

The Structural, Representation, and Interaction Aspects of Governmental Social Networking Account

Aspek Struktural, Representasi, dan Interaksi pada Akun Jejaring Sosial Pemerintah

Yayuk Lestari

e-mail: lestari.yayuk11@yahoo.com

Rahmi Surya Dewi

Jurusan Ilmu Komunikasi, Universitas Andalas, Kampus Unand Limau Manis Padang Indonesia

e-mail: rahmi.ikom@gmail.com

Yesi Puspita

e-mail : yesiranza@gmail.com

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Abstract

This study was inspired by the growth of media and technology, particularly social networking accounts. Such accounts help people interact and participate in political decisions in spite of geographical, time and socio-economic barriers. However, West Sumatera provincial government has yet to optimize media as a means of communicating with the public. In the study, we use public sphere theory proposed by Habermas. Dahlgren developed it further into three dimensions: structural, representation, and interaction. Of two accounts examined, i.e. Solok and Pariaman city administrations', the three dimensions of public sphere have not existed. Public relations unit as the department that manages the accounts, still puts social networking accounts as a means of image polishing of the institutions rather than a means to disseminate information to the public. Social networking management that has not been taken as a performance appraisal tools has made social networking accounts as an additional task, although essentially they realise the importance to manage them.

Keywords: Public sphere, Social networks, structural, representation, interaction

Abstrak

Penelitian ini dilatarbelakangi oleh perkembangan media dan teknologi terutama akun social network. Social network juga membantu masyarakat untuk melakukan interaksi dan berpartisipasi dalam pengambilan keputusan politik tanpa mengenal wilayah, waktu dan hambatan sosial-ekonomi. Namun faktanya Pemerintah Sumatera Barat belum mengoptimalkan media tersebut sebagai sarana berkomunikasi dengan publik. Teori yang digunakan dalam penelitian ini adalah teori public sphere oleh Habermas. Dahlgren kemudian mengembangkan teori ini menjadi tiga dimensi, yakni; struktural, representasi dan interaksi, dari dua akun yang diteliti yakni Pemko Solok

dan Pemko Sawahlunto ketiga aspek tersebut belum ada. Humas sebagai pihak yang mengelola akun tersebut masih menjadikan social network sebagai ajang pencitraan image institusi dibandingkan memberi informasi kepada publik. Pengelolaan social network yang belum menjadi alat ukur kinerja juga menjadikan keberadaan social network sebagai tugas tambahan, walaupun pada dasarnya mereka menyadari pentingnya untuk mengelola akun social network.

Kata kunci: Public sphere, social networks, *struktural, representasi, interaksi*

INTRODUCTION

While social networks are basically not intended for political purpose, Obama's victory in US presidential election in 2008 and 2012 can not be separated from his campaigning team effort in using social networks to attract voters. This success did not only take place in America but also in South Africa. Social network such as Facebook also acts as a tool for Egyptian political activists in overthrowing Hosni Mubarak's regime. Conventional media that are considered in favor of the ruling regime have made Facebook an alternative medium to perform public mobilisation. However, according to Sirky (2011) new media are not substitution to real world activity but only serve as tools for coordination. Based on this statement, we can assume that it still needs a real action but in the decision making process, social networks can be a public space where people gather to express their opinions.

Government as a public institution should be able to utilise social networks to create publicity or to communicate and interact with people. Social network is not only more interactive but also less pricey, compared to the cost of advertisements that the government has to spend in mass media or billboard as a means to spread information. Thus, social network is as what Habermas suggested (1993: 449), i.e. a public space, where aspects of openness and easy access have made all people are able to interact.

Unfortunately, the West Sumatera provincial government has not optimized

social network as a means to communicate with the public. The fact that there are only few regencies and municipalities in West Sumatera that use social networks show the lack of awareness that the government has in communicating with the public. Government's public relations as a unit that manages information to the public has not utilised social networks as main media in disseminating information to the public. In fact, the West Sumatera provincial government that theoretically could set an example for many regencies and municipalities in West Sumatera does not have even one official social network.

