

Alternative Imaginations: Confronting and Challenging the Persistent *Centrism* in Social Media-Society Research

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Abstract

This article attempts to intervene the current trend in social media research that, to a certain degree, reflects the centrality of technology. Beyond the broad trend of *technocentrism*, I identify and outline four other major oversights or challenges in researching the social media/society relationship, namely *online data centrism*, *moment centrism*, *novelty centrism*, and *success centrism*. Stemmed from these four types of centrism, I offer an alternative imagination, namely a set of alternative pathways in social media research that value histories and historical context, interdisciplinarity, *longue durée*, and complexity. By revealing these oversights, this article aims to contribute to our collective attempt to interrogate the relationship between social media and society (and technology/society) critically. This alternative imagination might help animate, reveal, and make transparent various societal dynamics that otherwise would be invisible and, thus, might contribute to a better, deeper, and more comprehensive understanding of the technology/society relationship.

Key Words

Technocentrism, social media research, technology and society, alternative imaginations

Introduction: *Technocentrism* in Social Media Research

It was the month of March 2022. I wrote this article under the shadow of a long Covid-19 pandemic that has just entered its third year and another global event that took the world by storm, the Russian invasion of Ukraine. For these two events, media commentaries about social media platforms, written both by journalists and academic writers, have primarily focused on how the platform facilitated misinformation and conspiracy theories around Covid-19 and the invasion of Ukraine (e.g., Falcon 2022; Ling

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2022; Schreiber 2022). This trend seems to be a continuation of earlier conversations that we had seen several years before the pandemic, albeit on different events. Indeed, in the last several years, notably since the 2016 U.S. Presidential Elections and the Cambridge Analytica scandal, media commentaries on social media's negative impacts and implications have surged. Media pundits have blamed social media for emboldening right-wing, populist, and authoritarian narratives in various political events, including the victory of Trump in the United States (Grassegger and Krogerus 2017; Rosenberg et al. 2017), the Brexit campaign in the United Kingdom (Scott 2018), the reigns of Duterte in the Philippines (BBC Trending 2016) and Modi in India (Ayed and Jenser 2019), and the success of Bolsonaro's presidential campaign in Brazil (*The Economist* 2019).

Media commentaries are meant to provide quick, immediate insights into social phenomena. In media, reductionist, singularity, and deterministic tendencies are not exceptions to the rule. Academic publications, which are naturally much slower than media, expectedly reveal more nuanced analysis. Yet, they, too, reflect a similar trend. Since the mid-2010s, academic insights on social media in socio-political areas have been primarily focused on the adverse implications of the technologies. Social media are implicated in spreading misinformation, disinformation, fake news, and conspiracy theories; proliferating racist and discriminatory messages; facilitating populism and extremism; exacerbating socio-political polarisation and divides; and undermining democracy (e.g., Cesarino 2020; Castaño-Pulgarín et al. 2021; Tucker et al. 2017; Shu et al. 2021; Vaidhyanathan 2018).

This tendency stands in contrast to the trend of scholarly analysis of social media in the early 2010s. Following the MENA (the Middle East and North Africa) uprisings, academic discourse primarily focused on the role of social media with analyses that “overestimate the role of technology” (Fuchs 2012:387) and were criticised as being technologically deterministic (Aouragh and Alexander 2011; Fuchs 2012; Alrasheed 2017). Alrasheed's (2017) systematic research on journal articles published on the MENA and Iranian uprisings, notably in political science, sociology, and communication and media studies, reveals that the majority of these writings reproduced technological utopianism. They collectively viewed what unravelled in the Arab countries through the “progressive notion of revolution”, namely “the belief a revolution is relatively short and should generate conditions superior to previous ones” in conjunction “with the belief that technology is part of progress” (Alrasheed 2017:231). Such a lens, Alrasheed (2017:231) further argues, has energised “the notion that new communication technologies revolutionise, make, enhance, or replace

the path to democracy in the region of MENA”. I concur with Alrasheed (2017) that by exploring the complex phenomena through the technological utopian lens, such a discourse “hinders the production of the production of exegetic frameworks that informatively evaluate the MENA movements and their interactions with technology” and “generates stories with less human action and less history” (Alrasheed 2017:237).

