



**DIGITAL PUBLIC SPACE
AND THE FACE OF INDONESIAN POLITICAL EDUCATION**

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Abstract

Reporting on digital mass media often vulgarly takes a position in favor of interests. Is the partiality direct, or is it in the form of framing? Television shows and newspaper reports have even become the public's 'breakfast'. The mass media is increasingly becoming a determinant of the cognitive menu of people's daily thoughts. And not a few are lulled into believing that it is the most true and authentic. This article directs attention to the role of social media as a digital public space for Indonesian people's cognition. By using Jurgen Habermas' theoretical frame on the public sphere, the author concludes that digital media plays a significant role in shaping the public's way of thinking which tends to be co-opted to political power and capital owners. This way of thinking then forms a mass culture that is prone to authoritarianism. The findings of this research also serve as a warning to stakeholders who must be more vigilant in anticipating the globalization of digital media which can actually change the face of political education and the future of our democracy.

Keywords: *Social Media, Digital Public Space, Mass Culture, Political Education.*

Introduction

A number of new theories of mass-culture and mass-society explain the vulnerability of modern democracy to the power of radio and film as tools of propaganda (Swingewood 1977; Sproule 1987; Lacey 1996). These theories blatantly prove that media propaganda can bind people's solidarity for a fascist state. Then, can the public and public space, and even democracy be realized effectively in this day and age, where the mass media is increasingly playing a significant role?

It is Jurgen Habermas, a German philosopher who is a master of modernism, who claims to be able to maintain a rational direction of democracy, free from capital interests and authoritarian grip. the 18th-century bourgeois model of the Public Sphere provides a

normative guide to this notion. The pre-eminence of Habermas's response is rooted in scholarly discourses on political theory and political philosophy, combined with history. From here, Habermas spreads a scent of optimism that democratization will continue despite the increasingly massive onslaught of the media nowadays.

However, by his critics, Habermas's conception of the Public Sphere is considered to have a historical defect from the time he was conceived. As is known, the characteristics of public space, which Habermas terms as "communication conditions" are characterized; rational, free from domination, and equal (accessible to all levels of society). This claim turns out to be undermined by historical-critical lawsuits, that there cannot be 'equality'; 'ratio' is not a necessary foundation; and the mass media of the 20th century were forever under the domination of the state but never corrupted the public sphere (see Negt and Kluge, 1972; Calhoun, 1992).

In today's digital technology era, digital mass media plays an important role in informing and directing public opinion. Digital mass media has even changed the structure of public space into a 'space' where rhetoric, public benefit, plus mixed advertising profits are prioritized simultaneously. The public can easily access news, opinions, and commodities in a matter of seconds with the touch of a finger on a sophisticated gadget; laptops, tablets, smartphones, through social media networks, citizen journalism, and various application stores presented by a number of well-known software applications such as Android, Apple Macintosh, Windows, and many more. People's lives are truly radically connected by digital media.

What can be understood from this phenomenon? Today's society is of course much more literate (aware) of the current social and political economy than the conditions of society in the past. With openness and ease of access to all the information needed, citizens become more 'rich' in information, increase their imagination power and become more educated. But not for people with a low level of thinking maturity and minimal economic income who are often called "laymen", then it is very likely that the positive effect above will not be obtained, instead it will further plunge the ordinary public into the waves of entangled political issues.

Method

This article uses the method of library research (library research) which refers to descriptive methods of critical and comparative analysis. This method aims to capture the primary ideas from the main issues of media and political education in Indonesia which are enriched with other relevant sources. Facts are approached through Jurgen Habermas's theoretical framework on the public sphere, with a critical understanding of the ideas of Habermas and his staff, including his works and style of thought. The aim of the study is to understand the real condition of politics in the country, as well as to criticize the Habermasian ideas confronted (*vis a vis*) by the current context of political education in Indonesia.

