Informational Terrains of Identity and Political Power:

The Internet in Indonesia[1]

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Abstrak

Internet, sebagai teknologi yang melalui proses pengalihan dari tempat lahirnya ke Indonesia, mengalami proses transformasi dan lokalisasi yang terjadi dalam arena perebutan kekuasaan politik antara negara, korporasi, dan masyarakat sipil. Di dalam arena perebutan kekuasaan ini, titik utama pergulatan ini adalah pembentukan dan penegasan identitas. Berdasarkan pengalaman historis di Indonesia, tulisan ini mengungkapkan bagaimana internet bersisian dengan pergulatan identitas dan pembentukan komunitas politik yang mandiri di luar negara dan korporasi. Studi kasus di Indonesia memperlihatkan bahwa internet dapat digunakan untuk mempersenjatai masyarakat sipil dalam menghadapi kekuatan politik dan ekonomi yang hegemonis. Internet memiliki potensi untuk menciptakan 'ruang publik' yang baru—yang berdiri terpisah dari campur-tangan negara (dan korporasi)—sehingga keberadaannya dapat menciptakan perubahan politik yang bisa menggiring Indonesia untuk menjadi masyarakat yang lebih demokratis. Namun demikian, pergulatan identitas dan politik kekuasaan yang diwadahi internet ternyata tak selamanya memiliki kontribusi terhadap pembentukan masa depan yang lebih baik bagi masyarakat Indonesia. Mengetengahkan beberapa kasus yang diangkat dari penelitian empiris, tulisan ini memperlihatkan bahwa internet tidak netral terhadap kekuasaan. Dengan menempatkannya dalam segitiga negara, korporasi/bisnis dan masyarakat sipil, kajian ini lebih dari sekedar kajian sosio-teknikal yang menjelaskan bagaimana teknologi dan masyarakat saling membentuk. Kajian ini juga memperlihatkan bahwa internet sebagai teknologi juga bersifat politis. Dengan memasukkan pertanyaan mengenai demokrasi ke dalam wacana ini, kita dapat melihat internet dalam konteks politis dan juga menguji peran, pengaruh, potensi, serta artinya dalam fenomena politik, terlebih dalam pembaharuan politik sebuah negara, khususnya Indonesia.

Introduction

Technological transformations, including internet transformation, are embedded in power relations and localities—nations, cities, and communities (including cyber-communities)— are

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sites of technology struggle. No one source of power is pre-determined to 'win' in these contests. Rather, dynamic tensions foster historical change, which, as an open-ended trajectory, allows human agency, when collectively empowered, to make a difference. The internet, as a technology of informational and symbolic linkages in civil society, allows for the possibility of people to make history locally and over wider spaces.

In the power relations among state, corporate economy, and civil society, a focal point of contestation is the creation and assertion of identity. More than merely the making of a self-image that stands in a simple relation to larger social, economic and political forces, creating identities is part of a struggle for power. In the extreme, projects to create identities drive toward becoming hegemonic systems of belief, loyalty and action. This was the case with the so-called 'developmental state', which used all kinds of controls and manipulation of media to cast a rigid identity with and loyalty to political regimes that, in not a few cases, remained in power for decades. With the collapse of these regimes one by one, the new source of hegemony comes from globalization and takes the form of commodification and consumer identity penetrating local social formations. At the same time, the rise of civil society as a potent political force interacts with state and corporate economy identity formation, sometimes legitimizing them but at other times resisting, occasionally even leading to mass mobilization to create alternative social projects centering on alternative identities. The internet is intricately involved in these processes, both a means of communicating and forming identities and as a technology that is transformed through shifting power relations.

The Indonesia experience is drawn upon to suggest how the internet might more generally interface with identity struggles and the formation of new political communities outside of the state and corporate economy. The Indonesia story of the internet shows how it has been used to resist and even create alternative technology to empower civil society in the face of seemingly hegemonic political and economic forces.

Civil society, public sphere, and identity

Three concepts are helpful to exploration of the internet as technology received and transformed in the context of localized processes of social change; civil society, public sphere, and identity.

