

**POWER AND CRITICISM: THE DYNAMICS OF DIGITAL
COMMUNICATION IN ONLINE PUBLIC SPACES**

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Abstract

The development of digital communication technology has transformed the landscape of public space into an interactive and participatory arena where power and critique confront each other. This study aims to analyze the dynamics of digital communication in Indonesia's online public space, particularly in the context of the relationship between power and society. Using a descriptive qualitative approach with digital observation (netnography), in-depth interviews, and content analysis, this study explores the phenomenon of public discourse on platforms X (Twitter), Instagram, and TikTok. The results show that power in digital space is hidden and exercised through algorithmic mechanisms and information control. Society, on the other hand, utilizes digital space as a means of resistance through humor, memes, and online activism. The digital public space ultimately becomes an arena for the dialectic between control and freedom, emphasizing the importance of critical digital literacy in maintaining democracy in the information age.

Keywords: digital communication, power, critique, online public space, digital literacy

Abstrak

Perkembangan teknologi komunikasi digital telah mengubah lanskap ruang publik menjadi arena interaktif dan partisipatif di mana kekuasaan dan kritik saling berhadapan. Penelitian ini bertujuan untuk menganalisis dinamika komunikasi digital dalam ruang publik online Indonesia, khususnya dalam konteks relasi antara kekuasaan dan masyarakat. Menggunakan pendekatan kualitatif deskriptif dengan metode observasi digital (*netnografi*), wawancara mendalam, dan analisis konten, penelitian ini menelusuri fenomena wacana publik di platform X (Twitter), Instagram, dan TikTok. Hasil penelitian menunjukkan bahwa kekuasaan dalam ruang digital bersifat tersembunyi dan dijalankan melalui mekanisme algoritmik serta kontrol informasi. Masyarakat, di sisi lain, memanfaatkan ruang digital sebagai sarana resistensi melalui humor, meme, dan aktivisme daring. Ruang publik digital akhirnya menjadi arena dialektika antara kontrol dan kebebasan, yang menegaskan pentingnya literasi digital kritis dalam menjaga demokrasi di era informasi.

Kata kunci: komunikasi digital, kekuasaan, kritik, ruang publik online, literasi digital

I. INTRODUCTION

The development of digital communication technology has brought significant changes to the way people interact, express opinions, and shape public opinion. The public sphere,



once dominated by conventional media, has now transformed into an online public sphere that is open, participatory, and interactive. Through social media platforms such as Twitter, Instagram, TikTok, and YouTube, people are no longer just consumers of information but also active producers of discourse, building social and political narratives.

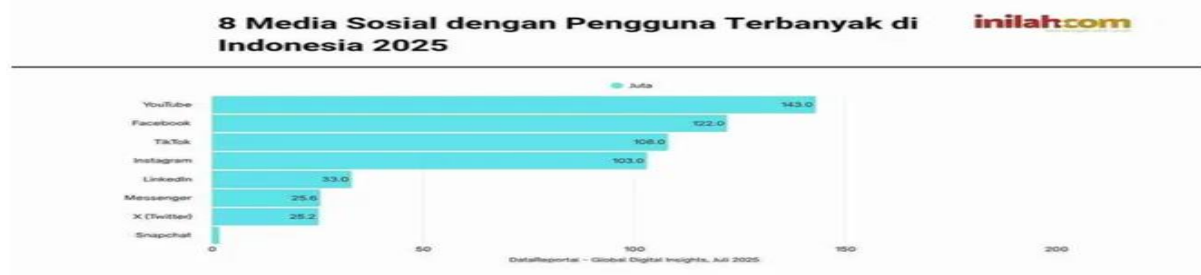


Figure 1.1 Data on social media with the most users in Indonesia in 2025

Source: www.inilah.com

Based on data reported by www.inilah.com, the vast number of social media users and high internet penetration have made the digital public sphere highly relevant as an arena for public interaction and socio-political discourse.

In this context, digital communication has become a new arena for the emergence of criticism, resistance, and public participation in issues of power. The online public sphere enables broader democratic practices because every individual has the opportunity to express their views and directly criticize public policies. However, on the other hand, this space has also become a battlefield for symbolic power struggles between state actors, corporations, influencers, and the public. Power is no longer solely held by formal authorities but is also exercised through algorithmic mechanisms, information control, and discourse framing hidden behind digital systems.

Habermas (1989) described the public sphere as an ideal forum for rational discussion free from the pressures of power. However, in digital communication practices, this idealism is often distorted by censorship, disinformation, and the dominance of certain discourses. Criticism emerging on social media can be an effective tool of social control, but it is also vulnerable to digital repression and manipulation of public opinion. The phenomena of "cancel culture," "political buzzers," and "cyberbullying" demonstrate the complex relationship between freedom of expression and power in digital communication.

