Public participation and multi-way communication in virtual space: Building deliberative democracy in the era of communicative plenty

[ID]**Muhammad Mahsun[1]**, [ID]**Mochamad Parmudi[2]**, [ID]**Masrohatun Masrohatun[3]**, [ID]**Shahrin bin Hashim[4]**

[1,2,3] Universitas Islam Negeri Walisongo, Indonesia
[4] Universitas Teknologi Malaysia, Malaysia
Email: muhammad.mahsun@walisongo.ac.id

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Abstract

Purpose - This study examines the phenomenon of Lapor Hendi in Semarang city as a communication channel to enhance public participation in the era of internet-based communication to address two key questions: how does citizen participation in virtual spaces through Lapor Hendi contribute to public policy-making and improving public service quality in Semarang City? How does this experience of participation impact deliberative communication and democracy in virtual spaces within Semarang City?

Method - To explore these questions, this study uses a qualitative method with a phenomenological approach that prioritises data collection through in-depth interviews, documentation, and analysis of netizens' communication texts on social media connected to the Lapor Hendi website.

Result - The results showed that the experience of citizen participation with multi-way communication in expressing aspirations and shaping public discourse through Lapor Hendi has successfully introduced public deliberation into the policymaking processes concerning urban spatial development, public goods governance, and public services.

Implication - Qualitative study of the Lapor Hendi initiative in Semarang City offers significant insights into how deliberative democracy can be cultivated and developed in virtual spaces within the local Indonesian context.

Originality/Value - This study provides an alternative theory to procedural democracy, which is increasingly experiencing a legitimacy crisis and decline, by developing a communication channel in virtual space for building citizen engagement and democratic policies.

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Abstrak

Tujuan - Studi ini mengkaji fenomena Lapor Hendi di Kota Semarang sebagai saluran komunikasi untuk meningkatkan partisipasi publik di era komunikasi berbasis internet guna menjawab dua pertanyaan kunci: bagaimana partisipasi warga dalam ruang virtual melalui Lapor Hendi berkontribusi pada pembentukan kebijakan publik dan peningkatan kualitas layanan publik di Kota Semarang? Bagaimana pengalaman partisipasi ini mempengaruhi komunikasi deliberatif dan demokrasi dalam ruang virtual di Kota Semarang?

Metode - Untuk menjawab pertanyaan-pertanyaan ini, penelitian ini menggunakan metode kualitatif dengan pendekatan fenomenologis yang memprioritaskan pengumpulan data melalui wawancara mendalam, dokumentasi, dan analisis teks komunikasi netizen di media sosial yang terhubung dengan situs web Lapor Hendi.

Hasil - Hasil penelitian menunjukkan bahwa pengalaman partisipasi warga dengan komunikasi dua arah dalam mengemukakan aspirasi dan membentuk diskursus publik melalui Lapor Hendi telah berhasil memperkenalkan deliberasi publik ke dalam proses pembentukan kebijakan terkait pengembangan ruang kota, tata kelola barang publik, dan layanan publik.

Implikasi - Studi kualitatif tentang inisiatif Lapor Hendi di Kota Semarang memberikan wawasan signifikan tentang bagaimana demokrasi deliberatif dapat dikembangkan dan ditumbuhkan di ruang virtual dalam konteks lokal Indonesia.

Orisinalitas/Nilai - Studi ini menawarkan teori alternatif terhadap demokrasi prosedural, yang semakin mengalami krisis legitimasi dan penurunan, dengan mengembangkan saluran komunikasi di ruang virtual untuk membangun keterlibatan warga dan kebijakan demokratis.

Introduction

Liberal democracy, adopted in many countries including Indonesia, faces a legitimacy crisis following the third wave of democratic transition (Fishkin & Mansbridge, 2017; Offe, 2017). This crisis is marked by the collapse of civility in interactions and political practices among political elites (Dryzek et al., 2019), the growing exclusion of public aspirations, and the absence of public participation in the policymaking process (Hadiz & Robison, 2014). These conditions challenge political scholars around the world to identify effective mechanisms for increasing public participation and fostering stronger citizen engagement in public policymaking processes (Cheyne & Comrie, 2002). Mechanisms to promote citizen engagement in public policymaking include encouraging political authorities to adopt a deliberative political system in the virtual sphere (Dahlberg, 2001; Dahlberg, 2007; Janssen & Kies, 2005; Gimmler, 2001). This system not only emphasizes direct elections as a means of public participation in selecting representatives for parliament and executive leadership, but also mandates 'public deliberation' in policymaking and improving the quality of public services. It can be done by using the massive proliferation of the internet and social media (Ercan & Dryzek, 2015; Dryzek, 2009; Karim, 2024; Carpini, Cook & Jacobs, 2004).

Public deliberation requires citizens to have both the ability and the opportunity to participate directly in providing rational and argumentative considerations, as well as reflecting from a position of political equality during critical political processes. This is especially important in decision-making related to state and societal governance (Dryzek, 2002). Such practices aim to ensure that democracy in a given country gains legitimacy from its citizens, who hold ultimate sovereignty in a democratic system. Moreover, a democratic political system should not focus solely on institutional strengthening but should also actively involve citizens in critical political processes concerning public life regulation (Ercan & Dryzek, 2015).

