Which One is More Powerful Digital Power in Papua: Internet Shutdown or Internet Throttling?

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Abstract: *This research explores the deliberate implementation of internet restrictions by the Indonesian government, focusing on situations of political instability or conflicts that challenge its authority in the digital sphere. The concept of digital power, signifying government control over information in the digital space, is examined, particularly when this control faces challenges leading to internet shutdowns. The study highlights the connection between internet shutdowns and conflict situations, with a specific focus on Papua, indicating the government's use of these measures to suppress potential counterpower. The government's influence over both government and non-government entities, including internet service providers, is emphasized, revealing its ability to enforce internet shutdowns in response to perceived threats to national stability. Despite the positive role of social networking sites in democratic development, uncontrolled information dissemination is viewed as a potential threat, prompting strategic internet shutdowns to maintain narrative control during critical periods*.
Keywords: *internet shutdown; internet throttling; digital power; papua; indonesia.*

Introduction

Social networking sites are the most popular communication platform, along with the development of communication technology, and they also have an impact on enhancing democratic development around the world (Becker, 2001; Howard, 2011; Moore, 2018; Weare, 2002). Information technology development and its relationship with democracy are known in various forms, such as *digital democracy*, *electronic democracy*, *cyber politics,* and many other forms *(Faris & Etling, 2008; Schmidt & Cohen, 2010; Weare, 2002).* Social networking sites' role in the development of democracy is enormous and in line with the rapid development of communication technology after the 1990s (Aspinall & Berenschot, 2019; Howard, 2011; Moore, 2018; Paskarina, 2021).

Likewise in Indonesia, the development of social networking sites has been catalyzing the quality of democracy and becoming an arena for political participation that is not only traditional but also rooted in the social life of various elements of society (Masiha et al., 2018; Saud & Margono, 2021). Currently, we can observe various ways in which social networking sites are remodeled into democratic platforms, digital spaces are filled with various kinds of visual or textual material expressions with very open opportunities (Aspinall & Berenschot, 2019; George & Leidner, 2019; Saud & Margono, 2021). Public spirit of involvement in the democratic process is in many ways focused on contributing to the state's political structure, hence, *cyber democracy* becomes a broader space for all levels of society to participate proportionally and be involved in every aspect of the political process (Kumar, 2017).

Internet shutdown is a situation or condition where the internet or telecommunication network is severely disrupted, in this case the internet is being cut off on purpose so it cannot be accessed effectively in a certain location or population for the purpose of controlling the flow of information (KeepItOn, 2023). *Internet shutdown* is commonly performed by the government or by the private sector under the pretext of maintaining security, on the other hand, *Internet shutdown* is a method used to restrict civil society's freedom of expression and access to information (Ryng et al., 2022). Governments in various countries use *internet shutdowns* to suppress mass actions or mass protests, to avoid defeat in elections, to launch a military coup, and even isolating conflict areas from the rest of the world (Feldstein, 2022).

Based on the previous research on the development of digital space, digital democracy, and repression of digital space through the practice of internet restrictions, the author notices that there is no existing literature that can answer the reasons why the government restricts the internet access in the areas that are experiencing conflict to maintain digital power. Hadi (2022) explains that the occurrence of internet restrictions in Papua is part of a policy implementation by the Indonesian government. Following the research conducted by Safenet, Freedom House also explains how internet restrictions are part of Indonesia's digital authoritarianism, but this research has not explained that internet restrictions are a policy practice of the government to produce, reproduce and maintain digital power in Indonesia.

Digital Power

Within the sphere of cyberspace, digital power can be described as a form of

electronic democracy, cyber democracy, digital democracy, and other terms to describe digital activities in the digital space (Aspinall & Berenschot, 2019; Foot & Schneider, 2002; Kumar, 2017; Moore, 2018; Saud & Margono, 2021). The internet has become an integral part of political activity, with a steady increase in the percentage of citizens connected to the internet, which has become one of the sources of digital power (Bichard, 2006; Chadwick & Stromer-Galley, 2016; Elishar-Malka et al., 2020; Gibson et al., 2003).

