



Communicative discourses and ideological practices in Indonesia's digital political spheres

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ABSTRACT

Discursive spaces are necessary for maintaining democratic politics. Media serves as one of the key components in attempting to preserve the sanity of democracy and protect it from oligarchic practices entrenched in many political parties and the Indonesian government. The present research is aimed at understanding the representation of deliberative democracy in the public sphere by analysing the podcasts presented in the *Akbar Faizal Uncensored* (AFU) YouTube channel and examining the ideological practices that unfold in the podcasts. This study employed the qualitative method and critical paradigm approach while applying John Fiske's semiotic analysis, with a focus on texts obtained from the AFU podcast. This podcast represents a possible case of deliberative democracy in practice. According to Jurgen Habermas, deliberative democracy pertains to all public policies carried out and legitimated through discourses held in public spheres. The YouTube podcasts of AFU have the potential to represent deliberative democracy as intended by its mission. The research findings suggest that although the AFU YouTube podcasts can indeed represent democracy, these podcasts cannot be considered representations of deliberations (deliberative democracy) in a comprehensive manner since no legitimacy was reached at the end of the discussions. The AFU YouTube podcasts are by no means an unadulterated public sphere, yet they can function as a conduit between public spheres in communities and the authority, which in this case, is the government.

Keywords: **Discourse, deliberative-communicative, representation-ideology, digital public sphere**

INTRODUCTION

The most widely used social media platform in Indonesia today is YouTube, a video-on-demand application utilised by 88% of Indonesian internet users between the ages of 16 to 64 in 2020 (Hootsuite & We Are Social, 2020). One of the rapidly growing content formats on YouTube is the podcast format, which initially came in the form of audio recordings and is now largely packaged in a video format to increase its appeal and expand its audience (Sharon, 2023). Initially, podcasts were only available on platforms such as iTunes and Spotify, as well as some websites (Pérez-Alaejos et al., 2022). However, the potential of this media format extends beyond entertainment and art; it is also increasingly influential in news reporting and political discussions. A significant number of news-oriented podcast programs release episodes daily, some even multiple times a day, discussing current political situations and global affairs in a variety of formats, including news reports, interviews with political figures, and political commentaries (Dowling et al., 2022).

The consolidation of podcasts within the YouTube platform has resulted in a unique media phenomenon. Content creators now produce podcasts in audio-video formats and publish them via their personal YouTube channels. This integration has not only made podcasts more visually engaging, but has also expanded their audience reach and monetisation potential (Sullivan, 2019). As a social media platform, YouTube podcasts can function as a digital public sphere where audiences not only receive information, but also engage in discussions through comments and interactions. From the perspective of the traditional public sphere theory, podcasting presents an opportunity to reclaim the discursive potential of mass media (Sienkiewicz & Jaramillo, 2019). Further, studies indicate a positive correlation between social media use and civic engagement as well as political participation (Boulianne et al., 2022).

According to Habermas et al. (1974), public sphere is an arena where citizens can discuss political issues rationally and critically with neither state intervention nor economic interests. The digital public sphere is considered as a transformation of this concept, wherein social media platforms have the potential to create more inclusive spaces for discourse (Dommett & Verovšek, 2021; Sakariassen, 2020). However, a number of studies show that the digital public sphere still encounters challenges such as the dominance of certain actors, commodification of information, and algorithm bias that affect the distribution of discourses (Jungherr & Schroeder, 2021; Palau-Sampio & Lopez-Garcia, 2022). Nevertheless, the digital public sphere serves as a forum for dialogue between state and citizens amidst the lack of communication transpiring in formal spaces and mainstream media.

An understanding of digital public sphere helps to analyse potentially influential public opinions (Dahlberg & Mancewicz, 2021). Social media presents the public with opportunities to voice their opinions in the democratisation process. The concept of digital public sphere was developed to supplement or even replace the traditional public sphere, which had become a substantial part of modern democracy (Schäfer, 2015). In the last decade, the digital public sphere has gained dominance in Indonesia's political discourse. This is due to the fact that out of 274.9 million Indonesians, as many as 170 million (61.8% of the total population) were active social media users in 2021 (Kemp, 2021). Social media has become a medium for political communication between the state

and its citizens, where political debates emerge on social media, including YouTube. This is the underlying reason for conducting a study that seeks to examine how the digital public sphere functions in the context of political podcasts on YouTube, with a case study of the *Akbar Faizal Uncensored* (AFU) channel.

