

Communication and the Empowerment of Powerless Civil Society

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Abstrak

Masyarakat sipil, atau lebih dikenal sebagai *civil society*, dianggap oleh pihak negara merupakan golongan masyarakat yang bukan kategori warga masyarakat dan oleh pasar dianggap bukan pembeli, namun melebihi kategori yang ada. Pandangan para ilmuwan menunjukkan peran penting masyarakat sipil dan keandalan komunikasi merupakan faktor penting dalam mengungkapkan pendapat dan mempengaruhi. Peranan masyarakat sipil di negara-negara maju menunjukkan kemampuan mereka untuk mempengaruhi kebijakan. Akan tetapi di Indonesia, kapasitas yang dimiliki belum dapat membantu masyarakat sepenuhnya, sehingga perlu diadakan assesmen bagaimana memberdayakan masyarakat sipil.

Kata kunci: *masyarakat sipil, komunikasi publik, kekuatan dan pengetahuan, pluralistik*

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1. Civil society revisited

The concept of “civil society” is generally distinguished from those of “state” and “market” perspectives. According to the perspective of state, civil society consists of people who do not yet belong to the category of “citizen”. It is a society of “human qua human”, rather than of “human qua citizen”. In Rawlsian jargon, the very concept of “civil society” might be referred to as “background culture”, to which the requirement to conduct any communication according to the “public reason”, using “public language”, does not apply.

From the perspective of market, civil society cannot be regarded as an entity which consists of categories such as “buyers”, “consumers” or “customers”; “employers” and “employees”, “stockholders” or “investors”. The concept of “civil society” contains more than such categories, since it includes those who cannot participate as “market actors” or those who are economically marginal. In the marketing jargons, they might have “needs” and even “wants” or “preferences”, but they cannot make any “demand” due to their lack of “purchasing power”. Businessmen may call them “public” or put them in the broader category of “stakeholders”.

Be this as it may, when talking about “civil society”, it is not thinking exclusively about the activism of UN agencies or some “global” NGOs campaigning on global programs, such as how to avoid “global warming”, by practicing “social marketing” or “integrated marketing communications” for “not for profit” causes. Rather, I am thinking specifically about what Paulo Freire has mentioned “circulo de cultura” (cultural circle), in which an activist should not play the role of “communicator”, nor even “teacher”. Conversely, the activist should play

the role of a fellow human qua human who involve in a cooperative effort to break “the culture of silence”, which is not unrelated with the accumulation of “spirals of silence”, empowering the community to speak up and to speak their own words, their own sentences, and their own stories. I am thinking of a community who builds their own forum after having “been left out of a flourishing economy” and “having also had their livelihood (...) threatened by recent state and national policies regarding welfare”. In doing so, the members of the community would try together to build their own society and their own history with their own hands.

2. Power and Knowledge

Under the influence of Thomas Kuhn and Michel Foucault, in his book entitled *On the Philosophy of Communication*, Gary Radford emphasizes that the mainstream paradigm of communication science has in itself a flavor of power that he calls it a regime, namely “the regime of communication as transmission”. Kuhn’s concept of “paradigm” or “normal science” is in itself contains the elements of power, in the form of textbooks and professorship, although Kuhn himself is seemingly not quite aware of such an implication. Like any normalcy, the normalcy of “the normal science” contains in itself the elements of power.

The hardcore of the regime of transmission is Locke’s philosophy of knowledge, from which one can draw a conclusion concerning an effective communication. A communication will have the possibility of being effective, if and only if there is a “sender” adequately “encode” ideas which come up in his or her own mind into “symbols”, transmits the “message” (in the form of symbols) through a reliable “medium”

¹Hannah Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, New York: Schocken, 2004.

²Samuel Freeman, Rawls, New York: Routledge, 2007.

³Philip Kotler & Kevin Lane Keller, *Marketing Management*, New York: Pearson Education, 2006.

⁴Paulo Freire, *Pedagogy of Hope: Reliving Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, New York: Continuum, 2004

⁵Steven R. Goldzweig and Patricia A. Sullivan, “Electronic Democracy, Virtual Politics and Local Communities” in Robert E. Denton, Jr. (ed.), *Political Communication Ethics: An Oxymoron?*, London & Westport: Praeger, 2000, p. 58.

to a “receiver”, who is able to adequately “decode” the symbols back into “ideas”.

