

Shallow or Rational Public Spheres? Indonesian Political Parties in the Twitter-Sphere

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ABSTRACT

Despite the impressive democratic gains of the Indonesian political system since the fall of the authoritarian New Order regime, a noted weakness of the current political party system is the lack of clear ideological positions across parties and the difficulty that voters face in differentiating policy programs in order to hold parties accountable. Yet, with the increasing popularity of social media, new channels of communication are opening up between political parties and their constituents, reshaping Indonesia's political communication landscape. This raises the question of whether these new forms of media offer spaces that allow, or even encourage, parties to articulate ideological positions and discuss issues of public concern with constituents. This paper addresses this question through a mixed-methods analysis of how political parties are using the popular social media website Twitter and how users are responding to party messaging strategies. Based on a content analysis of party messages, qualitative observation of party-constituent interactions, and a quantitative analysis of user response, the findings suggest that there is reason for modest optimism that the medium of Twitter encourages a less superficial brand of party communication. Whereas other studies have found that the goals or the size of the party as the best explanation for the social media strategy and performance, the Indonesian case suggests that parties that attempt to differentiate themselves ideologically, regardless of their ideological content, and engage the public directly perform better on Twitter. It also finds that tweets about electoral politics receive the most reaction from users. This suggests that Twitter is a medium that will reward more programmatic and engaged party messaging, with potentially positive impacts on the Indonesian political communications landscape.

Keywords: Social media, Indonesia, Indonesian political parties, political communications, Southeast Asia

1. INTRODUCTION

The Indonesian political system has made impressive democratic gains since the fall of the authoritarian New Order regime in 1998, including a political party system that is fairly stable, relative to other countries in the region (Tomsa, 2010a: 142). A noted

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weakness, however, of the current political party system in Indonesia is the lack of clear ideological positions across parties and the difficulty that voters face in differentiating policy programs in a way that enables them to hold parties accountable (Ufen, 2006: 23-24). Yet, new channels of communication are opening up between political parties and constituents, as Indonesians increasingly get their news online (Grazella, 2012) and political parties acknowledge the importance of online messaging strategies through social media websites, such as the popular microblogging website, Twitter (Rochamuddin, 2012; Subagja, 2012; Tambun, 2012). This raises the question of whether social media websites offer a space that allows, or even encourages, parties to articulate ideological positions and discuss issues of public concern with constituents. Or, do the programmatic weaknesses commonly associated with Indonesian parties manifest themselves in the online sphere as well?

This paper uses the case of social media strategies by Indonesian political parties to consider whether social media promotes the development of a rational public sphere. Jurgen Habermas (1991) describes the rational public sphere as a sphere in which people publicly engage in rational debate about the role of governance (27), in which issues previously considered the realm of the state are opened up for public discourse as a common concern among citizens (36). Such a sphere mediates between civil society and the state, in which public opinion regarding issues of public concern are expressed through the use of public reason. In order to consider whether political parties promote the development of a rational public sphere, we can operationalise the term as communication strategies by political parties that are characterised by interactive communication emphasising the party's role in interest mediation regarding issues of common concern and where communication is open to dialogue with constituents in order to develop communities of political interest (Rommele, 2003: 9-10).

Yet, while the public sphere of Habermas has served as a potential ideal for democratic political communication, those who are skeptical of the social media's potential to deepen democratic political communication can also find inspiration in Habermas. Habermas expressed concerns regarding the impact of mass media on the public sphere. He suggested that mass media created "a public sphere in appearance only" (1991: 171), in which the scope and access of public discourse is expanded but debate is replaced by the administration of publicity that is consumed by the wider public (1991: 164). We must then ask whether the embrace of social media by political parties is simply more evidence for Habermas's concern, that while the public sphere's "scope is expanding impressively, its function has become progressively insignificant" (1991: 4). If indeed social media is promoting a more shallow public sphere, then we should expect to find that political party communication strategies on social media are characterised by dissemination rather than dialogue, in which communication strategies are based on the top-down broadcast of information, do not provide opportunities for interaction, and contain messages that are apolitical or unrelated to issues of common concern. The paper addresses these questions using a mixed-methods approach, based on content analysis, qualitative observation, and quantitative analysis. The findings

suggest that key factors that explain the social media presence and performance of political parties are their emphasis on ideological framing, regardless of the ideological content, and their willingness to engage in interactive communications strategies. The evidence additionally shows that users reward parties that adopt these communication strategies. Such findings foster modest optimism that social media websites, such as Twitter, can encourage less superficial forms of political party communication.

The quantitative content analysis of political party messaging on Twitter shows that many Indonesian parties have been slow to develop interactive social media strategies and have relied on shallow, top-down communication. These findings are consistent with studies on social media strategies of political parties in the US, UK, and Scotland (Baxter & Marcella 2012; Gibson, Margolis, Resnick, & Ward 2003), which found that party use of social media was characterised by one-way information flow and little engagement with other users or discussion of policy questions. However, there are a handful of Indonesian parties that have developed more interactive communication strategies that enter into dialogue with constituents and attempt to mobilise members. The qualitative observation of party interactions suggests that in the Indonesian case, it is the more ideologically-orientated challenger parties, regardless of their size or the content of the ideologies, which are more likely to fully utilise the interactive potential of online communication and develop deeper party-constituent interactions. This differs from previous studies in other countries, which found that a party's online communication strategies depended upon the goals of the party (Rommele, 2003; 14) or the prominence, size, or newness of the party (Gibson *et al.*, 2003; Semetko & Krasnoboka, 2003; Tkach-Kawasaki, 2003), and also differs from Vergeer, Hermans, and Sams' (2011: 489) findings that showed more politically progressive candidates adopt social media strategies. Additionally, whereas most studies have focused on the content of party messaging, this paper also examines party interaction and user response to party messaging. The qualitative observation of party-constituent interactions and statistical analysis of user response to party messages affirms that Twitter is a medium in which users reward the parties that adopt more interactive and ideological approaches. Further, regardless of whether a party uses a top-down or interactive communication strategy, they must also contend with the agency of other social media users who may resist their messages. This poses a challenge to political party communication that may push them to interact with constituents in ways that go beyond simple dissemination.

