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Research Article



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
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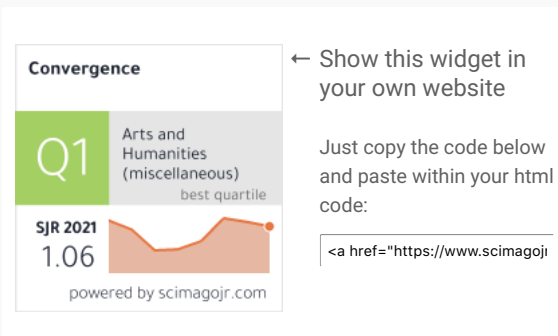
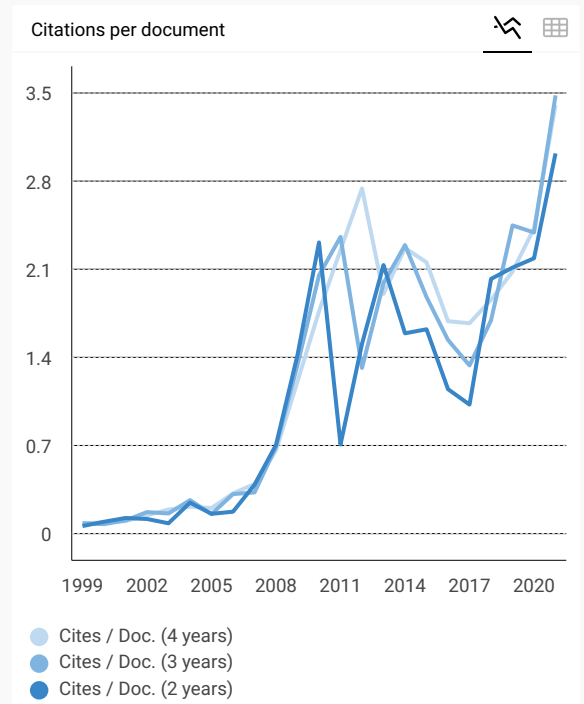
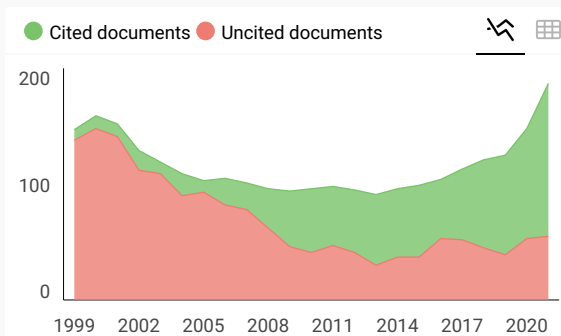
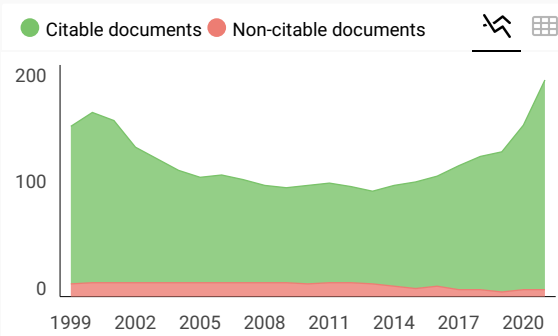
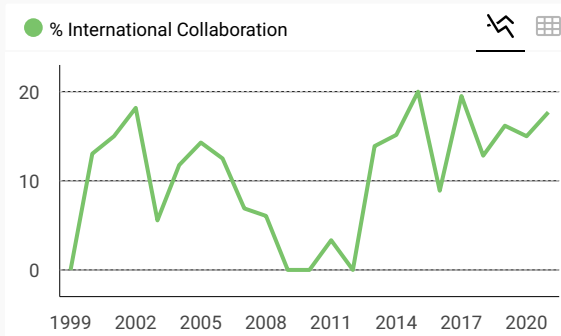
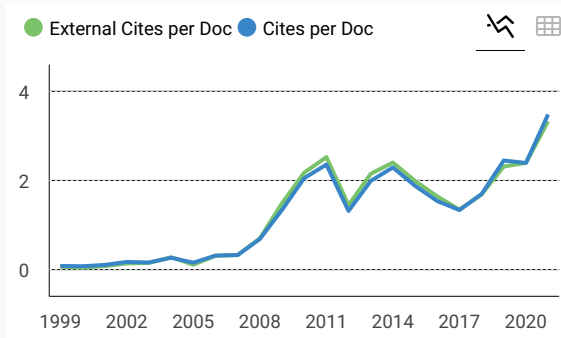
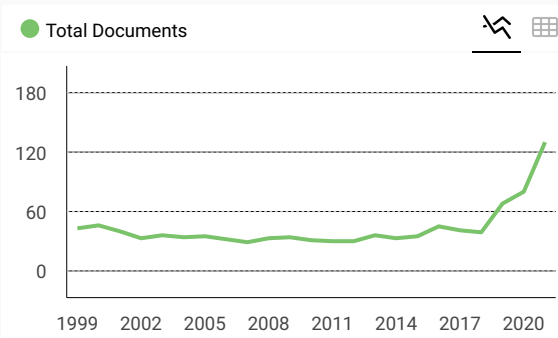
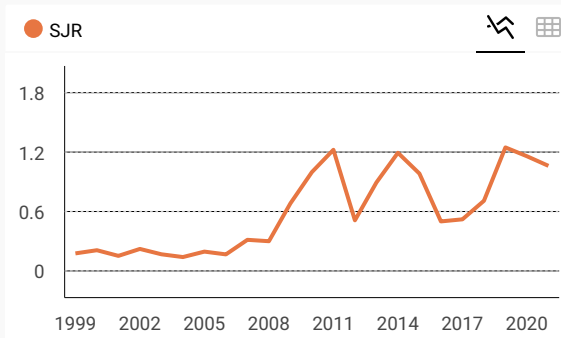
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Framing the startup accelerator through assemblage theory: A case study of an intensive hub in Indonesia

