@_TNIAU: Case Study on Interactive Public Communication in Indonesia

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ABSTRACT
@_TNIAU is a Twitter account managed by DISPENAU (Indonesian Air Force Public Relations). The account gains popularity among citizens because of the approach they used, such as humour and using conversational tone on each tweet, which is not common for government agencies, especially the military. The purpose of this research is to explore how government agency uses a new platform to increase engagement to the public and to generate some conceptual communication strategies used by TNI AU. This article used a qualitative methodology. Data was collected using virtual observation, interviews with representatives from the Public Relations of TNI AU and Twitter Indonesia. The result shows these strategies include fact-finding, using a conversational tone, emoticon power, stay up to date with the current situation, promote credibility via activation, and timely distribution. The conversational tone will also improve interactivity especially on Twitter. The result suggests that government agencies should use social media to increase the quality of public communication.

Keywords: Interactive communication, public communication, TNI AU, twitter

INTRODUCTION
Public communication is a prominent issue in Indonesia. Even Indonesian President Joko Widodo pays great attention to the lack of public communication from government agencies to citizens (Harliantara, 2017). For 32 years Indonesia had been under the dictatorship of President Soeharto, who left a strong culture of one-way communication in government agencies (Holik, 2005; Sandra, 2013). In the New Order era,
government officials were deemed more exclusive and high-class than entrepreneurs or private employees. This means that government officials were allowed and expected to build a barrier between them and the citizens. Moreover, in the New Order era, people were not allowed to express their opinions freely, and the press was allowed limited freedom. One of the biggest communication challenges that are currently faced by Indonesia is to break the barrier and become an inclusive country. After 20 years of reform, the government began to clean up, starting with the implementation of the principles of good governance, with transparency being the most notable one. The government hopes that with the improvement in transparency, the level of public trust can be increased.

In 2017, Indonesia reached an internet penetration rate of 50 per cent, equal to approximately 143.26 million internet users (Maulani, 2018). The internet penetration rate nearly doubled since 2015. Setyawan et al. (2018) summarized that people aged 19 to 34 years old constituted the largest group of internet users with preferred activities ranging from visiting social networks and using a search engine to watching online videos. This massive internet penetration rate shows that the Internet has a big potential as a tool for public communication. However, it seems that internet usage is only maximized by private sectors.

A study by Picazo-Vela et al. (2012) into risks, benefits and strategic alternatives of social media applications in the public sector stated several results: (1) governments’ participation on social media may result in improved communication and citizen participation, higher transparency and transfer of best practices among government agencies; (2) a good implementation strategy is necessary to realize these benefits and to avoid risks; (3) the implementation of social media highlights the importance of updating laws and regulations, and of promoting changes in government culture and organizational practices. From that perspective, we argue that social media, especially in Indonesia, has a strong possibility to be developed and used in the public sector. Social media represents a powerful instrument for promoting interactions between the government and the citizens (Khan et al., 2013; Panagiotopoulos et al., 2011).

The pioneer of interactive government communication in Indonesia is the Indonesian Air Force or TNI AU. On 6 June 2012, TNI AU made a Twitter account, @_TNIAU, and as of 29 April 2018, had gained 264k followers. TNI AU had an impressive achievement; they won the Marketeers Netizen Award in 2016 from Markplus Inc. In April 2016, the account @_TNIAU became the first Twitter-verified account of a governmental agency. We intended to explore three main questions in this paper: (1) How did TNI AU become a pioneer of interactive public communication in Indonesia? (2) How do they motivate other government agencies to use social media as a platform to engage with the public? and (3) How does TNI AU use communication strategies for their Twitter account? Meanwhile, the purposes of this paper were to explore how a government
agency uses a new platform to increase its engagement with the public and to generate some conceptual communication strategies to be used by TNI AU. We hope other government agencies will consider using social media to have better engagement with the citizens.

Literature Review

Social Media and Government. As a social site, social media has gained a huge number of users and become an interaction hub. There are seven functionalities of social media — the extent of how users; 1) disclose their identities; 2) converse with one another; 3) share contents; 4) make known their presence; 5) form relationships; 6) know the reputation of others and 7) form groups (Kietzmann et al., 2011). Meanwhile, to government agencies, social media is expected to escalate information sharing, increase transparency, create opportunities for collaboration and enhance government responsiveness (Bertot et al., 2010, 2012; Panagiotopoulos et al., 2014; Picazo-Vela et al., 2012; Patrice, 2010).

The idea of spreading information through mediated communication in the public sector is not new. It has already been used by multiple countries around the world (Zheng & Zheng, 2014). One example is research by Zheng & Zheng (2014), which focused on content analysis on selected Chinese government microblogs. The result obtained is quite outrageous. They found that most messages on Chinese government microblogs were posted for self-promotion rather than service delivery.