Although some scholars recognise the potential of the digital public sphere, they also caution that it may not fully embody an ideal public sphere conducive to democratisation. Economic interests and commercialisation have influenced modern public spheres, co-opting them into bureaucratic structures (Giannelos, 2023). Nonetheless, social media platforms provide a space for individuals to express their opinions and contribute to democratic processes. The rise of the digital public sphere has attracted academic interest in recent years, as it has been conceptualised as either a complement to or a replacement for the traditional public sphere, which has long been a cornerstone of modern democracy (Schäfer, 2015). Democracy is fundamentally based on the right of citizens to express their opinions, choose their ideology, and respect differing viewpoints. Freedom of expression is a core liberal and democratic principle, provided it adheres to legal boundaries. Additionally, political participation is crucial to democratic governance, as it influences public legitimacy and governmental accountability (Nuna & Moonti, 2019).

Deliberative democracy is a theory of democratic legitimacy that emphasises the exchange of public arguments among free and equal citizens. Developed in the late 1980s and 1990s, it serves as an alternative to aggregative democracy, which primarily derives legitimacy from the aggregation of votes in elections (Landemore, 2017). This study examines how deliberative democracy is represented and how ideological practices are constructed within the digital public sphere, as exemplified by the AFU YouTube podcasts.

The selection of the AFU YouTube podcast as the research object is based on its relevance as a prominent political podcast channel in Indonesia. The channel is affiliated with the Nagara Institute, an NGO founded by Akbar Faizal, a former member of the Indonesian House of Representatives (*Dewan Perwakilan Rakyat Republik Indonesia – DPR-RI*) during the 2014–2019 period. Launched on September 21, 2020, the channel is hosted by Akbar Faizal himself and aims to provide political literacy to the public, aligning with Nagara Institute's vision of promoting a legal and democratic state system that upholds human dignity. According to Dandy Hakim Pradana, the person in charge of the channel's production, AFU podcasts strive to educate the public on political matters.

The topic on Jokowi's potential third term as the president of the Republic of Indonesia was chosen on account of its implications on principles of democracy, political stability, and the role of the media in creating public discourse and political narrative in Indonesia. The episode under study was selected based on its course of discussion, which particularly highlighted efforts made to push Jokowi to run for a third term, which is an act that goes against the basic principles of democracy outlined in the 1945 Constitution. This idea not only violates ethics of democracy, but also reflects a basic logical fallacy. The group that raised this discourse disregarded the principle stating that the leadership in Indonesia's democratic system must comply with constitutional boundaries (Akbar Faizal Uncensored podcast, 2021).

Accordingly, the current study is aimed at addressing the following key questions: (1) How did representation of deliberative democracy emerge in the discourses on the

AFU YouTube podcast? (2) How was ideological practice formed within the digital public sphere represented by the said channel?

This study is expected to provide new insights regarding how the digital public sphere functions within the Indonesian political context and the implication it has on deliberative democracy in the digital era.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Digital public sphere

The concept of public sphere, developed by Jürgen Habermas and his team (1974), emphasises the significance of a discursive arena where individuals are able to discuss political issues rationally without state intervention and economic interests. In the digital era, public sphere has undergone a significant transformation, given the advent of various social media platforms allowing more extensive participation in the formation of political discourse (Schäfer, 2015). YouTube, as one of the largest video-based social media platforms, serves as a primary medium for political discussions in various countries, including Indonesia (Gil-Ramírez et al., 2020; Masadeh & Hamilton, 2023; Santoso et al., 2020).

The assumption that new media can augment democracy is based on the alignment between the features of new media and democracy. Equality, recognition of differences, freedom, participation, and protection of fundamental human rights reflect democracy. These democratic values are manifested in the new media, which opens free spheres (even unlimited at times), provides equality as support, and freedom. Each individual even has his/her respective independence as a content producer. The presence of the internet today has significantly driven the process of democratic deepening in social institutions, which results in people being able to appear fully as *demos* (the populace) (Jati, 2016). Yet, there is a great challenge in ensuring that the digital public sphere does indeed support rational and constructive deliberations.

