



## **Südostasien**

## **Working Papers**

## **Band 5**

ISSN 1810-7354

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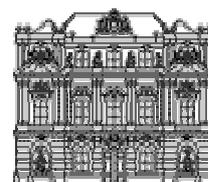
Kommission für Sozialanthropologie  
Österreichische Akademie der Wissenschaften

### **Towards a New Autonomy: Internet Practices of Indonesian Youth**

This paper was presented in a slightly different form at the 3<sup>rd</sup> International Symposium of the Journal ANTROPOLOGI INDONESIA “Rebuilding Indonesia, a Nation of ‘Unity in Diversity’: Towards a Multicultural Society”, Udayana University, Denpasar, Bali on July 18<sup>th</sup> 2002

DOI 10.1553/soawp5

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# Towards a New Autonomy: Internet Practices of Indonesian Youth

Martin Slama

This paper is based on research conducted in the city of Yogyakarta, Indonesia's most important centre for higher education. Its students come from different parts of the archipelago and have different ethnic and religious backgrounds.<sup>1</sup> However, what they increasingly have in common is regular use of the Internet. Additionally, they are linked by their social affiliation, as students almost exclusively stem from Indonesia's middle class.<sup>2</sup> In Yogyakarta, students usually stay in boarding houses where it is possible to bring PCs but where one cannot go online. At campuses and schools IT infrastructure is rather basic; thus it is the Internet café which serves as the main point of access. From 1996 onwards, Internet cafés spread throughout the city<sup>3</sup>; by now they number in the hundreds. The students not only represent the main customers, but they are also actively involved in running the cafés as it is they who primarily form the staff. In some cases, students themselves open smaller cafés by allowing use of their private PCs.

At the time of my research in 2000-1, the Internet became part of students' everyday-life in Yogyakarta. Unsurprisingly, their interest in the Internet was not only driven by their studies. Rather on the contrary, students liked the Internet because it opened new ways to fill their spare time. One just had to ask about the programmes most popular among the young users. More than web-browsing, email and chatting—especially the chat programme mIRC, with its interactive mode of real time communication—filled students with excitement. mIRC, in fact, makes possible two qualities of communication: in the main chat room or channel, the words typed in can be read by every user logged on, but it is also possible to open a channel just for two chatters without permitting oversight by a third party. In short, there is a public and a private part of the programme, and especially the latter makes chatting popular among students.

This new privacy made possible by chat rooms is of particular importance for my argument, that by using the Internet in their everyday-life, Indonesia's on-line youth gains more autonomy from their parents' generation than their offline peers. This new autonomy appears to these students as greater privacy, especially in regard to social relations between the sexes. In official Indonesian discourses, however, only the privacy of married adults is regarded as legitimate. The Internet privacy of students thus is part of a youth subculture, one moreover not recognised or not noticed at all in society. To make visible the significance of

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<sup>1</sup> Ethnographic research (face-to-face interviews, online and offline participant observation) was conducted in Yogyakarta (Central Java) among high school and university students in the years 2000 and 2001. This working paper was presented in a slightly different form at the 3<sup>rd</sup> International Symposium of the Journal ANTROPOLOGI INDONESIA "Rebuilding Indonesia, a Nation of 'Unity in Diversity': Towards a Multicultural Society", Udayana University, Denpasar, Bali on July 18<sup>th</sup> 2002. It can be considered as a preliminary result of my fieldwork containing already the basic themes discussed at length in my doctoral dissertation which is going to be completed in the year 2005 at the University of Vienna. I sincerely thank David Hakken (New York) and Stefan Khittel (Vienna) for their comments and for editing my English; thanks also to Nuri Suharto (Jakarta) for her comments.

<sup>2</sup> The internal structure of the Indonesian middle class is analysed by Robison (1996), its lifestyle centred around (symbolic) consumption by Gerke (2000).

<sup>3</sup> For the beginning of the Internet in Yogyakarta see Hill/Sen (1997).

this new online privacy, a comparison with (the possibilities for) offline privacy is carried out in the second part of this paper. Before doing this, I want to show how students autonomously shape their online chatting realms .

When I asked young users why they like chatting, their offhanded answer was that they were just "looking for friends" (*cari teman*), because "it is nice to have a lot of friends"<sup>4</sup>. Of course, this is not the whole story, but it offers a nice entrance to students' online strategies. In fact, what is so neutrally described as "friends", as the Indonesian language is gender-free, usually means chatters of the opposite sex. Indeed, in a country where names often do not function as gender markers, it is interesting that some students' online nicknames, required to enter a chat room, do reveal a male or female identity.

