Papua's Internet Ban 2020: Politics, Information Democracy, and Digital Literacy

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ABSTRACT

Internet ban in the middle of 2019 in Papua after the outbreaks of demonstrations and riots in Papua and West Papua, still leaves various speculations and question marks. The court ruling which had won the lawsuit of the Press Freedom Defender Team against the President and the Minister of Communication and Information of Indonesia also seemed to pass by without any significant follow up. Many studies on this phenomenon in terms of law and human rights have been carried out. However, several other aspects that are also interesting and useful have not been much elaborated. This paper explores this phenomenon based on political aspects, information democracy, and digital literacy that is closely related to communication. This is a literature review that employs document study data collection techniques and interactive data analysis. From the analysis it can be found that the Papua's internet ban relates to the effort by the Indonesian government to domesticate Papua issue in the context of politics. In terms of information democracy, there is a violation in citizen rights that intend to internationalize the issue. Finally, in the context of digital literacy, there is a need to collaborate in order to improve digital literacy skills among Papuan. The implication of this study is the richer perspective in viewing a controversial phenomenon and involves the wider community, considering that this phenomenon is very likely to still occur in Indonesia in the future.

Keywords: *Internet ban, Papua, information democracy, digital literacy, political aspect.*

INTRODUCTION

In mid August 2019, the Indonesian Ministry of Communication and Informatics issued an official release about internet throttling and restrictions in several areas of West Papua and Papua where mass actions took place. This decision was carried out gradually from Monday, August 19, 2019. In the release, the government mentioned that this policy was enforced in order to avoid the spread of hoaxes related to information on attacks on Papuans in Java island beforehand (Setu, 2019). Events related to race are never easy to resolve, even for Indonesia, a country which is known as a multi-ethnic country. The press release at least provided insight into the condition of the internet network in Papua, which actually greatly disturbed society activities.

As mentioned before, the policy issued by the Ministry was a response to various riots that occurred in Papua which were triggered by racial actions experienced by Papuan students in Malang and Surabaya. The incident in Malang was preceded by a demonstration held by an alliance of Papuan students regarding the right to independence of Papua from Indonesia, which ended in chaos due to acts of racism by a group of citizens (Perwitasari, 2019). In Surabaya, racial acts were also carried out by a group of residents and mass organisations against students who were in dormitories (Perwitasari, 2020). Racial acts and incidents in Malang and Surabaya quickly spread on the internet. From this incident, through messages on social media, native Papuans in various regions in Papua responded in various ways including riots in various areas in Papua, namely Sorong, Manokrawi and Fakfak.

Indonesia is not the only country that has taken the decision to restrict and ban the internet as a solution to reduce conflict. Sri Lanka, Bangladesh, Turkey, Vietnam and Sudan are countries that have experienced restricted internet access (Haryono, 2020). In a similar case to Indonesia, a conflict in an area that is eager to separate from Indonesia and gain its freedom, India has also restricted and banned the internet in response to conflicts that have occurred in Kashmir areas, the border areas of India and Pakistan. Another term for restriction or ban of internet connection is 'internet shutdowns', as mentioned in The #KeepItOn report (Access Now, 2018). Internet shutdown is also becoming a concern of a social organisation 'Access Now', headquartered in New York, with the #KeepItOn campaign. In the 2018 report, the rate of internet shutdown in the world increased by more than 50% compared to 2017. In 2018, there were 25 countries that experienced internet shutdowns with various government justifications. Public safety is the most dominant reason, followed by national security and the spread of fake news or hate speech.

It is such a dilemma for a country. Demands for giving space to democracy are rubbing against the issue of stability, state security and maintaining territorial integrity. In the aspect of democracy, digital activitists are organized in social organizations that actively express or engage online, for development of movement and promote social chance (Jansen, 2010). In this case, activists criticize acts of racism and promote Papuan independence.