Counter perspectives indicate that the digital public sphere does not necessarily reflect the idealism of deliberative democracy as Habermas suggested. Some studies indicate that the algorithm of digital platforms is more likely to reinforce polarisation by presenting echo chambers and filter bubbles, where users are more frequently exposed to information that reinforces their political preference (Kobellarz et al., 2022; Vasist et al., 2023). In the context of Indonesia, the political discourses that develop in the digital public sphere are often saturated with disinformation, biased media framing, and involvement of political actors with particular interests (Lim, 2017).

According to Schäfer (2015), the potential emergence of digital public sphere has been conceptualised by many scholars as a complement of, or even replacement for, the previously known “old” public sphere, as a crucial element of modern democracy (2015). Habermas posits that the public sphere is a key prerequisite of deliberative democracy (Schmitt-Beck, 2022; Seeliger & Sevignani, 2022). There are two conditions that need to be met as a public sphere, namely being free and being critical (Haliim, 2016). These two conditions are further elaborated by Cohen and Fung (2023) as a fair and ideal conversation situation requiring three formal conditions, i.e., inclusivity, freedom of coercion, dominance and intimidation, as well as symmetric and open deliberative procedure (Permana, 2019). However, in practice, the digital public sphere is often confronted by challenges that obstruct the unfolding of open and rational discussions.

The public sphere in the digital context, discussed in the current research, positions the public as the wielder of communicative power that is not entirely autonomous. Anonymity in the comment's column and the possibility of buzzers (*pendengung*, is an Indonesian term that refers to a person who attempts to influence public opinion to align with their cause) frequently appearing reinforce echo chambers and become toxic substance that polarises public discourse (Gusti, 2021). Further, public sphere in the form of a social media account, has a vested interest to enlarge its followers, subscribers, and viewers to achieve its purpose of creating the account, which may be both political and financially profitable. This also results in a gap between what is expected from the concept of public sphere as Habermas suggested with the actual reality unfolding in the current digital era. Nevertheless, the digital public sphere still allows responsive interactions and easy access for the state to receive information relating to public opinions.

Jurgen Habermas' deliberative democracy

Deliberative democracy is, essentially, a legitimization process of a policy or political decision by means of rational consent by engaging in a discussion, i.e., authentic in-depth deliberations from and by various parties of interests or those who are impacted by the said policy or political decision (Habermas, 2015). According to the Habermasian perspective, an emancipatory community remains unattainable unless sustainable efforts are made to achieve a solid democratic format based on deliberative power embedded within the people's communicative capacity (Susen, 2018).

Deliberative democracy is a theory of democratic legitimacy that peruses laws and policies of the authority into exchanges of public arguments among free and equal citizens. Deliberative democracy is an alternative to the previously dominant theory of aggregative democracy, wherein democratic legitimacy is solely derived from the aggregation of votes in a free and fair election pitting one elite against others (Bernholz et al., 2021). Most experts on the theory of deliberative democracy follow the Habermasian aspiration of "public sphere" and accentuate the heterogeneity of groups engaged in deliberative discussions to ensure the diversity of arguments presented and to include demographically representative populace in reaching an optimal decision (Pernaa, 2017).

Habermas believes that social interactions in the society are rational in nature because these interactions constitute actions oriented toward achieving a consensus (Hardiman, 2019). Communicative acts refer to actions aimed at efforts to comprehend or achieve mutual understanding to reach an intersubjectively acceptable consensus about a specific condition for producing a design and coordinating mutually agreed actions (Littlejohn et al., 2017). To reach an agreement towards a consensus, Habermas (1985) posits that all communication activities occurring in the public sphere should be oriented toward a performative stance of the world (Hardiman, 2019). There are four kinds of validity claim that may be conducted by actors of the communicative action theory (Setyowati, 2016), namely:

1. **Propositional truth:** This kind of claim is a representation of several conditions in the objective and natural world.
2. **Normative rightness:** Statement claiming that several (actual or possible) conditions in the social sphere are right and are expected to be a consensus for the implementation of the inherent norms.

