

## **“Politicamedia Authoritarian”: The Post-Idealism of Journalism**

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### **Abstract**

The mass media is commonly regarded as the fourth estate of democracy, playing a crucial role as a counterweight and supervisor of other democratic institutions. The journalistic ideal of independence and neutrality is often exemplified by the engagement of media outlets and their political owners. However, concerns arise when media ownership and political affiliations turn the media into a pragmatic political tool, particularly during Indonesia's general elections. This issue becomes more pronounced when media owners in Indonesia also hold positions as heads of political parties or are part of political coalitions, a phenomenon termed "Politicamedia Authoritarian" in this study. When the media fails to fulfill its functions and live up to its role, it becomes imperative to reconsider its status as the fourth estate and also reevaluate the legal framework governing the press.

**Keywords:** Democracy; Media; Journalism; Law of Press; General Election.

### **Introduction**

In 2018 and 2019, Indonesia conducted simultaneous general elections to elect the Head of Regions, members of the House of Representatives, and the President. One intriguing topic of discussion is the issue of broadcast media ownership. Surprisingly, Indonesian media law does not explicitly prohibit individuals affiliated with political parties from owning broadcast media. This lack of clear regulation is partly due to the stigmatization of such ownership being reinforced by the behavior of broadcasting owners who openly declare their

political alignment and, in some cases, even hold leadership positions within political parties.

As an educational medium, broadcasters should prioritize programs that provide information on the electoral process. This includes educating the public about the significance of community involvement in the election process. As an essential source of information, broadcasting agencies have a responsibility to provide accurate and unbiased information about legislative and presidential candidates. Furthermore, as a medium of empowerment, broadcasters have the potential to diminish apathy and encourage higher voter participation, thereby reducing the level of abstentions in the elections.

The three functions of the media in the electoral process are questionably applied given the current condition of broadcasting institutions being controlled and affiliated with political parties. Therefore, in order to realize the true role of broadcasting media in the electoral process, the implementation of very strict regulations is necessary. Without strong regulations, the election process may suffer from a lack of ideal information dissemination, as public opinion could be influenced to benefit only a handful of media owners.

Consequently, this situation could tarnish the media's idealistic image and erode public confidence in its role as "the fourth estate of democracy." It is crucial to address this issue to ensure that the media can fulfill its essential functions as an educational medium, an information provider about candidates, and a means of empowering the public to participate in the electoral process more effectively.

### **The Role of Media in General Election**

We recognize the crucial role of the media in the process of community empowerment. The relationship between the media and society is one of mutual influence, where they both affect and are affected by each other. The media holds the power to shape collective consciousness, impacting the intellectual, moral, and cultural climate, and influencing public opinion, which can become a defining aspect of a nation's values.

Additionally, the media plays a significant role in mediating within society, facilitating the building of peace and social consensus. According to Habermas (in Fulton et al 2017:13), the public sphere serves as a platform where everything becomes revealed and visible to all, fostering a shared symbolic environment and facilitating the widespread dissemination of specific ideas.

In democratic societies, the media acts as a watchdog for social and political accountability, a role of utmost importance. Freedom of the press is a fundamental right in democratic societies that adhere to the Rule of Law. The guarantee of freedom of expression and access to information is considered a basic human right, and it plays a crucial role in upholding democracy and ensuring transparency and accountability in governance.

It is essential to appreciate and protect the role of the media in empowering communities and fostering democratic values through responsible and independent journalism. In particular, Article 19 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UNGA res. 217A, 1948) states:

"Everyone has the right to freedom of opinion and expression; this right includes freedom to hold opinions without interference and to seek, receive and impart information and ideas through any media and regardless of frontiers."

However, freedom of the press should not be considered an end in itself. The relationship between the growth of a free press and the democratization process is believed to be mutually reinforcing. The press has a public function that requires it to exercise its role with the utmost sense of responsibility.

Since the time of Edmund Burke, the "fourth estate" has been recognized as a classic check and balance in the division of powers. Thomas Carlyle attributed to Burke the idea that while there were three Estates in Parliament, the fourth Estate, represented by the reporters in the gallery, was even more important than the others. However, it is worth noting that some sources credit William Cobbett as the originator of the phrase "fourth estate." Regardless of its origins, the main concept behind the fourth estate is that an independent and unfettered press is crucial for the process of democratization. A free press contributes to strengthening government responsiveness and accountability while providing a pluralistic platform for various groups and interests. In essence, the mass media or press acts as a marketplace of ideas.

