



# Virtual Community and Local Civil Society Empowerment

## Study on Virtual Community in Sikka Regency, East Nusa Tenggara

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### Abstract

*Social media has changed the way of people to communicate. The similarity of attractions (hobby, idealism, study, culture, religion, faith, etc.) creates virtual community. Online networking presence will actually be used as a tool for joint action as well as empowerment. Sikka District is one of area in East Nusa Tenggara. In this study, the researchers show how people in Sikka through online discussion forums use the media community to participate in local development. Furthermore, this research also shows how the role of virtual communities is used as tools for joint action as well as empowerment as to strengthen the government and society. The role of virtual communities in community empowerment and development has been demonstrated by the average virtual communities in Sikka. Discourses of empowerment and development in discussions delivered through virtual communities are generally followed up in concrete activities that have a positive impact both to the community members and the wider community. Cohesiveness between members of virtual communities in Sikka is one factor of involvement of these communities on community empowerment. In addition, the ability to access, analyze, evaluate, and use of the media that has been owned by members of the community remain conducive in helping maintain both online and offline activities. This condition helps create a public sphere that is the crucial element in either national or local development.*

### 1. INTRODUCTION

Virtual community was born as the positive impact of the internet. When someone was actively connected to the

Internet with all the activities such as browsing to chat and follow discussion forums then automatically that person will be entered as part of the virtual community. Because the internet rates become more affordable and the prices

of devices are getting cheaper, the number of virtual communities in Indonesia is increased. Facebook social media is one of the most widely owned by Internet users in Indonesia. Until the second quarter of 2016, the number of active Facebook users reached 88 millions (<http://tekno.kompas.com/read/2016/10/20/17062397/>, accessed 25 of Oct 2016). This kind of social media is interesting for the people of Indonesia and the number of the user become bigger because basically people of Indonesia are the type of people who were very happy to chat. Starting from the fan community of artists, technology, politics and the group of buying and selling exist there. The unique thing in virtual communities is that sometimes we get the news faster than the official reporting by the main mass media.

The advantage that is not found in any print media is the media capabilities of online news portal to connect directly with readers. Relations or engagements among the media, journalists and readers are now entering a new era. The reader becomes part of the editorial, part of the newsroom, even a resource by providing tips, leaks, suggestions, comments, in real time, in the editorial.

The other unique thing in the social media is that there is always someone who knows more than us. So that the pattern of dissemination of information in the digital age is now a multi-way, no longer only in the direction from the newsroom to the reader, but the mass media now is part of the public conversation, in which the production of information is no longer monopolized by journalists.

Formerly, there was absolutely no conversation between the journalist and the reader, now the public and the media can be together formulate the news agenda, focus attention on the institutions that need to be highlighted because it is a great impact on people's lives. It is not surprising that later there will be virtual communities emerged by the online news portal. Rheingold in Mc Quail (2012: 164) shows that virtual communities can be formed by any number of individuals via the internet on the basis of their own choice or in response to a stimulus. Communities like this one have an added advantage in principle, which is open and accessible, while the real community is often difficult to enter.

New electronic media is widely welcomed as a potential way to escape from the politics of the 'top down' oppressive of mass democracy, in which political parties are strictly organized unilaterally making policy and mobilize support behind them. Freedom of the press that was born in Indonesia since 1999 contributed to the emergence of various media. The digital age offers many conveniences that is easier for us to find good information, correct information, and misinformation, which implies the risk of widening the gap of information and increased inequality between social classes.

The amount of media that appears, make the audience faced with many choices, and of course, the audience choice is the media that suits their ideals, their views, their beliefs, and their hobby. The similarity of idealism, views and beliefs are almost always the background for someone to participate in disseminating news perceived support of their positions, provide confirmation of their political preferences, or a variety of other reasons, regardless of the

truth of the contents of the news they distribute. Postings they spread on this social media then reap the reaction and action from the back redistribute the content of either posts or news previously shared, until the real action is taken to the streets. The actions appear is also diverse, either a positive impact to the community or in the form of riots or social problems in society.

