

THE ROLE OF CITIZEN JOURNALISM IN CREATING PUBLIC SPHERE IN INDONESIA

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Abstract

Contribution of media in creating public sphere in democratic society has been widely known. The features of media allow citizen to share and contest their opinion and thought. Furthermore, academics agree that good quality information of political issue and public interests would provide a basis for citizen to make better decisions making related to their own interests and public concern. However, in many countries media are no longer serve the public interest, they tend to serve interest of the elite. Thus the elite overpowered the public sphere. This also happen in Indonesia, previously media were controlled by the government for long time in an authoritarian system, after the growing numbers of private owned media, there is a tendency that public sphere in media are could only be accessed by the elite. Meanwhile the some of the prerequisite for democracy and good governance is the right to information and equality for people to express their opinion. This condition could only be fulfilled by independent and free of interest's media. Citizen journalism as a new form of media is believed to bring hope in creating ideal public sphere according to model of deliberative online public sphere by Dahlberg.

Keywords: citizen journalism, media, public sphere, democracy

INTRODUCTION

Many scholars believe that media has a significant role in promoting democracy. Simarmata (2014) states that media has the role to provide qualified, substantial information related with public interest and to evaluate the government. The information gained from media could be an important basis to shape citizen critical politic attitude. Furthermore, media in democratic arena play a role as public sphere. A space where people are able to express their opinion and idea to gain mutual understanding for the sake. Democratic public sphere will also result in political opinion that become a basic in leading the democratic process. Ideally, Public sphere should allow people to have same chance to participate in the public deliberation.

However, Simarmata (2014) stated that conventional media, especially television, has been long criticized for their news bias as they no longer serve as a social institution. Television tends to be influenced by elite interests. As a consequence, they who involved in political discussion are only people or group who have access to the media. As a consequence, this public sphere mainly used by they who have power and access and far from information and news that covers important information that can be used by the people to enhance their welfare and life quality.

In Indonesia, previously media were owned and controlled by the government. Their roles were to support the development and the state interest. After the presence of private television, media began to show their tendency to the interest that far from public interest. Where Private Corporation owns the media. As stated by Widodo (2011) in his research that in Indonesia recently there are eight big media

conglomeration. For example, there are around 140 companies spanning under the holding company of PT. Jawa Pos Group (Widodo, 2011). These unhealthy conditions are worsen when the owner of the media has participating in politic and use the media as a mean to reach their goals. The condition also discussed by Beers (2006). He explains that in many countries there were a media shift, from government-controlled media to private ownership and private controlled media. This condition made the economic orientation become more apparent than the objectivity in delivering political issue. Meanwhile media should fulfil the right to information. As democracy require well-informed citizen. When they have proper and balance information, citizen will be able to make good decision related to the interests of public and state. Also, free of interests' media has the potency to develop citizen political awareness, which is the power of democracy itself.

Since the advancement of Internet and communication technology, independent news media such as citizen journalism begin to flourish. This new form of media brings hope for the new public sphere, which fulfilled the public sphere criteria formulated by Habermas on Wayansari (2011). According to academics, this new form of journalism is believed to contribute to the democratic society both in the developed or developing countries. As an example in Pakistan, the emergence of Citizen journalism has triggered the growth of 124 private radio stations, which previously there was only one state owned radio in the country (Riaz & Pasha, 2011). As CJ provide great opportunity to people for being involved in news gathering and reporting the news (Rappaport and Leith, 2007) which is mean given the chance to the unheard people to speak out their thought, provide access and information. With these features, people not only able to report fact but also express their experience and emotions (Thomas, 2011). It is believed that these features can bring benefit for the society as it creating space for citizen to gather and discuss their interests.

One of the academic that support the idea that Internet can enhance the public sphere, is Kellner, he states that Internet has “produced new public spheres and spaces for information, debate, and participation that contain the potential to invigorate democracy and to increase the dissemination of critical and progressive ideas” Dahlberg (2006). Thus, question raised in this paper is whether citizen journalism site as an online discourse is extending the public sphere.