Elections are a key democratic exercise wherein the media can have both positive and negative impacts. As societies become more modernized, traditional patrons, parties, and institutions' influence on the electoral process diminishes, making the media a dominant platform for candidates and parties to appeal to the public and propagate their messages. In line with the agenda-setting theory proposed by McComb and Shaw in *The Public Opinion Quarterly* (1972: 176), information presented in the mass media becomes the primary source of political knowledge for many individuals. The media significantly shapes public perceptions of political figures and constantly presents objects that influence what the public should think about, know about, and have feelings about.

A report by the Cairo Institute for Human Rights Studies (2010: 27) assert that:

"Elections constitute a basic challenge to the media, putting its impartiality and objectivity to the test. The task of the media, especially national media outlets, is not and should not be to function as a mouthpiece for any government body or particular candidate. Its basic role is to enlighten and

educate the public and act as a neutral, objective platform for the free debate of all points of view.”

Recognizing the strategic role of the media in the electoral and democratic processes, it is essential to establish mechanisms that hold them accountable to the public and uphold ethical and professional standards. Media independence is of utmost importance, and it can be achieved by ensuring that media organizations operate free from the influence of media owners or external interests, such as political parties and government, on their editorial boards.

However, ensuring complete media independence can also give rise to another problem. When media organizations are entirely free from any external influence, there is a possibility of them becoming detached from the needs and interests of the society they serve. This detachment could result in a lack of diversity in perspectives and a focus on sensationalism or clickbait content, rather than providing objective and meaningful information to the public.

Finding the right balance between media independence and responsibility is crucial. Media should be free from undue influence, allowing them to serve as watchdogs for accountability, but they also need to remain connected to the concerns of their audience to fulfill their role effectively as a pillar of democracy. Responsible journalism, adherence to ethical guidelines, and transparency in reporting are vital elements that contribute to the media's credibility and its ability to play a constructive role in the democratic process.

Inspired by Douglas Cater's book, *The Fourth Branch of Government* (Cook, 1998: 164) drawing America's media situation that:

“the news media are an intermediary institution in Washington D.C. ... current news media has always been closely fostered by practices and public policy, how the news media perform governmental task, how reporter themselves are political actors, and how government officials attempt to use the news as part of their daily jobs of governing. So, the American news media do not only constitute a political institution; they are part of government.”

### **Media Industry**

Gerbner and Gross (in Miller 2003: 126) assert that television serves as a medium for socializing most people into standardized roles and behaviors. It functions as a means of enculturation, not only providing information, data, knowledge, analysis, and education, but also acting as a platform for cultural expression, strengthening identity, values, and social cohesion. However, some broadcasting can be criticized for being excessive and sensationalist, occasionally lacking factual basis and relying more on speculations, similar to Baudrillard's concept of hyper-reality. This tendency is particularly evident when television networks prioritize advertising revenue over accuracy and meaningful content.

In Indonesia, television remains the most significant media consumption choice for the public, with a 2017 Nielsen Consumer Media View survey indicating a 96% television penetration rate (Media Indonesia, 2017). However, the broadcasting industry in Indonesia has experienced a concentration of media ownership among a handful of conglomerates or enterprises. While the Broadcasting Act of 2002 introduced the principle of diversity of ownership and content, the practice has not always been adequately followed, leading to limited progress in democratizing broadcasting.

Media ownership concentration, driven by economic principles and the pursuit of profits, is a common industry trend. The desire of managers to build empires and vested interests often influence media content, allowing manipulation and biased coverage. Profit-driven market forces have increasingly influenced news production, leading to concerns about unfair and biased reporting that can alienate certain segments of the audience.

The size and influence of media conglomerates present new and unprecedented threats to freedom of expression, independent journalism, and the free exchange of ideas in the market. As the company grows larger, the meaning of journalism can become more fragile, with corporate interests potentially compromising the integrity of reporting. The magnitude of company size can lead to conflicts of interest and issues associated with divisions within the company or competitors of the company.

Overall, the concentration of media ownership and the pursuit of profit can have implications for media independence, journalistic integrity, and the diversity of content in broadcasting. Efforts to promote diverse ownership and content, as well as responsible journalism, are crucial to ensure a healthy and accountable media landscape.

