



Playing with publics: Technology, talk and sociability in Indonesia

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Abstract

This paper describes an analog chat network in Bandung, Indonesia known as ‘interkom.’ Interkom is a network that links together the homes, food stalls and farms of a segment of Bandung’s urban and peri-urban underclass. Interkom is interesting because it provides the occasion for users to reflect upon and manipulate the material and ideological conditions that shape experiences of self, talk and sociability in a densely mediated world. Interviews with users reveal that interkom constitutes a public that straddles the line between an indefinite community of strangers and a known audience. In playing with this public, users also play with an image of ideal sociality.

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A conversation on the Saluyu interkom line, July 27, 2002:

Babay: (Calls out). Uncle!

Dedi: What?

Babay: Ah, uncle Dedi. (Makes sound of a kiss)

Dedi: Ah, Babay! (Makes sound of a kiss)

Upay: What about me?

Dedi: (Makes sound of a fart). That’s for you.

Upay: (I) don’t want (that).

Babay: (Laughter)

Dedi: (Makes sound of a kiss). That’s for lightning. [Referring to an earlier conversation where Dedi and Babay had compared Upay’s voice to the crackle on the line when lightning strikes].

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Babay: (Makes sound of a kiss). For lightning.

Upay: Fine. If (you) don't want to talk then all the better for me.

Babay: Oh, great God, that's not what it's like Upay!

Upay: You just like things that aren't actually real.

In this paper I examine the relation between technology, talk and sociability in a public that artfully straddles the divide between a *local* and an *imagined* community. I focus on a form of chat network found in Indonesia, known as interkom.

Interkom is something I stumbled upon quite by accident one day while conducting research on the social and cultural histories of Indonesian telephony, satellite and Internet technologies.¹ One day while I was working at home I tried to place a call and discovered that the phone was dead. Slightly annoyed, and knowing from experience that this could be the result of repairmen accidentally disconnecting my line while trying to repair another line, I looked out my front window to see if a repair truck was visible out on the street in front of my house. Instead of a repair truck, I was surprised to see two men climbing a tree in my front yard. When I went outside and asked what they were doing, they explained that they were repairing an interkom line. This came as quite a surprise. By that time I had lived in Indonesia for four years and I had spent fully half of that time researching communications technologies, and I had no idea that I had a communications network running through my front yard.² As I enquired further and walked around town, I came to realize that interkom lines were strung up to trees and utility poles throughout the city. It seemed that wherever I went if I looked up I would see the string-like cables of interkom networks. My failure to notice these cables previously was not due to any attempts on the part of interkom users to hide their networks from view. In fact, people strung up the lines quite openly. It was just that my interest in new technologies had made me so habituated to training my gaze on the latest gadgets from abroad that I simply overlooked what was right in front of me.³

What is interkom? Interkom is an analog communications network found in various cities and towns in Indonesia. When a person chats or 'breaks' (*ngebreak*) on interkom she or he wears headphones and talks into a microphone. The microphone and headphones are plugged into an interkom set, which is connected via cable to other nearby interkom sets. If everything is working properly, all the people whose sets are connected together on a line or 'path' (*jalur*) will be able to talk with one another and listen to one another talking, much as one is able to do on a telephone conference call. On interkom, however, at any one time there may be dozens of people on a single line. Usually just two or three of these will actually be in conversation at a given time, but everyone on the line knows that there may be a number of others lurking in the background, listening. Those in conversation tend to speak in short bursts, like one might do on a walky-

¹ Some of the results of this research have appeared in my "Engineers and Political Dreams" (2005), "Telephony at the Limits of State Control" (2002), and "Imagining the New Order Nation," which was co-authored with Bart Simon (2002).

² Although I had heard about interkom from friends who grew up in the city of Yogyakarta, like them I believed it to have been a short-lived fad for kids in the early-1980s and that it had long since disappeared.

³ I was not the only person to overlook it. None of the engineers I knew at the nearby technical college, Institut Teknologi Bandung, knew that interkom was still in use either. And a fairly exhaustive search of the archive of the main newspaper in Bandung, *Pikiran Rakyat*, yielded only a handful of references to interkom since the networks' inception in the early-1980s.

talky or on Citizen Band radio. Those who are simply listening must also remain engaged since they usually have to sit in front of their set with their headphones on.⁴ When people are busy doing something else, like preparing a meal or doing other chores, they will thus tend to dip in and out of conversation as they move back and forth between their chores and their interkom set. Although the mainstay of interkom communication is talk, sessions frequently also involve a variety of other kinds of sounds. It is not at all common to hear someone who is in the midst of a conversation suddenly make some sort of vocal effect (as in the sound of the kiss in the conversation above) or launch into a short segment of song. Furthermore, many interkom sets are hooked up to tape decks and radios so that individuals can pipe music into the network for all to hear. All of this gives interkom chat an unusual and interesting quality. While it resembles other kinds of chat networks—especially multimedia chat over the Internet—it is clearly something that is also rather unique.