Scholars argue that online forums, government e-participation platforms, and social media can provide alternative venues for inclusive and scalable deliberation (Dahlberg, 2001; Coleman & Blumler, 2009). These platforms allow asynchronous, non-hierarchical, and potentially anonymous participation, which may empower marginalized voices (Jankowski & van Os, 2004). However, the quality of online deliberation is contested. While some studies report that digital forums encourage rational-critical discourse (Graham, 2009), others observe the prevalence of polarization, echo chambers, and incivility (Sunstein, 2001; Papacharissi, 2004). Furthermore, questions arise about representation, gatekeeping, and algorithmic bias in the digital public sphere (Helberger et al., 2018). Most existing evaluations of digital feedback platforms focus on *efficiency* and *responsiveness*, often employing managerial or service-delivery perspectives (Wirtz & Birkmeyer, 2015; Parycek et al., 2014). There is insufficient exploration, especially in Indonesia, of how such platforms might evolve toward facilitating deliberative democracy in virtual space.

This study aims to contribute to filling the gap in the existing literature by examining citizen participation and multi-way communication through the platforms of "Lapor Hendi" as a system designed to accommodate citizen aspirations in policymaking and enhance the quality of public services that launched in 2016 by local authority in Semarang City, Central Java, Indonsia. More specifically, "Lapor Hendi" is part of the Open Government Indonesia (OGI) initiative, which has been in place since 2012. OGI has three national-level programs: the One Data Portal, the One Map

Policy, and LAPOR, which is designed as an online platform for public aspirations and complaint services (Yuwanto, 2020). As part of this national policy, Lapor Hendi is integrated with all OGI programs at the national level, incorporating various features tailored to the context of Semarang City. The Lapor Hendi website includes links to the LAPOR application, connecting it with similar platforms operated by the Central Java Provincial Government (Lapor Governor), ministries (Lapor Kemendagri), and even the president (Lapor President). This platform allows citizens to engage in dialogue, express their aspirations, file complaints about public services, and address urban issues on the basis of equal opportunity and political equality. Similarly, local authorities in Semarang can interact and engage in direct dialogue to respond to these public concerns.

In this context, the study examines the phenomenon of e-participation among Semarang City residents through the *Lapor Hendi* application, framed within the discourse of deliberative democracy in virtual spaces, particularly in the practices of public policymaking and improving the quality of public services in the city. The research focuses on two main areas of analysis. First, it explores the experiences of actors within the bureaucracy, civil society, and city residents who have participated in virtual engagement through the *Lapor Hendi* system for public policymaking and service improvement in Semarang City during Hendrar Prihadi's leadership, from its initial implementation in 2017 through 2020. Second, it examines the extent to which the e-participation experiences of city residents via *Lapor Hendi* have impacted the development of deliberative democracy in virtual spaces within Semarang City. By answering these questions, study of *Lapor Hendi* initiative in Semarang City offers significant insights into how deliberative democracy can be cultivated and developed in virtual spaces within the local government Indonesian context with similar character with Semarang City by developing communication channel utilising advances in the internet and sosial media for building citizen engagement and democratic policies.

Research Methods

This study examines the experience of online citizen participation through *Lapor Hendi* during the period of 2017–2021, when the City of Semarang was led by Mayor Hendrar Prihadi, who demonstrated significant attention to virtual citizen engagement in urban development. The research employs qualitative methods, which aim to understand political and social phenomena through the lived experiences of research subjects, emphasizing the use of descriptive data (Creswell, 2015). In this context, qualitative methods are utilized to explore and analyze political processes, particularly how city residents and civil society actively participate online through the *Lapor Hendi* system in policymaking and improving public service quality. Additionally, the study examines how other key actors, such as bureaucratic elites, engage in governance practices and respond to various citizen aspirations through the *Lapor Hendi* system, contributing to the formulation of public policies and enhancements in public service delivery in the City of Semarang.

To understand the experiences of the aforementioned subjects, this study employs a phenomenological approach as a framework to guide data exploration and analysis. This approach provides a theoretical basis for researchers to comprehend and describe the diverse meanings derived from the lived experiences of research subjects involved in specific socio-political phenomena (Creswell, 2015). In the context of this study, phenomenology is utilized to examine and interpret the experiences of public officials, civil society members, and city residents who participate

virtually through *Lapor Hendi* in their everyday lives, particularly in the processes of public policymaking and improving the quality of public services.

The data collection techniques employed in this study included conducting in-depth interviews that were highly open-ended and utilized non-structured questions. These interviews were conducted with a range of informants, including public officials from the Communication and Information Service, academics, civil society activists, and residents of Semarang City. In addition to interviews, this study uses data from the city government in Semarang about the online participation of city residents through the *Lapor Hendi* platform, which operates via social media channels such as Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram. Then, author analyzed the narratives, conversations, dialogues, and debates that emerged around various issues faced by residents, particularly those related to the implementation of development policies (e.g., road infrastructure projects, urban spatial planning) and the quality of public services in Semarang City in social medias linked to Lapor Hendi platform.

Results and Discussions

Deliberative Democracy and Communicative Plenty in the Era of the Internet and Social Media

To begin the theoretical discussion on deliberative democracy, it is important to note its emergence in academic discourse. The term gained popularity in the early 1980s. However, its theoretical foundations can be traced to the political philosophy of Jürgen Habermas and the social theories of modern society developed by Anthony Giddens and Ulrich Beck (Hiariej, 2019). According to Dryzek (2002), the 1990s marked a significant rise in deliberative democracy theory, establishing it as a dominant approach in democratic thought.

Deliberative democracy represents a variant of democracy that places citizen deliberation at the center of public policymaking (Yuwanto, 2020). The development of this concept is, in part, a critique of contemporary liberal democracy, which has faced serious degradation and a crisis of legitimacy (Fishkin & Mansbridge, 2017; Hiariej, 2019). Deliberative democracy creates a space for the transformation of citizens' political preferences into meaningful political interactions, whereas liberal democracy merely facilitates the reconciliation and aggregation of these preferences (Dryzek, 2002). In deliberative democracy, citizens' political preferences are not only aggregated but also critically examined through public discourse, supported by reasoned debates based on logical arguments (Hill & Hughes, 1998). The goal is to achieve consensus and make collective decisions on matters affecting public life (Wright & Street, 2007).

