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# Media Independence in Indonesian Broadcast Television News: A Comparative Case Study of iNews TV and Metro TV during the 2024 Presidential Election

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ABSTRACT

This research investigates Indonesian broadcast television news media's independence in the 2024 Presidential Election, focusing specifically on iNews TV and Metro TV. The study is driven by the media's critical role in shaping public opinion and the integrity of democratic processes, particularly during electoral periods. Through qualitative comparative case study with interview and literature review as data collection methods, this research examines how these two prominent news outlets maintain neutrality and impartiality in their reporting on election-related issues. The findings reveal significant differences in the editorial approaches of iNews and Metro TV, which appear to be influenced by their respective ownership structures and political affiliations. iNews, linked to media conglomerates close to specific political figures, shows a distinct bias in framing news stories, favouring certain candidates. Conversely, with its political affiliations, Metro TV exhibits a different pattern of bias, though equally impactful on audience perceptions. This study underscores the challenges faced by Indonesian media in maintaining editorial independence in a highly polarized political environment. It also highlights the implications of biased media coverage for public trust in the media and the overall democratic process. The research contributes to the broader discourse on media independence in Indonesia, calling for stronger regulatory frameworks to ensure that broadcast media serve the public interest with fairness and impartiality, particularly during critical electoral events.

**Keywords:** *Media independence, Metro TV, iNews TV, Indonesian television, Presidential Election 2024.*

## INTRODUCTION

The media plays a pivotal role in democratic societies as both a source of information and a platform for public discourse, often referred to as the "fourth pillar" of democracy (Allsop, 2025). However, this function is frequently compromised by external pressures and interference. In the Indonesian context, Kakiailatu (2007) emphasizes that the press is susceptible to intimidation, particularly through lawsuits initiated by influential individuals capable of manipulating judicial outcomes. Nyarko and Teer-Tomaselli (2018) further argue that financial dependencies undermine editorial independence, especially when media ownership is tied to political actors.

In Indonesia, the concentration of media ownership among political elites raises profound concerns about journalistic autonomy. For instance, Viva Group or Bakrie & Brothers One is owned by Aburizal Bakrie, a prominent figure in the Golkar Party. At the same

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time, Media Group is owned by Surya Paloh, the founder of the National Democratic (NASDEM) Party (Silitonga & Muqsith, 2023). As Tapsell (2015) and Arifuddin (2017) note, private control over media outlets enables ruling elites and political parties to instrumentalize these platforms for electoral gains. Under these conditions, journalists often operate in constrained environments, where critical reporting may lead to professional penalties such as demotion, reassignment, or even dismissal (Tapsell, 2015).

Theoretically, media independence refers to the extent to which news organizations operate free from undue external influence, particularly from political or corporate interests (Karppinen & Moe, 2006). In contrast, media bias and partisanship arise when editorial content systematically favours particular ideologies or political candidates, often due to structural entanglements with ownership (Budiana, 2024). This convergence between media proprietorship and editorial orientation blurs the boundary between journalism and political advocacy (Saad & Sannusi, 2023). Consequently, such alignment poses risks to the integrity of democratic communication, underscoring the necessity for media pluralism and regulatory safeguards to maintain a fair and balanced information ecosystem (Setiawan et al., 2024), especially during high-stakes electoral contests.

Empirical evidence substantiates these concerns. Fahadi (2019), through a case study of the 2014 presidential election, demonstrated that both TV One and Metro TV exhibited polarized reporting. TV One aligned with the Prabowo Subianto–Hatta Rajasa ticket, while Metro TV supported Joko Widodo–Jusuf Kalla. These findings resonate with longstanding critiques regarding the alignment of Indonesian media with elite political figures, such as Hary Tanoesoedibjo (Leader and owner of the Perindo Party), who owns RCTI, Global TV, INewsTV, and MNC Group (Ida, 2014). This alignment contributes to societal polarization, fostering affective partisanship where individuals grow increasingly distrustful and hostile toward opposing viewpoints (Levendusky & Malhotra, 2016; Morris & Morris, 2022).

In the 2014 and 2019 elections, the Indonesian Broadcasting Commission (KPI) repeatedly summoned media affiliated with politics because they were considered biased, such as Metro TV's excessive coverage of Jokowi and TV One's coverage of Prabowo in 2014 (KPI, 2014). KPI assessed that Metro TV had committed a violation because it covered presidential candidate Jokowi's Umrah pilgrimage from departure to the implementation of the Hajj pilgrimage, even though it was the campaign's quiet period (Indriani, 2014). Meanwhile, MNC TV reported Prabowo Subianto's activities in performing *pencak silat*, which benefited presidential candidate number 1. In 2019, the two media, namely the General Chairperson of the Nasdem Party and the Perindo Party supporting Jokowi, were again summoned by the KPI because the portion of broadcast time, substance, and "tone" tended to favour one of the candidates (RG, 2019).