In response to what has unravelled globally in the last decade, some scholars take a longer view arguing that social media has transitioned from a platform for progressive activism and a force for democracy to one of facilitating regressive actions and proliferation of dis- and misinformation (e.g., Sinpeng and Tapsell 2020). It is crucial to point out that much of these debates echo much earlier scholarly discourse following the proliferation of the Internet throughout the 1990s and each debate concerning the introduction of new media in media history. Discourses on earlier technologies, from telegraph to telephone, radio, and television, underwent similar paths with the amnesiac and ahistorical shift from utopian to dystopian tones.

However, on closer and more longitudinal empirical examination, it becomes apparent that the relationship between any technology, including social media, and society is always complex and essentially does not fit the progressive-to-regressive scenario discussed above. On the contrary, early works on the Internet in various empirical contexts, including my own, demonstrated that even in the late 1990s, uncivil and regressive practices were already embedded in digital media usage (Lim 2002, 2005; Bräuchler 2013). For example, in the 1990s, the early static Internet was not only appropriated by progressive movements such as the Zapatista in Chiapas-Mexico (Froehling 1997) and the Battle of Seattle protests (Eagleton-Pierce 2001), but also by far-right groups such as the Stormfront, a neo-Nazi Internet forum focused on propagating white nationalism (Back et al. 1996).

There has been an exponential growth of scholars researching the impact of Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, Instagram, TikTok, and any other social media platforms. As a result, publications in information studies, communication and media studies, and relevant fields now comprise a swollen bibliography of research about trending topics on social media in various empirical contexts. Many of these studies focus on social media’s roles, impacts, and effects and make a direct/indirect causality or strong correlation to its impact on society, whether utopian or dystopian, positive or negative.

Observably, the research focus—which largely determines the selection of the case, the phenomena, and/or the context—to a certain

degree, has encoded the possible direction of the research outcomes. For example, studies that focus on the role and impact of social media in progressive phenomena or for progressive usage or movements eventually end up formulating a positive association between technological uses and a set of progressive values and/or characteristics such as civic participation, freedom of speech, social awareness, and citizen empowerment. Similarly, studies focusing on regressive phenomena/usage, too, tend to find a positive correlation/association between the usage of technology and negative outcomes such as deepening polarisation, aiding the proliferation of hate and discriminatory speeches, and facilitating disinformation and misinformation. Further, scholars who study progressive usages and movements, in general, rarely look at the other side, namely, the regressive ones. Likewise, scholars who dedicated themselves to studying anti-democratic events, groups, and phenomena, such as those who called themselves scholars of terrorist studies, also primarily focus merely on the dark side of politics. As such, their studies tend to perpetuate a dystopian view of technology.

At the heart of both sides is the centrality of technology. By focusing on the “impact”, “roles”, and “effect” of the technology, these studies tend to privilege the position of technology in social explanations. The extreme form of this technological determinism views technological platforms such as social media as the decisive force, the prime actors that shape social relations and cause social change (Matthewman 2011:15). While not taking social media as the prime cause, the more moderate ones still formulate their frameworks around the active roles of technology in society, community, and individuals. As succinctly pointed out by Rodriguez et al. (2014), many of these studies reduce the richly contextual human relations surrounding media use into flat, unrevealing technological determinism. In other words, they privilege the technological features and constructs and subsequently render human agency invisible. And by so doing, the technological determinism in research push for the anti-human conceptualisation of technology.

However, I do not necessarily argue for the opposite approach, namely humanist theories that privilege the absolute role of society/people. In the humanist approach, which is sometimes referred to as social constructionism or (socio)cultural determinism, humans take a central role as the main actors (Matthewman 2011:15). In this approach, technology is simply an extension of human users. Therefore, a technological system such as social media is viewed as merely a neutral artefact that is malleable, ready to be moulded by the hands of its users. This view simplifies the relationship between society and technology into a popular but partial catchphrase “Guns don’t kill people; people kill people”.

It is essential to clarify that most social studies of social media do not fall into the crudest and simplest form of either anti-humanist or humanist approach. Some, however, revolve around these approaches and thus are at risk of being reductionist and partial. In dealing with the binary, I am positioning myself with a stream of scholars who see the relationship between technology and society as an integrated sociotechnical system. We do not need to choose between privileging the role of society/humans or the role of technology. Instead, we can adopt a *posthumanist* approach that advocates “distributed agency”, namely “the idea that humans and technologies (and a host of others) have agency and create their effects” (Matthewman 2011:19). Echoing Matthewman (2011), here we can transgress the technology/society binary and, instead, turn into a dialectical relationship between the two that can be conceived as “co-agency, collective production and interaction” (Matthewman 2011:19), “co-shaping” (Verbeek 2005), or “mutual shaping” (Boczkowski 1999).¹

