

# Political Economy of Communication Conferences in Indonesia

Masduki

*Program Studi Ilmu Komunikasi, Universitas Islam Indonesia, Yogyakarta, Indonesia*

Author correspondence: masduki@uii.ac.id

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.18196/jkm.13751>

## Article Info

### Article history:

Received 19 Jan 2022

Revised 27 Apr 2022

Revised 13 May 2022

Accepted 12 May 2022

## ABSTRACT

This study was triggered by the widespread scientific conferences in the field of communication during the past six years, from 2015-2021 in Indonesia. It intends to find a model of an academic conference within the trend of liberalizing universities. In addition to identifying its technical aspects (themes, speakers, funding, types of organizers, and post-conference publication choices), this study examines the macro-political aspects of organizing scientific conferences. This study uses a qualitative method. The author observed 36 conference posters from 2015 to 2021 and conducted field visits and interviews with selected conference organizers. The author also examines government policy documents directly and indirectly related to those scientific conferences in Indonesia. The study found a massive growth in the academic conferences, with various organizers (universities, associations of academia, etc.). It follows the trend of academic mobility, knowledge exchange, and collaboration which are driven by the 'commodification of knowledge'. Amidst the lack of conference regulation, it tends to follow 'the logic of market competition', not complying with the mission of academic dissemination itself. Most conferences placed bureaucrats more privileged above scientists, offering additional activities such as city tours or non-academic events showing academia's dependence on political paternalism and economic power.

Keywords: ASPIKOM; Academic Mobility; Communication Conference; Knowledge Capitalism; Scientific Publication.

## ABSTRAK

Studi ini dipicu maraknya penyelenggaraan konferensi ilmiah bidang Komunikasi dalam enam tahun terakhir (2015-2021) di Indonesia, sebuah tradisi mobilitas akademisi dan diseminasi pengetahuan yang selaras dengan globalisasi dan liberalisasi perguruan tinggi di seluruh dunia. Penulis mengidentifikasi aspek teknis model manajemen acara, tema, pembicara, pendanaan, tipologi organizer dan pilihan publikasi pasca konferensi, riset ini juga mengkaji aspek makro ekonomi politik penyelenggaraan konferensi ilmiah. Penelitian ini memakai metode kualitatif. Peneliti mengkaji 36 poster konferensi sepanjang 2015-2021, melakukan observasi dan wawancara mendalam dengan penyelenggara acara. Peneliti juga mengkaji dokumen kebijakan pemerintah yang secara langsung dan tidak terkait penyelenggaraan konferensi ilmiah di Indonesia. Peneliti menemukan fakta semaraknya konferensi akademik Ilmu Komunikasi, dengan penyelenggara yang beragam, dari kampus, asosiasi program studi dan akademisi hingga pihak di luar keduanya. Fenomena ini selaras dengan tradisi mobilitas akademik pertukaran pengetahuan, kolaborasi riset dalam nuansa 'komodifikasi dan kapitalisme pengetahuan'. Di tengah minimnya regulasi, konferensi akademik cenderung mengikuti logika kompetisi pasar, belum taat pada misi diseminasi akademik, seperti menempatkan birokrat lebih istimewa di atas para ilmuwan, menawarkan kegiatan tambahan seperti *city tour* atau acara non-akademik lain yang secara umum menggambarkan ketergantungan kepada kuasa uang dan budaya paternalistik.

Kata Kunci: ASPIKOM; Konferensi Komunikasi; Kapitalisme Pengetahuan; Mobilitas Akademik; Publikasi Ilmiah.

## 2

**INTRODUCTION**

Throughout 2015-2021, seminars and scientific conferences took place in Indonesia, including in the field of communication. For example, the National Communication Conference (KNK) is held every year by the Indonesian Association of Communication Scholars (ISKI). For example, on March 8, 2018, ISKI held a national conference entitled: Communication in Today's Society. In collaboration with the Ministry of Communication and Information, ISKI invited Minister Rudiantara and Deputy Governor of West Java Ahmad Heryawan as keynote speakers. The Association for Higher Education in Communication Studies (ASPIKOM) also regularly holds Communication conferences, both at the central and regional/regional levels. Not only on a national scale, but ASPIKOM also holds international conferences, for example, in collaboration with the International Communication Association (ICA) in 2019. Apart from these two organizations, Communication Conferences were held on several campuses such as Atmajaya University Yogyakarta, Islamic University of Indonesia, Mercu Buana University, etc.

The phenomenon of conferences in various big cities in Indonesia is becoming more common because there are supporting national policies, such as the obligation of scientific publications and the necessity of collaboration between academia, industry, and the state as indicators of higher education performance. The Ministry of National Education, for example, provides funding support for the implementation of scientific activities, in addition to issuing study program accreditation guidelines that regulate scientific conferences as an added value to performance. Higher education accreditation and university rankings on a national and global scale also contributed to the splendor of holding the conference, which was given the status of achieving academic mobility. From hundreds of conferences from 2015 to 2021, there is a general worrying trend: call for papers with short selection times, additional tourist visits outside scientific forums, and the presence of government officials as keynote speakers. These three patterns have sparked controversy around the quality of academic conferences in Indonesia.

In contrast to the debate over the publication of national and international journals extensively researched and discussed, efforts to map out the scientific conference model in the field of Communication in Indonesia have never been carried out. For this reason, this study becomes the trigger for a more comprehensive follow-up study using a critical approach to political economy. This study departs from the assumption that the prevalence of conferences is part of strengthening academic reputation on the one hand and the occurrence of the commodification of conferences, which risks a crisis in the quality of academic forums for strengthening communication science as a scientific discipline on the other. The questions answered are: how is the model of organizing a Communications conference in Indonesia (2015-2021) and the extent to which the dimensions of political-economic interests influence it.

Controversy regarding the quality of scientific journals in Indonesia and various Asian countries is closely related or intertwined with controversies related to scientific conferences that determine lecturers' academic careers (Rubiono & Finahari, 2017). Journals of "predatory" (a term for fake publishers) are increasing day by day. The number skyrocketed from 2011 to 2017; it increased 5000% from 18 to 923 publications (Cress, 2017). The emergence of many fake publications is allegedly motivated by several factors. Firstly, academics tend to pursue Scopus indexed publishers to pursue promotions. Second, this phenomenon is a risk from the outbreak of unreliable conferences as business opportunities with the promise of publishing indexed journals and proceedings. Third, this kind of practice tends to be considered more common.

