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The Dysfunction of Formal Legal Institutions and the Emergence of Netizen Movements as a Form of Social Control over Information in Indonesia

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ABSTRACT

This research discusses problems that occur in legal institutions in Indonesia and the role of netizens in supervising the law through social media. This research uses a qualitative method by taking data from several journals that discuss legal institutions, social media, netizens, and cancel culture. The results of the study show that problems such as lack of honesty of officials, administrative problems, and poor legal processes can make people lose trust in legal institutions. Therefore, people use social media to monitor legal cases, express opinions, provide criticism, and ask that cases be handled fairly. This can be seen from the emergence of the term no viral no justice and the phenomenon of cancel culture. However, netizens' actions can also cause problems if they are done without knowing the actual facts. A person may be criticized or considered guilty even though it is not necessarily true. Therefore, the public must be wiser in using social media and not easily disseminate unproven information. Meanwhile, legal institutions must work more openly, fairly, and responsibly so that public trust in the law can increase.

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1. INTRODUCTION

From a sociological point of view, society is considered a structured system in which there are elements that are interrelated to maintain social balance. Through a structural functional perspective, each social institution has its own role to maintain stability through renewal and pattern selection (Parsons, 1951). However, this perspective recognizes the existence of social deviations, namely dysfunction, a situation in which the situation of an institution fails to carry out its duties so that it causes disorder in society (Merton, 1968). When a formal institution experiences dysfunction, the social system will automatically look for a way to recover independently. The failure of the function of social control of this

formal institution makes the community to return to active in informal social control institutions as a savior to restore the balance of the disturbed system (Ross, 1901).

The spontaneous reaction of netizens is manifested through changes in the situation of norm enforcement in the digital space. This event has become the main means of informal social control that becomes the mainstay of society when formal institutions are dysfunctional (Pratama, 2024). In sociological terms, this change in groups indicates a sense of solidarity in the digital era. Digital societies or netizens who are not regionally bound and do not even have blood relations are quickly united due to the emergence of a strong shared and emotional consciousness (Durkheim, 1893; The columnist, 2026). Through the influence of virtual interactions, these new social groups can emerge and enforce their own system of norms to adjudicate social deviant behavior that is beyond the reach of formal legal institutions.

If these events are associated with the pressure of the Indonesian social system, then this will be closely integrated with the characteristics of netizens in Indonesia. Netizens in Indonesia are not only social media users, but cybercitizens who also act as supervisors who are very responsive and aggressive on issues of justice ('Azzam, 2020). The characteristics of netizens in Indonesia can be said to be complex because the social media space often releases everyone's social barriers in the real world, thus triggering them to respond to unexpected and profoundly joint responses when responding to viral news (Prasetya et al., 2022). Such characteristics are what create the power of new social pressure "no viral, no justice" (Sudirman, 2023).

The impact of these characteristics of netizens has made a fundamental cultural shift in the Indonesian social system. Cyberspace as a place to complain is currently implementing the practice of cancel culture, which is a cancel culture that functions as a strategy for netizens to carry out mass sanctions (Norris, 2023). This incident has caused panic that is contrary to the cultural roots of Indonesian values (D. Clark, 2020). The values of Indonesian society, which prioritize the principles of kinship, tension, and deliberation in resolving a conflict, are currently undergoing a shift, namely becoming an irregular one-sided cyber judgment through digital exclusion without a valid clarification and confirmation process.

If you look at the examples of cases of law violations that exist in Indonesia, this is real evidence. Especially if there are those involving relationships who have high power (Mumtazia & Aini, 2026). These cases were raised by netizens into mass demarcation in the world of social media when the handling of formal legal institutions was considered to be hindered or there was no progress. With the influence of netizens on the media, it has succeeded in making the apparatus have to make corrections to institutions and accelerate handling after it has become a popular topic (Holil & Rahmadina, 2026).