Generally, the public relations division is responsible for communicating the organization’s values to the public. Moreover, since the main function of the public relations division is to serve the public interest, it should never discriminate between public and private audience (Liu & Horsley, 2007). Public relations division is termed as ‘Humas’ or ‘Hubungan Masyarakat’ in Bahasa Indonesia. The term ‘Humas’ to refer to government agencies is used in several regulations, such as the Regulation of the Ministry of State Civil Apparatus and Bureaucratic Reform No. 6/2014 and No. 30/2011 (Kriyantono, 2017).

However, in the case of Indonesia, it takes a bigger effort to change the way government agencies communicate with the public. Many Indonesian government agencies are still using one-way communication (Purworini, 2014). These agencies refuse to use social media because of human resources issues and uncertainty in work regulations. Suryadharma and Susanto (2017) also found that of 34 provincial governments in Indonesia only 9 used Facebook and 9 others used Twitter. This data shows how limited was the usage of social media for the public sector.

This paper focuses on the official Twitter account of TNI AU. Twitter is a microblogging service that has tremendous growth in the number of users over the past several years. Twitter’s average monthly number of active users (MAU) grew by 4 per cent per year to 330 million in the fourth quarter of 2017 (Team, 2018). In Politics, Twitter becomes an important platform. A
lot of politicians have been using Twitter as a medium to communicate values to their audience, for example, Barrack Obama, Donald Trump and Indonesian President, Joko Widodo.

**Interactive Communication.** Social media sites are virtual platforms for interactivity and information exchange (Perlmutter, 2008; Smith, 2010). These platforms encourage Hallahan (2003) and Kelleher (2009) to examine the qualities of interactive online communication and how they may be related to become a key factor in relational online outcomes. The effectiveness of interactive communication varies according to several elements, namely message, sender, receiver, medium and feedback.

This paper classified Twitter as a medium for interactive communication between TNI AU and citizens. The senders were TNI AU officers called “airmins,” an abbreviation of air force admins. TNI AU considered netizens, especially high school students and parents, as their receivers in order to increase the rate of military student intake each year. The message and feedback are to be analyzed further in this article.

The interactive communication concept is similar to the concept of open communication. Without openness, there will always be rejection to use social media in the effort to achieve relational results important to the government and the citizens. Open communication is defined as a key to effective communication and assurance that information is conveyed in a way that individuals can converge on shared meanings, and it may require the use of multiple formats (Dennis & Valacich, 1999). To have open communication, the government needs some strategies, including storytelling, informal communication and coaching (Mishra et al., 2014). This study will observe how interactive communication tools, such as Twitter can enhance interactivity in public communication.

**MATERIALS AND METHODS**

This paper used a qualitative method with a case study approach. This research was conducted as a single case study because of the uniqueness of TNI AU’s Twitter account and TNI AU’s being a pioneer of interactive public communication in Indonesia. Yin (2014) stated that the case study approach would employ two main questions: how and why it served as an explanatory way to understand the case. Data was collected through semi-structured interviews with representatives of the Public Relations Division of TNI AU (DISPENAU) and Twitter Indonesia. In addition, a virtual observation of TNI AU’s Twitter account and other Indonesian online mass media was conducted for five months from January to May 2018. We have requested permission from TNI AU to observe their official Twitter account. Field notes were written in a narrative format, and data from online media were compared with the interview results.
RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS
TNI AU as Pioneer of Public Communication through Twitter

On 6 June 2012, the Indonesian Air Force or TNI AU made a Twitter account named @_TNIAU. As of 7 May 2018, they had gained 265k followers. These figures are considered big for a governmental agency account in Indonesia. DISPENAU is a division that runs the functions of Public Relations in the Indonesian Air Force. The initial idea of making a Twitter account came up when DISPENAU intended to share information about Sukhoi Superjet 100 plane crash in Bogor, Jawa Barat back in 2012. They needed a medium to share information directly without any third party (media) intervention. One of DISPENAU’s staff members came up with the idea to use Twitter since it mostly consists of text, enabling DISPENAU to cut expenses considerably.

After the Sukhoi incident, DISPENAU realized that sharing information through Twitter is a brilliant idea. Citizens are able to read the news directly from the first party, minimizing misunderstanding. Additionally, DISPENAU will be able to answer netizens’ questions in real-time. DISPENAU later set another goal—to increase the rate of student intake of the Indonesian Military Air Force with the use of Twitter. To appeal to millennials, DISPENAU learned to use simple words and limited jargon. Also, they added humour to everyday tweets, which Indonesian millennials could relate to in an instant. In a year, the rate of student intake of TNI AU increased to 250 per cent (based on an interview with DISPENAU). This massive figure was considered extraordinary since TNI AU was deemed as the least popular military division in Indonesia.

