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From Reformasi to Retrenchment: Media Ownership, Political Power, and Public Voice in Post-1998 Indonesia

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Abstract

When the political system in Indonesia underwent a transition from authoritarianism to democracy at the beginning of the 1998 reform, there was a significant growth in number of mass media across the country. These mass media brought a variety of information and perspectives unrepresented in the previous regime. Indonesians also hoped that these mass media organisations could voice their aspirations and act as watchdogs in overseeing government performance. However, the freedom granted by the state to the public and private sector to establish mass media organisations was not as expected. Through literature studies and direct experience as a journalist, the author elaborates on how the mass media in Indonesia during the Reformation era became controlled by conglomerates who prioritised their business and political interests. This article also reveals how President Joko Widodo used conventional media to perpetuate his power. This study's findings explain how the public abandoned conventional media and turned to social media to obtain information and voice their aspirations. As a result, mass media increasingly lost readers and viewers, making businesses increasingly reluctant to advertise their products.

Key Words

Indonesia, democratisation, media oligarch, journalism, social media.

1. Introduction

In a country's democratic practices, mass media plays a central role in social life. It is undeniable that the most relevant prerequisites or principles for healthy democratic practices in society are freedom of expression and an independent press (Baker, 2007). The existence of independent mass media allows for the exchange of information, views, ideas, and discourse, as well as dynamics related to matters of public concern. Mass media is considered to provide channels of "undistorted communication," which are the primary means of liberating public participation (Habermas, 1984). Readers and viewers were enabled about local events that have rapidly evolved into global events through various news media channels. Moreover, local communities can also adopt customs, including democratic practices, previously practised by communities in other countries. In this regard, news media plays a crucial role in the distribution of communication power among social groups across economic, political, ethnic, cultural, and religious dimensions. It also plays a special role in articulating the local attitudes, interests, needs, and aspirations of the social sector.

Furthermore, independent journalism and alternative media play a crucial role in questioning the status quo, providing different perspectives, and holding those in power

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accountable. Citizens rely on objective journalism to stay informed about current events, issues, and policies. Without trustworthy and credible journalism practices, people can make decisions based on inaccurate or biased information, which can undermine the democratic process. Journalists act as watchdogs, providing citizens with the information they need to make informed choices. This can help prevent the spread of misinformation, fake news, and biased narratives. In modern life, citizens believe that no socio-political issue escapes the media. Through media channels, what happens locally can quickly become global; conversely, what is typically applied globally can now be implemented locally. The same is true for democracy. The media has been hailed as a champion of the spread of democracy throughout the world (Castells, 2010; Mansell, 2004). While these principles underscore the ideal role of media in a democracy, recent developments in Indonesia, particularly under President Joko Widodo, suggest a concerning deviation from these foundational tenets.

Several academics and civil society activists in the Indonesian context believe that democratic practices under President Joko Widodo, or Jokowi, have experienced a serious decline. This is marked by the weakening of the functions and authority of several elements supporting the sustainability of democracy in a country, such as freedom of expression, including a free press, a strong parliament, election organisers with integrity and an independent judiciary. Furthermore, Joko Widodo administration's efforts to allow active members of the armed forces (TNI) and the national police (Polri) to fill civil service (ASN) positions are considered a threat to democracy and a return to the ABRI's dual-function practices, reminiscent of the authoritarian New Order regime. This culminated in Jokowi's alleged direct involvement in the 2024 presidential and vice-presidential elections. Given this situation, it is not surprising that academics and several international institutions, such as IFES and the Economist Intelligence Unit (EIU), have categorised Indonesia as a flawed democracy (Tapsell, 2020; EIU, 2020).

One of the causes of the decline in the quality of democracy during Jokowi's administration is the lack of functioning of the mass media as a check and balance tool for power. The mass media, which should be a medium for conveying public aspirations, has turned out to be nothing more than a PR tool for the government. The credibility of mainstream media, which has been declining for years, has instead tended to become a buzzword for those in power. In fact, the mainstream media often becomes a tool to silence criticism from the public and the opposition. The proliferation of mass media outlets during the reform era has proved unable to guarantee a diversity of public voices. The claim of the mass media as a pillar of democracy was not fully valid in the Indonesian context during Jokowi's administration.

This article elaborates on why this situation occurred when the president and vice president were elected following a democratic process that was considered relatively good at the time (BPS, 2015). This article, therefore, substantiates its claims through a rigorous analysis of existing literature and the author's unique vantage point, having served as a national print media journalist for over two decades, including over 10 years covering the daily activities of the President and Vice President of the Republic of Indonesia. In addition to direct observations during my time as a journalist, the author also interviewed a number of journalists who covered the Presidential and Vice Presidential Palaces.

