



## The Disabled People Virtual Communities in Social Media from The Perspective of Public Sphere Theory

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Nurul Hasfi<sup>1\*</sup>, Turnomo Rahardjo<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1,2</sup>Communciation Department of Universitas Diponegoro  
Jl. Prof Soedharto, Tembalang, Semarang, Indonesia

\*Corresponding auhtor's email: [nurul.hasfi@live.undip.ac.id](mailto:nurul.hasfi@live.undip.ac.id)

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### Abstract

Many researches view the internet as a virtual public sphere or forum potential that provides a space for minority groups to voice their opinions. This article identifies the role of social media in creating political public sphere for voters with disabilities in Indonesia during Presidential Election in 2019. By applying the normative values provided by Public Sphere Theory and Sphere Public Subaltern Theory, this article determines various potentials as well as stumbling blocks of the internet as a virtual public sphere for internet users. Virtual ethnography method is used to determine the identity of virtual communities of disabled people on three most active social media platforms in Indonesia, namely Instagram, Facebook and Twitter. Virtual Ethnography enables researchers to conduct an online observation on virtual communities three months prior to the 2019 Presidential Election. The data findings help the researchers draw conclusion that social media has technically advocated the endeavor of the disabled people's political rights equality, proven by the existence of disabled people's virtual communities and the narratives of struggle for their political rights equality. However, the data has shown an inadequacy of disabled people's virtual community to create dynamic inter-activities between its members as this community has not been able to reflect a public sphere that is able to build public opinion which effectively influences public policy.

**Keywords:** People with disability, Social media, General election, Virtual public sphere

### Abstrak

Internet banyak disebut peneliti memiliki potensi sebagai ruang publik virtual yang memberikan tempat pada kelompok-kelompok minoritas untuk menyuarakan suaranya. Artikel ini mengidentifikasi peran media sosial dalam membangun ruang publik politik bagi pemilih difabel di Indonesia dalam Pilpres 2019. Dengan menggunakan nilai-nilai normatif yang disediakan Teori Ruang Publik dan Teori Subaltern Public Sphere, artikel ini mengidentifikasi berbagai potensi dan kendala penggunaan internet sebagai ruang publik virtual. Metode etnografi virtual, digunakan untuk mengidentifikasi identitas komunitas virtual difabel di tiga platform media sosial teraktif di Indonesia yaitu Instagram, Facebook dan Twitter. Etnografi virtual juga memungkinkan peneliti melakukan observasi *online* pada interaksi di komunitas virtual tiga bulan menjelang pilpres 2019. Berdasarkan temuan data di lapangan, penelitian menyimpulkan media sosial secara teknis telah menjadi perjuangan kesetaraan hak politik difabel yang dibuktikan keberadaan komunitas virtual difabel dan narasi-narasi perjuangan kesamaan hak politik difabel. Namun demikian, data menunjukkan komunitas virtual difabel belum mampu membangun

interaktifitas dinamis diantara anggota komunitas virtual sehingga belum mampu mencerminkan ruang publik yang mampu membangun opini publik yang efektif mempengaruhi kebijakan publik.

**Keywords:** Difabel, Media sosial, Pilpres 2019, Ruang publik virtual

## Introduction

People with disabilities are one of minority groups that have become the object of emancipation of right equality by democratic activists all over the world. In Indonesia, nowadays, the rights of disabled people have been promulgated in Law number 8 Year 2016 as the revision of Law number 4 Year 1997. This Law guarantees equal rights for disabled people in many aspects of life, i.e. the right to live, right to be free from any stigma, privacy right, right to legal protection, education right, right to work, political right, religious right, right to receive public service and any other rights. The Law firmly positions disabled people as human beings, Indonesia citizens that have the right to voice their opinions.

Although the law on equal rights for disabled people in Indonesia is near to perfect, there are still many obstacles to implement it. People with disabilities (with physical and/or non-physical limitations) do not own a forum to voice and to control their criticism. On the other hand, the negative stereotype problematics derived from the society continuously describes them as a voiceless group (no chance to voice their opinions).

In the context of political participation, the voice of disabled people is unheard contrary to other Indonesia citizens without disabilities who can well express their opinion on social media (Fadillah, 2019; Hasfi, Usman, & Santosa, 2017). Owuor, Larkan, & MacLachlan, (2017) stated that technology should be able to provide a social inclusive chance to people with disabilities as well help them to socialize without any physical hurdles.