However, TNI AU also faced both internal and external challenges. Internally, TNI AU’s military members were afraid that DISPENAU would share classified information with the citizens. Therefore, at first, DISPENAU received a lot of complaints from internal colleagues. Meanwhile, the main external challenge came from the netizens who doubted whether @_TNIAU is an official account or a scam. This scepticism is not for nothing. In Indonesia, the army carries many negative stereotypes: being unfriendly, strict and exclusive. However, TNI AU’s Twitter account is far from the stereotypes.

These challenges have urged TNI AU to prove themselves. They want the army to be perceived as humanists. This means that TNI AU needs to release “down to earth” publications on Twitter with some humour and contemporary “millennials” languages. DISPENAU release Twitter posts containing student application information, events or additional info regarding TNI AU and air force on a daily basis. DISPENAU aims to re-brand the image of TNI AU through their posts.

Several informative contents, for example, the information on jet fighter planes, have been published through TNI AU’s Twitter account. A representative of DISPENAU stated “...people love the
contents about jet planes, especially if we make them in a simple and easy-to-understand language. We avoid using complex terms and prefer to translate them so everybody can understand the meaning.”

TNI AU’s Twitter account stood in the spotlight in mid-May 2016 after responding to a tweet from the Chairman of Presidium Save Indonesia Movement or Gerakan Selamatkan Indonesia (GSI) Ratna Sarumpaet. Sarumpaet claimed that Ahok (former governor of Jakarta) had bought the Indonesian Army, the Police and the Corruption Eradication Commission (KPK). To counter that claim, TNI AU used a personal approach as if they were not a government agency. They asked Sarumpaet to show the buyer’s receipt, which was hilarious and became viral (BBC, 2016).

TNI AU also came under the spotlight when Fahri Hamzah, deputy speaker of the Indonesian People’s Representative Council, who claimed that TNI AU had sold Halim Perdanakusuma International Airport to a private company. Netizens praised the way TNI AU handled this accusation. TNI AU did not show any bit of anger in their response, but they managed to prove the accusation wrong completely. TNI AU presented statistical data and facts about the regions of military airbases and used hashtag #BandaraHLP which stands for Halim Perdanakusuma International Airport (Tribunnews.com, 2016). TNI AU uses hashtags to group a large amount of information based on themes or topics for easier tracking.

The way TNI AU handled these accusations has been considered as a breakthrough in public communication in Indonesia. It was uncommon in 2012 for the government to use social media as the main medium to engage with citizens. Before that point in time, Indonesia’s government agencies used to practice one-way communication. This practice is in contrast with the public relations division’s (Humas) functions, which are to serve as a gateway from the government to the citizens, to serve as a public policy interpreter and to establish effective public communication (Regulation of the Ministry of State Civil Apparatus and Bureaucratic Reform No. 30, 2011 in Purworini, 2014).

Even though the number of followers increases drastically, not all followers have the same perception of TNI AU. Most of them are considered “enthusiasts” who like, retweet and reply in a positive way. Some followers are considered as “haters”, who reply with hate comments. Some others are considered as “neutrals”, who are silent readers with no interactivity. However, TNI AU’s efforts have earned the public trust. Twitter has verified TNI AU’s account, making them the first agency to have a verified account among Indonesian government agencies. This is proof that @_TNIAU is an official account of the Indonesian Air Force (TNI AU). Today, DISPENAU is constantly being asked by other government agencies to share its strategies for having effective public communication (interview with DISPENAU, April 2018).
TNI AU’s Interactive Communication Strategies

Twitter, one of the existing interactive online platforms, can be used to mediate communication between the government and the citizens. As previously mentioned, TNI AU is a pioneer in interactive online communication for Indonesian government agencies. Based on the interviews and observations conducted, there are several strategies used by TNI AU which can be divided into the following components:

Fact-finding before Tweeting. TNI AU stated that it is a taboo for them to delete tweets, meaning that they must be careful with every post. Research before making a post is a must. Any mistake will hurt their credibility.

Using Conversational Tones. One of their objectives is to make TNI AU perceived as humanists and a credible government agency. To achieve that, it started by using easy-to-understand sentences in their posts avoiding any use of jargon that is hard to understand. Also, TNI AU uses the conversational tone of a friend rather than the tone of a government agency, and most of the time they add some humour to their tweets.