An important thing that distinguishes interkom from more well-known communications networks in Indonesia is that it is a product of bricolage (*dirakit*) rather than engineering (*direkayasa*), and has its roots in the informal economy rather than in capitalist or state-led infrastructural development. Interkom users and hobbyists make their own interkom sets and build and maintain the networks themselves. Such sets usually consist of a gutted amplifier box or cassette deck that has been rewired with new circuits. A variety of kinds of cable are used to link the sets together, but the most common are inexpensive speaker wire or stolen or salvaged telephone cable. The vast majority of networks that I have observed during my research were free to use, as long as one could afford the cost of an interkom set and the cost of enough cable to connect one's set to the nearest line. As I encountered it on the outskirts of Bandung, interkom was used primarily by members of the urban and peri-urban underclass. The networks linked together tiny street side food stalls (*warung*), ramshackle city homes, rooms in migrant workers' rooming houses, farms among rice paddies, and the odd middle class home. Its extensions were rhizomatic, stretching from Bandung proper out into rural areas just outside the city limits, following alleyways, roads, and river valleys.

In this paper, I examine how interkom functions as a *discourse network*⁵ that 'affords' (Hutchby, 2001) breakers the opportunity and the occasion to reflect upon, play with, discuss, and manipulate the material and ideological conditions that shape people's experiences of self, talk and sociality in a densely mediated world. Scholars analyzing everyday conversation have shown that much of ordinary talk is dedicated not just to the pragmatic aims of making oneself understood but also to the meta-pragmatic aims of providing reflexive commentaries on the conditions that make communication possible (as well as those conditions that make it problematic). Both the form and content of interkom discourse is also meta-pragmatic, even if the conditions it reflects upon are understood to be rather different from those that underpin 'ordinary' conversation.⁶ This

⁴ Occasionally, an interkom set will be equipped with a speaker, making it possible to listen to interkom chat in the same way one might listen to talk radio. However, such speakers can disrupt the signal strength of others' transmissions, so they are generally discouraged.

⁵ I take the term discourse network from Friderich Kittler's (1990) book of the same name. It refers to 'a level of material deployment that is prior to questions of meaning' (p. xii). The materiality in question includes both the technological aspects of discursive acts, such as modes of storage and transmission (*à la* McLuhan), and the apparatuses of power that surround these acts (*à la* Foucault). These materialities establish the limits on what is said, to whom, and under what conditions of mediation.

⁶ As we will see, assertions about how interkom talk is different from ordinary talk are an important feature of the language ideology that informs interkom communication.

difference is intellectually productive and meaningful since it places things that might ordinarily be taken for granted, such as talk, in a different perspective, causing them to seem less familiar. Like many new technologies, it provokes reflexivity.⁷ In the case of interkom, I will show that such reflexivity is not restricted to the meta-pragmatics of speech but extends to the broader question of the forms of sociality and community that some forms of talk can give rise to. Briefly stated, I view interkom as a kind of real world laboratory where people can learn how discourse publics are created and experiment with some of the pleasures, challenges and disappointments of participating in public life.

The discourse publics of interkom are comparable in certain respects to the more paradigmatic kinds of ‘imagined communities’ (Anderson, 1991) or publics that come into being ‘in relation to texts and their circulation’ in an age of modern print culture (Warner, 2002, p. 50). Like the reading publics and counterpublics described by Warner, an interkom public is self-organized rather than being organized by an outside authority like the state. But the degree of self-organization is far greater and more conscious than it is for most reading publics, since self-organization takes place not only at the level of discourse but at the level of ‘materialities of communication’ (Gumbrecht and Pfeiffer, 1994).⁸ Kelty (2005) describes this kind of self-organization as that which pertains to a ‘recursive public.’ In a recursive public, members address each other by addressing and retooling the means of address itself (p. 200): they make the sociotechnical assemblage that forms the backbone for their public discourse a subject of their discourse and practice. In addition to sharing with reading publics a quality of self-organization, interkom publics also share the quality of being grounded in a sense of personal anonymity, or stranger sociability. However, as will I will show, the degree of stranger sociability is significantly more circumscribed than it would be for, say, a newspaper readership. By virtue of both the conventions that surround interkom talk and the materialities of the networks themselves, interkom publics straddle—and play with—the line between an imagined and indefinite anonymous public and a known, or at least theoretically knowable, audience that is spatially and temporally delimited.⁹

For the most part, the study of publics and imagined communities has taken place in contexts where the question of politics is absolutely central. Both Anderson and Warner, for example, are interested in the formation of publics and imagined communities largely because such social imaginaries have recognized implications for the quality of political discourse and for the structure of political formations. In this regard, their studies of these phenomena sometimes appear rather teleological. What about publics that do not ultimately give rise to a self-consciously political subject? Should we consider such publics to be apolitical or somehow inauthentic simply because they do not imagine themselves in such terms? The example of interkom publics is instructive on these questions, since

⁷ Indeed, it could plausibly be argued that by definition all communications technologies provoke meta-pragmatic awareness since their definition as ‘technologies’ implies a reflexivity about how communication takes place. The advent of a new technology reminds people of other forms of mediation which seem relatively ‘old’ and often more essential. On the defamiliarizing effects of new technologies, see Marvin (1988) and Mrazek (2002).