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File name: Framing_the_startup_accelerator_through_assemblage_theory.pdf (672.41K)

Word count: 9323

Character count: 52103

Framing the startup accelerator through assemblage theory: A case study of an intensive hub in Indonesia

Convergence: The International Journal of Research into New Media Technologies
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Abstract

This article presents how assemblage theory, as taken from Deleuze and Guattari, can be used to understand the intensive approaches of startup accelerators in supporting startup companies. Through a study of a startup accelerator in Jakarta, Indonesia, we present three snapshots to exemplify manifestations of what we argue as the accelerator's "seed accelerator" form of content and "seed funding" form of expression as well as their *reciprocal presupposition* to demonstrate the multiplicity of assemblage as the organizational principles of the accelerator. Employing the tenets of formalization and territorialization from assemblage theory to analyze the results, this article shows that the "seed accelerator" form of content is manifested by way of how the accelerator's bodies of its human elements, activities, events, and infrastructure relate and interconnect throughout the accelerator's 12-week program towards its end point, that is, fulfilling the stakes for the Final Demo-Day, while, on the other hand, the "seed funding" form of expression is manifested by way of the usage of terms related to fund-raising, expressions of worry, and the expectations of the hub management and the VC in preparing the startups for the next level of funding. Moreover, we argue that the formalized function of the accelerator assemblage is to intensively seed scalable startups. This assemblage analysis thus offers an interrelational perspective regarding startup accelerators, and demonstrates the value of formalization and territorialization in assemblage theory to understand the programming arrangements in a startup accelerator.

Keywords

assemblage, formalization and territorialization, intensive seeding, startup accelerators

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Introduction

Previous studies on startup accelerators have focused on definitional issues, such as differentiating accelerators from incubators (e.g. [Cohen and Hochberg, 2014](#); [Isabelle, 2013](#)), or proposing the accelerator as a new generation of an incubation model with “design elements” and “design themes” ([Pauwels et al., 2016](#)).