Digital power can be interpreted as a form of reduction to symbolic power, where symbolic power is a form of capacity to intervene in a series of events to influence a person's actions or create an event through the production and transmission of symbolic forms (Thompson, 1995). However, the media itself not only has a form but also can communicate content to influence the public mind (Curran, 2002; Fuchs, 2023).

In an economic, political, and cultural sense, digital power is explained as a multidimensional power that is not merely symbolic, where there are several main factors that can encourage the media to support the dominant power, but the media are also subject to a counter-pressure that has the potential to drag in the opposite direction to the power (Curran, 2002; Fuchs, 2023).

Based on the views of Curran (2002), the digital space can be described as a source of power for the state by performing manipulative practices in combination with highly advanced political activities stemming from the development of information technology in communication. Meanwhile, Fuchs (2023) interprets that digital space is a source of power for the state by executing various manipulative practices, with the existence of advanced political activities resulting from the development of information technology to communicate directly with millions of people.

States with power over the context of digital space can eventually take four approaches, as described by Clemons (2019) as the ability to monopolize digital space: (i) power to conceal sources of information in digital space; (ii) power to replace sources of information in digital space; (iii) power to use sources of information in digital space; and (iv) power to fund sources of information.

One of the approaches described by Fuchs (2023) is the ability of monopolies to provide assistance by seeing technology from two sides so that there is a causal relationship between the state and society that is multidimensional and complex. So in this context, Digital Power Theory is not something in the usual sense of the term but an 'ambivalent' development process hanging between various possibilities (Feenberg, 2002; Fuchs, 2023); further details can be seen in Figure 1 below.

Power responds to digital activity in various ways in digital spaces, ranging from network restrictions, web and content censorship, to internet blackouts. The state carries out internet blackout measures in conditions where national stability is threatened in various economic, political, and cultural aspects to control the flow of information as a form of digital power. Power's efforts to control digital space are also a direct part of power's involvement in the digital ecosystem. Power also gains legitimacy from digital spaces, so that in conditions where the digital space can no longer be controlled in terms of the dissemination of information, which can cause disruption to national stability, power will take measures to stop the spread of that

information by imposing internet restrictions as a form of digital power.

Internet Shutdown

Internet restrictions can be divided into several categories, such as internet disconnection or *shutdown*, internet throttling, and internet banning. The internet restriction measures are grouped into two categories: total internet restriction and partial internet restriction (Ayalew, 2019).

First*,* total internet restriction (*internet shutdown*) is a situation or condition where the internet is completely inaccessible and unusable in certain locations and populations. *Internet shutdown* practices are carried out to launch all power interests in the digital ecosystem, such as controlling the flow of information, which can disrupt national stability. According to Ben Wagner (2018), the concept is a deliberate act of digital communication disconnection by government authorities. Such disconnection is also in terms of shutting down internet and cellular services.

When the *Internet shutdown* practice occurs, information is concealed only at key moments, allowing the avoidance of accusations of Internet censorship and enabling plausible deniability by the perpetrator. In regions where internet connectivity is unstable, *internet shutdowns* can easily be mistaken for another technical fault on the network. Furthermore, in many countries with military conflicts, it is common for attacks on civilian services to intensify during conflicts and wars, including attacks that specifically target telecommunications infrastructure (Hernandez et al., 2022; KeepItOn, 2022).

Such conditions can occur with severe and deliberately destructive attacks on internet and telecommunications systems and infrastructure, causing an affected population to be completely isolated for months (Deibert & Rohozinski, 2010; Hernandez et al., 2022; KeepItOn, 2022).

Second*,* partial *internet shutdowns* can be interpreted as a variant of internet throttling and internet blocking.

