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The Media Landscape in Indonesia: The More Things Change, the More They Stay the Same

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A newspaper kiosk in Jakarta showing the front pages of various newspapers on 16 March 2019. Picture: Bay ISMOYO/AFP.

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

- The structure of Indonesia’s media landscape has remained largely unchanged over the last decade, and continues to be dominated by a handful of conglomerates.
- As this study shows, many of these conglomerates have clear political leanings and affiliations, and have often used their media platforms to advance the agendas of their political allies.
- Many owners of these large media groups have also utilized their businesses to diversify their investments and broaden their economic interests.
- The emergence of digital media has not resulted in more diversity in terms of ownership control and editorial content. The capital-intensive nature of the industry means that large media groups have the ability to become larger by resorting to multiplatform media. In addition, many new digital media outlets need to be backed by conglomerates in order to become sustainable and significant.
- While the media landscape is still largely dominated by the established media groups, a couple of new players have used digital media as gateways to enter the industry. These new players are also business conglomerates seeking to diversify their portfolios.

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INTRODUCTION

There are ample examples around the world of media owners using their platforms to cultivate access to politicians and government officials. The situation is no different in Indonesia. In fact, media owners are not only actively involved in the political sphere, some even have direct affiliations with political parties.

The same few media groups that have controlled Indonesia's information and media sector over the last decade continue to dominate the information landscape. In essence, 12 media companies control 90 per cent of what people watch, listen and read in Indonesia (Nugroho et al, 2012). These groups—mainly seven of them—also control a majority of large online media platforms.

INDONESIAN MEDIA, MEANS OF POLITICS

Forgot to tell [#Leveson](#) that it's unreasonable to expect individuals to spend £millions on newspapers and not have access to politicians.
(Evgeny Lebedev, UK, owner of The Independent, current member of House of Lords, tweet 23 April 2012)

Within Indonesia's media landscape, several conglomerate owners are considered key players (Tapsell, 2017). These are Chairul Tanjung (CT Corp), Hary Tanoesoedibjo (Global Mediacom), Eddy Sariaatmadja (Emtek), Bakrie Group (Visi Media Asia), Surya Paloh (Media Group), the Riady family (Berita Satu Media Holding), and Jakob Oetama-PK Ojong (Kompas Gramedia)¹ (see Table 1). Several of these names are directly linked to political parties and, to some extent, the Jokowi administration. At the same time, some other players are actively using their media platforms to influence broader issues and policies to serve their interests.

Surya Paloh, the owner of Media Group (MetroTV, Media Indonesia daily, Medcom.id), is the founder and chairman of NasDem Party (*Partai Nasdem*, National Democrat Party), which currently holds three ministerial posts within the cabinet and 59 out of 575 seats in the House of Representatives. Paloh, who established NasDem after he lost his bid for Golkar Party's (*Partai Golongan Karya*, Functional Group Party) chairmanship in 2009, is known as one of President Joko Widodo's closest allies.² This support has been clearly demonstrated in publications under the Media Group, especially Metro TV which was nicknamed "TV Jokowi" throughout the election cycle of 2014 and 2019 for the way it aggressively promoted news on then-presidential candidate Joko Widodo.³

Although arguably not as politically influential as Paloh, two other conglomerate owners, Chairul Tanjung and Hary Tanoesoedibjo, are also supporting Joko Widodo. Interestingly, both Tanjung and Tanoesoedibjo have managed to place their respective daughters in governmental positions: Putri Tanjung is one among seven presidential "millennial" special staff,⁴ while Angela Tanoesoedibjo is the Deputy of Tourism and Creative Economy Minister.⁵ Chairul Tanjung, who had served as coordinating economic minister under President Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono, is in control of several media outlets, including two large television stations (TransTV and Trans7) as

well as Indonesia's largest online news portal (Detik.com). He has generally refrained from interfering in the editorial content of his media outlets and largely treats his media outlets as profitable business entities. (Fernandes, 2018).