2. BACKGROUND: INDONESIA'S NON-PROGRAMMATIC POLITICAL PARTIES & POLITICAL COMMUNICATION

Following Indonesia's first parliamentary election in 1999, Indonesian political parties have competed in a multi-party parliamentary system and since 2004, parties have competed in a multi-party system in which the parliament is elected separately from a president who is elected directly. In the 2009 parliamentary elections, a total of 38 parties ran for seats in the national parliament, known as the People's Representative

Council (*Dewan Perwakilan Rakyat – DPR*). Of these, nine parties received enough votes to hold seats in the DPR, with no party receiving more than 21% of the vote (Sherlock, 2009: 1-4). From a comparative perspective, despite some procedural flaws, Indonesian elections are undeniably competitive, not engineered to favor particular parties (Mietzner & Aspinall, 2010: 7-8 Mietzner, 2008), and viewed as fair and well-organised by the public (Tan, 2002: 105). Indonesian parties have also been more durable than those in other emerging democracies, where parties are often simply electoral vehicles for individual elites which come and go with each election cycle (Mietzner & Aspinall, 2010:10). As Marcus Mietzner has argued, unlike the tumultuous democratic era of 1950s Indonesia, the current political party system has developed into a stable system in which parties compete for the ideological center rather than ideological extremes (Mietzner, 2008).

Despite this relatively competitive environment populated by fairly stable parties, Indonesia's political parties are generally held in low regard among the general public, as well as domestic and foreign commentators (Mietzner, 2008: 441; Tan, 2002). In particular, there has been a noted lack of ideological or policy differentiation between parties, aside from the division between secular and Islamic parties. Party platforms tend to be vague or superficial (Mietzner & Aspinall, 2010: 147). It has been observed that voters often struggle to discern policy differences between parties (Ufen, 2006:24) and overwhelmingly desire more information about elections, candidates, and parties (Schmidt, 2010: 113-114). Even the divide between secular and Islamic parties, which has long been an ideological axis of Indonesian politics, is becoming more unclear as secular and Islamic parties increasingly form coalitions (Mietzner, 2008: 451; Tan, 2006:99). This disconnection between party choice and policy programs has been blamed on a number of factors: the lack of internal party discipline to enforce a coherent party line (Tomsa, 2010b: 317), the lack of internal party democracy and the choice of candidates based on money politics rather than political positions (USAID, 2006: 33-34), the absence of a majority party which leads to the creation of 'rainbow coalitions' that lack ideological coherence or party accountability (Slater, 2004: 64; Tomsa, 2010b: 311), the common practice of horse-trading (*dagang sapi* or 'cow-trading') for political appointments that has little to do with policy (Slater, 2004:66-67; Tan, 2002: 489), the decision-making process in the DPR whereby legislation is produced in committees without transparency in terms of debate (Sherlock, 2009: 11), the increasingly candidate-centered campaigns that have come with direct presidential elections (Ufen, 2006: 17), the lack of party connection to particular constituencies (Tan, 2006: 13; USAID, 2006:33-34), or the domination of a predatory elite that uses parties as a cartel to capture rents and share, rather than compete for state power (Hadiz & Robison, 2004; Slater, 2004). Regardless of the explanation, the focus of scholars on the lack of programmatic political parties highlights its importance as a major obstacle to an Indonesian democracy where voters can hold lawmakers accountable for policy outcomes.

As the political communication landscape of Indonesia has undergone rapid

changes in the past decade, similar critiques about the lack of programmatic substance have been directed at the communication strategies of Indonesian political parties. The opportunities for political communication have greatly expanded since democratisation, through the loosening of state-censorship of the media, the privatisation of the previously centralised state media regime, and the proliferation of digital technologies and platforms (Lim, 2011:4). Yet, political parties are continuously criticised for the ways in which they have used this new freedom, too often focusing on party symbols and candidate image, rather than promoting issue-based content (Atkinson, 2000:97; Danial, 2009:232-233). Interestingly, the more recent shift in the political communication landscape towards online news and social media could have meaningful effects on the way parties communicate with the public. While internet use remains a common practice of mostly urban and middle class Indonesians, the number of internet users has been growing rapidly in recent years, particularly with the growth and increasing affordability of internet-capable mobile phones (Abernethy, 2012). A 2012 Yahoo study found that in Indonesia's 12 largest cities, internet penetration was at 57%, surpassing radio and newspaper exposure and trailing only television (Grazella, 2012). Additionally, the portion of Indonesian internet users using social media websites like Facebook and Twitter is very high relative to other countries (ComScore, 2010; Doherty, 2010; Lim, 2011: 5). While the use of social media remains mostly social, news websites are frequently viewed by Indonesian internet users (Lim, 2011: 30). The growth of interactive, online media raises the question of whether such media holds the potential for a new dynamic in political communication between constituents and parties.