Internet throttling can be seen as an act of deliberately slowing down and disrupting internet connections through internet providers, which is most often executed at the request of a government to control the flow of information during a certain period, usually when the political situation is deemed to be unstable (Taye & Cheng, 2019). Internet banning, on the other hand, can be seen as limiting access to platforms such as social media, information and news, financial accounts, pornographic sites, and information websites.

In its practices, first, an internet throttling can be understood as an effort made by the state to slow down a network where there is a connection disruption in terms of impeding the connection. Other forms of practice include targeting applications, IP addresses, or websites.

Second, internet banning, when seen in reality, can be understood as an action of the state that is different from *internet shutdowns* and internet throttling. In internet banning, the focus is more directly on material, or generally, in various countries, this banning activity is a collaboration between the state and the private company that owns the application and then becomes the vanguard in terms of blocking content or certain platforms such as Facebook, WhatsApp, Twitter, and other platforms.

Method

The article on internet restrictions can be seen as a unique phenomenon, so

the author will conduct research using a case study research design. The case study, according to Yin (2009), is empirical research that seeks to investigate a contemporary phenomenon in a real-life context.

In this research, the author decided to use qualitative methods. The qualitative method is appropriate to answer research questions that require methodological tools provided by qualitative methods.

The data collection technique in this research uses literature studies to analyze the issues discussed in this article. A literature study is conducted by collecting a number of books, journals, news, and other research information that will support the author in analyzing internet restrictions.

The reason for using strategies, designs, and methods in this article is based on the necessities of answering the questions that have been asked. It also includes consideration of the use of options and the relationship of theory to research work.

In this article, data analysis is done inductively, where the author builds a pattern or category with the technique of processing data on units of information in a more abstract manner through the development of construction and interpretation of the phenomena that the author sees and understands (Margaret, 2014). As a result, the research conducted will provide a complex and holistic view of the phenomenon that occurs to be analyzed using a natural design.

Result and Discussion
In the previous section, the author builds an initial argument that when the information distribution of new stream media or online media is unable to be controlled as a form of digital counter-power against the state, resulting in

information that later develops poses a threat to national stability, at the same time there is a conflict phenomenon that also poses a threat to national stability, such as occurring in the Papua region, the option of internet restrictions will be very possible to do.

Figure 1. Internet Restriction Practice
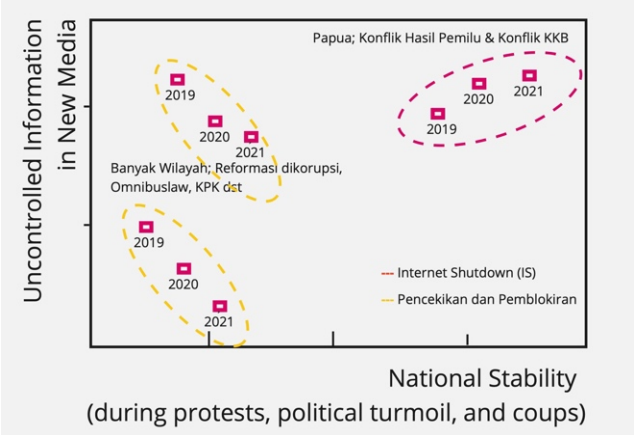
Source: Researcher, 2024

The Y-axis explains the distribution of information on new media; the higher the Y-axis, the more the engagement and coverage of information on new stream media become uncontrollable by the state. In other words, the practice of spreading information in the digital space has a wider reach; first, the quantity of digital media involved has grown; second, the new stream media's coverage is not only national but also international.

The X axis explains the level of threat to national stability; the more to the right, the level of threat is getting higher, such as demonstrations, horizontal conflicts, political chaos, coups, and military conflicts, in the sense that the more to the right, the conflict that occurs not only involves civilians and the police but also involves the military, in this case the Indonesian Armed Forces (TNI). Furthermore, the issues that are later found in the conflict are not only between

civilians and the state, but there is international involvement in the issue of the conflict, threatening national stability.

