

The art of fake news: The Indonesian artist fooling the world with his photos

By Alfred Ginting

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PHOTO: Angelina Jolie has never been arrested by Indonesian police, but Agan Harahap's work has fooled many into thinking she has. (Supplied: Agan Harahap)

In the age of social media and up-to-the-second celebrity news, one photographer's faux-paparazzi snaps are delivering fake news with a distinctly Indonesian flavour.

In the years since, Mr Harahap has also been "spotted" being detained by police alongside pop star Rihanna.

Kim Kardashian and Scarlett Johansson also found themselves in a similar predicament, with the help of Mr Harahap's photo doctoring skills.

Mr Harahap says his digital mischief is a warning to Indonesians who are new to internet culture, but eager to share and comment on anything: stop believing everything you see online.

Key points:

- Agan Harahap says his doctored photos raise awareness of fake news
- Indonesia has been trying to tackle the proliferation of online hoaxes
- The country is heading towards a general election next year



PHOTO: Agan Harahap (centre right) and Rihanna detained by Indonesian police in another doctored image. (Supplied: Agan Harahap)

"It's a giddy transition era today. Since cheap Chinese smartphones invaded the market, everyone has been connected to the internet," he said.

"Many people who are new to the internet think they know it all. They are my target, but I pity them."

Despite the tongue-in-cheek humour in Mr Harahap's fake images — glamorous Hollywood celebrities, edited to look like they're posing for Indonesian police photographers after a raid — the message is serious.

Indonesia has a fake news problem, and as the country heads towards general elections next year, there is concern about how social media hoaxes will impact the campaign period.



PHOTO: Mr Harahap has used his computer skills to place celebrities like Scarlett Johansson and Kim Kardashian in the back of police vans. (Supplied: Agan Harahap)

Communist fish and unlikely friendships

Beyond fake celebrity photos, Mr Harahap's work has used the low level of online literacy in Indonesia to lampoon the country's increasingly divisive politics.

He frequently gets inspiration from his social media timeline.

When he heard two shop owners had been arrested for selling a heavy metal band T-shirt, as it featured a hammer and sickle symbol, Mr Harahap pulled together an image of his own in response.

Promoting Communism in Indonesia remains a serious offence, stemming from the country's notorious purge of suspected Communist sympathisers in 1965 that saw half a million people killed.

Mr Harahap's fake news story and accompanying doctored photo about a fish detained from a pet shop because of a hammer and sickle symbol on its forehead went viral, and was even picked up by mainstream media.

Fake news in Indonesia



Fake news played a role in the Jakarta 2017 gubernatorial election, with much of it targeting the ethnicity of former Jakarta governor Ahok.



PHOTO: The manipulated image was accompanied by a fake news article and shared on Mr Harahap's social media. (Supplied: Agan Harahap)

The blasphemy trial of Jakarta's former Christian governor Basuki Tjahaja Purnama, better known as Ahok, has also been artistic fodder.

Mr Harahap posted a photo of Ahok alongside the leader of the Islamic Defenders Front, Habib Rizieq Shihab, the man who led the campaign that saw Ahok jailed last year.

"When there is tension between two parties, my function is to give freshness," Mr Harahap said.

"For some people who were overwhelmed with the conflict, it was successful. But some saw it as slander, they hated it."



PHOTO: This work of photo fiction brings together Basuki 'Ahok' Purnama (left) and the man who advocated to put him behind bars, Rizieq Shihab. (Supplied: Agan Harahap)

The campaign that called for Ahok to be jailed was peppered with examples of fake news conspiracy theories.

Some articles said the ethnic Chinese governor was a spy for the Chinese Communist Party, and others focused on his Christian faith.

Rewriting history

Some of Mr Harahap's reworked historical images have seen him feature in exhibitions overseas in Australia, Singapore, Japan and several European countries.

One of his most popular fake historical photos features Indonesia's first president, Sukarno, speaking warmly with Marilyn Monroe, Elizabeth Taylor and Jackie O.

"Sukarno was known as a womaniser, so the photo attracts attention to Sukarno's charm. My work is my response to history."

It was from his 'History X' series, where he created the identity of a fictional palace photographer from

It was from his 'History X' series, where he created the identity of a fictional palace photographer from Sukarno's rule, documenting his interactions with a range of well-known celebrities.

The altered images were so believable, Mr Harahap was contacted by the foundation responsible for collecting historical material related to Sukarno.



PHOTO: His doctored images are often surreal, like this one of Fidel Castro and Batman. (Supplied: Agan Harahap)



PHOTO: Mr Harahap's imagined scenarios look so real, he has even fooled historians.
(Supplied: Agan Harahap)

Mr Harahap is not worried about his photos interfering with the work of historians in the future, and says there are still many serious and competent media organisations who fact check before publishing.

But even if his manipulated photos were believed to be historical documents, he would see it as an achievement.

"It's a pride for me if my fiction is considered as truth," he said.

"History is the same, history is not 100 per cent truth."



PHOTO: In this doctored photo, celebrity chef Gordon Ramsay is caught in possession of MSG. (Supplied: Agan Harahap)