⁸ Another way of expressing this is to say that interkom is a self-organizing ‘discourse network’.

⁹ Warner (2002, pp. 49–50) distinguishes between three kinds of publics: the public, which is a totality that includes all the people in a given social field (e.g. the nation); a public as a concrete audience, such as a crowd witnessing itself in physical space; a public that comes into being only in relation to texts and their circulation. He admits that the distinction between these three are not always clear and that the different senses of the public or the audience may be operative in the same context as when one kind of public may ‘stand in’ for another.

for the most part—at least, to the best of my knowledge—interkom publics have had never expressed an interest in politics. Politics is not what gives these publics their meaning. Rather, like so much of telecommunication today, the importance of interkom is first and foremost as a space for what Georg Simmel refers to as sociability. In sociability, according to Simmel, there is ‘a feeling of the worth of association as such, a drive which presses toward this form of existence and often only later calls forth that objective content which carries this particular association along’ (Simmel, 1949, p. 255). As is the case with so many networked publics, with interkom this drive is reflected primarily in users’ desire to be connected and secondarily in the form of their chat.¹⁰ This focus on the form rather than the content of communication is central to Simmel’s notion of sociability: ‘talking is an end in itself; in purely sociable conversation the content is merely the indispensable carrier of the stimulation, which the lively exchange of talk as such unfolds’ (259). Yet as Simmel makes clear, even a space of pure sociability does seem to presuppose a kind of politics. As he puts it:

Inasmuch as sociability is the abstraction of association—an abstraction of the character of art or of play—it demands the purest, most transparent, most engaging kind of interaction—that among *equals*. It must, because of its very nature, posit beings who give up so much of their objective content, who are so modified in both their outward and their inward significance, that they are sociably equal, and every one of them can win sociability values for himself only under the condition that the others, interacting with him, can also win them. It is a game in which one ‘acts’ as though all were equal [...] This is just as far from being a lie as is play or art in all their departures from reality. But the instant the intentions and events of practical reality enter into the speech and behavior of sociability, it does become a lie [...] (pp. 257–258).

Sociability, in this regard, provides a way of participating in a public which is not absent of politics but where politics takes place at a formal level only and is sustainable precisely because its ‘practical reality’ is suspended by an ‘as if’. As soon as talk gives weight to content, it loses its purely sociable form. While it retains its focus on ‘nothing but relationship’ itself (259), it allows people to play with what Simmel refers to as ‘a miniature picture of the social ideal that man might call the freedom of bondage’ (260).

In the analysis of interkom that follows, I will show that the culture of interkom plays with precisely these tensions: tensions between medium and message, form and content, equal association and social hierarchies, freedom and constraint. Insofar as an interkom public has a politics, it is a politics that plays with privileging a form of free and equal association while holding it in a space of suspension from ‘reality’. In this regard, one might say that interkom play is a kind of counterpoint to the ‘deep play’ Clifford Geertz (1973) described for the Balinese cockfight: rather than providing a space for risky ventures involving symbolic stand-ins for real world status contests, interkom provides its users with a space where they can play at being equal members of a public.

In order to develop this argument, I focus on two main aspects of interkom. The first aspect is that of the evolution of the network itself: the way it has grown and transformed

¹⁰ On the interest in connection for its own sake, see Horst and Miller (2005) and Don Slater’s attached commentary.

through the years. The second aspect concerns the ways in which people talk about and describe the kinds of communities and kinds of selves, both those that are supposedly ‘new’ and those are supposedly ‘old’, which interkom brings into view for those who use it. The paper is based partly on participant observation—taking part in interkom chat and meetings—and partly on 20 lengthy interviews conducted with interkom users in the northern part of the city of Bandung.

1. Rhizomatic evolution: From Lokalán to Jalur Lintas

If one asks people who have been involved in interkom since its inception in the early-1980s about how the network has changed since that time, they invariably describe its growth as passing through a number of distinct stages. The first lines were used to link together neighboring houses, usually within a single residential compound. They grew relatively quickly to link together a number of different houses within the same neighborhood (*kampung*) or hamlet. When this process happened in two adjacent neighborhoods, and when the strength of the transmission signal was sufficient for longer-distance communication, links were established between neighborhood networks. In this manner, larger sections of the city became wired. Up until this point the evolution occurred in a manner suggesting the growing extension and density of a web. The webs themselves, however, were still quite small: the total extension of such networks, measured as the crow flies, would rarely have exceeded a kilometer or two.

In the mid-1990s, however, interkom users started building sets with higher wattage and a different type of line emerged, one that aimed to link together distant points but with a relatively low level of local density. These long distance lines are known generically as *jalur lintas*: high-speed or translocal lines. With the emergence of *lintas* lines the old networks that were confined to a neighborhood came to be called *lokalán* or local lines. The longest translocal line that was operational during my period of observation in north Bandung extended for at least seven kilometers. People reported that such lines had on occasion extended even further, connecting to areas outside Bandung that are 20–25 km away. There were even initiatives to build a Bandung-wide network that would link together all the various parts of the city, although this never materialized.

