Hoax and Paradox of Digital Public Sphere

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Abstrak/*Abstract*

Along with technological development, social media have brought various problems which have not been thought of before. Various public conversations are mediated in a space which initially was idealised as an equal and free space. However, multiple indicators indicate that the digital public sphere is vulnerable to hoaxes and fake news. This essay discusses the rise of hoax spreading groups in Indonesia and applied several cases to look back at the public sphere concept in the digital era.

Seiring dengan perkembangan teknologi, media sosial telah membawa berbagai masalah yang belum terpikirkan sebelumnya. Berbagai percakapan publik dimediasi di ruang yang awalnya diidealkan sebagai ruang yang setara dan bebas. Namun, beberapa indikator menunjukkan bahwa ruang publik digital rentan terhadap hoaks atau berita palsu. Artikel ini membahas tentang munculnya kelompok penyebaran hoaks di Indonesia dan menerapkan beberapa kasus untuk melihat kembali konsep ruang publik di era digital.

Kata kunci/*Keywords:*

hoax; public sphere; Habermas; social media

hoaks; ruang publik; Habermas; media sosial

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Introduction

Indonesia is a country where the access to the internet and social media is rapidly increasing. Social media has increasingly been utilized as people's conversational space for socio-political issues. In the last few years, the social media has even played a more significant role in several political events in Indonesia. However, similar to the technological development character in Indonesia, it also brings some consequences which have never been imagined before.

Various positive effects from the massive use of the social media come together with a paradox that the social media sends us to the information overload era. Information sources have been abundant, but they are not equal to people's critical information reading level. Moreover, there are more and more groups which, in a structured way, disseminate hoaxes and disrupt opinions on the social media with fake news.

At the mid of 2017 and beginning of 2018, several hoax spreading groups on the social media, such as Saracen and Muslim Cyber Army (MCA), were exposed. These groups and the massive number of buzzers cause the social media to become a battleground for forming opinion which can be manipulated. This confirms that the social media does not really become the free space as idealized by many people.

In such context, this essay would discuss Juergen Habermas' idea on public sphere in the digital era. To be more specific, this essay would review such hoax spreading groups to know how far the idea on the public sphere re-

mained relevant and any limitations of such idea in the digital context.

From the Indonesian cases, this essay argues that, in some contexts, the Habermas's idea on the public sphere remains relevant to construe any phenomena on the social media in Indonesia. Several key concepts formulated by Habermas help us to understand what actually takes place in this changing world. Nevertheless, the increasingly massive social media development makes the public sphere as conceived by Habermas more difficult to realize.

In order to observe the relevance and limitation of the public sphere notion, this essay will be divided into two parts. First part summarizes a debate on the public sphere and its development in the social media era. This part reviews key concepts, several harsh criticisms, and also revision attempts offered by Habermas. Meanwhile, second parts use the public sphere notion to discuss case studies in Indonesia before finally reviewing the current public sphere idea.

Literature Review
Public Sphere and Social Media

Before I discuss the public sphere and social media, this section will first review debates on the public sphere notion a bit.

Since the Jurgen Habermas's book entitled *Strukturwandel der Offenlicheit* was issued for the first time in Germany language in 1962, it has triggered many debates among academics. Moreover, when the book was translated into English language and titled as The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere in 1989. The translation time interval of 27 years causes the debate to be more heated and widen (Crossley and Roberts, 2004).

Even though it received many criticisms, it did not make Habermas's idea on the public sphere lose its relevance. In his further works after The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere, Habermas has received many criticisms on his initial idea on the public sphere.

One of the academic works which summarizes debates on Habermas quite well is a book entitled Habermas and the Public Sphere (1992) which was edited by Craig Callhoun. This book derived from a series of articles from a conference to welcome the Habermas's book translation into English language.

In this book, several criticisms to Habermas come from several scientific branches, such as social sciences, history, philosophy, and also communications. Fraser (2007) divided such criticisms into two types. First is criticisms on the public opinion legitimacy in the public sphere. Habermas obscured systemic boundaries which are supposedly important to be observed as they create an unequal access to the public sphere.

