Whatsapp Group as a Communication Technology in Higher Education Internationalization

Whatsapp Group sebagai Teknologi Komunikasi dalam Internasionalisasi Pendidikan Tinggi

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Abstract

Individual adaptability towards communication media in Higher Education institutions as organizational entities could be reviewed from social semiotic perspective. Following Kress, social semiotic is a theory focuses on how semiotic resources in a varied social situation and locations become meaningful signs regulating human interaction. The theory was adapted in this research to translate patterns and activities of communication occurred in internationalization initiatives recorded in Whatsapp Group PSIK FISIP Universitas Brawijaya, as an artefact of communication. Non-participant observation was conducted towards series of 7 months conversations on Whatsapp Group as sequences of communicative act, and then analysed using Van Leeuwen’s four Dimension of Semiotic Analysis. Results indicate that there were distinction between administrative staff and lecturers with added function in the way they post their messages, indexing “doers” and “thinkers” that further conforming to their offline interaction standpoints when collaborating for internationalization activities.

Keywords: Higher Education, Internationalization, Whatsapp Group, Social Semiotics.

Abstrak

Kemampuan individu sebagai bagian dari institusi pendidikan tinggi sebagai sebuah entitas organisasi untuk beradaptasi menggunakan media komunikasi dapat dianalisis melalui perspektif semiotika sosial. Meminjam definisi Kress, semiotika sosial fokus pada bagaimana semiotic resource dalam berbagai situasi sosial dan lokasi digunakan sebagai tanda sarat makna yang mengatur interaksi manusia. Semiotika sosial digunakan dalam penelitian ini untuk menerjemahkan pola dan aktivitas komunikasi dalam konteks kerjasama dan internasionalisasi di FISIP Universitas Brawijaya melalui Whatsapp Group sebagai artefak komunikasi. Data dikumpulkan melalui observasi non-partisipan melalui pemilihan transkrip 7 bulan aktivitas komunikasi Whatsapp Group dan kemudian dianalisis menggunakan empat dimensi analisis semiotika sosial Van Leeuwen. Data menunjukkan bahwa terdapat kenesjangan posisi antara staf dan dosen dengan fungsi tambahan sebagai “doers” dan “thinkers” yang terlihat melalui pesan teks yang dikirimkan, yang mencerminkan sikap mereka dalam interaksi offline ketika bekerja sama dalam aktivitas internasionalisasi.

Kata Kunci: Pendidikan Tinggi, Whatsapp Group, Semiotika Sosial
Introduction

It is inevitable to consider the role of media as “institutionalization and materialization of practice of communication” (Hepp, Breiter & Hasebrink, 2018) in the context of education globalization. Wide-ranging collaboration initiatives held by most of the host universities with other foreign educational institutions are mostly drawn from recurring mediated communication via emails, personal chats, and Skype. Furthermore, mediated communications towards other members of the host institutions, particularly at Universitas Brawijaya (UB), are also habitual in convening activities involving guest academicians or representatives, including ones from foreign universities.

As one of the top rank universities in Indonesia located within a great distance from either the capital city of Indonesia or the capital town of East Java province, UB has been establishing its position as an international standard university. Quoted from UB Strategic Plan 2015-2019, it is admitted UB organizational management in forming international collaborations need to be optimized further. For example, it is marked that the staff are unprepared to establish interactions with foreign guests using English in some of the in-bound mobility programs held by UB, resulting the engagement of face-to-face communications becomes the monopolized role of lecturer with added functions. This created a contribution gap between staff and lecturer with added functions in collaboration initiatives, as the staffs mostly were left idle during events.

This paper presents how one of unit handling international collaboration initiatives at Faculty of Social and Political Science (FISIP) UB called PSIK FISIP UB communicates for collaboration activities in 2017-2018 by analysing the Whatsapp group chat as a communication artefact. As “Going global is both a function of the supply of IT services and the demand for global connectivity and governance … Empowered by interconnected networks and digital media, the new governance is less about control and more about engagement” (Beldarrain & Baggio, 2011: 62).

Whatsapp Group PSIK FISIP UB, then were perceived as inseparable part of social domain where communication culture continuously reshaped by both expectations and adaptations of media in the everyday formal-informal interactions inside the organization. This mediated communication dynamics occurred inside an organization as a social domain is academically referred to transforming communication condition.

Transforming communication, as a concept was first introduced by Hepp, Breiter, and Hasebrink (2018) explains how human communication practice has changed following the maturing of media affordance and specificities. Their assertion is not a new thing. In 2009, Merchant contends that mediated communication will be regarded as an equal with face-to-face communication, both in individual’s private and public domains. Not only that human personal lives has changed, but also their formal and professional activities in the office, as results of superabundant use of smartphones. Yet, human interactions have change back from oral communication to text-based communication.