Based on the issue above as well as the researchers' optimism about the role of social media in improving the life quality of disabled people, this article is meant to see further how they use social media to participate in politics. Is the social media able to play a role as subaltern public sphere (Fraser, 1993) that provides a space to the minority voicing their opinions on virtual communication?

The researchers adopt the definition of virtual community based on Rheingold (2005) in which at that time internet space was defined as usenet and email list. This research sees social media as one of the new virtual communication platforms as referred to by Rheingold. The definition of social media as a forum of virtual communities is referring

to online discussion forum defined by Fuchs, (2014; 158). He stated that online discussion forums help people to share their thoughts by using blogs (Blogspot, WordPress, Tumblr), microblogs (Twitter, Weibo), social network sites (Facebook), wikis (i.e. Wikipedia) and content sharing sites (YouTube, Flickr, Instagram).

Furthermore, related to the context of this research, the researchers see that the internet has become an open space for the public to voice their opinions, especially during general elections. In the 2014 and 2019 general elections, both events displayed an openness of social media and the internet as the new political communication forum which connects the elite to the public. This is evident from an increase in the number of internet users in Indonesia. APJII (2016) recorded internet penetration rate in the country reached 64,8 % or 171,17 million people out of the total population of 264,16 million.

By focusing on the 2019 presidential election, this research aims to answer the research questions below: (1) who are the actors in social media that care for disabled people?; (2) how are the inter-activities within the virtual community for disabled people?; (3) what are the potentials and challenges for the virtual public sphere in creating a virtual public sphere that fight for the importance of disabled people?

## Theoretical Frameworks

Studies about the connection between digital technology and people with disabilities focused on the effort to see the impacts of the use of technology on their lives. Macdonald (2012) explored the failure of digital technology related to the social exclusivity towards disabled people. He found that assistive technology could not handle this social exclusion matter. Whereas based on his research, the technology instead brought in a new challenge for disabled people due to digital divide issue.

The result of research above contradicts the findings by Owuor et al., (2017) who built a technology model that was able to intellectually improve the life quality of disabled people (Intellectual Disability/ID). The conclusion of their research is that technology could help to form social inclusion for disabled people, and otherwise, closing

the access to technology could lead to disabled people's exclusions.

Spagnuolo & Shanouda (2017) explored the role of e-voting technology as a solution to the obstacles faced by disabled people (disability barrier) in which technology was used during the general election. The research was conducted by reading the experiences of some college students that had disabilities and had the right to vote. They found out that there was far more crucial thing than e-voting that should have been fulfilled by the government to build inclusive elections for disabled people.

Hall (2018) had also done a research on disabled people and online communities which has the same focus as this research. He spotted disabled people's resistance in the British online media against a mainstream discourse that categorizes them as an asexual group as well as another discourse that defines healthy sex only for those who are young and physically fit (able-bodied). His findings indicated that disabled people actually have active sexual preferences not according to the discourse mentioned by the media. Some disabled people preferred to have a relationship with people without disabilities and some others preferred to have sexual relationship only with people without disabilities.

Jaeger (2009) researched a variety of laws about internet access to disabled people and elderly people. He found that disabled people and elderly people did not only need access to information, but also access to build communication that could facilitate their physical, cognitive, and geographical limitations. Trevisan (2017) conducted a qualitative text analysis about advocacy for disabled people by using narrative-counter method through collection and dissemination of the life stories of people with disabilities on online media.

In Indonesia, there are not many researches about disabled people and online community. Nastiti (2013) conducted a research and perceived the online community as a means of emancipation for people with visual impairment (blind) by looking at the process of disabled people's identities establishment. Santoso, Achmad Budi, M, (2013) realized the effort made by disabled people to build their existence on online media by building a virtual solidarity.

There are many studies or researches about the connection between technology, virtual communities and disabled people as was also done by this research. However, there is yet a research that is focusing only on disabled people's virtual communities in social media in the context of a

general election. This article is intended to fill the gap of that discussion by exploring how disabled people, as a marginal group in Indonesia, make use of social media (Instagram, Twitter, and Facebook) to be politically involved in the general election. Furthermore, this research is aimed at finding out an answer to what extent social media as a virtual public sphere plays a role for disabled people.