The discourse of the Communication academic conference is closely related to the development of Communication science and how the public's perception of the position of Communication science is in the mainstream of national development and academic competition at the global level. After the collapse of the New Order, there were two significant communication studies (Adiprasetyo, 2019). First is the technocratic positivistic current: communication science follows market logic and produces labor in a competitive job market. Following this current, the performance of study programs and popular curriculum patterns is the assessment and provision of students in practical aspects. Performance indicators are graduates who are accepted into the professional job market. From this stream emerged the idea of conference themes that accommodate industrial or government discourses as the recipients of graduates. Second is the flow of alternative critical thinking in which the science of communication is oppositional to market power and the government's agenda, which is considered destructive to the public. The output is a scientist who thinks analytically about the

condition of an unequal society. From this group, discourses on de-westernization emerged, concentrations of interdisciplinary media studies, conference topics that dismantled scientific foundations, etc.

In Indonesia, the first stream seems to be more dominant than the second stream, in line with the strong intervention of the government and industry in the academic culture of higher education. Referring to the thoughts of Mosco (2009), there are indications of the commodification of communication science through conferences. Communication Science is a product exchanged between academics, bureaucrats, and business practitioners, not academically debated. A conference as a ceremony is more important than its role as a forum for ideas. Within this framework, Kahan and Kushner (2017) introduced the term fake conference, a practice of exploiting researchers presenting their research results at high-cost conferences, including the cost of post-conference publications. According to them, the high cost, the location of the event at the hotel, and the organizers who are not from educational institutions are the characteristics of a 'questionable conference'. The pros and cons of holding conferences that are categorized as 'fake' have been going on for a long time in Europe. Its appearance is in tune with the phenomenon of predatory publishers. Common signs of this fake publication are, for example, untidy paper grammar and syntax, typos, and use of incorrect punctuation marks. In line with this, a fake conference can be seen from the typology of the organizers and the choice of conference topics that are too broad, or the paper review process is fast.

The terminology of the conference in question (questionable conference), according to Kahan and Kushner (2017), is a scientific meeting that takes advantage of the needs of academics to present research but is organized by a non-academic agency to make profit. Fake conferences in various countries have shaped the practice of academic cannibalism (McCrostie, 2018), and there is intense business competition due to its large market share. Still, according to Kahan and Kushner (2017), this portrait is similar to the practice of fake journaling. The practice of publishing scientific writings with the obligation to pay a certain amount of money, regardless of the ethics of publication, peer review, indexing, and the feasibility of the work.

Simply put, Cowan (2016) defined a good academic conference as a forum organized by scientists to benefit knowledge, and the organization is non-profit. Non-profit here is indicated by pure financing from the organizer's internal funds or participant registration. The review process is strict and carried out by experts with blind authorship. In the Communications sector, two well-known and reputable international conference forums are the International Communication Association annual conference (ICA, 2021): <https://icaib.id/> and regular annual conferences held by the International Association of Media and Communication Research (IAMCR, 2021), for example in Nairobi, Kenya in 2021: <https://iamcr.org/nairobi2021/online>. This conference was attended by thousands of Communication science academics who came to share research results. The conference's reputation is demonstrated by a number of rigorous stages: adequate publication of events (using official digital platforms), a long and rigorous paper review process, annual regularity, etc.

After researching many conferences with suspicious academic labels in countries in the Middle East and North America, Besyah (2017) concluded that the main characteristic of fake conferences lies in the management of funding. It means the activities orientation is only to make money; it has non-transparent event financial reports. In addition, the dominance of the event by sponsors from related industries is a determinant of its activities.

Eaton (2018) detailed the indicators of a problematic conference (a predatory or vanity conference) in the following twelve aspects: (1) the event is held by a business corporation, not an association or academic community based on certain sciences; (2) the event combines many topics or has a large scope, for example social science as a discussion theme, does not focus on a particular issue; (3) coordinating organizers using a free email address, not an official email address; (4) invitation correspondence via email is usually categorized as spam with an excessive/hyperbolic description of the excess facilities or events; (5) information related to the conference is not very detailed or the organizers are not widely known in the global academic community; (6) the paper selection process takes place quickly, in a matter of hours or days; (7) the conference is also packaged as a form of entertainment event, in a tourism location, not as a forum to debate a scientific issue; (8) the organizers guarantee the publication of journals by charging an expensive publication fee, but the journals are indicated to be predatory; (9) the conference website is unstable, using a free account, sometimes changing the account address; (10) conference publication posters or conference website contents contain many English grammar errors; (11) conference fees are expensive compared to

## 4

regular academic conference fees; (12) conference names are sometimes very similar/similar to the names and topics of previously well-known/reputable academic conference forums.

Based on the various literature above, the general differences between objective and professional scientific conferences and the conferences in question are summarized in the following categories: (1) frequency of activities: once a year or several times a year, (2) scientific committees: there is publication of detailed profiles of reviewers and keynote speakers, or only limited information on names and titles, (3) event contact: using official accounts in the form of emails and websites or freebies, (4) university organizers or scientific bodies or business institutions, (5) the scope of the theme is specific and specific or general in a very macroscope.

What is the model of the Communication Science conference in Indonesia? Studies on this matter are still rare in Indonesia and quite a few in other countries. For example, Corona-Sobrino et al. (2020), Donlon (2021), and Sá et al. (2019) examine the phenomenon of international conferences as part of the modernization of academic traditions, which continues to experience innovation in terms of technology and is also affected by the COVID-19 pandemic. The phenomena also include the internationalization of universities (Mali, 2020; Surya, 2021) and the strengthening of the liberalization of higher education in Indonesia (Binangkit & Siregar, 2020; Nasution et al., 2014), where knowledge and academic forums have become commodity products that are in demand. As a public space for academics, it is important to study the governance of Communication conferences in Indonesia. This paper is an initial effort to answer the scarcity of this study to provide early awareness and encourage policy reform in conference management in the scope of the Communications study program and higher education in general.