However, there is still a gap in understanding the organization of different elements in startup accelerators. On filling this gap, we share [Croteau's \(2006\)](#) concerns on the challenges of understanding the production of self-produced media content, such as who owns and controls the production, and in what forms of structure. Having said that, concern with the way media is being produced goes beyond capital or funding issues because factors such as discourses, knowledge, and daily practice play important parts in cultural production ([Levine, 2001](#): 67). In their critique, [Havens et al. \(2009: 238\)](#) emphasize that they “cannot accommodate the conclusion that meaning, textual production, and identity practices are predictable or guaranteed to reflect only the interests of those who control the means of production”. In other words, media scholarship to date has concentrated on the politics of participatory media and/or user-generated content, rather than establishing a more relational-oriented framework in understanding the components at play in producing media or, specifically in this case, software.

This article thus seeks to address the above concerns by scrutinizing the interrelations of an accelerator's elements through assemblage theory by Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, specifically via their focus on connections and relations between different things or bodies. As Deleuze states in an interview with Claire Parnet (later published in the book, *Dialogues* (1977, originally in French)): “[An assemblage] is a multiplicity which is made up of many heterogeneous terms and which establishes liaisons, relations between them, across ages, sexes and reigns – different natures” ([Deleuze and Parnet, 1987](#): 69 translated edition). The logics of connection in the theory of assemblage thus fit our tasks, which are to understand the inter-relational structuring of the startup accelerator; how that structuring of its elements works in organizing a startup accelerator? and what possibilities such an assemblage may open up? Specifically, we seek to go beyond the face value of merely observing the interrelations of its elements, but to examine the *underlying principles of organization* that guide the way an accelerator operates. In this examination, we thus also present a novel interrelational perspective to “perceive” ([Brown, 2020](#): 280) the creation and development of new media in a specific production context. In the process, we can understand what kinds of organizing principles hold together different bodies in the accelerator, and unravel what drives an accelerator's approach in developing its startup companies.

On that basis, this article investigates the following question: *how may the assemblage of a startup accelerator explain the organization of the approach it takes in supporting startup companies?* Out of findings from ³a three month study of a startup accelerator in Jakarta, Indonesia, we draw on assemblage theory by Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari (1987) to analyze our results. The article will proceed as follows: the section *The Startup Accelerator: a brief introduction* will provide, by way of background, a brief introduction to the definition and operation of a startup accelerator; the section *Research methods* will describe the methodology of research for this study, including an overview of assemblage theory as our analytical framework. In the section *Accelerator assemblage: Intensive seeding*, we present our analysis of the accelerator's principles of organization through assemblage theory. The section *Conclusion* concludes.

funding, and networking access to its chosen startup companies. The VC team selected seven startups out of 186 applicants, representing a 3.76% acceptance rate, to constitute the cohort under study. This chosen cohort then participated in the accelerator's program starting in early 2017 which spanned 12 weeks, culminating with a Final Demo-Day pitch and presentation.

Research methods

Field work

We employed an ethnographic toolkit (LeCompte and Schensul, 2010) to study the operations of the accelerator so as to grasp its underlying principles of organization. Over a period of 3 months, the first author took a role as one of the accelerator's staff members and accessed the hub to work alongside its members, as well as observed all the accelerator's operations, activities and events both in and outside its working hours. Approximately 300 h of observation in all was conducted and a thick description of the observations was produced.

Interviews were also conducted with members of the accelerator, such as startup founders; hub management staff; VC investors; mentors; and startup alumni. In all, 20 participants were interviewed. Six of those 20 participants were interviewed more than once. The interviews consisted of both individual and group interviews in formal and informal settings. In formal settings, structured interviews took place in a room or space for that purpose. In informal settings, unstructured interviews took place as discussions at casual encounters such as networking events, and usually in co-working spaces or communal areas (e.g., the lobby of a building or in a car) where topics or questions were offered to the startup founders and co-founders to which they gave their thoughts and related their experiences. The observation notes of related activities, including expressions related to the topic of study, were also discussed with the participants to gain "validation" and to add participants' voices to the findings.

We also studied archival data of the accelerator, such as lists of applicants; startups' pitch decks; Final Demo-Day videos; and alumni contacts. The hub team also gave the first author access to their shared drive, shared calendar of events/meetings and mailing list of the batch under study, and introduced the first author to the partner VC team.

In our report, we will use the following participant codes to maintain anonymity: hub management (HM); startup (SU); startup founders and co-founders (SF); mentors (ME); venture capital team (VC); and startup alumni (SA). We will also assign numbers (e.g., 1, 2, etc.) to differentiate participants within the same code (e.g., SF1, SF2, etc.). All relevant ethics committee approval was obtained prior to conducting the research.