Second is criticisms on the potential public opinion where Habermas failed to see the systemic problem in whole. Such systemic problem eliminates public opinion from various political interests affecting the opinion. In a more practical sense, these criticisms may be observed, among others, in several public opinions affecting the public policy but they do not involve marginalized groups and issues of the marginalized groups. In the public sphere, they are considered to not exist.

A harsh criticism against Habermas came from, among others, Seyla Benhabib (1992). Even though Benhabib did not review in details, she mentioned that the Habermas's public sphere idea is biased against female. This bias appears because the Habermas's notion contains a difference on what can be discussed in public and what's not. In this context, issues which affect female, such as issues on reproduction and nurturing, are infused into private issues and dissociated in debates from the public sphere (Benhabib, 1992).

Fraser in Rethinking the Public Sphere: A Contribution to the Critique of Actually Existing Democracy (1990) even further wrote for his response to Habermas. He offered what he called as "revisionist historiography" (1990:58). In this concept, Fraser attempted to make understanding on the public sphere more accurate by problematizing the Habermas's understanding on the historical development and transformation of the public sphere.

The historiography offered by Fraser (1985) is a reading for narration that many problems, such as issues on gender and inequality, have existed from the very beginning in the bourgeois public sphere, which are not offered in the Habermas's explanation. By including such problems, Fraser (1990) mentioned that it makes the public sphere is no longer a utopia item.

A consequence of the inclusion of several problems aforesaid to be inherent with the public sphere is possibilities on participation, including discourses of private and public interests to be more open. Issues which have previously not considered as a public issue, such as gender issue, have become significant to be discusses. An equal access is more possible as the public sphere becomes more inclusive and emancipative. Habermas responded to such various criticisms, because he later admitted the importance of inclusivity, varied identities, and complexity of the social system (Lunt and Silverstone, 2013). It can be found in the Habermas's work, Between Facts and Norms (1984), where there is more optimist voice on the public sphere (Staats, 2004).

In the Habermas's work, the public sphere is positioned as an element of a comprehensive theoretical framework on deliberative democracy. In the deliberative democracy, Parkinson (2006) mentioned that a public decision is legitimate if such decision gets a rational approval through participation in an authentic in-depth deliberation by all stakeholders in such decision.

The social media development which is encour-

aged by the massive telecommunication and information growth makes the Habermas's notion on the public sphere reappear. The social media in several parts show ideal matters in the public sphere. For example, is a logic that everyone has equal position and access to have an opinion, or a public opinion which can affect public policies. There have been many examples which show that the opinion driven by the social media and viral has a significant influence in changing or making a policy (see, for example, Tapsell, 2017). From here, it can be observed how the social media has potential for the public sphere and communicative actions like the Habermasian approach.

One of the emancipative potentials arises when the amateur, i.e. an ordinary person in the Habermasian approach, cannot participate in a traditional debate or political circle, nor have an opportunity to participate in a space provided by the social media. On the social media, every person with access to the internet can have any opinion regardless of his background.

However, this can show the main problem of the social media and public sphere. Mahlouly (2008) mentioned that this presence of amateur is different from what Habermas has said. In the digital era, the quality of debates and public opinions is indeed determined by numerous participations in those debates. Nevertheless, the social media characteristics of viral and divided time enable the digital public sphere not to be localized nor obtaining a complete consensus as previous.

Such viral trait confirms that the public sphere is not a guarantee for democracy (Dahlgren, 2005). In many debates, there should be a factor connecting what appears on the social media and the state policy making process. In other words, a formal structural connection is necessary.

In addition, in a big and ideal potential within the public sphere imagined by Habermas, the social media shows many interventions which put such potential at a risk of failure. Fuchs (2014) stated that the public sphere in the social media era will be highly limited by any political power controlling the media and money of the corporations to penetrate the social media.

Furthermore, there is also supervision for data users on the social media. This supervision, in practice, looks like a normal issue. For example, the government supervises the citizens on the social media for security purposes and many more. However, it can also make the public sphere not being realized due to the oppressive and repressive traits of power or control in such context. The main requirement for the free public sphere which has a distance from the state and market intervention becomes unfulfilled.