#### METHODS

This study uses a qualitative method. Researchers observed posters on the conference organizer's website, reviewed the contents of conference posters, and conducted in-depth interviews. Observations and poster studies were chosen to map out the technical side and substance of the conference that appeared on printed posters and/or other similar publications such as digital posters. Meanwhile, in-depth interviews were chosen as a form of the qualitative method, according to Creswell (2014), to understand the meaning of individuals or groups associated with some social issues. Creswell also emphasized that data analysis in qualitative research is generally done inductively, and the researcher interprets the meaning of the data.

In carrying out this research, the researcher took several steps. The first is determining the sample in the form of posters for Communication conferences throughout 2016-2021 as the object of analysis. The collection is done through a search engine for poster data on google channels, social media, and websites. Researchers determined 36 scientific conference publication posters representing organizers from the Western, Central, and Eastern regions of Indonesia, representing the diversity of topics and also the typology of the organizers, etc. In the second step, researchers analyze policy documents directly or indirectly related to academic conferences made by the Ministry of National Education and or associations related to scientific publications in Indonesia. Policy documents such as regulations regarding accreditation of study programs at universities.

The third step is to conduct in-depth interviews with the initiators and/or representatives of the conference committee at random to confirm the findings in the content analysis. The researcher conducted interviews with representatives of the conference organizers, namely from the Association for Higher Education Communication Studies (ASPIKOM) Central, representatives from the Indonesian Communication Bachelors Association (ISKI) Central, and representatives of the conference organizing campus from Yogyakarta. Interviews were conducted online via the Zoom application. Meanwhile, the fourth step is to conduct an analysis in the form of data categorization on posters referring to the characteristics of the conference and the characteristics of the conference from the substantive and technical sides.

The categorization of this research includes: (1) the organizer, whether it is an academic or non-academic institution (event organizer outside the association/campus), (2) the communication platform used: the official website and email or not, providing adequate conference-related data, etc. (3) topic choice: whether the conference topic focuses on a particular scientific study topic in communication or is it too general. (4) selection of keynote speakers: identify the correlation of topics with speakers, speaker profiles, etc. (5) the paper selection process for parallel discussion forums between participants, related to the fairness of the selection time, selection mechanism etc. (6) financing model: source of funds from participants or sponsors who risk the quality of the conference,

nominal registration fees, etc. Provisions regarding funding are clarified with the facilities provided by the committee. (7) post-event publication: paper or proceedings and how to proceed towards post-conference publication. (8) additional activities, whether related or not to the substance of the conference, such as city tours or other non-academic forums. In addition to the content, the researcher also looked at the visual packaging of the poster: the choice of text color, composition, etc.

In the fifth or final stage, the researcher conducts a critical analysis using a political economy approach to communication. The political economy thoughts of Vincent Mosco, Edward S. Herman, and Noam Chomsky regarding commodification are the primary references. The discourses place the conference as a commodity in the global academic and Indonesian universities undergoing liberalization, commercialization, globalization, etc.

## RESULT AND DISCUSSION

In general, the quantity of Communication Science academic conferences from 2015 to 2021 is very high. The events and the organizers are spread from Jakarta, the island of Java, to outside Jakarta (especially the islands of Sumatra, Bali, and Sulawesi). In detail, this section will describe the research findings in two parts. The first part examines the conference posters and related conference documents available online. The second part analyzes regulations/policies for organizing academic conferences issued by the government or related scientific associations. The third part discusses the macroeconomic and political analysis of the two findings.

### Modelling Communication Conference

Based on observations of 36 publication posters of Communication Science conferences in Indonesia during 2015-2021, interviews with representatives of conference organizers from the two main communication associations in Indonesia: ISKI and ASPIKOM, analysis of policies for organizing academic conferences in Indonesia, and analysis of the macro-economic and political contexts. This study finds some interesting phenomena.

In terms of organizers, Communication academic conferences are not only held by associations such as ASPIKOM or ISKI but also by state and private universities and even state institutions such as the Indonesian Broadcasting Commission. For example, Lustrum and the 2017 ASPIKOM National Communication Conference in Salatiga, the 2019 Islamic Communication National Conference by ASKOPIS, and the 2017 CCCMS Switch on by the Indonesian Islamic University (UII) Yogyakarta were organized. This finding shows that communication is a daily thing for many parties on the one hand and the choice of many institutions in showing their existence on the other. In terms of thematic choices, there is a major tendency to respond to issues of general development communication, such as tourism communication and communication in disciplines such as regulation, health communication, etc. The big theme that appears on the poster adapts the discourse that develops in the government or the discourse that is the industry's aspiration. For example, the theme: *Komunikasi Membangun Kebersamaan dan Kemajemukan Bangsa; Mewujudkan Media Komunikasi dan Industri Penyiaran yang Sehat, Tangguh dan Berbasis Kemanusiaan; Komunikasi Digital: Kreativitas dan Interkonektivitas.*

In terms of choosing a conference location, there is a similar trend between on-campus and off-campus, especially star hotels. It is interesting to observe that the choice of the host city is identical to its popularity as a tourist destination, for example, in Bali, Lombok, Yogyakarta, Batam, and Jakarta. For example, the 2016 ASPIKOM National Conference with the theme The Power of Communication took place at the 4-star Novotel hotel in Pangkalpinang, Bangka Belitung, while the 2019 ICA-ASPIKOM Regional Conference took place in Denpasar, Bali. This effort to integrate academic interests with tourism can be seen in the poster design that uses the background of the local city tourism icon. For example, on the 2016 ISKI KNK poster, there are photos of tourist attractions in Makassar, on the 2016 ICCIC poster, there is a photo of the Bedugul area of Bali, and on the 2017 KNK ISKI poster in Jakarta, the committee displays a photo of the old city of Jakarta. Various offers for additional activities outside the conference emerged in this context, such as city tours, dinners, journal writing workshops, corporate workshops, and networking.