This presents a dilemma for broadcasting, as on one hand, we expect it to be a means for community empowerment. However, the media industry often falls short of fulfilling the public interest. It sometimes forgets that the frequency spectrum is a limited resource and a public sphere. As a result, the broadcasting industry tends to concentrate its operations only in major cities, leaving remote and underdeveloped regions without adequate access to information. This creates what is known as the "blank spot phenomenon," where residents in rural areas resort to purchasing expensive satellite dishes to access broadcast emissions.

To effectively serve as part of the press, broadcasters should organize themselves to fulfill their media functions. The primary functions of media are to educate, inform, and empower the community. In the context of elections, broadcasting institutions should play a significant role in enhancing public involvement in the democratic process. Their involvement should contribute to improving the quality of elections and reaffirming the media's role as a guardian of democracy.

However, the behavior of media ownership being used for political purposes compromises the media's position and its intended functions. When media ownership is controlled to serve specific political viewpoints or values favored by dominant media owners, it can lead to over-representation and marginalization of other perspectives. This jeopardizes the media's credibility and undermines its role as a pillar of democracies.

As pointed out by Doyle (2002: 13), media ownership that lacks ethical principles can turn the media into a tool for owners and interest groups rather than serving the public's best interests. Joseph Pulitzer's warning reminds us that without high ethical ideals, the media not only loses its potential for public service but can also become a danger to society (Gross 1966: 39-40).

If the media has transformed into a commercial tool serving the interests of specific groups, it becomes essential to shift the societal paradigm to avoid being influenced or easily deceived by the media. To achieve this, the public must view the media as a "franchise store," making informed choices about the media they consume. Both society and media practitioners need to develop media literacy skills.

On the other hand, if broadcasting media wish to maintain their role as a reliable pillar of democracy (the fourth estate), they must take steps to clean up their practices. To regain public trust, strict regulations might be necessary. For instance, it may be crucial to prohibit media owners from engaging in political activities.

### **The Dilemma of Law Enforcement**

The current situation in Indonesia is marked by a concerning collaboration between the media and political affairs. Some media owners also hold positions as party chairmen, while certain journalists actively participate in elections. As a result, the independence and neutrality of the media have become problematic both from an academic and practical standpoint. Broadcasting is being utilized for political propaganda and pragmatic interests, leading to a growing sense of cynicism among society towards the media. This has resulted in societal divisions, with different groups blaming each other, and even incidents of attacks being shown on air.

As a consequence of this shift, the media is no longer seen as an agent of democracy but rather may be contributing to the deterioration of democracy. The prospect of the media being used as a tool to consolidate power for ruling parties, stemming from collaborations between the authorities and media owners, is alarming. This situation raises concerns that the intended role of the media as the fourth pillar, serving as a watchdog and enabling public control of the government, may never be realized.

It is imperative to address this issue by establishing clear boundaries and ethical standards between the media and political entities. Preventing media owners

from holding positions within political parties and ensuring journalists maintain impartiality during elections and political events is crucial. Implementing regulations to avoid conflicts of interest will be vital in restoring public trust and confidence in the media's ability to fulfill its democratic responsibilities. By upholding independence and journalistic integrity, the media can reclaim its role as a genuine pillar of democracy and foster an informed and united society.

It would be highly dangerous if the media were used as a tool to justify or legitimize wrong policies and the dysfunctional actions of those in power. Research conducted by Gillian Doyle (2002: 19-20) indicates that owners often exert indirect editorial interference, such as influencing the selection of key personnel or fostering a culture of obedience and self-censorship. In some European countries, this direct and indirect interference by media owners has resulted in negative consequences for media diversity. Even in cases where agreements or contracts are signed to prevent such interference, specific restraints may not be easily dismissed (ibid: 21).

When the media industry colludes with political parties, the public is subjected to deceit and manipulation through information tailored to serve only certain interests. In our view, this collusion is a situation where mass media and press ignore their responsibility to remain independent, neutral, and impartial while representing all parties and the public interest. Instead, they align themselves with "wrong approaches" of political parties, compromising their essential role. This authoritarian behavior of the media and political coalition against the people led me to introduce the term "Politicamedia (Politic and Media) Authoritarian" in 2014 to describe this situation. Authoritarianism, in this context, refers to the strict enforcement of authority, suppressing personal freedom, not only by the government or political parties but also together with media owners. The public is forced to accept information shaped solely to fulfill political and media desires, leading to a situation where authoritarian regimes attempt to control or censor mass media's provision of vision and information (Baker, 2006: 5).