At the practical level, an example of such intervention model can, for instance, be found in the case of China where the state highly controls her citizens' social media sphere. Several social media platforms, such as Facebook and Instagram, are prohibited. Social media made by the Chinese industry is allowed. Other example is NSA in the United States of America which monitors every single step of the American citizens in the cyberspace. A direct supervision contains any democratic trait of the public sphere.

Fuchs (2014: 82-86) explained that the social media is currently formed by three antagonisms, i.e. economic antagonism between data users (citizens) and social media corporate interests, political antagonism between users' privacy and complex surveillance-industrial model by the government, and antagonism between the creation of public sphere by the civil society and colonization of the public sphere by the state and market. In a slightly different context, what mentioned by Splichal is relevant to explain effects of antagonism as explained by Fuchs. Splichal (2007) described that the public sphere is never created due to an unequal access to communication channels. In addition, there is also significant reduction of a public debate which is later dominated by an opinion created by ruling elites.

Several recent studies affirm Splichal and Fuchs's statements. Collins, Marichal, and Neve (2002) and Pond and Lewis (2019) explained how the social media is indeed a part of the elites which significantly decides whether an idea is appropriate or not appropriate to be discussed on their platform. Exposure to the information flow will differ from one user to another, and such exposure is a consequence of the algorithm which provides an automatic recommendation on specific contents for the public.

Collins, Marichal, dan Neve (2020) referred to this as a "structural transformation" which is created by the social media platform by commodification of existing contents. The social media platform does not care whether such contents trigger public hatred and anger. Provided that they are able to reach high engagement, they will be good enough for the platform (Collins, Marichal, dan Neve, 2020). Kruse, Norris, and Flinchum (2018) stated that the social media does not provide any in-depth and rational discussion space. Instead, it only creates a superficial space on the surface.

Indeed, it should be comprehended that it takes place due to the more complex and massive influence of the social media. It causes the digital space to be more vulnerable to hacking. Several cases during the Arab Spring, for example, confirm this issue. At first, the social media shows its emancipatory potential by becoming a space to mobilize a revolution in order to overthrow the ruling regime. The social media becomes a channel for the public to express their anger. Nevertheless, we finally see that such revolutions fail.

We have not considered any hoaxes and fake news which currently dominate conversations on the social media. In this case, hoaxes and fake news are forms of interventions created by a specific interest group to dominate or steer the conversations or debates on the social media. When these hoaxes and fake news become an underlying reason for making any decision, a rational

argument idealized within the public sphere will automatically collapse.

In such condition, fragmentation and polarization on the social media will get stronger. Then, what Dahlgren (20015: 152) referred to as "cyber ghettos" will be created where the public space is divided into smaller parts based on a specific interest group. When this circle is created, it will be difficult to meet other circle(s) which has a different interest. A dialogue under various backgrounds which leads to a collective understanding or agreement will be challenging.

Next part will discuss case studies in Indonesia and observe how the public sphere concept operates in such case studies.

Internet and Social Media Landscape in Indonesia

Based on a survey carried out by the Indonesian Internet Service Providers Association (APJII) (2021), 196.71 million out of 266.91 million (almost 71%) of the Indonesians have used the Internet. This number is much higher than the figure found in the similar survey in 2014, where the 2014 survey revealed that there were only 88 million internet users.

Not only the Internet users, the social media users in Indonesia are also growing rapidly. The number of Facebook and Twitter users in Indonesia is within the top 5 highest number of users in the world. The Guardian (2016) even refers to Jakarta, the capital city of Indonesia, as the "Twitter city" due to the Jakartans' high activities on the social media.

A study by Willnatt (2012) compared the use of social media for the political participation in 5 Asian countries (Indonesia, Taiwan, China, Thailand, and Japan) and it found that Indonesia is the country with the highest social network user market share (71.6%) and the users in Indonesia utilize social media to consume news.

With such internet and social media users' landscape, it is no wonder that digital media becomes an important facility for public conversations on many issues in Indonesia. Public issues related to public policies issued by the government, newest world issues, to daily life gossips fill the cyberspace and its influence gradually increases.