In this digital era, the diversity on ethnicity, religion, customs, culture and language of Indonesia as well as the height of Internet users in Indonesia is a new challenge of the democracy life in Indonesia. Many of us see many riots and social issues using social media as a means of communication. Tanjung Balai Medan riots case, for example. This case arose out of a request from a woman who asked one of the mosque congregations to turn down the volume of loudspeakers in mosques. The case became bigger after allegedly provocation through social media that moves the crowd to riot.

From this case, we can see how social media in wrong way can endanger life of the nation. Social media is used as a medium for conducting mass raiser anarchy. Research conducted by Dewi (2016) stated that the freedom of the press and social media support enable people to participate and be part of democracy. But the flow of information and social iteration in the media, in fact, also a threat to democracy itself, so that media literacy is a solution offered to reduce fanaticism, radicalism and intolerance in Indonesia.

In fact, democracy is crucial in the capital development of a country or region. In spite of various shortcomings and negative impacts, the presence of the internet and social media, however, has spawned a new public space that is equal among the netizens in which none of the parties is allowed to perform manipulation, coercion, and domination. However, in spite of the negative stuff on social media, social media actually also has a positive side. Christopher Mele (2005) in his article entitled *Cyberspace and Disadvantaged Communities: The Internet as a Tool for Collective Action* shows how online networking presence will actually be used as a tool for joint action as well as empowerment.

In line with the growth of facebook users in Indonesia, people in Sikka regency, East Nusa Tenggara Province are increasing literacy using virtual media, especially social networking facebook. Group Features in this application is used as a community media gathered in a community based on certain common interests. Sikka Regency Society Facebook users have joined the virtual community of diverse topics. Some of them; *Solidaritas Jurnalis Sikka*, *TIK (Teknologi Komunikasi & Informasi) Sikka*, *pecinta Sastra (KAHE)*, *Forum Rakyat Pencari Keadilan (RPE-KAD)*, *MauFoto*, *Mofers Photography*, *English Club of Nian Sikka*, *inimaumere.com* and many more virtual communities in Sikka district.

Number of members of these groups ranges from hundreds to ten thousands of members. Group English Club of Nian Sikka is one of a new group in Sikka district that has the mission of literacy in English for its members. This group has 111 members. *Grup inimaumere.com* is a group that has quite a lot of members, 38,592 members. *Mofers Photography* group consists of 3,609 members. The mem-

bers of this group are photography lovers or those who want to learn photography. Two of the last group are two of several groups that sufficient attention on tourism in Sikka.

There are many activities that were held by virtual communities in Sikka District that has empowerment value. The impact of this activity was not just felt by the member but also common people. They held both online and offline activities. They use the virtual community in social media to discuss, to express their idea, to get support and to execute the idea. The appearance of Azizah (local dangdut singer) at the national level singing competition is one of the example how virtual community in Sikka district took a role of her success in KDI (Kontes Dangdut Indonesia) 2015, and also Mario G. Klau, the winner of The Voice Indonesia 2016. There are many social action such as cleaning the beach, charity, education, workshop, etc. that were also held by virtual community.

In this research, the researchers wanted to show how people in Sikka through online discussion forums using the media community to participate in local development. Furthermore, in this study will also show how the role of virtual communities is used as tools for joint action as well as empowerment as to strengthen the government and society.

## 2. METHOD

This research was conducted in Sikka from August-October 2016. This research used descriptive qualitative method to describe the detailed condition or process and also inter-related findings on the subject of research (Sutopo, 2006). The data gathering techniques were interview and documentation. Meanwhile, the sampling technique was a purposive sampling.