These cases offer a salient context for re-examining media independence, particularly the 2024 presidential election. The two media owners supported different presidential candidates: Hary Tanoesoedibjo supported Ganjar Pranowo–Mahfud MD (candidate 03), Surya Paloh supported Anies Baswedan–Muhaimin Iskandar (candidate 01), and Aburizal Bakrie supported Prabowo Subianto–Gibran Rakabuming Raka (candidate 02) (Priyanto & Ghofur, 2024). The election itself was framed by a narrative battle: Candidate 01 championed reform and change, Candidate 02 advocated continuity, while Candidate 03 offered a centrist approach. This dynamic strengthened the influence of affiliated media outlets in shaping public opinion and influencing electoral preferences.

Media organizations aligned with political patrons are often mobilized to promote specific political agendas. This includes directing editorial content, assigning coverage priorities, and deploying journalists to advance strategic narratives (Arifuddin, 2017). Masduki (2017) observes that such practices erode journalistic integrity and diminish public confidence in the media's credibility. The resulting politicization of journalism weakens the media's role as an impartial public watchdog and undermines its normative commitment to serve the public interest.

Against this backdrop, examining the state of media independence during the 2024 presidential election becomes imperative. Hanretty (2014) found that across 32 countries, higher levels of media ownership concentration were associated with diminished editorial autonomy. Similarly, Stetka (2012) identified a strong correlation between ownership centralization and the entanglement of media systems with political and economic power. While previous studies have explored agenda-setting mechanisms, this study aims to examine how media ownership during the 2024 presidential election influences the objectivity and independence of media outlets in Indonesia.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

### *a. Media Independence Dynamic*

The independence of the media is an important debate in media policy. “For many media independence has come to mean working with freedom: from state control or interference, from monopoly, from market forces, as well as the freedom to report, comment, create and document without fear of persecution” (Bennet, 2014, p.1). This definition is not wrong, as the media is essentially a provider of information to the public, which must report objectively without interference from any party.

Table 1: Media independence indicator

| **Whose independence?** | **From what?** | **By which means?** |
|---|---|---|
| Media system | State/Government | Law and statutes |
| Media organizations | Political parties | Organizational arrangements |
| Journalism | Special interest groups | Self-regulation |
| Individual voice/speaker | Market forces | Ethical guidelines |
| | Major media corporations | Professional culture |
| | “The mainstream” | |

Source: Karppinen and Moe (2016)

Karppinen and Moe (2016) provide a comprehensive framework on aspects of media independence. The focus is on what the media is free from. There are six actors that the media must be free from to emphasize objectivity in the news, namely the government, political parties, specific groups, market forces, media companies, and 'mainstreaming'. Rožukalne (2013) sees it at the system level, where there are three levels of editorial independence: the individual level, the media organization, and the media industry, with each level of independence depending on self-regulation and media regulatory mechanisms. This means that the instruments for ensuring media independence must be strong.

Sukmayadi (2019) explains that Indonesia’s media landscape has undergone rapid growth and significant transformation, particularly following the 1998 Reformation era, which ushered in a greater degree of press freedom. Despite having one of the highest numbers of mass media outlets in the world, Indonesia's media industry is largely dominated by a few major conglomerates, resulting in media consolidation and an oligopolistic structure. This

concentration of ownership has considerable implications for the diversity and reliability of information accessible to the public. Moreover, the shift from conventional to digital media—fuelled by increased internet penetration and social media engagement—has fundamentally altered the way news is consumed.

The implications of media ownership extend directly to journalistic practices within politically affiliated media outlets. Although journalists generally strive to uphold professional standards, indirect interventions by politically aligned owners can gradually undermine journalistic integrity (Ekayanti & Xiaoming, 2018). Furthermore, recent studies indicate a marked decline in journalistic freedom among reporters working within Indonesia's mainstream media organizations (Ahmad, 2022).

Karppinen and Moe's (2016) framework is well-suited for ensuring media independence, with financial autonomy being a critical component. Financial independence minimizes reliance on external funding, including government support, safeguarding editorial freedom. Although journalists working in independent media may earn less compared to those in state-sponsored outlets, the presence of social capital and the strong historical relationship between journalists and the community play a pivotal role in sustaining independent journalism (Lowrey & Erzikova, 2018).

Masduki and d'Haenens (2022) argue that media pluralism and diversity of perspectives in Indonesia are increasingly under threat due to the high concentration of media ownership. A limited number of corporations dominate both the print and broadcast media sectors, while public service and community media remain significantly underdeveloped. This issue is further exacerbated by the growing trend of media conglomeration and platform convergence—where owners who once operated a single medium (such as print, radio, or television) now control large, powerful multiplatform oligopolies that span across media formats. Sukmayadi (2019) contends that such media consolidation creates an illusion of choice for audiences, who are often unaware that they are, in fact, being deprived of access to reliable and diverse information. Moreover, while media framing can potentially stimulate public interest in political life and uncover new insights, it also runs the risk of fostering public distrust and cynicism (Aulia, 2016).

The government also often funds media that promote its agenda and the interests of its allies and supporters, both political and business groups (Dragomir, 2018). Similarly, media financed by philanthropic organizations is not entirely free from external influence. Funding is often restricted to specific topics, and in some instances, there are quotas for different types of stories, indicating the presence of imbalanced power dynamics. These foundations typically shape the agenda, exerting significant influence over the media's role in society (Moyo, 2021).