Civil society

While previous ideas of civil society define the term in opposition to an all-powerful state, more recent approaches differentiate civil society as a middle ground, or third way, between the political interests of the state and the economic interests of business as eloquently stated by Fine (1997:9):

> 'The common ground of civil society theory is that it places civil society on the side of agency, creativity, activity, productivity, freedom, association, life itself. In contrast to the vital properties of civil society, it identifies the properties of the economic and political systems in essentially moribund terms: conformity, consumerism, passivity, privatization, coerciveness, determination, and necessity are the words which prevail. Through this opposition between life and death, activity and passivity, agency and structure, civil society theory justifies the primacy of civil society over the political and economic spheres.'

In discussing civil society, a central question is how civil society informs itself and enters into dialogue with other powers in society, namely, the state and the corporate (business) economy. Such dialogue takes place in an arena that is understood to be the public sphere.

Public sphere

Since ancient Greek times, creating a public sphere has been important to the political life of a society (Seligman 1992). It is presupposed that having an open process of public input and debate will result in a better decision for society as a whole.

The notion of public sphere by Tarde (Katz 1997:80) refers to a linear model where:

- the newspaper fuels conversation,
- conversation shapes opinion, and
- opinion triggers actions.

This model reveals four components that make up the public sphere, namely, the press (media), conversations, public opinion formation, and action (Kim 1997:12). Thus one of the pillars of an effective public sphere has been the mass media and media technology, such as printing press in the 17th–18th century, which has been the means to distribute individual ideas that can become an effective opposition to the power of the state.

However, over the past century, according to Habermas (1989) the public sphere has been transformed. The control over the media by the corporate economy has led to the equation of public interest with corporate interest with the public sphere was thus transformed into a commercial arena.

In other contexts, such as countries with tyrannical/authoritarian government, the public sphere is overwhelmingly dominated and controlled by the state, which is itself directly influenced by corporate interests unmediated by civil society. The public sphere is transformed into being the domain of the state, the space for propaganda, the space to control and sponsor the legitimization of the state.

Thus in the triangle of relationships among civil society, the state and the corporate economy, there are at least three widely observed configurations of power:

- the authoritarian 'developmental state' marked by the dominance of the state, though possibly in alliance with corporate interests as it suppresses civil society,
- the now ascendant neo-liberal corporate economy model, with its diminished state and transformation of society into brand name consumers, and
- the ideal of the active society marked by a public sphere mediated through civil society and its many organizational faces and forms.

Which of these models will prevail is a question not only of whose voice will be empowered but is also equally one of a struggle over identity, which is itself both a source and an expression of power.

Identity as a source of power and resistance

Castells (1997) argues that identity is a universal human experience and fundamental source of meaning, a driving force in contemporary world history. While identity is multi-layered and often contradictory, it gives 'symbolic identification' that links a person or a group to her/his/its actions.

Castells divides the forms and sources of identity into three types (1997:8):

- legitimizing identity, introduced by dominant institutions of society to extend and rationalize their domination,
- resistance identity, generated by those who are in positions/conditions of being devaluated and/or stigmatized by the logic of domination, and
- project identity, when people build a new identity that redefines their position in society and, by so doing, seek the transformation of overall social structure.

Identities that start as resistance can induce projects and in the course of history may also become dominant. However, history is not linear, and the values or identities must be viewed in the context of historical moments.

Civil society can emerge from legitimizing identity because it brings together the 'apparatuses'—such as churches, unions, parties, co-operatives, civic associations—that actually prolong the dynamics of the state because they are deeply rooted among people. In contrast, resistance identity leads to the formation of 'communes' and may be the most important type of identity building in our society. It 'constructs forms of collective resistance against otherwise unbearable oppression' (Castells 1997:9). This can become project identity aimed at transforming society through collective action against a dominant identity.

Should the third type of identity, project identity, emerge in a society, it could lead to the renewal of the public sphere, by giving space for civil society to arise against a dominant identity, whether the state's legitimizing identity or the corporate economy's comodified identity.