Assemblage analysis

We then used the theory of assemblage by Deleuze and Guattari (1987) to analyze the findings from our study, framing the data via assemblage into a set of organizational principles to better understand the accelerator's structure, the interrelations between its different elements, and its developmental approach. Specifically, we applied the theory's concepts of *formalization* (in terms of *form of expression* and *form of content*); *reciprocal presupposition*; *formalized function*; *territorialization* (in terms of *de-territorialization* and *re-territorialization*); and the assemblage's nature of its space of the in-between. Given the complexity of the theory as well as multiple variations which have morphed in its discourse, we lay out below a brief clarification of the concepts used in our analysis.

An assemblage is first stated by Deleuze and Guattari to have “two sides: it is a collective assemblage of enunciation; it is a machinic assemblage of desire” (Deleuze and Guattari, 1986: 81 translated edition). Subsequently, Deleuze and Guattari re-affirm the formalization of assemblage as a constitution of form of content (via bodies) and form of expression or “enunciation” (via acts, statements or *énoncé*). They (1987: 88) write:

[A]n assemblage comprises two segments, one of content, the other of expression. On the one hand, it is a *machinic assemblage* of bodies, of actions and passions, an intermingling of bodies reacting to one another; on the other hand it is a *collective assemblage of enunciation*, of acts and statements, of incorporeal transformations attributed to bodies. [Emphasis in original]

Specifically, form of content (or the operation of “machinic assemblage of bodies”) is reducible not to a thing, but to a complex state of things, bodies, and action. Form of expression (or “collective assemblage of enunciation”) is likewise reducible not to words, but to a set of statements, discourses, and ideas arising in the social field (Deleuze and Guattari, 1986, 1987; Deleuze and Parnet, 1987).

Moreover, both forms are in paradox—while they are relatively independent (Deleuze and Guattari, 1986: 4), they may also re-unite. As they (1987) write:

The independence of the form of expression and the form of content is not the basis for a parallelism between them or a representation of one by the other, but on the contrary a parceling of the two, a manner in which expressions are inserted into contents, in which we ceaselessly jump from one register to another... In short, the functional independence of the two forms is only the form of their reciprocal presupposition, and of the continual passage from one to the other. (87)

Hence, forms of expression and content also exist in this state of “continual passage,” or what Deleuze and Guattari (1987) call “reciprocal presupposition” (66, 87), namely, a state of bidirectionality or bidirectional relation (A presupposes B and B presupposes A).

Subsequently, Deleuze further clarifies that this mutual presupposition gives rise to a second meaning of form, so that form has two meanings. The first is as the organizational logic of matter (or formed matter). The other is to *distribute function* by abstracting function and matter to their particular virtual traits and connecting them together (or formalized function). Hence, form also gives direction or function for the organization of bodies or elements, and for the arrangement of the signs or utterances in or regarding a specific assemblage. Deleuze illustrates this clarification of form (in terms of *formed matter* and *formalized function*) in his explication of Foucault’s reading of the prison:

Form here [of the prison] can have two meanings: it forms or organizes matter; or it forms or finalizes functions and gives them aims. Not only the prison but the hospital, the school, the barracks and the workshop are formed matter. Punishment is a formalized function, as is care, education, training, or enforced work. The fact is that there is a kind of correspondence between them, even though the two forms are irreducible..... (Deleuze, 1988: 33; emphasis added.)

In other words, the two forms of content and expression of the assemblage may come into contact with each other not only as formed matter, but also as formalized function in terms of the assemblage’s aim and operational limits.