This issue has been evident since the 2014 Indonesian presidential election and is expected to worsen in future elections. The article "Who Owns the News in Indonesia?" in Nieman Reports (2014) highlights how corporate media ownership intertwines with politics, posing challenges for independent journalists. Merlyna Lim's research (2012) mapping media concentration in Indonesia reveals the existence of "The League of Thirteen," severely distorting freedom of the press and information. Media concentration concerns are not limited to Indonesia but also arise in America (Noam, 2009), Europe (Doyle, 2002), Australia (Schultz, 1998), and globally, as indicated by research by Noam and the International Media Collaboration (Noam, 2016).

Essentially, the Broadcasting Act of 2002 does not explicitly regulate or limit the involvement of broadcasting media in elections. Specific rules governing broadcasting during elections are instead found in the General Election Act, as part of the campaign terms. However, when it comes to elaborating provisions

concerning the use of broadcasting in campaigns, there are several potential dilemmas in enforcing the law, particularly with broadcasters affiliated with or owned by leaders of political parties participating in the election. The subjectivity and pressures imposed by broadcast media owners can influence the content of broadcasts, leading to potential bias in favor of contestants affiliated with the media.

For instance, certain provisions may mandate that printed mass media and broadcasting institutions providing special sections for election campaigns must be fair and balanced towards all Election Contestants. In the Press Law, the Editorial Board of a media outlet has independence in determining what news to air and how to present it, including framing, tone, frequency, and duration. This situation can be exploited by media outlets affiliated with political parties to favor their affiliated candidates and potentially reduce coverage of other parties. If such coverage is perceived as unequal or unfair, editors can offer various arguments, citing editorial independence as one of the reasons.

The questions arise: Is it acceptable for the media to have a preference for a particular candidate or political party? How does the election supervisory body handle cases when media outlets openly support contestants? For example, the editorial of The Jakarta Post (July 4, 2014), which firmly supports Joko Widodo in the 2014 presidential election, on the grounds:

“There is no such thing as being neutral when the stakes are so high. While endeavoring as best we can to remain objective in our news reporting, our journalism has always stood on the belief of the right moral ground when grave choices must be made.”

Due to the absence of specific rules, referring to the implementation of the 2014 General Election and likely continuing in subsequent elections in 2018, 2019, and beyond, interagency coordination becomes necessary when campaign-related violations occur in the mass media. The General Elections Commission is authorized to impose sanctions (administrative or criminal) on the contestant only after receiving recommendations from the Elections Observer Body (Bawaslu). Regarding violations of campaign advertising on radio and television broadcasting, Bawaslu collaborates with the Broadcasting Commission. Bawaslu recommends actions to the General Election Commission, while the Broadcasting Commission administers sanctions to broadcasters, typically issuing reprimands for violations. If alleged infringements are related to news content, the Broadcasting Commission coordinates with the Press Council to determine if there is a violation of journalistic principles. In such cases, broadcasters are required to make corrections or grant the right of reply if requested, as per press law.

Another potentially problematic issue arises with the broadcasting of campaigns in the form of dialogue and debates. Broadcast media have the freedom to self-regulate such events, including the selection of resource persons or audience



engagement. However, this could lead to dishonest and biased execution of dialogues and debates. Media outlets, driven by industrial-oriented characteristics and political motives, may manipulate the process to achieve their own interests.

The following simple illustrations provide examples of the complexities in campaign settings within the media. For instance, a television program featuring a game or quiz presents a candidate or member of a particular political party, where the party chairman also owns the television station. During this program, the candidate does not overtly campaign, nor does he or she say "choose me" or state their vision and mission if elected. However, the hour-long event heavily focuses on the candidate's intelligence, presumably arranged in a way to highlight their strengths. Similarly, other events, such as featuring a candidate as a newscaster or interviewer in a talk show, explicitly showcase the candidate's expertise.

Candidates without similar affiliations or television backing may not have the same opportunities and may not be facilitated by the television network. Is this situation a violation of election campaign rules? Not necessarily, as it does not meet the specific elements outlined in campaign regulations. The candidate is merely a guest star on a program facilitated by the affiliated television station, not explicitly campaigning. As for the Broadcasting Act, proving a violation becomes challenging because the program content remains constructive and beneficial to the public, aligning with the purposes of the Broadcasting Act. Additionally, any ban on candidates or members of political parties could be seen as a violation of human rights concerning freedom of expression and non-discrimination in media appearances during and outside the campaign period.