However, maintaining media independence presents a range of persistent challenges, as various actors attempt to exploit the media to serve their own interests. In the 2014 presidential election, both TV One and Metro TV failed to adhere to the principles of ideal journalism—namely balanced, objective, and impartial reporting— as mandated by the Indonesian Broadcasting Commission, particularly in their coverage of the two presidential candidates (Fahadi, 2019). In the context of the 2024 election, the position of media oligarchs is likely to remain advantageous, as Indonesia still lacks comprehensive regulations that limit political activities in the media or restrict content that contributes to favourable framing of specific parties or candidates (Dahlia & Permana, 2022).

Media bias has long been a concern among media regulators. In Indonesia, there are several regulations to uphold press independence. Akil (2014) explained that press freedom in Indonesia is primarily governed by Law No. 40 of 1999 on the Press. To support this legal framework, the Indonesian Press Council has also issued the Journalistic Code of Ethics (Kode Etik Jurnalistik or KEJ), which serves as a guideline for both journalists and media organizations. In parallel, broadcast media—comprising radio and television—is regulated under Law No. 32 of 2002 on Broadcasting. This law categorizes broadcast institutions into four types: (a) Public Broadcasting Institutions, (b) Private Broadcasting Institutions, (c) Community Broadcasting Institutions, and (d) Subscription-Based Broadcasting Institutions, each with distinct operational characteristics. In order to enforce the provisions of the Broadcasting Law, the Indonesian Broadcasting Commission (Komisi Penyiaran Indonesia or KPI) has developed two key regulatory instruments: the Broadcasting Code of Conduct (Pedoman Perilaku Penyiaran or P3) and the Broadcast Program Standards (Standar Program Siaran or SPS).

*b. Media Political Economy*

According to Wittel (2016), media institutions are increasingly being privatized and turned into businesses, which is problematic because the media industry is not just any industry. To understand the uniqueness of the media industry, we need to look at the dual nature of the content it produces, which is both a commodity and a public good. As a private good, media content is used to accumulate profit, but it also functions as a public good by contributing to the public sphere. This dual nature means that while media institutions have social, cultural, and political functions, they are also driven by economic interests. As a result, the assumption that the media is an independent force that naturally safeguards democracy and the public interest is challenged, as is the idea that mass media merely reflect public opinion. The political economy of the media assumes that the media is a powerful entity capable of influencing public opinion and shaping public discourse.

Mosco (2009) clearly describes the political economy of the media. According to him, the political economy of communication observes that fewer companies are growing large and controlling more of the media market than before. This means that certain companies have a larger share to control more market share. This concentration also occurs across media, as newspaper owners buy up broadcasters and other media properties, a process known as cross-ownership concentration. This often evolves into conglomerate concentration as transnational companies built on non-media businesses buy media properties.

There are many facts on the ground where transnational corporate owners or conglomerates acquire media, such as General Electric (NBC) and Time Warner (CNN, AOL) (Mosco, 2009). In Indonesia, MNC Group, a company owned by Hary Tanoesoedibjo, acquired RCTI, Global TV, and TPI. Despite the similar pattern, there are significant differences in the landscape. In developed countries, media ownership is no longer used to increase political and business influence. On the contrary, in developing countries, the media has become an extension of businessmen's influence in politics and business (Noam, 2018; Stetka, 2012).

## METHODOLOGY

This research uses a qualitative approach with rigorous analysis about the perspective of news report news making regarding political news, the usage of national media, and the media industry ecosystem. Based on themes that authors are obligated to analyse, the authors choose to interview several people based on their affiliation and diversity of perspectives. The author chose iNews and Metro TV as case studies because each media is owned by political actors who support different pairs of candidates: Harry Tanosoedibjo supports the Ganjar Pranowo-Mahfud MD ticket, and Surya Paloh supports the Anies Baswedan-Muhaimin Iskandar ticket. Accordingly, the author conducted interviews with key stakeholders to obtain in-depth perspectives, which include the following:

1. A representative from the Metro TV editorial team, referred to as Respondent #1;
2. A representative from the iNews editorial team, referred to as Respondent #2;
3. A representative of the NasDem Party, referred to as Respondent #3;
4. A representative of the Perindo Party, referred to as Respondent #4;
5. A communication scholar, referred to as Respondent #5.
6. A representative of the Indonesia Press Council, referred to as Respondent #6.

The selection of interviewees was guided by the author's intention to gain insights from insider sources, thereby enabling a nuanced and contextually grounded understanding of the issues from individuals who have experienced them firsthand. Such perspectives are invaluable to the objectives of this research. In addition, the author also conducted interviews with communication scholars and Indonesia Press Council to incorporate critical and theoretical viewpoints on the subject matter.

### *a. Data Collection Techniques*

The author used the semi-structured interview method to gain perspectives from a selection of interviewees. Semi-structured interviews are advantageous when a question requires follow-up questions (Adams, 2015). In other words, the semi-structured interview method is more flexible. Participants can answer these open-ended questions as they see fit, and the researcher can explore these responses (McIntosh & Janice, 2015).

In addition to interviews, the author also used a literature review to strengthen the research argument. A literature review is useful when the aim is to provide an overview of a particular research question or problem. Usually, this literature review evaluates what is known about a particular topic. It can be used, for example, to create a research agenda, to identify research gaps, or simply to discuss a particular issue (Snyder, 2019).