While this story about the evolution of interkom is a good characterization of an overall developmental trend, it masks many of the complexities of network transformation. The most important of these complexities is the fact that interkom networks do not merely grow by extension and by increasing in density: they actually reproduce through a type of division resembling mitosis.

People I interviewed gave three main reasons why users may decide to form a new line. One of the most common reasons was that a given line had simply become too crowded. There are limits to how many people can be talking on a single line and still feel that they can get a word in edgewise. Most people put the ideal number of users on a given line at somewhere between 20 and 80 people. When the number of users becomes unmanageable, one will see a tendency for division. Often the name of the new line will reflect its origin: it will be called by the name of the original line but with the additional specification ‘two.’ Thus, for example, a line called Dalas Line (Jalur Dalas) was divided into Dalas Line One (Jalur Dalas Satu) and Dalas Line Two (Jalur Dalas Dua). Other times, however, or over time, the new line will get its own name. Sometimes the relation between two such lines is expressed in the idiom of kinship: as an older sibling line and a younger sibling line.

A second reason people gave for establishing a new line was to provide a space for a different type of discursive content. This may also be related to the problem of overcrowding but the solution is not merely to create a new line of the same type but to create a line dedicated to a particular type of content. This is what happened, for example, when some members of a line called Jalur Selekt decided to create a new line called Jalur Musik. As one of the founders of the Music Line described it, they wanted to create a bit of entertainment on the side of the existing line, but in a way that would not bother the members of Jalur Selekt who wanted to talk. In other cases, it may not be the content that is being divided up but the discursive styles. Conversations on interkom can be quite vulgar and coarse, so sometimes members of a line may decide to set up a line that is more polite and refined. People who want to join the new line will have to agree to abide by the discursive conventions. Those who do not abide by the rules risk being disconnected.

A third reason people gave for establishing a new line was to increase the level of privacy. Under these circumstances the new line will have a selected membership. It happens once in a while, for example, that two people who like to spend a lot of time talking to one another will decide to create their own private line that others are not invited to join. In fact, there is a term for this type of line: Jalur Guha or Cave Line.

The initial shape a new line takes depends on the reason for its creation. If the line is established to deal with overcrowding, it is quite likely that it will follow the shape of the original line, at least for a time. The same is generally true if the line is an attempt to create different venues for different types of content or style, although this will depend on individual members' interest in what the new line has to offer. In the case of a Jalur Guha, in contrast, the line will have quite a different shape and length from that of its parent line.

The fact that there are multiple lines that criss-cross and run in parallel across the landscape means that in any given neighborhood there may be several different lines, some local and some translocal. What makes any particular one of these lines expand or link up with others varies. Sometimes a line will extend to a new house because someone hears about it from others or tries it out while visiting at someone's house (there is a term for this: *ngeron*). This is what one would expect. What I did not expect, however, is that one of the main reasons people cited for wanting to join a line was what is referred to as *cepretan*. The literal meaning of *cepretan* is clicking, like the sound of an insect, but here it means cross-talk. The currents that pass over interkom lines are actually quite powerful and they have a tendency to jump across onto other lines they come close to. (This can cause trouble with the phone provider because interkom signals often jump onto phone lines and when this happens people on their phones hear interkom conversations in the background). But when people say *cepretan* what they mean is cross-talk between interkom lines. Usually the sound is quite faint but it can be loud enough to understand conversation and to peak one's interest. Such overhearing—made possible by the existence of numerous lines—can thus also cause lines to grow.

Not all network change leads to network growth. Just as there is a tendency for certain lines to become popular and for these to extend greater and greater distances, gathering more and more users as they grow, so too is there a reverse tendency whereby lines are used less and less. If they are rarely used, there is little incentive to keep them in working order and people will either intentionally disconnect themselves from the line or simply fail to fix connecting cables when they break. In fact, all four of the lines that I was connected to in 2000 were no longer in operation just two years later. In at least one of these

instances, gradual attrition prompted remaining users to decide *en masse* to dismantle the network so that the cable could be salvaged and put to use in building a new line with a different name and a different geographical extension. Indeed, during the time that those four lines died out, three new lines were born in the same immediate vicinity, gathering together the former users and others in new constellations.

When one takes into consideration the tendency of interkom lines to reproduce and divide, the picture of network evolution becomes far more complex than it appeared at first glance. While one overall trend in the evolution of interkom has thus been toward networks with greater geographic spread and greater densities, processes of division, reproduction, and attrition have mitigated this trend. Rather than the picture of an ever-expanding and increasingly unified network, we are left with a picture of lines growing, connecting to one another, and creating new unities, all the while reproducing, dividing in new ways, and losing pieces here and there.

All of this makes the interkom network seem a lot like the image of a kind of freedom of association Simmel describes as pertaining to sociability (a portion of which I cited above):

If it is [...] the ethical task of association to make the coming-together and the separation of its elements an exact and just expression of their inner relations, determined by the wholeness of their lives, so within sociability this freedom and adequacy are freed of their concrete and substantively deeper limitations; the manner in which in a ‘society’ groups form and break up, conversation spins itself out, depends, loosens, cuts itself off purely according to impulse and opportunity, that is a miniature picture of the social ideal that man might call the freedom of bondage (1949: 260).