The issue of Papua is an issue that continues to corner the Indonesian government. Access to information that has crossed national borders can make the international public respond to problems in Papua, one of them, Australian National University who wrote on its Twitter account about the issue of racism in Papua and ABC News Media who reported about it (Nasution & Wiranto, 2019). Various violence by the apparatus has also been in the spotlight. With the existence of social media, texts, photos and videos on the Papuan issue, especially on the issue of racism lately, will use this as propaganda targeting human right activists, academics and individuals or groups who support independence for Papua. This phenomenon will continue to strengthen various parties' support for Papuan independence, including by those abroad. This study aims to elaborate several aspects related to this phenomenon, which are politics, information democracy and digital literacy in the case of internet ban in Papua.

In socio-political studies, the discovery of the digital world opens a new chapter. The development of technology is one of the great ongoing science projects that affect many things. The discovery of the internet network was followed by the creation of the digital world and cyberspace as a form of information technology development which also influenced political activity. Lerner (2010) is based on the idea that the internet is used to inspire sympathetic individuals to real world political action. Ideas in the political arena can quickly be accessed and shared with many people across national borders.

The emergence of the Internet has forced a reformulation of communication in all areas and at all levels. The digital environment has promoted a deep transformation in both the way of understanding politics and its manifestations (Pineiro & Martinez, 2019). Moreover, the research of political communication in general, but online especially, has become more an interdisciplinary field. Yet the collection and analysis of data from new media and social networks requires more and more advanced expert skills (Charvat & Brunnerova, 2019).

In addition, the level of literacy also plays a pivotal role in this matter. Government mentioned that one of the reasons for banning the internet in West Papua was because of the massive hoaxes spread during the period. It indicates that people (in Papua) are

considered as having a low rate of digital literacy (Burhan, 2020). Chief of Indonesian National Police (Kapolri) Police General Tito Karnavian also acknowledged that the riot conflict that occurred in Manokwari, West Papua was triggered by a hoax that was intentionally developed by certain parties (Nasution & Wiranto, 2019).

Based on this background explanation, this article will review how internet ban in Papua, Indonesia, is related to several aspects which are politics, information democracy and digital literacy. This article is a literature review article. Therefore, the references used in this article come from several materials related to the aspects that will be researched. The implication of this study is expected to be able to provide an overview of this phenomenon from various aspects, so that it can be used as a basis for scientific studies in specific cases related to similar phenomena.

POLITICS AND DIGITAL WORLD

Current political studies overlap with various studies, such as media, information and communication technology as well as the digital world. In particular, the development of information and communication technology has influenced how political studies are conducted. The digital transformation has brought enormous benefits and convenience. Yet, policymakers and market participants will likely only be able to understand the full economic and political implications in hindsight. This is a major challenge when it comes to addressing the risks and opportunities of technology for democratic institutions and processes (Korner, 2019).

The issue of Papua is a classic problem for the Indonesian government. In political studies, the issue of Papua, which is a domestic issue, has become an international issue (Lantang & Tambunan, 2020). In February 2019 the World Council of Churches (WCC) was permitted to send a multi-national delegation to West Papua where it visited several main centres (Blades, 2019). Pro-independence Papuan actors and some sympathisers continue to strive to internationalise the problems. Internationalisation is used as a strategy to gain the support from international actors in order to get independence from Indonesia (Lantang & Tambunan, 2020). It covers two crucial matters, formal legalisation and discourse which can be explained as follows.

The first is about an official organization, Papuan pro-independence activists who established the United Liberation Movement for West Papua, (ULMWP) as the official organization for Papuan independence abroad. ULMWP succeeded in registering the the Papuan independence organisation, to the Melanesian Spearhead Group, and in a regional organisation of countries in the South Pacific region, in the United Nations (Blades, 2019). In addition, international support continues to rally for Papuan independence, both from state actors such as Vanuatu, a country from the South Pacific, that often brings Papuan issues to international organizations (Sekarwati, 2018) and non-state actors such as human rights activists.

The second is in terms of discourse. Several efforts have been made by the Papuan pro-independence society to draw international community attention (Blades, 2020). Issues such as economic inequality, Indonesian government injustice, human and racial rights are consistently voiced out by Papua pro-independence activists, through several campaigns. Some of the campaigns use social media (Titifanue, Tarai, Kant & Finau, 2017). These efforts have also been used to draw international community attention to suppress the Indonesian government and support Papua independence. Those two matters have been being fought

by the Indonesian government in order to domesticate the conversation about Papua in the social and media discourse.