3. **Subjective sincerity/truthfulness:** Agreement on the alignment between one's expression and spiritual realm. This claim emphasises certain subjective conditions of the speaker in their case.
4. **Comprehensibility:** This claim is attainable once the prior three claims can be explained by the subject.

Through the theory of communicative action, Habermas suggests that effective communication is one that achieves the fourth claim, and the communicating actor can, thus, be said to have acquired "communication competence". Ideally speaking, free and rational discourse takes place in communicative action until such informed consensus regarding the inquired validity claim (comprehensibility) is achieved, although Habermas admits that progress toward such a consensus is seldom achieved in actual practice. Therefore, the current study not only examined the function of digital public sphere in the context of political podcast, but it also analysed how the concept of deliberative democracy and communicative action posited by Habermas can be applied in the digital era, which continues to develop in Indonesia.

METHODS

Critical paradigm in semiotic analysis

This research employed critical paradigm, a qualitative approach, and the semiotic analysis method. Critical paradigm is employed to understand and criticise power structure, ideology, and discursive inequality in digital political discourses (KhosraviNik, 2023). In the digital context, this space experiences distortion through set algorithm, political interests, and media framing (Almuqren, 2023). Thus, the study critically analysed how digital public sphere functions in political podcasts and how ideological elements work in digital deliberations to maintain discursive space.

The study adopted John Fiske's (2010) social semiotic approach to analyse visual and verbal texts in political podcasts. Fiske's semiotics enables analysis of meaning production and negotiation through codes of reality, representation, and ideology (Vera, 2014). Elements like narratives, visual expressions, host-source interactions, and visual data form part of deeper meaning analyses. The study aimed to identify how the AFU discourse construction affects deliberative democracy in the digital public sphere.

John Fiske's semiotics enables analysis of various symbols and linguistic models that are productive, creative, transformative, subversive, and anarchic (Pah & Darmastuti, 2019). Three levels of social codes encode audio-visual broadcasts:

1. **Reality Level:** Events encoded as visible reality, including appearance, attire, background, behaviour, conversation, gesture, voice, expression, and documents or interview transcripts.
2. **Representation Level:** Reality encoded electronically through technical codes like cameras, lighting, editing, music, and sound effects. In written form, this includes words, sentences, photos, graphs, and propositions.
3. **Ideology Level:** Elements organised into ideological codes such as patriarchy, individualism, race, class, materialism, and capitalism. These ideologies are typically represented within the reality construct (Vera, 2014).

Selection of subject and object of study

Akbar Faizal Uncensored (AFU) YouTube podcast was selected as the object of study based on the following considerations. First, this channel is well-known for its data-based approach in presenting political discourses, which can enrich the dynamics of digital public sphere compared to other podcasts that are more opinionated. Second, AFU boasts credibility as a channel that features political figures, academicians, and experts who present their perspectives based on rational arguments. Lastly, this channel has a high level of interaction in every episode, in terms of both number of comments and level of audience engagement, indicating public participation in digital political discussions.

To reiterate, the study examined the podcast episode titled “*Karena Covid-19, Pantaskah Jokowi 3 Periode?*” (Because of COVID-19, Should Jokowi Run for a Third Term?) due to its relevance with issues of democracy and the discourse of extending the president’s term in office, which had been a heated public debate in Indonesia. This episode presented discussions about the impact that the pandemic had on political stability and the potential of democratic manipulation through amendments to the constitution. Accordingly, this episode served as the most fitting case study to analyse how digital public sphere represents deliberative democracy in the context of Indonesian politics.

Data collection and analysis procedure

In addition to the data collected from the aforementioned video recording from the AFU YouTube channel, an interview with the channel producer, Dandy Hakim Pradana, served as secondary data to understand the discourse production and framing, while also facilitating data triangulation.

Data analysis comprised three qualitative stages:

1. **Data reduction:** Selecting and simplifying data to identify relevant meaning patterns.
2. **Data presentation:** Organising data through descriptions and tables to reveal discursive correlations.
3. **Drawing conclusion:** Interpreting findings through critical paradigm and theoretical frameworks.

These stages formed a sequential analytical process over eight months from May to December 2021.