To answer this question, a citizen journalism site will be analyzed using Dahlberg concept of the six requirements of online public sphere. This condition of online public sphere was developed from Habermas' theory of rational communication. This paper will look at on how the public sphere is being facilitated by the citizen journalism site. The Dahlberg six requirements are as follow:

1. Autonomy from the state and economic power.
2. Exchange and critique of criticizable moral-practical validity claims.
3. Reflexivity or participants must critically examine their cultural values, assumptions, and interests, as well as the larger social context.
4. Ideal role taking, which means participants, must attempt to understand the argument from the other's perspective. This requires a commitment to an ongoing dialogue with difference in which interlocutors respectfully listen to each other.
5. Sincerity. Each participant must make a sincere effort to know all information, including their true intentions, interests, needs and desires, as relevant to the particular problem under consideration.
6. Discursive inclusion and equality. Every participant affected by the validity claims under consideration is equally entitled to introduce and question any assertion whatsoever.

METHODS

Desk study (internet research) method is employed in this research by observing the citizen journalism site, Balebengong.net. The primary data is collected through observation. Secondary data

is gained through literature reviews of previous research to support the research. It is traced through books, journals, engine search machine, and research documents. A data analysis is done on qualitative data, which is processed and analyzed according to its content using interpretation. The examination of the Balebengong.net has been carried out by comparing Internet practices with Dahlberg's model of public sphere, which is developed from Habermas theory of democratic communication. The conversation through Internet was observed and compare with ideal conditions of public sphere, which has autonomy from state and corporation interests, exchange, and critique of moral validity claims, reflexivity, ideal role taking, sincerity, and discursive inclusion and equality.

FINDINGS AND ARGUMENTS

Based on secondary data, there were a number of citizen journalism site in Indonesia, some of the popular site that has significant contribution to the dynamic of democracy in Indonesia are: wikimu.com, politikana.com, panyingkul, bale bengong and a number of other sites. Wayansari (2011) argue that user generated content plays an important role in broadening the public sphere in Indonesia. Politikana.com provide an example on how interactive citizen journalism site has become an accessible space for citizens to come together and discuss politics and other public concerns (Wayansari, 2011). Furthermore she found out that Politikana has significant role in extending public sphere and educating politics to the youth at the election time.

3.1. Balebengong.net, citizen media for sharing story

Another pure journalism site in Indonesia is Balebengong.net, which is based in Bali. Balebengong.net established in June 2007 and managed by Sloka Institue in collaboration with Bali Blogger Community. The establishment of this portal is to "create" citizen journalism activities in Bali. Began with the intention to involve citizen in writing and responding to a news so the citizen are not only become a passive audience but also could actively involve in the process of information management, from news production, monitoring, correcting, responding and commenting or even selecting what information is needed.

There is no limitation for everyone to post in this site. They allow everyone to write about everything, as long as it related with Denpasar or Bali. It is written on the "Question and Answer" page on the site, that the site accepts news from the most important news to personal information. They provide chance for the community to share news and information using their own perspective. It is said that objectivity is not the most important thing, the writer is allow to be subjective, however they must write based on the real fact and fairness. First hand information is prioritized. One of the issue on citizen journalism site that always been criticized is the quality of information issue, hence Balebengong has a set of rules for the writer to post on the site. Users are allow to report, write and edit information in any format. However they should write in 5W+1H formula (What, Who, When, Where, Why and Who). Editor has the right to publish the article and also has the right to edit without change the content. Any articles which contain defamation, pornography, violent, or provocative would not be published. Name of the writer should be attached as a form of responsibility

3.2. Balebengong.net and alternative space

Dahlberg (2006) argue that state power and big corporations ownership of media could be a threat to an autonomy and public independency in Internet. The state censorship and Internet online surveillances could limit free speech and public interaction. Whereas Internet has a potential to encourage critical debate. For example the site shut-down by Indonesia government, Vimeo, which is suspected for publishing pornography content. In other side, Vimeo used by million people to share their video, learn to make video, to interact between people who have same Interest and discuss about

it in the vimeo platform. Thus to enhance online public sphere, a site must be free from state and private interest. It must be driven from public need without any political and financial interest.

Besides state censorship, private corporations have the same threat to the journalism activity. The competitions between media provide limited space in media and tight deadlines. Consequently, there is a possibility that many important stories and issues were remaining not covered by the journalists. Here citizen journalist could play an important role writing stories that are not published in mainstream media. Balebengong as a public portal aimed to provide alternative stories from mainstream media such as television, radio and newspaper. They consider that at this time, mainstream media tend to be influenced by the elite as most of the source of information aired on the media come from the group such as politician, legislative members, police, government and others. Besides, Balebengong view information preferred by mainstream media tend to contain tragic things and conflicts. While, according to Balebengong, citizen are tremendous source of information, there are lot of daily issues that is interesting, important and is needed by the citizen to elevate their life quality (Balebengong, 2015).