The communication transformation in the organizational context could be discussed from social semiotic perspective, as it is text based and heavily engaged to the use of pictorial symbol such as emoji or emoticon. Furthermore, the nature of convergence in smartphone and features offered by Whatsapp has been allowing
members of PSIK FISIP UB to send data in form of images, hyperlinks, and documents. It is argued that media literacy is needed even more in this transforming communication era.

As social beings who live alongside technological devices and rapid media connectivity, separation between time constrains in message exchanges and messages derived from mediated and face-to-face communication have become blurred (Hepp & Hasebrink, 2018: 20), resulting immutable communication process. It is not surprising, as Harris (2008: 379) mentioned, “At heart media offer an experience that emerges from the interaction of our minds ... These mental constructions then become the framework around which we interpret the totality of experience...” Further, Hepp, Breiter and Hasebrink (2018) assert that the phenomenon called mediatization, a condition where quantitatively, human social domain are more connected to the media, and qualitatively social realities are constructed more by the intertwined face-to-face and mediated communication. Not only affecting personal lives, “Information technology has become part of the infrastructure of organizations and institutions” (Beldarrain & Baggio, 2011: 59).

Predominantly, virtual ethnography had been employed to analyse how mediated communication, particularly occurred in social media, such as Line (Prasanti & Indriani, 2017). However, the research was focus on the pattern of communication, omitting the utilization of features offered by the social media or chat applications. Other approach to study the adaptation of media in an institution had been conducted by Sasongko (2017). The research (2017) applied quantitative survey to analyse the relationship between employee communication activities via Telkom Portal to the fulfilment of corporate information needs and interests in internal communication of PT Telkom DCS Regional Semarang. The limitation of researches mentioned above is the lack of comprehensive depiction of the communication occurrences that were being investigated, because communication process involved three inseparable components: human, message, and media.

Communication then, should be seen beyond a mere information transmission process. It is argued that in communication process, messages are the sole connectors from and to individuals to the broader groups, either in the form of society, community, or organizational body with distinctive routines and cultures (Carey, 2009). In the higher education institutions, Beldarrain and Baggio (2011: 73) compile seven cross media communication activities supporting e-governance as follow:

1. Adapting to the evolving approaches to communications between man and devices
2. Promote collective sharing and generating of knowledge
3. Computing in three dimensions
4. Connecting people via the network
5. Games as pedagogical platforms
6. Shifting of content production to users
7. Embracing and adapting to the evolution of a ubiquitous platform

This technological adaptation for the e-governance in higher education context is referred as communicative figurations. Quoted from Hepp and Hasebrink (2018, p. 29), communicative figurations could be defined as communication practices that involve multi-modal media in a social domain. The model proposed by Hepp and Hasebrink as follow:
It is argued that as *animal symbolicum*, individuals have multimodality skills, the competences in using and translating different modals of communication. Therefore, as an effort to understand human interaction in mediatization, the adoption of concepts such as transforming communication, communicative figuration, and social semiotic analysis would help deciphering what Kress (2010) mentioned as the flaw from semiotic tradition which heavily rely on single text or popular culture to understand social conditions from values and quality representation inside a society.

**Methodology**
This is an exploratory research employing text analysis on conversation sequences occurred in Whatsapp Group PSIK FISIP UB as baseline for establishing an explanation on how members of PSIK involved in mediated communications supporting the collaboration initiatives held by FISIP UB in 2017-2018. 16 conversation sequences were further analysed implementing four dimensions of social semiotic analysis quoted from Van Leeuwen: discourse, genre, style, and modality. Transcripts of conversation sequences then converted into table below:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>No</th>
<th>Statement</th>
<th>Category</th>
</tr>
</thead>
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Table 1. Transcript of Speech Act (source: van Leeuwen, 2005: 127)

The state of the art of this research is how social semiotic as an approach could be used in understanding human interactions particularly on how social regulations were established in higher degree education institutions as an organization. Which had been frequently discussed from organizational communication perspective.

**Result and Discussion**
In the discussion, data will be presented employing the concept of social semiotics from Theo van Leeuwen’s abstraction. Van Leeuwen categorizes dimensions of communicative act or communication activities, in both through face-to-face and mediated communication as: discourse, genre, style, and modality. As many as 16
conversation segments in 7 months period conversation transcripts downloaded from Whatsapp application, were gathered and then analyzed. Four lecturers with added functions and five staff of PSIK FISIP UB were regarded as actors on this research. Names and other details were wiped off from presented data to avoid recognitions that has potential risks as the conversations had occurred both in a closed online group.

In social semiotic, the discourse dimension emphasizes on an initial or more visible signification source, more commonly referred to as semantic and the presence of the message itself. With simpler language, the discourse dimension discusses how words or images represent the reality that the sender of the message wants to communicate. The selection of words is crucial because as animal symbolicum, individuals who interact, both in the context of interpersonal communication and organizational communication have word preferences that reveal their identity (Pujarama, 2016), message orientation, emphasis, and also emphasis on the message.