Yet, these two “segments” (content and expression) only comprise of an assemblage on a “first, horizontal” axis. As Deleuze and Guattari proceed to clarify, on a “vertical axis,” “the assemblage has both *territorial* sides, or reterritorialized sides, which stabilize it [the assemblage], and *cutting edges of deterritorialization*, which carry it away” (Deleuze and Guattari, 1987: 88; emphasis in original). Or, per their declaration: “The assemblage is tetravalent: (1) content and expression; (2) territoriality and deterritorialization” (505). Referring specifically to de-territorialization, Massumi (2002) describes its context in the following way: “As aggregate formations, expression-content articulations have a tendency to drift over time. ... Content and expression [re-articulate] themselves, toward a new aggregate result” (xix). He draws on metaphors of gardening to describe this process of renewal:

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...[E]stablished forms of content and expression must give of themselves. They shed functions, like so many seeds in search of new soil, or like branches for the grafting. It is of their cobbled-together nature to do so: to disseminate. And it is the inconstant nature of their sheddings to mutate as they disseminate. This mutational dissemination of transplantable functions is an instance of what Deleuze and Guattari call a ‘deterritorialization’. (*ibid*)

Hence, it is clear that, as Deleuze and Guattari (1987) put it, while “every assemblage is basically territorial” (503), “its territoriality (content and expression included) is only a first aspect; the other aspect is constituted by *lines of deterritorialization* that cut across it and carry it away” (504; emphasis in original). Transformational movement via the territorial aspect of assemblage thus runs through its forms of content and expressions.

Finally of note is, how these forms for an assemblage are not merely prescriptions for a mixture or amalgamation of heterogeneous elements. It is clear that an assemblage is not an organic unity. Rather, 3 an assemblage is a multiplicity that relies on its arrangement, layout, or construction, thus giving a sense of the processual rather than a static whole or situation. This sense of arrangement, too, is reflected in the gap in meaning between its original French word, “agencement”, from which the current English word of usage, “assemblage”, was translated. As Nail (2017, 22) explains, the former derives from the verb *agencer*, meaning “to arrange, to lay out, to piece together”: “the noun *agencement* thus means ‘a construction, an arrangement, or a layout.’” Conversely, the English word “assemblage,” derived from the French word *assemblage* (a-sahn-blazh) rather than *agencer*, means “‘the joining or union of two things’ or ‘a bringing or coming together.’” There is thus a gap in meaning out of the translation: as he writes, “a layout or arrangement is not the same thing as a unity or a simple coming together.” (Nail 2017, 22)

In other words, “assemblages are more like machines, defined solely by their *external relations* of composition, mixture, and aggregation.” (Nail 2017, 23; emphasis added.) Or, as Buchanan (2015) puts it, “in practice, the assemblage is the productive intersection of a form of content (actions, bodies and things) and a form of expression (affects, words, ideas)” (390); elsewhere, he pushes an even more (self-admittedly) extreme conclusion: “I would even go so far as to say that the assemblage does not have any content, it is a purely formal arrangement or ordering that functions as a mechanism of inclusion and exclusion.” (463) Or to return to the primary material, we also underscore Deleuze and Guattari’s (1987: 23) note that “an assemblage establishes connections between certain multiplicities.” Moreover, “in a multiplicity, what counts are not the terms or the elements, but *what is ‘between’ them*, the in-between, a *set of relations* that are inseparable from each other” (Deleuze and Parnet, 1987: viii; emphasis added). Accordingly, an assemblage exists in a dynamic space of the *in-between*, where “between things does not designate a localisable relation

going from one thing to the other and back again, but a perpendicular direction, a transversal movement” (Deleuze and Guattari, 1987: 25).

We thus use these key concepts of assemblage theory as our approach to understanding the interrelations of elements in the accelerator hub in a way that goes beyond merely reporting what are those relations. Our field work as conducted through ethnographic tools will yield data on which elements exist and how they operate in the startup accelerator. Our assemblage analysis will further explain what is “between” those elements in the accelerator and what are its organizing principles.

Accelerator assemblage: Intensive seeding

In this section, we categorize our findings of interactions between the accelerator’s heterogeneous elements on the terms of Deleuze and Guattari’s assemblage theory, namely, *formalization* (form of content and form expression), *formalized function*, and *territorialization*. Specifically, we identify three organizational principles: (i) “seed accelerator” form of content and “seed funding” form of expression (as the accelerator’s formalization); (ii) *intensively seeding scalable startups* (as the formalized function of the accelerator); and (iii) *in medias res of the accelerator* (as territorialization). The subsections below will examine each in turn.