Thus, several people create Balebengong portal to liven up the citizen journalism in Bali. To provide a chance for citizen to be actively involved in the news production process. They believe that this activity could change the community from passive user to be an active actor. From the observation of the author, this portal has no relationship with government or any other funder. They have support from people, the member of community and from limited advertising. This made the site as an independent site, which has autonomy from the state and economic power. This condition fulfills the first condition of online public sphere required by Dahlberg (2001).

Bali is well known as one of popular tourist destination in the world. At present time, Balinese has an issue that impact directly to the community and Bali environment. There is a plan from Bali Tourism Board (BTB) to conduct reclamation at Benoa Bay. This become a vibrant issue among Balinese include involving government, religious organization and leader, private company, academics, environmentalist and community. However, this issue was not heard in national mainstream media. The role of balebengong can be seen as it provide space for public discussion and encourage critical debate. There are several articles related with Benoa bay reclamation, as such "Tempatation of the clergy, defend the people or capital" wrote by Made Supriatna, researcher on ethnic conflict and communal violent who lived in New Jersey USA . "Open Letter for Honorable Mpu Jaya Prema" wrote by I Wayan Prema, a son of small shop owner, "Benoa Bay Reclamation between Jerinx and Wiana" wrote by Dudik Mahardika. In his article he criticized a religious leader and also academic who support the reclamation. He argue that, they should not support company that will bring damage to the Bali environment.

As described above, Balebengong has provided alternative information that differs from the mainstream media and has becomes an alternative platform for people to talk and converse or exchanging ideas about all these sensitive matters. Thus, the exchange of ideas shows deep reflexivity and critical and logical background. At some extent, they also try to criticize the existing value and norms. This can be seen from the article that discuss about the gay marriage in Bali and article about women inheritance rights. For Balinese women, this is an important issue as in Bali a daughter has no inheritance right.

Those examples demonstrate the critical examination (Wayansari, 2011) or reflexivity as said by Dahlberg (2006). As in several discussions, the user shows their effort in understanding the happening issue, try to understand other people perspective and keep show their respect. The process of information exchanging and opinion will only enrich their understanding about the issue. Thus, Balebengong has provided space for users to exchange information, which leads to further learning and understanding about the issue. This reinforced by the fact that in the article, writer also include link to other source for further information and the site also provide comment space and link to twitter and Facebook account, for them who want to discuss in another internet platform.

CONCLUSION

We can conclude that Balebengong is an example of how interactive and independent websites can be an accessible place for public to come together and discuss about issues that considered important for the community. Furthermore, Balebengong is also has fulfill the conditions of online public sphere set by Dahlberg (2001). First, Balebengong was established by civil society based on public concern and free from state or big private sector. Secondly, Balebengong site has functioned as alternative place for some citizen to discuss public issues that matter to them. From the writing it can be conclude that the article shows that the delivered opinions are involved in critical thinking process, contain “critique of criticisable moral-practical validity claims” Dahlberg (2006). Give logical reasoning and background before when they deliver their opinion. Thirdly, discussion on Balebengong are diverse, user are welcome to write any information in several categories that are; “Gaya Hidup” (lifestyle), “Lingkungan” (Environment), “Opini” (Opini), “Sosial Budaya” (social and culture), “Sosok” (sosok) and “Teknologi” (Technology). Fourth, discussion in Balebengong in some degree shows reflexivity as some of the posts showed critical examination of their assumption and interest, giving a logical background before their opinion (Dahlberg, 2001). Fifth, The discussions also reflect ideal role taking. Those who posted opinions and articles open to comments with differing view. Sixth, from the range of writer and the location of writer, Balebengong allow everyone to participate.

Overall, we can conclude that balebengong, a citizen journalism site, has proven to be useful in providing alternative information from mainstream media, in generating discussion among people with different role in community and extending accessible public sphere for those who have interest to Bali. However, it is worth mentioning that this research is done in limited time with one citizen journalism site as case study, thus further investigation is required to get a wider picture of the development of public sphere through online deliberative sites in Indonesia.

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