This study found that based on the discourse dimension, messages sent by members in Whatsapp group (WAG) PSIK FISIP UB involved both words and emoticons, reciprocating formal-informal condition in a face-to-face communication processes. Both are used to mimic verbal messages in that are habitually occurred in the daily organization. As an organizational unit, the discourse seen in the communication artifacts analyzed is the discourse of "PSIK FISIP UB as the implementing actor in cooperation activities" and also "the key for FISIP UB " management efficiency in attending to the visiting international colleagues.

The genre dimension emphasizes more on the relationship between semiotic resources and on how time and distance matter in communication processes. Looking at the time that was seen from the communication artifacts in WAG PSIK FISIP UB, there are two periods of communication time that show the blurring of communication boundaries in conventional organizations in Indonesia, the conventional 8 hours day work to be an indefinite time of organizational communication activity. The first period message exchanges, were done for making coordination for a present event or for asking about the progress of the progress of the initiation of cooperation. The second period message exchanges that were happened after the working hours, the interactions were more about coordinative and instructional one way or group communication, especially regarding how and what will be done the next day or reports on today's activities that need to be continued further the next day. Again, from the analysis of the genre dimension, it is shown how the context of formal-informal communication seen through the existing communication artifacts had shown how the members in the FISIP UB WAG PSIK form office space outside the physical office space where they work in conventional office hours. This dimension shows the level of media literacy that is owned by a person and also the level of politeness that also shows a self-view of the position in social groups, in the context of this research where the individual joined WAG.

Figure 2 below showcases the generic conversation between members of PSIK group that mimic conversational style of communication in their offline interactions. Two dominant types of message had appeared: authoritative and passive. Mostly the lecturers with added function sent the authoritative messages towards the staff. Staff used Emoji or symbols to complement their compliant responding the instructive messages sent by lecturers with added function.
Figure 2. Coordinative Interaction: Differences in how Lecturer and Staff Sent Messages
(Source: owned by the researchers)

The style dimension is related to the style of communication, which is more reflected in the text that is formed, either explicitly or implied. Based on the dimension of style analysis, although the communication that occurred were formal-informal communication or conversational style, the communication carried out were uneven, as there were dominant individuals who sent authoritative messages and take position as the “thinker”, while the staff members were passive and showed more conformity as responses and take position as the “doer”, so that the difference in style further shows the position gap of the lecturers and staff in FISIP UB PSIK.

Considering the style dimension further, it is evidenced that the Whatsapp group had been fruitfully utilize for sending varied data, such as images, hyperlinks, and other documents. The text-based communication occurred had provided rich information beyond conversations that took place in the Whatsapp group. The phenomenon is also called datafication (Hepp & Hasebrink, 2018), explaining the nature of mediated communication that rely more on collective sharing of knowledge via group messages rather than sending repeated message via personal chat. The blurring of time constrains in sending the messages especially from the lecturers with added function and the willingness to promptly respond the message received by other members of the group has shown how immediacy were cultivated in an online networked connections. As a result, the Whatsapp group then, has become the connector for its members to gain collective term of references and organizational experiences to support their unity as a team handling the collaboration process.

The last aspect of social semiotic dimension is the modality dimension. It emphasizes more on the aspect of creating truth on the reality of the representation of the communicators. Along with the style dimension analysis, the dimension modality analysis also shows the gap where the lecturers with additional function tend to use messages with high modality or messages that are authoritative while the staff of FISIP UB PSIK more often use messages with low modality and confirm instructions or questions from lecturers with assignments additional compared to initiating activities or
messages. The multimodality of the messages sent on the Whatsapp group had not been explored on this research.

To summarize, it could be stated that the communication artifacts analyzed on this research had shown how communication processes, especially in an organization group chat have become more omnipresent, more fragmented (by exhibiting the formality of the group communication showcasing differentiation), move towards datafication, rely more on connectivity of the Internet, and depend on the technological adaptation of its users, as Hepp and Hasebrink (2018) stated in their model of communicative transfiguration. Whatsapp group communication had become more complicated than informal message exchange, and move towards the institutionalized communication exercises. As a technology communication, Whatsapp chat application has performed its capability as supporting channel of communication for internationalization activities conducted by PSIK FISIP UB.

Conclusion

It is contended that Whatsapp group is an important aspect in an institution and serves as an important factor in higher education message exchanges between members who are involved in internationalization activities that are timeless. When viewed in terms of communication and technology, the existence of the concept of Whatsapp group become a key of successful communication, albeit the communication dynamics. Communication patterns analysed with van Leeuwen’s social semiotics demonstrates meaningful but stratified communication process. There were distinction between administrative staff and lecturers with added function in the way they post their messages, indexing “doers” and “thinkers” that further conforming to their offline interaction standpoints when collaborating for internationalization events.

This study tried to observe mediatized communication phenomenon, exhibiting the communicative figurations of Whatsapp Group PSIK FISIP UB. This research serves as an embryo from a wider research, for example, considering the scope limitation; looking at other aspects that are still related to social semiotics, communication technology and cultural studies in the realm of social media.

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