Analysing ULMWP's Online Propaganda Strategy Through Hank Prunckun's ICV Framework

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Abstract
This study explores how the United Liberation Movement for West Papua (ULMWP) uses digital communication to promote Papua independence narratives and gain attention in international forums. Drawing on Prunckun's Threat Analysis Theory (2015), this research examines ULMWP's online propaganda strategies by assessing its intent, capability, and the vulnerabilities it targets. Using an explanatory qualitative method, data were collected from interviews with practitioners and secondary sources published between 2019 and 2023. The findings show that ULMWP consistently works to build global support while undermining Indonesia's legitimacy through emotionally charged narratives focused on injustice and human rights. These efforts are implemented through coordinated digital activism and proactive engagement with international media, while uses a diplomatic mechanism. According to Ring's Threat Level Classification (2009), ULMWP's efforts fall between serious and critical categories given their impact on public perception and foreign policy challenges. The study suggests that stronger intelligence strategies are needed to maintain national cohesion in the digital era.

1. Introduction

The digital era has transformed the nature of political conflict. The rise of low-cost, accessible internet infrastructure enables not only state but also non-state actors to engage in transnational operations. As noted by the Internet Society (2006), connectivity has become both an enabler of innovation and a conduit for exploitation. Social media platforms so called unregulated, decentralized, and emotionally charged, have become fertile grounds for propaganda dissemination (Wibawa, 2022).

In Indonesia, ULMWP is classified as a non-state actor utilize online media to internationalize the Papua independence issue. Through the application of hashtags, images, and appeals to emotions, ULMWP has succeeded its separatist discourse within global digital spaces. One of the initiatives, the so-called Global Raising Flag for West Papua, encouraged netters around the world to display the Morning Star flag in a show of support. These campaigns received responses from several cities in Australia, Europe, and the Pacific, marking the strategic potency of online activism in constructing political narratives to which the activists were able to respond (Pedrason, 2022).

Benny Wenda, the exiled leader of ULMWP, has intentionally promoted his cause through international media sites such as The Guardian. His op-eds and interviews frame Papua's struggle in humanitarian and racial justice terms, portraying Indonesia as a repressive state. These narratives have spread globally, amplifying diplomatic challenges and undermining Indonesia's image in international forums (Pedrason, 2022; Widyaningsih & Lestari, 2020). Simultaneously, ULMWP actively seeks political recognition from regional and international entities such as the Melanesian Spearhead Group (MSG), the Pacific Islands Forum (PIF), and the United Nations Human Rights Council.

Therefore, this study focuses on understanding ULMWP's online propaganda and its transformation into a more extensive security threat. It applies intelligence analysis frameworks to assess the threat level and recommend countermeasures relevant to Indonesia's national security policy.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Propaganda and Digital Communication

Propaganda has long been acknowledged as a strategic instrument of influence in political communication. Harold Lasswell (1927) defined propaganda as the management of collective attitudes through the manipulation of significant symbols. Similarly, Edward Bernays (1928) viewed it as the "engineering of consent," emphasizing its function in shaping public opinion to serve a particular interest. Propaganda is the intentional and methodical effort to shape perceptions, manipulate cognitions, and influence behaviours to fulfil the propagandist's aims (Jowett & O'Donnell, 2019).

In the contemporary context, the digital environment has profoundly transformed the practice of propaganda. Social media platforms operate on algorithmic logic that privileges engagement, emotion, and virality over factual accuracy. As such, messages designed to provoke outrage or empathy are more likely to gain visibility and traction (Marwick & Lewis, 2017). The participatory nature of Web 2.0 blurs the boundary between producer and consumer, creating what McQuail (2010) describes as a networked public sphere, where users simultaneously act as message disseminators.

Dan Nimmo (2001) emphasizes that modern propaganda not merely on coercive persuasion but on emotional resonance and repetition. The emotional contagion theory suggest that affective content disseminates faster and more pervasively than rational discourse, leading to what Sunstein (2017) refers to as information cascades, when individuals embrace beliefs not due to evidence but due to perceived social agreement. In his earlier work, Nimmo (1992) also identified seven classical propaganda techniques, name calling, glittering generalities, transfer, testimonial, plain folks, card stacking, and bandwagon, which remain foundational in contemporary political communication and persist in various hybrid forms across digital platforms.