Discourse

1) *Habermasian Public Space*

In Habermas's interpretation, the history of capitalism and mercantilism essentially requires a 'space' where information can be exchanged freely. This then became the forerunner of the bourgeois public space, where not only business information, but also culture and politics were allowed to be discussed freely (Habermas 1991, 14-26). From this historical analysis, Habermas concludes that it is the characteristics of public space that play a role in advancing a democratic state. In bourgeois public spaces--such as coffee houses, salons and the press--he finds conversation between the interests of equal and unequal civilian citizens, which in turn allows for rational discussion and debate about state policy and action.

Habermas' positive assessment of the mass media as the environment for the formation of public space is in fact a sharp turn from the previous social theory tradition as reflected by the mass culture criticism of his mentors from the Frankfurt school, Max Horkheimer and Theodore Adorno. Both of them criticized mass production and mass culture of the 20th century which were claimed to be the result of the dominant ideology rather than the construction of public space (Jay, 1973).

Habermas is well aware that large-scale capitalist and monopolistic media can threaten the structure of the political public space so that it becomes merely a media for commodity consumption. Because of that, he also tries to 'protect' the definition of a healthy public space as a space that requires small-scale media so that it is not polluted

by commercial interests (Habermas 181-88). But, again, the facts prove, Commercial media nevertheless require huge capital investment, and as a large and economically powerful organization then it will crowd out its smaller competitors. This strength and power then get rid of equality and common sense as a feature of this Habermasian public space. Habermas then offers the concept of "re-feudalization" of public space, as an effort to restore the function of public space as a forum for public representation and not as a vehicle for public discourse/debate.

2) *Political Education*

Education is entirely an ethical matter. The orientation is printing humans, and not technical robots. That's about what Hegel, the philosopher, meant. And as if interpreting Hegel's words, Sutan Sjahrir also once said more or less the same thing, that "education is not just a routine of adding more school buildings, adding more people who are good at reading, or adding more graduates. But education that is oriented towards high ideals forms a new mind, a new person, a new society" (Sjahrir, 1982:240).

Hegel's thoughts, as well as those of Sjahrir's, are at the same time sharp criticism of anyone who still extols the sophistication of educational technology but is indifferent to the uncertain fate of teachers; or the educational gap experienced by poor students in rural and urban areas; or even the problem of immorality as a result of being exposed to sophisticated gadget technology for teenagers, which is increasingly troubling.

For Sjahrir, education that is only oriented towards technical achievement and not ethical is nothing but colonialism itself. That is, the people who adopted it were not truly independent. Because independence is everything for Sjahrir. Freedom is not just a goal of political struggle, but a way for the people to actualize themselves freely without hindrance. "That is freedom in thinking, speaking, religion, writing, get a life, get an education" (Sjahrir, 1994:15).

3) *Criticism of Habermas' Public Space*

One of the most influential criticisms after Habermas published his work *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*, was that of a philosopher, Nancy Fraser, who refuted Habermas' four assumptions regarding: (1) equality of social status; (2) the plurality of public spaces, (3) the orientation of public interests and welfare, and

(4) a situation free from domination. Fraser believes that the public space created by Habermas never existed in the 18th century, let alone in the 20th century.

The first reason, the classification of social status is not successful, the gap continues to occur through the hierarchy of everyday cultural habits. In this case, Fraser based Bourdieu's (1984) statement which he thinks is more accurate, that a Rational Deliberation and debate are bourgeois social practices that are individualistic in nature, while other social classes have less of a role in practices like this, thus placing them at a disadvantage.

Second, the plurality of public spaces is also seen as mere fiction. This was revealed by Fraser by basing his argument on Raymond Williams' concept of 'alternative culture and oppositional culture' which is the result of his study of culture in its resistance to cultural hegemony (Williams, 1977; Hall and Jefferson, 1976). What Williams is trying to say is that alternative cultures implicitly define each domain as a homogeneous identity-based group, rather than a plural deliberative institution (Warner, 2002). Identity (and contestation) in it is also based more on 'emotions' than 'ratio'. This further proves his deviation from Habermas' normative-rational public space.