To ensure validity and objectivity, three strategies were implemented: data triangulation comparing semiotic analysis with literature on deliberative democracy in digital media (Gunawan, 2017); contextual analysis of audience responses through YouTube comments; and member checking involving digital media experts and academics to review the analysis (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The criteria for episode selection referred to aspects of deliberative democracy in the concepts, i.e., discussing political policy discourse that has quite a significant impact on the public through rational discourse as a deliberative procedure by prioritising sources from outside the government to represent social groups. The episode titled “*Karena COVID-19, Pantaskah Jokowi 3 Periode?*” (Because of COVID-19, is Jokowi worthy of

a third [presidential] term?) was aired on the September 20, 2021 and had been viewed 13,343 times with as many as 291 comments. This episode discusses the discourse regarding a third presidential term for Jokowi by presenting two opposing arguments from two sources or podcast guests, namely Baron Danardono Wibowo who was the General Chair of the JOKPRO 2024 Community, the main advocate of the Jokowi 3-term idea, and the opposing discussant, Hendri Satrio, founder of a survey institute known as KEDAI KOPI (*Kelompok Diskusi dan Kajian Opini Publik Indonesia* – Indonesia Public Opinion Study and Discussion Group) that disputed three terms for Jokowi.

Discussion 1



Source: Akbar Faizal Uncensored YouTube channel (<https://youtu.be/9EFrESssiY8>)

Figure 1. Communicative action

In Discussion 1, Baron Danardono Wibowo can be seen conveying his argument in response to a question raised by Akbar Faizal: *What is the logical argument given by the JOKPRO side for proposing the idea of a third presidential term?* At the reality level, the behaviour code suggests that Baron Danardono Wibowo sitting cross-legged during the dialogue implies a dominant characteristic and commanding prominence so that his words are accepted by his interlocutors. While at the representation level, the camera scene was taken by using a full shot technique with the intention of providing a full frame of the speaker to explicate his argument. In terms of the dialogue code, the statement made by Baron Danardono Wibowo is as follows:

Number one, our constitution is not something that is a taboo to change, things that we cannot change are the principles of state, the form of the state, apart from that it is possible, so long as the logical basis is solid, the reason is solid.

By making an assessment using validity claims, the words in the dialogue code can be categorised as truth claim. At the ideological level, Baron Danardono Wibowo

is portrayed as giving precedence to individual rights rather than the constitution. This is apparent in the dialogue which indicates that citizens can suggest changes to the constitution so long as the principles and form of the state are not amended.

Discussion 2



Source: Akbar Faizal Uncensored YouTube channel (<https://youtu.be/9EFrESssiY8>)

Figure 2. Communicative action

Based on Figure 2 which shows Discussion 2, the semiotic analysis of static code indications using John Fiske's three semiotic levels reveals the following. Two codes can be deciphered at the reality level. First, the dress/ appearance code, wherein all three discussants are wearing collared shirts to show neatness and mutual respect among them, with a nuance of sporting casual attire, indicating that the audience targeted by Akbar Faizal Uncensored is not under any specific category. Second, the environment code, which shows that the room setting is designed to imitate a comfortable living room with a big screen television on the wall displaying the logo of the Akbar Faizal Uncensored YouTube podcast, as well as Akbar Faizal sitting equidistantly between the two source persons in the room, intending to give the impression that a fruitful discussion or conversation is about to take place in that room.

At the representation level, for the lighting code, the lighting in the room is set as a soft key with the main lighting coming from the ceiling light, which not only creates a comfortable atmosphere, but is also meant to avoid interference with the display light coming from the television on the wall. At the ideological level, the static code analysis indicates the presence of class liberalism ideology in which the AFU YouTube podcast attempts to position itself as a better political podcast than other podcasts, while also placing individual equality and freedom along with inclusivism as a representation of the digital public sphere.