## Theoretical Framework

### 1. Virtual Communities

Discussions about virtual community are closely related to the characteristics of six new media by Holmes (2009): (1) decentralization or user generated – the media has many-to-many communication ability or many-to-few; (2) two-way – interactive and dynamic; (3) not easily controlled by the government; (4) democratic – promote equality of rights; (5) provide space to individual conscience as a space to empower public; and (6) individualistic – virtual community is expected to build public opinion that can influence elite policy.

Akkinen (2005) stated several definitions of virtual community that are referring to many researches about virtual communities, such as Rheingold (2005) who defined virtual community as a social agreement emerged on the internet by several people who consistently create public discussions. It involves sensitivity as human beings aiming to form a personal relationship on a virtual sphere. Akkinen (2005) defined the virtual community as a mediated space in which content and communication are both potentially integrated by emphasizing the concept of content dissemination between its members. Lastly, Rafaeli (2000) defined virtual community as a computer-mediated space that enables its members to be involved in and to contribute to the personal interaction activities by using a computer.

From the definitions above, this article refers to the definition of virtual community stated by Rheingold (2005) as it contains an important element shown in this research, which is public discussion. Virtual communities in this research refer to a group discussion space or forum of disabled people on the internet, such as Instagram, Facebook, and Twitter in which political rights equality of disabled people during 2019 Presidential Election were struggled for with the presence of these social media platforms.

Meanwhile, this article uses a typology concept to explain the virtual community in which the concept has two levels: establishment and relationship as described in the diagram below.

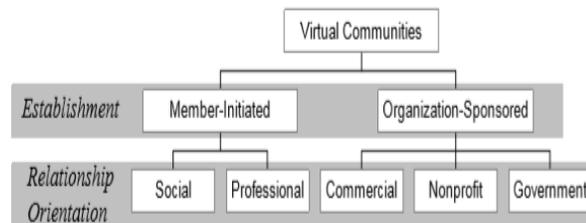


Figure 1: Poster of Virtual Communities Typology (Akkinen, 2005)

In this research, the virtual community's typology concept is expected to generate a description about the face of disabled people's virtual communities in Indonesia. The top left of the diagram shows how member-initiated communities is managed by its members, while the other side shows organization-sponsored, categorizes virtual communities from commercial or non-profit perspectives or sponsored by the government. The researchers use this latest categorization to find out the people (actors) who are involved in and care about the process of emancipation of disabled people's community, especially in fighting for equal rights of expression. By having a knowledge of actors who are active and/or passive in this virtual community, this research describes the face of virtual communities as a public place. If the social media is filled with actors from the public and emancipates the disabled people with integrity, then public sphere will be formed.

## 2. Public Spheres, Subaltern Public Spheres and Virtual Public Spheres

Fraser (1993) talks about the concept of subaltern public sphere that cannot be separated from the concept of public sphere (Habermas, 1989) as in building the subaltern public sphere concept, Fraser derived from his own critique on public forum of Habermas. This research is basically adopting both points of view, Habermas and Fraser, especially on normative values required in the virtual public forum such as public discussions, public opinions, powerless interaction, and effort to achieve mutual interests on a virtual public sphere.

In his work, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*, Habermas (1992) defines the public sphere as a bourgeois public sphere where at that time actors overseas could build public opinions. Habermas explained the bourgeois public sphere as a space where public opinion is created with certain conditions, such as it is taking place in the liberal political sphere, it has an institutional

system that supports rational-crisis argument and it has autonomy from the country as well as the market. Public sphere has a norm dimension, such as inclusivity and universal access that enables all types of public to be involved. It also uses rational argumentation reflected on three things: dominant-discourse purpose of the discussion whether to achieve consensus or not, open-to-criticism discussion, rights equality of every participant during dialogues.

Habermas in Poor (2005) emphasizes the 'public' from the word public spheres representing people involved in the discussion room where they do not act as citizens in the private sense, but citizens who carry the role of public. These citizens talk about issues that are relevant to broader public interests and issues about governance. 'Sphere' is defined as a mixed-space for both formal and informal institutions.

Fraser (1993) criticized Habermas' public sphere theory with his subaltern public sphere theory according to his two points of view; first, Habermas's public sphere has not excluded minority groups such as women, proletarians, and racial minorities. Fraser rejects the view that universal access to public sphere enables all of its members to be engaged in discussions. Fraser stated that social inequality determines who can enter certain public spheres and who are not able to. He also adds that the universal public sphere offered by Habermas only works in the interests of the dominant group. Secondly, the discourse rationality in a single public sphere does not allow the community to achieve real rationality. He stated that consensus is only used to eliminate subordinate status.