The less optimum use of social networks as a means to communicate with the public is due to the lack of staffs who are capable of managing information. It can be seen from the unattractive appearance of messages and pictures displayed and also the less frequent status updating or tweeting. In the end, they all have made the public unwilling to participate. Other problems that emerge are due to the lack of infrastructures (device, signal and Internet access) and the fact that not all people are able to operate it has made social networks has not been fully optimized by the public, so that the need to express opinions is still fulfilled by traditional ways, such as participating in public demonstrations and writing letters to the editor.

Some studies like Kahn and Kellner's (2004) examined how the growth of new media has changed political and cultural reconfigurations, especially daily lives. The presence of social networks has helped ordinary people to create social relationships and form of political possibilities. People who

own blogs, Twitter and Facebook that once are considered a sub-culture activity can transform into mainstream activity, where their voices are heard, becoming part of solutions and finally a public sphere.

Butsch (2007: 162) clearly states his position on new media:

New media are interactive, conflating the information supply and conversation of this old conception and relocating both in a simultaneous virtual space. They disaggregate audiences, integrate media use into everyday life, and reconceive users' relation to media... they share a digital foundation that has enabled rapid convergence of video and audio technologies... {new media} it has dissolved the dichotomy between public and private space, a social distinction underlying traditional concepts of public spheres... Today everyday life is immersed in media. Whatever we are doing some form of media is present... the interactive capacities of new media have been hailed as the basis for a new form of public sphere.

According to Entman and Bennet (2001:2), a public sphere-either physical or virtual- is a place where public can exchange their opinions and meanings. In a public space, public can exchange their opinions and discuss an issue of common interest so that broad participation is needed. Such participation certainly requires public access, just like what Habermas (1993:449) suggested that one of public sphere characters is that every society has the same access.

Mass media are often regarded as public sphere where they can read news in newspaper and then write their opinions in letters to the editor. However, according to Ramussen (2008), traditional mass media have limitations in managing feedback, not

all feedbacks are able to be accommodated. Apart from it, feedback has delayed nature, whereas the ability to contain all aspirations is the prerequisite of public sphere formation. Unlike old media, new media especially social networks have the ability to provide a means for the public to convey their aspirations.

According to Dahlgren (2005), media have to be the communication links between public and the decision maker. Dahlgren developed Habermas' concept further and divide it into three dimensions, i.e. structural, representation, and interaction. **Structural dimension** refers to the ability of the institution in economy, media organisation, regulation and ownership. In this context, Dahlgren sees how the media are able to manage the information flow. The following dimension is **representation** that accounts for the media ability to produce and also the influence. In this context the researcher will see the media ability in managing issues and make plurality as basis in producing messages. The last dimension is **interaction**, in which Dahlgren divides interaction into two aspects, i.e. interaction between public and the media that looks at the communication process such as uniting perception and media use and public interaction. In the context of public sphere, interaction does not look at the public with the media but also the interaction takes place in the public.

According to Bharata As and Al Kalam (2008: 1) social networking site is a site built with technology facilities so that users can socialize on *the Internet* or commonly called the virtual world. Social network can also be called a virtual network. Boyd and Ellison (2008:211) suggested the definition of social networks as internet-based services that allows individuals to create public or semi-public profile with closed or limited system. Social networks enables list of how and with whom we will be connected to others. The presence of blogs or social networking sites such as Facebook and Twitter represents the

way communication networks used to interact and access various interests. Lastly, social networks has enabled users to see other users' activity. In Facebook, for instance, we can choose whether our profile can be seen by all or only our friends. Unlike private account that has limited access, public accounts such as the one owned by the West Sumatera provincial government is surely expected to be accessible by all people. Regarding the openness aspect of public sphere, we can see that the activity of the account is an important aspect.

METHOD

This research used qualitative method. Research using qualitative approach is intended to explain certain phenomenon through in-depth data collection. What is more important is the depth (quality) of the data, rather than the width (quantity). Researcher actively participates in deciding the type of data desired so that researcher becomes the research instrument that has to conduct fieldwork (Pawito, 2008:83).

The type of the study is descriptive, that is intended to describe phenomenon systematically, factually, and accurately about facts and the nature of certain populations or subjects. In this type of study, researcher has already had certain concepts and conceptual frameworks. Through conceptual frameworks (theoretical basis) that have been written in previous studies, researcher creates operational concept that will produce variables and indicators (Kriyantono, 2006:69).