Upon analyzing the situation, it becomes evident that the key issue lies not in the election law but in the law governing media ownership. Media ownership should be free of political interests, ensuring impartiality and neutrality. The journalistic code of ethics affirms this principle, but a problem arises when media owners (often businessmen or non-journalist members of political parties) are not bound by the same code. While there are no restrictions preventing them from owning or affiliating with media outlets, this creates a paradox for journalists. On one hand, they must adhere to and uphold the code of ethics, while on the other hand, they face pressures from media owners as employees. This creates a challenging environment for journalists, with the idealized notion of the media as the fourth estate of democracy often conflicting with practical realities. As Fulton et al (2017: 1) assert that: "power used to be conceived largely as a property of hierarchies. This conception held that power operates in a top-down linear fashion and this thinking gave rise to concerns about who is in control."

However, based on past election experiences, there has been skepticism among society regarding media neutrality. Therefore, the press must professionally perform its function as a social control institution, being fair by providing equal opportunities to all election participants, maintaining transparency, and firmly guarding the firewall between editorial space and business interests.

Despite these efforts, people have already started assessing and stigmatizing certain media outlets as having party affiliations. Some parties also revel in having their own stage in the mass media, while others compete to control the media when they lack affiliations. This new phenomenon in Indonesia's political landscape, especially in the context of general elections, challenges the conventional notion of the press as 'the fourth estate.' Instead, it presents a new paradigm where the press becomes more of a political commodity or industry tool. This shift will require changes in media and legal education and also alter society's conventional mindset regarding the media. The traditional doctrine of the fourth estate, attributed to Burke or Cobett, may no longer be valid in this new media age.

If this new paradigm is forced to be accepted, significant changes will occur in the legal system, particularly in press laws. The application of press freedom may become challenging, leading to the management of press-related matters within the corridors of criminal law rather than press laws. Freedom of the press could be placed within the context of right or wrong. Any wrongdoing could lead to prison sentences, which could ultimately lead to authoritarianism or tyranny of the media. The threat of imprisoning journalists is a way to silence the press and opens up the potential for manipulating public opinion or forming a single opinion, which could have severe consequences for societal intelligence and the survival of democracy.

Finally, it is intriguing to quote Noam Chomsky's opinion (in Schultz 1998: 12) that:

"As institutions, the media are integral parts of the system of ideological control, and they couldn't function otherwise. Nevertheless, there are people within those institutions who are actively struggling against these inherent functions."

If we wish to avoid embracing the new paradigm as a post-idealism era for journalism, the only way forward for the press is to return to its own idealism and maintain editorial independence by rejecting all forms of intervention. In light of this, we believe that the best mechanism to address this problem is through a strong legal framework that ensures the separation of media activities from political interests.

## **Conclusion**

To maintain and uphold the role and function of the media as the fourth estate of democracy, clear regulations governing the relationship between the media and political parties are essential. The process of media reconstruction must start by preventing any reintegration of the media as an industry and a political tool. The primary goal is to reinstate the media's core function, aligning with the purposes outlined in media law and ethics, which include strengthening national integration, promoting democracy, facilitating education, fostering character building, and preserving culture. This implies that the media should prioritize the public interest rather than serving the interests of specific groups or political parties.

Journalists play a crucial role in ensuring professionalism. In the context of democracy, the mass media acts not only as the fourth estate but also as the "guardian of democracy." Through objective journalism, the media must cover all perspectives for the benefit of the public and to foster a marketplace of ideas. Therefore, media literacy initiatives need to be improved for both practitioners and media owners, helping them understand the function and role of the media.

Furthermore, the public should be educated about the characteristics and impact of the media, empowering them to optimize the media as a tool for social empowerment. Emphasizing journalistic idealism and rejecting partisan media requires a shift in society's perception of the function and role of the media. As the public gains better media literacy and access to new media, they can actively engage in the political process without relying solely on traditional media as an intermediary.

Dangerously, if this new paradigm is accepted, there may be a reduced need for strict regulation of the relationship between media and politics. Consequently, we must work to change the paradigm so that traditional mass media remains the fourth estate of democracy, preserving its vital role in promoting an informed and engaged society. Ultimately, we need to shift the paradigm that traditional mass media is no longer the fourth estate of democracy. \*\*\*

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