Figure 2. Existence of Online Media and Use of social media for Mass Mobilization
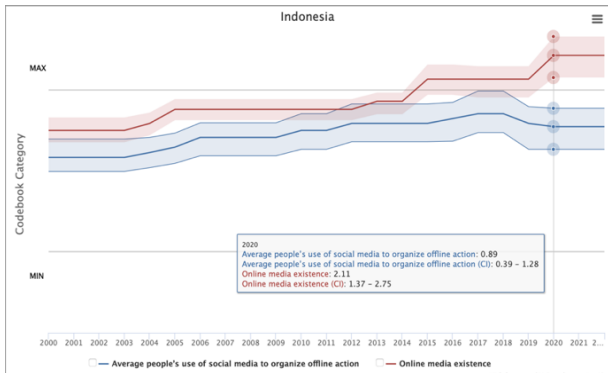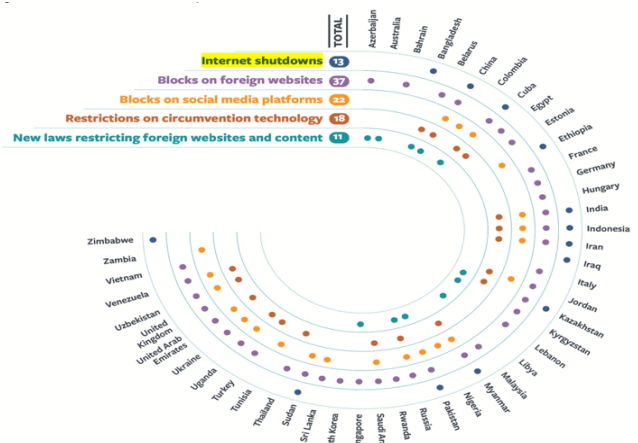

Source: (2022)

According to the data presented by V-Dem (2022) in Figure 4, the use of social networking sites in Indonesia has significantly increased by 2.75 on a scale of 3, which means that almost all Indonesians have accessed online media. Increased access to online media is followed by an increase in the use of online media in engaging in various forms of digital activities; mobilizing the masses to do social and political actions has also increased on certain issues (V-Dem, 2022).

The use of social networking sites does support and force people to participate in cyber democracy to implement revolutionary ideas and criticize the functions of government institutions and political parties on social networking sites such as Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, TikTok, and others (Howard, 2011; Lim, 2017; Moore, 2018; Saud & Margono, 2021).

Figure 3. Practices and Distributions of digital repression

Source: Freedom House, 2022

Figure 5 in the *Freedom House* report in 2022 (Shahbaz et al., 2022) shows that in Indonesia there are practices of manipulating digital space in various forms of repression of internet freedom, such as the practice of massive censorship of websites in 2022 and *internet shutdowns* in conflict areas (Sanjaya et al., 2021, 2022).

The phenomenon of internet restrictions in Papua, as Hadi (2022) explained, was built on a narrative basis to build national security in response to the ongoing political dynamics in Papua on every socio-political issue that developed in 2019. The data released by *KeepItOn* in 2022 in Figure 6 shows that the *internet shutdown* phenomenon occurs in almost all parts of the world. In addition to the phenomenon that occurs during the pandemic, it reveals the comeback of government strategies that violate human rights, and these strategies are propagating in various countries as a sign of the rise of digital authoritarianism around the world (Albrecht & Naithani, 2022; Hernandez et al., 2022).

Figure 6 shows that throughout 2021, *internet shutdowns* occurred in various conflict areas, and as a form of attack in the conflict, it can be seen during coup attempts in Myanmar and Iran. *Internet shutdowns* are carried out on a prolonged basis in Myanmar; during 2021, there were 15 *internet shutdown* practices in Myanmar. The longest *internet shutdown* lasted for 2.5 months in 2021 (Hernandez et al., 2022). *Internet shutdowns* that occur in Myanmar appear to block the possibility of reporting information on airstrikes against civilians, house burnings, and extrajudicial killings and arrests, including of children. Myanmar is now the second-worst neighborhood for digital human rights. Since the military junta seized power from the elected civilian government in February 2021, it has established a censorship regime that blocks 1,200 websites, restricts access to information on social media platforms, and imposes *internet shutdowns* on areas opposing the military junta's rule (Hernandez et al., 2022; Shahbaz et al., 2022).