My aim here is not to propose a new theoretical framework or approach to challenge the technology/society binary. Instead, I ground my intervention in this debate pragmatically by discussing how such a binary is rendered legible in the current trend of social research on social media. Beyond the broad trend of *technocentrism*, I identify and outline four other major oversights or challenges in researching the relationship between social media (and communication technologies in general) and society, namely *online data centrism*, *moment centrism*, *novelty centrism*, and *success centrism*. When needed, they are illustrated by empirical snapshots from various places in the world, including Indonesia. My inclusion of the Indonesian context is a conscious choice as I consider that the journal’s reader comprises primarily Indonesian scholars and social sciences students. Beyond identifying the oversights, I also attempt to chart alternative pathways in researching the relationship between digital media, particularly social media, and society by offering an alternative imagination that might help animate, reveal, and make transparent various societal dynamics that otherwise would be invisible. Finally, on the ontological level, I wish to engage with and contribute to the broader conversation that challenges and transgresses the technology-society binary.

Online Data Centrism: Data Mining and Big Data Analytics Trends in Social Media Research

A study on 1632 papers in the Web of Science database from 1990 to 2013 by Zhang et al. (2015) found that social media studies had developed rapidly, especially after 2008. Their analysis reveals that the pre-2008 study was related to journalism and social problems such as social capital, anti-war

movements, people's relationships, and health (Zhang et al. 2015:1145). Since 2008, however, they have predominantly concentrated on studying users' connections and networks. Their analysis of citation and reference practices shows that most references were introduced in frequency and burst. Further, they argue that "most researchers are still focusing on fundamental works on social media instead of studying deeply on branches of this field ... social media knowledge has not been transferred enough" (Zhang et al. 2015:1146).

Meanwhile, an earlier and much more extensive study of 27,349 Internet studies articles between 2000 and 2009 in the Social Sciences and the Arts and Humanities Citation Indexes by Peng et al. (2013) found that the field has primarily focused on the Internet usage patterns (and their relationship to specific behaviours/attitudes/effects) and networks. This study also found that only 21% cited theoretical works and 59% of the conducted research used quantitative methods (Peng et al. 2013).

These studies do not capture the more recent evolution in social media research. Observably, however, this early trend has influenced the subsequent development of social media research. My limited scan of selected 100 articles studying social media and society in the Indonesian context published between 2018 and 2021 demonstrates that the earlier trend is not only confirmed but also amplified. Utilising data mining as the primary method, the majority of the publications rely on the 'reading' and 'mapping' of patterns and connections among social media messages and users as their methodological framework to explain the social phenomenon. Hence, data mining takes a central stage as the most popular method.

Social media data-driven research has become popular and even mainstream in academia, mainly due to the public availability and ease of access to such data. Advances in big data and deep learning have paved the way for the developing methods of information extraction and data analytics on social media platforms. Large-scale computational analysis of online data has unsurprisingly become the foundational approach to studying social media dynamics in computer science, information science, and cognate fields such as human-computer interactions. However, beyond these fields, "the obsession with quantification, the use of computation in the social sciences and big data have also manifested itself as a preoccupation with attempts to develop new digital methods in both the humanities and social sciences" (Fuchs 2017:39). Some research grant institutes, such as those in the United Kingdom, associate social media research with big data analytics (Fuchs 2017:39). From data journalism to digital humanities, big data and open data have become buzzwords for many funding initiatives on social science and humanities not only in Europe and North America,

but also in developing countries such as Brazil, India, and Indonesia.

Thus, in the last decade, large repositories of online users' data, particularly traces of users' interactions, have become a gold mine for social science and humanities researchers studying social media. Big data-based research is seductive that it construes mythology; there is the "widespread belief that large data sets offer a higher form of intelligence and knowledge that can generate insights that were previously impossible, with the aura of truth, objectivity and accuracy" (Boyd and Crawford 2012:663). As such, big data analytics reinforce the "illusion of informational comprehensiveness, representativeness, and trustworthiness", which, in turn, "tend to be held as ontological foundation, guiding, and shaping scientific knowledge and its public diffusion" (Soares 2018:170).