In addition, efforts to bring the Papua issue into a regional problem in the South Pacific region are also being pursued by pro-Papuan independence activists. Together with the United Liberation Movement for West Papua (ULMWP), Papuan independence activists made a long effort to gain support from South Pacific countries that are members of the Melanesian Spearhead Group (MSG) regional organisation (Roziqi, 2020). The intensity of the relationship between the Papuan independence fighters and the MSG flourished in recent years.

Recent flare-ups between West Papuans and security forces, combined with steady international support for the West Papuan struggle, and the emergence of the United Liberation Movement for West Papua (ULMWP), foreshadowed a looming regional diplomatic struggle (Blades, 2019). Ethnic similarities between indigenous Papuans and residents in the south pacific have raised the solidarity of the population in the south pacific to support Papuan independence. This ethnic similarity is the entrance for ULMWP to internationalise ethnic issues.

Vanuatu, one of the important members of the MSG through its Prime Minister, made a speech on the issue of Papua in international forums. In his speech in front of the UN Human Rights Council on March 4, 2014, Vanuatu's Prime Minister asked the UN to take the human rights violations that have occurred in Papua seriously. In addition, the General Secretary of the ULMWP, Mote said the ULMWP is currently the only coordinating body recognised to lead the membership campaign in the MSG and continues the campaign for independence from Indonesia (CNN Indonesia, 2020).

These efforts are being resisted by the Indonesian government by continuing to seek domestication of the conversation about Papua. This is done to avoid pressure on the Indonesian government and the widespread support of the international community such as regional organisations in the South Pacific and various countries in the world that pay attention to Papuan independence.

The Indonesian Government's policy on Papua's internet ban related to the conflict in Papua and West Papua cannot be separated from Papua's issue which has become an international spotlight. The Indonesian government argued that hoaxes which spread in the community had triggered the riots (Nasution & Wiranto, 2019). The Indonesian government, in turn, continues to increase security forces in Papua, which indicates a security approach as a solution from the Indonesian Government (Kompas.com, 2021).

Indonesia faces new challenges by the rapid development of information technology. The government remains consistent in domesticating Papua's problems, as an effort to fight the internationalisation narrative of Papua's problem carried out by some actors who want Papua to get independent and get support from international communities. The concern on human rights is escalating due to the use of social media platforms by the Papuan activists to mobilize their support and audiences towards the West Papua issue (Lantang & Tambunan, 2020). Some of them even got involved too deeply. The riots that occurred in Papua indicate that the government has not resolved the problems in Papua.

The government has a political interest by imposing an internet ban, preventing pro-independence Papuan activists from making narratives and disseminating it to some actors abroad. The narrative will certainly garner support for Papua's independence. Therefore, the policy as the political purpose is aimed to continue domesticating the problems in Papua by localising conflicts only in the Papua region. Therefore, the Indonesian Government's policy

on Papua's internet ban related to the conflict in Papua and West Papua cannot be separated from the independence issue, which has become an international spotlight.

DEMOCRACY IN THE DIGITAL ERA AND INFORMATION RIGHTS

The terminology democracy comes from two words "demos" which means the people and "kratein" which means power. Based on each meaning, it can be understood that democracy can be defined as power in the hands of the people (Welzel & Ronald, 2008). The involvement of people in terms of running a state becomes something that is allowed in the practice of democracy, because this definition provides a wide space of opportunity for citizens to be involved in the process of the country.