Although vigilante play in the digital world is starting to be rampant, there is a real research gap in the sociological literature in Indonesia. Generally, in the past, it tended to see the netizens movement or cancel culture as only limited to pure communication science research on the effectiveness of the media, or considered as a new digital crime event (Setiawan, 2025). There has been no research that has examined this event as a form of compensation for informal social control that arises due to the dysfunction of official legal institutions in the social system in Indonesia. Therefore, this study aims to analyze the dysfunction of official legal institutions and how the netizens movement works as a form of informal social control in Indonesia.

2. METHODS

This study uses a qualitative approach with descriptive analytical methods and content analysis. The data in this study fully uses secondary data collected through the documentation method. The data search process was carried out online through the Google Scholar database with a publication time limit of the last 5 years (2021-2026). The criteria for the selected article were scientific journals that discuss netizens' behavior, cancel culture, and law enforcement cases in Indonesia. The data that has been collected is then read, grouped by topic, and critically analyzed using sociological theory to describe how the netizens movement functions as a social control in the digital space.

3. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Structural functional theory emphasizes that society functions as an interdependent social system, where dysfunction in an institution will greatly disrupt the overall social balance and stability. In the context of law enforcement in Indonesia today, cultural and administrative dysfunctions such as the practice of corporatism, patronage practices, and human rights violations have weakened the independence and level of public trust in law enforcement agencies. The inability of these formal institutions to provide a consistent response to stability and justice ultimately encourages a shift in social control mechanisms from the state to a digital public space.

Through social media platforms like today, netizens (netizens) take an active role as a new social control that uses virality to urge law enforcement officials. Phenomena such as "no viral no justice" in the Vina Cirebon case to the implementation of cancel culture show how digital mobility is able to create real social pressure and become an informal sanction or punishment in society. However, the role of this netizen still has ambivalence because it has the potential to trigger the phenomenon of trial by social media which can threaten the objectivity and principle of innocence in the criminal justice system.

Basically, structural functional theory views society as a complex social system consisting of various interrelated elements. These elements include social structures, norms, values, institutions, and behavior patterns that play a role in regulating interactions between individuals. Each element has its own function in maintaining social order and balance. Therefore, if one institution is dysfunctional, this condition can affect other elements so that the balance in society has the potential to be disturbed. In this case, effective and sustainable communication is one of the important aspects in maintaining social stability and order (Radiansyah & Sabilla, 2022). In addition, social norms also function as a control mechanism that directs individual behavior to remain in accordance with the values and rules that apply in society (Putri et al., 2024).

Dysfunction in an institution can cause various problems that have an impact on the disruption of social stability and order (Turama, 2020). One example can be seen through corrupt practices in legal institutions that have the potential to reduce the level of public trust in the institution. This problem is also related to cultural dysfunction which can be seen from the practice of compromise and corporatism within law enforcement institutions, such as the police, prosecutor's office, and even anti-corruption institutions. The culture of patronage and conflicts of interest that develop within these institutions can weaken the independence and professionalism of law enforcement officials. As a result, the law enforcement process in a number of cases tends to take place selectively and is influenced by political interests.

This condition shows that a number of law enforcement institutions in Indonesia are still facing dysfunction problems, both in the administrative aspects, the implementation of legal processes, and the integrity of their apparatus. Komnas HAM (2023) noted that human rights violations are still found in various stages of the legal process, including torture and detention without the support of valid evidence. These problems reflect that the functions of law enforcement agencies have not run optimally. As a result, the application of the law has become inconsistent and does not fully reflect the principles of justice for all people.

In the era of rapid digital transformation, social media has cemented its position as an important instrument in public control over bureaucratic performance in Indonesia, especially in the 2021–2026 range. The existence of digital platforms such as Twitter (X), Instagram, and TikTok has opened up a wider space for public participation, thus allowing citizens to actively supervise the implementation of public services (Zordi et al., 2026). This is in line with the finding that social media has fundamentally changed the communication pattern between the government and its citizens (Ambarwati et al., 2025).