According to Elster (1998, cited in Wright & Street, 2007), the concept of deliberative democracy comprises two key elements: the deliberative and the democratic. The deliberative element emphasizes that the best decisions emerge from arguments made by and for participants (citizens) committed to rationality and impartiality. The democratic element underscores the principle that all individuals affected by a decision must have the opportunity to discuss the issue directly or, at a minimum, have representatives engage in the deliberation on their behalf.

Cohen (1989) identifies five principles central to deliberative democracy: (1) public deliberation must serve as the foundation for all public decisions and policies, (2) Only decisions made through such deliberative processes can be considered to possess public legitimacy, (3)The decision-making

process must be transparent, and all decisions should be traceable to the deliberation process, (4) There must be a commitment to respect the plurality of values and goals expressed by all citizens involved in the deliberation, dan (5) All citizens must have equal opportunities to participate freely in the deliberation process to influence public decisions or policies. These principles collectively establish deliberative democracy as a framework that prioritizes reasoned discourse, inclusivity, and transparency in the decision-making process.

In recent decades, deliberative democracy has gained traction as a theory that increasingly influences political practice, particularly with the rise of social media driven by advances in internet technology in many democratic nations. In this context, Carolyn M. Hendriks and John S. Dryzek introduced the concept of "communicative plenty," which underscores how the proliferation of the internet facilitates public deliberation in critical political processes. The term "communicative plenty" refers to a new era characterized by expanded opportunities for communication, information exchange, and interaction, both online and face-to-face. In this era, political elites, community organizations, and citizens can connect to communicate, express opinions, engage in dialogue on public issues, and deliberate on programs or policies. These interactions are made possible through government-created platforms, such as the *Lapor Hendi* system in Semarang City, as well as social media platforms like blogs, Facebook, Twitter, Telegram, and other online communication tools (Ercan et al., 2019: Mudhofi et al, 2023). Long before Hendriks and Dryzek introduced the concept of *communicative plenty*, Wright and Street (2007) argued that online discussion forums could serve as technologies enabling large-scale citizen conversations and discussions. Social media, similarly, has the potential to create deliberative spaces for decision-making and public policymaking processes. The assumption is that technological advancements provide forums or spaces that facilitate citizen conversations and the formation of discourses, both of which are prerequisites for deliberative democracy.

The concept of *communicative plenty* acknowledges that, in the digital era, the contestation of public issues and the formation of public discourses can occur in spaces beyond traditional venues of public debate, such as parliaments, mass media, and large-scale protests. However, it is crucial to recognize that *communicative plenty* is not merely about the expansion of opportunities and communication spaces. More importantly, it signifies the transformative implications for how democracy is understood and practiced. This involves questions about who can participate in democratic politics, where participation takes place, and how it is enacted (Ercan et al., 2019).

According to Ercan et al. (2019), the diverse online communication spaces enabled by advances in internet technology allow for large-scale public engagement that transcends the boundaries of citizenship and territorial limits within a nation-state. For citizens, *communicative plenty* provides numerous opportunities to access, understand, digest, listen to, reflect on, and discuss important public issues related to national development and policy content that impact their lives on social media.

Citizen Participation Through Lapor Hendi Across Various Channels

The advancement of internet technology and the widespread proliferation of social media have ushered in what Hendriks and Dryzek et al. (2019) refer to as the era of *communicative plenty*. In this era, citizens have expanded opportunities to engage in communication, exchange information, and participate in activities—not only through offline, face-to-face interactions but, more

extensively, through online platforms. In this context, the *Lapor Hendi* program leverages multiple channels, including the LAPOR!-SP4N website, Facebook, Twitter, Telegram, WhatsApp, and Instagram, among others. These platforms offer equal opportunities and experiences for all citizens to participate by sharing aspirations, complaints, ideas, and suggestions with public officials. This engagement often occurs in two-way (and sometimes multi-directional) interactions, addressing a wide range of urban development issues. These include public services, such as E-KTP processing, illegal parking, road repairs, waste management, and even the management of COVID-19 responses. Through *Lapor Hendi*, citizens can directly engage with public officials, fostering inclusivity and responsiveness in urban governance.

Lapor Hendi, as a system leveraging internet technology, has provided equal opportunities for all members of the community to actively participate in the development process of Semarang City. Citizen participation occurs in an environment that recognizes the political equality of all citizens, including both public officials and the general public who share their aspirations.

This section focuses on community participation through *Lapor Hendi* since 2017. Why 2017? This timeframe is selected based on the argument that *Lapor Hendi* only became fully optimized as a channel for citizen aspirations and complaints after it was integrated with LAPOR!-SP4N in 2016. It was also officially designated as a professional platform for citizen complaints with the adoption of *Perwal* Number 34 of 2017 concerning Guidelines for Managing Public Complaints Regarding Public Services. Furthermore, in 2017, the organizational management of *Lapor Hendi* (P3M) was moved from the Organizational Section of the Regional Secretariat to the Semarang City Communication and Information Service, further solidifying its role as an effective tool for community engagement.

In 2017, with the introduction of new regulations and the adoption of internet technology—particularly the use of social media—*Lapor Hendi* became an integrated platform for accommodating citizens' aspirations and complaints. This development sparked significant enthusiasm among city residents to actively participate in addressing issues related to urban development. According to annual report data from P3M, citizen participation in submitting aspirations and complaints through *Lapor Hendi* in 2017 totaled 9,477 reports.