With the establishment of personal computers and the Internet on a massive scale in the 1980s and 1990s this medium immediately captured the imaginations of future observers, scientists, and early users of this medium. They articulated a more or less utopian vision of the future, including in politics and policy. Several characteristics of computers with internet connections are considered to have revolutionary or at least transformative implications for the democratisation of politics and society in general (Hacker & van Dijk, 2012). The main character of one of the new media, which is social networking sites, is the emergence of a personal connection between social media users and certain political streams. This causes someone to get information according to their political thinking, because there is the ability of internet algorithms that can read political choices from searches made by internet users. This makes democratic life more segregated so that the possibility of distrust in the government and the media is getting bigger (Barberá, 2020). The characteristics are interactive medium, active and creative medium, direct medium, platform that can be used by everyone, and has a network to connect people. One of the impact of this feature is the less role of elite, and the increasing role of interaction between the people (Bimber, Cunil, Copeland & Gibson, 2015)

Relating to democracy and the digital age, it is considered that they seem to be two entities that are somewhat difficult to be separated. However, the union of those two concepts gives different impacts for different studies. According to a study by Pew Research Center in 2019, democracy will not run smoothly in the digital era. From this study, predictions emerge that the use of technology by humans in the information age will undermine democracy due to the speed and scope of distortions of reality, the decline of journalism, and the impact of capitalism controls (Pew Research Center, 2020). One of the pivotal highlights of seven findings of the study is the existence of exploitation of people who do not have digital literacy: The lack of digital literacy of citizens and their apathy will lead to a public who is uninformed or has no decisions related to taking sides with the public, weakening democracy and social order. This is in line with Treré's (2016) findings which concluded that discussions on democracy must also include digital technology, especially when scrutinizing new algorithmic strategies. Based on an analysis of the political and social phenomena of contemporary Mexican society and two years of ethnography with the #YoSoy132 movement network, it is revealed that digital tools have been successfully used by Mexican parties and governments to generate consent, stop dissent and activists who threaten the integrity of the state, and collect personal data without citizen's consent.   This new algorithmic strategy, it is argued, clearly demonstrates that nothing is inherently democratic in digital communication technology, and that citizens and activists must fight against increasingly

sophisticated techniques of control and oppression that exploit mechanisms that many consider emancipatory technology (de Zúñiga, Huber, & Strauß, 2018) .

As a product of technology, social media is also considered not always beneficial for the advancement of healthy democracy. Social media does not fulfill political knowledge tasks, leading people to participate without deep political issues knowledge gain.

In contrast, it is found that there is a democratic model that is able to provide some enlightenment in terms of networking aspirations, constructing participation of society and their involvement in the development during this digital era. It is called deliberative democratic (Saepudin, Suryadi & Malihah, 2018). Saepudin, Suryadi and Malihah had concluded that the existence of digital media will support the dynamics in the government policy and society needs. Democracy, which has been considered the best system for presenting freedom of opinion, equality of rights, guarantees of human rights, and others, has undergone various reforms, especially with the existence of virtual-based communication channels as the aspirations of citizens (Saepudin, Suryadi & Malihah, 2018).

Meanwhile, Tsagarousianou's work regarding democracy in the digital era came with three claims (Tsagarousianou, 1999). The first claim is related to the ability to enhance the retrieval and exchange of political information between governments, public administrations, representatives, political organisations and communities and individual citizens. With the characteristics of digital tools, it was also found that public debate, deliberation and community building were supported. The third claim was about the participation in political decision-making by citizens which is believed to have increased since the beginning of the digital era in the democracy practice of a society.

With the claims by Tsagarousianou, it can be seen that democracy in the digital era is also quite challenging. Marta and Agustino (2020) did a study about it, and they found that the readiness of Indonesian citizens to face digital political culture is hard to achieve, considering the development of hoaxes and speeches of hatred, especially in Indonesia, is still increasing until recently.

In the context of scientific studies related to democracy and the digital era, it is common if there are indeed differences in the findings of each study conducted by researchers. This happens because they use a variety of perspectives and various contexts. However, in relation to the phenomenon of internet ban in Papua, this provides an explanation that the digital era hinders democracy and people's freedom to obtain information, yet on the other side, the digital literacy skill of the Papuans need to be improved so that they able to use the tools as well as the information that are disseminated using the advance technology.

The findings of from Pew Research Center stated that the digital era worsens the practice of democracy because it is associated with the level of digital literacy (Pew Research Center, 2020). This is in line with Treré (2016) who mentioned algorithmic strategies which apparently is a new thing in digital practice which requires people to have the skill to operate it. The assumption that people who do not have digital literacy skills will be increasingly oppressed, because democracy allows the creation of information widely among the people. This is very possible to do in the digital era, considering that anyone can become an information producer.