This phenomenon shows that netizens have transformed the digital public space into a shared moral space. From a sociological point of view, this dynamic shifts the authority in determining justice priorities from the state to influencers and anonymous masses. People now tend to rely on social media as a means to express opinions and demand justice, which ultimately puts pressure on the authorities

to act faster, more openly, and more responsively. This digitalization has shifted the communication system from a closed and bureaucratic one to an open, fast, and more accountable one. Strong social pressure urges the authorities to act immediately, reflecting how the legal process is influenced by the social forces that are developing in cyberspace. This underscores the need for a legal system that is adaptive and sensitive to people's aspirations.

As a case study, the Vina murder incident, hereinafter referred to as the Vina Cirebon Case which occurred on August 27, 2016, is one of the real pictures of this phenomenon. Although the police have named 8 suspects out of a total of 11 perpetrators and stated that 3 others are on the Wanted Persons List (DPO), the fact that this case has not been solved for 8 years is concrete evidence of the inresponsiveness of law enforcement officials. This case was drowned out by various news and other legal case handles, which reflects the lack of attention to the completion of the case.

The case, which was initially handled by the Cirebon City Police, was then transferred to the West Java Police to involve the Criminal Investigation Branch of the National Police. The wave of virality on social media created great public pressure on law enforcement officials to immediately take concrete action and resolve the case. This phenomenon emphasizes the manifestation of the jargon "no virality no justice" in the reality of law enforcement in Indonesia.

In addition to escorting cases, the participation of netizens is also manifested in the cancel culture phenomenon. The act of canceling or digital exclusion is in the form of stopping various forms of support for individuals, public figures, and brands who are considered to have committed actions or made statements that violate social norms, ethics, and conformity. Along with increasing public awareness of social issues and injustices, people use the power of social media to stop behavior that is considered detrimental. As a product of a digital society born from the development of social media as a new public space, cancel culture functions as an informal social sanction mechanism to enforce norms and encourage public accountability.

4. CONCLUSION

Based on the discussion above, it can be concluded that problems that occur in legal institutions in Indonesia, such as the lack of honesty of the apparatus, administrative problems, and legal processes that do not run well, can make the public lose trust in the law. Therefore, the public has begun to participate in supervising legal cases through social media. They use social media to express their opinions, criticize, and ask that a case be handled fairly. This is in line with Semadi's (2024) research which explains that social media has a role in increasing transparency and accountability in law enforcement and is a means of social control of the community. Social media can also be a means for people to voice and fight for justice when they have difficulty obtaining justice through formal procedures.

An example can be seen from the case of Vina Cirebon which was again talked about after receiving attention from netizens. In addition, there is also the phenomenon of cancel culture, which is the action of the community to give criticism or social sanctions to someone who is considered to have made a mistake. In the research of Muharman et al. (2022), cancel culture is described as a form of social control on social media that can be carried out through education, reprimands, and sanctions as a consequence of actions that are considered deviant. Thus, cancel culture can be a form of community participation in responding to actions that are considered contrary to social norms.

However, netizens' actions do not always have a good impact. Sometimes, people immediately blame someone without knowing the real facts. Research on cancel culture shows that this phenomenon can be a "double-edged sword", because on the one hand it can encourage someone to take responsibility for their mistakes, but on the other hand it can lead to excessive judgment. In fact, cancel culture can occur not only because of a violation of norms, but also because of public hatred or dislike for someone. Therefore, social media users need to be careful in sorting out information before giving judgments or participating in cancel culture.

Thus, the netizens movement is one of the ways for the public to supervise legal institutions through social media. Social media can act as a tool of social control and help encourage transparency in the law enforcement process. However, the public should still not replace the duties of legal institutions in determining whether a person is right or wrong. Legal institutions must be more open and fair in handling cases, while the public must be wiser in using social media so that it is not easy to disseminate information or provide judgments without knowing the truth. With a balance between public supervision and the authority of legal institutions, social media can be used as a means to support the creation of more transparent, fair, and responsible law enforcement.

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