Social media is often credited for its increasing role in the political sphere, especially in raising awareness and launching civil society campaigns around various issues, including the Lapindo mudflow disaster, the Jakarta terrorist bombings of July 2009, bike to work programs, harassment by Islamic vigilantes, religious extremism, and the censoring effects of defamation laws (Gale, 2010; Nugroho & Laksmi, 2011; Nugroho, 2012; *The Jakarta Globe*, 2012; Zwartz, 2010). Other examples have pointed out how social media can just as easily be used by extremist groups (Allard, 2011). Indonesian political campaigns are also increasingly acknowledging the importance of online communication and social media strategies (Iskandar, 2012; Subagja, 2012; Tambun, 2012). While much has been written about the examples of civil society actors in Indonesia adopting social media strategies and the limitation of such strategies, there has not been much coverage about the ways political elites are using social media, despite the growing interest in the literature regarding the ways political campaigns in other democracies have utilised social media (Chen, 2010; Cogburn & Espinoza-Vasquez, 2011). This raises the question of whether these emerging spheres of political discourse, such as social media, can change the dynamics of Indonesian political party communication strategies and whether it creates opportunities for parties to differentiate themselves based on ideology or policy. Do online communities, such as the microblogging website, Twitter, create a space in which parties are encouraged

to articulate policy positions or aggregate the interests of particular constituencies? The following analysis will attempt to address these questions by examining the way political parties are using Twitter and how they are interacting with other users.

3. DATA AND METHODS

The following analysis is based on a mixed-methods approach (Johnson, Onwuegbuzie, & Turner, 2007). First, in order to address the question of what is being discussed on political party Twitter accounts, a content analysis was conducted, which Kimberly Neuendorf defines as the “systemic, objective, quantitative analysis of message characteristics” (Neuendorf, 2002: 1). Based on a simple random sample of tweets by major Indonesian parties in the first six months of 2012, 612 tweets¹ were coded based on issues being discussed, including agriculture, coalition politics, corruption, economics, education, elections, environment, foreign policy, human rights, healthcare, infrastructure, the Jakarta gubernatorial election, nationalism, religion, security, gender, and other social spending programs. Such an analysis compared the forms of political messaging adopted by political parties on Twitter with previous analyses that have critiqued political party communication as being shallow and lacking ideological and policy content.

Next, in order to capture the interactive strategies of political party messaging that are not easily quantified, a qualitative analysis of interactions between political parties, politicians, and other Twitter users through internet-based ethnographic observation (netnography) was conducted. Netnography is a method that has developed in the literature on marketing and consumer research and applies the principles of ethnographic methods, that is, contextualised and interpretive participant-observation through long-term engagement, to the internet (Kozinets, 2010). While Robert V. Kozinets argued that netnography must include online participation and interaction of the researcher (2010: 74-75), there is a body of research that adopts strictly observational netnography methods that are more appropriate for the purposes of this study (Beaven & Laws, 2007; Hewer & Brownlie, 2007; Maulana & Eckhardt, 2007).

Finally, to test the types of Twitter party messaging that garners reader response, the number of times that a tweet has been “retweeted”, or shared by users, was noted, which provides a measure of the influence of a given tweet (Bakshy, Hofman, Mason, & Watts, 2011: 2). The elements of party messaging that are associated with reader response were then tested. For this, negative binomial regression model, a statistical model used to predict discreet count variables such as the number of times a tweet was retweeted, was used (Long & Freese, 2006: 372-381). Using this method, one can treat retweets as the response variable that is being predicted and test various components of tweets. In this way, we can test which elements of party messaging are associated with responses from readers of their tweets.

¹Of the coded tweets, 418 (68.3%) were originally tweeted by the parties’ Twitter accounts, while the remaining 194 (31.7%) were tweets by others that parties chose to share with their followers.

4. ANALYSIS & FINDINGS

4.1 Content Analysis: What are Parties Discussing?

In order to examine how the increasing influence of online media in Indonesia's political communication landscape affects political party messaging, the analysis begins with the presence of political parties on Twitter and a content analysis of their discussion on the website. A survey of the online Twitter presence of Indonesia's major political parties demonstrated a relatively modest Twitter following for most parties (Table 1). When the levels of Twitter followers across parties were compared, a few clear patterns emerge. There is very little correlation between the percentage of votes a party received in the previous parliamentary election and percentage of Twitter followers. There are neither statistically significant differences between secular and Islamic parties, nor between parties inside and outside the current governing coalition. There is, however, a strong correlation between a party's level of Twitter activity in the first six months of 2012 and their total Twitter followers in July 2012. A similar pattern emerges when one looks at the relationship between the level of a party's followers and their adoption of interactive messaging strategies specific to Twitter. Twitter messages allow users to employ hashtags, replies, and mentions to organise discussions around keywords, include specific users in a discussion, or respond directly to the tweets of other users. The parties that more often include these interactive components in their tweets are parties that have fully embraced the medium, such as the Islamist PKS and the secular-populist Greater Indonesia Movement Party (*Partai Gerakan Indonesia Raya* - Gerindra) which are smaller parties but with substantial Twitter followers. These relationships between Twitter activity, interactive strategies, and Twitter followers suggest that it is the party's commitment to the medium as a communication strategy, rather than electoral popularity, which drives a party's presence on Twitter. This would also help to explain how smaller parties, such as the Islamist PKS and the secular Gerindra Party, have developed wider Twitter followings than their larger competitors.