In this study, the subject is the Solok, Pariaman and Sawahlunto city administration. Both Solok and Pariaman city administration have official Facebook accounts although the last time the Solok city administration updated its account was in 2012. The public relations unit of Sawahlunto city administration does not

have official Facebook account, but the Tourism Office has used their staff's private Facebook account to send information or promote their activity related to their Offices.

Based on their source, there are two kinds of data: primary and secondary. Primary data are the first-hand data from the fieldwork, in the form of observation and depth interview regarding social networks of the West Sumatera provincial government as public sphere. The informants were selected based on their structural positions and authorities in cities/regions and the social networks administrator. The user community is also a primary source in which the informants were selected based on intensity and the duration of social networks use. Secondary data are the data derived from secondary sources. Informants are then interviewed by researchers until the data obtained are considered enough. Secondary data are generated from observations and documentations or literatures related to this study, which are the appendixes of social networks page used by the users were included in this study.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Strategy of Social Networks' Optimisation to Create Public Sphere

In accordance with the purposes of the study, it will examine the barriers leading to non-optimal utilisation of social networks as a public space for the community. By discovering the problems that occur, it can be examined the appropriate strategy that can be used to solve them. To examine these problems, this study uses the theory of public sphere postulated by Habermas, which then further developed by Dahlgren. Dahlgren divided it into three aspects, i.e. structural, representation, and interaction aspects. The followings are issues examined based on the aspects studied.

Structural Aspect

At the conceptual level, this study attempts to look at barriers leading to the less optimum use of social networks as public space that can be accessed by public. By determining these issues, researcher could identify barriers causing the less optimum use of social network as public space. According to Dahlgren (2005), public sphere falls into structural dimension. In this context, it refers to institutions' ability to manage social networks, either from the aspects of financial, human resources, regulation and also ownership. Structural aspect also refers to political institution as a space where media as information gate-keeper. To create public sphere, we surely need institution that has good structural dimension. To examine the less optimum use of social networks in three cities; Solok, Pariaman and Sawahlunto in structural aspect, therefore researcher will divide it into four aspects, as follows:

a. Regulation

At present, the main duty of public relations (PR) department of city or regency administration does not involve the obligation to create and manage social networks, unlike the creation and maintenance of website that have officially been the duty of PR department. Due to the lack of rules that requires PR practitioners to create social networks, the maintenance of social networks can not be a measure or indication of PR practitioners' performance. So far, the presence of social networks is driven by the initiatives of PR staffs as they realize the importance of it. The interesting part is that almost every city recognises the importance of social networks. However, since social networks have not been included into PR main duty, the maintenance of social networks becomes less than optimum.

b. Human Resources

Human resources issue has been very crucial in the structural aspect. The less-than-

optimum of human resources is due to the lack of regulation that requires PR to optimise the use of social networks as public sphere. The lack of capable human resources has made many social networks outdated. Take Solok for an example, in which the last update was done in September 2012, due to the current activity of its' administrator who has to continue his education, so that the Facebook account was neglected. As for Sawahlunto, the PR unit has not had social networks due to the heavy work load and yet the lack of resources.

To optimise every feature that a social networks has, a reliable communicator figure is certainly needed in generating effective and persuasive communication in the form of information, news, and anything, according to the purpose of the account. Every Twitter account must have an owner. In practice, several Twitter accounts also have a manager (not the owner) that is called 'admin', taken from the word 'administrator'. The writer associates the meaning with the the term related to organisation, so that the term 'admin' is deemed inappropriate to be used in private account.

Today, an admin is not simply an account manager, but also has transformed into a profession, be it full time or part time. An 'admin', as well as other jobs, has certain qualifications and requirements that must be met. As a profession, 'admin' or what is known as social media specialist, is often underestimated and neglected by some people. They consider 'admin' as an unnecessary profession since some of their jobs are done using gadgets and their jobs are confined to social media, i.e., updating Facebook statuses and tweeting.

As part of government PR, an 'admin' has priority responsibilities that are virtual and do not necessarily represent what it represents. An admin is required to have good communication skills in processing words, providing information and utilising opportunities, in order to create a good

communication process between ‘admin’ as a communicator and followers or friends as communicants.