That year, residents utilized at least 12 complaint channels to communicate their concerns, encompassing both direct and indirect methods. Notably, the majority of reports were submitted through non-social media electronic channels. SMS accounted for the highest number of reports (6,853), followed by the *Lapor Hendi* website (1,047). Among social media platforms, Twitter emerged as the most widely used channel, with 894 reports submitted by Semarang City residents (Diskominfo, 2017). For greater clarity and detailed information on the various channels used to convey aspirations and complaints, refer to Table 1 below.

Table 1 Sources of Citizen Reports Through *Lapor Hendi* in 2017

No	Channel Used for Reports	Number of Reports
1	Android	137
2	Institutional Email	28
3	Facebook	69
4	iOS	2
5	Postal Mail	1

No	Channel Used for Reports	Number of Reports
6	Agency Website	17
7	SMS	6853
8	Newspaper	324
9	Face-to-Face	63
10	Telephone	51
11	Twitter	894
12	Web	1047
Total		**9477**

Source: Diskominfo, 2017

The data on citizen participation reports submitted through the *Lapor Hendi* system, as described above, were not entirely managed by the Semarang City Government. According to the 2017 annual report from the Communication and Information Service, of the 9,477 reports received via *Lapor Hendi*, 6,317 were managed directly by the Semarang City Government. These reports were categorized into three main groups: aspirations or suggestions, complaints, and requests for information. Detailed data for these categories are presented in Table 2 below.

Table 2 Categories of Citizen Reports Managed Through *Lapor Hendi* in 2017

No	Category of Managed Reports	Number of Reports
1	Aspirations	584
2	Complaints	5267
3	Information Requests	466
Total Reports		**6317**

Source: Diskominfo, 2017

The data presented in Table 2 can be explained as follows: first, aspirations or suggestions: A total of 584 reports fall into this category, generally consisting of ideas or recommendations resulting from citizens' reflections and analyses regarding city governance issues that require attention or improvement by public officials. Second, complaints: With 5,267 reports, this category predominantly addresses concerns related to the quality of public spaces and services directly affecting the lives of city residents. Third, requests for Information: A total of 466 reports in this category relate to a wide range of topics, including E-KTP management, prolonged disruptions to PDAM water services, road closures, BRT (Bus Rapid Transit) operations, and more.

It is important to note that not all reports submitted were managed or processed by policymakers in the Semarang City Government. According to 2017 data, 3,160 reports received through the *Lapor Hendi* system were classified as unmanaged. Many of these were submitted via the LAPOR!-SP4N platform operated by the central government through the website *lapor.go.id*. Reports categorized as unmanaged often had incomplete or unclear formats, lacked sufficient data, or were duplicates. Additionally, some reports submitted through *lapor.go.id* were found to be unrelated to the responsibilities of the Semarang City Government after coordination with admins from the respective OPDs (Organisasi Perangkat Daerah) or the designated Section Head managing complaints. Such reports typically involved issues outside the jurisdiction of the Semarang City Government or were misdirected to unrelated agencies. These cases were usually returned by *Lapor Hendi* officers to the central admin of *lapor.go.id* for further action (Diskominfo, 2017).

The findings of this study indicate that most of the city-related issues submitted by residents through *Lapor Hendi* and categorized as "managed" have been addressed by the Semarang City Government. This demonstrates that various concerns related to urban development—ranging from the quality of public spaces to public services—which constitute the focus and subject of citizen complaints via *Lapor Hendi*, have been effectively responded to and followed up through program or policy implementation. Quantitatively, the data from the report documents show that 100 percent of managed citizen reports were resolved.

In contrast, citizen reports classified as "unmanaged" remain unresolved, leaving these issues unaddressed for various reasons, as outlined above (Diskominfo, 2017). In 2018, the level of citizen participation in conveying aspirations and complaints related to development governance in the City of Semarang through the *Lapor Hendi* system declined compared to 2017. This indicates a decrease in the number of citizens reporting issues related to urban development, particularly concerning the quality of public facilities and services. According to the annual report from Diskominfo, only 4,467 reports were submitted by citizens through the *Lapor Hendi* system in 2018. For a detailed breakdown of this data, refer to Table 3 below.

Table 3 Sources of Citizen Reports Through *Lapor Hendi* in 2018

No	Channel Used for Reports	Number of Reports
1	Android	135
2	Institutional Email	25
3	Facebook	52
4	iOS	58
5	Postal Mail	2875
6	Agency Website	1
7	SMS	141
8	Newspaper	58
9	Face-to-Face	27
10	Telephone	459
11	Twitter	583
12	Web	31
Total		**9477**

Source: Diskominfo, 2018

The data in Table 3 indicates that the primary channels used by residents to convey aspirations and complaints related to governance or development issues in Semarang City remain dominated by electronic media. SMS accounted for the highest number of reports (2,875), followed by the *Lapor Hendi* website (583 reports) and the Twitter social media platform (459 reports). Conversely, other social media platforms, such as WhatsApp and Facebook—two of the most widely used social media platforms in Indonesia—were still relatively underutilized by residents for submitting reports through the *Lapor Hendi* system.

This pattern is largely consistent with the trends observed in 2017. However, it is noteworthy that in 2018, the total number of citizen reports submitted via the *Lapor Hendi* system decreased by more than 50 percent compared to 2017, dropping from 9,477 reports to 4,467. From a positive perspective, this decline could suggest that the *Lapor Hendi* system has been relatively successful in addressing urban development issues and improving the quality of public services in Semarang City. Consequently, fewer residents felt the need to report problems during 2018. This trend

highlights the positive impact of high citizen participation in the city development process, contributing to improvements in various aspects of urban governance, particularly in the quality of public spaces and public services, key areas frequently reported by residents in Semarang City.