### *b. Data Analysis*

"For semi-structured or unstructured interviews in particular, the analysis of interviews often involves a process known as "coding" (structured interviews may follow a pre-selected coding pattern)" (Young et al., 2018, p. 13). Punch explains the coding process, which consists of several steps:

> First level coding mainly uses these descriptive, low inference codes, which are very useful in summarising segments of data, and which provide the basis for later higher order coding. Later codes may be more interpretive, requiring some degree of inference beyond the data. Thus, second level coding tends to

> focus on pattern codes. A pattern code is more inferential, a sort of "meta-code." *Pattern* codes pull together material into a smaller number of more meaningful units.... a pattern code is a more abstract concept that brings together less abstract, more descriptive codes (Punch, 2014, p. 174).

Data analysis in this research uses The Living Codebook approach. The Living Codebook has four parts: (1) a processual database that keeps track of initial codes and a final database for completed codes, (2) a "definitions and key terms" list for conversations about codes, (3) memo-writing, and (4) a difference list explaining the rationale behind unmatched codes (Reyes et al., 2024). From these four parts, five stages will be carried out in analyzing qualitative data: compiling, sorting, understanding, interpreting, and explaining (Bingham, 2023). The coding process in data analysis will remain flexible to allow appropriate interpretation and categorization, thereby enhancing the accuracy of data presentation and explanation.

## RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Following interviews conducted with representatives from each stakeholder group as well as academic experts, the author undertook a systematic coding process. Analysis of the interview data revealed distinct patterns, which were subsequently organized into three overarching themes concerning media independence:

1. Partisan Media, encompassing subthemes related to editorial processes and media sentiment;
2. Media Power Relations, including subthemes on the political positioning of media and strategies for safeguarding independence;
3. Media Ecosystem, comprising subthemes on media reform and the critical role of media in sustaining democratic practices.

These three thematic categories served as the analytical framework for the classification and interpretation of findings presented in this study.

### *a. Between Independency and Partisanship*

Numerous scholars have emphasized the critical role of media in sustaining democratic life within a country (Jackson & Stanfield, 2004; Mukhtar et al., 2016; Sparks, 1995). In the Indonesian context, the post-reform era has allowed the media to rediscover its "soul" by providing valuable input to the government, especially after 32 years of media freedom being suppressed under the New Order regime. This newfound freedom has significantly enhanced the media's role in society and governance, positioning it as an entity expected to operate independently of external influences (Muqsith et al., 2019).

Table 2: Media use of Indonesia people

| Media | Weekly use - offline | Media | Weekly use - online |
|---|---|---|---|
| TV One | 43% | Detik.com | 50% |
| Kompas | 41% | Kompas online | 39% |
| Metro TV | 36% | Tribunnews online | 28% |
| Kompas TV | 33% | TVOne News online | 26% |
| Liputan 6 (SCTV) | 27% | CNN.com | 25% |
| TransTV | 24% | Liputan 6 (SCTV News online) | 22% |

| | | | |
|---|---|---|---|
| CNN | 23% | Metro TV News online | 22% |
| RCTI | 21% | Kumparan.com | 17% |
| Indosiar | 15% | Tempo.co | 15% |
| Media Indonesia | 14% | Seputar Indonesia (RCTI News online) | 13% |
| Regional or local newspaper | 12% | Viva.co.id | 12% |
| TVRI | 12% | Merdeka.com | 12% |
| Tempo | 12% | Okezone | 12% |
| Koran Sindo | 8% | Sindonews.com | 11% |
| Republika | 7% | Jawa Pos online | 11% |
| BBC News | 6% | Idntimes News | 9% |

Source: Digital News Report (2024)

Nevertheless, the complex media ecosystem in Indonesia poses significant challenges to achieving genuine media independence. Contemporary media outlets rely heavily on advertising revenue, audience reach, and online viewership, which drives them to continuously seek public attention. The table below illustrates how national media platforms compete for the highest user engagement. In the context of this study, Metro TV performs relatively well, while iNews has yet to enter the rankings. Naturally, each outlet strives to secure a leading position, and media owners may resort to various strategies to boost audience numbers—including leveraging journalists to publish favourable or attention-grabbing news content.

However, during election periods, the position of media within the spectrum of political valence confirms widespread allegations of media partisanship (Maulana & Situngkir, 2020). A study conducted by the Center for Digital Society at Universitas Gadjah Mada (UGM) found that each media outlet exhibits its own bias in naming presidential candidates. For instance, CNBC mentioned "Anies" and "Prabowo" more frequently than "Ganjar," whereas Detik, Kompas, and Tribun tended to mention "Ganjar" more often (Tasya, 2023).

The media is no longer positioned solely as a platform for delivering objective information, but increasingly functions as a vehicle for advancing the interests of its owners—particularly when those owners are directly involved in politics, either as party elites or party founders. This concern is echoed by a communication expert who states:

> Media is often used as a tool of propaganda to shape public opinion, with the goal directed at supporting a favoured presidential candidate endorsed by the media owner (Respondent #5).

