Warouw (2023) found that WhatsApp groups could facilitate communication between village government and citizens in Sinisir Village. These findings indicate that digital communication becomes politically consequential when it is integrated into existing institutional and social routines.

The rural character of these networks matters because political communication in villages is rarely detached from everyday social relationships. Residents may encounter the same people as relatives, neighbors, religious participants, economic partners, and political interlocutors. A WhatsApp message transmitted by a village elder, community leader, religious teacher, or neighborhood coordinator can therefore carry social authority that exceeds the informational content of the message itself. Bourdieu's concept of symbolic capital is useful here because authority can be converted from one social domain into another. A person trusted for religious knowledge, community service, or administrative experience may become an influential political information intermediary even without formal political authority. This dynamic suggests that rural digital politics cannot be understood solely through platform metrics such as views, shares, or engagement. Political influence depends heavily on the social position of the person who introduces or validates information.

Bafadhal's (2017) study of a WhatsApp religious group during the 2017 Jakarta gubernatorial election illustrates the importance of this relational dimension. The study found that political news circulating within the group could generate anxiety and uncertainty, while continued interaction among members simultaneously created a sense of order. This apparently contradictory outcome demonstrates that communication performs both informational and social functions. A group does not merely exchange messages; it also maintains relationships and establishes shared interpretations of events. Carey's ritual view of communication is relevant because communication can reproduce social bonds rather than merely transmit information. In rural political communication, this means that political discussion may sometimes be valued because it maintains community connection even when the information being discussed is incomplete or contested. The democratic function of a WhatsApp group therefore cannot be measured exclusively by informational accuracy.

This observation complicates the normative assumption that more political discussion necessarily produces better deliberation. A group can be highly active while remaining politically homogeneous. Members may exchange numerous messages, respond rapidly, and demonstrate strong political engagement without seriously confronting alternative arguments. Sunstein's (2001) concern about group polarization remains relevant because repeated interaction among people who

share similar political predispositions can strengthen existing beliefs. Bafadhal's (2017) findings concerning relatively homogeneous WhatsApp discussions indicate how the absence of counterarguments can contribute to stronger beliefs. In rural communities, where social networks may already overlap substantially, political homogeneity can become particularly difficult to disrupt. WhatsApp may therefore intensify existing community cohesion while reducing exposure to competing interpretations.

At the same time, it would be misleading to portray rural WhatsApp groups as closed systems. Messages can move across multiple groups, family networks, and face-to-face interactions. A political message posted in a neighborhood group may subsequently be discussed in a family group, repeated during a religious gathering, or referenced in a village meeting. The boundaries between digital and physical communication are consequently porous. This hybrid circulation challenges the distinction between online and offline political participation. A WhatsApp message may begin as digital communication but produce an offline political meeting, campaign activity, administrative response, or community debate. Political communication should therefore be understood as a process that moves across media environments rather than as activity confined to a single platform.

The capacity of WhatsApp to connect communication across these environments can strengthen local government responsiveness. Himpong, Waleleng, and Warouw (2023) found that WhatsApp provided an efficient communication channel between the village government and residents. Similarly, Maindoka, Randang, and Lotulung (2024) found that WhatsApp could improve interaction between residents and village government in Tounalet. These findings suggest that WhatsApp can reduce the communicative distance between citizens and local authorities. Residents may raise questions, request information, communicate complaints, or respond to government programs without waiting for formal meetings. This creates a more continuous relationship between government and citizens. Nevertheless, communication efficiency should not be confused with democratic responsiveness. A government that answers messages quickly but does not incorporate citizen input into decision-making may be digitally accessible without becoming substantively participatory.

The central implication is that WhatsApp functions as a localized communicative infrastructure that extends existing political relationships rather than replacing them. Its democratic significance emerges through the interaction between technology and social structure. Where community networks are inclusive, trusted intermediaries are accountable, and group discussion permits disagreement, WhatsApp can support information sharing, political discussion, and civic coordination. Where networks are highly homogeneous or dominated by local elites, the same infrastructure can reinforce political conformity. This suggests that the democratic quality of WhatsApp groups depends less on the technology itself than on the institutional and social norms surrounding its use. The platform provides

communicative capacity, but communities determine how that capacity is socially organized.

