**E-COMMUNICATION DURING COVID-19 OUTBREAK: A STUDY OF SOCIAL MEDIA AS A PUBLIC SPHERE IN JAKARTA**

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**ABSTRACT**

Following the COVID-19 outbreak in Wuhan, the Republic of China has become a major concern of the public in around the world, including Indonesia. Besides the massive spreading around many countries, the information related to COVID-19 has also become an important issue both for the individual and also social media users. In fact, social media has an important role in spreading COVID-19 information and its associated analyses; as in January 2020, a CBS News correspondent Ramy Inocencio reported the COVID-19 case on his Twitter. The report became a big hit since many mainstream media and social media users around the world discussed it. In this respect Jürgen Habermas defines the public sphere as a discussion platform which allows individuals to express their opinions in public without interference. Therefore, this study is aimed to understand how the public in Jakarta use social media to shape and exchange information during COVID-19 outbreak primarily which social media (Twitter, Instagram, Facebook and Whatsapp) most frequently used to get information as well as to discuss COVID-19, what issues are discussed regarding COVID-19. A qualitative approach is used in this research by taking the advantage of interviews as a data collection tool.

***Keywords*:** COVID-19, social media, public sphere, the outbreak, e-communication

**1 Introduction**

The press has been known as a tool for disseminating information to the public, but unfortunately, it has only been one-way-flow for more than decades in Indonesia. Still, due to the technology transformation, media has an important role in the social changes by empowering the public sphere. So as the mass media audience could give feedback related to the information they are concerned for. Many scholars have agreed that media acts as a really big role in shaping our ideas and establishing our position in society. However, according to German Scholar, Jürgen Habermas in his book, The Structural Transformation of Public Sphere, he stated that the media have turned into deceiver tools by turning the public into passive consuming audience since the state, corporates and media control the public sphere [1]. Still, according to Habermas, the public sphere must involve the community in every discourse without the existence of certain structures or limitations [2].

As technology develops, the mass media is also experiencing a change. For example; a newspaper in the United Kingdom expands its function by adding columns of comments, opinions, criticism in addition to create interaction among the readers. It means that the developments of the internet facilitate the existence of the digital public sphere nowadays [1]. This has become a separate space for discussion between the bourgeoisie and the intelligence community until then social media was formed as the latest product of the communication technology revolution. The public sphere and public opinion are two very strong terms related to the function of the media and the representative theory of democracy [3].

The internet in the field of communication gave rise to many new products in the form of social space, including social media. Social media is classified as a new media that is different from conventional media such as; TV, newspapers and radio. When initially the mass media only went in one direction flow, on the contrary, social media enabled the public to interact and exchange information and opinions among them or media itself. These discourse areas are referred to public sphere by Habermas. According to Habermas, the public sphere is a social area where public opinion can be formed without the presence of limitation or exclusion boundaries. Concerning the COVID-19 pandemic, we can see that the role of social media is very important. Twitter was one of the early platforms which spread the first case of COVID-19 news in Wuhan by CBS correspondents who served in Hubei Province at the midst of last January. Interestingly from Twitter, the news regarding COVID-19 became widespread in the world. This phenomenon shows how strong and massive social media role that was driven by the public, to form opinions and also spreading information.

Therefore by this research, the author wants to focus on how social media has played a role as a public sphere for the public of Jakarta to form and exchange opinions during the COVID-19 outbreak.

**2 Research Method**

The research was using qualitative methods and interview as the data collection tools. The selected informants were those who live and work in Jakarta. Province Jakarta was chosen as a place of the research since it is the central area of the spread of the Coronavirus or the epicentre spot with the largest number of infected people in Indonesia. And its citizens are the highest active users of social media compared to other regions.

The interviews produced answers from 15 key informants. The researcher has determined the characteristics and knows the right informants who meet the specified criteria. Then the interview was conducted in writing using the Google form service which can be accessed by all informants.

**3 Result and Discussion**

Since the innovation of the internet, the scholars brought the idea of differentiation of the public sphere and public opinion from their classical meaning to a new “networked public sphere” where the public opinion is shaped through exchanges in online platforms [1]. This new formed of the public sphere has reached a higher level thanks to social media platforms like Facebook, Twitter and YouTube. These users can communicate freely with each other and consequently can come together for a certain theme. Communicating online means to publish online which on the other hand refer to be connected online with other people. The published content in the social media is reachable from anyone throughout the world eliminating in this way the physical and infrastructure obstacles which mean that the freedom of the speech is now the freedom of the press and as a consequence the freedom to gather together [4].