Table 1. Political party presence on Twitter

Political Party	Notes	2009 Votes (%)	Followers†	Tweets in Sample	Tweets With Interactive Components
Democrat Party (PD)	Secular; Party of the President	20.8	3,198	8	14%
Golkar	Secular; Ruling party under New Order	14.5	5,956	115	3%

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Table 1. (con't)

Political Party	Notes	2009 Votes (%)	Followers†	Tweets in Sample	Tweets With Interactive Components
Indonesian Democracy Party-Struggle (PDI-P)	Secular	14.0	4,090	47	59%
Justice and Prosperity Party (PKS)	Islamic	7.9	23,196	273	60%
National Mandate Party (PAN)	Islamic	6.0	0	0	0%
National Awakening Party (PKB)	Islamic	5.3	142	18	28%
United Development Party (PPP)	Islamic	5.0	851	12	0%
Greater Indonesia Movement (Gerindra)	Secular	4.5	6,577	134	76%
People's Conscience Party (Hanura)	Secular	3.8	822	5	20%

Source: Election data from Sherlock (2009). Twitter data based on simple random sample of tweets from official party Twitter accounts from January 2012 to June 2012

†As of July 9, 2012, at the end of the content analysis period.

In order to address the common critique of shallow and non-programmatic nature of Indonesian political party communication, a content analysis was conducted on a sample of party tweets, coded by topic, to examine whether parties were using Twitter to discuss issues of public concern, political competition, or topics of little interest to users. The content analysis produced mixed findings (Table 2). On the one hand, the most frequently discussed issue was elections and the third most discussed issue was coalition politics, suggesting that the parties' messaging strategies continued to focus on the party itself as a contestant in elections rather than a representative of policy or ideology. This is similar to the findings of Wong and Lean (2011) on party agenda setting as mediated through print media in the 2008 Malaysia elections, whereby it was found that political issues outweighed discussion of other issues. However, on the other

hand, unlike Wong and Lean's (2011) results, the unmediated party communication of social media did contain a significant number of issue-based messages. When all the messages on policy matters were combined, 38% of tweets in the sample were found to be related to policy, compared to 20% being about elections or coalition politics. Perhaps what is most telling is that only 3.8% of the sampled tweets mentioned both elections and any issue. This suggests that parties are not attaching their campaign appeals to specific issues. In other words, you are unlikely to read a tweet that says "Vote for Candidate X because they will do something about Issue Y." This would appear to be a discouraging finding if one hoped to see parties frame elections as choices made by voters to hold them accountable for policy outcomes.

Table 2. Content of Tweets by issue

Issue	Percentage of Tweets in sample (%)
<i>Politics</i>	
Elections	16.7
Coalition politics	8.0
Jakarta Governor election	7.5
Total	20
<i>Issues</i>	
Economy	10.0
Corruption	7.8
Religion	6.7
Gender	4.2
Other social programs	4.1
Foreign policy	3.9
Nationalism	3.9
Healthcare	3.4
Education	3.1
Infrastructure	2.5
Security	1.5
Agriculture	0.8
Human Rights	0.8
Total	38
<u>Both politics and issues</u>	3.8

N=612; Random sample from official party Twitter accounts, January - July 2012

4.2 Qualitative Analysis: Interactive Strategies of Political Parties on Twitter

While the above content analysis offers a snapshot of the issues raised by parties on Twitter, it does not capture the interactions that are essential to creating a rational public sphere. As Habermas described, the rational public sphere is not just the use of public reason but also the process of interaction to achieve public opinion (1991: 27). Just as Habermas expressed suspicion that mass media was likely to replace rational-

critical debate with consumption (159-175), contemporary communication scholars have raised the question of whether mass communication is best conceptualised as a dialogue or mere dissemination, where dissemination is characterised by “the endless proliferation and scattering of emissions without the guarantee of productive exchanges” (DeLuca & Peeples, 2002: 130). How do the interactive strategies of political parties on Twitter compare with these two conceptions of a public discourse?

To address this issue, the study employed a qualitative analysis of interactions between political parties, politicians, and other Twitter users through internet-based ethnographic observation (netnography) (Kozinets, 2010). This ethnographic approach to the messaging strategies and interactions on Twitter was to develop a “thick description” (Geertz, 1973) that draws upon the context-specific and relational meanings of tweets that are difficult to capture through quantitative content analysis alone. The researcher carried out daily observations the accounts of major political parties and notable politicians during the six month period of the study. The findings showed a spectrum of interactive Twitter strategies, some of which foster a more rational-critical public sphere, while others can be characterised as the simple dissemination of information.

