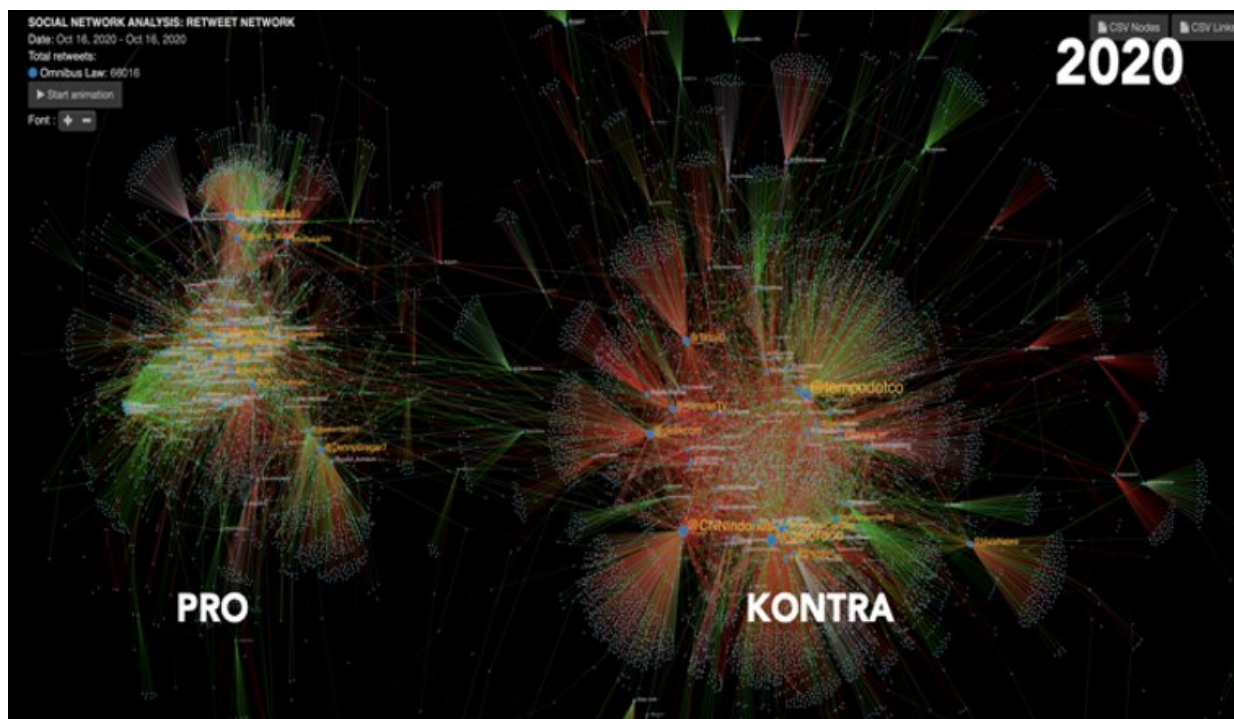


Digital innovation cuts both ways: Repression rises, resistance responds

September 3 2021, by Fiona Suwana and Wijayanto



Drone Emprit, Author provided

The advancement of digital media is a double-edged sword.

In South-East Asia, political scholar Aim Sinpeng has argued that [digital media](#) have emerged as a [vital repertoire of activism](#). However, a cunning combination of political authoritarianism and increasing internet

controls has put pressure on democratic society.

These contradicting digital forces are at work in Indonesia.

On one side, the internet has helped the public voice their criticisms of the government. But, on the other side, digital technology has aided authorities in silencing criticism.

Encroachment on freedom during the pandemic

During the pandemic, the Indonesian government has introduced [new regulations](#) and initiatives to control the flow of information in cyberspace.

The authorities claimed these measures were to protect the nation amid advances in digital technology. But these regulations and initiatives may well be preventing citizens from interacting in the digital sphere.

Last year, the Indonesian National Police ordered its personnel to carry out a [cyber patrol](#).

The patrol aims to monitor the circulation of opinion and news, the spread of hoaxes regarding COVID-19, the government's pandemic response and [insults against the president and government officials](#).