Several media outlets are owned by individuals deeply involved in politics, such as Metro TV, affiliated with Surya Paloh, chairman of the National Democratic Party, and iNews, owned by Hary Tanoesoedibjo, who leads the Perindo Party. The connections between these political figures and their respective media outlets are particularly evident in the 2024 presidential election, where Metro TV and iNews are compelled to support the candidates endorsed by their owners. Notably, Surya Paloh and Metro TV have significantly shaped public opinion during critical periods in Indonesian politics, particularly during the 2004-2014 general elections under President Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono (SBY) (Iannone, 2022). The consequence of these affiliations is a compromised news-making process. Members of the editorial teams at Metro TV and iNews have acknowledged this issue:

> …The intervention is often veiled as serving party interests, though efforts are made to present other candidates. To be honest, it is difficult to separate from the objective of promoting the candidates supported by the media-owning parties (Respondent #1).

> …Achieving balance is challenging, especially when our association with the Perindo Party, whose owner is Mr. Hary Tanoe, the party's chairman, is well-known (Respondent #2).

The association of media owners with these outlets makes the pursuit of true independence challenging. Some of the content produced by Metro TV bolsters the credibility of the Anies-Muhaimin pair. For instance, on October 15, 2023, Metro TV aired a report titled "Jokowi Called to Have Built a Political Dynasty Since the Beginning," which discussed President Jokowi's efforts to establish a political dynasty and linked it to Prabowo's candidacy for president. Additionally, on October 17, 2023, Metro TV featured news highlighting perceived injustices in the 2024 election following the Constitutional Court's ruling that allowed Gibran Rakabuming to run as a vice-presidential candidate. Further, on October 19, 2023, Metro TV aired a segment quoting one of its editorial board members, Elman Sargih, who stated, "*I concluded that the decision of the AMIN and Gama pairs was made without any drama. There was no need to listen to whispers from the sidelines or higher-ups, so they proceeded with their independence*" (MetroTV, 2023).

iNews implicitly target certain parties. In October 2023, two iNews articles subtly undermined the credibility of candidate pair number two. The first, published on October 23, was titled "Foreign Media Highlights Gibran as Prabowo's Vice Presidential Candidate: Triggering Controversy, Jokowi Trying to Create a Political Dynasty," which highlighted the nomination of Gibran Rakabuming, President Jokowi's eldest son, as a vice-presidential candidate. On October 29, iNews released another report titled "Connie Rahakundini Slams Gibran as Vice President: A Leader is One Who Keeps His Word". These news stories from October 2023 illustrate a process of polarization by Metro TV and iNews, which contributes to public misperceptions and divisions among voters. This may, in turn, create a self-perpetuating cycle that fuels both affective polarization and actual ideological polarization over time (Wilson et al., 2020). The ultimate consequence is the erosion of public trust in mainstream media (Guess et al., 2021). The Metro TV and iNews editorial team echoed this sentiment:

> The public perceives Metro TV as biased, viewing it merely as a mouthpiece for the candidates it supports in the election… (Respondent #1).

> … When we present critical perspectives, we are often perceived as lacking neutrality (Respondent #2).

The tendency of media outlets to favour certain political candidates has become increasingly common, particularly given the media's influential role in shaping public perception. This concern was also acknowledged by a communication scholar:

> Media ownership significantly influences the quality of content and the independence of journalism (Respondent #5).

When a media organization consistently presents favourable coverage of a particular candidate while providing limited information about others, it can foster a perception of favouritisms toward that candidate or their affiliated party. This phenomenon is not unique to Indonesia. In the United States, both Democrats and Republicans often perceive members of the opposing party as hypocritical, selfish, and close-minded, and they tend to avoid social interaction across party lines (Iyengar et al., 2019). Research has also shown that affective polarization tends to intensify in environments with high unemployment, income inequality, and majoritarian political institutions (Gidron et al, 2018).

The public tends to engage in *news sorting*, selectively consuming information that aligns with their existing views. There is qualified evidence suggesting that media fragmentation contributes to partisan-ideological sorting, where audiences increasingly align themselves with specific political viewpoints (Davis & Dunaway, 2016). The effects of ideological polarization are most pronounced among individuals who are highly politically engaged (Davis & Dunaway, 2016; Prior, 2013). Interestingly, media portrayals of a deeply divided electorate may lead some voters to adopt more moderate positions on certain issues, yet at the same time, these portrayals can intensify negative sentiments toward the opposing political group (Levendusky & Malhotra, 2016).

Metro TV has shown signs of losing its neutrality, and any attempts to present more balanced news must first pass through the approval of media managers. This is evident from headlines such as "Polls of the First Debate: Anies 37.9 Percent, Ganjar 22.6 Percent, and Prabowo 21.8 Percent," "Anies-Muhaimin's Electability Trend Continues to Rise," and "Anies-Muhaimin's Electability Rises 6 Percent." These headlines suggest that media managers are the dominant decision-makers in the newsroom. As a result, objectivity—which is already a challenging quality to measure and an equally difficult standard to achieve in news reporting—can be further compromised by the involvement of media owners in editorial decisions (Okon, 2018). Communication experts have also noted:

> Firstly, it is clear that iNews and Metro TV are partisan. Since 2014, these media outlets have not changed; Metro TV remains closely tied to Surya Paloh and the Nasdem Party. This connection undoubtedly contributes to the lack of objective independence in these media, driven largely by the influence of their owners (Respondent #5).