Castells (2009) asserts that, from a socio-technological standpoint, communication power in the network society is defined by the capacity to create meaning via digital narratives. This shift results in "networked propaganda," a method of influence that leverages interconnection and user participation to enhance ideological content. Howard and Kollanyi (2016) characterize this phenomenon as computational propaganda, in which automated systems, coordinated accounts, or bots are utilized to control online debate and fabricate grassroots consensus (astroturfing). According to Warner (2010), internet propaganda exacerbates political polarization by dividing viewers into echo chambers that reinforce preexisting biases. The selective exposure process guarantees that individuals preferentially interact with content that corresponds to their beliefs, so reinforcing group identity and animosity toward conflicting narratives.

2.2. The Role of Social Media in Modern Conflict

The rise of digital technology has fundamentally altered the nature of conflict and power projection. Arquilla and Ronfeldt (1993) introduced the concept of netwar, describing how non-state actors utilize decentralized communication networks to wage informational and psychological warfare. In this model, power is derived not from traditional military strength but from the capacity to control narratives, coordinate dispersed actors, and influence global audiences.

Social media platforms have evolved into essential tools in what Rid (2020) describes as information warfare, where the aim is not necessarily to destroy the opponent but to manipulate their view of reality. Unlike traditional warfare, digital conflict are conducted using memes, hashtags, and viral films, which leverage emotional resonance, repetition, and simplicity to garner public attention.

For non-state actors, including separatist and extremist groups, social media offers three strategic advantages:

1. Low operational cost: platforms like Twitter, Facebook, and YouTube provide free global reach;
2. High diffusion speed: information spreads rapidly through algorithmic amplification;
3. Legitimacy construction: online activism can simulate mass support and moral authority.

According to Pamment (2019), online propaganda campaigns operate as part of a broader strategy of narrative warfare, where actors seek to define "what is true" in international discourse. Non-state groups often frame themselves as victims of oppression, thereby aligning with global human rights or anti-colonial discourses. This process enhances their legitimacy among international civil society networks and sympathetic foreign governments.

Moreover, social media platforms facilitate transnational solidarity, enabling diaspora communities to serve as echo chambers for political mobilization. Bennett and Segerberg (2012) describe this as connective action, wherein collective identity is formed through individualized digital participation rather than established organizational structures. The resulting movements are fluid, decentralized, and resilient, traits that make them difficult for state authorities to monitor or suppress.

From a security perspective, these dynamics pose complex challenges. As Rid and Buchanan (2015) argue, disinformation and influence operations erode the boundary between external and internal threats, transforming social cohesion itself into a target. The weaponization of information in this way creates what Buzan (1991) identifies as a societal security threat, undermining the sense of shared identity and legitimacy within the state.

2.3. Propaganda as Security Threat: A Threat Analysis Theory

Hank Prunckun (2015) developed a comprehensive model for assessing threats to national security by evaluating both the intent and capability of an actor. His framework posits that a threat becomes operational when these two elements intersect in a conducive environment of vulnerability. Propaganda, therefore, represents a non-military but strategic challenge, as it targets cognition, perception, and legitimacy, the very foundations of a state's resilience.

From an intelligence standpoint, propaganda operates within the information domain, which Prunckun identifies as the most dynamic arena of modern conflict. Unlike traditional military threats that rely on physical force, propaganda seeks to erode the a of societies by introducing narratives that divide, delegitimize, and disorient. The danger lies in its subtlety: while the effects are intangible, shifts in belief, trust, and identity, the consequences can be as destabilizing as armed aggression. For example, sustained propaganda that delegitimizes a government's human rights record or amplifies regional grievances can gradually erode international credibility and domestic trust, fulfilling the same destabilizing function as coercive conflict.

According to Prunckun's threat analysis model, the risk posed by propaganda can be dissected through three primary dimensions:

1. Intent or motivation reflects the propagandist motivation, comprising desire (the will to act) and expectation (the perceived likelihood of success). In propaganda campaigns, intent is reflected through ideological consistency, persistence of messaging, and the strategic selection of emotionally charged issues such as race, injustice, or identity.

2. Capability or operational capacity includes knowledge (strategic, technical, and operational expertise) and resources (financial, technological, and human assets). In the digital age, these capabilities are magnified by access to social media algorithms, online communities, and transnational advocacy networks (network reach and amplification).

3. Vulnerability pertains to the target's susceptibility to attack, which depends on attractiveness, ease of attack, and potential impact. In this context, volatility in public sentiment serves as an indicator of target vulnerability.