2. The locality of interkom

While tracing structural transformations in interkom over time sheds light on how the networks developed and the types of material constraints that shaped that development, it says little about how interkom relates to other social institutions or what it represents to its users. For a more contextual perspective, it is necessary to look at interkom not as a rhi-zome that is suspended above other institutions but one that grows into and out of these institutions in particular ways.

As noted above, early interkom lines emerged in the context of the household and were used to link together different buildings within a residential compound or to link together houses in close proximity. Networks started in a piecemeal fashion as extensions of particular neighborhood-level face-to-face discourse networks. Ibu Karmini, a 34 year-old mother, for example, emphasized that interkom provided a way of visiting relatives without having to leave the house. So when someone died while she was busy at home she could pass on the news to her parents via interkom. For her, the early interkom was identified with the types of communicative practices associated with familial ties. For others, early interkom lines represented something a little different: the possibility of a culture of chat that replaced that of *nongkrong*, or hanging out. Rather than hanging out in front of the local food stall or shop, which was often associated with such costly habits as drinking and gambling, one could hang out and chat on interkom.

Growing out of these neighborhood-level interactions, interkom quickly became a fad. In these early years, some *kampung*s might have as many as 20 or 30 houses on a line (com-

pared to three or four from any given neighborhood nowadays). In many places interkom was popular enough that communities experimented with turning it into a semi-official communications medium for communication between local government offices. To a certain extent, these initiatives were a function of the times. The early- to mid-1980s was a period when the Indonesian government was placing a great deal of emphasis on the importance of neighborhood security (Barker, 2001). The police encouraged heads of neighborhood associations to improve their guardhouses and to work with the local precinct to organize their neighborhood watches and report the presence of visitors. One of the things the government wanted was for every community to have a guard house with a *kentongan*—a wooden bell that could be struck in particular rhythms to indicate the presence of a threat: one sound for a fire, another for a thief, another for a death.

For a time, users started to imagine interkom as a network that would fulfill the same function as the *kentongan*, linking neighborhoods to the surveillance state, but in a high-tech way. A military man, Rahmat, remembered it like this:

The reason for early [interkom lines] was the need for communication. Communication between the heads of neighborhood associations (RW): between RW 1, 2, and 3. At that time security was difficult because telephones were still rare. So we used interkom. So if there was a visitor who wanted to directly report to the RW, we would let the RW know that if the visitor showed up, there was no need for the signature of [a lower level official].¹¹

In north Bandung, Rahmat was active in getting people to build two early lines, one called Jalur Kecamatan (Subdistrict Line), the other Jalur Kantibmas (Security and Order of Society Line). The former line was built in collaboration with the subdistrict office and was used for reporting any gatherings of neighborhood youth, such as for sports meets or concerts. The latter line was linked directly into the local military command (Koramil) and police precinct. As Rahmat explained:

We connected it to the Military Command so we could pass on information, about crime, delinquent youths, drunkenness, and so on. Yes, cooperation with the Command back then was very useful. If anyone did something wrong it would be visible.¹²

In the case of Jalur Kantibmas, it was no longer just the face-to-face neighborhood ties associated with families, neighbors, and hanging-out communities that were being wired together, but the nested hierarchical ties of local government and local military authority. At least for a brief time, interkom became an additional means for these structures to insinuate themselves deeper into neighborhood life.

In the long run, the experiment with making interkom a tool of the surveillance state was just that: an experiment. Both Jalur Kecamatan and Jalur Kantibmas eventually disappeared and no similar lines have emerged to replace them. Rather than the state, it was *kampung* culture that ultimately left its imprint on the evolving network. Nowadays, this imprint can be seen in how the network is maintained, in the types of social activities that interkom users engage in, and in the terms in which users imagine the interkom community

¹¹ Personal Interview, October 2000.

¹² Personal Interview, October 2000.

as it extends further afield, leaving the *kampung* as such behind. I will discuss each of these aspects in turn.

Maintenance: The vast majority of interkom lines were run on a very informal basis. An initial group, usually not very large, would agree to establish a line and would buy the cable necessary to link together their houses. Once established the line would grow incrementally, from house to house as others heard about it and wanted to join up. Each person who joined had to provide the cable necessary to reach the nearest point in the line from his or her particular location. Thus, the line was built out of pieces of cable that were supplied individually or in small groups. Maintenance, however, was a more collective concern because if the line got disconnected somewhere in the middle—something that happened quite frequently—it meant that large numbers of people would not be able to communicate.

Line maintenance was handled by a number of people called *teknisi* or technicians, who could be called upon when there was a problem. Each neighborhood had one or two people who acted as technicians, usually maintaining more than one line in the area. They did this on a volunteer basis, but were often get some coffee or cigarettes from those benefiting from their services.

Occasionally, interkom lines were organized quite formally. One that I studied had an elected head, a membership fee, rules of use, and small monthly contributions for line maintenance. In essence, it functioned with the same political structure as a neighborhood association. The advantage of this system, according to its users, was that any problems with the line were usually fixed within a few hours, as the head supplied any necessary cable and had technicians on call. Furthermore, the quality of sound was good because the cable used throughout the whole line was telephone cable purchased with the money from membership fees.