The existence of social networks is very much determined by the ‘admin’, since he or she is responsible to update information. The first thing that other users see when accessing an account is the account updates. If the account is outdated, other users will be reluctant to like it or to make friends with it. The essence of social networks is how we obtain and share information and also relate to each other.

c. Financial

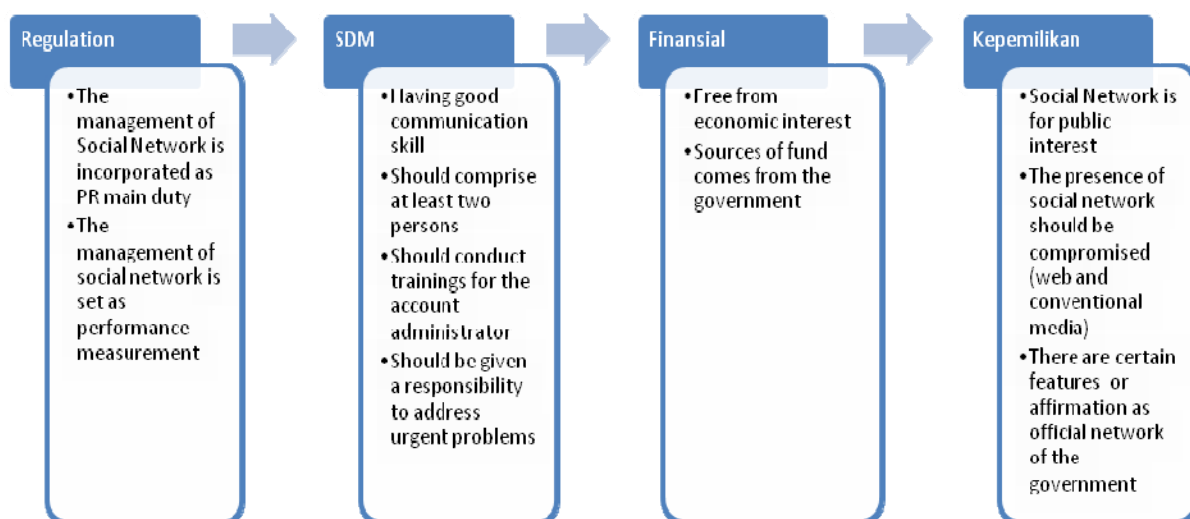
Overall, financial is not a major issue causing the less-than-optimal use of social networks. Having a facebook account is free of charge, Internet access is inexpensive. With the media convergence in which one device can perform several activities (such as the use of mobile phone to call, send SMS, take picture and surf the Internet), the Internet related activities can be done anywhere. The ubiquity of hotspot areas (cafes, offices, schools) has made the Internet access free of charge. Unlike the

content updates that is carried out by the PR department, the technical matters are performed by the Ministry of Communication and Information Technology. Therefore, the update process is time consuming while the website maintenance is pricey.

d. Ownership

Low cost and easy access have made social networks very popular and become a trend. To make an account does not require special skills or any costs, so that every person has equal rights to make an account, so do accounts that represent cities or regencies, such as “Solok Nation”, “Kota Solok”, “Sawahlunto News”. The emergence of such accounts can not be hindered nor deemed illegal, yet they deserve some consideration. On one hand, those accounts can give positive impact such as building partnership in the virtual world, yet on the other side the city administrator is encouraged to promote their official accounts so that it is widely known by the public.

In terms of media, trust becomes a key. If the public know that a social media account is official, it will indirectly foster



Picture 1. Solution in the Structural Aspect

(Source: Adapting from Dahlgren’s perspective of Public Sphere Theory)

trust and pride of the public toward their government. In general, the followings are model offered as a solution regarding structural aspect on how to make a social network account a public sphere.