Purposive sampling tends to choose the right informants who know the problems and can be trusted as reliable sources (Sutopo, 2006). The informants chosen in this study are the admins of the groups (Mofers Photography, iniSikka.com, Forum Diskusi Politic Sikka), the members of the groups (Mofers Photography, inimaumere.com, Forum Diskusi Politic Sikka Forum Rakyat Pencari Keadilan, English Club of Nian Sikka, Ayo ke Maumere, smansamof). The analysis used interactive model from Miles & Huberman (1992). This analysis has three analysis components namely: data reduction, data display and verification or conclusion withdrawal.

## 3. RESULT AND DISCUSSION

### 3.1. Virtual Communities in Sikka District

When we type the word “Sikka” or “Maumere” in search column on Facebook, it can display dozens of forum discussions, starting from a political discussion forum, culture, information technology, hobby, until the forum to find friends and exchanging phone numbers (HP) and the amusing stories that developed in Sikka. The members of this discussion forum range from teenagers, college students, and adults of working ages.

This phenomenon shows the greater interest and aware-

ness of Sikka people who live either in or outside Sikka to use social networking Facebook as media gathered in a virtual community.

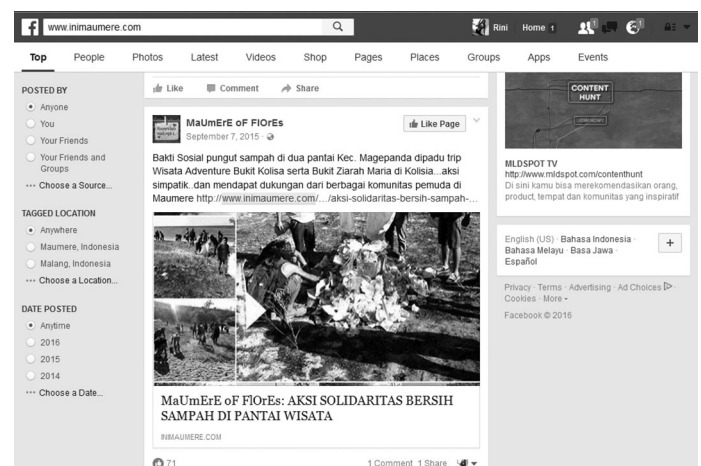
Discussion topic discussed in this virtual community is mixed, sometimes still in the groove corresponding philosophical meaning groups, sometimes also out of the groove. For example, in the group Political Discussion Forum Sikka (FDPS) it does not only discuss politics in Sikka Regency, but also sometimes talk about tourism, or other topics. But even so, the equation of these virtual groups is for “Sikka progress”.

There are many of actions performed by virtual communities that have become a real action in the real world, or become an input for the government to a better Sikka. Ferdy (2015) in his study of the discourse of tourism development through Facebook discovered that through discussion “Blue Print of Tourism in Sikka” mediated by a group FDPS which lasted from November 27, 2014 through February 13, 2015, the people of Sikka member FDPS represents their desire to involved from the planning stage in the development of tourism in Sikka regency.

Community empowerment through the virtual community is also seen in some action such as social work to clean up the beach. Netizens are concerned to the behavior of littering that impact on tourism attraction in Sikka. These concerns were then led to the joint action to clean up tourist beaches in the area. Another example is raising public support NTT, especially Sikka on the appearance of Azizah, a local artist from Sikka, on the national stage. This support is the form of sympathetic posts, which appears to the Sikka youth.

The real action support are fundraising (they do this on the street and in the market), make the event to watch together (*nobar*) to almost the entire community of Sikka district gathered to watch together at the town square. Public enthusiasm for the emergence of community pride Azizah represents public pride at once showed the yearning of Flores society of the their existence on the national scene. Similar support is also given to Maria Carolina Noge, Putri Indonesia 2015 and Mario G. NTT Klau, winner of the Voice Indonesia, 2016.