Whether organized formally or informally interkom lines all involved activities and events that resemble the types of things a neighborhood or a village hamlet might organize. There were *arisan* (a gathering where women make contributions to a common kitty and take turns winning it) for the women of a particular line, feasts where people gathered to eat, and special events like musical festivals and group outings to the beach or to nearby tourist destinations. These events were paid for by those who chose to participate and were often organized to celebrate the anniversary of the formation of the line. Not all members of a line turned out for these events, but a good number did.

Even as networks extended beyond the *kampung* sphere, users described interkom relationships in an idiom of kinship and neighborly relations. As Dede, a man in his forties, put it:

Besides communication, [interkom] is for harmonization. Looking for kinship (*persaudaraan*), bringing friends closer together. As we look for kinship, people who we didn't know become people we know. Kinship, really, that is the goal. So every month we gather somewhere to celebrate our friendship. And we have an *arisan*. Yes, basically it is to strengthen the lines of kinship.¹³

¹³ Personal Interview, November 2000.

Strengthening the lines of kin can be understood in both a metaphorical and a literal sense. Establishing a line to a relative who lived some distance away was often cited as the reason for interkom growth. At the same time, however, people who met on interkom would frequently enter into the types of exchange relations associated with kinship. Whether understood in ‘literal’ or ‘metaphorical’ terms, the important thing was that interkom added to one’s circle of relations. Halimah, a 36 year-old grandmother, described types of relations she had on interkom this way:

It wouldn’t be possible to have [interkom] and be enemies. . .not possible! Cause you are only friends when you have interkom. That the women on it now have an *arisan*, it’s not for nothing. Like when we’re finished cooking, we can chat. . . Rather than being bored or daydreaming while cleaning, better to chat on the line.¹⁴

Even though interkom was comprehended within the familiar idiom of kinship and kampung relations, it was not necessarily seen as reducible to these relations. Users drew a sharp distinction between interkom life and regular life. This distinction, borrowed from the older cultures of amateur radio and CB radio, distinguished between an ‘on-air’ (*di udara*) world (sometimes ‘on-line’ or *di jahur*) and ‘on-land’ (*di darat*) world.

Everyone who used interkom had both an on-land name (*nama darat*) and an on-air name (*nama udara*). On-air names, which were chosen for oneself or given by others, were not all of a given type. Some were Sundanese¹⁵ words with a particular meaning. Some examples of this type were: Seagull, Mr. Open Hand, and Granpa Swinging Back and Forth. Other names included The Japanese, Scooby-Doo and Delta as well as several ordinary Sundanese names. Some people had different on-air names for different lines, while others kept the same name regardless of which line they were on. People who were frequently on-air together eventually learned each other’s land names. But when invitations were sent out for social events like picnics and anniversary celebrations, they were addressed using people’s on-air names. Even in person people referred to each other by these names.

One thing these on-air names did was to provide a space for people to construct a sense of self that was different from the one they had on-land. Rather than being based on one’s familial ties, the place one lives, or one’s looks, this sense of self was established largely on the basis of one’s discursive style and sound on-air. The types of adjectives people used to describe the voices they liked were gentle (*lembut*), sweet and melodious (*merdu*), exquisite (*bagus*), attractive (*menarik*), and easy on the ears (*enak didengar*). People were always experimenting with their voice modulation by speaking in different tones and trying different bass, treble, and reverb settings. Since they could not hear the output of their own speech as it sounded on-air, they relied on others to help them find the settings that generate the most attractive sound.

This fascination with the modulated voice as a way to captivate listeners was not restricted to the world of interkom. Local radio personalities achieved stardom on the basis of a particular sound, a fact interkom users were well aware of. Indeed, one user I talked to said that he originally got into interkom because he did not have the background necessary to get a job in radio. This similarity to radio is evident in the term used for

¹⁴ Personal Interview, December 2000.

¹⁵ The Sundanese are the main ethnic group in Bandung and western Java.

someone who likes to act as host on a given interkom network: *penyiar lokal* (interkom broadcaster). In this sense, interkom represented a kind of amateur version of the radio big leagues, much as home karaoke systems represented an amateur version of singing stardom. Both provided a means to partake in, and to appropriate, the power of modulated voice and to generate a local version of public stardom.

The persona one developed on-air did not necessarily carry into interactions on-land. As Ani, an unemployed 26 year-old who lived with her parents, pointed out:

It's true that when we chat on the line we hear their voice. The voice is great so we figure the person is also great. But then it turns out they are just ordinary...So voices and people, sometimes they are the same and sometimes they're different.¹⁶

According to Iwan, a 28 year-old civil servant who moonlighted at a VCD rental stall in the evenings, it was not just that a person's voice guarantees nothing about someone's other characteristics, but that the sound of a voice on interkom can be quite different from its ordinary sound.

