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The Digital Public Sphere And The Face Of Indonesian Political Education

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Abstrak

The reporting of digital mass media vulgarly always side with the interests. Is it siding directly, or is it in framing? Television shows and newspaper reports have become the public's 'breakfast'. The media increasingly determines the cognitive menu of people's everyday thoughts which are convincingly lulled that that is the most true and authentic. This article discusses the role of social media as a digital public space for Indonesian people's cognition. Using library research and critical and comparative analysis, this study aims to capture the primary ideas about media and political education in Indonesia within the theoretical framework of Jurgen Habermas' Public Sphere. This paper concludes that digital media plays a significant role in shaping the way of thinking of the public 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, Politics, Democracy

Abstrak

Pemberitaan media massa digital seringkali secara fulgar mengambil posisi keberpihakan pada kepentingan. Apakah keberpihakan bersifat langsung, ataukah dalam bentuk pembingkaihan (*framing*). Tayangan-tayangan televisi dan pemberitaan koran bahkan telah menjadi 'sarapan pagi' publik. Media massa kian menjadi penentu menu kognitif pikiran sehari-hari masyarakat yang terbuai secara meyakinkan bahwa itulah yang paling benar dan otentik. Artikel ini mengarahkan perhatian pada peran media social sebagai ruang public digital di Indonesia. Dengan menggunakan metode studi kepustakaan (*library research*) dan telaah kritis dan komparatif, studi ini ditujukan untuk mencandra gagasan primer dari permasalahan media dan pendidikan politik di Indonesia yang dibaca dalam frame teoretik Ruang Publik (*public sphere*) Jurgen Habermas. Tulisan ini menyimpulkan bahwa media digital berperan secara signifikan dalam membentuk cara pikir publik yang cenderung terkooptasi kepada kekuasaan politik dan pemilik modal. Cara pikir itu kemudian membentuk budaya massa yang rentan terhadap otoritarianisme. Temuan riset ini

sekaligus juga menjadi *warning* bagi pemangku kepentingan yang harus lebih waspada mengantisipasi globalisasi media digital yang justru dapat merubah wajah pendidikan politik dan masa depan demokrasi kita.

Kata Kunci: Media Sosial, Ruang Publik Digital, Pendidikan Politik, Demokrasi

Intoduction

A number of new mass-culture and mass-society theories explain the vulnerability of modern democracies vis-a-vis the power of radio and film¹ as propaganda tools². These theories openly prove that media propaganda can bind people's solidarity to a fascist state. Then, can the public and the public sphere, and even democracy be realized effectively in this day and age, where digital mass media is increasingly playing a significant role? It is Jurgen Habermas, a German philosopher who is a proponent of modernism, who claims to be able to maintain a rational democratic direction, free from capital interests, and authoritarian grip. The 18th-century bourgeois Public Space model served as the normative guide for this idea. The excellence of Habermas' response stems from scientific discourse on political theory and political philosophy, combined with history. From here, Habermas spreads the scent of optimism that democratization will continue despite the increasingly massive media attacks today.

However, Habermas's conception of the Public Space has been criticized for

having historical defects. As is well known, the characteristics of the public sphere, which Habermas termed as "conditions of communication" are characterized by; rational, free from domination, and equal (accessible to all levels of citizens). This claim has been undermined by historical-criticism claims, which say there is no 'equality'; that 'ratio' is not a necessary foundation; and the mass media of the twentieth century were forever under state domination but never damaged the public sphere³.

In this era, digital mass media plays an important role in informing and directing public opinion⁴. Digital mass media has even changed the structure of public space to 'aerospace' where rhetoric, public benefit, plus mixed advertising profits, are prioritized simultaneously. The public can easily access news, opinions and commodities in just 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 have become radically connected by digital media.

What can be understood from this phenomenon? Today's society is certainly much more literate (aware) of the current situation of social life, political economy than the conditions of the past. With openness and ease of accessing all the information needed, people become more 'rich' in information, increase their imagination power and become more educated. But not for people with low levels of thinking maturity and lack of economic income, then the positive effect above is very likely not to be obtained, instead it plunges the general public even more into a wave of intertwined political issues.

Method

This article was compiled based on the results of qualitative research with the type of literature review that aims to map, categorize, and analyze Jurgen Habermas's theory of the public sphere and its relevance to the study of political education in Indonesia. The type of data used in this study is library data that is directly related to the main ideas of Jurgen Habermas, whether those who support or oppose the Habermasian concepts. The technique used in understanding Habermas's texts as a whole is content analysis, which is a

systematic tool for observing, analyzing, and processing the selected data. The purpose of content analysis is to draw conclusions by identifying the characteristics of certain messages in a work of text in a structured and systematic way. The sequence of content analysis consists of reviewing and understanding the data, taking relevant essences, gathering information in accordance with the formulation of the problem and research objectives (proving the problem, answering the problem, and achieving the goal), classifying the information, and making conclusions.

Results and Discussion

Digital Media: Threat or Hope?