The following sections look at how the internet in Indonesia developed in relation to the state-corporate-civil society struggles over identity thus leading the internet to be a forum of a new public sphere for political dialogue and new forms of consensus.

Communications, information, and the state

With its history of Dutch colonization and independence, the nation building of Indonesia became a conscious project of the state. The control of communication and information flows was important as a strategic tool for national integration. The Government of the Republic of Indonesia saw telecommunications and the media as the tools for 'development' that would legitimize the New Order regime of President Suharto, which lasted more than 30 years, from 1966 to 1998.

The Television of the Republic of Indonesia (TVRI), established in 1962, functioned mainly in a development role, one designed to engender popular identity with the state. It programs across the country to build 'unity' through media. By the 'television enters village programme' televisions were placed in village halls throughout the nation and served by a network of national broadcast transmitters under the control of the state apparatus (Shoesmith 1994:133).

From this 'unity in diversity' perspective, the urge to use telecommunications to foster identity with the proclaimed developmentalist pursuits of the state was great. Indonesia, a so-called third-world country with per capita annual income of US$125 in 1976, became the third country in the world to launch its own communications satellite, the Palapa satellite, which costs US$160 billion.

In contrast to de Sola Pool's declaration that 'Ésatellites are technologies of freedom' (1983), the Indonesian satellite pulled freedom away from society, strengthening centralized control of the state through control over expanding systems of telecommunications. For more than three decades, radio and television broadcast in Indonesia were directly employed as tools of state-propaganda. Print-based information sources, like newspaper and magazines, though mostly privately owned, were under the control of the state. Censorship and outright banning and even closing of news media were common during the New-Order era. Government, through its Ministry of Information and pervasive policing capacities, could easily shut down publications that displeased it. The ban of Tempo magazine in 1982, due to its incisive coverage of the general election, and again in 1994, because of its controversial report on one of Habibie's pet projects, is one

obvious example of how the state protected its legitimacy by quashing press freedom. Indonesia under Suharto appropriately fit the classic definition of the state, defined by Max Weber as the set of institutions having the 'monopoly of violence' (Gissurarson 1990:15). As the media show, violence was not always physical but was directed toward controlling thinking. More deliberately, media were used to construct an identity as a progressive developmental state, a nation-building project to sustain the Suharto regime.

Through its control over communications and information the New Order regime under Suharto effectively controlled society and, in doing so, provided no real public sphere for dialogue between state and society. This led to the suffocation of civil society. Whatever public sphere existed was fully integrated into the state's propaganda machinery. There was no opposition, and (fake) public opinion was always 100% in agreement with the state's opinion. In 32 years no people were brave enough to suggest any name but Suharto for president. Every 5 years, a General Election was held, just to choose the same party and the same president. Giant boards on the streets, big pictures in the newspapers, and scenes on television kept telling the success stories of the New Order regime under Suharto. The consciousnesses of the people of Indonesia were infused by such advertisement. Instead, no opposition could flourish in these circumstances.

Through its control of media, the state controlled the building of a national identity, filling up the public sphere with production and manipulation of images, symbols and ideas. The public sphere was the state's theater of identity formation and manipulation (Lim 2002).

A brief history of the internet in Indonesia

The internet has been highly instrumental in bringing the episode of authoritarian state to an end. This technology has proven to be far more powerful in scope than the printed page, the electronic voice or televised picture. It was revolutionary in how it could allow citizens—and corporations—to bypass, finesse, and resist attempts by the state to control its use and access to it. As such, it created new cyber-terrains of contests over identity and, thus a renewed public sphere for civil society in Indonesia.

The internet was introduced to Indonesia for the first time in early 1980s, the first internet connection being made by the University of Indonesia (Lim 2001). This institution also joined UUNET in 1984, thus making Indonesia among the first nations in Asia to enter the internet world at that time (*Dunia Cyber* 1999). However, due to a lack of infrastructure, there was no permanent internet link until 1994 (Lim 2001).