Indonesians distinguish between friend (*teman*), boy-/girlfriend (*pacar*) and marriage partner (*jodoh*). In the language of the chatters, however, the person one has intimate chats with and with whom one feels sympathy is called *gebetan*. This word comes from *menggebet*, meaning "to tie someone", probably a word of Jakarta's dialect. "Have you got a *gebetan*?"—a joking question one often hears in Internet cafés—alludes to a main criterion for whether the chats were successful or not. My interview partners were also well aware of the possibility that some of their online *gebetan* might lose the status of mere friends by becoming offline boy-/girlfriends, even their marriage partners. Actually, we find a high readiness, if geographic conditions allow it, for blind dates among Yogyakarta's chatters. This means that the kind of online identity play, e.g. "gender-bending", that is a prominent theme in the Internet literature seems to be not of prime importance for Indonesia's young chatters.<sup>5</sup>

Whether students will find a future spouse, lover or friend on the net, what they are looking for, first and foremost, are relaxed social relations. These are manifest online through unconstrained talk in an informal version of the Indonesian language, *bahasa gaul*, the language of socialising.<sup>6</sup> No wonder, then, that students described chatting as "nice, amusing and fascinating" (*enak, menyenangkan, asyik*) as well as a good way to "get rid of bad temper, stress and narrow-mindedness" (*ngilangin bete, stres dan suntuk*). As a twenty-year-old student explained to me: "If I'm annoyed, if I'm in a *bad mood* [her English expression], if I'm looking for a friend to talk to, I talk in the channel. Usually my *bad mood* immediately disappears." And she goes on: "[On the Internet] we just write, we release everything we have in our heads."<sup>7</sup>

Indeed, the possibility of talking openly about personal problems in a private channel is highly appreciated among the young users, who have a well-fitting term for this practice - *curhat*, an acronym for *curahan hati*, literally "to pour out one's heart".<sup>8</sup> And there are a number of things to discuss online: problems with peers, boy- and girlfriends, parents and teachers etc. One should add here that - like chatting in general - most *curhat* takes place

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<sup>4</sup> "Itu enak punya banyak teman."

<sup>5</sup> Turkle's book (1995) on MUDs is the reference point of this debate where she represented users "experimenting and playing" with their identities hereby nicely suiting postmodernist/structuralist theories of a "decentred subject". What Indonesian chat rooms concerns, experimentation happens not so much with identity than with social relations and this primarily between the sexes.

<sup>6</sup> With its various abbreviations and acronyms as well as being influenced by English, Javanese and the Jakarta dialects this language is no invention of Indonesia's online world. Popular among urban, media influenced youth, it simply went online, together with its speakers.

<sup>7</sup> "Kalau lagi sebel, lagi bad mood pingin cari teman ngobrol, ngobrol di channel. Biasanya langsung hilang bad moodnya. Enak aja ngobrol sama teman chatting ... jadi kita cuman sekedar tulis, keluarin semua apa yang ada di kepala."

<sup>8</sup> For a more detailed account of the *curhat* phenomenon than that given in this paper, see Slama (2001).

between the sexes, too. A seventeen-year-old high-school student said this about her *curhat* experience: "Well, [to *curhat*] about my boyfriend, this is nice with boys, because they have also [romantic] experiences. How the boys feel - that's what I want to know!" Anyway, she also tries to find girls for *curhat* because: "[To *curhat*] about a friend, this is nice with a girl."<sup>9</sup>

Students who have already experienced *curhat* online talk of its advantages over conventional offline *curhat*. The seventeen-year-old student explains: "Well, if I'm in bad temper I *curhat* with the people in the chat rooms. If I *curhat* with someone I don't know, it's not possible that he will tell people I know. That's the nice thing of *curhat* with chatting people."<sup>10</sup> The anonymity the chat rooms provide makes it possible for the young users to limit the social fields - like the peer group, the family and the neighbourhood - where gossip usually takes place.

Students favour the online world of chat rooms for another reason that I came to understand during an interview with a fifteen year old student, who said to me: "If we meet like now, I'm ashamed! There [in the chat room] I don't see his face, so I'm not so [ashamed] ... In conventional places I'm timid, [but] on the Internet it's free, there is no reason to be ashamed, there I don't see his face. But normally I'm timid, I tend to be timid. I mean, I'm not free to express myself."<sup>11</sup> *Malu* is the term Indonesians use for being ashamed; and to "know shame" (*tahu malu*), as the phrase goes, is something highly valued and points to good manners, especially in Javanese settings.<sup>12</sup> At least for the time she goes online, the fifteen year old student, herself Javanese and raised in Yogyakarta, can overcome her dispositions and circumvent the cultural field where these dispositions are produced and demanded.