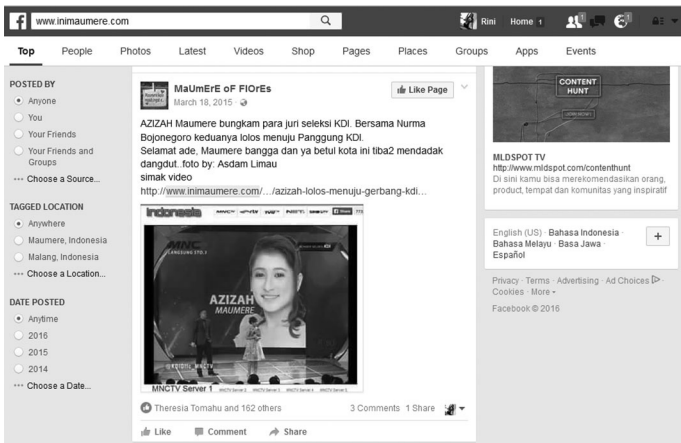
Figure 1.  
The social action to clean up the beach travel



Source: <http://www.facebook.com/inimaumere.com>, accessed October 31<sup>st</sup>, 2016

Figure 2.

Support shown to Azizah, Local artist runner up Kontes Dangdut Indonesia 2015



Source: <http://www.inimaumere.com>, accessed October 29<sup>th</sup>, 2016

As the case in the virtual community at large, the virtual communities in Sikka are also inseparable from the spread of the pros and cons news. But what is interesting here is that there is awareness of the news production process, the awareness of being not easily provoked by the news. Here is an example of news that is shared by one of the members in the group Forum Rakyat Pencari Keadilan. This news is about one charismatic figure in Sikka who is a member of the House of Representatives of Indonesia. From the headlines, we can see obviously it shows the positions of the media related to the news about Hugo Andreas Parera.

Figure 3.

The negative news about Hugo Andreas Parera, a member of Parliament from Sikka



Source: <http://www.facebook.com/group>, accessed 30 of October 2016

The news does not easily provoke FRPEKAD members. Jonas Jensen as the one who post shared this news and wrote his status. Through his status, he asks the netizens to think positively on the work of Corruption Eradication Commission/KPK (Komisi Pemberantasan Korupsi) although this commission examined him as a witness. Some of the member commented on this post. Some have shown awareness of the news production process that is a statement from a member named Santi Sima Gama who said "It's just the art of politics commonplace follow the flow

of the Commission, now only as witnesses, sometimes the media likes to give bombastic title." Her statement shows the awareness that sometimes the media uses bombastic headlines to attract the reader's attention, especially if the news publishes the politics content. Some of the members pray for him. Some comments also show that as a good citizen it is OK to come to KPK.

Figure 4.

Reaction of RPEKAD members on negative news.



Source: <http://www.facebook.com/group>, accessed October 30<sup>th</sup>, 2016

The members in virtual communities also use the media as a venue for sharing knowledge. In Mofers Photography group, for example. Frequent dialogue about photographic techniques occurs between members. Sharing knowledge is not only happening in the virtual world, but also in the real world. This community conducts sharing knowledge for several times, bringing members into the real world, bringing the professionals in the field of photography. Tribhuwana Wetangterah (Photography Mofers club chairman) said that virtual communities Mofers Photography formed after the formation of a real community. Their purpose of establishing the group on FB is to facilitate communication between members. Mofers Photography members consist of those who just love the look of photographic works to professionals, such as Valentino Luis, who is a photojournalist from NetGeo, a media industry worldwide scale. With the community in FB, then the distance and time is no longer a constraint. Another thing that underlies the formation of this virtual group is the awareness of the development of communications media that has the function of empowerment. Tribhuwana, in an interview conducted by researchers in mid September 2016 said that photography is another way to build the area with their photography to describe the beauty of the area.

Another reason behind the formation of Mofers Photography group is to develop the group in terms of quantity, quality of work and also to make it easier to establish relationships with other photographic community. According to Slevin in his book *The Internet and Society* (2000) "online communities such as this has the additional advantage in principle, open, and accessible, while the real community is often difficult to enter". With the establishment of the group Mofers Photography versions of cyberspace, it will allow people to easily enter this community.