Although media owners may not directly influence professional journalistic practices, their ability to intervene in the newsroom remains significant (Ekayanti & Xiaoming, 2018). Various instances illustrate the influence of media owners on news coverage policies, such as Israel Hayom's support for Benjamin Netanyahu (Grossman et al., 2022). As a result, it becomes increasingly difficult for the media to produce objective news free from vested interests. Additionally, media conglomerates often have a stake in disseminating news that discredits their competitors and the political networks behind them (Mietzner, 2024). A communications observer views this phenomenon as a common occurrence during general elections:

> Typically, in political reporting, there is a tendency to emphasize news that benefits certain political actors, but this primarily occurs during elections. While this pattern is evident during general and local elections, it is more a reflection of ownership trends rather than direct intervention… (Respondent #5).

This perspective holds some truth, as the intensity of coverage for particular candidates tends to increase during elections. This phenomenon is closely tied to the influence and involvement of media owners in the democratic process, which takes place every five years. For instance, the Legal Aid and People's Advocacy Agency of the *PDI Perjuangan* reported Metro TV and Media Indonesia to the Press Council, alleging that these outlets had structural officials who also held positions in political parties (Amin & Rizky, 2023).

However, there are ongoing efforts by the editorial teams at Metro TV and iNews to uphold media objectivity and independence. These efforts include producing news from various perspectives, striving to present sources from both pro and con parties, and adhering to a rigorous check-and-recheck process on sensitive issues. While these measures aim to ensure neutral reporting to the public, the persistent perception of Metro TV and iNews as partisan media suggests that these efforts have yet to achieve their intended results.

Media owners' involvement in politics undermines the role of both media institutions and journalists, as owners may mobilize their resources to support specific candidates. Levendusky (2013) argues that biased news coverage by partisan outlets leads audiences to view opposing parties more negatively, resulting in decreased trust and reduced support for bipartisan cooperation. This creates a perspective bias in news coverage related to particular candidates—whether in campaign processes or electoral expectations—highlighting where people obtain their news and how partisan media cover election contests significantly influence electoral perceptions (Searles et al., 2018).

*b. Media Power Relations*

The primary reason why efforts toward more objective reporting have not succeeded is due to the power dynamics between the media and political parties:

> In Indonesia, the relationship between media owners and editors resembles a power relationship, where the owner expects that their investment will be repaid in the form of favourable news coverage that supports their political activities… (Respondent #5).

Table 3: Media ownership in Indonesia 2020

| Media Institution | Holding Company | Media Company | Owner |
|---|---|---|---|
| 1. Kompas<br>2. KompasTV<br>3. Kompas.com<br>4. Tribun Group<br>5. Tribunnews.com<br>6. Sonora Radio<br>7. Kontan<br>8. Gramedia Digital | Kompas Gramedia Group | Kompas Group (150 brand media) | Jakob Oetama |

| | | | |
|---|---|---|---|
| 1. SCTV<br>2. Indosiar<br>3. Bangka TV<br>4. Surya Citra Pesona<br>5. Kapanlagi.Com<br>6. Sinemart Indonesia<br>7. O-Channel<br>8. Liputan6.com<br>9. El-Shinta | EMTEK | Surya Citra Media (SCMA) Tbk | Eddy Sariatmaja |
| 1. TransTV<br>2. Trans7<br>3. CNNTV<br>4. CNN Online<br>5. Detik.com<br>6. Transvision (70%) | CT Corp | TransCorp | Chaerul Tanjung |
| 1. MNCTV (10,6%)<br>2. GTV (6,7%)<br>3. RCTI (18,4%)<br>4. iNews (1,5%)<br>5. RCTI+ (layanan OTT)<br>6. Trijaya FM<br>7. Koran Sindo<br>8. SINDOnews.com<br>9. RDI<br>10. Global Radio<br>11. V-radio<br>12. MNC Vision (96,0%)<br>13. MNC Pictures | Global Mediacom | MNC Tbk | Hary Tanoesoedibjo |
| 1. Berita Satu TV<br>2. Berita Satu Online<br>3. Suara Pembaruan<br>4. First Media | LIPPO Group | Berita Satu Media Holding | James Riady |
| 1. TVOne (43 stations)<br>2. ANTV (44 stations)<br>3. VIVA Networks (digital) | Bakrie Brothers | Visi Media Asia | Aburizal Bakrie |
| 1. Jawa Pos<br>2. Jawa Pos TV<br>3. Fajar FM<br>4. Jpnn.com | Jawa Pos | Jawa Pos Group | Dahlan Iskan |
| 1. Metro TV<br>2. Media Indonesia<br>3. Metrotv-news.com | Media Group | Media Televisi Indonesia | Surya Paloh |

Source: Masduki and d'Haenens (2022), Nainggolan (2018) and Tapsell (2017)

This table illustrates the media landscape in Indonesia, where four out of eight major media owners have political affiliations. These four individuals either lead their own political parties or hold senior positions within them. According to Masduki and d'Haenens (2022), MNC controls approximately 35% of the market share, followed by EMTEK with 22.8%, and Visi Media Asia with 17.3%. Among private broadcasting stations, TransTV holds the highest audience share at 17.2%, followed by SCTV (16.5%) and RCTI (14.0%). Meanwhile, the two main news channels—TVOne and Metro TV—account for 3.1% and 1.6% of the audience share, respectively.