Table 1. Major Indonesia News Media Groups

Owner	Corporation	Subsidiary	TV (main)	Print (main)	Online (main)	Radio (main)	Other	Political Leaning
Hary Tanoesoedibjo	Global Media Com	MNC	MNC, Global TV, RCTI, iNews	Koran Sindo	Okezone, Sindonews, iNews.id	Trijaya FM, ARH Global	IT, content production and distribution, talent management, automobile industry, banking, insurance, infrastructure.	Chairman of Perindo Party, supporting current regime but was campaigning for Prabowo Subianto in the 2014 presidential election; daughter is the Deputy Tourism and Creative Economy Minister.
Chairul Tanjung	CT Corp	Trans Corp	TransTV, Trans7, CNN Indonesia, CNBC Indonesia	-	Detik, CNNIndonesia.com, CNBCIndonesia.com	-	Hotel, F&B, banking, retail, theme parks, venture capital, insurance.	No clear affiliation to political parties but supporting current regime. Tanjung was the Coordinating Economic Affairs Minister during President Yudhoyono's regime and daughter is one of President Widodo's "millennial" expert staff.
Aburizal Bakrie	Bakrie Group	Visi Media Asia	TVOne, ANTV	-	Viva, TVOneNews.com	-	Telecommunications, property, metal, oil & gas, agribusiness, coal, infrastructure.	Former chairman of Golkar Party, supporting current regime but was campaigning for Prabowo Subianto in 2014 presidential election.
Surya Paloh	Media Group	Media Televisi Indonesia	MetroTV	Media Indonesia, Lampung Post	Metrotvnews	MG Radio	Hotels, property, catering, oil, coal.	Chairman of Nasdem Party, supporting current regime.
Jakob Oetama, & PK Ojong	Kompas Gramedia	KG Media	KompasTV	Kompas, Kontan, Warta Kota, Tribun	Kompas.com, Tribunnews, KompasTV.com, Kontas.co.id	Sonora, Smart FM, Motion	Hotels, PR agencies, event organizer, university, printing and publishing, bookshop chain, hotel chain, F&B.	Currently no clear political affiliation.
Edy Sariaatmadja	EMTEK	SCMA Group	SCTV, Indosiar, O Channel	-	Liputan 6, Merdeka, Kapanlagi	Elshinta	Property, home shopping, hospital, venture capital.	Currently no clear political affiliation.
James Riady	Lippo	Berita Satu	Berita Satu	Suara Pembaruan, Investor Daily	Beritasatu.com	-	Property, banking, education, insurance, shopping malls, retail, hospital, venture capital.	Currently no clear political affiliation.
Erick Thohir	Beyond Media	Mahaka Media	Jak TV	Republika	Republika.co.id, Jak-TV.co.id	Jak FM, Gen FM, Delta, Prambors	Content provider, advertising, event organizer, marketing company.	Current Minister of SOEs, President Widodo's campaign chairman for 2019 presidential election.

Source: Author, data compiled from Haryanto, 2011; Nugroho et al, 2012; Tapsell, 2017; Souisa, 2020; and official websites.

Unlike Tanjung, Tanoesoedibjo adopts a more activist and interventionist approach. He is founder/chair of Perindo Party (*Partai Persatuan Indonesia*, Indonesia's Unity Party) and owner of MNC Group, which is Indonesia's largest television network with the largest audience share,⁶ consisting of 4 television stations (RCTI, MNC TV, GTV, and iNews). He has been known to abuse his ownership of public-frequency television stations to frequently air Perindo's advertisements to the point of violating campaign regulations.⁷ He also recruits journalists working for his media to become party functionaries⁸ and forces his employees to attend Perindo party's political campaigns⁹. Such behaviour has resulted in him receiving sanctions for pushing his party's agenda.¹⁰ Even prior to Perindo's establishment in 2015, Tanoesoedibjo had used his media platforms to support parties he was aligned with – such as NasDem Party in 2011 where he served as a functionary, and Hanura Party (*Partai Hati Nurani Rakyat*, The People's Conscience Party) in 2014.

Aburizal Bakrie, former Golkar Party chairman, has also been using his media outlets (TVOne, ANTV, VIVANews and several other news outlets) to advance his political interests. While Metro TV was dubbed "TV Jokowi", TVOne was regarded as "TV Prabowo" in both the 2014 and 2019 presidential elections. It has been reported that Bakrie's youngest son, Ardie Bakrie had sent a strongly-worded email to all members of VIVANews editorial board, accusing some of them of disloyalty to the company simply because the news outlet had an advertisement of Widodo's campaign¹¹ in its website header (Dhyatmika, 2014). Not long thereafter, the chief editor on VivaNews and the chief editor of ANTV resigned. On election day, TVOne, along with all MNC Group television stations which at the time supported Subianto, deliberately aired a bogus quick count suggesting that Prabowo was leading in the election.¹²

James Riady, owner of Lippo Group (Berita Satu, The Jakarta Globe and several investment news outlets), is allied with Widodo (Tapsell, 2017). Erick Thohir, the current State-Owned Enterprises Minister, who owns Mahaka Group (Republika, Jak TV, and several radio stations) is also allied with Widodo and is said to harbour ambitions of running for president in 2024. While the media companies associated with Riady and Thohir have been more subtle in their affiliations to the regime, the political leanings of their owners are evident.