Through this engagement, we use assemblage theory to dissect the accelerator’s mode of organization, thus framing our understanding of the accelerator on previously unexplored terms, and particularly under new light of organizational principles which go beyond capital and operational issues. The benefit of this analytical approach is to discern how the relations between content and expression in the accelerator fit its purpose, such as understanding how the absence or the changing of one of the forms influences the accelerator’s interrelational constellation of different elements. In turn, this analysis also advances understanding of the accelerator’s operations—for instance, why it has a specific intensive timeline, why its interrelations of elements move towards a specific direction, and why a particular element has a particular role. Finally, this analysis, particularly through territorialization/de-territorialization (*In medias res of the accelerator*), also enables the mapping of events of disjuncture or discontinuities which signal the possibility of what a particular formalization may open up, thus seeing the discontinuities as creative encounters that may lead to different modes of organization.

1 “Seed accelerator” form of content and “seed funding” form of expression

On the terms of Deleuze and Guattarian assemblage theory, we read the accelerator as an assemblage of heterogeneous elements (humans; activities; infrastructure; themes; terms; expectation) via (i) the operation of machinic assemblage of bodies that organizes the accelerator’s bodies, infrastructure, and activities (such as the startup founders, mentors, investors, hub management, mentorship activities, and networking events); and (ii) the collective assemblage of enunciations that organizes its expressions (such as of funding and expectations of investment). We term the former the “seed accelerator” form of content; and the latter the “seed funding” form of expression.

In turn, we argue that the “seed accelerator” form of content is manifested by way of how the accelerator’s bodies of its human elements, activities, events, and infrastructure relate and interconnect throughout the accelerator’s 12-week program toward its end point, that is, fulfilling the stakes for the Final Demo-Day, which are the continuity of the accelerator’s different elements (namely, that the participant teams to continue achieving investment funding and developing their product and companies; the investors to continue productively and profitably with their investment; and the hub management to continue the operation of the hub). Inherent in this end point is also the

immense pressure faced by all the stakeholders in the participants' preparation of their product pitch for the Final Demo-Day, which requires concise content on the product, its future prospects, the ability of the team to handle all the pressures, and the investment needed to expand the company. From archival data on the previous cohort (namely, media articles; the startups' pitch decks; and their Final Demo-Day videos) and the content of the mentorship classes held throughout the accelerator's program, it is clear that pitching well at the Final Demo-Day was critical for the continuity of the arrangement of all the stakeholders.

The "*seed funding*" form of expression, then, is manifested by way of the usage of terms related to fund-raising, expressions of worry and the expectations of the hub management, and the VC in preparing the startups for the next level of funding. Following the last point, the "*seed funding*" form of expression in relation to expectations thus also undergoes variables (or what Deleuze and Guattari term "variables of expression, immanent acts, or incorporeal transformation" (Deleuze and Guattari, 1987: 85), whereby the physical body remains the same but its expression or function changes). In this case, the expressions of securing more funding conveys more than the meaning of its amount and its intrinsic value; it also conveys the prestige and affirmed expectations which change the social status of the startup.

We thus present three snapshots from our field study to illustrate diverse manifestations of the "*seed accelerator*" form of content and "*seed funding*" form of expression in the accelerator as described above. Taking Deleuze and Guattari's phrasing, we will also present the "*reciprocal presupposition*" between form of content and expression to demonstrate the multiplicity of assemblage as the organizational principles of the accelerator.

The *first* snapshot is an observation made during the 8th week of the accelerator's program about a team meeting that took place in the VC's office which discussed how the program and participants have performed so far. Specifically, it shows how the Final Demo-Day pitch is a source of tremendous pressure:

After lunch, one of the accelerator's teams [HM2] went to the VC's office and met with three members of the VC team. They first talked about the accomplishment of yesterday's event (press conference) and the beneficial coverage from the media. The conversation's topic then moved internally to the current content and feedback of the acceleration program and to the progress of each startup.

Above all, what worried them most was the preparedness of the startups because the final demo-day was getting closer; it was less than three weeks away. The discussion ended with follow-up actions of increasing monitoring activities and of maximizing the mini demo-day (the next week—week 9). (Snapshot 1: Observation)

A brief context for this snapshot: This pressure for the Final Demo-Day did not occur only at that specific week; both organizers and participants had recognized the pressure for the Final Demo-Day since the beginning of the program. Rather, Snapshot 1 was more of a reminder of the pressure which constantly appeared throughout the program.