The influence of event sponsors is also seen in the choice of additional events outside the plenary and parallel sessions. Sponsors consist of the central government, local governments, private companies, state-owned enterprises such as BNI bank, national and international associations such as

## 6

ICA, international donors such as the British Council, etc. At the 2015 ASIPKOM Conference in Surabaya, there was a CSR workshop with PT. Amerta Pijar Indonesia as one of the event sponsors. This research informant admitted that ISKI also often held conference delegation dinners with the Governor/Regent who hosted/sponsored the event. Referring to Herman and Chomsky (2002), the factor of the provider/source of funds influences the content or the choice of conference topics and various supporting events.

What about managing key conference events such as panel speakers, information and communication between participants and organizers, and post-conference publication opportunities? This research found that the speakers presented were a way for the organizers to increase the event's prestige and attract participants to attend. Those regarded as keynote speakers are mostly academics with doctoral/professor degrees from within and outside the country. At several conferences held by the association, officials from the central and local governments and representatives of media sector entrepreneurs appeared. It is interesting to note that the presence of officials seemed dominant, as at the following conferences: the 2016 International Conference of Communication, Industry, and Community held by UNTAR and USM invited the Minister of Research, Technology, and Higher Education, Muhammad Nasir and the Minister of UKM Puspayoga; the 2016 ISKI Communications National conference scheduled the presence of President Jokowi; the 2016 ASPIKOM National Conference invited the Minister of State Secretary Pramono Anung; the 2018 National Communication Seminar at UNPAS invited the Minister of Communication and Informatics, Rudiantara; The Indonesian Broadcasting Conference held by the Central KPI in 2021 presented several Ministers such as Sandiaga Uno, Rachmad Gobel, and Erick Thohir.

The research found that event information channels already use digital platforms such as special websites and emails specifically for events, but most free accounts are not self-managed emails. For example [www.iccic.untar.ac.id](http://www.iccic.untar.ac.id), [poccumb2016@gmail.com](mailto:poccumb2016@gmail.com), [CFPLustrumUKSW@gmail.com](mailto:CFPLustrumUKSW@gmail.com), [iski.konference@gmail.com](mailto:iski.konference@gmail.com). This finding shows that there has been no attempt to build a serious and reputable organizational infrastructure for organizing conferences. The most serious problem lies in the abstract or paper review process from participants, which tends to be very instant and undisciplined towards appropriateness: the distance between acceptance and publication of the review results is very short, only a week or less. The majority of activities still select abstracts, not directly selecting whole papers. For example, some conferences set an abstract deadline of January 31, 2018, announcements of February 5, 2018, and full papers from February 6-15, 2018. Some conferences apply abstract deadlines of 19 May 2021, notification of 22 May 2021, and full paper deadlines of 5 July 2021. Besides, it is encouraging that the forms of post-conference publication tend to vary: a combination of book chapters, proceedings of abstracts and papers, nationally indexed journals (SINTA), and internationally indexed journals (especially Scopus). Conference registration fees tend to be reasonable, between 1 to 2 million (not including hotel stays).

Some of the important findings above illustrate that academic Communication conferences in Indonesia tend to be unpatterned and commodified. First, conferences are not uniform in focus theme, location, publication opportunities, and regularity. Second, the sponsors are also diverse, which shows that there is no condition of independence and commitment from the organizers for an academic forum. Regarding the choice of location, the research informant emphasized that the determination took turns in each province. The tourism advantage factor in the chosen city is placed as a bonus to trigger participant attractions and, at the same time, help local government revenues. Third, the main forum speaker factor becomes a contestation space for finding domestic and foreign partners. In this context, the organizers fully open sponsorship cooperation with the government and corporations, such as bartering speakers, banquets, etc.

In general, the data above describes the face of an academic conference, as revealed by Sá et al. (2019), as a forum that combines the event of disseminating research results and social networking. The academic strengthening function is integrated with the social relaxation function where participants use the conference opportunity to "enjoy" new exotic locations, meet famous speakers, and raise their "social status" as an academic. This situation leaves a serious issue of discrimination in social status and financial ability between participants from universities with substantial financial support and lecturers from small campuses. Conference data, as in the table above, confirm the opinion of Richards (2015) as a space for the accumulation of economic benefits (consumption costs, accommodation, souvenirs, etc.).

Interestingly, several national-scale Communication conferences held by ISKI, Central KPI, and ASPIKOM presented government officials such as the Minister and Governor as keynote speakers.

The presence of this official invites controversy because it is not entirely relevant to the conference's theme or at least interferes with the main idea of the conference as a research dissemination room. The conference turned into a forum for political communication dialogue or dissemination of research results to negotiate practical policies and lobby for opportunities for non-academic cooperation. The excellent condition found by this research is that there is no commercial institution organizing the conference.

The mindset of the communication conference which are cross-interested, cross actors, not purely driven by the need of academic examination illustrated above, appears in the minds of the organizers who became the informants of this research. Research informants emphasized that the conference aims to foster a socialization culture and share research works in academia. In addition, to have a lasting record of knowledge from conferences and research through books, proceedings, etc. The informant assessed that the conference was not an exclusive space for academics. Scientists and academics need to interact with each other across campuses and professions. Conference forums are to create a community culture and find solutions to various academic problems at Communication colleges. For this reason, the conference must also bring together various parties: academics, regulators (broadcasting commissions, etc.), government, and industry representatives. With meetings at conferences, various issues in the academic world can be communicated, resolved, and synergized. This idea refers to the Penta helix concept, which is well known in community service programs.

### **Forms of Government Intervention**

Based on a search of documents and in-depth interviews, until 2021, there is no government policy, especially the ministry of education and research in Indonesia, that specifically regulates the organization of academic conferences. This condition can be understood and appreciated as an effort to give autonomy to the academic community in carrying out scientific activities. However, this does not mean that there are no conference-related policies. The government seems to have chosen a position as a facilitator for conference activities, for example, by granting funds to professional associations and campuses to hold events or individual lecturers attending annual conferences related to certain academic issues. In the grant scheme, the conference-related arrangements are less stringent as long as the formal requirements of the applicant organization are met.

In various policies issued, the government uses three dictions referring to the internationalization project of academics and universities in Indonesia. Namely: increasing the number of international academic publications and dissemination; cooperation between researchers from various countries; encourage regular international scientific meetings in the campus environment/scientist associations in Indonesia. Based on these criteria, the conference funded must target participants originating from at least five different countries, and the target for publication of international articles is at least ten participants. This policy is part of the ambition of the Indonesian government to place universities in the top 500 in the world in rankings by foreign institutions such as QS, Times Higher Education Supplement, etc.

