



## Cyber-Urban Activism and the Political Change in Indonesia

Merlyna Lim - Annenberg Center for Communication, University of Southern California

*Focusing on cyber and physical urban civic spaces in Indonesia, this paper attempts to provide detailed instances of the ways in which space and place have been bound up with the formation of (political) identities in the history of conflicts and struggles over political power. By tracing the emergence of cyber and physical civic spaces during and after the political reform of 1998, this paper argues that cyberspace and physical (urban) space have become interdependent dimensions of political activism.*

*This paper uses the case of the May 1998 popular activism against the state to show how cyberspace provides an opening for political activism to, first, break through the barriers of state monopoly over the production of knowledge and flows of information and, second, to reach a national and even international audience through the cascading of information from the Internet to people on the street using other media technologies.*

*By examining the existence and roles of both cyber and physical civic spaces in the routine urban city life of Jakarta after May 1998, this paper further argues that the future continuity of these civic spaces in everyday life very much depends on the roles of the state, corporate economy actors and civil society in governing the provision of and access to them. Processes to transform overtly-contested, often violent and yet ephemeral sites of political action into routinely accessible spaces for tolerance and peaceful civil society are a central issue in the ongoing political reform in Indonesia.*

**Keywords:** activism, urban, cyberspace, Indonesia, politics

### Introduction

***That woman, a wife of one protestor, said: Because the struggle should be continued, my dear husband, I am giving a sliver of my eye for you. To replace your left eye that was smashed during the demonstration***

*("A Sliver of Eye", a poem by Nanang Suryadi, translated from Indonesian, 2 October 1996).*

In the condition where state authority situates urban spaces under strict surveillance and scrutiny, and uses violence against its citizens, as poignantly revealed in the poem above, the advent of the Internet and its interplay with the built environment of cities can greatly increase the complexity and flexibility of the creation of spaces for activism. The multitude of specialized cyber-civic spaces on the Internet is evocative of a sense of convivial urbanism that has been diminishing with the physical and social transformations toward post-modern, ultra-privatized and socially fragmented urbanism. The ability of Internet technology to provide spaces for interpersonal dialogue has also, in many countries, bolstered the potential for a more democratic public realm. These cyber-civic spaces have further generated a renaissance in the physical landscape of cities to provide social and cultural spaces in the built environment for interaction, debate, and political-cultural continuity and development.

These promises of the Internet in facilitating the fruition of civil society in its daily practices and in the public realm are not automatically fulfilled; rather, they are the outcomes of social processes that create and depend upon cyberspaces and urban spaces in specific historical contexts. Analyzing the existence of civic spaces in Indonesian cities, particularly in Jakarta, this paper examines an underlying system between politics and urban spaces, with identity as the driver behind political and spatial actions. Using the Indonesian case, this paper suggests that the political change which took place in the late 1990s, when the Internet played a significant role in creating cyber-civic spaces for political and social mobilization, cannot be understood as an independent event that occurred in a certain time-space nexus. It should be read as part of socio-political occurrences resulting from the power struggles within Indonesian political history.

Examining both the cyber and urban physical spaces of the city, this paper argues that cyberspace and urban space have become interdependent dimensions of establishing civic spaces for society; each can generate, strengthen, weaken or even kill the other. This paper also shows that a short rapid process of abrupt social mobilization can possibly lead to the creation of ephemeral civic spaces. As political change is accomplished, the sustainability of these ephemeral civic spaces is thus very much dependent on the outcomes of power struggles between the state, civil society and the corporate economy.

Using the case of 1998 Indonesia political reform, this paper argues that the provision of civic spaces, both in cyber and urban spaces, will continue to be an important element of democratization processes. This paper further argues that cyberspace will continue to play a significant role in social mobilization, which in turn leads to or is connected with civic spaces in physical urban settings - particularly insurgent civic spaces.

## Space and power (politics)

Despite a proliferation of academic literature in geography (Bosco 2001, Kurtz 2003, Routledge 2000, 2003), studies on political activism in most disciplines are not particularly geographically sensitive. Where spatial aspects are noticed, studies are hampered by the persistence of a realist conception of space, largely uninformed by two decades of theoretical development in radical geography. In much work in social sciences, space continues to be taken for granted; it is perceived as a given and neutral backdrop, and treated as a container of social practices.

Through the 1980s and 90s, the spatial turn in social theory (Soja 1989, Foucault 1999) was challenging prevailing assumptions of time as dynamic and space as static or neutral. Space was reconceptualized as socially-constructed, and social relations, in turn, were coming to be seen as socio-spatial relations (Harvey, 1996). Radical geographers have argued and demonstrated that spatial arrangements are constantly being produced and reproduced through ongoing practices and discourses. In turn, spatial discourses and practices actively condition social reality and social struggles (Massey 1992, Harvey 1989, 1996). These arguments also suggest that the successful manipulation of space is central to the exercise and contestation of power (politics).

***“Space is not a scientific object removed from ideology and politics; it has always been political and strategic”***

*(Lefebvre in Soja 1989: 80).*

Echoing Lefebvre, Foucault argues that “space is fundamental in any exercise of power” (1984: 252). This remark clarifies Foucault’s earlier statement (1980: 149) that “a whole history remains to be written on spaces which would at the same times be the history of powers.” Soja (1989: 20) interprets Foucault as constructing a “crucial nexus”, a linkage between space, knowledge, and power. This implies that structures of meaning which are implicated in the production and use of power are themselves implicated and produced in specific ‘spaces’. While ‘space’ may begin as a physical construct, the organization and meaning of space is “a product of social translation, transformation, and experience” (Soja 1989: 79-80). Therefore, space is more than just a backdrop that provides a “setting of interactions” (Giddens 1984). Space itself is a fundamental constituent of knowledge and power regimes. Indeed, “space is inherently political” and “politics is inherently spatial” (Elden 2001: 6).