Various public elections in Indonesia, either presidential election in 2014 and 2019 or regional head election in 2017, show how the social media plays a significant role in the political debates in Indonesia. For example, in two political events, namely 2014 presidential election and Jakarta regional head election, people used social media as a forum to campaign their choice, including launching a black campaign against their political opponent (Tapsell, 2017).

Even though the social media atmosphere during the presidential election in 2014 had also heated up, it cannot be compared to the condition in 2017 and 2019 presidential election. Hoaxes and fake news were rampant which have made the Jakarta gubernatorial election the worst election in the Indonesian public election history (Tapsell, 2017). Public debate on the social media became worsen and counterproductive. At the more practical level, for example, a couple of friends unfriended each other in Facebook because they had different political choices.

Within this period, what happened in Indonesia can be likened to the political situation in the United States of America during the 2016 presidential election, and the United Kingdom during the Brexit referendum. During such two moments, the cyberspace of both countries were full of propaganda and hoaxes and at the certain point, it affected the voters' behaviour.

The ironic thing in the case of Indonesia is the detection of Saracen syndicate by the police at the mid of 2017. This syndicate is a group that produces hoaxes and thousands of fake news on the social media. From the digital forensic investigation, it was revealed that this syndicate used Facebook groups, among others Saracen News, Saracen Cyber Team, and Saracennews.com to gather more than 800,000 social media accounts. These accounts were under different names but they were controlled under one commando (Kompas, 2017).

Then, the police also said that the perpetrators uploaded provocative content with SARA (ethnicity, religion, race, and inter-group) nuances by following the development of trends on the social media. Such uploads can be words, narrations, or meme which directs the readers' opinion to be negative against other community groups (BBC Indonesia, 2017). Saracen was hired based on orders to spread hatred on the social media.

They usually operated near or during the regional head or parliamentary elections. Their modus was spreading various news to disseminate negative propaganda against their political opponents and promote persons who are their patron. They had two modus operandi. First, they sent a proposal to prospective buyer. For website building service, they charged IDR15 million. Meanwhile, for buzzer service, they charged IDR45 million for a team of 15 persons.

Their second modus operandi was a direct order from a specific political group. Saracen's service was in demand because it is so easy to use opinion to divide the public on the social media. They were anti-government, and in Indonesian society which is still conservative, they were used to taking benefits from religious issues. One interesting fact is that the boss of the Saracen group is affiliated with the presidential candidate who lost in the 2014 general election (Jakarta Post, 2017).

Apart from Saracen, a few moments later the Muslim Cyber Army was also exposed. This group created groups on the social media and massively discussed various political issues, especially those concerning Islam (BBC, 2018). One of the things which they spread massively was the news of the ulema persecution in early 2018 which later proved to be untrue.

This Muslim Cyber Army group works by spreading provocative issues on the social media, such as religion and communism. In addition to spreading provocative issues, this group has the ability to attack accounts on the social media which they perceive as their opponents (BBC, 2018).

Discussion

Calhoun (1992: 33) stated that the system in the public sphere allows for "a democratic alternative media strategy so effects of the mass media existence is not always negative as stated by Habermas. Under a slightly different context, what Calhoun said is relevant to refer to the conditions in Indonesia.

The more widespread use of social media makes citizens create their own space to participate in political issues. In the context of Indonesia, for example, social media is a space to discuss public issues, including campaigning during the election period or making online petitions when there are state policies which are considered impartial.

When the narrative in the mainstream media is dominated by opinion-forming elites, the Indonesian public from various backgrounds can express their ideas freely. There is no single authority on the social media. This can be referred to as a form of individual emancipation. If it is associated with the Habermasian analysis, this is also an illustration of the amateurism emergence where everyone has the potential to cast their voice in a public discourse (Habermas, 1989).

Historically, the public sphere as idealized by Habermas (1989) marked the rise of a period in the history when individuals and groups (the amateurs) in the society could shape public opinion. From here, these ordinary people give a direct response to anything which concerns their interests and try to influence it. The public sphere fostered opposition to the hierarchical and traditional forms of feudal authority which for centuries dominated political practice in Europe (Habermas, 1989).

