SPEED-SPACE
AS THE NORMS AND VALUES OF COMMUNICATION
IN CYBERSPACE SOCIETY

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A. Context of Indonesian Media

In the era when Soeharto ruled the country of Indonesia (1965-1998), the problem of Indonesian media was government control of the press for its content and distribution, either directly through government censorship or indirectly through the ownership of the major media companies by Soeharto's family and their colleagues. The largest print media and four of Indonesian's five television stations at that time were owned by private companies in which New Order supporters held controlling interest (the other one left was Televisi Republik Indonesia (TVRI), wholly-owned by Indonesian government). Even the newsprint was monopolized and controlled by a New Order disciple.

Through its grip of key media companies, the tentacles of Soeharto's family ensured a vertical integration between political authority and the press. They curbed the press and exercised control over media content and editorial opinions. News and opinions unfavorable to Soeharto, his family and the New Order were excluded from the press and the government restrictions on media licensing made certain that new media outlets did not materialize as forums for alternative views. Therefore, as a de facto apparatus of the state, the Indonesian media during the New Order era served to build and maintain the authoritarian political order. Private media sought to become "partners" with the state and served as instruments of the New Order hegemony.

The press then had a dual or double position – one, as a hegemony instrument, and two, as a capitalist institution. The first put them in the role of guarding the stability of the New Order'' authority while the second needed to focus on gaining market dominance.

This dual role of the press as government instrument and profit-driven corporations produced interesting contradictions. As profit-driven corporations, the media companies found that the best way to expand their market shares and increase their profits was through the publication of "forbidden" stories. Accordingly, notwithstanding legal restrictions on media content, the press—owned primarily by Soeharto's family members and New Order disciples—began to ignore certain of the content restrictions in an effort to produce stories that would increase their audiences, even though such stories violated the laws imposed by the very regime that the media served. Yet

the privileges of TV owners resulted in them being able to find ways to avoid the regulations. Despite the media's bending (and occasional breaking) of the laws controlling media content, certain topics remained strictly taboo in the Indonesian media, and the issues of Marxism, racism, and the behavior and role of Soeharto and his family were rarely discussed. The state authority always managed to come up with another legal provision to counter any that opposed their authority, and those individuals who penned such stories, or stories questioning the New Order's commitment to human rights or democracy, quickly found themselves seeking new employment, if they were lucky, or languishing in jail, if they were not. This happened many times since Indonesian professional journalists held to the belief that the press was the fourth estate that had a role as a watchdog, that should publish any abuses of human rights, and support the principles of justice, and democracy. With such a stance they incurred the anger of those media owners.

Repression of the mainstream media gave space to the Internet to be used as a platform for dissent and as a weapon against state censorship. Only after the government crackdown on the current affairs periodicals such as Tempo, Editor, and DeTik in 1994 that the Internet in Indonesia began to be used as a medium for independent expression. Journalists and non-governmental organizations in particular found the Internet to be an effective means to express opinions free from the constraints imposed by the government and the media companies. Not only was the Internet free from censorship, it was also an inexpensive channel for the distribution of ideas: as the price of newsprint increased, access to the Internet remained affordable. In a nation with a web of formal and informal controls on the mainstream media, the Internet became the easy way to publish free thought.

The circle of dissent became wider and stronger as the political situation heated up. Politicians became so worried about survival that they forgot about controlling the media. Consequently, mainstream media then published and broadcast views similar to those expressed on the Internet. In addition, mainstream media came under heavy pressure from the citizenry to change the political rule in Indonesia so now the regular press also contributed to the flow of citizens' demands and also played a role as a catalyst for reform.

In the final days of Soeharto's regime, students, NGO activists, and journalists used the Internet to disseminate local information overlooked by the mainstream media, to co-ordinate demonstrations, to exchange information and to provide information to individuals and organizations outside of Indonesia. They bypassed the government-controlled media and disseminated information via emails, newsgroups, and used chat groups to exchange tips on how to resist the troops. When student demonstrators occupied the Indonesian National Parliament Building, Abigail Abrash of the Robert F. Kennedy Memorial Center for Human Rights, in Washington DC, received reports from someone inside the Parliament Building. This person had taken a laptop into the Parliament Building and was sending out updates of the situation, notwithstanding that the Parliament Building was surrounded by troops.