By putting politics alongside spatiality, any discourse of democratization and political changes must include a discussion about ‘civic space’ as a decisive factor of the rise of civil society. The term ‘civic space’ is used here instead of ‘public space’ to clarify the need for a space in which civil society can engage in its daily practices of voluntary organization (Douglass *et al.* 2002). By overlapping the

survival of civic spaces and civil society in the city, we can thus examine important aspects of the space-politics nexus.

## Suharto’s Panopticon: State, City, and Civic Spaces in Indonesia

Suharto, the second president of Indonesia, who was in power for thirty-two years, built a ‘Panopticon’<sup>1</sup> of constant surveillance over national territorial space. In constructing a national system of surveillance, the Suharto regime magnified its control through the fear of its capacity to identify anyone complicit with anti-government actions, and it did so in a manner that was greater than its actual capacity physically to enforce its rule (Lim 2002). Public spaces existed mostly for the purpose of creating spaces for activities symbolically in support of his regime. While one could almost always use these spaces for apolitical activities at any time, the use of these spaces were restricted to state-approved functions. Without public spaces with freedom of assembly, the public sphere was critically limited to state actors and their supporters.

Suharto’s success in creating regime-laden (legitimizing) identities was manifested in the general lack of awareness among people that they were being controlled and manipulated. For more than three decades, most people did not mind when plazas, squares and parks were used for national ceremonies (e.g. the flag ceremony on Monday morning) or for regimented national physical exercise (*senam kesegaran jasmani*) on Friday mornings and mass jogging on Sunday mornings. Indonesians went out onto the street to participate in state-sponsored weekly athletic events, and did so without any feeling of being controlled or manipulated (Lim 2002). Sometimes, those engaged in the exercise programs would wear identical athletic clothing – not unlike prisoners in an exercise yard – as symbolic evidence of loyalty to the nation and the ruling regime, while the government created the image that it really took care of its people by providing such spaces. The sponsored routines filled up public space, and people were sucked into participating in them, with the result that they became increasingly apolitical without any awareness of their being depoliticized.

For more than 30 years, the government was able to legitimate itself through such identity promotion in, and control of, public spaces. There was no space that was ‘civic’, in the sense of being available to civil society at arm’s distance from the state. Rather, all activities that happened in public spaces in Indonesia were required to be known of and permitted by the state. To hold social occasions, religious meetings, sports events, cultural and arts events, let alone political debates, required a stamped letter stating that the ‘authorized party’ permitted

<sup>1</sup> Foucault (1979), in his book *Discipline and Punish*, applied the Panopticon as a metaphor for the oppression of the individual by the state in modern society. Foucault observed that control no longer required physical domination over the body, but could be achieved through isolation and the constant possibility of surveillance. He wrote that, in modern society, our spaces are organized “like so many cages, so many theatres, in which each actor is alone, perfectly individualized and constantly visible” (Foucault, 1979: 200).

the activity. The terminology of *'pihak yang berwajib'* (the 'authorized party') used by the government did not specifically identify who this party or person was. Of course the so-called authorized party could usually be bribed, and at times there were authorized parties who would let people do whatever they wanted as long as they were recognizable. Nevertheless, with the knowledge that 'the authorized party' could be in any place and any time, and just might be observing people's actions, like the invisible guard at the Panopticon, this encouraged people to engage in self-censorship and self-discipline and not challenge the regime (Lim 2002).



Figure 1. A neighborhood sign (Lim 2002: 388)

A particularly ominous form of the use of the term 'authorized party' was the posting in every neighborhood, street and alley of small signs with the phrase: 'All guests who stay for more than 24 hours should be reported' (to the authorized party) (Figure 1). This simple sign was much more powerful than it appears to be. Much simpler and cheaper than the surveillance cameras mounted by many Western governments, it successfully controlled people without any overt feeling of being controlled (Lim 2002). Although people might not have actually reported their guests, they accepted the idea that the government had the right to ask them to do so and that it was the right thing to do. They were also encouraged by such signs to feel suspicious of 'strangers' in their neighborhood.

Interestingly, as argued by Barker (1999), New Order's surveillance worked on territoriality by hiding it and segmenting it. It confined territoriality by creating smaller domains within which it was allowed to operate. It sought "to establish mechanisms for bringing these discrete domains into a larger [system], thus making them of service to the state in the process" (Barker 1999: 126), as demonstrated in the use of the above mentioned small neighborhood signs, as well as:

- *the Rukun Tetangga (RT) system, and*
- *Siskamling, Sistem Keamanan Lingkungan (neighborhood security watch)*

Both the above examples are based on a Japanese method of getting people to spy on their neighbors. In the RT system, the state appoints a *Ketua RT* (leader) for every neighborhood block, a *Ketua RW* (*Rukun Warga*) for several RT, a *Lurah*

(chair of a village) for several RW, and so on, up to the top level. Within this system, no one can say where the state stops, because it is composed of layers of organizations that are not officially state functions but which nonetheless report to the state, right down to the neighborhood block level. The *siskamling* system was the New Order government's attempt to impose state control over local security practices, especially in urban settings, by taking them out of the hands of organized private gangs (Barker 1999: 123). The *siskamling* functioned to segment and categorize urban spaces, to assign them particular types of security personnel, and to bring them under the control of the state (Barker 1999: 126). It was established in the domain of voluntary security, and aimed to establish a system for centralized monitoring and control.