For Radford, such a Lockean view furthermore claims that the communication will be effective, if and only if the ideas the receiver decodes are identical with the ideas the sender encodes. The sender can always assess the effectiveness of his or her communicative action by examining the “feedback”, the “response” or the effect of the communication on the receiver’s attitude and behavior. In other words, should the sender, or “communicator”, want the receiver to behave in a certain way, then he or she simply needs to encode certain ideas that can ignite the intended behavior in the part of the receiver. To paraphrase it in a rather crude way, this amounts to saying that the science of communication is manipulative in character. But euphemistically, we can simply say that the science of communication indeed belongs to the science of “social engineering”.

Radford also points to the research conducted by Christopher Simpson, entitled *Science of Coercion: Communication Research and Psychological Warfare, 1945-1960*, which delineates how military and political power influenced and directed academic research in communication studies. The book shows us how ideas in academic circles can be shaped by powerful groups. That is the reason why Michel Foucault reversed upside down Francis Bacon’s adage. For Bacon, “knowledge is power”; for Foucault “power is knowledge” (*pouvoir est savoir*). Those who can exercise power, whether it is political or economic, can steer any knowledge – including scientific knowledge – in the direction of their own interests.

The pictorial model of a sender as a subject of “engineering” and a receiver who serves as

an object of such “social engineering”, while providing indicators needed for the assessment of the effectiveness of the very act of engineering – in the form of the so-called “feedback” – is well suited for serving the interests of the powerful, that is, the interest of state and market. In the practice of education, Freire calls such a paradigm as “banking concept of education”, in which the relation is that of teacher and pupil, of subject and object, of an “I” and an “it”, not an “I” with a “you”, to borrow Martin Buber’s philosophy on inter-subjectivity.

3. Toward a Plurality of Paradigms

Having delved into the political dimension of communication science as a regime of transmission, we are led to the bracketing or the deconstruction of the dominant paradigm. The term “bracketing” comes from Edmund Husserl’s phenomenology, while the term “deconstruction” is originated from Jacques Derrida, who was himself initially an expert on Husserl’s philosophy. We are expected to bracket or postpone the judgment that the regime of transmission is the normalcy of communication science.

The result is the picture of communication science as “extraordinary science” in Kuhn’s sense, according to whom an extraordinary science is characterized by plurality of paradigms. As Robert T. Craig argues in “Communication Theory as a Field”, communication science will “never be unified by a unified theory or theories”. There are some paradigms or – to borrow Craig’s own words – seven traditions, namely, the rhetorical tradition, the semiotic tradition, the phenomenological tradition, the cybernetic tradition, the socio-psychological tradition, the socio-cultural tradition, and the critical tradition.

Be different as they may, there are four traditions which tend to be manipulative,

⁶Gary P. Radford, *On the Philosophy of Communication*, Belmont etc.: Wadsworth, 2005.

⁷Thomas Kuhn, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, Chicago: University Press of Chicago, 1962.

⁸Michel Foucault, *Power/Knowledge: Selected Interviews and Other Writings*, New York: Pantheon Books, 1980.

⁹Christopher Simpson, *Science of Coercion. Communication Research and Psychological Warfare, 1945-1960*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994

namely, the rhetorical tradition, the cybernetic tradition, the socio-psychological tradition, and the socio-cultural tradition. Presumably, it is not by chance that Radford puts forth the discussion on Umberto Eco's semiotics, Husserl's phenomenology and Hans-Georg Gadamer's hermeneutics (which is itself rooted in Heidegger's phenomenology) as the last part after his having launched a "scientific revolution" towards a manipulative "normal science" in the field of communication. Similarly, Pat Arneson edits a book that discusses applications in communications of the phenomenology tradition (Martin Heidegger, Gadamer, Emmanuel Levinas, Maurice Merleau-Ponty), the semiotics tradition (Roman Jakobson, Mikhail Bakhtin), and critical tradition (Juergen Habermas, Hannah Arendt, Michel Foucault). If the conjecture is true, this means that the emancipatory character that is able to empower civil society vis a vis state and market can be found in those three traditions.

The semiotic tradition might be emancipatory because it encourages the initiative of the so-called "receiver" of the manipulative paradigms, for which the receiver is simply object of manipulation. The phenomenology tradition might be emancipatory due to its under stressing "lived world" or "horizon" of the so-called "receiver, from which he, she, or they interpret(s) any other "horizons". It is the critical tradition that is particularly emancipatory, although we can always doubt the unconscious motive behind the theories, as Adorno and Horkheimer have revealed and Nietzsche had underlined it before.