Similar to the conditions in 2017, not all citizen aspirations and complaints submitted through *Lapor Hendi* in 2018 were managed or addressed by the Semarang City Government through the relevant OPDs (Regional Apparatus Organizations) and BUMDs (Regional-Owned Enterprises). According to the 2018 annual report from the Communication and Information Service, of the 4,467 reports submitted to *Lapor Hendi*, 3,392 were managed by the Semarang City Government. The managed reports were categorized into three groups: aspirations or suggestions, complaints, and requests for information. Consistent with the previous year, the majority of citizen reports in 2018 fell under the complaint category. Further details are presented in Table 4 below.

Table 4 Categories of Citizen Reports Managed Through *Lapor Hendi* in 2018

No	Category of Managed Reports	Number of Reports
1	Aspirations	338
2	Complaints	2742
3	Information Requests	313
Total Reports		**6317**

Source: Diskominfo, 2018

Meanwhile, the aspirations and complaints submitted by residents through *Lapor Hendi* that were not managed totaled 1,215 reports, comprising 983 reports categorized as "Pending" and 232 reports classified as "Not Authority." The explanations provided by policymakers in the Semarang City Government regarding these unmanaged reports remain highly normative, similar to those presented in 2017. Unmanaged or unresolved reports were deemed to fall into specific categories: reports submitted with incomplete formats, unclear or duplicate data, reports unrelated to the responsibilities of the complaint manager, or issues outside the authority of the Semarang City Government. Additionally, some reports were not addressed because the relevant agency had not yet been connected to the *Lapor Hendi* system.

In addition to the categories of aspirations and complaints submitted through the *Lapor Hendi* system, a significant number of managed reports in 2018 were not fully resolved or followed up by the Semarang City Government. Unlike in 2017, when all managed reports were addressed with program or policy executions at a 100 percent completion rate, this was not the case in 2018. Study data reveals that of the 3,392 citizen reports categorized as managed in 2018, 47 reports remained unresolved, while 124 were still in the process of being addressed.

This data indicates that various issues related to urban development—ranging from the quality of public spaces to public services, which were the focus of citizen complaints through *Lapor Hendi*—were not entirely addressed or translated into concrete programs or policy actions. The persistence of unresolved issues reflects the limitations of local government resources in addressing all reported concerns in 2018.

According to one source interviewed during the study, one contributing factor to the unresolved issues was the complexity of the problems, which often required the Semarang City Government to coordinate with multiple stakeholders (Interview with Bambang, Head of Communication and Information, August 5, 2021). An example of such complexity involved resolving illegal parking and

E-KTP (electronic identity card) issues, which necessitated the formation of a Multi-Stakeholder Forum. Further details on this case will be elaborated in Chapter Four of this report.

Interestingly, despite the significant number of managed citizen reports in 2018 that were not followed up by the Semarang City Government authorities, the data indicates a relative decrease in the level of citizen participation in submitting aspirations and complaints through *Lapor Hendi*. Logically, if many citizen reports remained unaddressed in 2018, one might expect an increase in reports in the following year (2019), as residents often tend to resubmit complaints about unresolved issues. However, this anticipated pattern was not observed. One source interviewed for this study suggested that:

> "My experience in submitting aspirations, along with the experiences shared by many residents I interviewed in my previous study on citizen participation through *Lapor Hendi*, indicates that residents who encounter issues related to city development—such as road damage—can report the problem again through various channels in the *Lapor Hendi* system if the initial report is not addressed." (Interview, Semarang resident, July 28, 2021)

The use of social media, particularly WhatsApp, for citizen reporting through the *Lapor Hendi* system increased significantly in 2020. This trend reflects the emergence of new patterns in citizen participation in urban development facilitated by the *Lapor Hendi* system. Unlike previous years, when SMS dominated as the primary channel for submitting reports, WhatsApp became the most widely used platform in 2020, of the total 5,183 reports submitted that year, approximately 2,859 were sent via WhatsApp, which is integrated into the *Lapor Hendi* system.

The second most popular channel for submitting aspirations and complaints was SMS, accounting for 813 reports. This was followed by *LaporGub* (600 reports), a platform operated by the Governor's Office but integrated with the *Lapor Hendi* system. For a detailed breakdown, refer to Table 5 below.

Table 5 Sources of Citizen Reports Through *Lapor Hendi* in 2020

No	Channel Used for Reports	Number of Reports
1	Android	441
2	Institutional Email	813
3	Facebook	140
4	iOS	4
5	Postal Mail	2859
6	Agency Website	130
7	SMS	84
8	Newspaper	112
9	Face-to-Face	600
10	Telephone	5183
11	Twitter	441
12	Web	813
Total		**9477**

Source: Diskominfo, 2018

The increasing use of WhatsApp as a channel for submitting citizens' aspirations through *Lapor Hendi* over the past two years has been accompanied by a rising trend in the use of other social media platforms, such as Twitter, Instagram, and Facebook. A key distinction exists between citizen

participation via WhatsApp and other social media platforms, particularly Twitter (in this case, the Mayor's Twitter account, @hendrarprihadi). Online community participation through WhatsApp typically involves two-way communication: citizens submit their aspirations through *Lapor Hendi*, and the Semarang City Government responds to issues related to urban development. In contrast, platforms like Twitter facilitate multidirectional communication. For instance, when citizens express aspirations or concerns on Twitter, responses may come not only from the Semarang City Government but also from other citizens. These interactions may include support, argument reinforcement, or the expression of similar concerns, fostering a broader dialogue on development issues in Semarang.