The three Frasers disagreed with Habermas' assumption that deliberations in the public sphere were in the interest and general welfare. Fraser instead argues that in a multilevel (plural) society each has limited interests and common good. A layered society has a "zero sum" character (has one winner), where what is good for one group is bad for another. The purpose of deliberation only becomes futile (Fraser:129, 131). Fraser firmly adheres to the notion of competition of interests among the public. In defining relations with each other as 'competition'. Fraser reintroduced power as a factor. Fraser abandoned the deliberative method that Habermas considered important, and adopted Eley's and Murdoch's proposals that proposed solutions to differences between public inequalities be resolved through contestation, or in some other way, but not necessarily by deliberation.

Fourth, Fraser rejects the notion that public space must be independent of the state. Habermas seems to be saying that one time in the 18th century, the state had carried out a policy of *laissez-faire* (allowance of 'the state') towards the public. In the 18th century, the center of power was the state. So the need to secede is just a desire to protect oneself from state control.

Discussion

1) *Digital Media: Threat or Hope?*

This is a classic question, because for a long time the mass media has been recognized as a threat to democratization. Ridden by two superpowers; global capitalism and authoritarianism, civil society is easily propagated, public spheres are distorted, democracy is then hijacked by fascists. That's the story of the past. Today, fascism is dead, and more and more citizens are becoming politically aware, but is all that enough to give hope for democracy?

Some parties are even still adamant that the mass media since the 20th century has always been a 'ghost' ready to subvert public space and democracy. Film, radio and television as big industries, some of which are owned by conglomerates, especially those that work closely with power, have great potential to propagate and instill ideas of public space and limit discourse. Those who daily provide "food menu" treats for millions of people. Which is often accepted as a delicious truth.

George Creel in several of his writings has proven how effective war propaganda is for foreign policy in America. Even some 'realists', such as Walter Lippmann, argue that propaganda is necessary to channel the choices of the masses (Gary 1999: 3). A number of new theories of mass-culture and mass-society explain the vulnerability of modern democracy to the power of radio and film as tools of propaganda (Swingewood 1977; Sproule 1987; Lacey 1996). These theories blatantly prove that media propaganda can bind people's solidarity for a fascist state.

Then, can the public and public space, and even democracy be realized effectively in this day and age, where the mass media plays an increasingly significant role?

It is Jurgen Habermas, a German philosopher who is a master of modernism, who claims to be able to maintain the direction of democracy (especially liberal democracy) which is rational, free from the interests of capital and authoritarian grip. Through his work, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*, Habermas initiated the conception of "Public Space" which can be traced back to the bourgeois tradition of the 18th century.

The notion of the public sphere itself emerged as part of the liberal political Enlightenment philosophical tradition. And the 18th-century model of the bourgeois

Public Sphere became the normative guide for Habermas's ideas. The pre-eminence of Habermas's response is rooted in scholarly discourses on political theory and political philosophy, combined with history. From here, Habermas spreads a scent of optimism that democratization will continue despite the increasingly massive onslaught of the media nowadays.

2) “Crowd-Mass Room”: *An alternative idea*

In addition to the Habermasian term "Publik" above, there is another tradition about the public, rooted in social reality and not from political concepts and theories, framed in terms of different issues and questions, but which also places the mass media at the center of public ideas. In contrast to the liberal tradition of the public sphere which focuses on deliberation, this tradition takes into account what actions follow in a deliberation. This approach originates from the French theorist, Gabriel Tarde, who distinguished between 'public' and 'crowd' in the late 19th century within the framework of crowd psychology theory (Tarde, 1969).