The anonymity of communication allowed by the Internet served as a catalyst to free speech. Sophisticated tools such as Pretty Good Privacy (PGP) protected anonymous users from being tracked by the State. Given the relative novelty of the Internet in Indonesia at the time and given the government's disorder in the face of the Economic Crisis, the limited efforts by Indonesian government agencies to control Indonesian's access to the Internet and to identify those using it

for the publication of "heretical" views were unsuccessful. They realized too late just how fast information could flow and spread via the Internet.

Indonesian scholars overseas (and overseas scholars interested in Indonesia) used this privilege to address the current taboos in order to reveal home truths. In 1990, John MacDougall—a US citizen whose firm specialized in research findings and quality articles from Indonesian media—had created a mailing-list known around the world as "Apakabar (how's life)". Considering the content and its background (research firm) of news spread out in "Apakabar", this mailing-list grew phenomenally and became a key center of information. Later on, sites and list-services regarding Indonesian hot news brightened up the Indonesian netters. Journalists posted their mainstream-rejected-news to these lists, together with other posters that consisted of academics, researchers, activists, and also military and government personnel.

The flood of uncensored views and information was printed up by student activists and entrepreneurs and sold on campuses. The white-collar workers distributed downloaded items and articles to their relatives and friends. Photocopy operators kept some of the copies and disseminated them within their neighborhood. On and on, the information spread quickly and widely like a bushfire in a dry season. Together with the advocacy works of activists, oppressed people joined the students rallies to go downtown to Parliament. Previous incidents such as the lack of food, currency's falling, student killings by troops, plundering in riots, helped foster a strong drive for unity. Mainstream media instinctively followed the market imperatives as the authorities became too busy trying to save their own lives and to maintain a watch or control on media reporting.

The inability, in the face of the Economic Crisis, of the New Order to continue to provide Indonesians with the economic advantages that formed the basis of Indonesia's social contract gave dissatisfied Indonesians a common goal: the dethroning of Soeharto and the destruction of the New Order.

Because this common goal was held so widely in Indonesia, and because the Internet was a—perhaps the—medium through which this goal was promoted and organized, information posted on the Internet in Indonesia before the resignation of Soeharto was widely regarded as credible and accurate. This was the case notwithstanding that the anonymity of the Internet and the fear of the authorities ensured that no one knew the source of the information posted or the identity of its author. The sharing of a common goal generated a degree of trust between Indonesians, and it was this trust that was the foundation of the reputation for veracity that the Internet enjoyed in Indonesia prior to the resignation of Soeharto.

B. Discussion

Speed-space is the term that Paul Virilio used to describe the speed as a milieu of communication instead of a means of communication. Speed-space or dromosphere—the sphere of speed—is the space that of electronic transmission, of high-tech machines, and therefore, man is present not via his physical presence, but via programming.

In the era of this absolute velocity of electromagnetic waves, speed is power. Through the current revolution in data transport and information processing, the higher speeds belong to the upper reaches of society who have access to the major development of the increasing speed of information transmission.

In the case of the Apakabar list, there is no doubt that its agencies were in this sphere of speed. The discussion of Indonesian taboo occurred in a digital space where the absolute speed is put to work. And in what Edward T. Hall called the high-context of the nation's atmosphere at that time, this discussion spoke in the same 'language'. The words on the computer screen therefore were richly filled with its agency's behavior, setting, and the 'uttered' speech.

However, as Paul Virilio argued that globalitarianism is social cybernetics—one can be under control and surveillance in everywhere—the Apakabar list experienced this 'menace' from the beginning of its existence. As a citizen of the US where the digital had been presenting its tremendous history, John A. MacDougall had an advantage to own and manage a digital space. And as someone whose firm specialized in research findings and quality articles from Indonesian media, MacDougall had another advantage to crowd with the upper society of information sources.

With these two advantages, MacDougall gained the 'utmost' power in the Apakabar list conference. From the very beginning, he set up rules and norms on how the interaction would run and who could join 'his' digital conference. Moderating it himself allowed him a bigger power of control and surveillance. The world of Indonesian history at that time therefore was in his hands. Although he had a researcher's mind of not taking sides, still it was up to him to decide whether the list should cover the government or just go with the flow of the mass. He chose the latter.

The communication context was becoming higher. In the offlline (actual) reality, each agency had a common feeling of depression and a collective goal of ousting Soeharto. In the online (virtual) reality, the background of the list (its owner, its firm, its agencies, its US-based server, etc.) was in the strong position of know-how. Therefore, there is a co-existence between the offline and online reality or between the actual and virtual reality, that created the valuable common trust. And as the list-discussion occurred in the speed-space where information blasted in the absolute speed, this co-existence and trust pulled the trigger to accelerate movement.

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