2. Literature Review

As discussed in the previous section, numerous studies have shown that mass media, including social media, plays a crucial role in democracy. The mass media serves as a public space for the exchange of opinions, discussion, and deliberation (Currant, 2011; Habermas, 1989). This public space provides a channel of communication between politicians and the public, enabling politicians to communicate their ideologies and proposals, providing the information the public

needs to participate in, and allowing politicians to have their voices heard. Several studies have highlighted mass media as a means of political education, where the dissemination of information is considered capable of shaping public opinion and increasing political participation (Kleinnijenhuis, Van Hoof & Van Atteveldt, 2019; McQuail, 2010). In Indonesia, the media also strengthens democracy by providing a space for various political groups to voice their aspirations (Tapsell, 2017; Lindsey, 2013).

This situation is also seen in various studies of democracy in several countries in the Asia Pacific, where the assumption arises that a free press significantly contributes to more democratic political change. This situation is not much different in Indonesia, where the mass media, especially after the Reformation Era, is considered a crucial pillar in supporting democracy, opening up space for press freedom (Tapsell, 2015; Sen & Hill, 2010; Soeharyo, 2003). Compared with the New Order regime, press freedom in Indonesia experienced significant development during the early Reformation. New media companies could grow more freely after previously facing strict state censorship (Sen & Hill, 2006). However, various studies also highlight that press freedom in Indonesia has brought new challenges, such as the emergence of ownership concentration that can reduce diversity of voices, partisan media, and a lack of journalistic professionalism, which can actually affect the quality of democracy (Lim, 2012; Tapsell, 2009). Yet, maintaining diversity in media ownership and content is crucial in a democratic system to ensure that many segments of the public can voice their voices and aspirations. Owing to the lack of diverse information, the public is increasingly abandoning mass media and turning to social media to voice their interests. This shift highlights the evolving landscape where social media emerges as a critical, albeit complex, alternative.

As is the case in many countries, social media in Indonesia is attempting to fill the void left by conventional media through its role as a platform for increasing public participation, activism, and providing an alternative source of information for the public (Tapsell, 2020a; Howard & Hussain, 2013). Various studies have shown that social media serves as a platform for the public to conduct organised digital campaigns combined with political marketing, influencer marketing and underground strategies (Tapsell, 2020a). However, social media frequently has a negative impact on democracy through polarisation and the spread of hate speech within society (Rajagopal, 2019). Lim (2017) further highlighted the phenomenon of "algorithmic enclaves," where social media becomes an echo chamber based on identity-based sentiments that encourage tribal nationalism and the freedom to hate.

3. Results & Discussion

3.1. Mass Media in Indonesia at the Beginning of the Reformation

The condition of the mass media in Indonesia during the 1998 Reformation era changed significantly after restrictions on freedom of expression by the New Order regime. Political reforms allowed the mass media to perform their work more freely, ensuring fair and responsible democratisation. One example of this freedom was granted by President B.J. Habibie when the government revoked the Press Publishing Business Licence (SIUPP) to develop the press and mass media industry. Press freedom in Indonesia during the early Reformation era also gave the mass media greater courage to criticise government policies, a practice not seen during the authoritarian New Order regime under President Soeharto. The political and economic context at the beginning of the Reformation, which supported social movements and democratisation, enabled rapid and smooth changes in the media industry.

After the fall of the Soeharto regime, the public and press institutions have enjoyed freedom of expression, opinion, and access to more open information. At that time, the state provided a space for the growth of mainstream media pluralism as part of the fourth pillar of democracy and

a source of accurate and valid information. Regulations then governed the freedom to obtain information through Law No. 40/1999 concerning the Press, which included granting journalists the freedom to choose a press organisation. The mass media became an uncontrollable medium for political elites to communicate with the public. News media, especially mainstream media, seemed to stand between political leaders and the public. Politicians communicated through the media, which then reached the public and voters. News media were increasingly expected to recognise diverse ethnic constituencies and political interests and take steps to better represent these constituents in the news agenda, newsroom staff, and audience.

Furthermore, the fall of the New Order era sought not only to eradicate the authoritarian practices of President Suharto but also marked a historic moment for the liberalisation process, including in the media industry. The enactment of the Press Law and the subsequent enactment of Law No. 32/2002 concerning Broadcasting significantly transformed the press ecosystem, creating a more diverse environment and leading to the emergence of numerous new media companies, including print, radio, and television. The post-Suharto euphoria and the easing of press restrictions significantly increased the number of print media outlets, from 289 in early 1999 to 1,881 in 2001 (Lim, 2011). Furthermore, according to Tapsel (2017), at the beginning of the Reformation, changes in the media ecosystem and the ease of obtaining business permits led to the issuance of more than 900 commercial radio and television licences. It was during this era, a number of media empires or oligarchies emerged, transforming the media business landscape, such as Surya Paloh, who founded Indonesia's first news television station, Metro TV; Harry Tanoesoedibjo, who founded Global TV and acquired shares in TPI and RCTI; and Chairul Tanjung, who opened Trans TV.