On air people's vocals are more beautiful because of the influence of modulating technologies. When you meet they aren't that beautiful. Interkom, afterall, uses turn control, so you can adjust the bass and treble. You can even give it reverb.¹⁷

The contrast between people's on-air voice personae and their on-land personae provided the grounds for many humorous stories and some disappointments. A typical story was that of someone who was attracted to the power of an interkom voice and then learned upon meeting the person that he was just a parking attendant. Indeed, within interkom lingo there is actually a word, *kiobok*, which refers to someone who sounds beautiful on air but turns out to be unattractive in person.

The difference between on-air and on-land worlds is not only marked by a distinction between identities and traits on and off air but also by a difference in discursive style. Everyone I talked to described interkom discourse as being more free (*lebih bebas*) and less subject to the types of constraints that are usually placed on face-to-face interactions. Didin, the 42 year-old noodle vendor, described the difference as follows:

It's different. On the line we joke and chat [but] on land if you meet the person you're rather embarrassed (*malu*). On the line it is more free, on land it's a little shy if you don't know them that well. Afterall, on land they have a husband.¹⁸

This freedom from shyness or shame did not just mean that men and women felt they could interact in ways that would be frowned upon in on-land interactions, it also meant they felt a greater freedom from hierarchical discursive patterns. People said they could get away with teasing and jokes on interkom that would otherwise be considered disrespectful and impolite. Bahrudin, a 53 year-old construction worker, described his own feelings on this:

On land there are limits. Even when someone is younger than me, there is no way I can say something unpleasant to them on land. It just isn't ethical. But on line I can

¹⁶ Personal Interview, December 2000.

¹⁷ Personal Interview, December 2000.

¹⁸ Personal Interview, October 2000.

be burned [by other people]. ...they just go on and on. On land it couldn't be that way.¹⁹

Such supposed freedom, however, did not mean that such considerations were entirely absent. A 29 year-old man named Tulus, said that interkom discourse still had its rules.

It's the language. The language is different. On-air maybe it is free but there are still rules. You can't say just anything you want to. If you know you're connecting to someone older you talk well, different.²⁰

If names, personae, and speech styles found on-air were said to be somewhat discontinuous with those to be found on-land, the discontinuity was driven home by interkom's most popular speech genre, namely, *pojok-memojok* (cornering). Cornering is when two people, usually of the opposite sex (but not always, as the dialogue at the start of the paper illustrates), engage in a conversation that involves getting to know one another, flirtation, and intimate banter. It is something quite close to phone sex, but in cornering sexual references are never made explicit, but remain implicit in metaphor, allusion, and innuendo. As a speech genre, cornering is not restricted to interkom; it also exists on CB radio, amateur radio, and the Internet.

On interkom in Bandung, cornering involved a peculiar mix of intimacy and display. By definition it is a discursive interaction that involves only two people. But as one interkom user pointed out, although only two people are talking the number listening maybe as many as 40. In this sense, cornering was like a dance. Out of a crowd of people, two would take the floor and engage in a kind of intimate performance. Then, after a time, they would fade back into the darkness of the crowd and another pair would emerge to give their performance. On interkom lines in Bandung, this performance was going on almost non-stop day and night.

What is interesting about cornering is that over the long term it meant that most people on a given line came to be paired with a specific partner, referred to either as a *pojokan* (a person who one corners with) or a *pasangan* (partner). That is, through cornering people established more or less long-term on-air couples. These couples, along with the friendships and kinship ties that linked interkom users, helped give a definite but flexible structure to the interkom community. The structure was manifest not in any formal tie but in ties of loyalty. Edi, a 45 year-old laborer in a furniture factory, described such loyalty as follows:

On some lines there are people who really are loyal. Sometimes when their chatting partner hasn't turned up. ...sometimes they just wait for hours. Sometimes if one wants to shift over to another line one's partner won't allow it.²¹

The 26 year-old Ani also drew attention to the fact that partners can be quite possessive:

It's like this: on the interkom line each person has a partner. If I talk with someone else it's wrong and people will get angry at me. That's why everyone on the line has a partner, so there are a lot of them.²²

¹⁹ Personal Interview, December 2000.

²⁰ Personal Interview, October 2000.

²¹ Personal Interview, December 2000.

²² Personal Interview, December 2000.

To appreciate the significance of cornering and coupling on interkom, it necessary to realize that many of the people involved were—on-land at least—married and had children. In fact, many of the interviews in which people described the practice of cornering were conducted with both husband and wife present. Yet most people claimed that interkom did not cause any major domestic conflicts.²³ This despite the fact that within the communities where interkom is popular, any hint of on-land infidelity is treated very seriously. When I asked people about why interkom does not cause such conflicts the standard response was that it is because on interkom there are so many people listening. Thus, people expected that nothing too untoward will happen. Furthermore, they explained, everyone knows that interkom is ‘only for entertainment’ (or one might say, following Simmel, talk for talk’s sake). As long as it is kept that way it does not cause any problems. But more than a few people provided a word of caution. Yayah, a 34 year-old housemother, put it most clearly:

No, [the pairing] is only on interkom. Never bring it down to land...that would be destruction. No, we all understand this...if someone jokes with someone else’s wife or with someone’s husband that’s no problem, that’s only on line. If that took place on land: bankruptcy.²⁴