Pushed by the goal of being globally networked, Habibie's kids, that generation of technocrats who benefited from the largesse connected with Habibie's political vision of a high-tech Indonesia (Shiraishi 1996:164), endorsed the state's building of the first internet network in Indonesia, Science and Technology Network (IPTEK-Net). The Agency for the Assessment and Application of Technology (BPPT), via its project IPTEK-Net, made the first permanent internet link from Indonesia in 1994 (Kompas, 1 December 1994).

With the arrival of private commercial internet Service Providers (ISPs), the internet attained a public presence at the end of 1995 where there were an estimated fifteen thousand internet users in Indonesia being serviced by five commercial ISP's in addition to IPTEK-Net. Over the following six months the figures mushroomed (Hill and Sen 1997:73); at the end of 1997 there were nearly 40 ISPs in Indonesia. However, the internet was still just used by

certain social classes, namely, those people who were able to pay both telephone pulse and internet subscription fees and who had telephone lines and personal computers.

International pressure regarding the digital divide pushed the government of Indonesia to build a national internet program with a big loan from the World Bank. However, the low telephone penetration rate, low GDP, lack of stable infrastructure, and the economic crisis in 1997 led to the collapse, both of the commercial internet and the government's project. The growth rate of ISP subscribers was not satisfactory, and the national programs were stuck at a low level. The alternative form, a commercial internet that survived the crisis, was the *warnet* of internet cafes, which could reach even the lower classes with low-cost internet access. The internet became affordable for even larger segments of society and developed tremendously in the following 3 years.

The internet and *reformasi* (political reformation)

In a post-colonial Indonesia linked with global capitalism, the immediate crisis leading to the end of Suharto era was the outcome of the two entwined forces: state-corporate cronyism and the penetration of highly mobile global finance capital. The subsequent fall of the New Order regime and collapse of the export economy has left the corporate economy without a clear way to build its identity in a new form. In 1997, state and corporate interests lost their near monopoly of control over the Indonesian internet. At the same time, the state has also entered into an identity crisis. The 1997 crisis broke the implicit social contract, by which the state provided increases in material welfare in exchange for political docility in civil society. People lost whatever trust they had in the government. Student demonstrations marked the years of 1997–1998 that resulted in the ousting of Suharto in May 1998. During this crisis, civil society, which had been dormant for decades, reemerged, and the internet appeared as a tool or medium for civil society to challenge the domination of the state (and the corporate economy).

Although an article from a famous newspaper in the USA said that the political revolution in Indonesia was internet-driven (Marcus 1998), the internet was not the sole driver for the reformation. Internet users in Indonesia were just 1% (less than 200,000) of the population in 1998, making it impossible for the internet to create any major movement in Indonesia. Yet, at that moment there was no source of information other than the internet that was free from the control of the state. More specifically, the internet made direct global-local contact possible, thus making information available from abroad that was previously not accessible in Indonesia. This undermined not only the ability but also the legitimacy of the state to control information. When citizens were made aware through the internet of all sorts of alternative sources of information that are, to them, not dangerous to their well-being, the idea of allowing the state to control these sources and the internet that brought information to them was questioned and even rejected-either overtly by public acts of resistance or covertly through underground information networks using the internet.

The famous mailing list, *Apakabar,* is the perfect example to show the new social autonomy from the state. Started by an American, John McDougall, *Apakabar* forwarded Indonesian related news/articles to its subscribers all over the world. Most of information/news it brought was not available in Indonesia, and some was controversial and critical of the New Order regime. As it developed, it became one of the main sources for uncensored news and discussion on Indonesia. In 1996-

1998, this list became a major irritant for the army and the Ministry of Information and helped to establish the internet's reputation as a radically free medium (Hill and Sen 1997).

Global-local relations between Indonesians who were in and out the country generated massive amounts of information, which, previously banned, became available through the internet. George Aditjondro, an Indonesian professor who lives in Australia, was among the main sources of previously unavailable information. He sent thousands of email messages about the New Order government, especially about Suharto and his cronies, and opened the eyes of Indonesians to see the 'dirt' of this regime. The list of the wealth of Suharto's family was typed on emails and spread to many places. This information was also made available on a homepage.

