

“Facebook Nation: The Politics and Culture of Social Media in Indonesia”

An Open Forum with

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On March 7th, USINDO hosted an open forum with Dr. Merlyna Lim on the politics and culture of social media in Indonesia.

Lim began with a brief background on political activism and social media in Indonesia. Currently, there are over 35 million Facebook users in Indonesia, making it the second largest country of Facebook users. In the last six months, Indonesian Facebook membership has increased by over 28 million, and over the past year it has increased 600 percent. Indonesian membership is comprised of 59 percent males and 41 percent females, and most users are between 18 and 24 years old.

The recent increase of the use of Facebook and other forms of social media in Indonesia has brought up important questions of the significance and potential impact on political activism. However, Lim argued that right now social media is not the ideal public sphere for activism but could become an ideal space for such under the right conditions.

Lim pointed out that while Facebook, Twitter, and blogging have become very popular in Indonesia, they are primarily used for fun and to reach out to potential friends around the world in an increasingly globalizing world. However, there are a few examples of social media being used to criticize policy and to mobilize people on various social issues. Lim tracks these issues—the frequency and amount of activity surrounding them—on Facebook. She shared two prominent examples.

The first case she presented was the Facebook movement to support the KPK (the Corruption Eradication Commission). Using slogans, logos, comics, YouTube videos, and songs, all posted to Facebook, youth in Indonesia called for the public’s support of the KPK against corruption and graft. The mainstream media portrayed the KPK as a *cicak* (a small gecko) versus corruption, an alligator. The flood of social media mobilized and informed those that would not normally care or know about KPK. The movement was the first major case of the power of social media in Indonesia, and it resulted

in actions throughout the country, including a 5,000 person rally in Jakarta.

Another notable example of the power of social media in Indonesia was the case of Prita versus the Omni International Hospital. In this case, Prita, an average middle-class housewife, complained via email to a friend about poor treatment at a local hospital. The email was eventually posted online by Prita's friend, and the hospital sued Prita for defamation. Prita was imprisoned and ordered to pay a fine of 204 million rupiah (around \$22,000 US dollars).

Outraged bloggers began a campaign to free Prita. Social media mobilization eventually led to her release from prison, but she was still ordered to pay the fine. Through logos, YouTube videos, and social networking sites, the movement expanded to the national level. In an effort to translate support into action, bloggers called for donations and within seven days, they had raised \$90,000, more than enough to pay the fine. Prita has become a symbol for justice in light of the movement.

Lim asserted that these movements reflect that Facebook has given popular and cultural expression a new platform. The popular habit of cross-posting between social networking sites as well as the ability to post comments and to join virtual movements easily has increased the awareness and political participation of social media users.

The transparency these sites offer is extremely appealing and new to Indonesians. Issues become simplified narratives or symbols that can appeal to multiple clusters or groups of the population. Taking action through social

media by posting something, commenting on something, or 'liking' something is low risk, concrete, and affordable.

On the other hand, Lim argued, there is a difference between the mobilization that is taking place and the potential for deliberation. Currently, these uses of social media reflect a rapid and temporary reaction to specific events. As such, the use of social media has not yet developed into a democratically focused public sphere for deliberation, solution seeking, and long term conversation and reform.

Moving forward, the challenge is to move from mobilization to deliberation. Lim noted it is beginning to happen, but only on a small scale. She warned that if Indonesians do not begin to deliberate, they will always be mobilizing for each new event, issue, and movement.

A short question and answer section followed Lim's presentation.

Q. Could this type of mobilization be applied to political campaigns?

A. Yes, there is definitely potential for social media being used in campaigns because campaigns are all about mobilization. However, people think they can grow any movement using social media, but that is not necessarily true. Time will tell.

Q. Would you agree that social media empowers the masses to relieve social suffering? What would be the sufficient and necessary conditions to produce action under authoritarian rule? Would you agree that internet speeds up democratization and globalization?

A. I agree that the internet compresses time and space and intensifies issues, but it does not necessarily democratize. For example, in China the internet has been used for propaganda; internet can be utilized by the state. With internet in general, 90 percent of bandwidth goes to less than 10 percent of the actors on the internet. So while the internet is more accessible than other types of media to small players, it is still dominated by a few big players.

Internet is important to revolutions because revolutions are about capturing a movement in space but a revolution is not democratization. Ultimately, the internet is a learning space and training ground to exercising freedom of expression so in this way it is part of democracy.

Q. In the United States, we've seen direct attempts to use the internet politically. Has there been any effort by political parties to use the internet to mobilize voters?

A. Yes; for example, two elections ago, the PKS utilized the internet and had 27 websites at the time. Image making is important in campaigns but image making online is narrative and has to connect to the actual image people see in other media and in reality. Also, people follow political parties online, but that does not mean they necessarily support them. In fact, a lot of people follow those they do not like on Twitter or Facebook. In Indonesia, if parties were to focus on first time voters, they may have more success.

Q. In the Prita case, what did they do with additional funds they raised?

A. The extra funds were used to create a foundation to support other freedom of expression cases in Indonesia.