This question is actually a classic, because the mass media has long been recognized as a threat to democratization. Backed by two superpowers; global capitalism and authoritarianism, citizens are easily propagated, public spaces are distorted, democracy is then hijacked by fascists. That's the story of the past. Currently, fascism is dead, more and more citizens are aware of politics, but is all that enough to give hope to democracy?

Some parties are even steadfast in the belief that since the 20th century the mass media has always been the "enemy" who is ready to subvert the public sphere and democracy. Film, radio and television as big

industries, some of which are owned by conglomerates, especially those that are intimately coupled with power, have great potential to propagate and drown the idea of public space and limit discourse. Those who daily provide a spectacle to millions of people that are not infrequently accepted as true.

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 choice of the masses⁵. A number of new mass-culture and mass-society theories explain the vulnerability of modern democracy vis-a-vis the power of radio and film as propaganda tools⁶. These theories clearly prove that media propaganda can bind people's solidarity to a fascist state. Then, can the public and the public sphere, 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 retainer of modernism, who claims to be able to maintain the direction of democracy (especially liberal democracy) that is rational, free from capital interests, and authoritarian grip. Through his work, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*, Habermas initiated the concept of "Public Sphere" which has been

traced its origins in the bourgeois tradition of the 18th century. The idea of the public sphere itself emerged as part of the liberal political Enlightenment philosophical tradition. And the eighteenth-century model of the bourgeois Public Sphere became the normative guide for this idea of Habermas. The excellence of Habermas' response stems from scientific discourse on political theory and political philosophy, combined with history. From here, Habermas spreads the scent of optimism that democratization will continue despite the increasingly massive media attacks today.

Public Political Education

Education is entirely a matter of ethics. The orientation is to print humans, and not technical robots. That's roughly what Hegel, the philosopher, meant. And as if interpreting Hegel's words, Sutan Sjahrir also 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 scholars. But education that is oriented towards high ideals forms a new mind, a new human being, a new society"⁷.

Hegel's thoughts, as well as Sjahrir's, are at the same time a sharp critique to anyone who still glorifies the sophistication of educational technology but is ignorant of the uncertain fate of teachers; or educational disparities experienced by poor students in

rural and urban areas; or even the problem of immorality due to exposure to sophisticated gadget technology by teenagers who are increasingly worrying. For Sjahrir, education that is only oriented to technical achievement and not ethical is nothing but colonialism itself. This means that the people who adopt it are 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 any obstacles. "That is freedom in thinking, speaking, religious, writing, getting a life, getting an education ..."⁸.

Habermasian Public Sphere

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 sphere, where not only business information, but also culture and politics were possible to be discussed freely⁹. From this historical analysis, Habermas concludes that it is the characteristics of the public sphere that play a role in advancing a democratic state. In bourgeois public spheres--such as coffee houses, salons and the press--he finds conversations between the interests of civilians who are equal and without inequality, which in turn allows for

rational discussion and debate about state policy and action.

Habermas' positive assessment of the mass media as an environment for the formation of public sphere is actually a sharp turn from the previous tradition of social theory as reflected by the mass culture criticism of his mentors from the Frankfurt school, Max Horkheimer and Theodore Adorno. Both criticized the mass production and mass culture of the twentieth century which they claimed to be the result of dominant ideology rather than the construction of public space¹⁰.

Habermas is well aware that large-scale capitalist and monopolistic media can threaten the structure of the political public sphere, thus turning it into a mere commodity consumption media. Therefore, he also tries to 'protect' the definition of a healthy public space as a space that requires small-scale media so as not to be polluted by commercial interests¹¹. However, again the facts prove, commercial media however require a large capital investment, and as a large and economically strong organization will subsequently get rid of its smaller competitor organizations. This power and power then removes equality and common sense as the characteristics of this Habermasian public sphere. Habermas then offered the concept of "re-feudalization" of the Public Space, as an effort to restore the

function of the Public Space as a forum for public representation and not as a vehicle for public discourse/debate.

Critics to Habermas Public Sphere

One of the most influential criticisms after Habermas published his work *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*, was that of the philosopher, Nancy Fraser, who refuted Habermas' four assumptions regarding: (1) equality of social status; (2) plurality of public spaces, (3) orientation of public interests and welfare, and (4) domination-free situation. Fraser believes that the public space created by Habermas never existed in the 18th century, let alone the 20th century.

The first reason, the classification of social status does not work, the gap continues to occur through the hierarchy of everyday cultural habits. In this case, Fraser based Bourdieu's statement (1984) which he thought was more accurate, that a Rational Deliberation and debate were individualistic bourgeois social practices, while other social classes had less role in these practices, so that put them at a disadvantage¹².

The Second, the plurality of public space is also seen as mere fiction. This is revealed by Fraser by relying his argument on Raymond Williams' concept of 'alternative culture and oppositional culture'¹³ which is the result of his study of culture in its

resistance to cultural hegemony¹⁴. What Williams is trying to say is that alternative cultures implicitly define each domain as a homogeneous identity-based group, rather than a pluralistic deliberation institution¹⁵. Identity (and contestation) in it is also based on 'emotion' rather than 'ratio'. Which further proves his deviation from the normative-rational public sphere created by Habermas.