In addition to the social media platforms mentioned earlier, Telegram has emerged in the past two years as a significant channel for citizen participation, providing a space for residents to convey aspirations and engage in dialogue on development issues in Semarang City. The Telegram account, managed by the Semarang City Government, functions as a social media chat application similar to WhatsApp. Unlike WhatsApp, however, this Telegram account is integrated into the *Lapor Hendi* system and operates as a group, enabling multidirectional communication.

What sets the Telegram group apart is its inclusivity; it includes not only *Lapor Hendi* admin officers but also the heads of Regional Apparatus Organizations (OPD) and Regional-Owned Enterprises (BUMD) in Semarang City. This structure allows city residents to directly communicate their concerns and receive responses from public officials within the group. These responses range from commitments to check and monitor issues to providing updates on how reported problems have been addressed through programs or policies.

Through direct observation of the Telegram group, the author identified frequent practices of dialogue, debate, reflection, and the creation of public discourse. These interactions facilitate public deliberation, influencing decision-making and the formulation of public policies related to urban development in Semarang City. However, recording and collecting data on the development issues in Semarang City conveyed by residents is not always straightforward. While social media platforms like WhatsApp and others used as channels for submitting residents' aspirations through the *Lapor Hendi* system are well-integrated and easily identifiable, this is not the case for Telegram. Telegram, despite being utilized as a channel for conveying residents' aspirations, lacks the same level of integration and data tracking within the *Lapor Hendi* system.

As a result, information related to the various channels used for citizen participation, as presented in the earlier tables, does not include Telegram as a data source. Nevertheless, according to Semarang City Government authorities, all aspirations and complaints submitted by residents, including those through Telegram, are addressed appropriately through program and policy execution and are aligned with the issues reported. This was confirmed by Istiqomah, Head of Aspiration and Information Management at the Communication and Information Office, who stated:

> "Telegram, as a group-based platform under the name of the Semarang City Government, has recently been integrated into the *Lapor Hendi* system and is receiving serious attention regarding all issues reported and discussed by residents within the group. In addition to *Lapor Hendi* admin officers, the group includes the heads of OPDs and BUMDs of Semarang City. As a result, issues raised or questioned by residents often receive prompt attention and responses for follow-up. However, because Telegram operates as a group, it is challenging for the *Lapor*

Hendi system to systematically process all issues reported by residents. Identifying reported issues currently requires manual effort. We are actively exploring a new formula or design to enable Telegram, despite its group-based structure, to seamlessly integrate into the *Lapor Hendi* system. This would allow it to function as efficiently as other social media channels, such as WhatsApp and the mayor's Twitter account, in capturing and processing all resident complaints." (Interview, October 1, 2021)

What can be highlighted from the phenomenon of citizen participation on Telegram, as described above, is not merely the fact that certain city development issues raised by residents remain inadequately managed. More importantly, it relates to how the Telegram group managed by the Semarang City Government functions as a new public space in the virtual era. Similar to the Twitter account of the Mayor of Semarang (@hendrarprihadi), the Semarang City Government's Telegram group, which is integrated with the *Lapor Hendi* system, has become an important virtual public space. It provides opportunities for all citizens, regardless of their political position, to participate in the city development process by expressing aspirations and concerns related to urban issues.

From the author's perspective, such practices position *Lapor Hendi* as more than just a complaint platform—it serves as a space for the formation of public discourse and citizen deliberation by utilizing communicative practice (Ercan & Dryzek, 2015; Ercan et al., 2019). These processes play a crucial role in shaping and influencing important decisions related to regional development in Indonesia, particularly in Semarang City. Furthermore, it is important to emphasize how the practice of citizen participation in the development of Semarang City—whether through the submission of aspirations, complaints, or requests for information via short messages or through dialogue facilitated by various social media platforms and integrated electronic systems—illustrates what Ercan et al., (2019) refer to as *communicative plenty*. This phenomenon has a positive impact on strengthening deliberative democracy in virtual spaces.

Building on this explanation, the author argues that the *Lapor Hendi* phenomenon in Semarang City reinforces the theses of scholars such as Yuwanto (2020), Wright and Street (2007), and others. These scholars assert that the proliferation of the internet and social media positively influences development and, more importantly, contributes to the deepening of deliberative democracy in the local context, especially Indonesia. And the experiences of Lapor Hendi can contribute to theoritical discourse of deliberative democracy in the era of communicative practice.

Lapor Hendi as a Virtual Public Space: An Arena for Institutionalizing Public Participation and Deliberation

The existence of *Lapor Hendi* has created a space for city residents to actively participate in the development process of Semarang City. By utilizing various channels—ranging from web platforms and electronic media to social media—*Lapor Hendi* has evolved into a virtual public space, providing a new arena for residents to engage in the city's development process. This virtual public space is understood as a new public sphere that has emerged due to advancements in internet technology, serving as a platform for fostering democratic practices in the digital era (Yuwanto, 2020).

This study found that through the various channels adopted by the *Lapor Hendi* system, any citizen with access to a telephone (particularly a smartphone with an internet connection) has the opportunity to engage in discussions, build public discourse, and contribute to deliberations on managing public goods and services that directly affect their daily lives. Issues such as sanitation problems (especially water services managed by PDAM), damaged road infrastructure, illegal parking near public spaces, traffic congestion, unmanaged waste, population administration services, and even health services are among the primary topics of citizen discussions within the *Lapor Hendi* system. These conversations frequently take place on social media channels integrated into the system, such as Twitter, Telegram, Instagram, and Facebook.