Furthermore, the policy that can be considered a driving force for the rise of conferences from the government side is in the downstream realm in the form of assessment of performance reports in the form of lecturer performance load (BKD) made every semester not upstream. This policy also tends to be quantitative, not qualitative. For example, the criteria for participating in the conference will determine the value obtained by the lecturer: main speaker or parallel sessions (oral and poster), publication of conference results in the form of papers in reputable journals, or proceedings indexed by Scopus as a lecturer's performance (Lestari, 2015). The 2019 Lecturer Credit Score Operational Instructions stipulates that lecturer presentations in conferences with Scopus indexed proceedings will receive a credit appreciation of 30 points, almost equivalent to the publication of articles in international journals. Meanwhile, if it is presented at a national conference with the publication of the national proceedings, it will be worth 10. If it is only presented at a conference (without publication), the value is 5 points. This figure is quite large as a trigger for lecturers' participation.

Policies such as accreditation, quality assurance, etc., from the government, is the main factor triggering the splendor of conference forums in various cities, the interest of professional lecturers to attend, and the attractiveness of non-academic events. In other words, participants and the academic world's participation as conference organizers are more driven by administrative-academic motivation or government-driven. Whether the scientific need to dialogue the research results among colleagues for scientific productivity is the main motivation still needs further research.

Every year, the Directorate General of Higher Education (at least since 2015) has provided two schemes that encourage the splendor of academic conferences: First, financial assistance for presentations at international conferences outside Indonesia. Lecturers who pass this grant will receive assistance with travel, lodging, and event registration costs. The reporting requirement is the publication of the conference results in proceedings or Scopus indexed journals. Second, assistance in organizing international conferences for professional associations of lecturers or universities. In the guidelines for submitting proposals for organizing international conferences published by The Directorate of Research and Community Service, the Director-General of Higher Education in 2015 stated that DIKTI bears almost all costs, including the award for the best paper. The total budget allocation for aid for international conferences is IDR150 million. Similarly, almost all universities budget routine and competitive funds for their lecturers to send papers and presentations at conferences. Table 1 below describes the forms of government intervention in the implementation of various academic conferences in Indonesia in general:

**Table 1.** Government Interventions to the Conference

Product	Target	Approach	Main Issue	Impact
Study Program Accreditation Instruments	Study program	Performance report	Institutional reputation	Competition holding international conference
Credit Score Assessment Terms	Individual lecturer	Promotion points	Career path	Lecturer mobility to seek certificates
Conference Organizing Grant	academic association	Fund usage report	Improved mobility	Association becomes government partner
Sponsorship tentatively	Event organizer	As a speaker or sponsor of additional events: dinner/gathering	Government image	Non-academic atmosphere: lobbying and negotiating interests

Source: Director General of Higher Education of Indonesia (extracted by the author)

Table 1 illustrates that although it appears ‘silent’, the government has systematically intervened in policy and, at the same time, intervened in the piling pattern of academic conference activities in Indonesia on behalf of the education regulator. The government, especially the Ministry of National Education (Directorate General of Higher Education), is a strategic actor as the “final assessor” of the quality of the conference. The data above shows three forms of government intervention: determining lecturer credit scores, institutional accreditation, funding grants, and the obligation to evaluate lecturer/campus performance.

Informants who have been and or are currently active in organizing conferences admit that they use these various government policies as selling points or bargaining points in publishing events to participants. In this way, the committee obtains certainty about the target participants and ensures that participants receive registration funding support from their home campuses. Guaranteed publication of articles in reputable books or journals is considered the most attractive for participants to attend the conference. This phenomenon forms the mindset of academics to pursue attendance at various conferences as a quantitative achievement of publications and attendance certificates, not qualitative. Furthermore, he strengthened the paternalistic academic climate as a legacy of the New Order regime. In this concern, the government, with all its policy interventions and the provisions of its administrative reports, has a position as the ‘father’ who is always right and must always be referred.

**Discussion: Commodification of Academic Conference**

Based on the findings of the management of the Communication conference in the 2015-2021 period above, it is clear that there are two currents of interest. First, idealistic interests make conferences a public space for academic examinations. This interest can be seen in the existence of parallel and panel discussions at each conference, followed by plans for publication in indexed journals or proceedings. Publications in the form of guidebooks and abstract books also help disseminate scientific papers. The political enforcement of lecturer competency standards policies that incorporate

elements of collaboration, publication, and scientific dissemination makes the conference a lecturer's annual mandatory event. This situation depicts academic romance like the Homoboldian era in Germany. The conference becomes an emotional space full of scientific debate among critical academics (Karlsruhn, 2016).

*Second*, the economic and institutional political interests of the organizers highlight the conference's commodification. It is undeniable that conference activities are a business model for universities and associations to show the institution's self-image and accumulate financial benefits. This research informant said that the accumulated money from the conference was quite large and at least could cover the cost of the event. Conference funding models that are not limited to registration fees appear common in Indonesia. Organizers prefer to cooperate with corporate or government sponsors rather than managing fees or registering speakers and speakers. Referring to Edelheim et al. (2018), the conference is packaged so that corporations, governments, and academics think of it as a "social investment" that will be reaped by the parties' results, including the tourism industry.

The presence and/or invitation of some public officials at the central and regional levels to various Communication conferences in Indonesia demonstrates the persistence of the legacy of the authoritarian New Order regime that is unique to Indonesia. The legacy of a paternalistic mindset that places the official position as a father (Irawanto et al., 2012) and guardian and therefore the determinant of every policy (direction of ideas, political decisions, etc.), including the development of the discipline of Communication knowledge. In addition to the indications of motivation to gain financial support by presenting state officials, this culture illustrates the low self-esteem of Communication academics in Indonesia as autonomous scientists capable of managing issues and advocating for themselves to the public.