With the national system of panoptic surveillance, the state can see without being seen, and can expand its control through the fear of its imagined as well as its real presence, which is greater than its actual physical capacity to enforce its rule (Foucault, 1979). The state-sponsored activities were used to create an illusion that the state took care of its people by providing secure and safe spaces.

The difference between Suharto and Sukarno [the first president] is that while Sukarno [was] a visionary leader; Suharto is a 'televisionary' one. He appears on it each single day (George Junus Aditjondro in *Merdeka!* 1998).

Suharto was conscious of the spatiality of his power. He claimed his spatial existence in his territory by establishing the centralized eye-seeing tower. Suharto reproduced himself as the infinite eyes that existed in any place within the physical boundary of the Indonesian archipelagos—the eyes of the Father of Development who protected and cared for his people. His appearance on television—broadcasting him launching so many 'developmental' events all over the country—and the giant billboards of the 'smiling general' located in many public spaces just supported the reproduction of his regime's surveillance apparatus.

During Suharto's regime, the everyday practices of state surveillance rid Indonesian cities (particularly Jakarta) of any hope for civic spaces. Space for society was filled with the images and signs of the state and the corporate economy, leaving no autonomous spaces for civil society.

### Cyber-civic Space: the Internet and Suharto's Late Days

The crisis that hit Asia in the late 1990s brought Indonesia down to its lowest economic level since the last days of Sukarno. The private banking sector collapsed, while merely the interest payments on billions of dollars of debt almost exceeded the annual gross domestic product. The maelstrom of political and financial problems hammered the economy and sent foreign investors running for shelter abroad. During the crisis, the state physically stopped building the

country. As the economic level hit bottom<sup>2</sup>, the social contract between the state and society was broken, and thus the trust of society in the state sharply declined.

During this crisis, which lasted at least two years and continues in many ways today, the Internet started to develop in Indonesia. In its early development, the corporate/business economy and the state together started trying to control this technology. These state-corporate relations were revealed in the ownership configuration of the Internet in Indonesia. Some early ISPs (Internet service providers), such as Indonet, were private companies owned or operated in collaboration with state-owned companies, most of which were put into the hands of Suharto's clan and cronies (Lim 2003a, 2003d). But once the technology was made available to civil society, it could not be totally controlled from above. As popular unhappiness increased during the Suharto regime, the corporate sector began to distance itself from the state. This was greatly facilitated by a concerted ideological push by the World Bank and IMF towards neo-liberal structural reforms extolling the virtues of privatization, market-driven development, and economies open to global free trade.

the collapse of the export economy also left the corporate economy without a clear way to build its identity in a new form. The ISPs that emerged like mushrooms in the rain in 1996 simply died a tragic death in 1997 as a result of the combined political and economic crisis (Lim 2003a). During this crisis, a group of young people, Onno Purbo and the Computer Network Research Group (CNRG) at the Institute of Technology Bandung (ITB), emerged to socialize the '*warnet*', small commercial establishments equipped with several computers hooked up to the Internet, which have become the new frontier for Indonesians to create and mold their identities, searching for self-respect, belonging and the confidence to engage with fellow citizens of Indonesia beyond the purview of the state. The fast-rising popularity of *warnet* (two thirds of Internet access in Indonesia is done in *warnet*<sup>3</sup>) is a testament to the growing awareness of its capacity to offer an alternative means for creating personal identity through social interaction (Lim 2003a, 2003c, 2003d).

### Warnet: Finding Authentic Civic Space

For decades, civil society in Indonesia had been politically dormant. The lack of civic space, tight state information control and the violent practices of the armed forces made civil society movements fail over and over again. It was not only spaces for the political engagement of civil society that were tightly policed, so too were the life spaces of communities. Press and media freedom was non-existent; thus dialogue between the state and civil society in the press and other media was absent. Periodic police and military sweeps of protestors were

<sup>2</sup> In June 1998, the number of people living under the poverty line reached 79.4 million or 39.1% of total population. This was nearly as same as Indonesia's condition in 1976 (BPS, 1998).

<sup>3</sup> Based on the survey done by Swa and MarkPlus Magazine, November 2000.

conducted at university campuses, which in the Sukarno era had always been the most active spaces for the political mobilization of civil society, but were dulled under Suharto's authoritarian regime. The Internet, which represents a revolutionary change in time-space relations, was highly instrumental in ending this era (Marcus 1998, Hill and Sen 2000, Lim 2003b, 2003c).

For democratization, the Internet has all the features that are suited to civil society and grassroots citizen action in a manner that is less easy for a small number of people or groups to control. These features include: one-to-one communication, low/affordable cost, ease of use, broad availability and relative technological resistance to surveillance and censorship (Lim, 2003b). The Internet thus emerged as a 'convivial medium' - borrowing Ivan Illich's (1973) concept of 'convivial technology'. In other words, the technology allows for the creation of what can be termed 'cyber-civic spaces' that facilitate the rise of civil society in places such as Indonesia.

Yet, despite this potential, cyberspace is less 'virtual' to the world than it appears to be. Clearly it requires physical technology and infrastructure, ranging from satellites, telephones and cable networks to Internet cafés, that shelter the hardware and provide space for users. In addition, these elements need real people to manage at real geographical sites. In this new geography, cyberspace, each communication and information node is still dependent upon the local production of space, both narrowly in the form of Internet use sites and more broadly in terms of the construction of urban networks of infrastructure and communications linkages.

In Indonesia, the *warnet* (Internet café) phenomenon provides a clear example of how civil society has been able to develop cyber-civic space within the context of an authoritarian political regime. Accessing the Internet from the *warnet*, unlike connecting from other places, is a direct form of social engagement. Sitting in front of the *warnet* computer screens is not just dealing with the cyberspace but is also interacting with other *warnet* users within the physical space of the *warnet*.