ABOVE ALL ELSE: INTEREST

Paloh and Bakrie have been notorious for using their television stations to score political points. After the 2006 Lapindo mudflow disaster in the Porong subdistrict of Sidoarjo, East Java, both Paloh's Metro TV and Bakrie's TVOne portrayed very different narratives. In 2008, three years into the prolonged mudflow, Metro TV persisted in using the phrase *Lumpur Lapindo* (Lapindo mudflow)¹³ in an attempt to accentuate the responsibilities¹⁴ of Lapindo Brantas Inc., an oil and gas company that belongs under the Bakrie Group, while TVOne insisted on labelling the disaster as *Lumpur Porong* (Porong mudflow) to emphasize the location of the disaster in order to downplay the role played by the Bakrie Group (Nugroho & Syarief, 2012). The term Lumpur Lapindo used by Metro TV was more widely accepted, with Indonesians generally thinking that the Bakrie Group should be held responsible for the disaster. But that was not the only reason. During that time, both Paloh and Bakrie had been locked in a heated contest for the

2009 chairmanship of Golkar, Indonesia's second largest party, and both their television stations were used to attack the opposing camp. (Setiawan, 2010). Bakrie eventually won.¹⁵

Although these moguls might not agree on everything—and even use their media to politically attack each other, their shared interests do serve to override differences. One example was the response to the Broadcasting Law 2002, which was enacted to ensure decentralization mainly by: 1) setting up digital (as opposed to analogue) broadcasting to enable more broadcasters reaching households, and 2) requiring national broadcasters to establish networked broadcasting with local television stations in an attempt to democratize and diversify the media (Nugroho et al., 2012). In an act of unity, media conglomerates, using their political power and connections, managed to influence the government to establish policies that sustain their dominance (Armando, 2014): mainly by shifting broadcasting permit issuance from Indonesia's independent broadcasting commission's (KPI/*Komisi Penyiaran Indonesia*) to the government in order got it to be more accessible to media moguls. Networked-broadcasting had only begun its slow implementation in 2012 and digital broadcast only started in April 2022.

It is also a common practice among news media in Indonesia not to criticize each other in the name of maintaining good working relationships, and avoiding future retaliation should their own company face adversities.¹⁶ Attacks between media companies tend to occur in the context of political contests between their respective owners but almost never in order to cast criticism on editorial or managerial decisions affecting journalism in general. For instance, during and after the release of the bogus quick count results of the 2014 presidential election showing Prabowo Subianto's false lead, the Bakrie Group and MNC Group's television stations faced very little backlash from other prominent media companies. There was no attempt from other media companies to specifically hold them accountable for airing misleading information, hurting journalist integrity, and jeopardizing the democratic process. The details around the issue were simply reported as straight news.¹⁷

DIGITAL MEDIA LANDSCAPE: SAME OLD, SAME OLD

It has been thought that the advancement of digital technology would help level the playing field and result in a less concentrated media landscape. In Indonesia, digital technology has, on the surface, facilitated the flourishing of alternative media. However, the reality is that forces remain at play to keep real control over the digital media landscape in the hands of a few.

The latest data from Indonesia's Press Council show that up till 2018, there were approximately 43,300 online media portals in the country. But a large portion¹⁸ of them were reportedly fake media entities that had been created to exploit the availability of funding from the local government's advertising budget (Prasetyo, 2018).

It is apparent that digitalization has enabled media moguls to further expand their reach, perpetuating their continued dominance of the media scene and consolidating the oligarchic structure of Indonesia's media ecosystem. (Ambardi et al, 2014). This is the result of digital

conglomeracy, where existing media moguls expand their businesses to converge with or acquire digital media entities in order to expand their media empires and to cover both the communication and network infrastructure as well as the content (Tapsell, 2017). Currently, among the 30 most accessed digital media in Indonesia, 19 are directly affiliated with media conglomerates¹⁹ and thus practically control the majority of digital news.