Regional development through social media once was

raised by Ferdy (2015) in the scientific paper entitled “Discourse of Tourism Development in FB group”. In his study, Herman found that a Facebook group becomes a means for the Sikka public to participate in the development of local government; remembering that the local government has not utilized social media as a means of communication to the public. The response of the government to the discussions through the media this FB was newly delivered after the development discourse of the virtual space are appointed by local journalists in local print media, through closed discussions about the formulation of the blueprint for tourism development of Sikka district.

The examples above show about the image of the virtual community in Sikka and its role in Sikka society empowerment. The role of virtual communities cannot be separated from the group admin roles participated selecting allowable posts published in the group, and also the role of group members in these communities. Some of the admin set the “Post permission” setting on the ON mode in order to select the member’s post before it is uploaded in the group. By this way, the admin can select the flow of information. But another admins set the “Post permission” setting on the OFF mode because this they want to give free space for members to express their feeling, idea or information.

### 3.2. Group Cohesiveness in Virtual Communities in Sikka

Cohesiveness is the strength of the interaction of members of a community. The forms of cohesiveness itself can be realized in the form of interaction between members of the community, freedom of expression, enthusiasm and responsibility towards the community. Cohesiveness is then become the factor of a community endurance. Cohesiveness is also later became an important element in the movement of the community.

McDavid and Hariri in Rachmat (2009) argues that cohesiveness can be measured by three things, namely the existence of interest among members in interpersonal, interested members on the activities and functioning of a community, and the extent to which members are interested in the community as a means to satisfy the needs of personal. From the interviews to several members of the virtual community of some virtual communities in Sikka, it can be concluded that it is good to keep them interacting in virtual communities because of the activities and functions of their communities positive value. They can connect to a variety of people with all its advantages such as workshop, training, discussion. Some communities also found how community members feel the satisfaction of personal needs through community activities. In general, this happens in a community that has similarity hobby like photography. Coupled with the appreciation of which are regularly held by the community, so as to make community members more motivated to work better.

Forsyth (2010) explanation of the components required in the formation of a community is very relevant to explain how community cohesion is a decisive factor permanence

of a community and then also how this community can contribute to the empowerment and development. Some of the components include social cohesion, task cohesion, perceive cohesion, and emotional cohesion.

Social cohesion is the attraction between members of the community. Cohesiveness is a multi-level process where community members can be engaged to one another. At the individual level, members of the community found himself in the community; the community members have personal relationships between members of the community. At the community level, community members have a greater interest in a community. Community members will tend to remain in the community. Virtual communities member in Sikka are not only the original from Sikka, but also the migrants who live in Sikka, as well as indigenous people who live outside of Sikka. The word “Sikka” or “Maumere” (as the capital of Sikka District) is the main attraction for the members and the reason for them to join. Longing for home, the dream of a better Sikka, the dream of Sikka being well known by the outside community is also a reason this cohesiveness.

Task cohesion is a unity of community members focused on the task assignment depending on the cooperation shown by every member of the community to coordinate their efforts and collective every efficacy of the community. Collective efficacy is a conviction, so that community members develop and carry out tasks for the common goal successfully. It seems obvious to the hobby-based community such as Mofers Photography or MauFoto. Several offline activities have been carried out successfully. This success cannot be separated from the consciousness of each member to be responsible for duties and also solid cooperation among the members.

Perceive cohesion is cohesiveness where community members looking at a member of the community as a whole, a feeling of unity and togetherness in the community. Every member of the community was recognized in the community as an identity. Form of recognition is expressed in the form of appreciation of the work or through a link on the positive activities undertaken members. Mentioning one of the accounts is a form of recognition to the linked.

Figure 9.  
Tag name on the account of community members.



Source: <http://www.facebook.com/group>, accessed October 31st, 2016

Emotional cohesion is a form of positive togetherness in a community. This positive togetherness at the end gives a positive effect, such as improving personal performance and improving survival in communion. Offline activities such as social events and sharing together are one of the media for the group to increase the positive unity for the sake of the activity of the community and also the survival of the community. Emotional cohesion in virtual communities in Sikka was grown because of the feeling of being part of Sikka, the dream of a better Sikka, the dream of Sikka become well known place.