Discussion 3



Source: Akbar Faizal Uncensored YouTube channel (<https://youtu.be/9EFrESssiY8>)

Figure 3. Communicative action

Figure 3 shows a scene when Akbar Faizal responds to a statement made by Baron Danardono Wibowo who argues that Jokowi's statement (rejecting the 3 terms) is a normative response to a question asked by reporters in a situation that is uncomfortable or inappropriate for the President, and the given response makes it seem like Jokowi is unwilling. At the reality level, in terms of gesture code, we can see Akbar Faizal leaning forward in his sitting position when talking, and he is speaking while moving both his hands. Subsequently, in terms of the expression code, Akbar Faizal is sharply gazing at Baron Danardono Wibowo. While in terms of sound code, Akbar Faizal's voice intonation is higher. At the representation level, in terms of camera code, we can see that medium shot is used to focus on the speaker, Akbar Faizal. In terms of dialogue code, we can listen to Akbar Faizal saying the following:

Is this not democracy, we can talk about anything? Today our public sphere is different, Sir. So, a person can just ask, "Mr. President, you made this policy, it's wrong." Today, a president shouldn't get offended. That's how our public sphere works, Sir.

The statement Akbar Faizal made in this context relates to democratic morality that he intends to convey to the interlocutor, indicating a rightness claim. At the ideological level, Figure 3 presents an ideology that is apparent through the representative code, regarding the freedom that every individual have in expressing their opinions to anyone, which would even include the President.

Communicative action has the ultimate objective of arriving at a rational consensus, given that the validity claims have been achieved by all the discussants in regard to their respective opinions and positions, freely and without any coercion. In the current research, the validity claims were entirely met by all the discussants in the research, yet they were unable to achieve an intersubjective, unanimous, and complete consensus at the end of the podcast. Habermas states that the success of a communication process depends on the

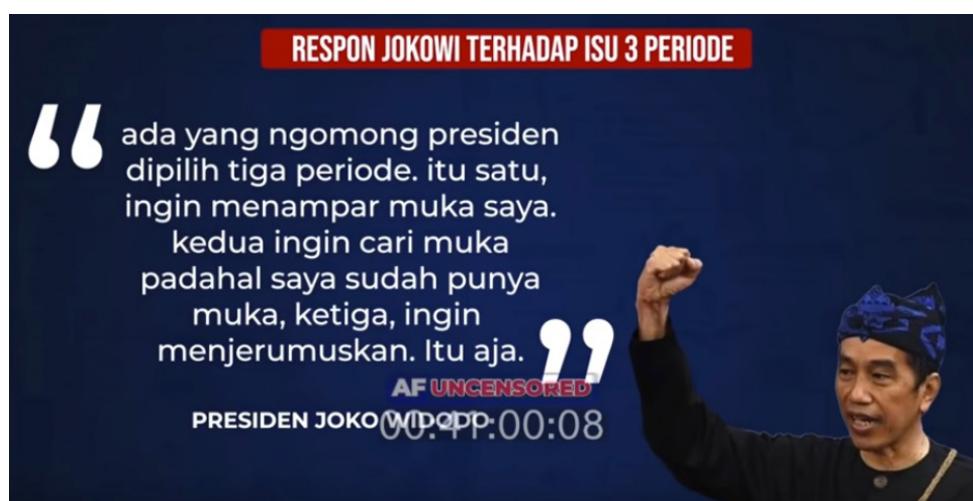
ability of listeners to “accept” (*Jaorder*) or “reject” (*Nein Stellungsnahme*). Furthermore, according to Habermas, the three validity claims need to be concurrently accepted by the listeners to reach a consensus (Gora & Sandra, 2017).

Ideological practices in the AFU YouTube podcast

The ideology that emerged is one that upholds equal rights for anyone to engage and participate in the discussion process, so long as they have the competence to conduct rational communication. There is also equality, thereby requiring identity clarity of all participants engaged in the discourse. With regard to the freedom of expression, we can observe an ideological characteristic that supports individual rights, including freedom of speech, the right for one’s ideas and views to be heard, freedom of thought without any coercion as exercised by each of the participants in the AFU YouTube podcast. Free and equal public sphere for public participation in politics signifies the identity of deliberative democracy. Most experts on the theory of deliberative democracy pursue the Habermasian aspiration of “public sphere” and accentuate the heterogeneity of groups engaged in deliberative discussion to ensure that diversity of arguments is represented and to include a demographically representative populace in aspiring for an optimal decision (Pernaa, 2017).