Meanwhile, from the historical development of Habermas's public sphere theory, his bourgeois public sphere is just one example of many other categories of public sphere which currently appear in different historical contexts. Zhang (2012) mentioned that there are at least three more public sphere institutions, namely the representative public

sphere, the literary public sphere and the mass media public sphere.

This research itself is about mass media of public spheres but focusing on new media that put forward a new term virtual public sphere which promises better democratic spheres as it opens a space for the citizens to freely express their minds (Rheingold, 2005). Papacharissi (2002) is one of the researches that used the term virtual public spheres to identify the internet potentiality as one of public sphere forms.

In the end, the researchers were focusing on the question of how effective or ineffective the virtual communities of disabled people is in carrying out the preconditions of norms that must be applied in public spheres such as public-oriented and egalitarian discussions to reach a mutual agreement.

### Material and Methodology

This research is a qualitative study that adopts Jørgen Skageby's online Ethnography method by (Daniel, 2011). The researcher took three steps. The first step is to define the settings of the virtual communities of disabled people, by (1) identifying virtual communities in social media in Indonesia (identity and managing actors); and (2) categorizing the typology of virtual communities identified by using the typology of virtual communities put forward by Poster (Figure 1).

In this *first* step, the researcher identified the research subjects, namely people with disabilities that manage social media accounts, such as Twitter, Instagram and Facebook in Indonesia. These accounts are recorded manually by tracking them online. This step includes; (1) entering the keyword 'disabled' in the search field; (2) observing the disability-care accounts that appear and then recording the name and number of followers, the level of interactivity and activeness of the accounts for a period of three months prior to the 2019 presidential election; (3) choosing an account that fits the criteria to be examined in this study, an account that is actively producing the 2019 presidential election discourse during a period of three months prior to the presidential election.

*The second* step is to conduct an online observation of the text in three social media platforms by identifying (1) the dominant narrative of the 2019 presidential election generated by the disabled people's virtual communities; and (2) conducting a data analysis: by observing the interactive quality of virtual communities of disabled people.

*The third step* is to make an interpretation and reflection of findings from the perspective of normative values of public spheres and the perspective of various literature reviews that studied similar cases.

### Result and Discussions

In general, the findings of this study support the arguments of researchers who found out that technology contributes to improving the life quality of disabled people (Owuor et al., 2017). Researchers believe that opening access to technology can help shape social inclusion, while on the other hand, closing access to technology for disabled people will create an exclusion. This is proven by the main finding that social media have been used by virtual communities of disabled people to fight for their political rights in the 2019 presidential election.

However, although the technology is required, it does not mean that disabled people face no hurdles to adopt social media. The barriers are derived from the lack of ability of social media accounts managed by disabled people to build a new media that is interactive, democratic, straightforward, and unlimited (Poor, 2005). In reality, the resistance narratives by disabled people (see Table 3) did not receive an appropriate response from the *netizen* in the virtual world or in the greater extent of public spheres (media mainstream), let alone response from the General Elections Commission (KPU), the General Elections Watchdog (Banwaslu) and the government. Consequently, disabled people's resistance narratives created in social media could not build public opinions that could effectively influence public policy.

The barriers faced by disability-care social media accounts in fighting for rights in social media ultimately also substantiate the findings of Macdonald (2012) who explored the failure of digital technology in helping disabled people avert social exclusion towards disabled people due to the existence of digital divide.

Therefore, this research argues that social media has become a space of social endeavour for disabled people or subaltern public sphere (Fraser, 1993) that provides a space for disabled people to voice their opinion. However, the normative function of this virtual public sphere has experienced barriers due to the non-optimality of the messages to call for responses from other public.

Furthermore, the researchers will present the arguments supporting the above findings that are

divided into three main topics namely; (1) typology of virtual communities of disabled people that view actors who drive the virtual communities in three social media platforms: Twitter, Instagram and Facebook. This part also shows hundreds of disability-care accounts that are active in social media to reflect disabled people in Indonesia who have used the internet as a space to form virtual communities; (2) interactivity built up on virtual communities especially focuses on discussions about the 2019 presidential election issues; how far does the discourse that has been built effectively build public opinion to a greater extent?; (3) which narratives developed by disabled people communities are used as a tool to fight for equality of political rights in the 2019 general elections.