Indonesian students (and young people) abroad also made use of global-local contact to infuse Indonesian society with information and provide Indonesians (cyber) space for political discussions. Indonesians at the University of Stuttgart in Germany established the website named *Pijar* than consisted of information on human rights while some at the Berlin Technical University established the Voice of Democracy (Alliances of Young People of Indonesia). An Indonesian in Columbia University created *Parokinet*, an active mailing list where the members could talk about Christianity, politics, culture, and Islam openly, something that was impossible to do during the pre-internet era.

Young educated people benefited from the new power to speak freely by creating many mailing lists and homepages to gain sympathy and support, especially for ones who were suppressed by government. The repressed party in opposition to Golkar (Suharto's party), the Democratic People of Indonesia in Struggle (PDI Perjuangan) under Megawati Sukarno, put together a homepage about Megawati and her party to raise public sympathy (Wirantaprawira 1998). The Indonesian Communist Party (PKI), which had been banned for more than 30 years, appeared again on the internet, and no government official could effectively ban it (Komunis 1999). The Democratic People's Party (PRD), a small pro-labor, largely student-based party also flourished on the internet. Despite a government crackdown, trial and continuing detention of the party leadership and the harassment of the rank-and-file, using the internet PRD continued maintaining its profile and openly challenging the government and contributing to the downfall of the Suharto regime (PRD 1999).

The internet was crucial, but it was not the sole source of support for reformation. Megawati and PDI Perjuangan still had to go to the street and hold many campaigns all over Indonesia to get support. PRD still had to hold road shows at universities to obtain votes from students. Students and youngsters still had to make internet-based information available for a wider range of society by transforming it to readable printed media. In 1997–1998, just before the fall of Suharto, much information from the internet was made available on the street. Newspaper sellers started selling copies of articles from the internet which were not available from any other media.

The internet, supported by actual political activities, became a medium that could provide alternative information and thus to sustain challenges to centralized information from the government.

The *warnet*: everyday forms of Indonesian internet

In addition to the linkage of digital with printed media, cyberspace took physical shape in the form of new social institution, the *warnet*, or internet cafe. Merging the existing idea of public telecommunications access created by the state, the *wartel*, with the new technol-

ogy — the internet — the *warnet* was created. A *warnet*, or *warung* internet, is a small privately run place equipped with several computers hooked to the internet and rented on hourly basis. It has become the new frontier where Indonesians create and mold their identity, searching for self-respect, belonging, and the confidence to engage fellow citizens of Indonesia outside the purview of the state. The fast rising popularity of *warnets* (two thirds of internet access in Indonesia is done via *warnets*) is a testament to the growing awareness of its capacity to offer an alternative means of creating personal identity through social interaction. Dominated by young people aged 16–25, *warnets* became a seemingly unremarkable yet altogether formidable source of the resistance through identity creation of the well-educated young generation.

Most of the forms of resistance that happen on *warnet* can be seen as mere resistance, with no vision or social purpose. Some 'legitimized actors' may see it just as an ordinary young people's style of seeking identity, but these 'everyday forms' of resistance are critical to and perhaps the most significant form of struggle against state and/or corporate hegemony. For Scott (1985), this kind of resistance can be intentional, non-intentional, individual, or coordinated — in fact, anything that members or subordinate groups do to help ward off the onerous presence of powerful state or corporate interests. While they might not necessarily result in large-scale social movements, they nevertheless serve as both protection against disempowerment and mechanisms to manage communities.

In this sense, the transformative impact the internet transpires in the act of use, not in the satellite or computer factory or the software in the machine. Via the selective use of the *warnet*, the internet is being channeled into new directions, with old pathways thickened or abandoned and new ones created. Thus, if the government monitors email, users find technologies to bypass surveillance. If spam fills the screen, ways are found through technology and software to marginalize it. In this way, technology is actively used to create room for different identities, and, at the end of the day, technology is itself transformed.