Researchers' observations on posters and at several conferences directly in the field show that academic conferences tend to provide themselves as a space for contesting various political economy interests, not purely academic. At the individual participant level, the conference caters to the self-image desire of celebrity syndrome. After arriving at the location, the participants will be busy taking pictures at the booth with the conference logo and uploading them on social media. Social media helps build wider public communication and participation, trigger online discussions, etc. (Sukowati, 2019). However, these various ceremonial events later became the menu for selfie photo activities, which were uploaded to various platforms to support the personal image of the participants, not inviting the public to discuss the conference theme. Through this practice, conferences become the 'big children' of academic capitalism (Jessop, 2018) or the 'knowledge-based economy'. The practice demands teaching, research, publication, and collaboration to align with the creation of humans as economic assets in the digital realm, fertilizing an exploitative digital labor system involving global corporations that own digital platforms.

Referring to Roland Barthes' trilogy of semiotic meanings (in Lantowa et al., 2017), the posters of the Communication academic conference for 2016-2021 have three meanings: denotative, connotative, and mythological meaning. Its denotative meaning lies in the informational text of the conference itself as a celebration held by associations or universities with a number of substantive and technical provisions for implementation. The connotative meaning refers to the text and visuals of the posters depicting the conference as a multidimensional space: dissemination of research results, networking opportunities, and travel opportunities. This depiction appears to be intentionally created to reach wider attractions from academics and practitioners to carry out interprovincial/intercountry mobility. The mythological meanings are contained in the symbolic icons: the placement of photos and names of speakers from abroad, state figures/officials, and logos of sponsoring corporations.

Referring to the concept of commodification developed by Mosco (2009), the conference forum has made commodification in three domains. First is the commodification of participants as consumers by placing them as buyers, in which their numbers are considered. The paper or summary of the paper sent is only the medium. The number of participants is an indicator of the success of the event. Lecturers as participants are workers who work for the organizers, which are business institutions. Second is the commodification of the content/topic of the conference itself. Based on the motivation to seek profit, the choice of conference topics was expanded, not specific, so the participants' market potential was wider. Within this framework, participants' review of summary papers will be simplified and accelerated. Likewise, packaged publication opportunities vary. There is a guarantee that certain channels are indexed, for example, in Scopus, ignoring the assumption of publication choices that are more relevant to the target public. Further commodification occurs in the use of various brands/brands sponsored by the event organizers, not the substance of the topic or the

presenters' ideas, for example, the use of government partners, the presence of speakers from the government, industry, etc.

Funding is a crucial problem in organizing Communication academic conferences throughout 2015-2021. No conference model is fully funded by participants or campuses. Research informants said that the main funding source for the conference was the sponsors, followed by the participant registration fee. The money that comes from participant registration does not contribute much. These sponsors include local governments or private companies. They are compensated for holding special sessions to promote the latest products, promoting regional tourism through distributing brochures or having dinners, etc. For example, at a National Communication Conference (KNK), ISKI received assistance from BRI IDR150million. The tradition of full ceremonial conferences outside the main event, such as providing transportation, location in star hotels, the large-scale menu of meals, and coffee breaks, is increasingly weighing on the budget. The huge need for conference funding has caused the organizers to impose an open competition for participants based on who can afford the registration fee. There are no free conferences and/or special treatment for certain lagging regions.

This study indicates that in a university climate experiencing liberalization, conference activities attended by academics are not ordinary social events. Conferences on a national and international scale are not only seen as a space for the contestation of idealism but also as academic ideas. It is an indicator of managerial ability to accumulate profits for the campus or organizer. The meaning of the conference changed from its function as a constructive public space (Habermas, 1991) into a contestation of the institution's reputation. Political intervention in conferences can be traced to higher education accreditation standards that give certain achievement figures to universities hosting international conferences. Furthermore, certain achievement scores are also given to individual presenters at international conferences who are considered reputable, both at home and abroad.

In general, this research has not found conferences that are indicated to be fake or problematic, but if there is no control of the minimum standard of quality conferences, the category of questionable conferences has the potential to occur on campus and off-campus, in all disciplines, not only communication science. Communication conferences in recent years have often invited figures outside of Communications, such as public officials and businesses, thereby reducing the space for academic examinations. Scientific conferences, which are a means for academics to get academic feedback from research results and papers that have been made, can turn into mere academic administration forums, business negotiations, or political lobbying to build the reputation of the organizers. It should be noted that the perception that a national seminar and conference should invite public officials such as the Minister has long been growing. Likewise, there is an assumption that the requirement to be called an "international" forum is to invite speakers and or presenters from academics with overseas campus backgrounds, either from which country, even though their academic track record is still questionable.

In the perspective of the political economy of communication, referring to the thoughts of Herman and Chomsky (2002), the conference can be positioned as a medium, a space for institutional and individual contestation to gain social, economic, and political benefits. Conferences are multi-interest events ranging from presentations of academic achievements in scientific research works to culinary business, tourism, or tourist mobility between countries. As a celebration, the conference increasingly requires a high cost. As a result, an academic conference is highly dependent on financial support from individuals other than the active participants or organizers, such as private companies, governments, or individual donors. The independence of the organization is at stake when an international conference is financed by a corporation whose mission is to build a business reputation.

If traced from the value chain side, a conference is an increasingly lucrative business chain: from event publication, online registration/visit, opening ceremony, extensive panel session, parallel session/room discussion, to awarding certificates and guaranteeing publications in certain international journals. The conference is a "bourgeois party" with lunch/dinner, traveling, and souvenirs as the main markers. The main event in the form of a presentation is only a compliment. In countries with a developing scientific tradition, such as the Middle East and North Africa, according to records by Besyah (2017), large-scale scientific conferences are usually attended by 1500 participants, often taking place in a luxury hotel. Business conferences are sponsored by related industries. For example, if the topic is health/drugs, then pharmaceutical companies will sponsor the participants, of course, in exchange for increasing their drug business. Participants are referred to as 'academic professionals', not academics/scientists. A similar situation also occurs in business-related conferences. Not only located in the Middle East, but fake conferences also often take place in

Western Europe, such as in Edinburgh, England, with a '48-hour peer review process' (MacKenzie, 2019). How about in Indonesia? The results of this research signal the beginning of a phenomenon that leads to a similar situation.