Based on the explanation above, the author argues that *Lapor Hendi* has become a virtual public space that institutionalizes citizen participation while fostering public deliberation practices in the policymaking process, particularly during the implementation, evaluation, and revision stages of public policies. This argument is supported by the author's findings, which identify several dimensions of virtual public space embedded in the design of the *Lapor Hendi* system, as conceptualized by Correia et al., (2011). These dimensions include being unlimited, universal, egalitarian, and interactive. The following sections provide a detailed explanation of these four dimensions as they pertain to *Lapor Hendi* as a virtual public space.

First, *Lapor Hendi,* as a virtual public space, does not impose restrictions on who can participate in sharing opinions, ideas, or complaints related to city development issues encountered in daily life. Whether the issue concerns traffic congestion, damaged public roads, illegal parking, garbage accumulation in public spaces, or challenges related to population administration services, health services, or access to social assistance, every citizen is free to voice their concerns through the *Lapor Hendi* system. This participation is not constrained by time or place. Citizens can submit their aspirations whenever they wish—morning, afternoon, or evening—and from any location. Through this virtual space, there are no limitations on when or where citizens can engage. By utilizing the various channels provided by *Lapor Hendi*, citizens of Semarang can easily report complaints, interact with public officials, or even engage with other citizens in this virtual public space. Additionally, citizens who submit complaints can effortlessly monitor the progress of their reports, tracking how their aspirations are being addressed by the relevant public officials or authorities responsible for resolving the issues raised.

Second, the universality dimension of the *Lapor Hendi* system as a virtual public space is evident in its design and practical implementation. This universality is reflected in the fact that the system is accessible to everyone. Every citizen has an equal opportunity to participate by sharing their ideas or complaints regarding public issues, as previously discussed. Through the various complaint channels integrated into the *Lapor Hendi* system, citizens from all social classes and backgrounds—regardless of gender—have equal access to express their aspirations. The only requirement is that they possess a smartphone and an internet connection, enabling them to easily communicate their concerns to public officials online via *Lapor Hendi*. This system design facilitates the institutionalization of public participation in policymaking processes, particularly those affecting the broader community and regulating the lives of residents in Semarang City.

Third, the equality dimension of *Lapor Hendi* as a virtual public space is reflected in its implementation, where every citizen is treated equally by the Semarang City Government authorities. All citizens are regarded as holding the same status, with no special privileges granted to specific individuals or groups. This means that every citizen who submits aspirations or reports related to city development issues receives the same level of response from the authorities. Moreover, one of the egalitarian characteristics of this virtual public space is the recognition of every individual—whether an ordinary resident or a public official—as an equal citizen. As a result, the dialogues and discussions that occur on the various social media channels integrated with the *Lapor Hendi* system, particularly platforms such as Twitter, Instagram, and Telegram, are conducted on an equal footing, fostering a balanced and inclusive exchange of ideas.

According to a source from the Semarang City Government, as part of the validation and verification process for reports, residents who submit development issues—such as damaged roads needing repair or piles of garbage accumulating in public spaces—are required to provide a short biodata and photos of the reported issue through the *Lapor Hendi* system. Photos of the reported objects serve as critical documentation to verify the validity of the residents' claims. From the author's perspective, this requirement is reasonable. In an era characterized by widespread internet use and the proliferation of hoax news, the provision of evidence is essential to ensure that public authorities make informed decisions (Interview, Bambang, August 5, 2020).

The author's observations of conversations and discussions among residents regarding public issues in Semarang City reveal that these exchanges occur without obstacles or undue pressure. Participants, whether residents or public officials, engage with one another on equal footing. For example, a resident, using informal or everyday language, can express aspirations or concerns about an issue to public officials through *Lapor Hendi*. Similarly, other residents or public officials—including the Mayor of Semarang—respond to these arguments in an equitable manner, positioning themselves as peers in the dialogue.

In such conditions, public opinion on urban issues is collectively formed and, in practice, becomes a factor in public deliberation that can influence decision-making processes within the government. An important element in this process is the requirement for evidence related to the reported issue, which provides legitimacy to the public arguments submitted through the *Lapor Hendi* system. This approach demonstrates the application of deliberative democracy in virtual spaces in certain decision-making contexts in Semarang City. The details of how public deliberation operates within this framework and how it contributes to deliberative democracy in virtual spaces will be explored further in the next sub-chapter.

The fourth dimension of *Lapor Hendi* as a virtual public space is its interactive nature, which is evident in the communication and dialogue processes between citizens and public authorities, as well as among citizens themselves. As highlighted in previous discussions, *Lapor Hendi* was intentionally designed by the Semarang City authorities to function as a virtual public space that fosters dynamic interactions. These interactions are not limited to two-way exchanges but also encompass multi-directional communication, enabling a more inclusive and participatory discourse.

As a complaint system that incorporates multiple channels, citizen discussions in the *Lapor Hendi* system related to city development issues occur in two distinct models. First, citizen aspirations submitted through channels such as WhatsApp, the LAPOR!-SP4N website, SMS, and Android applications are limited to two-way communication. In these cases, discussions regarding the issues raised by citizens take place exclusively between the reporting individual and the local authority. This authority is typically represented by the head of an OPD (Regional Apparatus Organization) or BUMD (Regional-Owned Enterprise), and mediated by a bureaucrat serving as a liaison admin or an admin managing the *Lapor Hendi* system.

Second, citizen aspirations submitted via social media channels such as Twitter, Telegram, and Facebook enable multi-directional communication. In this model, discussions about urban development issues or public affairs in the virtual space allow for interactions not only between the reporting citizens and public officials but also directly with the heads of relevant OPDs or BUMDs, the Mayor of Semarang, and even between citizens or community groups. Essentially, these social media platforms provide an interactive dialogue space that fosters engagement among citizens themselves or between citizens and government officials. The findings of this study align with statements made by two civil society activists actively involved in governance issues in Semarang, as discussed below.