Social media data-driven studies are helpful in that they allow us to document patterns, nodes, and connections among messages and users and, thus, can provide us with insights into the formation of networks. However, these insights do necessarily yield accurate, meaningful, or comprehensive explanations. Kitchin (2014:5) argues that "data are examined through a particular lens that influences how they are interpreted" and that "correlations between variables within a data set can be random in nature and have no or little causal association." Further, big data analytics is problematic in the way that "it often does not connect statistical and computational research results to a broader analysis of human meanings, interpretations, experiences, attitudes, moral values, ethical dilemmas, uses, contradictions and macro-sociological implications of social media" (Fuchs 2017: 40).

Hence, I do not advocate dismissing data mining, especially big data analytics, from our research repertoire. Rather, I call for decentring its place and repositioning it as one of many possible methods in social media research. More importantly, I insist that we need to understand the limitation of this method and recognise that these types of data are inadequate for answering complex questions that deal with cultural and social dynamics, power and resistance, and other societal processes that shape and influence how we utilise social media.

Moment Centricism: Preoccupation with the Moment, Neglecting Historical Context

Social media data-driven studies, both quantitatively and qualitatively, are particularly valuable in capturing a moment and/or an event whose data are made visible in a specific time and space, notably through the emergence of associated keywords and #hashtags. Facebook and Twitter have become the most popular research sites. Further, hashtag-driven

studies, especially on Twitter, have become one of the most popular types of social and humanities studies on social media. In addition to big data analytics, qualitative methods employing content and discourse analysis of tweets collected within a specific timeframe on a particular event have been customarily utilised. Terms such as tweet-activism, hashtag activism, hashtag feminism, hashtag feminist-activism, and hashtag discourse/discursive activism emerge as keywords of such studies. This type of research has its currency and values. The concern here is not about the method itself but the prevalence and homogeneity of this research framework in the field. Regardless of the method chosen, whether quantitative or qualitative, big data or small data analysis, there is a broad tendency to focus on a single phenomenon, narrowly examined from the capture of data originated in a certain moment, and thus miss society's big picture.

Such a trend in social media research perpetuates *moment centrism*, which reads a complex phenomenon from what transpires during a brief period rather than interrogates it as an outcome of longitudinal and historical societal dynamics. Every moment has a history. A robust explanation of how and why a particular moment is created cannot be found in the moment itself but originated in the past. What is notably missing from a moment centrism is a historical context.

Specific to the field of communication for social change, Rodriguez et al. (2014) highlight the “need for research that takes seriously the idea” that media and communication technologies “are used within historical conditions” (p. 153). By taking historical context into account, we can potentially “explore how media technologies are bent in specific ways according to local power dynamics, level of expertise, cultural negotiations, and social interactions” (Rodriguez et al. 2014:153) —all of these contribute to a deeper and robust understanding of the relationship between social media and society.

Moment centrism, in addition to techno centrism, has prompted to dominant but misleading views I discussed earlier, such as one that saw the MENA uprisings in 2010-2011 as spontaneous and driven mainly by social media and the other that cast social media as the main instrument for the global rise of right-wing populism in the more recent years. The Tunisian uprising, for example, was not a spontaneous movement and was not fuelled by Facebook. It was years in the making and went through many smaller-scale and even failed mobilisations (Lim 2013). Similarly, the recent public visibility of far-right groups, through online and in-person collective actions, in the United States, Canada, and Europe, was

not spontaneous but a culmination of years of networking and propaganda works (Lim and Rigato 2022).

To further illustrate the practice of moment centrism, let us look at an Indonesian example, namely the transparency of the voting system in the 2014 (and 2019) Presidential Elections in Indonesia. The 2014 election was the first election subjected to a high level of openness where the public was very much involved in the process. Many academic and media commentaries too quickly credited this to the spontaneous outburst of citizen participation, notably the outsized role of Kawal Pemilu. Translated as “guard the election”, Kawal Pemilu was a close voluntary-based crowdsourcing initiative that attempted to document vote tally manually and release the count result on its website in real-time. Calling Kawal Pemilu members “election tech fighters” and “keyboard warriors” and framing their actions within an “electronic democracy” or “digital democracy” framework, media and scholarly discussions on social media and the 2014 election tended to idealise online citizen participation (Lukman 2014; Bland 2019; Grigg 2019; Febriansyah et al. 2020; Sukartini 2020). This tendency elevates citizen initiatives such as Kawal Pemilu into an ideal, heroic, and even mythical entity that spontaneously emerged mainly due to the “power” of social media. These discussions reflect not only technocentrism but also the preoccupation with the moment itself.