### 3.3. The Real Role of Virtual Community in Society Empowerment and Local Development

Virtual communities in Sikka District, like most other virtual communities, create not only a public space in the virtual world but also create physical spaces in the public domain. Through the virtual world such as social media, community members interact and communicate to form the dialogue and discourse until they finally decided to do the offline activity or movement.

New public spaces created by these online communities, each of which has a goal and a positive vision. Any positive activities designed to achieve the goals and vision, though not all communities have a clear vision and mission, but they have one thing in common that is the love of their area, Sikka District. Activities conducted both online and offline from some of the examples mentioned above, either directly or indirectly contain empowerment activities. Empowerment is “proses, cara, perbuatan membuat berdaya, yaitu kemampuan untuk melakukan sesuatu atau kemampuan bertindak yang berupa akal, ikhtiar atau upaya” (Depdiknas, 2003). Empowerment is the process, way, act of making power, namely the ability to do something or the ability to act in the form of sense, initiative or effort. Koentjaraningrat (2009) gives definition on Society as the unity of human life that interacts according to a certain customs system that is continuous, and which is bound by a sense of shared identity. In several studies on community development, community empowerment is often interpreted as an effort to provide power to make their voices heard in order to contribute to the planning and decisions that affect the community.

Conceptually derived from the word power means power or empowerment. The concept of empowerment is originated from social capital gains in public (group) that includes strengthening social capital, trust, comply rules, and network. If we already have a strong social capital, we will easily steer and adjust (direct) public and easily transfer knowledge to the community. By having a strong social capital then we will be able to strengthen knowledge, capital (money), and people. In the virtual community, the community itself was already a social capital. The greater the number of members is, the greater the social capital will be. This concept implies that the concept of community empowerment is transferring power through the strengthening of the group’s social capital to make productive groups to achieve social welfare. Strong social

capital will ensure sustainable in building a sense of trust in the community, especially members of the group.

They use the power of community with bottom-up planning that will continue to grow, after planning with top-down methods continually ‘failed’ to provide the needs of the public space. But intuitively, this grassroots movement should remain informal. These communities should remain as a community with their actions that though it may be informal but should be able to influence policies and legalities that are formal.

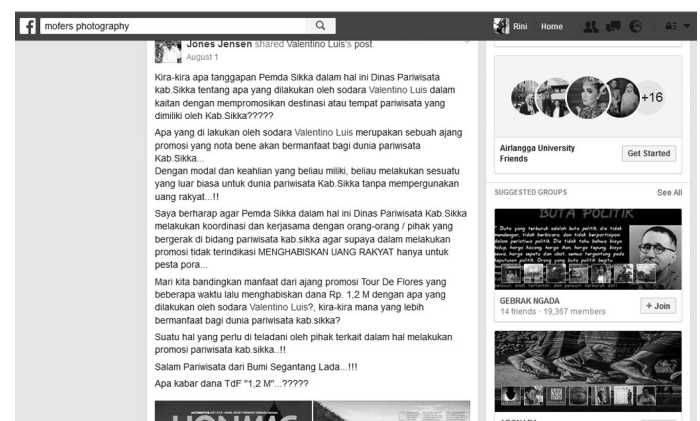
Subiakto and Ida (2012) said that the mass media is an important component for controlling the government as “power”. Here the media is positioned as a “watch dog” of power that should be guaranteed freedom as the fourth estate of democracy to make government cautious, intelligent and thoughtful. The communication technology advances emerge the internet that change the way of people to communicate. The social media emerge public space and it emerge a new estate of democracy.

According to Sirikat Shah (2014: 14) “Today, the public creates its own voice channel through cyberspace. This is the fifth pillar, which emerged as the public’s disappointment previous four pillars. In 2011 the future, this pillar will be more dominant in the world of communication settings, particularly Indonesia “.