The third, Fraser disagreed with Habermas' assumption that deliberation in the public sphere is in the public interest and welfare. In fact, Fraser argues that in a pluralistic society, each has limited interests and the common good. Layered society is characterized by "zero sum" (having one winner), where what is good for one group is bad for another. The purpose of deliberation is only in vain¹⁶. Fraser firmly adheres to the notion of competition of interest among the public. In defining each other's relationship as 'competition'. Fraser reintroduced power as a factor. Fraser abandons the deliberative method that Habermas considers important, and adopts Eley and Murdoch's proposal which proposes a solution to the difference between public inequalities being resolved through contestation, or in other ways, but not necessarily by deliberation.

The Fourth, Fraser rejects the idea that the public sphere should be independent of

the state. It is as if Habermas is saying that once in the 18th century, the state had carried out a policy of *laissez-faire* (abandonment of the 'state') towards the public. In the 18th century, the center of power was the state. So the need to secede is only a form of desire to protect oneself from state control.

Crowd-Mass Public Sphere: An Alternative Idea

In addition to the Habermasian term Public above, there is another tradition of the public, rooted in social reality and not from political concepts and theories, framed in different issues and questions, but also placing 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 comes from the French theorist, Gabriel Tarde, who distinguished between the 'public' and the 'crowd' in the late 19th century within the framework of crowd psychology theory¹⁷.

At the same time as Tarde, an American sociologist, Robert Park wrote, he completed a dissertation on the same subject, the difference between "crowd" and "society"¹⁸. Tarde and Park write at a time when the mass media were in control of a metropolitan daily newspaper, both of which highly valued the media's role as a

center for public affairs. Park later founded a sociological study of collective behavior that included the study of crowds, publics, and other collective gatherings. Crowd is a mass action which is different from the public understanding¹⁹. However, both are connected, but the social dimension is more dominant than the political. This was illustrated in a public debate in America between Walter Lippmann and John Dewey in 1920²⁰. Lippmann considers the masses who have not been able to carry out their role as 'truly' public in need of guidance through propaganda, namely mass media messages by an educated elite²¹. Dewey, on the other hand, conceived of the public as being born naturally out of people's efforts to solve common problems, with solutions which were then institutionalized in government²². The concepts of the public and the public sphere from both Habermas and Tarde and Park include the media as an important element for public deliberation. However, the media is considered in both traditions as part of the public sphere. On the other hand, 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 the public sphere.

Digital Media Age: Virtual Public Space, Virtual Democracy Education?

In this era of digital technology, digital mass media plays an important role in informing and directing public opinion. Digital mass media has even changed the structure of public space to 'space' where rhetoric, public benefit, plus mixed advertising profits, are prioritized simultaneously. The public can easily access news, opinions and commodities in just 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 radically connected by digital media. In the morning we read the news in online newspapers, in the afternoon we were treated to a friend's post on the wall of the Facebook page about the hot issue of genuine presidential candidates and fraudsters, then in the afternoon a broadcast was sent via BBM Group regarding the chaos in the party body which was claimed to be political engineering. Not to mention the news and opinions we hear and read on tv news, headline news, or on the free pages of a number of citizen journalism sites.

Conclusion

What can be understood from this situation? In the context of politics and

democracy, today's society is certainly much more politically literate than conditions in the past. With openness and ease of accessing all the information needed, people become more 'rich' in information, increase their imagination power and become more educated. However, especially for people with low levels of thinking maturity and lack of economic income, it is very likely that the above positive effect will not be obtained, instead it will plunge the general public into a tidal wave of intertwined political issues.

Then what is the impact on the public sphere and democracy? In addition to changing the structure of the public space, which is certainly very different from the conditions in which the idea was first born, the digitization of information also affects the communication conditions of citizens in it, and in turn affects the quality of citizens' democracy, if not immersed in political apathy and democracy. The idea of the Habermasian Public Space is increasingly being challenged for its relevance now, if it still holds on to claims of validity and accuracy that are based on rationality, equality, plurality, and are oriented towards understanding. This is because the face of a digitalized public space is now increasingly irrational, has an identity, is tiered and multilevel, and is more oriented towards the goal of controlling opinion. What exists now is that there are so many variants of the public sphere that are mediated and

contested with each other, and no longer aim to understand each other but to influence the public through opinion.

In such a situation, the rationality of the public is increasingly nullified, while the authenticity of the news is increasingly being eroded by the mediated image. Talking about figures and all the frenzy of political issues that appear on the public surface, spread in digital media segments, on Facebook pages and freelance articles in online newspapers, what sticks in the mind is a battle of opinions. competing opinions. Public space becomes an arena for representing ideas that contradict each other. Which of them has the most 'strong' influence on the public, that is the one that excels 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's idea as an ideal that must continue to be realized.

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