There is no doubt that online monitoring initiatives such as Kawal Pemilu have their currency in one of the most important political events in the country, the Presidential Election. As a researcher who was among the most active volunteers of the Kawal Pemilu, I can attest that the dedication of some volunteers in this initiative was indeed impressive. The initiative itself, along with some other citizen initiatives, contributed to making the election more transparent and accountable. However, it is misleading to view the public availability and transparency of electoral data resulting merely from a spontaneous upsurge of social media-driven citizen engagement. It is important to point out that the citizen monitoring of voting data was only made possible due to the online availability of the official data released by the General Elections Commission. Further, it is significant to understand that the high level of transparency of the 2014 (and 2019) Presidential Election cannot be separated from years of open data activism involving tremendous hard work, struggles, and many failed negotiations, errors, and conflicts that can be traced back to at least the mid-1990s. The persistent activism eventually pushed the government to issue the 2008 Public Information Disclosure Act (*Undang-Undang Keterbukaan Informasi Publik* No.14/2008), which gives the public the

right to request information and access government documents. Specific to the election, open data activists from the open-source movements had been trying to push the government to make the election data available since the 2004 election. While the 2008 law has not been exercised to its fullest extent, the online publication of the electoral voting data was one of some attempts to observe this law.

Momentous social media events are worth researching. Social media research focusing on a single phenomenon, if robust, may yield some understanding of the relationship between technology and society. However, researchers need to be aware of the limitation of such a study, especially if the explanation solely originated in the capture of data collected from a particular moment in space and time, such as in hashtag-driven or Facebook group-driven studies. To gain a more comprehensive understanding of the relationship between social media and society, the study needs to be anchored in larger social contexts and historical conditions. Further, it may also necessitate shifting focus from the moment or the phenomenon itself to the processes that contribute to associated (societal) changes.

Novelty Centrism: Preoccupation with the “New” and “Newness”

I concur with Menke and Schwarzenegger’s (2019) statement that “it is an old, yet, accurate observation that the ‘newness’ of media is and most probably will continue to be a catalyst for research in media and communication studies” (p. 657). Specific to studies of social and political implications of social media, research publicised “new politics of food” (Phillipov 2017), “new politics in the Middle East” (Katz 2019), “new politics of party organisation” (Domett et al. 2021), “new politics of extremism” (Mann and Ornstein 2016), “new forms of rioting” (Baker 2011), and many other “new politics”. I neither oppose nor disagree with using the term “new politics” in these studies. Some of these authors indeed reveal social, cultural, or political dynamics and arrangements that challenge or alter the “old” ones and therefore appropriately employ the term “new politics”. Beyond these studies, in this section, I question, problematise, and caution our tendency to be *novelty centrism*, focusing on and being preoccupied with the “newness” of the so-called “new” technology.

It is understandable that the emergence of something new, especially if it is a new technology for the mass, as reflected in the global ubiquitous of social media platforms, would scratch our inquisitiveness and prompt us to seek something new. However, such a curiosity typically comes with an assumption that the new thing would challenge the existing practices, norms, or even values. And thus, this conjecture may lead us to ask the same

old same old question. For every new technology, we have been asking whether this technology makes us more social or not. Does it promote democracy or not? Does it deepen inequality or not? And other questions that represent binary thinking. To a certain degree, these questions, too, may trap us in similarly broad and polarised answers between the positive and the negative, the optimists and the pessimists, the utopian and the dystopian.

However, while critical of novelty centrism, I am not advocating for anti-newness views. It is important to remember that newness is relative to place, time, and societal context. Every technology was once new. As we cannot recognise something as new without defining it in comparison with “the old”, therefore, it is easy to be preoccupied with the newness itself rather than interrogating an associated artefact as a more complex entity that may offer a mix of old, new, and everything in between. Arguably, old and new media continually intertwine and remediate each other (Bolter and Grusin 1999), leaving a shifting and sometimes arbitrary picture of novelty and oldness in the process (Acland 2007). Therefore, old and new should be considered in a relational framework, which is not about the characteristic of media as such but rather the way people perceive and imagine them (Natale 2016). In line with this framework is the notion of “remediation” coined by Bolter and Grusin (1999). They argue that each new medium undergoes a process of refashioning old media or at least one older medium, retaining some of its features while discarding others. Here, remediation is “the way which one medium is seen by our culture as reforming or involving upon another” (Bolter and Grusin 2016:59).