The internet and its complex of nodes, the *warnet*, should not be romanticized as a virtuous sanctuary of social good and harmony. Civil society is itself complex and internet users are not always the most enlightened or well-intentioned people. Socially irresponsible acts, such as violence of one identity group against another, can be and are promoted on the internet. Resistance on its own does not easily counter hegemonic tendencies of global capital or the state-corporate nexus. The flowering of the internet within civil society is itself fraught with pitfalls and misdirection, antagonisms and even violence. During the reformation struggle against the Suharto's government, for young people *warnet* was the major source of 'forbidden' information, like short-wave foreign news broadcasts, campus rumors, and faxed and photocopied underground bulletins — all of contraband information not carried by Indonesia's mainstream media.

Everyday form resistance can sometimes be transformed into a social project, even into a victory of civil society over the domination of the state. Such was the case of asosiasi-warnet@yahoogroups.com which was originally just a forum to discuss *warnet* related issues but later developed into a space for discussions of a wider range of topics, shifting from daily technical computer-related problems to heavy topics, such as the monopoly power of state-owned companies and telecommunications regulations/policies.

Many events followed discussions on the mailing list. An open community of *warnets*

was formed through this mailing list. While the association was virtual, many real activities emanated from it. Their motto was, 'the association is virtual, the fight is real'. Everything seemed to work well in this virtual association, but the need to have a real and legal forum eventually emerged. Finally, in May 2000, the active members of the mailing list met and legally established their association, namely *Awari* (Asosiasi *Warnet* Indonesia: Association of internet Kiosks in Indonesia) (Awari 2001).

What was a lose network of exchanges became an organized project of building an alternative to the state run system. A boycott against the increase in the telephone tariff, which was followed by a street demo, a boycott against the Minister Act licensing the internet industry, and other resistance actions resulted in the some positive outcomes. The mailing list also discussed and successfully proposed a revision to the national telecommunications law, allowing *warnets* to operate without permission from the Department of Communications. Meanwhile, at the local neighborhood and city levels, unaffiliated *warnet* associations also emerged in response to two needs: to prevent price gouging and to organize the sharing of bandwidth (Lim 2001). While perhaps modest or narrow in focus, this association reveals how the creation of an open-ended bulletin board was transformed into a successful project to resist state control.

Conclusions

Through considering the case of the internet in Indonesia, this paper gave an overview of what impacts internet has on society, showing that internet support to civil society is real. Yet, contrary to utopian perspectives, which say that the internet is an egalitarian world where equal distribution of information and conversation lead to a new and better democracy, the internet can also create contrary outcomes. The fact that in Indonesia the internet is still just available to a small percentage of the population, most being highly educated, shows that it can also afford inequality, an overabundance information for one group while little goes to the majority. Moreover, it is entirely possible that the internet can be used by some factions of civil society to plot violence against others.

Identifying the potentials of the internet, this paper recognizes that the internet is not neutral to power. Further than usual socio-technical treatments of the internet which only showing how it and society shapes each other, by locating the internet the triangle of state, corporate economy/business and civil society, this paper also shows that technology is political. The question of democracy inserted into the discourse allows the technology to be given purpose beyond techno phenomena thus also allows an examination of the internet as a means for political reform. In pursuing this issue of social purpose, the drivers behind the shift toward more democratic practices throughout the world, including Indonesia become less obscure. The rise of an urban middle class demanding more freedoms from the state is an important element in this process. Others include the contradictory process of globalization, which promises more freedom while enclosing the world into spheres of corporate monopolies over information, ideas and knowledge. The push for democracy is fundamentally a manifestation of the use of human agency to create meaningful identities beyond the grasp of state and corporate power.

The internet, in providing a new site for this struggle, has become a potentially vital public sphere. Who controls the internet is likely to be a major determinate of the future of Indonesian

society, especially as more and more people have access to it. Will control shift from the authoritarian state to the transnational corporation, or will it be grasped by civil society in association with a more democratic state? The real public sphere and civil society of the past now are back in a virtual sphere—the internet—with all elements that this brings. Will they return to real sites of struggle over identity and political power to contribute the actual material and social support for the better future of this country? This is the question now at hand in Indonesia.

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