2.4. Threat Level Classification and the Intelligence Function

While Prunckun's model provides a conceptual framework for identifying and assessing threats based on intent, capability, and vulnerability, an additional analytical layer is needed to determine the severity and priority of the threat once identified. Robert Ring (2009) developed a four-tiered system known as the Threat Level Classification, designed to assist intelligence and security institutions in ranking threats according to their magnitude, immediacy, and potential impact on national interests:

1. Minor: Limited intent and minimal capability and limited impacts;
2. Moderate: Moderate intent or capability but potential for public concern;
3. Serious: High intend and moderate to high capability and give significant political or societal impact;
4. Critical: Very high intent and capability, also immediate threat to national stability.

This classification aids policymakers and intelligence practitioners in prioritizing responses proportional to the level of risk. To operationalize threat management, Sugirman (2009) outlines four essential functions of intelligence:

1. Judgment by identifying and evaluating emerging threats;
2. Forecasting through predicting their trajectory and escalation potential;
3. Early Warning with detecting precursors or indicators of hostile activity;
4. Problem Solving by formulating and implementing countermeasures.

Through the synthesis of Ring's classification and Sugirman's intelligence functions, the evaluation of threats transitions from conceptual diagnosis to operational response. It allows intelligence agencies to move systematically, from understanding the nature and intent of a threat, to measuring its severity, and finally to designing an appropriate mitigation strategy.

3. Methodology

An explanatory qualitative research design is adopted to examine how separatist propaganda operates as a non-military threat within the digital information environment, with a particular focus on the ULMWP. This approach enables an in-depth understanding of the mechanisms through which online narratives are constructed, disseminated, and perceived, as well as their broader implications for national security. The research combines primary and secondary data sources. Primary data were obtained through semi-structured interviews with selected informants representing former separatist actors, practitioners, and government officials. The interviews explored their perspectives on the roots of separatist narratives, propaganda intent, dissemination strategies, and national countermeasures. Secondary data were collected from various documentary and digital sources between 2019 and 2023, including ULMWP statements, media publications, and academic reports. Ethical standards were maintained through informed consent and data confidentiality.

4. Results and Discussion

The findings demonstrate that ULMWP's propaganda efforts constitute a persistent and adaptive non-military threat operating within the digital information ecosystem. Informants consistently emphasized that the organization has increasingly relied on online campaigns and media engagement to strengthen political narratives concerning Papuan independence. Since 2019, there has been a clear shift in separatist strategies from physical confrontation toward international opinion-building, as online visibility is perceived to generate broader support for the movement.

Evidence from Drone Emprit Academic (2019) shows that global digital conversations around "West Papua" are predominantly driven by pro-independence networks. These engagements are systematically amplified by official ULMWP accounts and diaspora communities, transforming online spaces into primary

arenas for narrative contention. This aligns with the shift toward non-kinetic influence operations aimed at building international sympathy and digital solidarity.

Informants from intelligence agencies emphasized that propaganda has evolved into strategic influence operations involving emotional framing, digital coordination, and transnational amplification. The messaging commonly highlights themes of oppression, racism, and militarism to mobilize international concern. These patterns conform to established propaganda techniques such as name-calling, glittering generalities, and bandwagon appeals.

From the perspective of Prunckun's Threat Analysis Theory (2015), three key drivers of ULMWP propaganda were identified:

1. To gain international legitimacy by framing the Papuan issue as a global human rights crisis;
2. To sustain separatist morale and solidarity among Papuan communities;
3. To delegitimize Indonesia's governance in Papua through narratives of racism and militarism.

The study also found that ULMWP's online messages are intentionally crafted to evoke emotional contagion, as described by Dan Nimmo (2001). Posts frequently feature humanitarian appeals "Stop Racism in Papua" or moral calls "Freedom for the Oppressed". Such content taps into collective emotions rather than empirical reasoning, aligning with Sunstein's (2017) concept of information cascades.

The second dimension in Prunckun's model, capability, concerns the means through which actors operationalize intent. ULMWP's propaganda capability is supported by three interrelated components:

1. Digital Infrastructure – The group maintains multiple official websites such as freewestpapua.org, ulmwp.org and coordinated social media accounts @freewestpapua, @ppk.nrwp, @freewestpapua.australia. These serve as dissemination hubs, ensuring consistent messaging across platforms.
2. Transnational Networks – Informants reported that ULMWP collaborates with advocacy groups in the Pacific and Western countries. This global alliance provides the infrastructure for message amplification.
3. Media Penetration – Secondary data show that major international media outlets, such as Reuters, ABC Australia, and The Guardian, have frequently echoed ULMWP narratives, particularly those related to human rights and racial issues. The 2020 coverage titled "West Papuan Separatists Declare Provisional Government" (ABC Australia) is a prime example of how separatist framing gained traction in mainstream media.