> "Perhaps it can be said this way, sir: by providing this space, residents can submit input and complaints and participate in monitoring development. The government offers a channel for participation, essentially saying, 'If there are issues with development, come and supervise us.' Additionally, from my understanding of democracy, which requires dialogue, I see that the *Lapor Hendi* application was designed to facilitate dialogue. For instance, when the government responds to a resident's report and the resident is not satisfied, they can reply. This creates a space for residents to challenge the government's perspective or invite the government to discuss development issues and public affairs reported through the *Lapor Hendi* system." (Interview, reseacher of BRIDA Semarang, July 29, 2021).

> "I observe that *Lapor Hendi* is effective in processing aspirations and complaints from the community. This system creates the conditions for deliberative democracy. The key is that the city government shows a willingness to listen to public complaints about city issues that need to be addressed." (Interview, Widi Nugroho, Director of Pattiro Semarang, July 21, 2021).

The statements from the two informants above highlight that the adoption of *Lapor Hendi* is explicitly aimed at incorporating public aspirations into the policymaking processes of the Semarang City Government under Mayor Hendrar Prihadi. These public policies specifically address issues related to public spaces and services, which are integral to the daily needs of city residents. This demonstrates that, through *Lapor Hendi*, the Semarang City Government seeks to institutionalize substantive citizen participation in decision-making processes, particularly in the implementation, evaluation, and revision of public policies.

The institutionalization of substantive public participation through virtual spaces extends beyond procedural democracy (or electoral democracy) and introduces public deliberation as a vital element in local governance decision-making. In this context, *Lapor Hendi* functions as a virtual public space—or a new public sphere—that significantly fosters and influences the development of deliberative democracy in virtual spaces at the local level in Indonesia, particularly in Semarang City. However, it is important to note that this deliberative process does not occur in all decision-making contexts related to urban development in Semarang City. It is primarily observed in specific

cases of governance that directly impact the everyday needs of city residents, as previously described, where decision-making is conducted through public deliberation.

In summary, the *Lapor Hendi* phenomenon can be understood as a virtual public space insofar as it facilitates political decisions within the Semarang City government that are informed by public deliberation, based on the four dimensions outlined earlier. This indicates that the institutionalization of substantive public participation and public deliberation is not yet fully realized across all aspects of governance in Semarang City. Nonetheless, this does not diminish the significance of *Lapor Hendi* as an important initiative in fostering deliberative democracy in Semarang City.

Conclusion

This study on the *Lapor Hendi* phenomenon within the discourse of deliberative democracy, which examines citizens' virtual participation in policymaking and the improvement of public service quality in Semarang City through the *Lapor Hendi* system, can be summarized in the following two key points. First, the experience of Semarang City residents participating virtually through *Lapor Hendi* to influence public policymaking and improve the quality of public services has evolved dynamically, shifting from a reliance on electronic networks to a greater use of social media. Initially, SMS (Short Messaging Service), the LAPOR!-SP4N website, and Twitter were the three primary channels most commonly utilized by citizens to engage in the public policymaking process during the first two years after *Lapor Hendi* came under the management of Diskominfo, guided by the new Mayoral Regulation Number 34 of 2017 on Guidelines for Managing Public Complaints (P3M) regarding Public Services.

Second, the communication and dialogue between residents about public issues through various integrated complaint channels position *Lapor Hendi* as an innovative virtual public sphere characterized by the following attributes: advantage, compatibility, complexity, trialability, and observability. Through this virtual public space, *Lapor Hendi* facilitates residents in expressing their aspirations and engaging in discussions that shape discourse on public issues intersecting with the daily lives of Semarang residents.

As a virtual public space, *Lapor Hendi* has institutionalized citizen participation in decision-making and public policy processes. This practice of citizen participation operates on several principles: equality among citizens (*equality as citizenship*), accessibility that transcends spatial and temporal constraints (*unlimited access*), inclusivity for all citizens (*universality*), equal standing among participants (*egalitarianism*), transparency in decision-making (*transparent policy process*), and multi-directional dialogical communication (*interactivity*). The experience of citizen participation through this virtual public space validates the dimensions of virtual public space outlined in Correia's (2011) concept.

The experience of citizen participation in expressing aspirations and shaping public discourse through *Lapor Hendi* has successfully introduced public deliberation into the policymaking processes concerning urban spatial development, public goods governance, and public services. However, public deliberation through *Lapor Hendi* primarily influences the stages of policy implementation, evaluation, and revision. Unfortunately, it has limited impact on the earlier stages

of policymaking, such as agenda-setting, policy formulation, and drafting, including the *Musrenbang* process held in Semarang City.

This limitation highlights a significant constraint in the practice of public deliberation through *Lapor Hendi* within the policymaking process in Semarang City. Despite this shortcoming, the phenomenon of citizen participation via *Lapor Hendi* provides valuable insights into how deliberative democracy can be fostered and developed in virtual spaces, particularly within Indonesia's local context. This serves as a potential alternative in an era where procedural democracy is experiencing a legitimacy crisis and decline. This experience aligns with the ideas of Dryzek (2009) and Hendriks and Dryzek (2019), who argue that advancements in internet technology and social media—creating what is termed *communicative plenty*—have opened new avenues for implementing deliberative democracy in virtual spaces. Finally, this study argues that the *Lapor Hendi* initiative in Semarang City offers significant insights into how deliberative democracy can be cultivated and developed in virtual spaces within the local Indonesian context. And theoretically, this study provides an alternative theory to procedural democracy, which is increasingly experiencing a legitimacy crisis and decline, by developing a communication channel in virtual space for building citizen engagement and democratic policies.

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