While the desire to promote diversity in news media can be heard across various national contexts, media owners have not always implemented this call in the same way. Various studies on news media and democracy have shown that the Reformation era in Indonesia resulted in an oligarchy that objectively controlled the media (Wijayanto, 2019; Tapsell, 2017; Lim, 2012). The concentration of media (especially mainstream media) in the hands of a few individuals has actually contributed to the creation of an oligarchic system through the implementation of an oligopoly media regime. Furthermore, this has led to an alliance between politics and the media, which could pose a threat to media democratization in Indonesia. Contrary to the arguments of Bresnahan (2003), McChesney (1999), and Garnham (1993), who emphasized the importance of vigorous antitrust enforcement in limiting cross-ownership and media concentration to improve the quality of democracy in a country, the opposite occurred at the beginning of the Reformation in Indonesia. Ownership restrictions are crucial for increasing control over the media distribution system, particularly in efforts to foster media democratization. Unlike social media (or alternative media), which tend to be free, only a few mainstream media companies control the oligopoly regime of the media industry in Indonesia (Lim, 2012).

In addition to government-owned media, only 12 business groups controlled media ownership in Indonesia from the Reformation era until 2012. This is certainly very worrying because only 12 media groups in a country with a population of over 200 million people control public opinion (Kristiawan, 2013; Lim, 2012). Moreover, these media conglomerates expanded their core business by expanding into non-media businesses. In reality, this consolidation of various media generated unhealthy information and business competition between independent and business-owned mass media. Conglomerate-controlled media often disseminates information that is subjective, prioritizing the political and business interests of their owners. This conglomeration of media ownership certainly contradicts the principles adopted by democratic countries, where diversity of opinion can be created if media owners are also diverse. The existence of media ownership conglomeration almost certainly produces homogenous news and

reduces the aspirations of the wider public (Kristiawan, 2013; Awad, 2008). A study conducted by the Centre for Innovation, Policy, and Governance (CIPG) found that approximately 70% of news content on national television stations originates from Java, with approximately half originating from Jakarta (Nugroho et al., 2013). Mainstream media coverage appears to be increasingly commercialised and abandons idealism in voicing the public's interests. Tapsell (2012), Haryanto (2011), and Skjerdal (2010) noted that to safeguard economic and political interests, media owners and journalists tend to engage in self-censorship. This aligns with Baker's (2007) argument that combined with partisan media, concentrated ownership creates a recipe for authoritarianism.

3.2. Social Media's Dual Role: Opportunity and Threat

The rapid development of science and technology is increasingly encouraging the public to use social media as an alternative medium. Shirky (2011) stated that social media contributes significantly to the dissemination of ideas and freedoms by the public because it can be used by anyone. The denser and more complex communication landscape and greater public participation in connecting to networks mean greater access to information, opportunities to engage in public conversations, and the ability to take collective action. Unlike the early days of mobile phones, which were enjoyed only by a select few elites, social media users are more open and not divided by socioeconomic characteristics. In many countries, social media use can enhance democratic practices, particularly public political participation. This is evident in the use of social media as a supporting element of government in the United States and the United Kingdom, and even during the Arab Spring revolutions in the Middle East. However, in Indonesia, particularly during the administration of President Joko Widodo, political activity on social media is often associated with efforts to undermine democracy.

As discussed in the previous section, Indonesia's 1998 political reforms caused the phenomenon of democratisation. A consequence of this democratisation process is the growth of hundreds, even thousands, of new news media companies as part of freedom of the press and expression. However, over time, media oligarchs have hijacked press freedom, which is guaranteed by the state through the Press Law and the Broadcasting Law, whose reporting tends to be uniform and only serves to voice their own business and political interests. Consequently, public aspirations that should be accommodated in mainstream news media, are neglected. The situation in Indonesia is not unlike that in many countries, where the public has begun to lose trust in mainstream media and seeks alternative media to obtain information and voice their aspirations and interests, making it easier for those in power to hear (Strömbäck et al., 2020; Groshek & Koc-Michalska, 2017; Shirky, 2011). For example, research by the Pew Research Centre (2015) indicates that 61% of millennials in the United States receive news from Facebook.