Figure 2. Warnet (Lim 2003b: 277)

Unlike usual Internet cafes, the *warnet* (Figure 2) is also something cultural. Many *warnet* in Bandung (47%<sup>4</sup>) offer a lesehan type of lounge, mainly because users favor this type. Imitating the traditional style of warung, the lesehan type permits users to access the Internet by sitting on the floor with the computer's monitor on a table with short legs (Japanese style table). Some *warnet* also offer a group lesehan lounge that allows users to enjoy accessing the Internet, discussing online materials, sharing some interesting URLs or listening to the same MP3 songs together as a group. This gives a sense of collectivity.

Besides its publicness, the *warnet* can also be private. For people who want personal privacy, most *warnet* in Bandung (96%)<sup>5</sup> offer partitioned private spaces (often covered by a bamboo curtain) where users can have their own highly secure space, preferred by those who want to access pornographic websites or sites with forbidden political ideologies (before 1998). All of these social activities happen in *warnet*.

Beyond the physical ones, the virtual activities held in the *warnet* are also culturally, socially and politically rare or even luxurious. The most common online activity in *warnet* is chatting. The *warnet* provides a space where people can escape from their routine and release the burdens of the day by chatting with others. For young people, the new privacy created in chat rooms is particularly important. In cyberspace, these youngsters can gain more autonomy from their parents or the older generation than in an offline space, especially concerning social relations between the sexes (Slama 2002). It is important to note that,

<sup>4</sup> 16% of *warnet* offers lesehan type only, 53% offers no lesehan type (normal chairs only) and 31% offers both choices (based on a field survey done in Bandung by Lim and Dwiarta, 1 August-14 October 2002).

<sup>5</sup> 92% of *warnet* offers partitioned rooms only, 4% are open space *warnet* (no partitioned rooms) and 4% offers both choices (based on a field survey done in Bandung by Lim and Dwiarta, 1 August-14 October 2002).

before 1998, sex as a social subject was as taboo as politics (except Pancasilaism<sup>6</sup>) for younger Indonesians. The privacy offered by the Internet thus provides for something of a subculture, which is not recognized in any other spaces or places in society. The *warnet* is therefore public and private at the same time. It also facilitates both online and offline social relationships, as in many cases the online relationship created in cyberspace would be followed by the offline relationship at an actual location, preferably the *warnet* itself (Lim 2003b). Obviously, the *warnet* itself is the authentic physical civic space, while it can also provide the authentic 'cyber-civic space' for Indonesians who are cyber-savvy - mostly youngsters.

To better understand how the Internet and its physical embodiment—*warnet*—can contribute to the democratization of the city, the following section will narrate the role of the Internet in supporting the rise of civil society as a political force in Indonesia.

### Cyberspace and the rise of civil society in Indonesia

Despite the severe surveillance system of the state, civil society started to emerge in Indonesia in the early 1990s, as shown by the appearance of hundreds of NGOs. This was partly impacted by the rise of civil society all over the world. Politically active NGOs were rare in Indonesia, however, as the state did not like this type of NGO, and many highly-educated people actually made use of the so-called 'technical' NGOs as a career path that allowed them to become more prosperous while avoiding politics.

Among the very few politically active pro-democracy NGOs, there was the Information Center and Action Network for Reform (PIJAR) and the People's Democratic Party (PRD). Founded in 1989, PIJAR consisted of students from various universities in Jakarta, Bandung and Yogyakarta. Its main purpose was to struggle for democracy and human rights in Indonesia. Since its birth, its public activities, such as holding street demonstrations or public meetings, were always considered illegal by the state, and its leaders were sent to trial then imprisoned. So PIJAR decided to shift its activities to disseminating resistance against the state by spreading an underground bulletin called 'News from Pijar' (KdP). KdP's content was essentially news about alternative opinions, mainly criticizing Suharto's regime, which were not provided by legal media. However, this kind of activity was not very effective; the circulation was not very wide, and the risk of getting arrested was still very high. In 1995, the chief editor of KdP was put in jail.

<sup>6</sup> Pancasila, literally means five principles, is the philosophy of the state. This rules how Indonesian lives or it acts as the so-called 'way of life'. Pancasila includes: believe in the One and Only God, just and civilized humanity, the unity of Indonesia, democracy guided by the inner wisdom in the unanimity arising out of deliberations amongst representative, and social justice for the whole of the people of Indonesia.

In 1996, KdP decided to move into cyberspace, and since then it became the major news provider for alternative political information about Indonesia. Helped by international networks, Pijar successfully built its nodes of information flows through a Germany-based<sup>7</sup> server (in Stuttgart) while the information to be disseminated was partly provided by anonymous contributors who wanted to support the pro-democracy movements but did not want to put themselves in danger. To protect the security of contributors who mostly accessed the Internet from the *warnet*, PIJAR provided an encryption program, called the Pretty Good Privacy (PGP) Public Key. This way anybody could secretly communicate with the PIJAR's administrators (Pijar 1999).

The second organization, PRD, consisted of a national student organization called Students in Solidarity for Democracy in Indonesia (SMID), an independent trade union called the Indonesian Center of Labor Struggle (PPBI), a national peasant's union (STN), and a youth-urban poor organization (Gozal 1998). Since its public debut in the mid-1990s, this organization had been facing severe negative sentiments and a crackdown by the state. When the bloody attack against Megawati's Democratic People's Party in Struggle (PDI-P) happened on 27 July 1996, the PRD, which was always paralleled with communism, Marxism and the forbidden PKI party, became a target of the state's politics of scapegoating. Many of its activists - called the sons of PKI - were kidnapped and killed. The PRD thus had no single space to hold its activities. In less than three weeks after the July 1996 tragedy, the PRD's leading and high-rank activists were sent to trial and were held in continuing detention. From July 1996 onwards, PRD activists thus decided to pursue an underground struggle and hold their meetings in 'itinerant civic spaces' to avoid military attacks (Sudjatmiko in Green Left 1998). However, such activities were not effective, in the sense that the state police could always arrest and imprison the PRD activists as a result of this physical activity. In this critical situation, the PRD members decided to continue their struggle in cyberspace. From 1996, the PRD used the Internet actively to communicate and coordinate at the national level, linking its members all across the country by *warnet* connections, and also building networks with international pro-democracy institutions<sup>8</sup>.