Research on the digital media/society relationship is neither the domain of media scholars nor social scientists and humanities scholars specialising in media. Nearly all disciplines in social sciences and humanities have incorporated the new media, notably social media. Further, other fields—information science, education, human-computer interaction, and economics—have become interested in tapping into this relatively new area of research. Over twenty years ago, when I started researching and publishing on the relationship between the Internet and politics in Indonesia, scholarly writings on the topic were a rarity.² At that moment, digital technology was seen as external to socio-political dynamics. Scholars in Indonesian studies, or the so-called Indonesianists, had not included this technology in their existing studies. However, scholars in communication and media studies, especially those examining the empirical context of the United States and Western European countries, have written extensively on the socio-political implications of the Internet. As scholars in areas where such a media was previously absent started tapping into “digital research”,

there had been successive waves of excitement about the “newness” of digital media from the static Internet to social media, largely driven by the fact that such a focus was new in their associated discipline.

Research of “new media” in varied disciplines in social science and humanities and beyond has been valuable in enriching our understanding of the relationship between such media and society. However, as Sonia Livingstone (2004) had already warned us nearly two decades ago, it is crucial to not fall “into the hyperbolic discourse of ‘the new’ and, thus, neglecting historical continuities and reinventing the wheel of media and communication research” (Livingstone 2004:75). Instead, it is essential to continuously reflect on historical and ideological dimensions of “newness” and “media” in studying social media platforms and any “new” media that will come along in the future. Beyond that, it is also imperative to “ask what the new media are in their variety and plurality” (Livingstone and Lievrouw 2006:12).

In this context, I find a set of questions formulated by Livingstone and Lievrouw (2006) particularly useful in our attempt to frame the “newness” of media better. Instead of being preoccupied with the new technical features of social media and how these may challenge old socio-political arrangements, we may ask: new textual experiences, new ways of representing the world, new relationships between subjects (users and consumers) and media technologies, new experiences of the relationship between embodiment, identity, and community, new conceptions of the biological body’s relationship to technological media; and new pattern of organisation and production (Livingstone and Lievrouw 2006:12-13).

Success Centrism: Preoccupation with Visible, Prominent, and Successful Events

Evidently, social media research tends to focus on successful cases, visible moments, and events. Scholars and media observers are seduced by how fast people unite under a certain symbolic act and perform collective actions online—mass tweeting under a particular hashtag, communally changing their profile, or collectively TikTok-ing a specific issue. While successful³ and visible events are in themselves important subjects for research, the tendency to privilege them fails to address complex and multiple realities of social media/society relationships.

For example, in the case of social media activism in Indonesia, journalists, scholars, and observers have generally focused on prominent cases deemed successful such as the Coin for Prita⁴ and Save KPK movements⁵, the #ShameOnYouSBY campaign⁶, Kawal Pemilu, Aksi Bela Islam 212⁷, among others. These are exemplary cases of social media

activism that are worth researching. Typically, these cases have been explored to shed light on the relationship between social media affordances and democracy. It is important to note that “exemplary cases are known, used, and reused because the case itself stands out as unique in some ways, regardless of the quality of the accounts about them” (Morgan 2019:6). To clarify, I am not dismissive of using a single case/phenomenon in research. While being mindful of its non or limited contribution to the formal generalisation of knowledge, context-dependent knowledge gathered from a robust exploration of such a case is highly valuable. The knowledge that cannot be formally generalised, such as in the case of a purely descriptive phenomenological case study, can certainly be part of the collective process of knowledge accumulation in a given field or society. However, as success centrism prevails, we may be at risk of being partial in our understanding of technology/society relationships.

Going back to the case of Indonesia, studies of successful social media activism cases typically come up with positive conclusions on the role of social media in mobilisation, activism, social change, and even democracy. However, the success centrism, which is typically accompanied by or overlapped with *techno*, *moment*, and *online data centrism*, may hinder researchers from seeing a broader context. In this milieu, we, the researchers, would be at risk of being trapped in a technologically deterministic framework and thus, do not gain a deep understanding of how, why, and under what conditions social media can be effectively used in mobilising issues.

Instead of focusing on exemplary cases, I advocate for doing exemplary accounts of a wider range of cases by exploring not only successful and prominent ones, but also obscure and mundane ones, and those that fail. What do we learn about the “thingness” of technologies when they fail to function? What would we reveal about the relationship between people and “things” from the story of failure? And, more poignantly, what might we learn about our misunderstandings and misperceptions about “things” when they cannot or will not fulfil our expectations?