Several interviewees stated that they use social media as a tool to express their opinions rather than news media. They generally choose to express themselves on social media because news media in Indonesia is currently controlled by media corporations and the government. With the availability of internet networks and a networked society, users can communicate and express themselves on social media with greater autonomy. Social media users will criticise government policies and their implementation if they do not support the interests of the wider public. This criticism often weakens the position of public institutions and their officials and can even undermine the government's position if it does not respond appropriately. Public activity on social media often forces criminal cases that are usually handled privately to be "forced" to be made public. In the murder of four inmates at the Cebongan Penitentiary in Sleman Regency, Yogyakarta Special Region, involving 11 members of the Special Forces Command (Kopassus) on March 23, 2013, the public was able to debate more openly about the handling of the case on

social media. Some supported it, believing that police instruments often fail to address crime. Others criticised the actions of Kopassus officers, accusing them of taking the law into their own hands by executing their colleagues' attackers to death. However, many members of the public were confused by the seemingly contradictory information available. Nevertheless, political conversations on social media and encouragement from the news media at the time succeeded in encouraging the military court to be more open to the public (Kompas, 2013; bbc.com, 2013).

Political activity on social media, especially among young people, can serve as a shadow parliament for government practices. Young people during the Reformation era seem unwilling to vote for conventional politicians who do not support pro-community policies. Social media can empower individuals to become spokespersons for the sociopolitical issues that surround them. In the case of regional head elections in Indonesia, users of social media actively discuss the candidates. While previously resigned to being controlled by the state, the public can now become involved in every decision-making process, from the village to the national level. Consequently, political party elites and politicians in the real political world cannot ignore public participation and political perceptions in the social media world. When receiving the Parasamya Purnakarya Nugraha award for the best performing regional government nationally for three consecutive years from 2014 to 2016, West Java Governor Ahmad Heryawan acknowledged the role of social media in the development process. Heryawan acknowledged that the award would not have been achieved if the regional government had ignored the public criticism frequently expressed on social media (tempo.co, 2018).

Several academics believe that vigilance is required for public political participation on social media because it is often used to spread manipulative information, such as incitement to xenophobia, racism, and religious fundamentalism, that endangers democracy. Social media often serves as a platform for spreading fake news (hoaxes) and propaganda to influence audiences. In political discourse, social media is often rife with pathological democratic practices (Engesser, Ernst, Esser, & Büchel, 2017). Consequently, many academics worry that the impact of political activity on social media platforms and the people who consume information there will put pressure on democratic ideals, potentially ending the hoped-for democratic life (Olaniran & Williams, 2020).

For political elites and some segments of society in Indonesia, the spread of false information and hate speech has become a national problem, perceived as causing political instability, security disturbances, and division, which undermines trust in the government and potentially hampers development programmes. The Jakarta gubernatorial election campaign in February 2017 served as an example of how social media has been accused of being a divisive medium. The Jakarta gubernatorial election was claimed to be rife with hate speech developed by supporters of each candidate through social media platforms against their competitors. Research conducted by Arsyad and Asdar (2019) on several discourses of religious identity on social media (2016-2017) revealed the proliferation of several popular hashtags and posts on Twitter and several Facebook Groups that promoted religious identity sentiments during the Jakarta gubernatorial election. They found that the average Facebook Group promoting religious sentiments had an average of 100,000 followers and could reach hundreds or even thousands of conversations for a single post on Facebook or Twitter. As a result, the election was considered the dirtiest and most divisive ever (The Jakarta Post, 2017).

Although often perceived as having negative impacts, social media can help people feel less powerless in some ways. A Pew Research Centre report (2022) stated that most citizens in various countries believe that social media makes it easier for them to stay informed about domestic and international events. In fact, in many cases, political elites in Indonesia play little role in educating the public to become more informed and aware of accurate information. Political elites and

government officials frequently use social media as a tool for propaganda and division. Even ruling elites use social media to silence political opponents who criticise the government through doxing (sharing personal data) or accusing critics of hoaxes.

Further evidence shows social media acts as an extension of mainstream media, providing a platform for news dissemination, audience engagement, and content creation. As mainstream media outlets begin to lose ground, they are utilising social media to reach wider audiences, share breaking news, and promote their content. Social media also facilitates interactive communication between media organisations and their audiences, enabling feedback and engagement with readers (Newman, 2011). While they cannot dominate completely, the reality is that much content on social media channels is news presented in mainstream media that has been co-opted by the interests of financiers and those in power. While their involvement is difficult to trace, in some cases, states and oligarchs have been implicated as disinformation agents, particularly since the Brexit vote and the election of Donald Trump as the US president in 2016 (Echeverría, Santamaría, & Hallin, 2025; Bradshaw & Howard, 2019).