In examining the various interactive strategies adopted by Indonesian political parties on Twitter, we can differentiate them and their role in the discourse around parties on Twitter as being interactive, dialogic, or issue-oriented. The interactive strategies take advantage of the various ways that Twitter allows parties to initiate conversations with users, respond to content of other users, or address wider discussions on Twitter indirectly. Dialogic strategies refer to strategies that are not just interactive but also include the emergence and acknowledgement of differing viewpoints. Such interactions need not reach consensus, but just by bringing in differences into the public sphere, they help to create a space for rational public debate. Finally, issue-oriented strategies refer to interactions about political or policy issues of public concern. When observing party interactions with users on Twitter through the lens of these factors, one finds a spectrum of strategies adopted by parties, which will be described next. Whereas some parties attempt to initiate interactions with users for the purpose of fostering discussion or mobilising followers, other parties have adopted less interactive strategies that amount to the simple dissemination of information. Apart from the communications strategies of the parties themselves, one finds that other users on the site are able to create interactions that resist the messaging of parties and politicians.

Interactions that most epitomise Habermas’s rational public sphere are those that encourage or lead to public discussion of issues of public concern and are the rarest form of interaction strategy adopted by Indonesian political parties. Though rare, these interaction strategies are more likely to involve political actors that take an interactive approach to the medium of Twitter more generally, such as PKS, Gerindra or the Indonesian Democracy Party – Struggle (*Partai Demokrasi Indonesia – Perjuangan* - PDI-P). Some examples include intentional conversation starters. In one such example, PDI-P solicited feedback regarding a proposed law addressing village governance. Not only did they ask for suggestions but they included a hashtag for the

legislation (#RUUDesa) and the Twitter name of the relevant legislator (Budiman Sudjatmiko, @budimandjatmiko) as a way to facilitate discussion on the issue. On another occasion, PDI-P engaged users by responding to criticism, such as a six tweet exchange in which PDI-P's account debated with a user about whether PDI-P's position against employer outsourcing was inconsistent with previous labor legislation passed during the Megawati Sukarnoputri presidency. The PDI-P account has also been a site where internal party issues have been discussed, with a number of conversations focusing on who PDI-P should nominate for upcoming local elections, an interesting scenario given the often cited lack of internal democracy among Indonesian parties.²

Other issue-oriented interactions that involve competing viewpoints do not take the form of debate, but parties do acknowledge contending positions. PKS, for example, does not often debate policy issues but does directly give feedback on user critiques, such as thanking them for their input or correcting misperceptions about the party's religious beliefs. Prabowo Subianto, former New Order general and leader of the Gerindra Party, often responds to criticisms from users with questions, soliciting suggestions from the user rather than debating directly. Such interactions may not represent public debate, but they often lead to more discussion about an issue and acknowledge contestation. Finally, the interactive nature of the medium makes it possible for political party tweets to generate public debate even when a politician or party did not intend it. Once a tweet has been posted, users can respond and discuss it without the participation of the original writer. In one such instance, a tweet about fuel subsidies by prominent businessman and Golkar leader, Aburizal Bakrie led to a lengthy and publicly viewable discussion about fuel subsidies by other Twitter users, albeit with no response from Bakrie himself.

While such interactions are useful for creating political discussion around political parties on Twitter, perhaps one might also expect parties to use the site more often as a tool to mobilise supporters for campaign events, volunteer opportunities, demonstrations, or other party efforts. While much has been written about the potential of social media in mobilising political activism, including examples from Indonesia (A. Dibley, 2012; T. Dibley, 2012; Lim, 2011: 19-21; Lim, 2013), only a few parties have made concerted efforts to use their Twitter feeds to recruit members or mobilise members for local action. The two notable exceptions are PKS and Gerindra. PKS has used their Twitter account to promote the work of party activists, for example, when party activists set up community service centers to assist those affected by floods in Jakarta. This tactic is not only part of PKS's well-institutionalized strategy of providing grassroots constituency services (Slater, 2004: 62), but was also used to promote their candidate in the Jakarta governor's election. However, the party that has most consistently attempted to mobilize members through Twitter is the secular-populist Gerindra Party, which used its Twitter feed to sign-up members online,

²See Aspinall, E. (2010). Princess of Populism. Inside Indonesia 99 (January-March) for his constrasting view that the internal debate in PDI-P is more dynamic and often acknowledged by observers.

distribute campaign materials, refer users to local party branches, promote local events or speakers, and solicit photos of party events from local cadre.

While the above examples reveal ways that parties are incorporating online messaging into wider campaign strategies or fostering, intentionally or not, a space in which discussion of issues of public concern can occur, other parties have adopted Twitter strategies that rely mostly on the dissemination of information, rather than the engagement of users. The National Awakening Party (*Partai Kebangkitan Bangsa* - PKB), Golkar (*Partai Golongan Karya*), the United Development Party (*Partai Persatuan Pembangunan* - PPP), the Democrat Party (*Partai Demokrat* – PD), and the People’s Conscience Party (*Partai Hati Nurani Rakyat* – Hanura) are all examples of parties that have very low levels of interaction with followers and mostly post party press releases. Such an approach is antithetical to communication practices that would encourage a rational public sphere, although just putting the information on Twitter also does open the possibility for others to discuss it. Ironically, such non-interactive strategies may be equally ineffective in the dissemination of information. As the findings above suggest, the parties that have adopted more interactive strategies have also secured more followers online compared to parties that turn their Twitter feed into a simple list of headlines. In addition to non-interactive strategies, there are also politicians who have used their Twitter accounts as a vehicle for creating a public persona, but one that has little to do with politics or issues of public concern. Anas Urbaningrum, former Chairman of the Democrat Party, is one of the high-ranking officials to use such an approach. Urbaningrum mostly tweeted about personal activities or, even more often, his reactions to English soccer matches in the period of study. Such uses of Twitter are certainly not uncommon among Twitter users in the general public, but they are not what one might expect from a high-ranking political party official. If simple dissemination is antithetical to creating a rational public sphere due to its lack of interaction, then the personal and mundane messaging of a politician like Anas Urbaningrum is also considered antithetical to fostering a rational public sphere for its complete lack of relevant public content.