In the context of the Papua's internet ban case, from the aspect of democracy in the digital era, based on the findings from Pew Research Center in 2020 and Treré's study in 2016, it can be seen that these findings tend to be able to provide strong arguments related to government decisions. With the internet network, there will be more and more information

produced by the public. The flood of information will not necessarily make people more knowledgeable, because to be able to understand information correctly and precisely, especially that which is disseminated through new media, requires digital literacy skills (Spires, Paul & Kerkhoff, 2017), which in fact is very low among Indonesians.

However, the efforts of the Indonesian government to domesticate Papua's issue since decades ago have shown that apart from data related to digital literacy of the Indonesian people and the people of Papua in particular, this policy of banning the internet in the Papua region is inevitably linked to restrictions on the distribution of information. Like people from other regions in Indonesia whose literacy rate is still low (Setu, 2020), the Papuan people have the same rights to freedom of information, processing of information, and even disseminating information. With the opportunity to access information, the Papuan people will also benefit, namely being able to be involved in democratic practices.

A study on democracy and the digital era found that this digital era is capable of driving the achievement of democracy that has benefits for civil society (Saepudin, Suryadi, & Malihah, 2018). This finding, if applied to the internet ban case in Papua, is certainly a crucial problem, because the government's decision is the same as limiting the development of positive democracy. This condition makes society unable to get the benefit from the internet in order to apply democratic life.

However, in a democracy, the freedom of the people to do something for themselves is very important. This cannot be separated from the context of providing information. Turner (2018) specifically stated that the development of the media should be able to make a positive contribution to the practice of democracy in a country. As a result, the advent of the digital era seemed to radically change the power relations for the better. Early enthusiasm, however, has been challenged and has ended up with: a digital landscape that does offer unprecedented access to information, in transformative ways - but it is also flooded with socially regressive content: fake news , hate speech, revenge porn, and so on (Turner, 2018).

Turner's (2018) findings mention two things that have an influence on one thing at a time. On the one hand, Turner acknowledges that the media, in this case digital media, has a role in improving the quality of democracy in the digital era. But on the other hand, he also describes negative things that are detrimental to society when democracy has increased and its practice is positive thanks to the contribution of the digital era.

This challenge was also shown in a study about the internet in Iran. In November 2019, protests erupted in Iran over an increase in fuel price. The authorities responded with violence and repression, violating human rights guaranteed by international human rights law and the Iranian Constitution, including the right to assembly, freedom from inhuman and degrading treatment, right to life, and freedom of expression. Unlawful and excessive force against protesters made it one of the bloodiest periods in Iran for the right to protest since the 1979 Revolution. The death toll ranges from verified reports of 304 to unconfirmed reports of up to 1,500 deaths. The number of those injured by security forces was estimated at 4,800. During the protests, authorities also disconnected millions of Iranians from the Internet (Ana, 2020).

Even though the Indonesian government may intend to keep the information on Papua's issue from international society, it also has a responsibility to ensure that its citizens get to exercise their rights. The focal point of democracy in the digital era is the involvement of some advanced technology in the practice of democracy, which is inevitable. So, it is not a

solution to ban the internet connection in several regions of a country because the digital era is happening.

DIGITAL LITERACY AMONG CIVIL SOCIETY

The study of digital literacy is increasingly being discussed, both in scientific and practical contexts. The rapid advancement of internet technology makes people no longer able to evade the necessity of having the skills to interact using the internet. More importantly, internet users are increasing from year to year. In early 2020, We Are Social in collaboration with Hootsuite released data on world internet users, which was recorded at 4.5 billion (Kemp, 2020). This number shows a 7% increase in the number of internet users compared to January 2019 data. Of the total world population, 49% of them are active social media users, namely 3.8 billion. This number shows an increase from the previous year, 9% to be exact (Kemp, 2020). An increase in internet users has also occurred in Indonesia. We Are Social and Hootsuite data as cited on the online news portal kompas.com shows that in early 2020, more than 175 million Indonesians were internet users, with a penetration rate of 64%. This number increased from a year earlier, approximately by 17% (Pertiwi, 2020).

