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DATA ACTIVISM AND COVID-19 IN INDONESIA

(AKTIVISME DATA DAN COVID-19 DI INDONESIA)

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Abstract

The government's inability to provide information in relation to COVID-19 in Indonesia, has stimulated grassroots efforts from society to develop data activism. These are the kind of activism that proliferates from modern social media ecosystem and utilizes data as the core of their movement. The article proposes that there are at least three forms of activism differentiated based on the actors, their main sources of data, and characteristic. These forms of activism are aimed to provide data and information that could help both government and society to better mitigate the impact of pandemic. While data activism provides some hope among other grim outlook of COVID-19 management in Indonesia, the questions on its impacts are still looming under the contested authorities of information in Indonesia.

Keywords: Data, activism, social media, COVID-19, information

Since Indonesia announced its first case back in early March, the handling of COVID-19 has been described as a mess by many scholars (Bland, 2020; Pisani, 2020). One crucial aspect that became the foundation of this mess is the absence of reliable data that could be used as a reference for accurate policy formulation (Nadzir, 2020). This is even more apparent when in their latest move, Jokowi's administrations pushed the agenda of 'new normal' that encourage Indonesian back to be active despite not being able to contain the spread of the pandemic (Bean, 2020). The lack of reliability from government to handle the pandemic has been responded by various grass roots movements from society. Among which are collective efforts to provide better data that is facilitated by digital media.

For a while, many has questioned the impact of digital technology on actual political and social changes (Gladwell, 2011; Morozov, 2011). In Indonesia, Lim (2013) has pointed out many caveats that limits the impact of Internet mediated activism. These criticism were justified, since Internet per se as a medium should

not be perceived to be inherently progressive (Dean, 2009). Nonetheless, the representation of our world has become so much more mediated nowadays that social media is integral for any social movements. The way Indonesian activists deal with the absence of COVID-19 data, is also not exempted from this phenomenon.

Based on preliminary observations, there are at least three trajectories of data activism that emerges during the spread of COVID-19 in Indonesia (Table 1). To discuss each category specifically, the article will look into three specific cases of data activism: The first form of activism is data storytelling. This is exemplified by the works produced by Edward Suhadi. He is known as a photographer and marketing experts, that back in 2014 also supported Jokowi by creating various creative forms of political campaign (Paraqbueq, 2014). During COVID-19 spread in Indonesia, Suhadi has produced a number of short videos that is intended to educate the public regarding the nature of this virus. To produce these visual contents, Edward referred to number of

articles mainly written from foreign sources such as journalists and scholars.

Table 1. Trajectories of Data Activism

Types of Activism	Actors	Main Sources of Data
Data Storytelling	Individuals	Journalistic Reports, Scientific Reports
Data Hub	Collectives	Government’s Official Data, Informative Contents, Scientific Reports
Alternative Data	Collectives	Citizen Reports

The data then is transformed into short videos with compelling visualization. Moreover, these contents were also presented on social media that eventually were shared through various online platforms including social messenger like Whatsapp. In this regard, data activism engaged by Edward Suhadi has mediated the scientific data to have larger outreach for Indonesian audiences.

The concern to educate the danger of COVID-19 is also shared by other people. Among those are the ones that initiated kawalcovid19.id. An information hub, that updates relevant information regarding the development of COVID-19 in Indonesia on daily basis. This second form of data activism focuses more on the creation of information hub. Ainun Najib, one of the initiators of this website, previously was already known for his creation of kawalpemilu.org. An online platform dedicated to provides election data transparency since 2014 (Yusuf, 2014). Similar to kawalpemilu.org, the second platform is aimed as a platform that could become an information hub to help raise awareness among society (Priambodo, 2020).

Their main activity is representing daily updates of COVID-19 in Indonesia. The data is taken from daily official data released by the government. Furthermore, the data then would be presented into graphics and charts that is disseminated through their website and social media account. Aside from official data, their website and social media account also published relevant information considered as necessary to educate

public. The contents from individual creators such as Edward Suhadi and other creative professionals are among those that was also shared on kawalcovid social media accounts. In addition, to also help influencing the policy, kawalcovid teams published their own policy paper. While it does not seem to have much impact on government policies, the platform and social media accounts has become one of the most important sources for COVID-19 information in Indonesia.

Another collective initiate comparable platform on website known as laporcovid19.org. The website is initiated by Irma Hidayana and her colleagues, to provide better data than the one officially announced by government (Najwa, 2020). The website represents the third type of data activism that creates alternative data from the official data. Hidayana, educated with doctorate in public health herself, was concern regarding the official count of COVID-19 patients that she believes does not reflect the number of the true cases. The website thus encourage society to be actively participating in creating a more reliable set of data.

The data of this platform is taken from reports from citizens all over Indonesia that suspects unreported COVID-19 cases in their neighborhood. While the system is far from perfect, these reports could help to map COVID-19 cases that are expected to be much closer to the number of true cases. This effort is even more significant, since Indonesian government has not been able to provide enough testing to COVID-19 suspects comparable to other countries (Hermawan, 2020).

CONCLUSION

These three cases should not be taken as whole representation of data activism related to COVID-19 in Indonesia nor mutually exclusive. As with every effort to categorize, the boundaries between each category are much more fluid and intersect on each other. The digital media as the medium of activism also reinforced these characteristics. Specifically, since the affordances of Internet encourage its users to utilize multiple platforms (e.g. Instagram, Twitter, Facebook) simultaneously, and exchange the contents from one to another. Nonetheless, the examination of these activism is still useful to provide general picture of data based public action in contemporary situation.

The question currently remain is, to what extent these activisms shapes either society or government? Preliminary observation suggests that the outlooks is grim for several reasons. In term of policy making, the government until recently does not prioritize scientific evidence as reference. It is evident, for instance from the way government pushed the narrative of ‘new normal’, while neglecting the evidence regarding the spread of COVID-19 that is still very concerning (“Ahli epidemiologi... , 2020). Therefore, even if data activism is able to improve or provide COVID-19 related data, there is not any guarantee that their work will be incorporated into actual policies formulated by government. At the same time, should data activists focus more to educate public, their existence is

contested by other sources of authority that disregard data, yet have many influences within social media ecosystem. Among which are celebrities and religious figures that propagates conspiracy theories and persuades public to neglect the COVID-19 health protocol. These conditions provide massive challenge for data activism to have a significant and sustainable impact on society. Particularly, since their platforms are most likely accessed by those that already inclines to use data as their reference regarding COVID-19 in Indonesia. Nonetheless, various forms of data activism have set the precedents for future grassroots participations on social and political changes in Indonesia.

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