Political Mobilization, Social Capital, and Local Electoral Participation

Political mobilization through WhatsApp differs from mass-mediated campaigning because it operates through interpersonal networks rather than primarily through anonymous exposure. A campaign message distributed through television or a public social media account reaches audiences as a mass communication product. A message forwarded by a relative, neighbor, community organizer, or religious leader is interpreted within an existing social relationship. This distinction is theoretically significant because interpersonal communication can make political messages more persuasive by reducing uncertainty about the credibility of the sender. Gil de Zúñiga, Ardivol-Abreu, and Casero-Ripollés (2021) demonstrate that political discussion through WhatsApp can facilitate activism, suggesting that messaging applications can connect political information to behavioral participation. In rural Indonesia, the effect may be stronger where political action is already organized through dense interpersonal networks.

Putnam's distinction between bonding and bridging social capital helps explain both the strength and limitations of this process. Bonding capital facilitates solidarity among people who share social identities and relationships. A village WhatsApp group can reinforce this form of capital by enabling residents to remain connected and coordinate common activities. Bridging capital, by contrast, links people to individuals and institutions outside their immediate social circle. Political democracy requires both because solidarity facilitates collective action while cross-cutting connections expose citizens to alternative perspectives. The problem emerges when WhatsApp strengthens bonding without creating bridging opportunities. A politically homogeneous group may become highly effective at mobilizing its members but comparatively weak at deliberating across political differences. The democratic outcome is therefore dependent on the network structure surrounding the group.

Damanik's (2018) research on WhatsApp and first-time voters in Medan demonstrates that messaging groups can contribute to political participation by facilitating political discussion. Although Medan is urban rather than rural, the case is analytically useful because it illustrates how interpersonal digital communication can become part of electoral socialization. In rural areas, political socialization may be even more deeply embedded within family and community structures. Young voters may encounter political messages through parents, relatives, neighborhood groups, religious networks, or community organizations before seeking information independently. WhatsApp therefore becomes a channel through which political knowledge is socially transmitted. This can encourage political participation, but it can also reproduce inherited political preferences. Political socialization through

trusted networks is consequently neither automatically empowering nor restrictive; its democratic effect depends on whether the network encourages independent evaluation.

Mobilization is also facilitated by the practical characteristics of WhatsApp. Group messaging allows organizers to communicate schedules, locations, reminders, campaign activities, and voting-related information efficiently. Because recipients can respond immediately, the platform can support coordination rather than simply information distribution. Milan and Barbosa (2020) conceptualize this capacity through the idea of the “WhatsApper,” a politically active user who appropriates messaging applications as part of a repertoire of political participation. This concept is useful for rural Indonesia because political activity may depend on individuals who occupy intermediary positions between formal political organizations and community networks. A village organizer can simultaneously act as a community member, political volunteer, information distributor, and mobilization coordinator. Digital communication consequently creates new intermediary roles rather than eliminating intermediaries.

The importance of intermediaries becomes clearer when considering Bourdieu's theory of symbolic power. Political messages do not circulate through socially neutral networks. Some individuals possess greater symbolic capital because of their occupation, religious status, family position, administrative role, economic resources, or history of community involvement. When these individuals distribute political messages, their social capital can increase the perceived credibility of the content. This may facilitate constructive civic communication, particularly when trusted intermediaries disseminate accurate electoral information. Yet it can also facilitate political influence that is difficult to distinguish from social obligation. A resident may feel pressure to support a candidate because the recommendation comes from a respected community figure. WhatsApp therefore expands mobilization capacity while potentially making informal political pressure more difficult to recognize.

Baulch, Matamoros-Fernández, and Suwana's (2024) analysis of the 2019 Indonesian presidential election demonstrates another layer of this problem. Their study shows how political elites developed meme production infrastructures that were subsequently operationalized through WhatsApp. The importance of this finding extends beyond memes. It demonstrates that interpersonal political communication can be strategically engineered to appear more organic than conventional campaign advertising. Political organizations may therefore seek to enter community networks indirectly, using content that appears to originate from ordinary users. The democratic problem is not simply persuasion but opacity. Citizens may be unable to distinguish between genuine peer communication, volunteer activity, coordinated campaign messaging, and professionally produced political content.