4. Civil Society in a Free-Trade Economy and a Democracy in-the-making

The empowerment of civil society can be seen as emancipative actions towards market and state. It can, however, be viewed as checks and controls over the behaviors of the two. So

¹⁰Paulo Freire, *Ibid.*

¹¹Quoted in Stephen W. Littlejohn, *Human Communication*, Belmont: Wadsworth, 2002 (7), p. 12.

far as Indonesian people are concerned, the empowerment of civil society is beneficial both for the political process of democratization as well as for the economic process of globalization, which is almost identical with free-trade arrangement.

As some participant-observers have mentioned, which are also revealed in our everyday experiences, the bargaining position of Indonesian civil society vis a vis state and market is very low, if any. Common Indonesians as customers and employees have hardly had any bargaining position. In the latter case, the lack of bargaining position manifests itself not only in the home country, but also taking place abroad. Some tragic events concerning the Indonesian workers (TKI =Tenaga Kerja Indonesia) or Indonesian women workers (TKW =Tenaga Kerja Wanita) in countries such as Malaysia and Saudi Arabia are of high concern. Indonesian labor migration is actually the initiative of Indonesian civil society, not of the state, in their coping with poverty and unemployment at home. Market, and in a sense also the state, simply exploit them. Similarly, Indonesian people as customers have to swallow instant noodles, among others that do not meet the international standard. In Sidoarjo, East Java, local people who have been suffering from the flood of mud produced by an oil company in 2006 have been waiting for the compensation up until today. The list seems to be endless if we want to include all cases that show how powerless Indonesian civil society is in facing the market.

The case of Indonesian civil society facing the state or the public administration is exactly the same. Since 1999, the people can directly elect not only their legislative representatives, but also their executive chief at various levels of administration. Yet, they frequently find

¹²Gary Radford, *op.cit.*, pp. 133-173.

¹³Pat Arneson (ed.), *Perspectives on Philosophy of Communication*, West Lafayette: Purdue University Press, 2007.

¹⁴See for example, Jakob Oetama, *Dunia Usaha dan Etika Bisnis*, Jakarta: Penerbit Kompas, 2001.

out that their elected candidate is a “thief”, rather than “chief”. The case is the same with legislators. After being elected, the behaviors of many parliamentarians are quite different with their promises spelled out during the campaign period. The cases of injustice, where common people are brought to court or going to court to seek justice, is similarly tragic. The case of Prita and the case of Minah are only two of such injustices. In their everyday lives, people are a bit reluctant doing business with public officials, for they have to pay some extralegal cost. The list will also seem to be endless if we want to include all cases that show how powerless Indonesian civil society is in facing the state.

5. Closing remarks: Considering plural society

With such powerlessness of the Indonesian civil society, it is time to counterbalance the market and the state by empowering the Indonesian civil society. Without neglecting its existing and potential drawbacks, digital media can contribute to the project of empowering Indonesian civil society, as it is shown by the success of the “coins for Prita” movement initiated through the new media, and also by the public opinion formation in the new media criticizing the hypocrisy of a cabinet minister when shaking hands with the first lady of the United States.

This case of hypocrisy reminds us that Indonesian civil society is indeed pluralistic. This can be summarized that in the formal political forum, a cabinet minister should be communication using “public reason”, as John Rawls holds, and not with the language and the reason of his or her religious or ethnic background. Yet, this position of John Rawls concerning civil society, in particular concerning

¹⁶See especially, “Rezim Keadilan Pascakolonial”, *Kompas*, December 9, 2009.

¹⁷See for example Gary W. Selnow, “Internet Ethics”, Robert E. Denton, Jr., *Political Communication Ethics*, London & Westport: Praeger, 2000.

communities with religious background, in the matter of political communication is not without criticism. Troy Dostert, among others, maintains that Rawls’s position cannot be implemented at all cost, since we are living in – quoting Habermas – a “post secular” age. Yet, everyone knows that for being able to survive, to cooperate and to ever more prosper, a civil society should find an authentically civilized way to engage each other interpersonally as well as inter-culturally. This is another aspect of the empowerment of Indonesian civil society, not to neglect by any Indonesian scholars of communication science.

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¹⁸This will be discussed in my next book, *Etika Komunikasi Politik*, Jakarta: Atma Jaya University Press, 2010 (to be published)

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