Table 2. Major Indonesia Digital Media Groups

Media Group	Owner/Affiliation	Notable Outlets
KG Media	Jakob Oetama & PK Ojong/Kompas Gramedia	Kompas.com, Tribunnews, KompasTV.com, Kontan.co.id
Detik Network	Chairul Tanjung/Trans Corp	Detik, CNNIndonesia.com, CNBCIndonesia.com
Kapanlagi Youniverse	Edy Sariaatmadja/EMTEK	Liputan 6, Merdeka, Kapanlagi
Pikiran Rakyat Media Network	Pikiran Rakyat Bandung	Pikiranrakyat.com, Portal Sulut, Potensi Bisnis
Arkadia Digital Media	Arkadia Corp	Suara, Suara Regional, Mata Mata
MNC	Hary Tanoesoedibjo/Global Media Com	Sindonews, iNews.id, Okezone, RCTI+
IDN Media	Winston Utomo & William Utomo	IDN Times, Popbela, Popmama
JPNN	Jawa Pos Group	JPNN, GenPi
GDP Venture	Martin Hartono/Djarum Group	Narasi, Kumparan, Historia
Tempo Media Group	Tempo Inti Media	Tempo.co, KoranTempo.co
Mahaka Media	Erick Thohir/Beyond Media	Republika.co.id, Jak-TV.co.id

Source: Dable.io; official websites.

With each media group controlling many news outlets across many platforms, the practice of republishing the same news content on multiple platforms has become ubiquitous. This has come at the expense of quality content. For many of these conglomerates, their media businesses are first and foremost a means of generating profits (Haryanto, 2011) rather than developing journalism as an industry. Hence, creating content to maximize the number of “clicks” and drive advertising revenues has become the primary motivation—above quality content. It is therefore common to see similar news and headlines repeated across many digital media platforms, decreasing the overall diversity and quality of news content. More profoundly, in this digital media landscape, any conglomerate with a particular agenda, especially a political one, will simply have more channels through which to propagate their content (Couldry et al, 2018). This has been the common practice of media moguls/politicians such as Harry Tanoesoedibjo and Surya Paloh.

The digital landscape enables new players to invest in digital media business through funding established by venture capital firms. It has become the gateway for other conglomerates who traditionally do not operate in the media industry to enter the arena. Among several venture capital firms in Indonesia funding digital news media, two are found to be investing considerably: East Ventures and GDP Venture. East Ventures²⁰ is backed by Indonesian conglomerate Sinar Mas Group.²¹ It currently funds various digital media companies in several countries in Asia. Two of their most notable investments are IDN Times (co-investing with GDP Venture) and Katadata, a business/finance media and data/research firm. Although Katadata's readership is behind many other business/finance online media, their integration of news and data quite often catches attention since data journalism has started to flourish in Indonesia.

GDP Venture is owned by Djarum Group, a diversified conglomerate with tobacco cigarette manufacturing as their primary business.²² The firm funds 12 news outlets of varied genre and two user-generated content platforms. Several notable companies receiving funding—either fully or partially—are Narasi, Kumparan, and IDN Times. Narasi is a multi-format news outlet established by one of Indonesia's most popular and influential journalists with huge followings, Najwa Shihab. Their news products, especially text and video-based journalism from Narasi Newsroom and talkshow Mata Najwa, have proven influential in shaping public opinion and discourse. Meanwhile, both Kumparan and IDN Times²³ are among native digital news outlets with the highest growth in readership. With this portfolio, along other smaller publications, GDP Venture has managed to form their own digital media group.²⁴ The entrance of a subsidiary of Djarum Group into the digital media industry might in the future be interesting as this conglomerate has allegedly been maintaining an as yet undisclosed relationship with Indonesian Solidarity Party (*Partai Solidaritas Indonesia*, PSI),^{25 26} a newcomer supported by members of the young urban middle class.

CONCLUSION

As this paper has shown, there are strong forces at play to keep the structure of Indonesia's media landscape oligarchic. While the internet has in theory enabled digital news media outlets to flourish, the grim realities of the capitalistic nature of the media sector mean that deep pockets are still required for media outlets to thrive and be sustainable. Conglomerates' stronghold on the media sector practically diminishes real competition within the industry. Granted that influential journalists and credible journalism continue to flourish, especially in the digital sphere, but in reality, they still have to operate within the structure of media conglomerates which, as has been proven from time to time, are largely driven by the owners' political, economic or other particular interests.

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ENDNOTES

¹ Tapsell (2017) mentioned eight media conglomerates. However, one of Indonesia's media key figure, Dahlan Iskan, lost his shares in Jawa Pos Group in 2018. Jawa Pos Group is currently owned by several entities, including PT Grafiti Pers, PT Jaya Raya, *Yayasan Jaya Raya* (Jaya Raya Foundation), and *Yayasan Karyawan Tempo* (Tempo Employees Foundation)—all are part-owners of Tempo Media Group (Tempo magazine, *Koran Tempo*, Tempo.co).