Representation Aspect

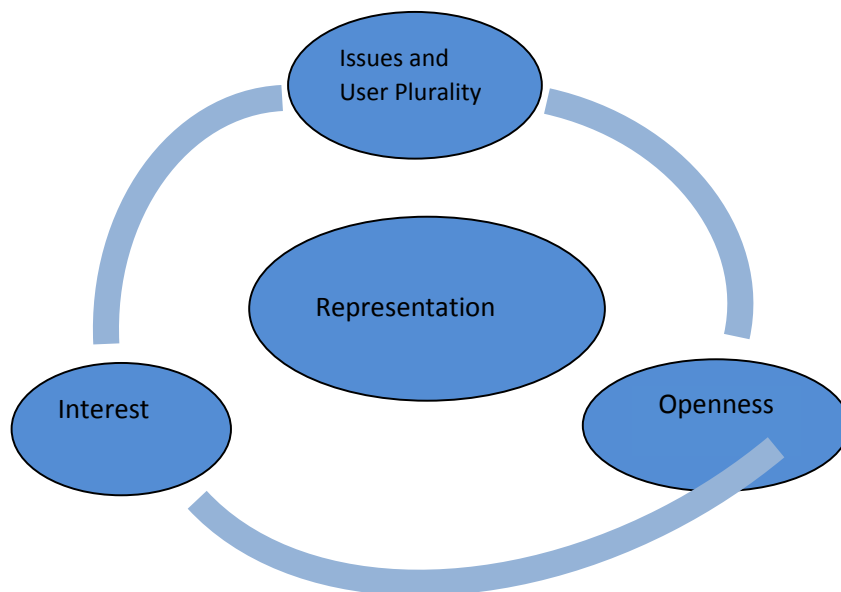
The second aspect in public sphere according to Dahlgren is representation that refers to how the media are produced and also account for the media influence. The aspect that will be examined is plurality, openness, accuracy, fairness, completeness and also political tendency:

- a. Plurality, in discussing plurality, researcher will divide it into two kinds of plurality, user plurality and issue plurality.
 - (i) Users Plurality

Social networks are considered inclusive in facilitating organisation of civil society’s actor, allowing new and less formal public participation outside its membership, and can be seen as potential to expand the public space outside the country. To

create the inclusive nature of the actor, the administrator has to be able to attract users from various groups (heterogenous). There are no data available as to how many social networks users in West Sumatera, yet referring to the national figure, young people ages 18-35 dominate the social networks account users. It is certainly reasonable because young people represents the easiest and fastest group to adapt the technology changes and growth. In the three accounts we analysed, it is found that the users who interact with the administrators of the governments’ account are also dominated by young people.

For individuals over 35 years old, the Internet is still considered a hard lesson, apart from being unfamiliar, they also regard the offline or conventional media still offer comfort, convenience and security. One of the examples is Yudeswartin,



Picture 2. Representation Aspect
 (Source: Adapting from Dahlgren’s Perspective of Public Sphere Theory)

a 52 years old civil servant in Sawahlunto who chooses television as her primary source to obtain information.

(ii) Plurality issue

The openness in social networks eliminates any barriers or reluctances to express opinions. Issues, discourses or criticism can be raised without having to deal directly with the government. Media and communication always play key mediation role in this regard. As Urry (1999) who suggested that "Citizenship necessarily require symbolic resources distributed through various means of mass communication". Social network is one of the various means of communication that has the potential in facilitating the development of infinite ideas of citizenship and plays an important role in organising the struggle for issues that arise from it. However, social networks play this schizophrenic role in this complex socio-politics (DiMaggio et. al., 2001).

On the other hand, it certainly gives positive impact toward the growth of democracy, yet the fact that many people who do not understand the ethics in Internet has required the Public Relations department to be able to manage the social networks account so that it will not be a space of cursing but can also be a space of healthy public discussion. Concerns over vulnerable use of social networks have made Bukittinggi city administration as one of the cities that deliberately does not have official government account. The Public Relations department considers that the nature of Facebook that allows users to write anything without the fear of censorship can be a threat to Bukittinggi. On one hand, Pariaman city administration and Solok city administration

think that dissenting opinions or cynical comments from other users is a common thing, even if any should do such thing, then it will be straightened out, yet the comments will not be deleted. Comments will be deleted or not taken if deemed obscene or offensive. From researchers' observation, so far there are no comments from other users that are grossly offensive or of an indecent, obscene or menacing character.