In my work (Lim 2013), by looking not only at prominent cases such as Coin for Prita and Save KPK movements but also at the cases that failed to generate mass support such as the Lapindo and Ahmadiyah cases, I gained a broader and deeper understanding about the complexity and dynamics of social media/society relationship. Notably, I found that social media activism generates “many clicks, little sticks” phenomenon, pointing to the reality that the majority of social media activism failed to achieve critical mobilisation. Further, the social media environment

is not neutral but is bound to disparity and is subjected to domination. Conversations and information that dominate social media reflect its users' interests, choices, and preferences; issues propagated by mainstream media that engage urban middle-class interest receive the most coverage. Despite the propensity of social media to promote radical transparency and to diffuse issues in multiple networks, activism around cases that represent the interests of the poor and marginalised communities tends to fail to reach critical mass. Additionally, comparing both failed and successful activisms, I also learned that successful activisms were typically framed in a populist⁸ binary framework of people against the corrupt elites as in the battle of David versus Goliath.

The ascendancy of the populist binary framework is one of the main characteristics of prominent social media activism. The success of *Kawal Pemilu*, for example, was not replicated by *Kawal Pilkada* despite the involvement of the same group of leaders and volunteers and the utilisation of the same technological application. The differing outcomes of these two initiatives cannot be simply explained by differences in scales, scopes, and contexts of the two elections (*Pemilu* is national while *Pilkada* is regional/local). The strong narrative of crisis that framed the 2014 Presidential Election in a binary framework of Jokowi versus Prabowo or, in many Indonesians' minds, the battle between the good versus the bad (or even the evil) was not entrenched in regional and local elections. As most Jokowi supporters can attest, any voluntary project to support Jokowi at that moment was indeed framed within the absolute fight for democracy, for "the good" and "good people" (*orang baik*). While its "volunteers demonstrated their impartial stance in words and deeds", virtually nearly all *Kawal Pemilu* volunteers were pro-Jokowi who, to a certain degree, saw their voluntarism in the same light, in the fight for good against evil. This fact certainly does not lessen the vital contribution *Kawal Pemilu* made in increasing the quality of the procedural democracy in Indonesia in 2014. However, this small but essential detail might help us understand the differing realities of two similar voluntary projects, *Kawal Pemilu* and *Kawal Pilkada*, and can serve as a focal point to further research and reveal the complexities of both initiatives.

"Success" label that we attach to technology, I argue, involves a complex and contingent tangle of social, cultural, political, economic, and material factors. Studies of unsuccessful cases and the cases of failure and breakage open an opportunity to tease out various factors that might and might not contribute to the success scenario. So, here I argue that we need to consider the significance of failure in recognising how societal

arrangements around the materiality of technology as well as the content (uses and appropriations) might contribute differently to the outcomes. Beyond the success or failure, ultimately, we need studies of the everyday, the mundane, and the insignificant, as the notion of everyday life is key to our understanding of power relations, resistance, and socio-political arrangements and dynamics in our contemporary society (Lefebvre 1961; de Certeau 1984).

Alternative Imagination: Embracing the Interdisciplinarity, the *Longue Durée*, and the Complexity

To reiterate what I have stated in the introduction, it is not my intention to propose a new theory or approach to challenge the technology/society binary in studying the relationship between social media and society. Instead, I have identified challenges or, in other words, several notable and persistent *centrism*, namely *technocentrism*, *online data centrism*, *moment centrism*, *novelty centrism*, and *success centrism*, that have obscured the complexity of social media/society relationship.

Hence, inspired and informed by other scholars who have been tirelessly generating critical discourse against technological determinism⁹, I offer an alternative imagination that may be useful in moving research away from the binary technological/social determinism. Stemmed from the five types of centrism I have outlined, such an alternative imagination, *first*, locates the technology not at the centre as in *technocentrism*, but in its right place, in its dialectical relationship with users, people, community, and society. Hence, it is crucial to shift the focus from the role or impact of the technological artefact to the process instead. The shifting focus to process affords us two adjoining routes. First, it will hinder us from inaccurately assigning an active role to technology (while treating society/people as a passive entity). And second, it will help us start seeing both technology and society as co-shapers of their relationship; neither is inferior nor superior to the other. *Second*, in response to *online data* (and big data) *centrism*, it considers alternative methodological pathways that may not always be popular, visible, or entrenched in our discipline or area studies. Here, I see the value of an interdisciplinary methodological framework or methodological pluralism (Topper 2005), namely alternative approaches for drawing productively on multiple methodological traditions, which include but are not limited to creative mixes of quantitative and qualitative methods, online and in-person observations, big and small data approaches. *Third*, instead of focusing on moments such as in *moment centrism*, the alternative imagination calls for the reading of a moment