The above examples highlight a spectrum of messaging strategies that were adopted by political parties and politicians on Twitter. However, the discourse around political parties is not simply a product of messaging strategies by the parties themselves. Their messages must also contend with other users and the possibility for resistance in their interactions with other users. It has been pointed out that there is apparent leeriness among Indonesian politicians about the potential for social media to generate criticism (Palmer, 2012). This is understandable as interactions on Twitter demonstrate that once politicians venture into the medium, they are unable to control the discourse that takes place around their messages. For example, attempts to use Twitter by Golkar leader and 2014 presidential hopeful, Aburizal Bakrie have been consistently followed by comments that make reference to the Lapindo disaster, a man-made mudflow resulting from a natural gas drilling accident that inundated large swathes of land, and displaced 40,000 to 60,000 people. The tragedy was declared a human rights violation by the National Commission on Human Rights (*Komnas HAM*) (“Lapindo Disaster”,

2012). The company accused being responsible for the accident is PT Lapindo Brantas, a subsidiary of the Bakrie Group connected to Aburizal Bakrie, one of Indonesia's wealthiest individuals (McMichael, 2009: 81). Despite Bakrie's attempts to distance himself from the disaster, the word "Lapindo" appears like a shadow following his tweets. Sometimes comments simply say "Lapindo?" or "What about Lapindo?" Other times, users mock Bakrie's current projects by comparing them to Lapindo. One such user responded to Bakrie's donation of laptops to students by asking if Bakrie had distributed mud to them as well.

Perhaps the most fearsome resistance to party and politician messaging on Twitter has come from a Twitter provocateur writing under the pseudonym @TrioMacan2000. Taking its name from a popular *dangdut* musical group, the writer(s) of @TrioMacan2000 claim to have insider information on high-ranking government officials and use blogs and Twitter to leak information about corruption among Indonesia's elite. While the veracity of the claims are up for debate, they have nevertheless gotten a lot of attention, even resulting in some officials filing defamation claims against the writers (Adisty, 2012; Belarminus, 2013; Marhaenjati, 2013; Silalahi, 2012).

While most of the writers of @TrioMacan2000 remain anonymous, in late 2012, one writer came forward. In an interview, he described himself as a member of a "public intelligence community" that produces the content of @TrioMacan2000 and brings transparency to elite politics (*Berita Satu*, 2012). During the duration of this study, @TrioMacan2000 made accusations about two observed accounts, those of Prabowo Subianto and Aburizal Bakrie. @TrioMacan2000 responded directly to a tweet by Bakrie, accusing his party of exchanging party nominations for money, which generated much conversation but no response from Bakrie himself. A longer back and forth exchange occurred between @TrioMacan2000 and Prabowo Subianto, former New Order general, leader of Gerindra, and 2014 presidential candidate. Following rumors that Prabowo's wealthy brother, Hashim Djojohadikusumo, did not pay taxes, Prabowo wrote nine consecutive tweets denying the rumours and denouncing his anonymous accusers, a likely reference to @TrioMacan2000. @TrioMacan2000 responded directly to the denials by calling Prabowo a "murderer" and "corrupter," referring to Prabowo's notorious reputation as a general under Suharto, which includes accusations that he was involved in the abduction of student activists and the instigation of the anti-Chinese riots that swept Jakarta in 1998 (Mydans, 1998; Tomsa, 2009). The writers of @TrioMacan2000, however, do not show allegiances to any particular political party and all political elites appear to be potential targets; which they demonstrated when they critiqued both candidates in the 2012 Jakarta gubernatorial election. Perhaps more importantly, such tussles between users and politicians are not simply stray *ad hominem* attacks, a part of the random noise of internet communication. In fact, one need not even be on Twitter to know about these conflicts, as the Indonesian news media has started reporting regularly on the conflicts between @TrioMacan2000 and Indonesia's political elite, including their exchanges with Prabowo (Musashi, 2013).

The conflict between Indonesia's political elite and @TrioMacan2000 illustrates that while politicians have control over the messages sent out by their accounts, they must still contend with the fact that the space for public discourse on Twitter is far less controlled than the more traditional channels of communication. However, this does not suggest that such resistance is entirely novel to Indonesian political communications. Even in far more closed media contexts, there have always been opportunities for resistance, as John Pemberton's story from 1977 of a bus terminal television that was turned upside-down during a speech by Suharto so aptly reminds us (Pemberton, 1994: 3). Yet, the ways in which the medium of Twitter facilitates interaction, allows users to interact directly with the accounts of parties or politicians, and documents these interactions for others to see does offer new possibilities for party-constituent interactions.