3.3. Ownership Diversification is Not Guaranteed

In various parts of the world, ruling elites often complain about the existence of mass media in their countries. They felt that the government's messages are distorted and unfairly criticised. Media outlets, both conventional and social, as well as journalists, are considered unprofessional and biased in conveying information to the wider public. In fact, journalists and the media outlets that employed them are often accused of spreading fake news because the information or data they present does not align with the desires of the government's elites. Rather than encouraging discipline in verifying information or creating counter-narratives, political and government elites often tend to intervene and control journalists and their media owners. Consequently, news presented to the public is uniformly tailored to the desires of political and government elites. The government even frequently issues "threats" by withholding advertising space from media deemed too critical. In this section, the author aims to highlight the threats faced by the public and mass media in Indonesia during the 10 years of Jokowi's administration.

During the 2014 presidential election campaign, various negative and black campaigns targeted the presidential and vice-presidential candidates. Black campaign attacks on each candidate pair occurred not only on social media but also on conventional media. Many people then considered the rampant black campaign during the 2014 presidential election to be worrying because the material distributed to the public was often not based on facts and touched on issues with ethnic, religious, racial, and inter-group (SARA) nuances. One media outlet caught the public's attention during the 2014 presidential election campaign when presidential candidate Joko Widodo was attacked by a black campaign from the *Obor Rakyat* tabloid through news material that was considered defamatory and slanderous regarding SARA issues. At that time, the *Obor Rakyat* editorial team printed approximately 1 million copies for massive distribution in Java, a breeding ground for the candidates. An estimated 28,000 Islamic boarding schools (*pesantren*) and 724,000 mosques on the island of Java were used as distribution locations for the tabloid (Kompas.com, 2018). Jokowi and his running mate Jusuf Kalla won the 2014 presidential election, defeating the Prabowo Subianto-Hatta Rajasa ticket despite being subjected to such harsh attacks in some conventional and social media outlets.

Initially, the Indonesian public, including media companies and journalists, hoped that Jokowi would uphold the democratic values established since 1998. After being elected president, Jokowi and his supporters built a public narrative as a pro-democracy regime that upheld human rights. This included promoting press freedom and condemning the spread of fake news, or hoaxes, which were considered harmful to democracy. A journalist from one of

Indonesia's largest newspapers, who has covered activities at the Presidential and Vice Presidential Palaces since 2017, revealed that she still witnessed the President actively engaging with the media at the beginning of Joko Widodo's presidency. At least once a month, the President was willing to be interviewed and directly answer journalists' questions on various public issues. Jokowi often provides behind-the-scenes stories about why a policy was made and which elites would be harmed by the policy.

However, not long after, the dynamics of media and democracy in Indonesia reached a turning point. Conventional media outlets and members of the public who criticised the government through social media were threatened with being stigmatised as spreaders of fake news and hate speech. This labelling was carried out systematically by social media buzzers and influencers, as well as conventional media institutions owned by the government's political elite. They labelled government critics, who were usually close to Islamic groups, as "kampret" (villains) and later "kadrun" (desert lizards). These buzzers and government-supporting media outlets even accused critics of the Jokowi regime of being intolerant and threatening to divide Indonesia. Various phenomena within the context of conventional media demonstrate the clear lack of diversity in the voices of the public, especially the opposition, during Jokowi's administration. Despite the diversification of media ownership, conventional media in Indonesia tended to present uniform information and prioritised the voices of government elites over those of the public.

The majority of owners of large media groups, such as Media Group, Viva, and MNC, were caught up in partisan politics, resulting in content that only reflected the voices of their respective political parties. To make matters even more difficult, these media owners are also affiliated with the ruling business and political alliances. Consequently, the media fails to capture or ignore the sociopolitical dynamics occurring in society. They are preoccupied with depicting political elites' manoeuvres, which do not reflect the realities of society. This aligns with the argument that media in developing countries tend to emphasise the dominance or hegemony of state power, where the media is used as a tool of state propaganda or a tool for interests to perpetuate the ideology of the ruling class (hegemony) and oligarchy (Tapsell, 2017). In this regard, those in power have significant interests in using mass media and social media as political tools to achieve their goals. Analyses by Klikauer (2021), Artz (2013), and Graber (2008) have indicated that media diversity does not always result in press freedom. This occurs because such diversity results from conglomeration, which is similar to monopolistic media ownership. This media ownership monopoly, which then continues with media owners close to those in power, leads to content uniformity. For example, the MNC Group, which owns dozens of local television stations, Jawa Pos owns hundreds of local print media outlets, and the Kompas Group, which controls dozens of local media outlets, Tribunnews, all produce a relatively uniform mix of information. This demonstrates the conglomeration of media companies that spawned so many media outlets during the Reformation era, which has led to a surge in social media platforms with increasingly disparate content.