According to a 2024 survey by the Ministry of Communication and Information Technology (Kominfo), 79.5% of Indonesia's population are active social media users, and more than half have expressed political opinions online. However, this freedom of expression

often clashes with regulations such as the ITE Law and content moderation by digital platforms, which can limit the space for public criticism. Therefore, it is crucial to understand how the dynamics of power and criticism operate in contemporary digital communication in Indonesia.

Thus, the online public sphere has become a dynamic arena reflecting the dialectic between power and criticism. On the one hand, society utilizes digital technology as an instrument of democracy and to convey aspirations; on the other, those in power utilize the same platforms to regulate, direct, and influence public opinion. This situation raises important questions: to what extent can digital communication truly be a means of free critique, and how does power operate in shaping the direction of public discourse in digital spaces?

Given these conditions, this research is crucial to understanding how the dynamics of power and critique play out in digital communication, as well as how society negotiates within the power relations that form in online public spaces. This study is expected to contribute to a critical understanding of the role of digital communication in shaping public opinion and democratic practices in the information age.

II. THEORETICAL STUDIES

Theoretical Basis

The Concept of Power

Power in the context of digital communication is not only understood as political control or formal authority, but also includes the ability to influence meaning, discourse, and public perception through digital media. Foucault (1977) stated that power is relational and distributed, present in every social and discursive practice. In the digital context, power manifests itself through algorithms, content regulation, and narrative control on social media platforms (Couldry & Mejias, 2019).

Meanwhile, Van Dijk (2020) explains that digital power arises from the ability to access, manage, and distribute data that determines who is "visible" and who is "silenced" in online public spaces.

The Concept of Critique

Critique in public communication is a reflective expression of power structures and social policies. According to Habermas (1989), critique is part of public reasoning in a democratic public sphere. In the digital context, criticism manifests itself in the form of

digital activism, hashtag movements, and citizen journalism, which challenge dominant narratives (Tufekci, 2017). Criticism in the digital space is also influenced by algorithms and platform culture, which can amplify or silence certain voices (Papacharissi, 2020).

Digital Communication

Digital communication is the process of exchanging messages, information, and meaning through digital technology-based media (McQuail, 2020).

According to Castells (2021), digital communication is networked, enabling two-way participation and decentralization of information, but also opening up opportunities for the emergence of new powers in the form of algorithmic control.

Rachmawati (2022) adds that digital communication creates new, more open forms of social interaction, but is vulnerable to polarization and disinformation due to algorithmic selection.

The Concept of the Online Public Sphere

The online public sphere is a digital arena where citizens interact, discuss, and express opinions on social and political issues. Habermas (1989) defined the public sphere as a place where communicative rationality works to achieve shared understanding. In digital form, the public sphere experiences expansion, but also fragmentation due to the emergence of echo chambers and filter bubbles (Sunstein, 2019).

According to Nugroho & Siregar (2023), the online public sphere in Indonesia reflects the dialectic between freedom of expression and state control through digital media regulations, such as the ITE Law.

The Dynamics of Digital Communication and Power

In the context of this research, the dynamics of digital communication encompass the interactions between citizens, media, and authorities that influence each other within the public sphere.

Digital power operates through three layers: (1) platform power, (2) state power (regulation and oversight), and (3) social power (norms and public opinion).

According to Fuchs (2022), digital power is a battleground between control and participation, where criticism becomes a form of resistance to the hegemony of algorithm-mediated information.

Previous Research

Lim (2020) examined the phenomenon of political buzzers in Indonesia and found that digital space is used to create "algorithmic tribalism" that reinforces social polarization. Nugroho and Tapsell (2021) point to the rise of digital authoritarianism, where the state and corporations jointly control the public narrative.

International research by Tufekci (2017) on digital activism shows that social media can be a tool of resistance, but remains vulnerable to repression and platform manipulation. These studies provide an important foundation for this research, which examines how power and critique are negotiated in Indonesia's digital public sphere.

III. RESEARCH METHODS

This research uses a qualitative approach with a descriptive-analytical approach. This approach was chosen because the focus of the research is to deeply understand how power and criticism interact in digital communication, rather than to measure quantitative relationships between variables.

According to Denzin & Lincoln (2018), qualitative research seeks to interpret social phenomena based on the meanings individuals or groups assign to their experiences. This approach is relevant for exploring the dynamics of symbolic power and critical practices in online public spaces.

This research will also focus on Indonesia's digital public spaces, specifically on platforms X (Twitter), Instagram, and TikTok, which have become active arenas for public debate and the expression of socio-political criticism.

The subjects of this research will include several things, including:

1. Public social media accounts that actively voice criticism of social issues or public policies (e.g., activist accounts, journalists, and digital NGOs).
2. Social media users who interact in comments, retweets, or discussion threads related to political, social, or public policy topics.
3. Government policies and regulations (e.g., the Electronic Information and Transactions Law, content moderation policies by the Ministry of Communication and Information Technology, and social media platforms).