Snapshot 1 thus presents the "*seed accelerator*" form of content by how the different bodies of the accelerator—that is, the accelerator and VC teams; the VC's office that is separated from the co-working area; and this meeting as recorded in the snapshot—were related and connected by the pressure they were all under due to the criticality of the Final Demo-Day pitch. Of particular note to underscore that connection is how the discussion of the program's participants' performance so far *varied* from the focus of previous team meetings which had been daily discussions of day-to-day technical operations and future events. Instead of the repetitive interactions of these bodies as in

“Seed funding” awareness can be de-territorialized into a form of expression that entails Series-A funding (i.e. funding between US\$2-15 million) awareness as opposed to seed funding (i.e. funding between US\$10,000-2 million) awareness. These possibilities all create the conditions in which the startup accelerator, as a (de/re-)territorialized assemblage, always remains “*in media res*.”

Conclusion

In summary, our analysis has shown the underlying organizational principles of the startup accelerator as an assemblage in terms of its formalized function as to intensively seed scalable startups. The accelerator achieves this seeding by, on the one hand, organizing its array of bodies (humans, activities, infrastructure) through the form of content of “*seed accelerator*” and, on the other hand, simultaneously structuring its expressions (terms, themes, and expectations) through the form of expression of “*seed funding*.” Eventually, the startup accelerator sits *in medias res*, which captures the temporary equilibrium of both forms of the accelerator assemblage (“*seed accelerator*”—“*seed funding*”) as subject to de-territorialization and re-territorialization that can transform the current assemblage.

The main significances of this analysis are two tenets of understanding with which to understand the startup accelerator’s interrelational organizational principles through assemblage theory as a framework which not been applied to this topic before. The first tenet is the mapping of the startup accelerator’s modes of operation, and movement of form of content and form of expression, as an assemblage of humans, activities, infrastructure, terms, themes, and expectations. This new light of organizational principle thus advances understanding of the accelerator’s operations and in particular, opens up that understanding to the possibilities of different agendas and modes of operation. Second, as discussed in our territorialization analysis, this mapping provides an opportunity to think of developing the startup accelerator by, for instance, re-arranging its different elements through the de/re-territorialization of the “*seed accelerator*” and “*seed funding*” forms. In turn, it also extends our understanding of the startup accelerator’s formalization of “intensively seeding the scalable startups,” particularly in thinking through its limitations and advantages, and paving the way for further strategic thinking on startup acceleration.

Our assemblage analysis of this accelerator in Jakarta, while not representative of all accelerators in Indonesia, also shows that startup acceleration in Indonesia tends to be driven by their modes of operation to grow quickly with the support of seed funding from collaborations of VCs and multinational corporations. At the time of the study, the dominant provisional model of support in Indonesia is the incubation model. However, the change of emphasis to an acceleration model for supporting startups has attracted various elements, including from outside of Indonesia, to be actively involved with acceleration processes. Our mapping of form, content, disjunctures, and discontinuities of the accelerator through assemblage thus show their creative encounters of “*seed accelerator*” and “*seed funding*,” and their implications for the cycles of generating, accelerating, and funding new technologies in emerging economies such as Indonesia. The interactions of the accelerator’s elements are not prescribed, but are exposed for variation. Modes of operations are also always subject to change as the consequences of the processes of re/de-territorialization.

To that extent, our model of the accelerator assemblage through this particular case study also illuminates further possible explorations in thinking through startup acceleration in general, including exploring different support/provision mechanisms for startup companies. The merit of understanding the startup accelerator model through assemblage can thus lead to different implementations with different operational action and different sources of funding, such as government agencies. Through further research, such as comparisons with other startup accelerators

which might also be alternatively framed as fixed and functional organizations, we can think through greater diversity of the accelerator's underlying organizing principles. In turn, that understanding can be extended to think of ever more radical and innovative possibilities or approaches for different kinds of support organizations.

7

Declaration of conflicting interests

The author(s) declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Funding

The author(s) disclosed receipt of the following financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article: This work was supported by Directorate General of Higher Education, Indonesia

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