The above spectrum of interactions is meant to provide a framework for understanding the types of interactions that occur between political parties, politicians, and other users on Twitter, and which of these strategies is more conducive to fostering a rational public sphere. However, it is also worth noting that the parties that are most likely to adopt rational-critical or mobilise interaction strategies are PKS, Gerindra, and PDI-P. Each of these parties, with varying levels of success, have made more effort than other Indonesian parties to distinguish themselves based on ideological grounds and employed ideological framing strategies. PKS is an Islamic party with roots in the Islamic student movement and whose message focuses on social justice, clean government, and a relatively conservative interpretation of Islam. It has distinguished itself from other Islamic parties through organisational discipline and programmatic consistency that has allowed it to position itself as a challenger, above the political horse-trading of established parties (Mietzner, 2008: 449-451; Tomsa, 2010a: 151). However, once the party found some electoral success and became Indonesia's largest Islamic party, tensions within the party emerged regarding the fine line between appealing to a wider mainstream audience and sticking to its Islamist activist roots (Fealy, 2010; Tanuwidjaja, 2012: 541). Gerindra, on the other hand, is a secular party founded by the controversial former New Order general, Prabowo Subianto. Despite being a newcomer to the political scene, Gerindra spent a significant amount on its 2009 media campaign and employed foreign consultants (Ufen, 2010: 24), branding itself as an economically populist, "pro-people" challenger (Gunadi, Widodo, & Siragar, 2008) and championing jobs, subsidies for basic necessities, and opposition to the privatisation of state enterprises (Tomsa, 2009). Finally, PDI-P is a secular nationalist party whose history can be traced to the nationalist party of Indonesia's first president, Sukarno, and is led by his daughter, Megawati Sukarnoputri. While some have criticised PDI-P for lacking a clear ideology and being dominated by Megawati Sukarnoputri, the party does have a history of populist and nationalist rhetoric (Mietzner, 2008: 444). This is evident from the continued tensions within the party in embracing its position as a populist challenger (Aspinall, 2010).

Thus, the more impressive online presence and interactive strategies of these parties suggest that Twitter is a sphere of communication that rewards ideological or challenger parties, rather than the more ideologically-vague parties. It suggests that the so-called Twitter-sphere is a discursive space that can reward parties willing to engage grassroots constituencies through interactive and mobilising strategies, as well as parties that “have something to say,” based on some kind of ideological or issue-based discourse. However, constituent engagement and ideological distinctness are generally not strengths of Indonesian political parties. So, if the most pessimistic views of Indonesian political parties are true that parties are simply vehicles for the sharing of power among elites, one may be pessimistic about the parties’ full utilisation of interactive communication strategies like Twitter in the future.

4.3 Quantitative Analysis: What Explains Reader Response to Party Messages?

If the above analysis paints a picture of how political parties are shaping the political discourse on Twitter, what do we know about the way Twitter users are responding to these messages? Unlike other channels of political communication, the interactive nature of Twitter allows us to measure the response of members in this emerging discursive sphere. On Twitter, users can “retweet” the tweets of others, sharing these tweets with their own followers and thus spreading the message to larger audiences. The number of times that a tweet has been “retweeted” provides us with a measure of the influence of a given tweet (Bakshy *et al.*, 2011: 2). Thus, by measuring the number of retweets attached to the tweets of political parties, we can measure the types of tweets that elicit a response from followers and provide insights into the types of political discourse to which Indonesian Twitter users are responding. While the retweeting of a tweet should not be mistaken for a vote of agreement with the message of the tweet, we can assume that it implies a level of interest in the tweet (positive or negative) that makes it worth sharing with followers.

Based on this measure of reader response, one can test the elements of party Twitter messages that are associated with responses from readers. To conduct this analysis, the researcher used a negative binomial regression model, a statistical model used to predict discreet count variables such as the number of times that a tweet has been retweeted (Long & Freese, 2006: 372–381). In the following model, retweets are the response variable that is being predicted with various components of a tweet serving as the independent variable. In this way, we can test the type of elements in party messaging that garner responses from readers. Such a test is not meant to generalise about all Indonesian Twitter users but it can offer insights on elements that elicits responses from users who read party tweets. The following regression model included a series of dummy variables, capturing data such as the party that posted the tweet, whether a tweet is about elections and coalition politics, whether a tweet is issue-oriented, whether it makes reference to identity (nationalism, Islam, other religions, Chinese-Indonesians), whether it is regarding local issues on Java or the outer islands, and whether it includes interactive components specific to Twitter. The model is based

upon 418 randomly sampled tweets by official political party accounts during the first six months of 2012.³

Table 3. Effect of party and message content on retweets (negative binomial regression)

Variable	Coefficient	Standard error	p-value	Effect size†† (if significant)
<i>Political party†</i>				
Party Democrat	0.57	0.695	0.415	
PDI-P	1.83	0.354	< 0.001***	525%
PKS	2.18	0.238	< 0.001***	789%
PPP	-0.77	0.616	0.209	
PKB	-0.94	0.810	0.244	
Gerindra	1.17	0.360	0.001***	224%
Hanura	0.17	0.953	0.856	
<i>Content</i>				
Issue-oriented	0.301	0.186	0.106	
Politics	0.660	0.195	0.001***	93%
<i>Region</i>				
Java	0.245	0.196	0.212	
Outside Java	0.325	0.281	0.248	
<i>Identity appeals</i>				
Nationalism	0.725	0.414	0.079	
Religion-Islam	0.386	0.372	0.299	
Religion-other	1.570	0.915	0.086	
Chinese	0.363	1.398	0.795	
<i>Interactive components</i>				
Hashtags (#)	0.518	0.252	0.041*	68%
Replies	-2.569	0.567	< 0.001***	-92%
Mentions	-0.640	0.174	< 0.001***	-47%
Multimedia	0.422	0.245	0.283	

Official party Twitter accounts, January - June 2012

N = 418; *p<.05; **p<.01; ***p<.001; Wald $\chi^2(19) = 185.70$, p<.001

†Reference Category: Golkar

†† Effect size can be interpreted as the percent change in expected retweets for an increase of one unit in the variable, holding all other variables constant.