**1. Typology of Virtual Communities of Disabled People: Public is the Main Actor-Leading Role**

The virtual ethnographic method found the existence of virtual communities of disabled people that has become a space for discussion for disabled people in Indonesia. Researchers successfully documented 206 Twitter, IG and Facebook accounts and then established the identities of their managers and the narratives they produced. There are some important notes related to the characteristics of disabled people's community, namely; a) not all identified accounts actively produced narratives within the data collection period (3 months before the 2019 presidential election); b) no more than 30 percent of accounts that are actively producing text are expressing the 2019 presidential election.

In general, disability-care virtual communities in Indonesia are driven by a variety of actors including Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs), educational institutions, and people with disabilities, volunteers with disabilities and special workers with disabilities distributors.

Table 1. List of Account Managers for Disability-Care Accounts on the Internet

Account Manager	Total of social media accounts that actively produce narratives of the 2019 presidential election for the period of Jan 17 - April 17, 2019		
	IG	Twitter	FB
Disability organizations run by the government.	5	2	-
Disability organizations run by NGOs.	71	27	13
Disability organization owned by educational institutions.	7	5	10
Communities of people with disability	11	20	1
Volunteers with disabilities	21	5	1
Labour distributors	1	3	-
Media for disabled people	-	4	-
<b>Total Accounts</b>	<b>116</b>	<b>66</b>	<b>25</b>

The table above shows categorization of actors who manage the disability-care accounts on Instagram, Twitter and Facebook.

**First**, disability organizations under NGOs (Non-Government Organization). These disability associations are formally organized and have an organizational structure, such as the Association of Indonesian People with Disabilities (*Persatuan Penyandang Difabel Indonesia*/PPDI), Association of Indonesian Visually Impaired (*Persatuan Tuna Netra Indonesia*/Pertuni); Association of Indonesian Women with Disabilities (*Himpunan Wanita Difabel Indonesia*/HDW).

**Second**, disability organizations sponsored by the state such as Disability Inclusive Service Unit (*Unit Layanan Inklusi Disabilitas*) under the National Disaster Mitigation Board (BNPB) Office in Central Java, Care Program under the Coordinating Ministry for Human Development and Cultural Affairs.

**Third**, disability organizations under educational institutions, such as Student Activity Unit of Disability Care, UGM.

**Fourth**, disability communities that set up associations for people with disabilities without formal organizational structure, such as Borneo Deaf

Community (BDC), Creative Deaf Community (*Komunitas Tuna Rungu Kreatif*), and so on.

**Fifth**, volunteers with disabilities under informal organizations established by the general public who care about disabled people and provide spaces for disability-support activities, such as House of Disabilities (*Rumah Difabel*), Deaf Volunteering, Inclusion Warriors (*Laskar Inklusi*) and many others.

**Sixth**, special workers with disabilities distributors set up by Sajana, a technology-based social foundation located in Yogyakarta and Disability Working Network (*Jaringan Kerja Difabel/JKD*).

**Seventh**, media about disabled people such as Sigab Radio and Diffa Magazine.

From the point of view of virtual community typology concept (Porter, 2004 in Akkinen, 2005) in Figure 1, the typology of virtual communities of disabled people in Indonesia on the internet consists of two groups, namely member-initiated social and professional organizations and those sponsored by the state and NGOs. Commercially sponsored disability organization is the only disability organization that does not appear on the internet.

The description of the typology of virtual communities of disabled people in Indonesia and the quantitative data shown in Table 1 indicates the main actors that play a strategic role in driving virtual communities of disabled people. They are non-profit disability organizations, namely NGOs, organizations initiated by volunteers who care about disabled people and people with disability themselves. This means that, from the point of view of public sphere theory, these virtual communities are indeed the spaces that represent the public and disabled people to fight for their interests.

Based on the public space theory’s point of view (Habermas, 1989), the driving force of this

online community has reflected what Habermas calls public who are fighting together to achieve their interests. These actors are mainly NGOs that facilitate the society who cares about disabled people and people with disabilities themselves. This is where the internet is being described as minority public who wish to build subaltern public sphere (Fraser, 1993).

Findings, that public (not the elite) who became the driving force (or main actor) of virtual communities of disabled people, reflect the potential for the establishment of virtual public spheres on virtual communities. The virtual communities have the potential to become a space for disabled people to build public opinion to fight for their interests and control government policies.