The proponents of Jokowi’s third term bid demonstrated a fatal flaw by forcing their interest in maintaining his power. This idea violates basic democratic ethics stipulated in Article 7 of the 1945 Constitution, which limits presidential terms to two periods. This provision is intrinsic to Indonesia’s democratic system. Those advocating for Jokowi’s third term ignored this logical fallacy, resulting in a manipulative claim by the Jakpro group that violated Indonesia’s political ethics. There is no rational reasoning or emergency condition warranting such an extraordinary measure for Indonesia’s leadership.

Although the third-term campaign failed, it undermined Indonesian political ethics’ fundamental values. No rational or legitimate reasoning existed to justify a third term. The campaign’s initiation by those aware of Indonesia’s democratic system’s two-term limit represents a manipulative claim that exploited public spaces for vested interests while destroying established democratic values and provisions.



Source: Akbar Faizal Uncensored YouTube channel (<https://youtu.be/9EFrESssiY8>)

Figure 4. Jokowi’s counter statement in pictures

In terms of political communication, while Jokowi himself denied any desire for running a third term, his political movements utilised various figures, influencers, and buzzers through social media and direct interactions to campaign for it. Social media was extensively used to promote a third term as essential for Indonesia's progress toward golden Indonesia. Ideally speaking, all parties should play a significant and equal part in the dialogue to exchange perspectives and conduct in-depth reflection regarding the topic of discussion, then reach and present a conclusion that all members of the deliberation are able to engage in (Burrall, 2015; Raisio & Vartiainen, 2015).

The dominant ideology found operating in the AFU episode analysed is the liberal democracy ideology, which relates to equal rights and individual freedom in expressing opinions. We did not find any commercialisation potential from AFU and according to the history of its establishment, the channel continues to voice its political viewpoints. Nonetheless, AFU podcasts indirectly functions as Akbar Faizal's political branding, bearing in mind that he is a cadre of the National Democratic Party (*Partai Nasional Demokrat* – NasDem). Although no political attributes are displayed in the podcasts, this can still be construed as an excess (result of) social media, and it is refined by having various guests who are not only proponents of the government, but those who are from the opposition as well.

Critique on representation of deliberative democracy in digital public sphere

There is an alignment between the rationale of deliberative democracy shown in the AFU podcasts with Habermas' ideal public sphere principle, which emphasises the concept of public sphere as an element of a theoretical structure. This point of view is based on the principles of the ideal public sphere: (1) equality of status or egalitarian, which is important as a basis to confirm the argument that it is better to win the fight in social hierarchy; (2) free from any form of dominance, wherein the ongoing discussions remove dominance or authority; (3) inclusiveness, in which all individuals should be able to have easy access to and participate in discourses that essentially discuss public issues (Buhmann et al., 2019). This is the reason why digital public spheres are also vulnerable to the spread of misinformation and disinformation, which can hinder a healthy and fact-based deliberation process (Pira, 2023). In the Indonesian context, the rise of political hoaxes and digital polarisation is a major challenge for efforts to build an inclusive and rational deliberative space (Masduki, 2021; Zulkarnain et al., 2023).

Based on the dress/appearance code, equality is apparent at the reality level, wherein all participants of the dialogue are wearing casual attire, and no one's attire/appearance is more prominent than others or displaying the social levels of the participants. However, in terms of the behaviour code, we can see differences in the behaviour of the three participants. Source Person 1 displays a desire-to-dominate attitude while Source Person 2 presents a more low-profile attitude apparent from the way he sits and his gestures. These indications negate the egalitarian principle that Habermas advocates as one of the features of discourses in public sphere. Free from dominance of authority is another principle, which in the context of this research reveals that the podcast host/owner is one of the entities that dominates the discourse in the public sphere. This is, however indistinguishable from the responsibility of the podcast host who must take control of the discussion so that it remains discursive, conducive, and interesting to watch.