We can find a discourse about critics on government policy in Mofers Photography group. In one of posts on the Mofers Photography, Jonas Jensen invites governments to look at what is done by Valentino Luis to introduce NTT to the world through his skill. On this post, he also hoped that the government in terms of tourism development makes coordination and cooperation with the parties – or those who engaged in tourism. Through this post, Jonas also questioned the effectiveness of the program Tour de Flores held by Sikka District Government in order to introduce Sikka district in the world, to what is done by Valentino Luis with his photography. What Jones Jensen has done shows that through social media (in this case he wrote in virtual community) he tried to criticize the government. This is the form of “watch dog” activity.

Figure 5.

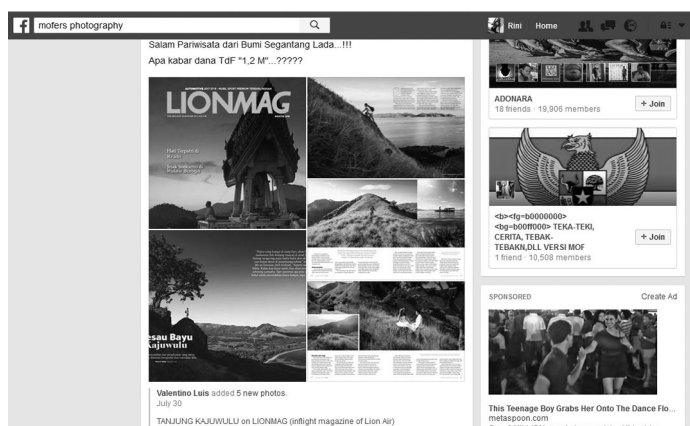
Jonas Jensen post on Mofers Photography group that questioned the effectiveness of the Tour de Flores programs and activities conducted by Valentino Luis Flores in order to introduce in the eyes of the world



Source: <http://www.facebook.com/group>, accessed October 25th, 2016

Figure 6.

Photographs of works of Luis Valentino linked posts in the group Mofers Jonas Jensen Photography.

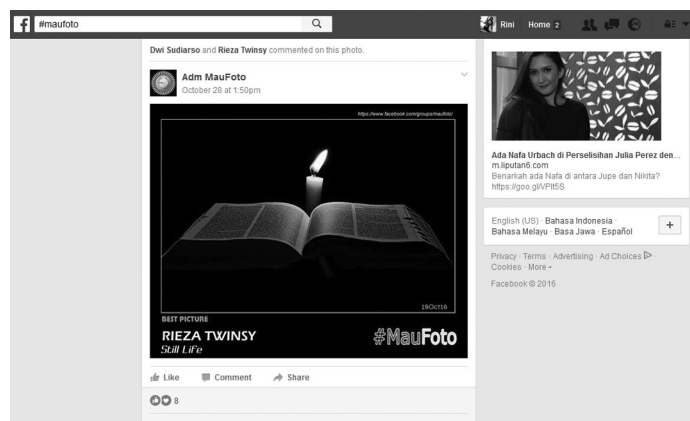


Source: <http://www.facebook.com/group>, accessed 30 of October 2016

Another empowerment initiated by virtual community in Sikka is by conducting competition. MauFoto is one of the virtual communities that conduct competition routinely for its members. They always give award to the pictures with various categories. They also conduct discussion and workshop on photography.

Figure 7.