As long as on-air society can be kept separate from on-land society, things will be just fine. Only if they get mixed-up could things fall apart.²⁵

3. Discourse networks and imagined communities

In sum, interkom had a rather peculiar status in relation to older forms of on-land communities. On the one hand, it grew out of these communities and was heavily shaped by them. In this respect we could say that interkom was ‘wired’ by neighborhood and kin relations. This wiring gave interkom an aura of familiarity rather than an aura of an alien technology. But at the same time, interkom itself wired these relations and transformed them by extending them out beyond their usual geographic and social confines. This extension enabled a new field of discursive interactions that are not reducible to face-to-face interactions. The differences between the two were partly due to materialities of communication: the differences between seeing people when they speak and only hearing their voices, the differences between modulated electric speech and ordinary speech, the possibility of stranger sociability, and so forth. The differences were also due to conventions that marked out a special discursive space for interkom, where talk was freer from social constraints and where people could practice the art of cornering and others could listen with envy to the melodious tones of a good performer.

As the dominant speech genre of interkom, cornering helped to pattern interkom social relations into male and female pairs. This flexible structure of pairs departed from other forms of sociality on interkom, which tended to be understood as literal or metaphorical extensions of kin relations into this new domain. In contrast to the latter types of relations,

²³ I discovered later that this characterization was not entirely true. In at least one instance, the wife of an interkom breaker became so angry with her husband’s cornering that she destroyed his interkom set. It is noteworthy that she only did this, however, after she caught him chatting to his on-air partner on-land.

²⁴ Personal Interview, October 2000.

²⁵ The situation for unmarried people is more complex, since many people actually use interkom to find spouses.

these pairs introduced a form of sociality that could conceivably disrupt the presumed order of family and neighborhood life. Perhaps to guard against this eventuality, interkom users chose to treat interkom as a world unto itself, an on-air world that ought not have any material effect on the on-land world of families and friendships, except when it acted to strengthen them. Thus, by using interkom to multiply themselves and their communities, interkom users naturalized a normative understanding of ‘on land’ sociality, while creating a space for greater social and discursive freedom from those particular norms. They then used humor and sanctions to negotiate the potential conflicts this new space engendered.

One could contrast the sense of community on interkom to the ‘imagined community’ of the nation. That idea of community purports to transcend locality and introduce a type of identity that is fundamentally different from face-to-face communities and fundamentally new. In contrast to this, interkom represents a community that is not-quite imagined but also not-quite face-to-face. Perhaps we could call it ‘voice-to-voice’ instead of face-to-face. It allows people to move beyond the familiar and safe settings of the household and the neighborhood, but does so in a manner that ensures that the routes back to these local worlds remain open and traversible. The foray into what could have been an unfamiliar world thus becomes an intriguing but relatively unthreatening excursion. It allows one to feel the pleasures and comfort of coming home without actually having left.

This point was impressed upon me by one of the people interviewed, Dede, a 45 year-old who worked in a low-level position in the government body responsible for elections. In relation to interkom, Dede was a colorful figure with a great deal of bravado. When asked about which lines he was connected to, he exclaimed that they were many because the citizens—*warga*—of interkom sent their lines to him because everyone wanted him on their line. This, he claimed, was because of his beautiful voice, which had the power to attract the interest of people everywhere. When he was on-air everyone else would stand by in silence so they could listen. In short, Dede presented himself as the interkom version of a charismatic leader, someone whose voice had the gravitational pull to attract both listeners and interkom lines. But what was most interesting about Dede was his on-air names. One of these names spoke to his prowess: *Suara Dewa* or Voice of Divinity. But his other name was revealing of something else: it was Mr. *Waas*. *Waas* is a Sundanese word that has a very particular meaning. In his dictionary Rigg (1862, pp. 524–525) describes it like this: *Waas* is what is

Waas is what is said when a pleasurable feeling is caused by seeing someone or something which reminds us of what we ourselves possess, but which, for the moment, is out of our reach. [It is] a happy or pleasing remembrance or emotion regarding something which we do not at the moment see.²⁶

Waas, then, is the type of feeling and the type of imagination that I would associate with interkom publics. What is generated as one passes outside of the local is not a fascination with the new and a nostalgic longing for irrecoverable origins, but a pleasurable longing for something that has been transcended but remains within reach. In this respect, interkom publics differ from those cultures—like ethnic and national cultures—that have

²⁶ The contemporary usage of *waas* is not always pleasurable. It can refer, for example, to the feeling one gets when, while looking down from a cliff, one suddenly imagines falling (but does not actual fall).

been subjected to control by the state and affected by the dialectics of power. It could have been otherwise. Had the Indonesian state recognized the usefulness of interkom for initiatives like the Security and Social Order Line, those could have become standardized across the nation and then Indonesia's security state would have been truly wired. But it did not; and interkom users themselves were not terribly interested in that particular path of development. What interkom breakers were looking for was a form of communication that was relatively free from hierarchy and was 'just for fun.' Anytime it stopped being fun, all a 'breaker' had to do was to pull out his or her cable and disconnect.

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