The increase in internet users in Indonesia is unfortunately not followed by the literacy level of the people. In a research entitled World's Most Literate Nations Ranked conducted by Central Connecticut State University in March 2016, Indonesia was ranked 60th out of 61 countries in terms of reading interest, exactly below Thailand and above Botswana (Devega, 2017). Data from the Ministry of Education and Culture in 2018 showed that the Reading Literacy Activity Index in Papua Province was 19.90 and included in the very low literacy activity category (in the range of 0 – 20.00), followed by West Papua with 28.25, also included in low category (Ministry of Education and Culture of Indonesia, 2019). This is an important issue that requires the attention of all parties, especially the government. Moreover, Indonesia is an archipelagic country where there are many areas that have not been touched by digital literacy education.

This data shows that there needs to be an effort to increase reading interest among the Indonesian people, not to mention that currently reading skills are no longer sufficient. With the development of communication and information technology, the term digital literacy has emerged.

Paul Gilster is widely cited as a scientist who first popularised the term digital literacy. However, in fact, this concept has emerged since the 1990s. Typically, scientists in that era defined digital literacy as the ability to read and understand items of information in hypertext or multimedia format (Spires, Paul & Kerkhoff, 2017).

In 2012, researchers from North Carolina State University published the results of their study on digital literacy, and explained that in digital literacy, there are three main things which are (1) locating and consuming digital content (finding and consuming digital content), (2) creating digital content (creating digital content), and (3) communicating digital content (communicating digital content). These three things constitute one unity in which to realise digital literacy, the three must be applied (Spires & Bartlett, 2012). Although at first glance it looks the same, the Spires and Bartlett (2012) concept is described in more detail, by specifically adding one more skill, namely re-communicating everything that is obtained from digital media. This does not specifically appear in the digital literacy concept initiated by Gilster when he proposed it in 1997.

There are also several definitions of digital literacy from an Indonesian perspective. One of them is arranged in a more applicable explanation, by formulating digital literacy competencies, so that they can be more easily understood. Tular Nalar, a consortium involving Mafindo (Anti Hoaks Society), MAARIF Institute, and Love Frankie formulated 8 competencies that are used as indicators of digital media users with an emphasis on critical thinking. The competencies that elaborate these various models consist of accessing, managing information, designing messages, processing information, sharing messages, building resilience, data protection, and collaboration (Astuti, Mulyati & Lumakto, 2020).

Digital literacy has now become an inevitable thing. When the government mentions that one of the reasons for limiting internet access in Papua is due to the low level of digital literacy, it is an ambiguous sentence. The statement that the level of literacy of Indonesian society is still low, is a truth. However, making this an excuse to justify the government's decision needs to be reviewed.

In the context of the Papuan people in particular and the Indonesian people in general, with regard to digital media, often their ability is still limited to just using them. From a survey conducted by Katadata Insight Center in 2020, it can be seen that in Papua and West Papua, the information and data literacy aspects are still very low when compared to other digital literacy indexes used in the survey, which are technological capabilities, security in digital media, and communication and collaboration (Katadata Insight Center, 2020). Of course, this is still a small part of a comprehensive digital literacy concept.

CONCLUSION

There are three aspects regarding the Indonesian government's policy of internet ban after the riots in Papua. First, in the political aspect: everything that happens in Papua is the consumption of the international community, so the Indonesian government policy to ban the internet in Papua is related to the Indonesian government's efforts to domesticate the problems in Papua. Second, in the context of information democracy related to the digital era, the phenomenon can be captured based on two perspectives, which are supporting or giving obstacles in the life of democracy. However, in the context of Papua's internet ban, human rights are more crucial. So, relating to its matter, the voices of the Papuan are restricted because of the violation of human rights pertaining to access to information. Third, which is actually still related to the second element, is digital literacy. In the context of the internet ban in Papua, the low level of digital literacy is an issue that is a noble task for all Indonesians to overcome.

The implication of this study is the richer perspective in viewing a controversial phenomenon and involves the wider community. Hopefully, in the future, when a similar case occurs, this study can be a reference so that it is expected that all parties can go through it better, both the government and the citizens.

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