Amid various economic forces, the media increasingly depends on the market, and more media are traded on the stock market (Udris & Lucht, 2014). Research has also shown that higher levels of ownership concentration are associated with higher levels of owner influence over media outlets. That owner influence is greater when voting power within the company is concentrated in the hands of individuals and families rather than corporations (Hanretty, 2014).

During electoral campaigns, candidates are driven to exploit all available resources to secure their victory, with the media functioning as a critical platform for amplifying their messages to the public. The more audience the media can capitalize, the more profit they can attain because many people watch and read their news. From a political economy perspective, media production and consumption are driven by the need to create scarcity (Mansell, 2004). For instance, during the 2024 presidential election, supporters of a particular candidate are likely to gravitate toward media outlets that align with their preferences to access favourable news coverage.

Metro TV, for instance, frequently covers its media owners during political events. In early February 2024, several news stories were directly related to Surya Paloh, such as "Surya Paloh Calls AMIN Supporters a Symbol of Hope", "Surya Paloh Discloses Reasons for Choosing Anies to Aceh Residents", "Prananda Paloh Believes NasDem Cadres Can Win Anies", and "Akbar Campaign in Deli Serdang, Surya Paloh Riding a Motorbike Through a Sea of Supporters". In highly mediatized democracies, political parties and other actors must manage the news, adapting to the reality that the news media have become largely independent yet highly influential (Strömbäck & Esser, 2017). Private media ownership has enabled the ruling elite and political parties to exploit these outlets for their electoral interests (Arifuddin, 2017).

iNews TV exhibits a similar pattern to Metro TV, frequently publishing news about its founder. Some of the headlines include "Hary Tanoesoedibjo Considered an Authoritative Figure and Willing to Engage with the Community", "Hary Tanoe Invites All Parties to Realize a Peaceful Election, Urging to Protect the People", "Perindo Believed to Reach 7 Percent of Votes in the 2024 Election, Says Hary Tanoe", and "Hary Tanoesoedibjo Convinced West Sulawesi Perindo Party to Achieve 2024 Election Target".

From the perspective of political parties, the media's role is critical in disseminating balanced information, ensuring that the public is well-informed about the vision, mission, and programs of presidential and vice-presidential candidates. However, when it comes about political affiliation, the representatives from the Nasdem party and Perindo party hold differing perspectives:

> Compared to countries like South Korea or Japan—where media often function as tools to discredit political opponents—media reporting in Indonesia tends to be relatively balanced. Indonesian outlets generally offer comparable coverage, enabling the public to form more neutral perceptions of political actors and parties (Respondent #3).

> The dual role of media owners as party leaders is not inherently problematic in today's democratic and globalized context. However, since broadcast media is not solely a political campaign tool, regulating content allocation through clear rules and broadcasting ethics remains essential (Respondent #4).

On one hand, political parties assert that media affiliations do not pose a significant issue, provided that reporting remains within acceptable ethical boundaries. This perspective suggests that the media, while affiliated with political parties, is a platform for promoting party interests. In contemporary democracies, political parties typically require favourable media coverage to attract voters (Van Spanje & Azrout, 2019).

On the other hand, biased reporting from affiliated media can erode public trust. Campaign propaganda is designed to present a political party's or candidate's programs and agendas and sway voters through popular sentiment (Okolie et al., 2021). Campaign propaganda thus serves a dual purpose: educating voters about proposed plans and encouraging them to exercise their right to vote. A representative of Indonesia Press Council also validated this sentiment. A communications observer corroborates this phenomenon:

> Political power-seekers increasingly exploit various media platforms—digital, terrestrial, online, and social—to advance their agendas, undermining media independence, including in Indonesia (Respondent #6).

Journalists may receive implicit or explicit instructions to highlight positive aspects of a particular candidate, thereby compromising editorial neutrality. This tendency became more evident during the third presidential debate, when media outlets owned by Hary Tanoesoedibjo and Surya Paloh appeared to prominently feature their respective supported candidates. For instance, *Metrotvnews.com* employed framing strategies that emphasized candidate number 1, Anies Baswedan, particularly by highlighting his policy programs. Conversely, *SINDOnews.com* framed its coverage in support of candidate number 3, Ganjar Pranowo, by focusing on his demeanour, presentation, grasp of the debate themes, and political experience (Mutiah et al., 2025).

However, the possibility that journalists may deliberately exhibit bias is also a valid argument, as such behaviour can be viewed as an expression of press freedom. In the United States, for example, writers in partisan media were more likely to report on polls that favoured their preferred electoral outcomes (Tremayne, 2015). Moreover, in the current era, where numerous online media outlets proliferate across the internet, partisan cues effectively shape individuals' perceptions of algorithmic news bias, though these effects are asymmetrical (Calice et al., 2023). The prioritization of speed over accuracy can ultimately erode public trust in online media platforms (Hijriani & Nur, 2024).