Around the same time as Tarde wrote, the American sociologist Robert Park was completing a dissertation on the same subject, the difference between "crowd" and "society" (Park 1972). Tarde and Park wrote at a time when the mass media were in control of a metropolitan daily newspaper, both of which greatly valued the media's role as a center for the public good. Park later founded a sociological study of collective behavior that includes studies of crowds, publics, and other collective gatherings.

Crowds are mass actions that are different from the public sense (Cantril, 1935, 1940). Even though they are different, the two are connected, but they emphasize the social dimension rather than politics. This is illustrated in a public debate in America between Walter Lippmann and John Dewey in 1920 (Gary, 1999). Lippmann considered the masses who had not been able to carry out their role as 'really' public in need of guidance through propaganda, namely mass media messages by educated elites (Lippmann, 1925). Dewey, on the other hand, understood the public as arising naturally from people's efforts to solve common problems, with solutions which were then institutionalized in government (Dewey 1927, 112, 149).

The two traditional concepts of the public and the public sphere from Habermas and Tarde and Park include the media as an important element for public deliberation.

However, the media is considered in both traditions as a child (branch) of the public space. In contrast, seeing the growth of various mass media with varying sizes and convergence in the 21st century, the media seems to be the main force for public space.

3) Digital Media Era: Virtual Public Space, Virtual Democracy Education?

In today's digital technology era, digital mass media plays an important role in informing and directing public opinion. Digital mass media has even changed the structure of public space into a 'space' where rhetoric, public benefit, plus mixed advertising profits are prioritized simultaneously. The public can easily access news, opinions, and commodities in a matter of seconds with the touch of a finger on a sophisticated gadget; laptops, tablets, smartphones, through social media networks, citizen journalism, and various application stores presented by a number of well-known software applications such as Android, Apple Macintosh, Windows, and many more.

People's lives are truly radically connected by digital media. In the morning we read the news in online newspapers, in the afternoon we are treated to friends' posts on the wall of the Facebook page regarding the hot issue of genuine and fraudulent presidential candidates, then in the afternoon we are sent a broadcast via the BBM Group regarding the chaos within the party which is claimed to be political engineering. Not to mention the news and opinions that we hear and read on TV news, headline news, or on the free pages of a number of citizen journalism sites.

Closing

What can be understood from this situation? In the context of politics and democracy, today's society is certainly far more politically literate than conditions in the past. With openness and ease of access to all the information needed, citizens become more 'rich' in information, increase their imagination power and become more educated. However, especially for people with a low level of thinking maturity and minimal economic income, it is very likely that the positive effect above will not be obtained, instead it will plunge the ordinary public even more into the waves of intertwined political issues.

Then what is the impact on the public space and democracy? In addition to changing the structure of public space which is of course very different from the conditions when the idea was first born, digitalization of information also affects the conditions of citizen communication within it, and in turn affects the quality of citizen democracy, if not instead immersing them in political and democratic apathy. The notion of Habermasian Public Space is increasingly being challenged for its relevance today, if it still holds on to claims of validity and accuracy that are based on rationality, equality, plurality and are oriented towards understanding. Because the face of digitalized public space is now increasingly irrational, identityless, tiered and multilevel, and more oriented towards the goal of controlling opinion. What exists now is that there are so many variants of public space that are mediated and contest with each other, and no longer aim to understand each other but to influence the public through opinion.

In such a situation, public rationality is increasingly nullified, while the authenticity of reporting is increasingly eroded by mediated imagery. Talking about figures and all the uproar over political issues that appear on the public surface, are spread in digital media segments, on Facebook pages and loose articles in online daily newspapers, what remains in the mind is a battle of competing opinions. Public space becomes an arena for the representation of ideas that are mutually disputed. Which of them is the most 'powerful' to influence the public, that is the superior one and will become a political reality.

This is our real politics today. This is our democracy. For many reasons, I respect the ideas of Fraser, Tarde and Park. However, there is still deep sympathy and longing for Habermas' ideas as an ideal that must be realized.

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