Meanwhile, with the help of some pro-democracy cyber-activists, such as John MacDougall from the Indonesia-L mailing list ([Indonesia-L@indopubs.com](mailto:Indonesia-L@indopubs.com) or the more well known 'Apakabar' list) and KdP, the New Order's assaults against pro-democracy movements in Indonesia were able to receive global exposure and sympathy from the international audience, especially Indonesians abroad. As a result, some pro-democracy groups were created. Among the significant ones was The People's Resistance in Indonesia (CSVI: *Coördinatiegroep voor Steun aan het Volksverzet in Indonesie* or Coordination Group for Support of the People's

<sup>7</sup> <http://www.uni-stuttgart.de/indonesia/pijar/> (last accessed on 30 July 1999).

<sup>8</sup> Personal interviews with PRD representatives by emails (2003).

Resistance in Indonesia). CSVI was founded in Amsterdam in June 1996 as a reaction to the military crackdown on the PPBI pro-labor movement in Surabaya<sup>9</sup>. Just two weeks after the 27 July 1996 tragedy, CSVI launched its website,<sup>10</sup> which contained numerous controversial articles with left-wing nuances—something that was inaccessible in Indonesia—that supported the pro-democracy movement of PRD and also the opposition PDI-P party of Megawati Sukarno.<sup>11</sup> CSVI had no difficulties voicing its ideas in Holland. This group held street demos in front of the Indonesian Embassy in The Hague and received easy access to Dutch media. In this way it created its own 'Indonesian civic space' outside Indonesia. Yet CSVI still did not have easy access to Indonesian society. However, with the advent of the Internet, CSVI could be in contact not only with other pro-democracy movements in the world, but also with those in Indonesia. Bonded by the same spirit of democracy, a similar ideology (pro-labor, Marxism, left-wing), and with a shared enemy (Suharto and his cronies), CSVI supported PRD by providing a space to maintain its profile on the CSVI's server.<sup>12</sup>

In the case of PIJAR and PRD, cyberspace not only functions as 'cyber-civic space' but also becomes the space 'in-between'. Cyberspace here becomes a unique instrument, since it works in a two-layered dimension: the real and abstract space. In this dialectic, we can term this the 'third space' (Soja 1996): a 'lived space', 'representational space' (Lefebvre 1991), or the 'space of heterotopia' (Foucault 1997). This is a space that is a space in itself, but that can also be inserted between two or more spaces and can link them up. This is an 'in-between' space that can be the channel of transformation between multi spaces and thus strengthen the civicness of the others.

In the Pijar case, cyberspace linked non-civic spaces in Indonesia where PIJAR could not actively engage in civic actions with a passive civic space in Germany (passive in the sense that the server in Stuttgart, Germany, while always ready for the storage of information, was not previously a repository for any Indonesian pro-democracy movement), thus activating the civicness in these two spaces and turning both of them into meaningful 'cyber-civic space'. In the PRD case, the spaces both in Indonesia and Holland were already civic spaces. The difference is that PRD's space in Indonesia was a covert or illegal civic space, while the one in Holland was an open/free civic space. Together they found a way to create an entry into the public sphere, an authentic cyber-civic space entering into politics in Indonesia.

It is important to note that pro-democracy civil society outside Indonesia played a significant role in the struggles for Indonesian political reform. Among some important contributors were: George Aditjondro, Indonesian professor of sociology

<sup>9</sup> Personal interviews with CSVI representatives by emails (2003).

<sup>10</sup> <http://www.xs4all.nl/~peace/> (last accessed on 30 April 2003).

<sup>11</sup> <http://www.xs4all.nl/~peace/pubeng/mov/mov.html> (last accessed on 19 August 2000).

<sup>12</sup> <http://www.xs4all.nl/~peace/pubeng/pdm.html> (last accessed on 19 August 2000).

in Newcastle, Australia, who kept providing articles about the corrupt practices of Suharto's family and his oligarchy of cronies; the Munindo website in Germany, which supported the pro-democracy movement by providing a website for Megawati Sukarno and PDI-P; Netherlands Radio (Ranesi), which always provided the most up-to-date alternative perspectives on issues, both in its short-wave broadcasting and on its website; John MacDougall in Maryland, who since the early 1990s has consistently provided controversial information about Indonesian politics on his online news service Apakabar, and who has provided space for dialog in his Indonesian-L mailing list; Murdoch University, Australia, which provided a server for SiaR; the University of Stuttgart, which provided a server for PIJAR, X-pos, and Indo-news; CSVI, which provided a server for PRD and Indo-Marxist—left-wing organizations that were illegal in Indonesia.

### **Reformasi 1998: from the Internet to the Street**

Though cyber-civic space is a significant source of information, because it cannot be a space for real-political actions it cannot by itself accomplish political changes. Political changes, after all, need a real space with real flesh and body engaged in it. Moreover, the Internet in Indonesia was initially only available to a small segment of society, providing cyber-civic space for an elite group of people only. It needs 'people' to create a real social movement. It needs the 'space of places' linked with the 'space of flows' (Castells 1996).