However, although with the finding of the identity of the main actor, actors without disabilities who initiated the emancipation of the disabled people shows that disabled people in Indonesia are still passively involved in fighting for their political rights in social media. This is different from the findings by Trevisan (2017) where disabled people actively build counter-narratives to make a story telling movement about sexual orientation of disabled people on online media (Hall, 2018).

## 2. Disabled People’s Narratives on Virtual Communities about the 2019 Presidential Election

In this section, this article will focus on efforts to understand the narratives built by virtual communities of disabled people on IG, Twitter and Facebook and to understand the dynamics of online communication that take place therein. The findings about the narratives of the struggle for disabled people (Table 2) show that disability-care social media has proven to have a role as virtual public spheres.

Table 2. Narratives of Struggle of Virtual Communities of Disabled People in the 2019 Presidential Elections

Narratives of Struggle for Equality of Political Rights of Disabled People	Evidence / Explanation
Critiques towards Voting Places (TPS) that are not accessible for disabled people.	Critiques of how minimum the facilities in Voting Places (TPS) for disabled people (access, Braille templates of DPR and DPRD papers for visually impaired voters; size of the ballot boxes - considerably small)
Direct report from the Voting Places during Presidential Election.	Activities of disabled people during voting hours at the Voting Places; Vote Count Reports; Photography contest related to the general elections.

Vote as Disabled people's political right.	Appeals for disabled people to vote; anti-abstention movement; inclusivity; denial of the discrimination of the right to vote of people with mental disorders.
Support towards Presidential Candidates	Invitation to choose either Prabowo or Jokowi
Presidential Candidates Debate	Invitation to watch the Debate of the Presidential Candidates; appreciation of sign language interpreters in Presidential debates; assessment of the understanding of the two candidates on disability issues.
Legislative Candidates with disabilities who are lack support	Support and advocacy discourses for legislative candidates with disabilities; Disability Right to become a legislative candidate; based on the 2019 general elections information, there are 40 disabled people as legislative candidates from all over Indonesia.
Limited Socialization	Voting procedures; final list of voters with disabilities; socialization of increased public participation in elections; minimum election socialization for the disabled people; socialization agenda with KPU.
Data of Voters with Disabilities	2019 Data of Voters with Disabilities; Final Voters List (DPT) of disabled people for the year 2014 - 2019.

There are two things that can be observed from Table 2, namely; (1) from the point of view of the narrative discussed, the virtual communities of disabled people have the potential to become public spheres because they are fighting for public interests and not for private interests; (2) from the perspective of political participation concept (Huntington & Nelson, 1976), the above themes indicate political participation activities of disabled people on the virtual world. Political participation (Huntington & Nelson, 1976) is an important activity in public sphere theory because it is an attempt by citizens to build public opinion and to change or to correct a wrong system.

The followings are the forms of political participation of disabled people in social media as reflected in Table 2, namely: *First*, lobbying which is an activity of negotiation with the elite by posting critiques towards the election organizers, such as critiques towards voting places facilities, critiques towards a lack of election socialization and critiques towards a lack of facility support for legislative candidates with disabilities. The most dominant critique is inaccessible voting places facilities. Other issues related to the Voting Places are the use of stairs, problematic voters' escorts, inadequate training and socialization for the escorts, tables at the ballot boxes that are considered too high and not wide enough for some disabled people. The most vocal criticism is the unavailability of Braille template on ballot papers for Regional Legislative Assembly (DPRD) and the House of Representatives (DPR) so that the principle of 'secrecy' in the

election is not obtained. In addition, there are online lobbying activities related to the narrative to fight for the rights of disabled people to become candidates. These narratives were posted by the @solideride account on Twitter and konekindonesia Instagram account. The narratives are about support and advocacy for candidates with disabilities as well as the potential and hurdles in political contestation.

*Second*, the electoral activity can be seen from the texts in social media that show the involvement of disabled people in the campaign activities of the two presidential candidates (see Table 2), the use of voting rights in the 2019 presidential election and the role of people with disabilities as volunteers. The dominant narrative is the invitation for disabled people to vote in the election as exercising their voting rights on the day of voting. Furthermore, in relation to electoral activity issues, an invitation to watch the presidential candidates' debate is given out so that disabled people can decide their choice of candidate and also to disseminate information about the data of voters with disabilities in the 2019 presidential election.