## CONCLUSION

Based on the author's analysis of 36 publication posters of Communication Science conferences in Indonesia from 2015 to 2021, interviews with representatives of conference organizers from two communication associations in Indonesia: ISKI and ASPIKOM, analysis of policies for organizing academic conferences in Indonesia, and analysis of the macroeconomic context of politics, the author can convey the following conclusions:

This research found that there was a boom in the organization of Communication Science academic conferences in Indonesia from 2015 to 2021 with various organizers, ranging from campuses, study program associations, and academics to parties outside the two. In the absence of regulation, academic conferences tend to follow the logic of open market competition. As a result, there are Communication conferences that have not fully adhered to the mission of academic dissemination. The organizers set the deadline between registration, paper review, and implementation very briefly, ignoring the paper selection process as the main pillar of the relevance of participant attendance.

This study also finds a unique phenomenon that national public officials such as Ministers, business people, and academics from abroad are specially placed as keynote speakers in Communication conferences in Indonesia. Scientists are positioned marginally, only as companions. In addition to the main agenda of plenary and parallel discussions, the organizers offer participants to participate in additional events such as city tours or other additional events. This phenomenon seems to describe Indonesia's academic culture, which is influenced by dependence on non-academic power and being held hostage to the logic of historical heritage in the context of Indonesia as a post-colonial country.

From the political economy perspective, two main factors trigger the rise of academic conferences in Indonesia. The first is the motivation to accumulate money from the conference through the accumulation of money from participants and/or sponsors. Referring to McQuail's (1983) opinion, factors of funding sources and the main donor of funds will determine the content or topic choice of an event and/or mass media. Second, political motivation for the image of an educational institution is measured procedurally: lecturers' participation in conference forums becomes an entry point for potential political economy interests. The scientific conference is far from its true ideality. Cowan (2016) detailed the notion of the 'pseudo-reputation' of universities that have undergone liberalization and seduced academics: political promotions, monetary bonuses, interstate travel, and national and international reputations. In Indonesia, the pseudo-reputation of academic conferences is built through the choice of locations in five-star hotels, speakers from abroad, and the event's opening by officials. Referring to Besyah (2017), this situation leads to three conditions: fake conferences, fake journals, and fake academia.

Empirical phenomena that lead to the commodification of academic conferences that have the potential to violate academic ethics must be taken seriously by academics. Darbyshire (2018) recommends the following five things. First, universities must decide not to fund or support faculty activities involving predatory conference organizers (funding of attendance, registration, and accommodation). Second, academics who intentionally publish or attend the forum must receive a warning from their university. Third, faculty and students remove publications and presentations at predatory events from their curriculum vitae and their faculty or university websites. Fourth, students and faculty should know that quoting from predatory publications in their essays and scientific works is not acceptable. Fifth, the attitude of anti-predatory conferences must be a commitment of policymakers such as universities, academic associations, and the government. As we have done in predatory journals, the publication of a list of problematic international conference names needs to be available and regularly on an official website that is open to the public.

This research is the initial initiative to inflame a critical attitude toward the commodification and exploitation of academic forums after the liberalization of education in Indonesia in the Communication Sciences sector. To maintain a productive academic tradition for developing uniquely Indonesian communication and media studies, efforts to anticipate holding conferences that are only

---

aimed at seeking economic benefits or imaging educational institutions must be carried out. This research contributes to providing data for policymaking. Universities and academic and professional communication associations, and other disciplines must work together to formulate standards for scientific forums that adhere to professional conference commitments without interference from parties who do not have the scientific capacity and non-academic content. Referring to the annual tradition of international conferences held by ICA and IAMCR, the Communications academic community in Indonesia urgently needs to have a single conference with strict scientific management discipline. The ability to avoid commercial or government sponsorship is a challenge apart from prioritizing Indonesian experts as speakers.

This research is still limited to reviewing research publication posters and in-depth interviews, government regulations, and conference management from the organizer's point of view. Further research needs to be done to determine the motivation for academic participation (Rowe, 2018) and universities in conferences at home and abroad. Another relevant topic of further research is how the motivation and workings of parties outside the academic conference organizing institution Communication are involved as main sponsors or co-sponsors. Following the COVID-19 pandemic, the online conferencing model has become an alternative to a more egalitarian space and, in the future, an efficient choice in terms of cost and time. Moreover, the future possibilities of hybrid conferencing models: online and offline, is also another interesting research topic.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENT

The author would like to thanks the Central Boards of the Association of Higher Education Communication Science (ASPIKOM) for including this research as their national agenda and for managing communication among their members. Thanks to Hangga Fathana and Cesha Dini Hari Santi from the Islamic University of Indonesia (UII), and Noverly Faikal Urfan from *Universitas Teknologi Yogyakarta* and the work team of the 2019-2022 ASPIKOM research division for the research collaboration. To the committe of internal collaborative research grants among lecturers of Psychology and Socio-Cultural Sciences Faculty, *Universitas Islam Indonesia*, I thanks for the funding allocation.

## REFERENCES

- Adiprasetyo, J. (2019). Perkembangan ilmu komunikasi di Indonesia: Instrumentalisasi kuasa hingga mekanisme pasar. *Jurnal Pemikiran Sosiologi*, 6(2), 124–149. <https://doi.org/10.22146/jps.v6i2.51583>
- Beshyah, S. A. (2017). Fake academia and bogus conferences are on the rise in the middle east: Time to act. *Ibnosina Journal of Medicine and Biomedical Sciences*, 9(6), 147. [https://doi.org/10.4103/ijmbs.ijmbs\\_61\\_17](https://doi.org/10.4103/ijmbs.ijmbs_61_17)
- Binangkit, I. D., & Siregar, D. I. (2020). Internasionalisasi dan reformasi perguruan tinggi: Studi kasus pada lembaga Pendidikan Tinggi Muhammadiyah. *Jurnal Dinamika Manajemen Pendidikan*, 4(2), 131. <https://doi.org/10.26740/jdmp.v4n2.p131-138>
- Corona-Sobrino, C., García-Melón, M., Poveda-Bautista, R., & González-Urango, H. (2020). Closing the gender gap at academic conferences: A tool for monitoring and assessing academic events. *PLOS ONE*, 15(12), e0243549. <https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0243549>
- Cowan, D. (2016). *Predatory journals, publishers and conferences*. Universiteit Van Pretoria.
- Cress, P. E. (2017). Are predatory conferences the dark side of the open access movement? *Aesthetic Surgery Journal*, 37(6), 734–738. <https://doi.org/10.1093/asj/sjw247>
- Creswell, J. W. (2014). *Research design: Qualitative, quantitative, and mixed methods approaches* (4th ed). In *SAGE Publications*.
- Darbyshire, P. (2018). Fake news, fake journals, fake conferences, what we can do. *Journal of Clinical Nursing*, 27(9–10), 1727–1729. <https://doi.org/10.1111/jocn.14214>
- Donlon, E. (2021). Lost and found: The academic conference in pandemic and post-pandemic times. *Irish Educational Studies*, 40(2), 367–373. <https://doi.org/10.1080/03323315.2021.1932554>
- Eaton, S. (2018). *Avoiding predatory journals and questionable conferences: A resource guide*. University of Calgary. <https://doi.org/10.11575/PRISM/20>