In addition, Habermas's explanation about the re-feudalization of the public sphere remains relevant if we compare cases in Indonesia. The fact that Indonesian politicians intervene in discourses within the public sphere by using groups, such as Saracen or the Muslim Cyber Army, shows that certain politicians or interests believe that public opinion is crucial. Therefore, they try in every way to make the public opinion runs for their interests.

Re-feudalization is a condition where the state and market tightly control (read: intervention) the public sphere and change its structure dramatically (Habermas, 1989). The public sphere which is characterized as autonomous with rational discourses from citizens becomes a means for the state and market's interest contest. These interests meet each other, attract and dominate, and want to dominate each other.

When this hegemony strengthens, it tends to distort an open exchange of ideas. Even at one point it eliminates people's political participation. The society transforms from active-collective citizens to passive-individualist consumers. This change forms a habitus which determines the political point of view.

In strong individualistic reasoning, the political information overload will lead to a hardening of the people's apolitical attitude. People are antipathy and reluctant to get involved in political life because the politics has never touched the root of their problems. In fact, politics is related to public policies which regulate the lives of many people. In order for the community to play an active role in making various policies, the public sphere must be deliberated (Habermas, 1989). However, the discovery of the Saracen and also the Muslim Cyber Army as a group that produced hoaxes and fake news at the same time shows how vulnerable it is to intervene the public sphere on the social media. Therefore, he also pointed out some limitations of the public sphere.

There are at least three weaknesses of the public sphere which are immediately apparent by looking at this case study. First, he pointed out that there is no such thing as equal and free access to the public sphere on the social media (Crossley, 2004). Technically even though everyone has access to the internet and social media, it does not mean that there is equality of opinion, let alone that opinion is accepted. Social media in a further stage has formed an unbalanced system and structure for its users. In Indonesia, for example, social media has produced political buzzers and opinion leaders whose writings have gone viral and have become a new form of authority on the social media. They are the ones who have an important influence in measuring public tone or sentiment on the social media. Public opinion is no longer really the voice of the majority but only a few.

Sastramidjaja and Wijayanto (2022) identified how this can happen. In their study, they mentioned that since the 2019 presidential election, the number of what they call cybertroops has increased dramatically, especially to mobilize public opinion consensus regarding controversial government policies, such as the revision of the law on the Corruption Eradication Commission in 2019, government policies related to the New Normal at the beginning of the pandemic in 2020, and passing of the law on job creation or commonly referred to as the Omnibus Law which triggered massive demonstrations in mid-2020.

In these events, the role of these cybertroops is ad hoc and involves a fluid mass on the social media. Indeed, there are actors behind the scenes who design the issues raised and use popular buzzers on the social media. Sastramidjaja and Wijayanto (2022) called them figures who are paid to manipulate public opinion. This manipulation works when the public on the social media becomes influenced by the opinions they make.

This happens because opposing opinions will be delegitimized in various ways, including by taking actions such as doxxing and spreading fake news regarding parties who are against government policies.

The study also stated that the digital public sphere in Indonesia is narrowing not only because of the manipulation of political groups that are getting stronger, but also due to repressive regulations. In this case, the regulation in question is the ITE (Electronic Information and Transaction) Law, which since its promulgation in 2008 has criminalized and restricted the voices of critical groups in the society. Not only that, in limiting protests by civil society, the government has begun to use cyber repression measures, such as turning off internet connections and social media. This, for example, occurred during protests ahead of the announcement of the 2019 presidential election results and also protests in Papua and West Papua in August 2019 (Sastramidjaja and Wijayanto, 2022).

Groups such as Saracen, Muslim Cyber Army, and various other cybertroops inject models of authority on the social media by using religious and political sentiments which can trigger debates on the cyberspace. As mentioned in the previous section, the injection process of poisoning the public debate on the social media was carried out by cloning 800,000 social media accounts (Kompas, 2017). These hundreds of thousands of accounts then spread propaganda messages, including hoax information, which was usually anti-government.