² <https://mediaindonesia.com/politik-dan-hukum/473273/jokowi-surya-paloh-mesra-pengamat-bisa-jadi-berkah-elektoral-buat-nasdem>

³ https://www.bbc.com/indonesia/berita_indonesia/2014/07/140702_lapsus_media_bias

⁴ <https://www.thejakartapost.com/news/2019/11/21/jokowi-picks-young-people-to-presidential-expert-staff-for-their-fresh-innovative-ideas.html>

⁵ <https://www.thejakartapost.com/news/2019/10/25/breaking-jokowi-announces-12-new-deputy-ministers-to-assist-cabinet.html>

⁶ <https://databoks.katadata.co.id/datapublish/2022/04/19/grup-mnc-kuasai-pangsa-penonton-televi-indonesia>

⁷ <https://www.jawapos.com/nasional/08/03/2018/sering-tayangkan-mars-perindo-tapi-mnc-tak-penuhi-panggilan-bawaslu/>

⁸ <https://tirto.id/perindo-partai-politik-rasa-mnc-cNvZ>

⁹ <https://pemilu.tempo.co/read/568160/karyawan-mnc-ini-terpaksa-hadiri-kampanye-hanura/full&view=ok>

¹⁰ <http://www.kpi.go.id/index.php/id/edaran-dan-sanksi/31996-teguran-iklan-kampanye-partai-hanura-mnc-tv>

¹¹ <https://nasional.kontan.co.id/news/ardie-bakrie-akui-marah-soal-iklan-jokowi-di-viva>

¹² <https://www.tribunnews.com/nasional/2019/02/27/di-ilc-karni-ilyas-klarifikasi-salah-hitung-quick-count-prabowo-menang-di-pilpres-2014-bukan-tvone>

¹³ The writer, whom worked for Metro TV and based in East Java during that time, was personally instructed to specifically use the phrase Lumpur Lapindo in all news pieces and live/taped reports on the disaster.

¹⁴ <https://news.okezone.com/read/2010/02/12/18/302972/ilmuwan-lumpur-lapindo-disebabkan-keteledoran-manusia>

¹⁵ <https://nasional.kompas.com/read/2009/10/08/03403172/~Nasional>

¹⁶ A very common, though rather poorly documented, example of this is when media companies undergo mass layoffs. It is a common “code of conduct” among larger media companies not to produce news regarding the issue unless it can be published as a simple straight news, e.g. when workers finally decide to file a public complaint. It is also very common for media owners and top managements to ask each other to drop this kind of news citing “kitchen business”, referencing to Indonesians’ way of signaling others not to meddle with internal household affairs.

¹⁷ See:

<https://money.kompas.com/read/2014/07/11/143425126/Jadi.Bahan.Canda.TV.One.Mengaku.Terus.Lakukan.Perbaikan> and

<https://nasional.kompas.com/read/2014/07/12/13581501/IRC.Akui.Dapat.Dana.untuk.Quick.Count.da.ri.3.Televisi.MNC.Group>.

¹⁸ Of that number, only 2,400 have passed the verification process and are listed as professional media by the council as of 2018.

¹⁹ <http://dable.io/wp-content/uploads/2022/02/ID-Media-Landscape-2022.jpeg>

²⁰ Based in Singapore but managed by Indonesians investing in Southeast Asia and Japan.

²¹ <https://jakartaglobe.id/business/sinar-masbacked-venture-capital-ev-growth-closes-250m-funding-round/>

²² Djarum Group owns PT Djarum—4th largest tobacco manufacturer (<https://www.tobaccofreekids.org/problem/toll-global/asia/indonesia>), BCA—3rd largest bank (<https://keuangan.kontan.co.id/news/ini-posisi-lima-besar-perbankan-dengan-nilai-aset-terbesar-di-indonesia>), and both owners of Djarum Group, brothers Budi and Michael Hartono, are Indonesia’s richest (<https://www.forbes.com/lists/indonesia-billionaires/#2814bfa72ff7>).

²³ IDN Times is itself part of IDN Media group, mainly funded by brothers Winston and William Utomo. GDP Venture currently partially funds IDN Times and several other outlets from IDN Media. Other than GDP Venture, IDN Times also received co-investment from another venture capital firm, East Venture.

²⁴ <http://dable.io/wp-content/uploads/2022/02/ID-Media-Landscape-2022.jpeg>

²⁵ Since its establishment, the party has been known to be a strong supporter of President Widodo, and has been gathering votes for him from young voters who are not adequately represented by other parties.

²⁶ A PSI politician filed a lawsuit against a senior journalist for criticizing President Jokowi’s minister’s policy regarding his cooperation, and against an e-marketplace owned by Djarum Group. <https://www.thejakartapost.com/news/2020/05/30/aji-condemns-lawsuit-against-senior-journalist-for-criticizing-ministers-policy-online.html>

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