Having presented some students' discourses and practices on and about the net, I want to explicate my argument further by comparing the conditions of online privacy with those of offline privacy. In doing this, I consider students' online and offline practices as existing in a continuum, suspending the online-offline distinction previously made for analytical reasons, since Internet usage is an integrated part of their everyday-life.<sup>13</sup> However, as the Internet is used in public cafés, I highlight first the place of the young generation in the public realm, then focus second on their possibilities for privacy.

Public places intended for the young are rare in Indonesian cities. Nevertheless, during the 1990s a public realm emerged as a consequence of the creation of consumption spaces: shopping malls, fast food restaurants and the like were quickly populated by Indonesia's emerging middle classes. Although Indonesia's growing economy suffered a massive setback at the end of the 1990s, these prestigious temples of consumption still provide their pleasing air conditioned spaces and are used for "hanging out" by middle class youth. Given its huge

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<sup>9</sup> "Ya kalau tentang pacar itu enakya sama cowok, masalahnya dia juga pernah ngalamin kayak gitu. Perasaanya cowok gimana itu, saya pingin tahu. Kalau tentang teman itu enakya sama cewek."

<sup>10</sup> "Ya sih kalau lagi bete gitu curhat sama orang di chatting kan. Kalau curhat sama orang yang enggak kenal kan enggak mungkin dia nyebarin ke orang-orang yang aku kenal. Enakya curhat sama orang chatting."

<sup>11</sup> "Kalau ketemu gini, malu! Kalau disana kan enggak lihat mukanya, jadi enggak gini ... Kalau di tempat biasa itu sungkan, kalau di internet itu bebas gitu loh, enggak usah malu, lihat mukanya. Tapi kalau biasa sungkan, suka sungkan. Kalau gimana ya, enggak bebas mengucapkan sesuatu."

<sup>12</sup> The student used the Indonesian term *malu* and the Javanese *sungkan* I translated as "ashamed" and "timid". For more about *malu*, that is the Javanese equivalent *isin*, and *sungkan* as well as about the socialisation of these values see Hildred Geertz' classic "The Javanese family" (1961: 109-118).

<sup>13</sup> Discourses that make what happens on the Internet appear as something totally distinct from offline reality can be subsumed under what Hakken (1999) calls "computer revolution thought" that he critiques as utopian. Miller and Slater (2000) particularly emphasise the embeddedness of Internet practices in everyday-life and thus argue for the necessity of both online *and* offline research; see also Hine (2000).

university campuses, its many schoolyards, its cultural centres – all places more or less clearly occupied by youth --Yogyakarta has even more to offer than just spaces of consumption. Naturally, in all such public places, one can watch young couples *pacaran* (be together with one's boy-/girlfriend).

A note on the concept of *pacaran* seems necessary : That young people have a boy- or a girlfriend is by and large accepted in Indonesian middle class circles. When they are about to finish their education, *pacaran* is even desired by parents, as it is time to find a marriage partner. In this way, the young can choose their potential spouse by themselves, although the parents' consent is still obligatory. This acceptance of premarital relations between the sexes does not include sex *per se* which is still to be confined to married-life. To have premarital sexual contact is considered silly (*nakal*) and/or amoral (in the monotheistic, mostly Islamic interpretation). Indeed, there is great concern about the loosening of morals among youth voiced - from time to time but regularly - by public figures and politicians from almost the whole spectrum of Indonesia's ideological currents.<sup>14</sup> Unmarried couples together alone are a source of suspicion.<sup>15</sup> In Indonesian middle class settings, intimacy, including sexuality, is restricted to the private family life of married adults, following the meanwhile globalised bourgeois ideal.

The practice of *pacaran*, granting the young a tiny autonomy from the world of adults, not only has consequences for students' elbowroom in public places. It also affects the amount of privacy they are allowed to possess in Yogyakarta. The unwritten but nevertheless official code of conduct in the city's boarding houses, where most students stay, forbids being inside one's room with the opposite sex, or at least – the more liberal case – the door must be kept open. There, as well as in parents' households, eavesdropping is common. This is also easily facilitated by the relatively thinly bricked walls common in tropical architecture,<sup>16</sup> or by conditions of more than one telephone receiver but only one line (as prevalent in boarding houses).