The existence of a critical narrative built by disabled people shows that social media reflects the character of the public spheres as it has become a means of struggling for disabled people as a marginal group as referred to by Fraser (1993).

### 3. Interactivity of Disabled People's Virtual Communities

This research is observing the interactivities of virtual communities of disabled people from three

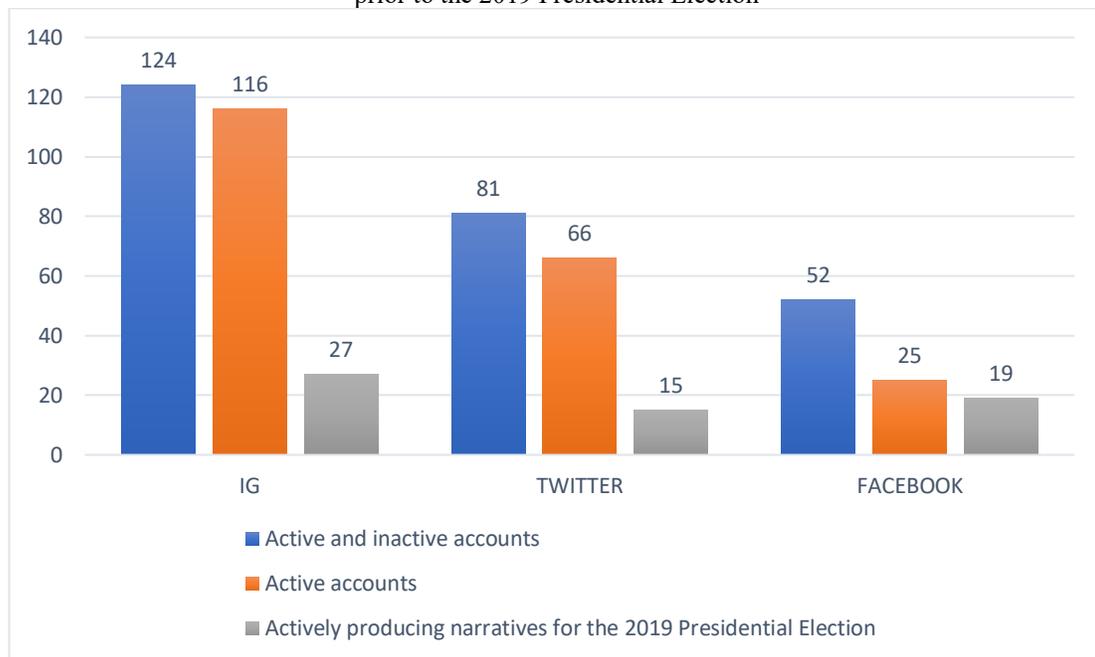
indicators, namely the number of followers. The higher the number of the followers of an account, the higher the possibility of interactive discussion to occur. In addition, the high number of followers also enables high exposure made by disabled people; also, response to texts posted by an account of disabled person(s) with an online in-depth observation towards discussion activities on social media of disabled people. The level of quantity of interactivities can be seen from online response, such as, like, love, share, and retweet. Lastly, observing the discussion quality can be seen from the existence of two-way communication in the comment field. The face of public spheres can be seen when a dynamic and egalitarian discussion occurs and from their purpose of building joint solutions on disability issues.

**First**, observation on followers shows that public attention is still low, as indicated by the low

number of followers of accounts for disabled people on IG, Facebook and Twitter. Disabled people Instagram accounts followers are at an average of 870, Twitter at an average of 430 and Facebook at an average of 1300. As a comparison, during the research of this study social media will be defined as a popular account if it has millions of followers. Jokowi’s social media account, for example, has 25 million Instagram followers, 12 million Twitter followers, and 9,6 million Facebook followers as of September 2019.

**Second**, the low level of political participation of virtual communities of disabled people in political elections is also reflected by the low level of narrative production on public issues - in this case the 2019 presidential election - three months prior to the presidential election (diagram 1).

Diagram 1. Activities of Social Media Accounts Three Months prior to the 2019 Presidential Election



Below is the interpretation of the diagram above, namely; (1) there is only 16% out of the total active accounts on Instagram that produce the 2019 presidential election narratives (27 accounts); only 22% of the total active accounts on Twitter (15 accounts); and 76% of total active accounts on Facebook (15 accounts) which has a way higher percentage compared to IG and Twitter. Although, it seems that Facebook had a higher percentage of

narratives production, it does not reflect the level of participation in this social media as it has the lowest number of total active accounts compared to IG and Twitter; (2) Diagram 1 shows that communities of disabled people talk more about job opportunities, activity documentations of disabled people (seminars, workshops, trainings, laws socialization), information about disability achievers (in sports and arts), information about assistance for disabled

people given to external parties (government, NGOs and political parties).