Subject selection was conducted using purposive sampling, selecting accounts and phenomena deemed most relevant to the research focus (Miles, Huberman, & Saldaña, 2019).

The data collection techniques used in this study include:

1. Digital Observation (Netnography), where researchers observe communication activities on social media platforms, noting forms of criticism, public reactions, and power interventions (e.g., takedowns, shadow bans, or media framing). This approach draws on the netnography method (Kozinets, 2020), which is used to study culture and social interactions in the digital world.
2. Documentation and Content Analysis, by collecting secondary documents such as online news, government regulations, social media posts, and research reports related to disinformation, digital literacy, or content moderation.

IV. RESEARCH RESULTS

Research Results

Based on digital observations (netnography) on platforms X (Twitter), Instagram, and TikTok, it was found that public communication in the digital space forms interaction patterns that demonstrate a tug-of-war between institutional power and the critical power of civil society.

A search of several popular hashtags, such as #RevisiUITE, #TolakKenakaiPajak, and #ReformasiDikorupsi, shows that people use social media as a platform for political expression and social criticism. Data from the Ministry of Communication and Information Technology (2024) shows that more than 79.5% of Indonesia's population actively uses social media, and 57% of them have expressed political opinions online.

However, in practice, the digital space is not completely free. Observations revealed practices of controlling discourse through:

1. Algorithmic moderation, where content deemed sensitive is often restricted in its reach (shadow ban).
2. Digital repression, where some users received warnings or even had their accounts blocked after criticizing government policies.
3. Intervention in public opinion, demonstrating the presence of buzzers or paid accounts that shift the public narrative with pro-power framing.

The thematic analysis revealed three main themes:

1. Algorithmic Power, which found that social media platforms act as new political actors that can influence the spread of public discourse.

2. Criticism as Digital Resistance, where the public uses humor, memes, and citizen journalism as a form of resistance to power.
3. Fragmentation of Public Space, which demonstrates that although the digital space appears open, ideological differences and polarization cause the public space to fragment into echo chambers

DISCUSSION

Research findings indicate that digital communication has changed the configuration of power in the public sphere. Power is no longer solely exercised by the state, but also by digital platforms and algorithms that regulate the flow of information. This aligns with the concept of "power of visibility" (Couldry & Mejias, 2019), where power in the digital era is exercised through control over data and the visibility of discourse.

The phenomena of shadow banning, news framing, and the dominance of certain content demonstrate how power operates subtly through technological mechanisms. According to Foucault (1980), power is not always repressive, but also productive—it shapes individuals' ways of thinking and acting. In the context of digital communication, power operates through algorithmic production that determines what is visible and invisible in the online public sphere.

Meanwhile, the practice of public criticism in the digital sphere can be seen as a new form of public participation and counter-discourse against dominant power. As Papacharissi (2015) points out, the digital public sphere has the potential to expand democracy through networked publics, communities that form organically through social media. However, this idealism has not been fully realized in Indonesia due to persistent unequal access to information, political censorship, and low digital literacy (Nugroho & Tapsell, 2021).

Furthermore, the emergence of the political buzzer phenomenon demonstrates that the digital space has also become an arena for struggles for hegemony. According to Lim (2020), buzzers are crucial actors in shaping public opinion because they possess the ability to manipulate collective perceptions through coordinated digital campaigning. This practice demonstrates that the digital public sphere is not sterile from political and economic interests.

However, research also reveals digital resistance strategies within the public. Political humor, memes, and online solidarity campaigns serve as forms of cultural jamming that challenge the official narrative of power (Tufekci, 2017). These strategies demonstrate that

even though power dominates digital infrastructure, the public retains the capacity to critique, negotiate, and create alternative spaces.

Thus, the dynamics between power and critique in the online public sphere demonstrate the complex dialectic of digital communication: power seeks to control discourse, while the public seeks to seize that space to speak the truth. The digital public space is no longer a neutral place, but an arena of contestation where technology, ideology, and social participation interact.

V. CONCLUSION

This research demonstrates that the digital public sphere in Indonesia is a complex arena where power and critique interact dynamically. Digital communication not only opens opportunities for people to express social and political criticism but also introduces new forms of power exercised through algorithms, discourse control, and the attention economy.

Observations and interviews indicate that digital power is invisible, operating through restrictions on visibility, control of the flow of information, and the presence of buzzers that frame public opinion. On the other hand, people respond to these conditions with various digital resistance strategies, such as political humor, memes, and online solidarity campaigns, which serve as a form of critique of the hegemony of power.

Thus, the dynamics of digital communication in the online public sphere reflect the dialectic between control and freedom, between domination and participation. The digital public sphere is not a neutral arena, but rather a space of contested discourse that continues to evolve with technological and political changes. This study emphasizes the importance of strengthening critical digital literacy so that people can read, assess, and participate consciously in the digital communication ecosystem.

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