b. Openness

The Internet has provided many opportunities to information disclosure and also easy access. Unlike the conventional media that set limitations for the public to access some media due to the limitations in the number of pages, lack of news worthy or the information presented contradicts the ideology of the media, social networks have wider disclosure. There are no limits of the number of users to participate in Facebook's fanpage, whereas regular account limits the number of users to 5000. From the observation, it is found that Facebook accounts of Solok city administrator and Pariaman city administrator have already used fanpage in their accounts. It also promotes the social media administrators' performance and makes the official account easy to be accessed by the public. When there is public who wishes to interact, the administrators' permission is no longer necessary. The interesting part is the account of the Tourism Office of Sawahlunto that uses private account of its staff. It will certainly confuse the public as to which information is private and which one is public. Privacy issue has indeed been a long time concern that is being debated in the beginning of Facebook' emergence, however as a user we have the ability to sort which information is private and which one is public.

The openness in managing issues becomes important in this regard. The advantage of social networks lies in its ability to retain public aspirations. All comments,

advices and criticisms are likely to be displayed without limitations, however the administrators have the ability to perform censorship. Censorship is still needed in the context of public sphere, because if there is any harmful or offensive accounts will destabilise the public. Still, the censorship concept is based on the public interest, not certain individuals or groups. However, this information disclosure can be a barrier when certain individuals do not want to be identified in social networks. There is an interesting comment of Elfida (a Koran recital teacher, 31 years old). All this time Elfida is not interested to give advices or inputs through media due to fear of negative comments from many people. Mora (2011:52) also stated the same thing, that the openness in social networks has made several groups eventually choose to remain silent or cover the information about themselves. In the end, they will end up isolated. Isolated individuals is vulnerable to terrors, self-oriented, and politically powerless (ability to persuade). Researcher wishes to emphasize that people isolated from media will eventually not be able to express their opinions and politically powerless regarding their problems.

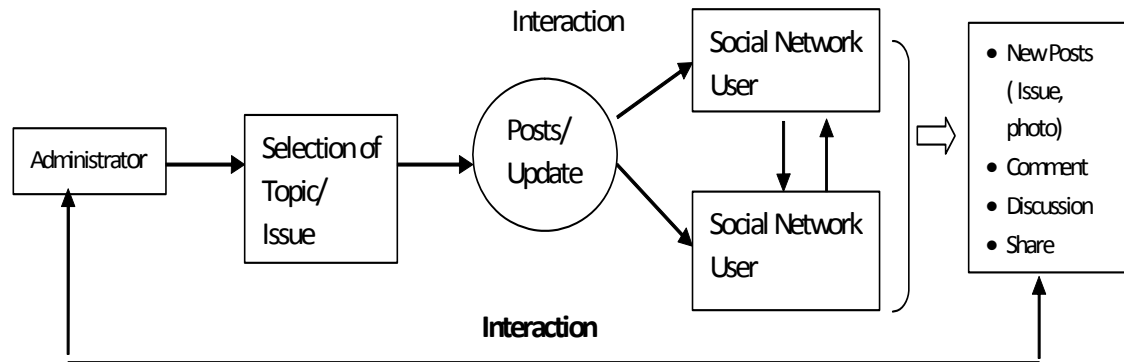
c. Interest

Ideally, a social network that could have been a public space should be used for public interest. The measurement of success is not in how many users who like or be friends, but on the usefulness of the information to the public. From the social networks accounts of Solok and Pariaman city administrators, it can be examined that the content of those two accounts is still about the mayor's activity. Eventhough the

government's account is runned by the Public Relations department that substantially represents the government, the government' account should not only serve the mayor's interest but also to fulfill the information need of the public.

According to McQuail (2005:150-151), new media have the potential to damage vertical (top-down) information where decisions were taken without having a negotiation or receiving inputs from the public first. New media such as Facebook provide unlimited access for the decision makers to listen to the public needs. There are features such as page, group, event in new media that can be used by the administrators to attract the public's attention toward the growing issues. Issues that directly relate to the public interest certainly will get attention and appreciation from the public. Information concerning the obtaining process of birth certificates, ID cards, mobile locations of driving license is certainly more necessary than mayor's activity in inaugurating a certain event. More crucial information such as local budget allocations is also needed for public accountability. The public has the right to know the local budget allocation, therefore social networks should be utilised to inform the public and also get the feedback from them.