However, it is unclear what parameters the patrol uses to label any information on COVID-19 and responses to it as a hoax.

Early in 2021, the [police](#) announced [the badge award](#) for citizens who actively report criminal acts committed on social media. While the exact assessments and mechanism for the award are yet to be finalized, it could drive citizens to find faults in others' online activities.

The police also created a new unit, dubbed the "[virtual police](#)" or cyber police. Its task is to monitor social media and issue warnings for content that violates the Electronic Information and Transactions (*Informasi dan Transaksi Elektronik*, or [ITE](#)) law.

The law was passed in 2008 to protect consumers in electronic transactions when the use of the internet for economic activities gained traction. In practice, the government and law enforcement officials have abused it to silence political dissidents.

The cyber police unit is a new monitoring model. Both the badge award and the virtual police pose similar [concerns](#) that they are stoking fear among citizens about expressing their opinions online. This amounts to an attack on freedom of expression.

In addition, criminalisation of online users using the controversial Indonesian cyber law has [escalated](#) during the pandemic. The effect has been to silence public criticism of the state response to the crisis.

Digital rights watchdog [SAFE](#)net has recorded at least 84 criminal cases against netizens in 2020. That's almost four times more than the 24 cases recorded in 2019.

Digital authoritarianism

An [analysis](#) by political researchers Tiberiu Dragu of New York University and Yonatan Lupu of George Washington University, US, showed technological innovation has led to greater levels of abuses that prevent opposition groups from mobilizing.

This innovation has also increased the likelihood that authoritarians will succeed in crippling such opposition.

This is because digital advances have provided authoritarian governments and institutions with many tools for digital monitoring that help them to repress freedom of expression and other [civil liberties](#).

Cyber police employ a one-way campaign and limit interactive deliberation in the digital public space. Indonesian netizens posted many questions about cyber police's tweets, but there was no response. It just created online debates among netizens that need clarification.

A recent [survey](#) by Kompas—one of Indonesia's largest media outlets—found 34.3% of the Indonesian public sees the cyber police as a threat to freedom of expression.

In a broader context, the cyber police have added to pressures on digital freedom in Indonesia. Digital freedom is already facing repression under the ITE Law and by cyber-attacks.

Cyber-attacks had already happened before the pandemic and the arrival of cyber police. These attacks on pro-democracy activists take multiple forms, including telephone terror and hacking, and WhatsApp and email surveillance.

One of the biggest cyber-attacks in the second author's research was against Indonesian academic activists who [rejected](#) the revision of the Corruption Eradication Commission (KPK) Law in 2019.

Other cases involved attacks [against activists](#), [university students](#) and [media websites](#).

On the bright side

The good news is that, despite these attacks, Indonesian civil society continues fighting.

Digital media have supported and facilitated the rise of civil society opposition to problematic government actions and policies. Examples of this include protests against the revised KPK Law, the new normal policy, [the Job Creation Law](#) and the decision to hold regional elections during the pandemic.

Collaborative research between Indonesia's research institute LP3ES , University of Amsterdam and KITLV Leiden in the Netherlands, Diponegoro University in Central Java, Indonesia, Indonesian Islamic University in Yogyakarta and big data consulting company Drone Emprit identified waves of civil society resistance in the digital sphere.

The soon-to-be-published research tries, among other things, to compare the number of Indonesian tweet accounts that supported the Job Creation Law and those that rejected it.

Indonesian civil society actors have continued fighting against cyber-attacks as well as the invasion of influencers, buzzers and bots supporting authorities in the digital sphere. The virtual police could be seen as yet another form of intimidation in this public space.

This resistance marks the emergence of new citizenship awareness about participating politically in the digital environment.

At the same time, Indonesian citizens need to keep learning about digital rights to understand their fundamental rights to express their opinions and find reliable information.

The government must facilitate freedom of expression in online spaces for citizens to voice their rights and interests. At the same time, it should avoid and prevent any authoritarian practice that deforms democracy. It can start with revising the ITE law and dismissing the [cyber police](#) unit.

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