Emoticon Power. While others use hashtags to differentiate their tweets, @_TNIAU uses an emoticon in every tweet. This uniqueness has become a trademark of TNI AU tweets. A lot of TNI AU’s followers gave positive comments about the emoticons. The term ‘emoticons’—short for ‘emotion icons’—refers to graphic signs, such as smileys, that often accompany computer-mediated textual communication (Dresner & Herring, 2010). This form of communication is often considered as a form of informal communication, which in TNI AU’s case is used to give a conversational tone normally used by a person in his or her communication with his or her friend.

Staying up-to-date. Another strategy is to be up-to-date with current situations and trends. One way to stay updated is to be active on informal WhatsApp Groups, from which TNI AU gain insights on current trends. DISPENAU admitted that they received a lot of funny tweet ideas from WhatsApp Groups.

Holding Several Contests to Ensure Credibility. During these past six years, @_TNIAU has held several competitions with unique prizes, for example, a tour by an official military aeroplane to Iswahjudi Military Airport, the main base of TNI AU operations. These competitions have been intended to ensure the credibility of TNI AU’s Twitter account. DISPENAU stated that in the first four years a lot of people did not trust their Twitter Account. Therefore, they made several contests and activities to enhance public engagement and public trust.

Timely Distribution. To make a social media persona, one needs to become social (Twitter Indonesia, 2018). One thing important to becoming social is to
choose the best time to post. A lot of people say that content is the king, but it is not necessarily true because when we fail to distribute at the right time, it still would not work. DISPENAU pays great attention to the timely distribution of their tweets with trial and error to gain a higher level of engagement.

Another interesting thing about TNI AU’s Twitter account is, they have an internal agreement to never publish the identities of “airmins.” DISPENAU only announced that airmins consist of several people and their identities will never be published. DISPENAU received several invitations to events relating to digital communication, but these airmins showed up in full pilot helmet and uniform, making it impossible for the audience to see their faces. This was so agreed to prevent discrimination and hate speech against the airmins.

TNI AU has made quite a lot of changes in Indonesian government communication. They brought a new perspective as an effort to restore the ideal public communication. TNI AU stimulated government communication style to change from passive to assertive. In the concept of interpersonal communication, assertiveness refers to a dimension in everyday perceptions reflecting an individual’s interpersonal willingness to stand up and speak out for their own interests and ideas, pursuing their objectives and resisting others’ impositions (Ames, 2009). Initially, TNI AU’s Twitter account has a younger target audience to persuade them to pursue military education. Younger target audience is favoured by TNI AU since they adapt to technology better and respond faster on Twitter than older users (Sakdulyatham et al., 2018).

The way TNI AU presents its identity on Twitter is closer to an assertive style. For instance, when they received hate comments, they countered with relevant data. Moreover, they also taught their followers to speak based on data and facts rather than assumptions, which might lead to hoaxes. In this case, to promote understanding of the government and citizens to each other, government agencies need interactive instead of one-way communication.

Kelleher (2009) introduced the concept of the “conversational human voice,” defined as the engagement and natural style of organizational communication as perceived by the organization’s audience based on interactions between individuals in the organization and individuals in the audience. This concept can be applied to the government’s social media activities. Government agencies need to use a conversational tone to decrease the gap between the government and the citizens, which will improve interactivity, especially with the help of social media.

**DISCUSSIONS**

Based on the results, we can draw an interactive public communication chart that shows the process of Twitter usage by a government agency, as seen in Figure 1. The chart starts with the illustration of how easy disinformation occurs in government agencies, and it can come from internal or external sources. Disinformation often leads
to misinformation, hoaxes and rumours spread between citizens. A major impact of it is distrust of the government.

This situation has driven TNI AU to try an alternative tool such as Twitter that offers a possibility to enhance the engagement between government and citizens. However, to make it work, they need to be more open to the public and try to eliminate the gap between them and the citizens. There are several factors that can contribute to the interactivity applied in government agencies’ communication strategy, namely fact-finding before every post, conversational tone, emoticon usage, up-to-dateness, credibility via contests and timely distribution.

![Interactive public communication through twitter’s chart](image)

**CONCLUSIONS**

As a final thought, we can conclude that the one thing Indonesian government agencies need is the willingness to break the exclusive culture, to be more adaptive to changes and to be more eager to explore new ways of communication. TNI AU has successfully brought a silver lining to better public communication in Indonesia. Some other agencies like @bank_indonesia (Bank of Indonesia), @Kemdikbud_RI (Indonesian Ministry of Education and Culture) and @DitjenPajakRI (Indonesian Tax Government Agency) are in their way to follow TNI AU’s success by adopting the same strategies, like using informal communication and humour in their tweets. According to the results, we encourage government agencies to use social media to decrease the gap between the government and the citizen.

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