The findings from the model confirmed some of the earlier findings from the content and qualitative observation analyses. In terms of parties, we again find that the parties that have embraced the medium were more likely to find responses from other users.

³ In order to maintain comparable counts across parties, the sample size is reduced here in order to measure user responses only to tweets that were originally posted by the party account, rather than both the tweets and re-tweets from other accounts.

Using Golkar as our reference category, there is statistically significant evidence that the parties that have been most active on the site, such as PKS, Gerindra, and PDI-P, were more likely to have their tweets retweeted. This can likely be attributed to the previously discussed factors that differentiated these three parties: higher levels of Twitter activity, more interactive messaging, and more ideological framing strategies.

When we look at the content of party messages, the 'politics' variable, representing tweets that are about elections or coalition politics, showed a statistically significant positive relationship to the number of times that a message is retweeted. Holding all other variables constant, when a party tweet is about politics, the expected number of retweets increased by 93.4% compared to tweets that are not about politics. This suggests that, at least among users who are reading party tweets, there is interest in information and messaging related to political competition in the form of elections and coalition politics. On the other hand, although the model predicted an increase in retweets for issue-oriented messages, coded as tweets about any of the issues in the previous content analysis, the relationship is not statistically significant. Thus, while there is evidence that tweets about politics garner a response, the model did not offer a clear picture regarding the relationship between issue-oriented tweets and user response.

The model also found very little evidence of an effect based on appeals to identity or regional issues. Among the variables that looked at appeals to identity, there were no statistically significant relationships between the frequency of retweets and tweets making reference to nationalism, Islam, other religions, or Chinese-Indonesians. Neither was there evidence that there was a regional effect on the response of readers, as there was no statistically significant relationship between tweets making reference to localities either on the island of Java or outside of Java and the frequency of retweets.

Finally, regarding the interactive components specific to Twitter, there was statistically significant evidence that tweets with hashtags were more likely to be retweeted, while tweets that were direct replies to specific users were less likely to be retweeted. If a party tweet had a hashtag, the expected number of retweets increased by 68%, holding all other variables constant. It is not surprising that hashtags are associated with reader response, since they are meant to connect tweets to wider discussions around searchable keywords. It also supports the hypothesis that parties that attempt to use more interactive strategies to tap into wider conversations are likely to find a response from other users.

Thus, the findings from the negative binomial regression analysis confirmed some of the insights from the content analysis and qualitative observations. The findings suggest that the parties that have committed to actively using the medium and taking advantage of its interactive potential are more likely to garner responses from users on the site. While the model was unable to produce statistically significant results for the relationship between issue-oriented messages and retweets, it does suggest that tweets about elections and coalition politics are more likely to garner responses from readers of party tweets. Finally, there was little evidence that appeals to identity or regional issues were associated with responses from other users.

5. CONCLUSIONS

To return to the initial question of the article, what does this mixed-methods analysis of political party messaging on Twitter suggest about the relationship between social media and political communication in Indonesia? The content analysis of party tweets shows the relatively modest Twitter presence of parties, suggesting that it remains an untapped resource for party-constituent interactions, but parties that have committed to using the medium have found responses. Similarly, the qualitative analysis of user response to party tweets provides evidence that the medium of Twitter rewards parties that are willing to interact with other users and attempt to tap into or initiate wider conversations. When it comes to the responses of users who read party tweets, tweets about elections and coalition politics and tweets by parties who have committed to the medium are more likely to be retweeted, while there is little evidence that appeals to identity or region garner responses. Finally, the qualitative observation of party-user interactions also suggests a relationship between a party's success in utilising the medium and its willingness to frame itself as an ideologically distinct organisation.

The consistency of the findings across each of these methods, that social media presence and performance are linked to ideological framing and interactive communication strategies, fosters modest optimism that the medium of Twitter encourages a less superficial brand of political communication by Indonesian political parties. However, the potential for Indonesian political parties to take advantage of new media will be limited by the institutional and programmatic weakness of the parties themselves. While the strategies of many parties on Twitter resemble the shallow, simple dissemination that Habermas saw in earlier forms of mass media, the findings also suggest that the medium rewards parties that adopt communication strategies that engage the public, initiate or tap into public discussions, and craft a communication strategy that distinguishes themselves from other parties. As a part of the larger political communication environment in Indonesia, Twitter represents potential new directions in the political communication landscape that may encourage more substantive communication strategies from political parties and foster a more rational public sphere.

The case of Indonesian political parties further suggests that future comparative studies of political party online messaging, particularly in the cases of new democracies, should consider not just party size or party goals, but also the ideological or programmatic strength or weakness of parties in explaining their online performance. Additionally, the above emphasis on interaction and measurements of user responses points to the ways in which party messaging on social media is not simply a choice of parties themselves. Instead, party messaging must contend with the reaction of other users who can reward parties for adopting more engaged messaging strategies or demand accountability.

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