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BOOK REVIEW

# Oligarchy and Netizens Fighting Controlling Indonesia Media

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Tapsell, Ross. 2018. *Kuasa Media di Indonesia, Kaum Oligarki, Warga, dan Revolusi Digital*. Jakarta: Margin Kiri

The digital revolution, which has been ongoing since the past ten years, has been of interest to scholars around the world. Especially in Indonesia, the digital revolution has massively urged scholars to explore the changes that have resulted from it. One of the questions is the impact of digital revolution on power relations in Indonesia. This question is crucial as the current theoretical debates among scholars on the relations between the media, the digital revolution, and power are mostly centred on the Western context.

Meanwhile, there are contextual differences when it comes to the digital revolution and its relationship with power in Indonesia. One of these pertains to the electoral landscape; the United States, similar to most countries in Europe, implements a simple electoral democratic system. Voters are spread across two polar opposites as a result of the two-party system. Such a system limits the involvement of media owners. For example, Rupert Murdoch—one of America's most influential media owners—with his media empire in the US, UK Australia, and Europe, has not involved himself directly in politics as a candidate (McKnight 2010).

In contrast, Indonesia implements a multi-party system. This allows more room for media owners to involve themselves directly in electoral processes. In certain contexts, this may have implications on discourse in the media, including control of the media's primary coverage. When

media owners are involved in electoral politics, they have more political opportunities to control discourse and news in Indonesia, which may impact electoral outcomes.

Tapsell's book *Media Power in Indonesia: Oligarchy, Citizens and the Digital Revolution* fills the gap amongst scholars on the transformation of media in Indonesia. Tapsell aims to explain endeavour of oligarchs and netizens who take advantage amidst the process of digitalisation and its domino effects on mainstream discourse to strengthen their position of each group.

This book, originally published in London in 2017, is organised into five substantive chapters. In Chapter 1, Tapsell closely observes the emergence of the media and development of new digital media in Indonesia. Chapter 2 discusses the digital conglomerates in Indonesia. Chapter 3 explains the oligopolistic processes that media oligarchs are involved in. Chapter 4 presents a narrative of the media as a counter against the oligarchy. Chapter 5 discusses the digital ecosystem.

Tapsell's main argument is that the digital revolution in Indonesia has brought changes in two directions. On the one hand, digitalisation has strengthened the oligarch's economic and political positions, leading the media industry to become more oligopolistic. On the other, it has allowed netizens to initiate participatory "social activism" on new media platforms to counter the oligarchs of mainstream media.

## THE DIGITAL REVOLUTION IN INDONESIA

The digital revolution has been a topic of debate for the past ten years. Many scholars have observed the unfolding of the digital revolution and its effects on various social activities (Levy 1999; McKnight 2010). The digital revolution in Indonesia was carefully observed for the first time by Tapsell (2012a; 2012b; 2015b; 2015c; 2017) although he had not explicitly stated when exactly this revolution began in Indonesia. This is because the event that could be used to indicate the beginning of the digital revolution is still unclear when and where the digital revolution first occur. To avoid lengthy debates and to set an academic boundary on what entails a digital revolution, several scholars agreed

that the digital revolution could be traced by looking at the emergence of online news platforms.

In the Indonesian context, the digital revolution is indicated by the transition of traditional media (e.g. newspaper and radio) to internet-based media platforms. Tapsell used this point in history to argue that the digital revolution in Indonesia is signified by the arrival of Facebook. Two years since its release in the US, Facebook users in Indonesia have reached 12 million. The presence of Facebook has not only transformed the entire media landscape but also entailed a larger phenomenon in relation to the strengthening of business patterns in mainstream or traditional media as well as the emergence of what Tapsell called social media activism.

Tapsell observed that Indonesia's digitalisation has been supported by internet users who are predominantly from urban areas with higher education levels and access to information. Tapsell called these users 'netizens'. Politically, netizens have a very strategic position as they would be the social media agents who carry out counter-oligarchic initiatives against the ongoing domination of mainstream or traditional media in Indonesia.

#### OLIGOPOLY IN DIGITAL MEDIA

Indonesia's digital revolution has pushed the country's oligarchs to expand their oligarchic reach. With the digital revolution, these oligarchs perform what scholars have called "wealth defense and efforts to expand their economic and political networks" (Robison and Hadiz, 2004; Winters, 2013; Tapsell, 2015a). This process began with the transformation of media platforms. The digital revolution created what Tapsell called the 'digital conglomerates'. These digital conglomerates conduct their business by expanding their mainstream media networks and investing in communication infrastructure. With a wider outreach of customers, there is bigger potential for the company to gain more revenue.