- Edelheim, J. R., Thomas, K., Åberg, K. G., & Phi, G. (2018). What do conferences do? What is academics' intangible return on investment (ROI) from attending an academic tourism conference? *Journal of Teaching in Travel & Tourism*, 18(1), 94–107. <https://doi.org/10.1080/15313220.2017.1407517>
- Habermas, J. (1991). *The structural transformation of public sphere*. MIT Press.
- Herman, E. S., & Chomsky, N. (2002). *Manufacturing consent: The political economy of the mass media*. Pantheon Books.
- IAMCR/International Association of Media and Communication Research. (2021). IAMCR Nairobi 2021. In *IAMCR/International Association of Media and Communication Research*. IAMCR/International Association of Media and Communication Research. <https://iamcr.org/nairobi2021/online>
- ICA/International Communication Conference. (2021). 7th Annual ICA Conference. In *ICA/International Communication Conference*. <https://icaib.id/>
- Irawanto, D. W., Ramsey, P. L., & Tweed, D. C. (2012). Exploring paternalistic leadership and its application to the Indonesian public sector. *International Journal of Leadership in Public Services*, 8(1), 4–20. <https://doi.org/10.1108/17479881211230637>
- Jessop, B. (2018). On academic capitalism. *Critical Policy Studies*, 12(1), 104–109. <https://doi.org/10.1080/19460171.2017.1403342>
- Kahan, S., & Kushner, R. F. (2017). New year's resolution: Say no to fake journals and conferences. *Obesity*, 25(1), 11–12. <https://doi.org/10.1002/oby.21738>
- Karlsohn, T. (2016). The academic seminar as emotional community. *Nordic Journal of Studies in Educational Policy*, 2016(2–3), 33724. <https://doi.org/10.3402/nstep.v2.33724>
- Lantowa, J., Marahayu, N. mega, & Khairussibyan, M. (2017). *Semiotika: Teori, metode, dan penerapannya dalam penelitian sastra*. Deepublish.
- Lestari, D. (2015). Pengembangan kinerja dan karir akademik. *Jurnal Kinerja*, 12(2), 71–83. <https://journal.feb.unmul.ac.id/index.php/KINERJA/article/view/7>
- MacKenzie. (2019). *Inside a "Fake" conference: A journey into predatory science*. [www.Technologynetworks.Com](http://www.Technologynetworks.Com). <https://www.technologynetworks.com/tn/articles/inside-a-fake-conference-a-journey-into-predatory-science-321619>
- Mali, M. G. (2020). Internasionalisasi kampus sebagai strategi perguruan tinggi dalam menghadapi era revolusi industri 4.0. *Jurnal Manajemen Publik & Kebijakan Publik*, 2(1), 68–78.
- McCrostie, J. (2018). *Predatory conferences: A case of academic cannibalism*. [www.Exordo.Com](http://www.Exordo.Com). <https://www.exordo.com/blog/9-signs-this-is-a-fake-conference/>
- McQuail, D. (1983). *Mass communication theory an introduction*. SAGE Publications.
- Mosco, V. (2009a). *Political Economy of Communication (SECOND EDI)*. SAGE Publications. <https://uk.sagepub.com/en-gb/eur/the-political-economy-of-communication/book231852>
- Mosco, V. (2009b). *The Political Economy of Communication*. SAGE Publications.
- Nasution, B., Suhaidi, Siregar, M., & Simamora, A. P. (2014). Liberalisasi pendidikan tinggi dalam kerangka GATS: Kajian hukum terhadap pendirian perguruan tinggi asing. In *USU Law Journal (Vol. 2, Issue 1)*. Universitas Sumatera Utara.
- Richards, L. D. (2015). Designing academic conferences in the light of second-order cybernetics. *Constructivist Foundation*, 11(1), 65–73. <https://constructivist.info/11/1/065.richards>
- Rowe, N. (2018). 'When you get what you want, but not what you need': The motivations, affordances and shortcomings of attending academic/scientific conferences. *International Journal of Research in Education and Science (IJRES)*, 4(2), 714–730. <https://doi.org/10.21890/ijres.438394>
- Rubiono, G., & Finahari, N. (2017). Dosen: Profil-profil sederhana dalam profesi yang rumit. *JAS-PT Jurnal Analisis Sistem Pendidikan Tinggi*, 1(1), 11. <https://doi.org/10.36339/jaspt.v1i1.35>
- Sá, M. J., Ferreira, C. M., & Serpa, S. (2019). Virtual and face-to-face academic conferences: Comparison and potentials. *Journal of Educational and Social Research*, 9(2), 35–47.
- Sokowati, M. (2019). Questioning Public Participation in Social Media Activities in Indonesia. *Komunikator*, 11(2), 116–124. <https://doi.org/10.18196/jkm.112025>
- Surya, P. (2021). Kritik terhadap internasionalisasi pendidikan tinggi ala kebijakan politik the New Southbound Taiwan. *Jurnal Akuntabilitas Manajemen Pendidikan*, 9(2), 203–212. <https://doi.org/https://doi.org/10.21831/jamp.v9i2.42586>