So based on the results of the conducting interview, the social media that are used by the public of Jakarta to get and exchange the information regarding COVID-19 are 1. Instagram, 2. Twitter, 3. Whatsapp, 4. YouTube and 5. Facebook.

Each of those social media has its characters that successfully attract the informants as an audience. Instagram was the most frequently used since it has a video and infographic feature so that easy to understand by the audience. Moreover, all media organizations both national and international have an Instagram account as well. Therefore it was really easy to access by following their Instagram account and keep up the update regarding the COVID-19 issue. For example, international media organizations such as ABC, CBS, VOA, and BBC post the COVID-19 content update regularly. The Indonesian local news organizations are using the Instagram account as well to give the newest pieces of information; Tempo, Kompas, The Jakarta Post and so on.

There are other reasons to support why Jakarta’s public prefer Instagram rather than other social media. Aulia Kurnia Hakim, a TV journalist in Jakarta said that she regularly access the Instagram to look for public transportation operational update during COVID-19 outbreak. Meanwhile Erny Suciapriyanti, a private employee choose Instagram as her favourite media social since its easy and used to access it long before the outbreak. Some informants agree that Instagram has full-package information related to any issues especially COVID-19. The form of information that popular on Instagram is infographics. The data shows there are some reasons to support this:

- All news organizations publish their information regarding COVID-19 on Instagram as a daily service.

- Video, illustration and animation or any other creative form involvement in its content.

However, some people in Jakarta prefer Twitter as a source of COVID-19 information than others. To support this, we must go back to the point when the first case of COVID-19 burst out in the public at the last January. The early case information of COVID-19 spread by a CBS journalist at the midst of January. Then it became popular and quoted by its users around the world. And become a trending topic in the world. But long before the pandemic era, Twitter is already popular for its advantage as a media platform. Many pieces of information can be found through Twitter.

Dani Purba as one of Twitter user said: “For me, Twitter is a kind of early media, we know all the new information, including breaking news. Since all of the news organizations, especially online news company will upload their news on Twitter, including news about COVID-19. So besides getting an expert perspective reviewed in the news, we also know the public perspective on that issue related to COVID-19 via Twitter. On Twitter, the public is given extensive opinion space through words, so we know the reaction of them to a COVID-19 issue. A recent example is how netizen (internet citizen) responded to a clinical trial plan for the coronavirus vaccine made by Sinovac, a Chinese company in Indonesia.”

There are many reasons why social media users tent to more enjoying Twitter than other platforms, such as:

- Easy to access

- Fast pace update information.

- Informative and interactive (two-step flow communications)

Meanwhile other a-32years-old-male-informant, Johanes Ginting chooses Whatsapp as a discussion platform to exchange the information with his colleagues in a group. Johanes said that he prefers Whatsapp since the member of his Whatsapp Group frequently share the information regarding the update of COVID-19.

Rotua Nuraini Tampubolon has a different opinion. She frequently used Facebook to gain the COVID-19 update. She said that Facebook has more feature for video and long-writing information. So she can read it thoroughly.

Therefore the presence of this new form of the public sphere through social media is successfully arousing the free and unlimited topic to discuss with. There are many topics and agenda that mostly discuss by the public of Jakarta regarding COVID-19, such as; 1. Vaccine trial and development against COVID-19, 2. Pros and contras regarding COVID-19 issue, 3. COVID-19 case update, 4. COVID-19 confirm case including death case in Indonesia, 5. Indonesian government policy on the development of COVID-19 outbreak, 6. World development against COVID-19.

1. **Conclusion**

Based on the data and analysis presented before it could be concluded that, firstly, Instagram is found as the most frequently used by the public in Jakarta by its visual information as the advantages. Subsequently, Twitter is the second most frequently used to get COVID-19 information, and Whatsapp, and lastly Facebook.

Secondly, it could be stipulated that the confirm case update of COVID-19 in Indonesia and its government policy against COVID-19 outbreak are the major topic or agenda to be discussed by the public in Jakarta. In this respect, the government policies that are commonly discussed are the COVID-19 update, vaccine trial on public, and public transportation operational during the outbreak.

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