Based on this reality, PRD, PDI-P and other pro-democracy groups felt the urgent need to spread the knowledge they gained from the Internet to society at large. Using 'dark letters', 'can letters' and 'underground pamphlets', various alternative forms of information to the ones provided by mainstream media, particularly about the corrupt practices of Suharto's family and his cronies, were disseminated to people in Indonesia. Indonesia Baru (1998), which also published this type of information on their website, urging website readers to 'print out the content of this homepage and fax them out to your friends' and to 'photocopy the printout; then give it to non-internet users'. Some other websites put out similar instructions. During those days in 1997 and 1998, many mysterious faxes sent by unknown fax numbers arrived at private and public office fax machines in major cities in Indonesia. The printed versions of this kind of information were also spread around. Many *warnet* and campuses in Jakarta, Bandung and Yogyakarta had this information on their announcement boards. This alternative information was not only spread among students and *warnet*-related peers. The photocopied pamphlet version of one very provocative item of e-news, which detailed Suharto's wealth, for example, was commonly found on the streets. Newspaper sellers and street-vendors sold this photocopied pamphlet at traffic lights and newsstands (Lim 2003b). Taxi drivers shared it with their passengers; bus drivers put it on their buses.

The construction of enemy images, with Suharto as the enemy, which was created by this information flux, was very effective in cultivating the sense of unity. The narrowing of identity definition, with Suharto as 'Other' or 'outgroup' and the rest of the people as 'Self' or 'ingroup', produced positive effects, which included individual integration into a group and its mobilization (Lederach 1997). Thus the spirit of democracy, wrapped up in a collective resistance identity, could easily be transformed for the benefit of society at large.

From cyber-civic space, collective resistance was transferred to the life space and reached people from all walks of life. The Internet cafés, traditional markets, street kiosks, public parks and squares and other spaces were suddenly transformed into spaces of resistance. The accumulation of collective resistance reached its peak in May 1998. Everyday people, from students to lecturers, from white-collar workers to trishaw drivers, from mothers to teenagers, all filled the streets, plazas, squares and parks—mainly in Jakarta, but also in other cities in Indonesia—to create insurgent spaces, the space where 'civil society rises up to confront the state' (Douglass *et al.* 2002: 354).

The state's spaces that had not previously functioned as civic spaces were radically transformed into the people's spaces, the civic spaces of the Indonesian people. The major proto-civic spaces that symbolically and historically represented the central power of state within the city (Jakarta), such as the Hotel Indonesia (HI) roundabout (Figure 3), *Monas* square, Semanggi Bridge, and the Parliament House (Figure 4), all turned into the major insurgent spaces for toppling the Suharto regime.



Figure 3. The Hotel Indonesia (HI) roundabout at the Thamrin-Sudirman intersection in Jakarta was filled with thousands of protestors, May 1998



Figure 4. The Jakarta Parliament House or Conefo building was swarmed by hundreds of thousands of student protestors, May 1998.

John Friedmann in his book *Economic Space and Life Space* (1987), John Friedmann describes how learning begins and ends with action, with purposeful activity. In addition to the action itself, social learning involves political strategy and tactics, which tell one how to overcome resistance, theories of reality, which tell people what the world is like, and the values that inspire and direct action. Taken together, these four elements constitute a form of social practice (1987: 181). Cyberspace in the case of Indonesian political reform has acted as a space for social learning, where political activists in Indonesia could interact with activists in the rest of the world, and thus come to an understanding about a reality different from that which the authoritarian regime endorsed. In cyberspace, these activists learned to sharpen their political strategies and tactics without being co-opted by the state. When the information flowing from cyber-civic space reached the physical world - the *warnet*, campus, *warung* and other 'life spaces' - social learning about political reform for society at large was begun. An active civil society successfully forced an immediate education of the Indonesian people that the state had fallen completely into the hands of a corrupt oligarchy, while at the same time promoting the conviction that society nonetheless retained the power to organize itself independently of the state. This knowledge supported the values that inspired and directed the people's action, compelling them to fill in the spaces of the city and turn these proto-civic spaces into insurgent spaces from which civil society challenged the power of the state.

### Ephemeral Civic Spaces in Demopolis

Since political reform struggles in the late 1990s, Jakarta has become a 'demopolis', at once a *demos' polis*, a city ruled by the people, and a *demo-polis*, a city that is always full of demonstrations. Street demonstrations happen almost

every day and have become something of a routine. Before 1998, by reconstructing the same enemy, Suharto, the various elements of civil society found a sense of unity, despite coming from different ideologies with different vested interests. While any difference within groups is seen as a problem for collective identity formation, recognizing an external difference can assist in highlighting external similarity, thereby strengthening group cohesiveness and the ability to act in a unified manner. However, this kind of bond is weak and very vulnerable. The downfall of Suharto eliminated the bond between the groups within civil society, and the differences between them subsequently emerged and escalated. At the same time, the civic spaces created before and in 1998, both in cyberspace and in physical space, were revealed as being ephemeral: the civicness created in these spaces was momentary and precarious.

The Internet itself, while there are attempts to use it to provide an authentic civic space, a public sphere, is very much dependent on those users who are dominant. Although the new informational space of the Internet had a great impact in intensifying the political revolution, it has not, following the fall of Suharto, continued to support civil society to continue democratic reform. While the state is weak, the student movement continuously confronts the state without a clear vision, and is adding to the chaos. At this juncture, individual interests take over the political agenda of civil society, while communal interests which pit elements of civil society against each other around issues of race and religion undermine the 'civil' attributes of society (Lim 2002b). In this situation, just as it can support good civil society, the Internet can also assist another aspect of the contemporary network society—communal resistance—which opposes not just the state, but also other segments in civil society that do not share the same beliefs. The use of the Internet by the radical and violence group Jihad Troopers is one extreme example (Lim 2002b, 2005). Its story shows how a project identity can be constructed not on the basis of a multicultural civil society, but as a continuation of communal resistance to the notion of a secular society and state (Castells 1997: 11).