Given these conditions, the role of technologies in providing privacy is all the more salient. The ultimate complimentary tool to the Internet, the cell phone, is a good example. One of my interview partners' motivations for working in an Internet café was that, with her salary, she could afford the monthly cost of her cell phone. Indeed, phone bills burden the budget of students, resulting in the cheapest use of the phones possible, sending SMS (Short Message Service, a written communication with similarities to chatting).<sup>17</sup>

Considering students' offline possibilities for privacy, the car has to be mentioned. Like anywhere else in the world, it, too, can be used for courting, by providing a closed space, separated from the public although *in* the public. The dimmed windows so common in Indonesia that simultaneously widen the social distance between the middle and the lower classes make this kind of courting even easier. No wonder that in the late 1980s, as the car

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<sup>14</sup> A similar situation seems to prevail in Malaysia as described by Stivens (2002) as "moral panics".

<sup>15</sup> This is nothing new, as H. Geertz writes of the 1950s (1961: 120): "Sex is evidently thought of as an impulse which cannot be inhibited if external restraints, such as lack of privacy or a watchful husband, are removed." Anyway, in contrast to the present, in the 1950s sexuality and morality were two concepts not mutually connected in Javanese cultural settings, "since sexual intercourse, in or outside of marriage, is not considered to have moral significance ..." (ibid. 128).

<sup>16</sup> In fact, old Javanese houses have woven bamboo walls (*gedeg*), letting in the comfortable winds but not the hot sun, as well as letting in the sounds of the neighbourhood. For a description see Sullivan (1992: 44).

<sup>17</sup> In boarding houses technical devices help to create an atmosphere of individuality and privacy. If affordable, students' rooms are packed with TV-sets, VCD-players, stereos and Pcs, making possible the playing of computer games, listening to music and watching films and music videos. As pointed out above, it is not possible for them to log on to the Internet.

became more and more obligatory for the middle classes, Yogyakarta was shaken by scandals caused by young, unmarried couples caught red-handed in their parents' cars at night.<sup>18</sup> Anyway, car-owning students are still a minority in Yogyakarta compared to those who have got a motorbike. Indeed, motorbike riding couples provoke a great deal of comments, as the speedy bikes - the female on the backseat pressing her body against the male driver - take them off from their immediate surrounding and, it seems, from social norms. This is a scenario one can observe best on Saturday evenings, when the streets of Yogyakarta are reigned over by couples on motorbikes, couples who probably stop by at an Internet café, as the clusters of bikes in front of the cafés demonstrate.

The sheer number of Internet cafés in today's Yogyakarta means they account for a considerable part of the city's public space inhabited by the young. They quickly became welcome places for having a date, especially for the spontaneous dates of chatters who are willing to change cafés in order to meet offline, just after an online conversation. Between the café and the chat programme, we find a structural similarity. Moving from public to private spaces in Internet cafés finds its equivalence in the programme, with its switching between public and private channels. Indeed, what these cafés sell is privacy. Computer terminals are carefully separated by thin walls or by curtains, the screens never being directed towards potential passer-bys. Thus, the Internet can become a largely private experience.<sup>19</sup> Despite the considerable scholarly reflection about the Internet as a public sphere,<sup>20</sup> in the particular case of chatters in Indonesia, it is the possibilities for privacy that make the Internet such an appreciated tool of communication.

In conclusion, I offer a note on the theoretical emphases of this paper. The main categories used to organise my ethnographic material consists of two pairs: the *online* and the *offline*, and the *private* and the *public*. Considering the first one, I want to stress again that to regard the online and the offline as mutually influencing and connected, rather than distinct and separated, makes it easier to see the particular roles a new medium or technology might likely play in a particular place. Further, metaphors of space are very helpful, especially those centred around concepts of the private and the public. Indonesian chatters' practices - from discussing personal problems, to looking for and experimenting with relations between the sexes, and up to searching for a marriage partner - are not particularly Indonesian, although possessing their local traits, like *curhat*, *gebetan* and the circumvention of *malu*. Nonetheless, they gain their significance only in relation to an offline reality, the local conditions for being public and private. How online and offline realms are connected in other places, under other local conditions, as well as to what extent online private and public spaces differ from their offline counterparts, are general questions, I suggest, crucial for anthropological Internet studies.

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<sup>18</sup> Laksono (1994); see also Utomo (2002: 218) for a more recent account concerning Jakarta.

<sup>19</sup> In this regard a comparison with other (Asian) countries where the Internet is accessed primarily in public places is worthwhile. Jeroen de Kloet (2002) contrasts Indonesia with China, where the public cafés provide far less privacy. It was de Kloet (Amsterdam) who encouraged me to elaborate more on this theme.

<sup>20</sup> Habermas' early work on the *Strukturwandel der Öffentlichkeit* functions as reference point in this debate. For a discussion of the Internet as public sphere in general see e.g. Poster (1997), for the particular case of Indonesia see Hill/Sen (2000: 194-117) and Lim (2001).

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