One of the counterattacks launched by the Jokowi regime and its supporters against criticism of the government was the imprisonment of social media activists Buni Yani and Jonru Ginting in 2017-2018 for allegedly spreading hatred and racial and ethnic intolerance. Buni Yani was found guilty by a court in November 2017 of violating Article 32 paragraph 1 of Law Number 11/2008 concerning Information and Electronic Transactions (ITE) in the case of the distribution of a video of former Jakarta Governor Basuki Tjahaja Purnama, also known as Ahok. Meanwhile, Jonru Ginting was found guilty in March 2018 of spreading hate speech by posting a Facebook post deemed to contain racial and ethnic intolerance. Interestingly, several months before Buni Yani was found guilty, or in May 2017, Ahok was also found guilty and sentenced to 2 years in prison

for being proven to have committed blasphemy related to a statement about the Al-Maidah Surah 51 of the Quran during a visit to Pramuka Island, Seribu Islands, Jakarta. Ahok was only found guilty shortly after he was confirmed to have lost to Anies Baswedan in the Jakarta gubernatorial election in April 2017. This verdict is considered unique because several months before the Jakarta Regional Head Election (Pilkada) was held, a number of large demonstrations were carried out by Islamic groups demanding that Ahok be imprisoned for insulting Muslims.

Meanwhile, pro-government buzzers and propagandists are given the freedom to attack or insult opposition figures and Jokowi critics without fear of imprisonment. Figures such as government spokespersons Fadjoel Rachman, Ali Mochtar Ngabalin, and others, generally disseminate symmetrical information and only speak from one point of view. Despite being frequently accused of undermining democracy, there is almost no strong legal action against pro-government buzzers. Furthermore, these buzzers often illegally disseminate personal data through social media or doxing to undermine political opponents. Even the actions of Ulin Yusron, a pro-Jokowi buzzer, who was suspected of doxing in 2019, have never been prosecuted by law enforcement to date (detik.com, 2019).

3.4. Media Intervention and Co-optation

As mentioned in the previous section, freedom of expression through mass and social media is essential to a country's implementation of democracy. Independent media is crucial to democracy as it serves as a platform for providing information, a government oversight (checks and balances), and a forum for public participation. However, on the other hand, during the 10 years of Jokowi's administration, Indonesian society has witnessed the practice of media co-optation by both those in power and those in power. Through the government and state-owned enterprises (SOEs), those in power intervene directly and indirectly in media operations, including exerting economic pressure and spreading disinformation. Meanwhile, media owners attempt to influence and control news reporting to suit their interests at the expense of objectivity and independence. This practice undermines democracy by restricting access to information, eroding public trust, and hindering public participation.

The practice of co-optation, particularly by media owners and leaders, had been in place since the early days of Jokowi's administration. The author experienced self-censorship when reporting on the circumstances surrounding Maruarar Sirait's cancellation of his ministerial appointment. In a draft of the article sent to the editor, he detailed the reasons why Maruarar was not appointed as a member of the 2014-2019 Cabinet. However, the following day, not a single sentence in the article explained why Jokowi withdrew Maruarar's appointment as Minister of Communication and Information, replacing him with Rudiantara. From then on, the author began to realise that self-censorship in the media where I worked would persist throughout Jokowi's presidency. Furthermore, the owner of Media Group, Surya Paloh, is the chairman of a political party in Jokowi's coalition.

This co-optation, which was initially unnoticed by journalists, continued throughout Jokowi's early administration. The media outlets where journalists worked were often limited to ceremonial coverage of the activities of political elites or government officials. Even if journalists or media outlets criticize government policies or its elites, government buzzers and influencers counterattack on social media, labeling the disseminated information as fake news. Furthermore, the government often does not provide journalists with the opportunity to gather information or clarify issues or conditions on the ground after ceremonial events or press conferences conclude. Several excuses are used to avoid journalists' questions, such as limited time, sources having other agendas, or only being willing to engage in one-way communication. This is evident when the President makes working visits to regions to inaugurate public infrastructure such as toll

roads and airports, claims over Esemka cars, distribution of agricultural equipment, and land conflicts.

Academics such as Tapsell (2020) suggest that one of the reasons for the decline in critical media attitudes toward government policies is that media oligarchs become partisans due to their membership in political party elites. However, the reality is more complex than suggested by Tapsell. Through their political networks, these media oligarchs apparently have businesses in other sectors unrelated to the media industry. For example, in addition to owning PT Indocater, a catering business for the mining industry, Surya Paloh also owns hospitality businesses such as the InterContinental Bali Resort, The Papandayan, and The Media Hotel and Tower, which are controlled by Media Group Hospitality. Furthermore, Surya Paloh also owns shares in the mining sector through his company, PT Surya Energy Raya. Similarly, other media group owners, such as Hary Tanoesoedibjo and Aburizal Bakrie, also have other, relatively similar businesses. As a result, these media owners are less likely to criticize the Jokowi regime and its policies, as this could negatively impact their businesses.