This distinction is particularly consequential during local elections because social distance between political actors and voters is smaller. Candidates for village,

district, or provincial positions may share family, religious, professional, or organizational networks with voters. Political communication can therefore become deeply personalized. A candidate's message may be transmitted through a relative, local leader, or community association rather than through an official campaign channel. Such communication can increase political accessibility because citizens may have opportunities to ask questions and obtain responses directly. However, personalization can also shift political evaluation away from policy toward loyalty and relational obligation. The language of political choice can become intertwined with the language of social reciprocity.

WhatsApp therefore creates a distinctive form of networked mobilization in which political participation is embedded in social capital. Its strength lies in converting existing relationships into communicative and organizational capacity. Its weakness lies in the possibility that the same relationships can constrain political autonomy. Democratic participation requires citizens to be able to engage politically without being excessively dependent on the approval of social intermediaries. Consequently, the democratic value of WhatsApp mobilization should be assessed not simply by the number of people reached or activities coordinated but by whether citizens retain meaningful autonomy to accept, reject, question, or reinterpret political messages. Local democracy becomes stronger when digital networks facilitate participation without turning interpersonal trust into political obligation.

Information Circulation, Misinformation, and Community-Based Democratic Resilience

Information circulation within WhatsApp groups presents a fundamental challenge because the platform combines high interpersonal trust with limited public visibility. Unlike open social media, where users can often inspect profiles, comments, public corrections, and alternative sources, WhatsApp groups provide a relatively enclosed communicative environment. Kuru et al. (2023) demonstrate that trust within WhatsApp groups has important consequences for misinformation-related perceptions and correction behavior. Smaller and more homogeneous groups can produce stronger trust, but strong trust may simultaneously lower perceptions of misinformation risk. The political implication is significant: a message may become credible because of the identity of the sender rather than the quality of evidence supporting it. In rural communities, where interpersonal relationships are dense, informational trust can therefore become relationally anchored.

Rahmawan, Garnesia, and Hartanto (2024) provide direct evidence from Indonesia by analyzing misinformation verified by MAFINDO between 2015 and 2020. Their study found that politics and everyday issues were among the most prominent categories of WhatsApp-related misinformation, with text-based misinformation representing a substantial portion of the verified material. This

finding challenges the assumption that misinformation is primarily a problem of fabricated images or sophisticated digital manipulation. Simple textual messages can also become politically consequential when they circulate through trusted interpersonal networks. The lack of a visible source can make verification difficult, while the conversational character of WhatsApp can encourage users to interpret forwarded messages as advice or warnings rather than as claims requiring scrutiny.

Wendratama et al. (2023) similarly demonstrate that WhatsApp groups were important channels for politically motivated misinformation and hate speech during the 2019 Indonesian election. Their study of Indonesian women's experiences is particularly valuable because it shows that users are not passive recipients of harmful information. Group members develop practical strategies for responding to misinformation, including questioning content, discussing credibility, and negotiating whether problematic messages should remain within the group. This suggests that community resilience can emerge from below. However, correction is socially sensitive because challenging misinformation can also be interpreted as challenging the person who shared it. In close-knit groups, informational correction can therefore become a relational act with consequences for social harmony.

The problem can be explained through the distinction between epistemic and social trust. Epistemic trust concerns confidence that a claim is supported by reliable evidence, whereas social trust concerns confidence in the person communicating the claim. WhatsApp often collapses these forms of trust. A resident may accept a political message because it comes from a sibling, religious leader, colleague, or neighbor. The message inherits the credibility of the relationship even when the original source is unknown. This mechanism explains why misinformation can circulate effectively without requiring sophisticated manipulation. Political actors need only produce content that aligns with existing concerns and persuade trusted intermediaries to transmit it. The architecture of interpersonal communication then performs much of the persuasive work.

Bafadhal's (2017) concept of ritual communication is useful for understanding why misinformation may persist even after its factual basis becomes uncertain. Communication within a group serves not only to exchange information but also to maintain social connection. A member who forwards a political message may be demonstrating concern for the group, political solidarity, religious commitment, or community responsibility. Correcting the message can therefore threaten the relational meaning of the act. This explains why factual rebuttals may not automatically eliminate misinformation. The recipient may accept the correction but continue to value the original message as an expression of social trust. Effective misinformation intervention must therefore address both informational accuracy and the relational dynamics of communication.