within the time continuum, where a visible moment is read as part of a series of moments, visible and invisible ones, across time and space. Here, we see the need to contextualise moments and events within a historical context. To put it bluntly, here I call for privileging the *longue durée* over the moment-centric approach and, further, for bravely bringing tedious and unpopular longitudinal research into the rapidly growing studies of social media. *Fourth*, I caution the social media research's preoccupation with the "newness" of the "new" technology or *novelty centrism*. Echoing Livingstone (2004), I invite research in any discipline to value historical continuities in media and communication research, to continuously quest historical and ideological dimensions of "newness" and "media", and to inquire "newness" in varied and plural forms and shapes. *Lastly*, rather than being seduced by successful cases, as in *success centrism*, I call for the investigation of the unsuccessful, the failure, the breakage, and, beyond that, the every day, the mundane, and the insignificant.

Conclusion

Studies of social media and society are a vibrant and evolving field that confronts critiques. In this milieu, neither the critique nor the area of research itself is static. Scholarly activities in this field are rapidly growing, with new research being published and new projects being launched every day. Some of my criticism in this article has indeed been confronted and tackled by scholars in the past and present. In this context, I understand that the five types of centrism I have discussed are not all-encompassing. Further, I also recognise that none of these calls is easy or straightforward, and applying any alternative pathways in research is even more challenging. Having said that, by revealing these oversights, I hope to contribute to our collective attempt to interrogate the relationship between social media and society (and technology/society) critically. The alternative imagination might help animate, reveal, and make transparent various societal dynamics and layers of complexity that are otherwise invisible. A better, deeper, and more comprehensive understanding of the technology/society relationship, I believe, cannot be achieved by simplifying the complexity but by revealing the complexity itself.

Notes

1 These three concepts are comparable but not interchangeable. Unquestionably, they all challenge the technology/society binary and can potentially provide an avenue to position technology and society in an integrated, dialectical relationship.

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- 2 Prior to 2002, there were only a handful scholarly writings on the Internet in Indonesia. Notable ones were authored by Krishna Sen and David Hill (1997; 2000).
 - 3 Here, “successful” refers to more than just positive events; successful mobilisation by regressive or uncivil groups are also included.
 - 4 This refers to a story of Prita Mulyasari, a nursing mother of two, who complained about the poor service she received at the international hospital in a private email and was found guilty of defaming the hospital, fined, and sentenced to 6 months in prison. Her complain prompted to the movement to collect coins to pay Prita Mulyasari’s fine. The activism, however, did not challenge the root of the problem; a draconian Internet law (ITE) was used to frame Mulyasari. See Lim (2013) for a complete account on the case.
 - 5 This refers to social media driven activism to defend the national Corruption Eradication Committee (KPK) that began in 2007 where thousands of Indonesians joined ‘one million Facebookers’ to protest the arrest of two senior members of KPK (see Lim 2013). In 2015, the movement re-emerged on Facebook and Twitter using the hashtag #SaveKPK.
 - 6 #ShameOnYouSBY was a worldwide trending hashtag used by Indonesians on social media to publicly force President Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono to reverse a controversial law which scrap the direct election of local leaders (took place in September 2014).
 - 7 Also called Aksi 2 Desember, Aksi 212 or Aksi Bela Islam III (translated as the Action to Defend Islam) refers to a mass gathering held on December 2, 2016, in Jakarta, involving at least 2 million protesters who demanded of the resignation of the Governor of Jakarta, Basuki Tjahaja Purnama (Ahok), due to the blasphemy case charged to Ahok. See Lim (2017) for an account of this specific case and its larger political and social media dynamics.
 - 8 Here, I use the term populist or populism as the idea that the society is divided into two antagonistic camps between “we the people” as a morally good force versus “they the elite” who are framed as corrupt and self-serving (Mudde 2016:25). Hence, populism is not an ideology but rather a way of thinking and expressing politics that appeals to the entire public against a common enemy, especially corrupt political elites (Laclau 2005).
 - 9 See Alrasheed (2017), Fuchs (2012), Jordan (2008), Lievrouw and Livingstone (2006), Livingstone (2004), Matthewman (2011), Rodriguez et al. (2014), Verbeek (2005), Winner (2001), and Wyatt (2008).

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