For the record, Table 3 below is a list of the ten most active accounts that consistently discuss the 2019 presidential election

Table 3. Ten Accounts of Virtual Communities of Disabled People that Actively Produce Narratives on the 2019 Presidential Election

IG	TWITTER	FACEBOOK
disabilitiesforworld	@HDWI	GerkatIn
gempi_2019	@programpeduli	PPDI
konekindonesia	@ppua_penca	Sapda Media
ypedulikasihabk	@5194b	Pertuni
sahabat_difabel_banjarmasin	@ppdi_id	Mitra Netra
mitranetra	@psldbrawijaya	Rumah Autis
tunanetrapedulibangsa	@soliderid	Bobotoh Difabel
konekindonesia	@kartunet	Komite Difabel DIY
ksdsemarang	@radiosigap	Indonesia Mendengar
psld_ub	@majalahdiffa	Rumah Autis

**Third**, related to interactive discussion, this research has identified that virtual communities of disabled people cannot yet present an adequate political discussion space. The communication is leaning towards a oneway communication model, low response to ideas and is still dominated by click activism (Lim, 2013) in which the way to express interest in and rejection of an idea is by only clicking (or not) a like, love or share button.

Among the most active accounts in Table 3 above, 'konekindonesia' is the most consistent and active account on Instagram to produce and discuss disability issues. While on Twitter, @soliderid has become the most active account in this matter. However, there is no any prominent account on Facebook as the text produced is not specifically created for the discourse of the 2019 presidential election.

The existence of critical narratives built by disabled people (see Table 2) shows that social media brings characters to the public spheres as it has

become a means of struggle for disabled people as a marginal group as stated by Fraser (1993). However, this access of information for the disabled people is not supported with an adequate communication access due to the low level of interaction.

This research shows that disabled people in Indonesia have owned a free access to information, but they are still limited to communication access. This causes the role of social media as subaltern public sphere (Fraser, 1993) does not run optimally. This finding supports the argument of Jaeger (2009) which argues that disabled people do not only need equality in obtaining information access, they also require access to build communication that could facilitate physical, cognitive and geographical limitations.

## Conclusions

This research concludes that virtual communities of disabled people in social media in Indonesia have the potential to become virtual public

spheres which can be used as a medium of struggle for this marginal group. However, there are challenges so that the disabled people communities cannot form the face of public sphere.

There are three points underlying the findings of the potential of virtual communities of disabled people to become public spheres, namely: (1) the existence of online political participation activities that are driven by disability-care accounts whose members derived from disabled groups and also driven by NGOs, disability communities, disabled volunteers and educational institutions; (2) narratives that carry the spirit of the struggle for equality of the rights of disabled voters built on these accounts; (3) there have been online political communication activities that occur on virtual communities of disabled people, namely lobbying and electoral activities which shows that this space has been used as a means to form public opinions.

However, this potential is also followed by challenges that cause the virtual communities of disabled people to be in unideal state according to the public sphere theory (Habermas, 1989 and Fraser, 1993). The arguments are: a) the low level of interactivities for both quantitatively and qualitatively. The formed communication is referring to media mainstream that is one-way communication while technically social media has had two-way communication characteristic. In the context of the 2019 presidential election, the narratives built by the virtual communities of disabled people do not give a massive impact to the society and yet are able to enter a wider public agenda as they only get involved in closed discussions on virtual communities of disabled people.

Supporting Jaeger's finding (Jaeger, 2009), this research found that social media has successfully provided information access for disabled people but failed to provide an adequate communication access due to the low level of interaction. (Owuor et al., 2017) argues that opening the access to technology means it also opens inclusive spaces for disabled people. Thus, this research recommends a better effort from many parties to maximize the potential of virtual communities of disabled people that have already existed as a means of struggle of disabled people's political rights equality. One of the ways is by forming a network between disability-care actors, such as NGOs, educational institutions, disabled volunteers, disability communities and mass media to work together in order to create effective narratives to emancipate disabled group and effectively reach a greater extent of public spheres.

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