Similarly to Myanmar, in Iran, the government implemented an *internet shutdown* in response to protests from civil society by disabling mobile internet access from February 24-28, 2021, in Sistan and Baluchistan, where more than 95.7% of people use social networking sites to stay connected. The *internet shutdown* in Iran was reportedly implemented to conceal severe human rights violations and possible international crimes, such as extrajudicial killings. According to media reports, Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps shot unarmed civilian fuel sellers, resulting in the deaths of 10 people, including a minor (Acces Now, 2021). The 2021 phenomenon in Iran is not the first; in 2019, 304 people were killed by Iranian security forces during a week-long *internet shutdown* intended to minimize protests. More than 220 of these deaths occurred within 48 hours of the *internet shutdown* (Amnesty International, 2020).

Research conducted by Howard (2011) entitled "*The Digital Origins of Dictatorship and Democracy*" describes how the government has monopolized the development of internet services since the 1990s in developing Islamic countries to prohibit access to the internet in their countries. In Syria, Iran, and Saudi Arabia, it took a long time for the country to make changes to the citizens access to the internet under strict conditions, such as monitoring the content that could be accessed by the public. In Southeast Asia, the government's work is different than in the Middle East; the practice of the government collaborating with service providers to control the content accessible to the public with direct political supervision is happening in the region (Howard, 2011).

Figure 4. Internet Shutdown Practices in Indonesia
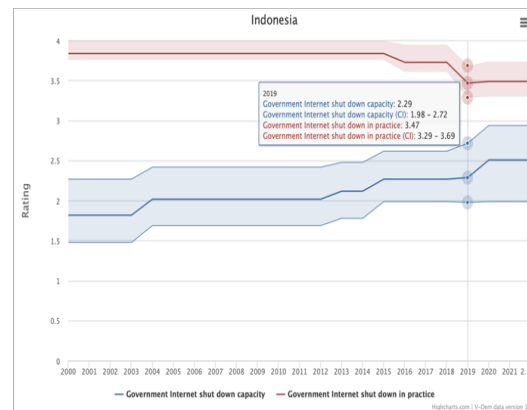
Source: V-Dem, 2022

The *internet shutdown* phenomenon described above illustrates that this phenomenon occurs in several

areas of Papua and is almost always related to conditions of national stability (conflict) when internet disruption occurs.

"Internet disruptions from February to December 2021 must be seen in the context of the ongoing conflict situation. They are also likely related to a series of digital attacks experienced by activists and journalists in Papua and West Papua" (Sanjaya et al., 2022).

Basically, *internet shutdown* practice as a form of digital repression in quantity is not as frequent as other digital repression practices in the digital sphere, but in Indonesia, the *internet shutdown* practice has increased in quantity, and the government is the main perpetrator of this practice. Figure 3: Data released by V-Dem (2022) shows that the government has experienced an increase in the ability to conduct *internet shutdowns*, increasing from the ability to close half of the access to three-fourths of the internet access that can be shut down by the Indonesian government. As the ability of the government to close internet access increases, the practice of *internet shutdown* has also increased in Indonesia; however, what needs to be underlined is that the use of *internet shutdown* has not become the first choice for the government in controlling the digital sphere, only during certain moments. If we look at the practice of *internet shutdown* in 2019-2020 in Indonesia, the government implemented *internet shutdown* practices during the 2019 election result riots in Papua and during conflicts with armed groups in Papua (Sanjaya et al., 2021, 2022; V-Dem, 2022).