The decline in media democratisation in Indonesia worsened during Jokowi's second term (2019-2024). This was especially true shortly after Jokowi's second inauguration as president, when the COVID-19 pandemic struck the world, preventing journalists from reporting directly. Journalists, especially during the COVID-19 pandemic, relied solely on press releases, often containing one-sided claims issued by the government and the ruling elite. Even if journalists wanted to ask questions, their questions had to be screened by the bureaucrats of the presidential palace. If the questions were deemed too critical, the palace press bureau or the ministry/institution would either stop the press conference or prohibit the question from being asked.

Furthermore, the government, through ministries/institutions and state-owned enterprises (SOEs), frequently threatened critical news outlets with advertising quotas. They were seemingly ordered to advertise in news outlets that were overly critical of government and SOE policies. During an editorial meeting, the author heard directly that government agencies and SOEs threatened to withhold advertising if their reports continued to criticise Jokowi. Several high-ranking government officials and SOEs who received the directive confirmed this measure. However, government and SOE advertising is the lifeblood of the media industry. While not a ban, the threat of a halt to advertising confirms the anti-criticism stance of the Jokowi regime, amid Indonesia's claims to be one of the world's largest democracies. However, this threatening policy was previously implemented during the era of President Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono (SBY), through Cabinet Secretary Dipo Alam, who stated that media outlets consistently criticising the government would not receive advertising from government institutions (Kompas.com, 2011).

3.5. Jokowi's Third Period Intention

The role of the mass media in Indonesia's democratisation process worsened when Jokowi expressed his desire to extend the president's term to three terms. Citing the COVID-19 outbreak and the completion of the Indonesian capital city project, Jokowi and his inner circle lobbied political party leaders to support this desire. According to one journalist interviewed covering the Presidential Palace, it became increasingly difficult for Jokowi to be interviewed by the mass media after the three-term discourse became a public debate. Unlike during his first term, which seemed to run smoothly, Jokowi, at the end of his second term, showed little interest in holding press conferences or involving Presidential Palace journalists in covering the president's out-of-town activities. The journalist suspected that Jokowi was reluctant to be interviewed or to confirm his desire to extend his presidential term. Press releases issued by the Presidential Palace were often only published through YouTube. Jokowi and the palace elites staged fictitious or fake

doorstop (spontaneous) interviews several times to maintain the public openness impression. This also demonstrates that the journalistic practices that have persisted during Jokowi's 10-year reign amount to a manipulation of democracy. The Jokowi regime appears to be using methods common to democratic regimes, but these are merely superficial methods intended to deceive the public.

Another common practice during the Jokowi era was when the president invited media leaders to the palace to clarify issues critical of the government. Typically, shortly after the media leaders are invited to the palace, they ask the editorial staff to change the direction of the news. One journalist covering the activities of the Presidential Palace admitted that her media leaders were invited by President Jokowi three times during his tenure. These invitations to media leaders usually occur when the media and the public are highly critical of government policies. One memorable case occurred during the widespread reporting of alleged interference by Jokowi in the Corruption Eradication Commission (KPK) in naming former Golkar Party Chairman Setya Novanto a suspect in the Rp5.84 trillion electronic ID card (e-KTP) corruption case in 2017. After meetings with the president or officials within the palace, media leaders immediately instructed their editorial staff to tone down the criticism in their reporting. In some other cases, media leaders do not uncommonly order their journalists to stop reporting on the news.

The Jokowi regime's intervention in media management became increasingly brutal as his administration neared the end of its term. This occurred during the 2024 presidential election campaign, which began in mid-September 2024. Jokowi, through his elites, even requested the replacement of editors-in-chief of media outlets whose reports were deemed too critical or exposed political maneuvers by his apparatus. After failing to change the rules that would have allowed him to run for a third term, Jokowi then put forward his eldest son, Gibran Rakabuming Raka, as Prabowo Subianto's vice presidential candidate. In mid-November 2023, a national media outlet reported police involvement in the Prabowo-Gibran victory process through the installation of campaign props in several regions. This news briefly became a hot topic of public discussion, demonstrating the lack of neutrality of security forces in the 2024 presidential election campaign. However, shortly after becoming public discussion, the head of the media outlet that published the news was abruptly replaced. Even politicians who openly discussed this issue were named suspects by the police on charges of spreading hoaxes that caused unrest (detik.com, 2024).