This issue presents a complex challenge within democratic systems, where media conglomerates hold significant influence over the media landscape. When these conglomerates engage in politics and endorse specific candidates, they mobilize their resources to boost electoral support. For instance, during Italy's financial crisis in 2011 under Silvio Berlusconi's leadership, authorities attempted to shift news coverage from hard news to soft news. This reduction in hard news coverage—by 107 seconds—significantly increased support for Berlusconi's party (De Angelis & Vecchiato, 2024). Similarly, Raza et al. (2022) investigated perceptions of the media ecosystem in Pakistan, revealing three significant findings: First, 70% of the audience exhibited low trust in the media. Second, 64% believed that cross-media ownership negatively impacts content diversity and journalistic independence. Third, 60% of journalists felt constrained in expressing opinions that differed from the official stance of their media organizations.

These findings underscore the constraints imposed on media by power relations, which limit journalists' freedom to address issues freely. Research identifies two primary forms of intervention perceived by journalists: interference in editorial content through various means and the application of disciplinary mechanisms (Urbániková, 2024). Amidst these power dynamics, journalists face a dilemma, as they are compelled to align with management directives. This creates a challenging situation for journalists, who must balance their commitment to independence with the demands of their employers. As articulated by a member of the Metro TV and iNews editorial team:

> We strive for independence, but there are undeniable influences from party officials, authorities, and editorial managers at higher levels. To manage this, we craft news coverage that appears smooth or favourable, even though we must follow certain directives (Respondent #1).

> When there were matters that needed to be conveyed, I expressed them; however, the final decision remained within the domain of the editorial management at that time, which was held by an ad hoc official (Respondent #2).

Journalists are thus disadvantaged, finding themselves acting more as public relations representatives for specific actors rather than providing objective reporting, analysis, and promoting tolerance and cultural diversity (Loosen et al., 2020). The level of public trust in the media remains relatively low, at 39%, according to the Reuters Institute Digital News Report 2023. This distrust reflects the challenges faced by mainstream journalism in representing all political perspectives equitably amid increasing ideological polarization (Ojala, 2021).

The independence of national television media during the 2024 Presidential Election is not solely an issue of journalistic ethics; it is also heavily shaped by economic forces—such as the commodification of content and audiences—and power structures, including media ownership and political affiliations. Media bias, therefore, is not necessarily the result of journalists' ill intent, but rather a consequence of structural pressures and the capitalist logic inherent in the media industry.

*c. Reforming Media Ecosystems*

Reform in the Indonesian media ecosystem is imperative for two primary objectives: restoring public trust in the media and reducing the power relations between media entities and political parties. A member of the Indonesia Press Council outlined the necessary elements of these reforms:

> Reform must be spearheaded by the Press Council to ensure media autonomy from governmental influence. Additionally, the government must enhance the laws governing political parties, elections, and their implementation. One essential measure is to prohibit media owners from holding leadership positions in political parties or running as legislative candidates (Respondent #6).

Media owners wield substantial influence due to their broad audience reach, which provides them with a significant bargaining position in political arenas (Muqsith et al., 2024). A member of the Nasdem party underscores the importance of media in this context:

> The role of the media is critical for providing informed choices to the public across the country. Currently, the media serves as the primary source of information for individuals making electoral decisions (Respondent #3).

The media can fulfil its role effectively without becoming entangled in politics by fostering a political learning environment, even in the age of social media (Park & Zúñiga, 2021), and providing valuable, trustworthy information that is credible and convincing to the majority (Michailidou & Trenz, 2021). To enable the media to perform these roles optimally, the Press Council identifies three essential factors. First, a press legal body is necessary to establish clear guidelines and permissible boundaries. Second, reporters or journalists must be competent and well-versed in their field, including editorial practices. The third factor concerns:

> In the private sector, media positioning is closely tied to ownership. Although legal frameworks and Press Council regulations prohibit owners from influencing editorial policy, true media independence depends on the autonomy of journalists and editors in shaping content (Respondent #6).

In other words, media owners should remain outside the sphere of editorial influence (Silitonga & Muqsith, 2023). While they are crucial for ensuring the sustainability of the media business, their role should be limited to maintaining the media's operational viability and reputation. When media owners engage in politics, they should step back from their media roles to preserve independence and prevent conflicts of interest. This separation is crucial to avoid situations where media owners might seek to manipulate media content for personal or political gain, as there is a tendency among new elites to seek vote-buying strategies (El Issawi, 2021).

## CONCLUSION

During the 2024 Indonesian presidential election, both Metro TV and iNews attempted to maintain neutrality. However, the political affiliations of media owners influenced editorial decisions, compelling newsroom teams to align with owner preferences. For political parties, media functions as a strategic platform to promote their vision, mission, and programs—effectively serving as a propaganda tool for affiliated owners and parties. This undermines journalistic independence and reinforces perceptions of partisan media. Theoretically, this study draws on media ownership and political influence frameworks, using Metro TV and iNews as case studies to illustrate how ownership dynamics impact editorial autonomy during elections. It contributes to understanding the media–politics nexus in Indonesia's electoral landscape. Practically, the study offers strategic insights for improving the country's media ecosystem. Two key limitations are noted: (1) the focus on only two media outlets limits generalizability, and future studies should include a broader range; and (2) the limited scope of interviews excludes perspectives from political coalition members, which could enhance understanding of media–party interactions.

## BIODATA

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