Table 1. Internet Restrictions in Papua 2020-2021

Time	Type	Detail	Location	Trigger
15-22 July 2020	Internet Shutdown	No internet services and communication phone	Nduga, Maybrat, West Papua	Conflict area between Papuan amed groups and Indonesian army
15 August 2020	Bandwith throttling		Papua	One year after anti-racism project
7 October 2020	Bandwith throttling		Papua	Tension over human rights in Papua at UN Human Rights Council meeting
1 December 2020	Bandwith throttling		Manokwari, West Papua	Celebration of West Papuan Independence Day from Dutch colonies
February 2021-now	Internet Shutdown	No Internet Service and communication phone	Bilogai, Intan Jaya Regency	Conflict area between Papua armed groups and Indonesian army
27 May 2021-now	Internet Shutdown	No Internet Service	Ilaga, Puncak Regency	Conflict area between Papua armed groups and Indonesian army
7 June 2021-now	Internet Shutdown	At 01.30 WIT	Boven Digoel	Mass protest

Source: Compiled from a report by SAFEnet, 2021

In 2021, the practice of *Internet shutdowns* that occurred in the Papua region coincided with violent upheavals arising from conflicts between the Indonesian military and the KKB in Papua related to human rights violations. In SAFEnet's 2021 annual report in Table 1, the cause of internet disruptions that occurred in Manokwari, Intan Jaya, Ilaga, and other areas was political and security instability between the Indonesian military and the KKB in Papua. *Internet shutdown* reports in Ilaga in May and Boven Digoel in June 2021 related to internet disruptions that occurred in these two places. Disruptions occurred after the escalation of armed conflict, resulting in casualties on both sides as well as the fall of Kabinda Papua Brigadier General TNI I Gusti Putu Dany and the evacuation of residents from villages to safer areas (Aliansyah, 2021; Sanjaya et al., 2021).

The 2022 *Freedom House* report (Shahbaz et al., 2022) *Internet shutdown* occurs at several moments, such as when accessing or providing information and in terms of expression on social networking sites. An example presented by Freedom House is the *internet shutdown* that occurred in August and September 2019 and February to December 2021 in Papua

and West Papua (Sanjaya et al., 2022). *Internet shutdown* is a situation or condition in which the internet or telecommunications network is completely disabled; in this case, the internet is deliberately severed, making it inaccessible effectively in a certain location or population with the purpose of controlling the flow of information (KeepItOn, 2023).

Table 2. Internet restrictions in Papua and West Papua in 2019

Time	Type	Detail	Location	Trigger
22-25 May 2019	Bandwith throttling	Blocking of WhatsApp, Facebook Messenger, Telegram by means of IDNS on some ISPs	National Wide	Violence protest after national election result
19 August- 8 September 2019	Bandwith throttling, Internet Shutdown	No Internet Service	Papua and West Papua Province	Peaceful demonstrations to protest over racism
23-28 September 2019	Internet Shutdown	No Internet Service	Wamena, Papua	Riots

Source: Compiled from a report by SAFEnet, 2021

Based on SAFEnet's 2021 report (2021), there were three internet restrictions in Indonesia in the Papua and West Papua provinces in 2019, starting from blocking applications such as WhatsApp, Facebook Messenger, and Telegram to removing access to the internet—the internet shutdown. Later on, from June 2020 to July 2021, there were seven internet shutdown practices that occurred within the context of the no access to the internet network and cellular telephone network. The internet disruption that occurred was a practice of internet restrictions for the people there through internet and telephone network shutdowns perpetrated by the government and internet service providers, leading to internet network infrastructure disruptions such as damaging fiber cables that occurred in Papua (Sanjaya et al., 2021, 2022).

In May 2019, the internet shutdown was triggered by demonstrations that resulted in violence committed by the police and military against the protesters (Kompas, 2019). In response, the government clarified the internet shutdown phenomenon that occurred by creating a national security narrative as conveyed by Rudiantara, the Minister of Communication and Information at that time, and the Chief of Presidential Staff, Moeldoko, stated that internet shutdowns in Papua must be carried out due to national security and emergency situations (CNN Indonesia, 2020); furthermore, the phenomenon of internet restrictions in Papua did not occur during the racial conflict alone; several other phenomena were caused by the demonstration against the 2019 election results (Sanjaya et al., 2021).