As the struggles between the state, civil society and corporate economy proceed, a new phase of conflict over control of the Internet and the ephemeral civic spaces of the city is creating a new crisis. The uncivil society and the state (in collaboration with the corporate economy) appear to dominate those spaces, thus turning them to either commercial spaces, propaganda spaces (state's space, company's space), or spaces of conflict and intolerance within civil society (ethnic and religious spaces).

The state is aware of the existence of civic spaces and the importance of these spaces in social mobilization. At this stage, the state feels threatened and directly attempts to re-legitimize its identity by recapturing these spaces. Using the term 'renovation', the state, under the local authority of governor Sutiyoso, turned the main insurgent spaces of the 1998 political reform—Monas Square and the HI

roundabout—into what Steven Flusty calls ‘interdictory spaces’-spaces that ‘intercept and repel or filter would-be users’ (1994: 16).

The renovation project of the HI roundabout in 2001-2002 has changed the surface around the fountain from a walkable circle into a slanted constantly wet surface splashed by a powerful fountain (Figure 5), making this major demonstration area both physically and ideologically ‘slippery’—a space that ‘cannot be reached, due to contorted, protracted or missing paths of approach’ (Flusty 1994: 17).



Figure 5. The newly renovated HI roundabout, Jakarta, January 2003 (source: author’s photo).

Using the term ‘disciplining public space’, the governor of Jakarta also gated Monas Square with high fences and put security guards at each of its two major entrances. By renovating this square, the state did not simply make this public space cleaner and more well-ordered, it also directed its redesign against the use of that space for legitimate protests.

### Concluding remarks

Despite the use of cyber and physical spaces for communal violence and state propaganda, the spaces that were opened by the political reform in 1998 can never be shut down; though ephemeral in terms of engagement in the public sphere, they continue to be the spaces for people. The state and uncivil society may try to take these spaces, but the doors are already opened for society at large to recognize their rights over the city space. At the very least, people are now aware that they can join any protest that taps into their identities; conversely, these spaces invite people to join in creating new identities.

All kind of protests that appear in city spaces clearly show that civil society and society are plural and diverse. There are various different groups co-existing in

the city and all are components of society. The city is the melting pot of diverse elements that provides the material for the ‘otherness’ of visibly different identity groups. While these material manifestations of otherness can enrich the city’s social and cultural wealth, some of these diverse groups are, unfortunately, each drawn into themselves, nursing their anger against the others. In this regard, nevertheless, as Sennett (1970: 162) argues, by bringing them together in forums of expression in civic spaces, the conflicts expressed will be increased, but the possibility of an eventual explosion of violence will be decreased.

Echoing Sennett’s attention to disorder and conflict in space, Lefebvre suggests that the possibility of violent dispute may well be the chief democratic virtue of city life. He argues that liberty engenders contradictions which are also spatial contradictions; ‘urban conditions, either despite of or by virtue of violence, still tend to uphold at least a measure of democracy’ (1991: 139). Therefore, in the chaotic *demopolis* of Jakarta, the awakening of civic spaces gives a sign of hope for democracy to rise, yet there is still a long way to go. The actors in the city, especially the state and civil society, should work together in creating more civic spaces as well as maintaining existing civic spaces that are tolerant, safe and inclusive.

In light of the dangers that might appear on the horizon for Indonesia, the question arises of whether the idea of civil society and civic space—however effective it was in helping to bring down Suharto’s authoritarian regime—will turn out to be useless in the building of democracy. This paper argues that it will not. Rather, the concept of civil society and civic space will retain its validity, both as an instrument of analysis and as a program of practical action. Nevertheless, its internal content has changed. The civil society of 1998 was the projection into the future of a vision that rested upon an extraordinary emotional unity. The civil society of more than ten years later cannot and should not base itself on emotions, but rather on the building of carefully-nurtured institutions of tolerance, on the practical realization of ethical and humanist values, and on the inclusion of as many as possible numbers of people in public life. The main task now is to construct democratic mechanisms of stability, such as constitutional checks and balances, good governance, civic education in the spirit of respect for law, and the encouragement of citizen activism.

In the struggle over power in creating, capturing, and expanding civic spaces, civil society alone cannot transform ephemeral civic spaces into sites for peaceful engagement in the public sphere. The state also plays a crucial role in governing the provision of and access to civic spaces, through its powers to make and enforce law and to create non-commercial, safe, democratic and tolerant public spaces in the city. How to transform overtly contested, often violent, yet ephemeral sites of political action into routinely accessible spaces for peaceful accommodation of the rise of civil society is a central question in Indonesia’s ongoing political reform

## Acknowledgements

This article is based on a paper presented at the RE:Activism conference held in Budapest, 14-15 October 2005. The author would like to thank the Netherlands Organization for Scientific Research (*Nederlandse Organisatie voor Wetenschappelijk Onderzoek*) for funding the research on which this paper is based. The author also would like to thank Mike Douglass for his comments and insights on this paper, especially regarding the 'civic space' concept.