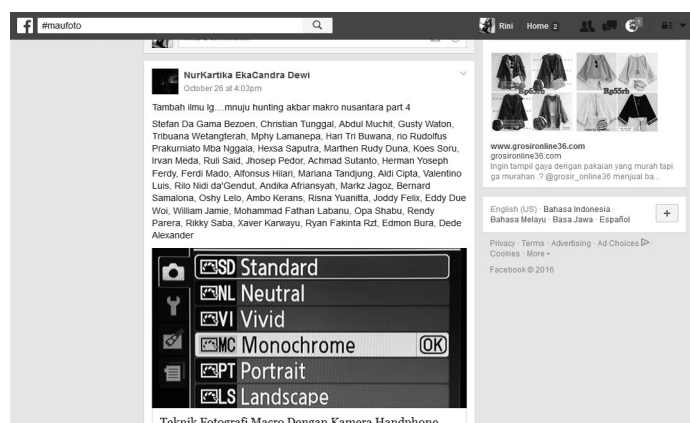
The appreciation of the best works of the community MauFoto.



Source: <http://www.facebook.com/group>, accessed October 31st, 2016

Figure 8.

Knowledge Sharing in MauFoto virtual community.



Source: <http://www.facebook.com/group>, accessed October 31st, 2016

Competition will make members compete to give their best effort, their best quality work. Discussion and workshop will increase their knowledge and their skill. They also conduct picture hunting activity to keep the member's passion on photography.

### 3.4. Social Media as a Means of Strengthening Communities and Government

Offline activities that are initiated from these virtual communities form a sympathetic movements and good cooperation and also emerge on the spirit of empathy that grows within each community in Sikka. This empathetic spirit then creates a new force within the community. The new force called civil society. In realizing this, the civil society is needed number of prerequisites. This prerequisite is an integral unity, and became the basis for the strengthening of civil society.

The first prerequisite is a free public sphere or Habermas call public sphere where there should be a free public space as a means of expression. Social media as a modified form of conventional media has been giving free public access to this sphere. Virtual communities that exist in Sikka have been able to use social media as a vehicle for interaction, engaging through meaning-meaning, forming a strong access to the so-called civil society.

The next prerequisite is the democratic attitude and democratic legitimacy expression. It seems from the existence of political discussion that discusses political issue or reaction as a response of political reality in some discussion in virtual community in Sikka. Common vision (to see a better Sikka) become one of motivation to keep the space into democratic community. The next requirement is a spirit of tolerance and pluralism to respect and accept pluralism in everyday life. Media literacy skills are shown by some members of the community to participate in keeping the discussion in the conducive environment. Judging from the number of requirements to form a civil society proposed by Habermas, it could be concluded that the condition of the existence of the public sphere becomes crucial. Society must have a public space, whether it is real visible in social life or virtual, which can be obtained through social media.

Democracy as a place for social movements is expected not to be a manifestation of the theory of hegemony as expressed by Gramsci. Gramsci said that hegemony is a way of life or a way of thinking that is predominant in which there are process control of the dominant class to the lower class and the lower class also actively supports the ideas of the dominant class. Mastery done not by force but through consent dominated society. This hegemony is a twit proverbial structured towards a democratic process.

The existence of social media seen from the positive side could also be one of the media educations and has a wide range of human resources quality improvement, for the region's development with community empowerment. Media literacy is also necessary so that the negative sides of social media can be minimized.

## 4. CONCLUSION

The role of virtual communities in community empowerment and development has been demonstrated by the average virtual communities in Sikka. Discourses of empowerment, development in discussions delivered through virtual communities are generally followed up in concrete activities that have a positive impact both to the community members and the wider community. Cohesiveness between members of virtual communities in Sikka is one factor involvement of these communities on community empowerment. In addition, the ability to access, analyze, evaluate, and use of the media has been owned by members of the community that remain conducive in helping maintain both online and offline activities. This condition helped create a democratic public space that is the crucial element in either national or local development.

## 5. SUGGESTION

In this research, the researchers have not seen yet the attention of Sikka district government related to the role and potential of virtual communities in the social media community empowerment and local development. The researchers found it necessary to further research to take from the standpoint of the government point of view of the social media. Besides the object of this research, there are some of the virtual communities so that the results obtained are in the form of an overview. With the objects of research, it is expected that the results obtained will be deeper and focused. Research on social media is the new thing today; it is actually a lot of aspects that can be examined by looking at the deficiencies in this study.

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