In 2021, the practice of *Internet shutdowns* that occurred in the Papua region coincided with violent upheavals arising from conflicts between the Indonesian military and the KKB in Papua related to human rights violations. In SAFEnet's 2021 annual report in Table 1, the cause of internet disruptions that occurred in Manokwari, Intan Jaya, Ilaga, and other areas was political and security instability between the Indonesian military and the KKB in Papua. *Internet shutdown* reports in Ilaga in May and Boven Digoel in June 2021 related to internet disruptions that occurred in these two places. Disruptions occurred after the escalation of armed conflict, resulting in casualties on both sides as well as the fall of Kabinda Papua Brigadier General TNI I Gusti Putu Dany and the evacuation of residents from villages to safer areas (Aliansyah, 2021; Sanjaya et al., 2021).

On the level of information dissemination and its relationship with national stability, the state will conduct

digital repression. For example, in the protests against the reformation of corruption, the KPK Law, and many more, the state will censor, ban, or limit to secure the digital power position. Different from when the digital sphere cannot be controlled regarding the dissemination of information, as happened in Papua in 2019-2021 on the issue of political turmoil over election results, armed conflict, and human rights violations, the option of digital repression will be an internet shutdown to maintain the source of digital power.

Despite numerous studies on the various ways in which countries have imposed total internet restrictions, internet shutdowns and partial internet restrictions are rare in Indonesia. Nonetheless, they occur at the most politically sensitive times and have far-reaching consequences for national stability in various aspects, such as the economy, politics, and culture of a country.

Why does the government impose internet restrictions? To answer this question, the author builds an event history database of incidents where the state has restricted and shut down the internet so that information is not accessible on social networking sites, in other words, controlling the flow of information. Of course, total and partial internet restrictions are carried out by the state when the digital space channel that was originally said by Elishar-Malka dkk. (2020), Fuchs (2023), and Curran (2002) is one of the sources of power for the state. In this case, it can no longer be a source of power in the sense that the government is unable to control it so that the digital counter-power is built.

The author has covered Jokowi's two-period regime and built a basic typology because the regime often restricts access to the internet in areas

with conflict sensitivity, such as Papua, and also at various political moments in various regions that interfere with the authority of power in the digital space. Apart from being carried out in areas with conflict situations, in other words, the state is unable to control the digital space as a source of power.

These conditions show that the Indonesian government has the ability to command government and non-government apparatus, in this case the internet network service provider, to perform internet shutdown actions through two approaches (Ayalew, 2019). First, when there is a threat to national stability, the government commands network service providers to perform internet and cellular access shutdowns in an area, and second, at the level of conflict areas in certain conditions, the government will command government apparatus to destroy or attack telecommunications infrastructure to disable internet and cellular networks in an area.

Conclusion

In conclusion, this research shows that internet restrictions are deliberately implemented by the Indonesian government in response to critical events like political instability or conflicts that threaten its authority in the digital sphere, especially in conflict areas like Papua. The notion of digital power, which implies government authority over information in the digital sphere, is explored, focusing on situations where this control is challenged and resulting in the implementation of internet shutdowns. The relationship between internet shutdowns and conflict situations, particularly in Papua, is highlighted, suggesting that the government uses these measures to thwart the emergence of counter-power to

digital power. The government's authority over government and non-government organizations, including internet service providers, is another important point to be emphasized. This shows that the government can issue an internet shutdown in response to conflict situations or whenever there is a perceived threat to the stability of the country. While social networking sites contribute to democratic development, the uncontrolled dissemination of information is seen as a potential threat to national stability, prompting the government to use internet shutdowns strategically to maintain narrative control during critical periods.

Acknowledgment

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