## References

- Barker, J.** (1999) "Surveillance and territoriality in Bandung" in Vicente E. Rafael (ed.) *Figures of Criminality in Indonesia, the Philippines, and Colonial Vietnam*, Ithaca: Cornell Southeast Asia Program, pp. 95-127.
- Bosco, Fernando J.** (2001) "Place, space, network and the sustainability of collective action: The Madres de Plaza de Mayo" *Global Networks* 1(4):307-329.
- BPS** (1998) *Statistik Kesejahteraan Rakyat 1997*, Jakarta: Biro Pusat Statistik, Maret.
- Castells, Manuel** (1996) *The Rise of Network Society, The Information Age: Economy, Society and Culture Vol. I*, Oxford: Blackwell.
- Castells, Manuel** (1997) *The Power of Identity, The Information Age: Economy, Society, and Culture Vol. II*, Oxford: Blackwell.
- Douglass, M., Ho, K. C., and Ooi, G. L.** (2002) "Civic Spaces, Globalization, and Pacific Asian Cities", *International Development and Planning Review*, Liverpool University Press, pp. 345-362.
- Elden, Stuart** (2001) *Mapping the Present: Heidegger, Foucault and the project of a spatial history*, London: Continuum.
- Flusty, Steven** (1994) *Building Paranoia: The Proliferation of Interdictory Space and The Erosion of Spatial Justice*, Los Angeles: Los Angeles Forum for Architecture and Urban Design.
- Foucault, Michel** (1979) *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, New York: Vintage Books.
- Foucault, Michel** (1984) *Foucault Reader*, edited by P. Rabinow, New York: Pantheon.
- Foucault, Michel** (1999) "Space, Power and Knowledge" in Simon During (ed.), *The Cultural Studies Reader*, London and New York: Routledge, pp. 134-141.
- Friedmann, John** (1988) *Economic Space and Life Space: Essay in Third World Planning*, New Brunswick: Transaction Books.

**Giddens, Anthony** (1984) *The Constitution of Society*, Berkeley: University of California.

**Gozal, Edwin** (1998) "Radicalism in Indonesia: a short history of the radical movement in Indonesia", presented to the *Asia Pacific Solidarity Conference*, 10-13 April 10-13.

**Green Left** (1998) "Pimpinan Partai Rakyat Demokratik (PRD) Berbicara dari dalam Penjara", in *Info Pembebasan*, weekly, 11 March, online publication, <http://www.xs4all.nl/~peace/pubeng/mov/movto/ipibs.html> [30 April 2003]

**Harvey, David** (1989) *The Condition of Postmodernity: An Inquiry Into the Origins of Cultural Change*, Oxford: Blackwell.

**Harvey, David** (1996) *Justice, Nature and the Geography of Difference*, Malden, MA: Blackwell.

**Hill, David and Sen, Khrisna** (2000) *Media, Culture, and Politics in Indonesia*, Oxford, Oxford University Press.

**Illich, Ivan** (1973) *Tools for Conviviality*, London: Calder & Boyars.

**Kurtz, Hilda E.** (2003) "Scale frames and counter-scale frames: Constructing the problem of environmental injustice" *Political Geography* 22:887-916.

**Lederach, John Paul** (1997) *Building Peace: Sustainable Reconciliation in Divided Societies*, Herndon, VA: USIP Press.

**Lefebvre, Henry** (1991) *The Production of Space*, London: Basil Blackwell.

**Lim, Merlyna** (2002) "Cyber-civic Space: From Panopticon to Pandemonium?", *International Development and Planning Review*, Volume 24 No. 4, Liverpool University Press, p. 383-400.

**Lim, Merlyna** (2003a) "From War-net to Net-war: The Internet and Resistance Identities in Indonesia", *International Information and Library Review*, Elsevier Science Publisher.

**Lim, Merlyna** (2003b) "The Internet, Social Network, and Reform in Indonesia", in N. Couldry and D. Miller (eds.) *Contesting Media Power: Towards a Global Comparative Perspective*, Oxford: Rowman and Littlefield, p. 273-288.

**Lim, Merlyna** (2003c) "The Information Terrains and Politics: The Internet and Political Power in Indonesia", *Indonesian Journal of Social and Cultural Anthropology*, Volume 73, Jakarta: University of Indonesia.

**Lim, Merlyna** (2003d) "From Real to Virtual (and Back again): The Internet and Public Sphere in Indonesia" in K. C. Ho, R. Kluver and K. Yang (eds.) *Asia Encounters the Internet*, London: Routledge, p.113-128.

**Marcus, David** (1998) "Indonesian revolt was Net-driven", *Boston Globe*, 23 May.

**Massey, Doreen** (1992) "Politics and Space/Time" *New Left Review*, 196: 65-84.



Merdeka! (1998) The Smiling General, online publication,  
<http://smilinggeneral.tripod.com/main.htm> [30 July 2005].

Pijar (3 January 1999) “KdP PGP Public Key”, online publication,  
<http://www.pijar.net/profile/pgp.htm> [30 July 1999].

Routledge, Paul (2000) “Our resistance will be as transnational as capital:  
Convergence space and strategy in globalizing resistance” *GeoJournal* 52:25-33.

Routledge, Paul (2003) “Convergence space: Process geographies of grassroots  
globalization networks” *Transnational Institute of British Geographers* 28:333-  
349.

Sennett, Richard (1970) *The Uses of Disorder*, New York: Vintage.

Slama, Martin (2002) “Towards a New Autonomy: Internet Practices of Indonesian  
Youth: Conditions and Consequences”, paper delivered to the Third International  
Symposium of Anthropology Indonesia Journal, Denpasar, 16-19 July.

Soja, Edward W. (1989) *Postmodern geographies: The reassertion of space in  
critical social theory*, London: Verso.

Soja, Edward W. (1996) *Third Space: Journeys to LA and Other Real and Imagined  
Places*, Oxford: Blackwell.

Downloaded from EastBound / Journal / 2006 / 1  
<http://www.eastbound.info/journal/2006-1/>