The public digital sphere deliberately created by the AFU podcast simply uses the internet and social media as a means for creating public space (virtual space) instead of creating digital public sphere (virtual sphere) as understood in Habermas' concept of ideal public sphere. Placing Habermas' concept of public sphere in the context of the current digital era has led to debates among scholars. Most of these debates encompass theoretical notes or essays that reflect optimism and pessimism regarding the development of digital public sphere and its impact on society. Meanwhile, optimistic scholars ("cyber-optimists", "utopians" or "net-enthusiasts") put more emphasis on the advantages and benefits of the internet. The differences of opinions between cyber-optimists and cyber-pessimists are summarised in Table 1 (Schäfer, 2015).

Table 1. Pros and cons of digital public sphere

Cyber-Optimists	Cyber-Pessimists
<p>Putting emphasis on the advantages of access to online media information that is relatively open, easy, and fast.</p> <p>Abundance of information in new and interactive ways that are not easily obtainable in real life.</p>	<p>Being sceptical about the level of public participation in the digital public sphere.</p> <p>Showing that the digital gap (differences in audience, social strata, or regional access) has an influence on the ability to use the internet.</p>
<p>Ease of uploading contents opens up the possibility of everyone's voice being heard anywhere and to have mutual connections among them without any intervention from gatekeeping journalists, large infrastructure, media institutions, and state or world authorities.</p>	<p>Questioning the diversity of online debates and believing that even among the participants, there is a danger of fragmentation by having small communities of likeminded individuals (algorithm of search engines provides information that is attuned to the user).</p>

Freedom of speech in the digital public sphere is still maintained, which is proven by the fact that approximately 50% of the audience or participants do indeed participate in the discourse through the digital public sphere provided in the AFU podcast episode "Because of COVID-19, is Jokowi worthy of a third [presidential] term?" (only 101 out of 292 comments). However, it is unfortunate that the political discussion forum taking place in the comment column does not directly serve as an ideal digital public sphere since the political debates or discussions are anonymous, which increasingly opens possibilities of moral and social fragmentation, polarisation in social life, and even radical social movements in the real world due to irrational dialogues unfolding in the digital public sphere. Deliberative democracy emphasises the importance of rational discussion and public participation in policy formation and political decision making (Vrydagh, 2022; Willis et al., 2022). In the digital context, social media and video-based platforms such as YouTube create new spaces for deliberative processes by enabling more individuals to participate in political discourse (Gil-Ramírez et al., 2020).

However, in digital debates, the debates become irrational and produce meanings that do not undertake critical construction of politics. So, to avoid any vague debates of little value, a common virtue claim among participants of discourse is necessary. Discourse ethics requires freedom for all community members as well as equality for all participants who have a voice to discuss in an atmosphere of equality (Habermas, 2018). Paying a closer look at discourse ethics, we can see that Habermas requires all discourse participants to have a common understanding prior to starting a discussion so that a

positive public sphere is created, and rational discussions can be carried out to reach an intersubjective consensus. This is necessary as social media algorithms often amplify the phenomenon of filter bubbles and echo chambers, which leads to polarisation of opinions and reduces the possibility of healthy debates among groups with opposing views (Cinelli et al., 2021). This phenomenon is also observed in the Indonesian political context, where the digital public sphere is often used by political actors to build certain narratives that can restrict the space for balanced deliberation (Danaditya et al., 2022).

CONCLUSION

The present study found that the digital public sphere in Indonesia offers potentials as alternative political discourses, yet it often becomes a pseudo-public sphere with deliberations that remain lacking. Using Habermas' approach, it is revealed that platforms like YouTube still facilitate open political dialogues that are essential for deliberative public spheres, despite the structural challenges encountered. The study also identified the risk of polarisation in the digital public sphere as a result of weak deliberative mechanism, thereby warranting the need for more moderation, platform accountability, and better design in the deliberative process.

The key contribution of the study is the analysis of the AFU podcast, which functions as a conduit between the public sphere and government authority. The novelty of the study lies in the use of John Fiske's semiotic analysis to understand the representation of deliberative democracy in digital media, which provides insights on ideological practices in Indonesia's digital political sphere. These findings enrich the digital democracy literature with perspectives from a country with a developing democracy.

Theoretically, the current study has broadened our understanding on the transformation of digital public sphere, while practically, it suggests a reformulation of media policies that balances freedom of expression and the need for quality discourses. Lastly, future research should further explore deliberative mechanisms that can optimise the democratisation of public digital spheres in the context of Indonesia's plural society.

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