These various accounts demonstrate the media industry phenomenon that emerged during Jokowi's 10-year administration consistent with Gramsci's theory of hegemony, where media content is largely designed to create false consciousness among readers. Although opposition persists, the narrative in mass and social media is dominated by the power of the state and the ruling elite. The ruling elite, along with buzzers, attempt to monopolise messages to win the narrative battle within the mass and social media public sphere. With the support of media entrepreneurs who also serve as leaders of political parties supporting the government, the ruling elite can easily control the direction of news coverage by highlighting or suppressing certain issues. Members of the public and opposition who take a critical stance against the ruling elite face repressive action, both within the media and through state violence on the ground. Consequently, counter-hegemony becomes difficult for the public because the media, which should represent the public, has instead become an agent of the ruling elite's hegemony.

Unlike the media business in a democratic country, the article also denies that the political orientation of media owners can sustain media outlets. During the Jokowi era, Indonesia's mainstream media struggled to find an audience due to the regime's partisan editorial policies. The media's lack of critical response to socio-political conditions led to a decline in readers' and viewers' trust. During Jokowi's era, the public perceived that mass media content, especially

online media, was produced solely to increase advertising traffic. Media outlets then relied on this traffic perspective to more easily disseminate information to readers and viewers, a phenomenon known as clickbait journalism. In reality, this practice backfired on the media industry, as the news often disseminated was low-quality and prioritised gossip over substance. As a result, the public shifted their attention to social media for information and a means of checks and balances on government policies and political elites. Consequently, the media industry has struggled due to the loss of readers and viewers. Although several media companies promised to provide fact-based reporting and invested heavily in building trust, most Indonesian public appeared to have lost faith in the credibility of mainstream media. This situation ultimately resulted in a decline in advertising revenue, which is the lifeblood of the media business. Therefore, it is not surprising that the Indonesian public witnessed the closure of hundreds of media outlets during the Jokowi era because they could not survive and were forced to lay off their journalists due to the inability to reduce operational costs.

4. Conclusion

As explained in the previous section, Indonesia's 1998 political reform transformed the authoritarian political and social order into a more democratic one. One of the pillars of this political democratisation was the emergence of openness and press freedom, which allowed Indonesian citizens and organisations greater freedom to establish mass media companies. Various mainstream media outlets, both print and electronic, sprang up in Indonesia like mushrooms in the rainy season during the early days of the New Order. Furthermore, the reformation era in Indonesia was marked by the increased role of social media as a medium for disseminating information and promoting freedom of expression. At the beginning of the Reformation, the mass media and journalists were able to criticise the government without pressure or threats, including exposing cases of abuses committed by those in power, such as corruption.

However, the proliferation of media companies during the Reformation era was not accompanied by improvements in the quality of reporting, with many media outlets failing to use accurate data and facts when writing their information. The liberalisation of the media industry in Indonesia resulted in a concentration of ownership, a consequence of the logic of capital interest in business. This concentration of ownership led media leaders to view media information as a commodity and treat audiences as consumers rather than citizens with a right to reliable news. Media conglomeration in Indonesia often results in symbolic expression appearing merely as part of a business mechanism rather than as a representation or reconstruction of socio-political realities in public. Worryingly, during the Reformation era, civil society witnessed media infrastructure and content being exploited by media owners for their own business and political interests, particularly because it was highly profitable for them to seek power.

The situation of press freedom in Indonesia became even more complicated during the Jokowi regime's 10-year rule. Despite being elected through democratic elections, Jokowi was arguably successful in stifling press freedom during his two terms, from 2014 to 2024. However, in contrast to the authoritarian New Order regime, which used the Press Licence (SIUPP) as a tool of repression, the Jokowi regime used oligarchic media owners as a tool to stifle press freedom. Aware that these media owners also operated in other sectors that were prone to legal challenges, Jokowi used his power to pressure media owners not to criticise the government. If one media outlet disobeyed, the Jokowi regime used other mainstream media companies to expose the "crimes" committed by its owner. As a result, media outlets controlled by these oligarchs often report only the positive aspects of the Jokowi regime's performance, ignoring the

public's right to reliable information and diverse content. Ultimately, this situation is no different from that of the New Order era, when the press became a government stooge, only trumpeting the government's "good" achievements while concealing the shortcomings and abuses of power of state officials.

While initially open, the government has sought to limit journalists' access to the information they need to gather. The government often denied journalists the opportunity to ask critical questions about the government and its officials. This situation worsened during the COVID-19 pandemic and until the end of President Jokowi's administration, when only one-way press releases were issued to journalists. Few journalists were given the opportunity to confirm or clarify public issues, especially those related to the alleged policy irregularities of government officials and political elites. This situation has further undermined the media ecosystem, both economically and in terms of content. Furthermore, most media owners are unprepared for the digital era, which has led readers and viewers to abandon mainstream media and embrace social media. Even though government buzzers and mainstream media owners try to control the critical reading public, social media is an alternative for them to seek more objective and transparent information.

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