This critique of impossible access complies with what Eley (1992) said when he asserted that Habermas over-idealized the public sphere as a discursive and rational arena, but ignored that naturally the sphere creates exclusivity and repression.

Second, the intervention of fake news and hoaxes by the Saracen group affiliated with political figures makes any public opinion formed on the social media vulnerable to manipulation and not immune from political interests. The ideal situation that the public sphere must be independent of the state and market is certainly not achieved. Crossley and Roberts (2004) mentioned that Habermas simplified power relations in the public sphere by simplifying complex media practices.

The Saracen case in Indonesia shows that there are certain political interests which want to influence the discourse on the social media. To achieve their goals, this group used money and they work according to the money paid. This power relation, especially between the public sphere and certain interests, must be elaborated further in order to understand the phenomenon more fully (Dahlgren, 2005). In this discussion, Habermas's public sphere model is not able to deconstruct it.

Third, as mentioned by Crossley and Roberts (2004:10), the bourgeois public sphere will give rise to what they called "counterpublic spheres". While the public sphere presupposes that the exchange of arguments occurs rationally, the communicative abundance on the social media actually makes public discourse less knowledgeable. This shallowness can be observed from the tendency of the importance of "image" rather than "substance", "quantity" rather than "quality" and "action" rather than "idea" on the social media.

The Indonesian government has charged groups, such as Saracen and the Muslim Cyber Army, with the ITE Law which regulates defamation on the social media. On the one hand, it guarantees citizens' human rights by trying to eliminate factors which are detrimental and even attack the rights of citizens. However, it once again shows how the idea of a public sphere by Habermas is difficult to solve the problem. The reason is that the law and strict attitude of the regulations show how dependent the public and public sphere are on the state.

This shows how the public sphere relies on weak assumptions about its independence from the state. As explained by Thomassen (2010), in reality the state always intervenes in the public sphere in particular and civil society in general, for example through regulations, maintaining order, providing infrastructure, and even intervening in the market.

Conclusions

This essay has briefly described Habermas's idea about the public sphere, pointed out the debates which have arisen, and demonstrated the relevance and weakness of this idea in the context of case studies in Indonesia. The case studies in Indonesia regarding social media and the interest groups which tried to pollute the social media are a good illustration to explain the public sphere.

In Indonesia, the public sphere on the social media is formed along with the development of communication technology. On the one hand, social media has a role in empowering citizens who are disadvantaged by state policies. Through social media, citizens have the space to express their opinions directly. This shows the emancipatory potential of the public sphere. Meanwhile, on the other hand, the existence of a group of hoax spreaders who have strong economic support makes the public sphere vulnerable to intervention. In a public sphere which has been intervened by political economy forces, it is difficult to expect that there will be an exchange of ideas or a rational dialogue.

In several respects, there are historical similarities between the case studies in Indonesia and Habermas's historical analysis. For instance, regarding the re-feudalization of public spheres and also the rise of amateurism. Amateurism means that everyone has the same potential and opportunity to speak out. In the bourgeois public sphere, public opinion is led by intellectual and political elites. However, now that authority has

spread on the social media.

Another similarity is also found in terms of economic and political issues which influence and dominate today's development of communication technology. It is comparable to the political economy interests which dominated the bourgeois public sphere in the past. At that time, the political economy interests were also a determining factor in deciding which issues were considered private and public. This made Habermas get a lot of criticisms.

In this context, various shortcomings in Habermas's public sphere, including various criticisms arising, do not mean that this idea has lost its relevance. Criticisms as proposed by Fraser (1992)

and Benhabib (1992) expand and strengthen the public sphere itself.

Fraser's (2007:199) idea of "transnationalization of public sphere" which revises and strengthens Habermas's public sphere is interesting to continue as an analytical tool to observe the phenomenon of social media and the changing world. Last but not least, this essay shows that in fact the public sphere is a concept which always experiences tension. The ideals of the public sphere of equality, inclusiveness, and rationality are considered to be difficult to realize, but the hope for a transformation to a more progressive direction is also maintained.

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