According to Prunckun's framework, vulnerability refers to the susceptibility of the target to exploitation. The study identifies three layers of vulnerability that enable ULMWP's propaganda to gain traction:

1. Cognitive Vulnerability: The public remains highly susceptible to emotionally framed narratives, particularly in digital environments where racially charged and humanitarian issues tend to spread rapidly compared to factual explanations. This condition allows narratives related to injustice and oppression to influence perceptions more effectively.
2. Social Vulnerability: The long-standing perception of inequality between Papua and other regions creates fertile ground for grievance-based narratives. The racial incident in Surabaya (2019) triggered widespread online outrage, demonstrating how propaganda exploits real incidents to deepen identity-based polarization.
3. Institutional Vulnerability: Government communication efforts are still largely fragmented and reactive, with limited preventive counter-propaganda mechanisms. The lack of coordinated and agile digital responses creates opportunities for separatist narratives to fill the information gaps and shape public discourse.

Applying Ring's Threat Level Classification, ULMWP's propaganda fits between the Serious and Critical categories.

1. At the serious level, propaganda causes domestic polarization, encourages distrust toward institutions, and incites sporadic unrest, as seen in the Papua demonstrations of 2019.

2. At the critical level, propaganda shapes international narratives that may isolate Indonesia diplomatically, particularly in forums discussing human rights and decolonization.

In Ring's model, a threat's severity increases as it transitions from influencing perception to influencing state behaviour. ULMWP's efforts to gain recognition in the Melanesian Spearhead Group (MSG) and at the UN Human Rights Council are concrete indicators of this escalation. Thus, while not violent, the propaganda's long-term effects align with non-kinetic warfare, a strategy designed to alter perceptions and policy outcomes through information control rather than physical coercion.

Within the Judgment–Forecasting–Early Warning–Problem Solving framework, the study indicates that Indonesian institutions have implemented several measures to manage the risks associated with ULMWP's online propaganda. These efforts reflect a developing approach to safeguarding information integrity and strengthening social resilience.

1. Judgment, intelligence assessments now acknowledge that online narratives concerning Papua may influence public perceptions and international viewpoints, thereby requiring closer attention within national security considerations.
2. Forecasting, digital sentiment analysis is used to anticipate increases in issue salience, especially during moments of heightened political or social sensitivity. This supports more informed decision-making in communication strategies.
3. Early Warning, Government monitor trends and anomalies in online discussions to identify the emergence of misleading or harmful narratives.
4. Problem Solving, coordinating responsive measure current initiative includes, dissemination of verified information to promote balanced public understanding; diplomatic engagement to clarify Indonesia's stance internationally; outreach to community leaders and local stakeholders to encourage dialogue; and collaboration among relevant institutions to improve message coordination.

These efforts highlight a continued refinement of intelligence-led communication strategies. Moving forward, enhancing preventive capability and multi-stakeholder cooperation will be essential to ensure that information ecosystems contribute positively to national cohesion and public trust.

5. Conclusion

This study concludes that the ULMWP utilize digital platform to promote Papua independence narratives across transnational information landscape. Guided by Prunckun's Threat Analysis Theory (2015), the findings show that ULMWP's propaganda strategy is shaped by the interplay of intent, capability, and vulnerability within the broader digital ecosystem. The movement's intent reflects efforts to gain wider international recognition for its political message, supported by capabilities rooted in social media engagement, digital activism, and international media visibility. Meanwhile, challenges such as unequal access to information, emotional issue framing, and evolving media dynamics create vulnerabilities that may enable the spread of contested narratives.

Based on Ring's (2009) classification, the influence of these narratives may generate strategic implications for Indonesia's societal and diplomatic posture. Therefore, maintaining information reliability and encouraging constructive dialogue become important aspects of national resilience in the digital era. Overall, the research highlights that contemporary contestation related to Papua increasingly occurs within informational domains. As such, collaborative efforts, strengthening public awareness, aligning communication among national stakeholders, and enhancing digital monitoring capabilities, can support a more adaptive and preventive approach in safeguarding shared national understanding and cohesion.

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