Overall, the above picture presents a scheme concerning representation aspect that should be present in social network. With the presence of representation aspect comprising issues and users, interest, and openness, social networks will have the potential to be a public space.



Picture 3. Interaction Model

(Source: Adapting from Dahlgren's Perspective of Public Sphere Theory)

The Aspect of Interaction

The third aspect that Dahlgren suggested is interaction, even though in the context of public sphere, the public is not only considered as an audience but as a group. Meaning that there is an interaction, an effort to conduct a discussion (a two-way communication), in which every party is deemed equal. For Crossley and Roberts (2004: 133-134), one of the forms of interaction is a forum, where freedom of speech and equality in communication and interaction are very much emphasized. Crossley and Roberts further explained that there are information exchange and even a debate in the forum, yet every individual involved has to promote mutual respect for others. In this context, the administrators simply serve as moderators of the exchange and debate, not as decision makers of which individuals' voice should be highlighted and which ones that have to be silenced.

Interactions here are not simply between users and the administrators, but also involve the interactions among users, so that it enables the information dissemination. To discuss the third aspect, researcher will look at the interactions between the administrators and users and the interactions among users.

a. The interactions between the administrators and users

Overall, of two accounts examined, they have not shown good interactions between the administrators and new media. As the moderator of the account and also as discourse initiator, the social networks account administrators have not shown optimum role. Ceremonial messages or tourism information will not attract the public to participate. The aspect of appearance is crucial to create a mediapolis. However if the public considers that media (governmental social networks) do not give information that fulfill their needs, then the public will be unwilling to participate. As stated by one of the informants, Kharisma Adytama Putra (Student, 22 years old), that the reason he 'makes friends' with the Pariaman city administrations account is to get information about Pariaman particularly concerning education and politics. However, according to Kharisma, the account is more of image polishing rather than information needed by the public.

b. Interaction among users

Interaction among users have not been present. The distance between reality and the public does not allow them to seek

and judge the truth exist in the reality. It can be seen that interaction between media and the public is very close. Public opinion are often easily influenced by media, and vice versa, media also make public as the party that should be heard, not only as readers or viewers, but their voice can be read in social media such as Facebook or Twitter. However, this openness can be a barrier when certain individuals are unwilling to be identified in social network. As what was stated by Elfida (a Koran recital teacher, 31 years old). All this time, Elfida is not interested in giving advices or inputs through media due to fear of negative comments by many people.

Below is an interaction model between the administrators and social network users and among social network users. The administrators have to be able to sort topics or issues related to public interest, and then the topics or issues have to be conveyed through certain communication style that is adjusted to communication style in new media. The present of information or issues related to public interest will make the public care to participate.

CLOSING

The potential of social networks such as Facebook has been recognised by city administrators. The low cost, its two-way-communication nature and its extensive coverage have made social network an effective means for Public Relations Officers of city administration in disseminating information. Using three dimensions developed by Dahlgren, researcher argues that the three aspects, i.e. structural, representation, and interaction have not dominated the Facebook account of Solok and Pariaman. Yet, the lack of rules that sets the performance measurement as the main factor of the less than optimum use of social network. It is this issue that has made the human resources that run the account are

not ready. The Ministry of Communication and Information Technology has to figure out the way to prepare regulations and human resources in order to make social network not only alternative media but also main media as a means of communication between the public and the government.

The human resources in this study, the administrators, have not been prepared well to manage the social networks, so that there have been overlappings of PR main tasks and there has not been a need to optimise social networks. At present human resources and their work load are predominantly intended for web optimisation. Eventhough the majority of users have recognised the importance of social network for the government in order to communicate with the public. However, since the existing social network does not meet the need of the public, they do not care to participate.

The administrators do not attempt to encourage the public to actively participate in establishing any discourses in social network. Communication messages in social network are still one way communication. There has not emerged a two ways communication that should characterise a social network.

Messages or information uploaded must be able to meet the needs of the community. Related information about government activities may also be included, but information relating to the public interest should receive a larger share, so that people ultimately interested in participating in the government social network. To formulate strategies and create a public space in the social network need to be a focused discussion between the government and society. Once the strategy has been formulated, then the strategy is tested before being applied to the field of public relations as an executive in the local government level.

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