With more capital, digital conglomerates expand their business platforms through horizontal and vertical mergers and acquisition. Mergers and acquisitions occur amongst both traditional media such

as television, newspapers and print media as well as online media. This process happens continuously, allowing those with larger capital to survive and potentially absorb those with less, therefore further expanding their economic opportunities. Traditional and online media that cannot compete economically are prone to acquisition or shutting down altogether. In this stage, Tapsell argued that digitalisation has pushed Indonesia's digital conglomerates to become oligopolistic—expanding their economic and political networks and concentrating the media in the hands of a few.

With media oligopoly, media owners have larger political bargaining power. Media owners have the opportunity to hold political positions or, in other contexts, become very influential supporters of electoral candidates. Tapsell's observations show two patterns on how media oligopoly play their media power that is taking place in Indonesia. Media owners were more involved in electoral politics since becoming more oligopolistic. Several of these media owners were Aburizal Bakrie (owner of TVOne, ANTV and Viva, and chairman of the Golkar Party), Surya Paloh (owner of MetroTV, Media Indonesia and MetroTV news, and chairman of the Nasional Demokrat Party) and Hary Tanoesoedibjo (owner of MNCTV, Koran Sindo, Okezone, Sindonews, Trijaya FM, ARH global and Radio Dangdut, and chairman of the Persatuan Indonesia Party). These media conglomerates are the chairmen of some of Indonesia's major political parties. Unsurprisingly, these figures often make appearances in both traditional and digital media. Furthermore, with their position as media conglomerates, they can quite easily control discourse that the media generates. As a result, media coverage has become more uniform with their monolithic political narratives.

While some digital conglomerates involve themselves openly in politics, others choose to appear distant from it. Unlike Aburizal Bakrie, Surya Paloh and Hary Tanoesoedibjo who hold political positions, other digital conglomerates such as Chairul Tanjung (owner of TransTV, Trans7, CNN and Detik), Eddy Saia Atmadja (owner of SCTV, Indosiar, O-channel and Liputan 6), Jakob Oetama (owner of KompasTV, Kompas and Tribunnews) and Dahlan Iskan (owner of JawaPosTV, Jawa Pos

and JPNN) are involved in politics indirectly. They usually give their support to particular candidates in elections. This support comes in the form of influence through news. This is done by creating narratives that depict the candidates that they support as the ideal candidate in comparison to other candidates, with the aim to increase the supported candidates' votes.

#### NETIZENS AND COUNTER-OLIGARCHY

In a different direction from the increasingly oligopolistic practices of media oligarchs, the digital revolution has opened room for citizens to contest the mainstream media, which Tapsell termed as 'counter-oligarchic'. Through social media, citizens can openly protest and contest issues that they dislike. Netizens can now easily express their anger and insist on oligarchs through alternative media. Tapsell observed these counter-oligarchic media to come in the form of memes or spread of content and information that indirectly attack the political positions of those in power.

By using new media platforms, citizens have channels for protest that reach those in power. This is in contrast to traditional media, where discourse is limited and news coverage on those in power are often designed to maintain the status quo. With digital media, people have the alternative to access narratives that are different from or contest the media affiliated with the oligarchs and media conglomerates.

The digital revolution is also characterised by new forms of participatory media. Citizens have made their way to the centre of news production and circulation, unlike mainstream media that is centralised and top-down, where news coverage is mostly limited to information that has been screened by media conglomerates. Tapsell observed this condition as an effort to maintain the status quo and avoid threats to media conglomerates' political positions. On the contrary, the participatory nature of digital media has allowed alternative discourses to emerge. People now can access alternative news from online media. Furthermore, in certain contexts, news that challenges those in power can be easily found through online media.

## FINAL REMARKS

The digital revolution in Indonesia has been characterised by what Tapsell called digital conglomerates with stronger economic and political positions. These digital conglomerates have strengthened media businesses by expanding their media platforms, investing in media infrastructure and expanding media networks, leading to the concentration of media business through acquisition and mergers. The domino effect of these practices is the increased bargaining power of these media conglomerates in politics. These conglomerates have become determinants of victory in every election through the production of monolithic news and discourse that is beneficial to only certain actors.

On the other hand, the digital revolution has empowered citizen's political agency. With the digital revolution, individually and collectively, citizens can easily produce alternative news and discourse, unlike the discourses on mainstream media. Most importantly, the presence of digital media has allowed citizens to channel protests and their political attitudes to contest those in power or at least counter the discourse generated by media conglomerates, through counter-oligarchic media such as memes and the spread of online content.

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