The problem becomes more serious during electoral periods because political information is emotionally charged and decisions are time-sensitive. Rumors concerning candidates, voting procedures, electoral fraud, religious identity, ethnicity, or political threats can generate strong emotional responses. Political

messages that create fear or urgency are more likely to be forwarded because users perceive sharing as a form of protection or civic responsibility. This dynamic can transform ordinary community communication into a rapid mobilization mechanism for both accurate and inaccurate information. The same infrastructure that enables citizens to distribute official election information can therefore distribute rumors at comparable speed. Democratic resilience depends on the ability of communities to distinguish urgency from credibility.

Community-based correction provides one potential response. Kuru et al. (2023) demonstrate that social correction is an important dimension of misinformation management within WhatsApp groups. The implication for rural Indonesia is that misinformation cannot be addressed exclusively through centralized fact-checking organizations or platform-level intervention. Local actors matter because they possess relational credibility. Village officials, religious leaders, teachers, community organizations, journalists, and respected residents can function as trusted verification intermediaries. Their role should not be to control political discussion but to establish norms that encourage members to ask about sources, distinguish opinion from fact, and seek confirmation before forwarding potentially harmful claims.

This approach is consistent with the broader principle that digital literacy should be socially embedded rather than treated solely as an individual cognitive skill. A citizen may know how to identify a suspicious website yet still forward misinformation because it was sent by someone trusted. Digital literacy therefore requires relational competencies: knowing when to question a trusted sender, how to request evidence without creating unnecessary conflict, and how to correct misinformation without undermining social cohesion. In rural communities, training programs involving village institutions and civil society organizations could therefore emphasize communication practices rather than technical fact-checking alone. The objective would be to transform verification into a shared community norm.

The analysis ultimately suggests that WhatsApp's democratic effects depend on whether communities can balance trust with verification. Trust is necessary for mobilization, cooperation, and social cohesion; without it, communication networks become inefficient and fragmented. Yet trust without verification creates an environment in which misinformation can acquire authority through interpersonal relationships. Local democracy therefore requires what may be described as relational epistemic resilience: the capacity of a community to preserve interpersonal trust while maintaining norms that permit questioning and correction. WhatsApp groups can contribute to this resilience when members understand that correcting information is not equivalent to rejecting the person who shared it. Under these conditions, the platform can support both social cohesion and informational integrity.

Conclusion

WhatsApp has become more than a convenient messaging application within Indonesian communities. Its integration into family, neighborhood, religious, occupational, and village networks has transformed it into a form of informal communicative infrastructure through which political information can circulate and collective action can be coordinated. The analysis demonstrates that WhatsApp contributes to local democracy primarily by extending existing interpersonal relationships into persistent digital communication spaces. These spaces can function as localized micro-publics in which residents discuss electoral issues, communicate with government representatives, mobilize political activities, and negotiate interpretations of public events. Indonesian studies of first-time voters, village communication, community participation, and WhatsApp-based news consumption support the argument that political communication through messaging groups has become part of the broader transformation of democratic participation.

The democratic consequences of this transformation remain fundamentally ambivalent. The same social capital that makes WhatsApp effective for political mobilization can strengthen political conformity and increase vulnerability to misinformation. Trusted community figures can facilitate accurate electoral information but can also unintentionally amplify misleading claims or intentionally become intermediaries for strategic political persuasion. The cases surrounding the 2017 Jakarta election and the 2019 presidential election demonstrate how WhatsApp can simultaneously generate social cohesion, political engagement, misinformation, and strategic communication. WhatsApp should therefore not be evaluated according to a simple technological determinism in which digital connectivity is assumed to produce democratic improvement. Its effects depend on the structure of social networks, the credibility of intermediaries, the diversity of political perspectives, and the norms governing information verification.

The principal implication is that strengthening local digital democracy requires a community-based rather than purely technological approach. Digital literacy initiatives should involve village governments, electoral institutions, civil society organizations, educators, religious leaders, and community administrators because these actors occupy the social positions through which information acquires credibility. Future research should investigate how political information moves across multiple overlapping WhatsApp groups and between digital and face-to-face environments, particularly during local elections. Comparative studies between rural and urban communities would also clarify whether the political effects identified here are primarily consequences of WhatsApp's platform architecture or of the distinctive social structure of rural communities. Ultimately, WhatsApp can strengthen local democracy when interpersonal trust becomes a resource for participation without becoming a substitute for evidence, political autonomy, and deliberative disagreement.

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