

The Role of Digital Media in Political Power and Information Polarization in Indonesia

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Abstract

Digital media in Indonesia play a dual role in post-Reformasi democracy: facilitating political participation while simultaneously reinforcing the dominance of ruling coalitions. Concentrated media ownership among political and business elites aligned with government actors produces systematic reporting biases, favoring government narratives and marginalizing opposition voices. Social media dynamics further amplify information polarization through algorithm-driven echo chambers and the dissemination of manipulative content. This study examines how digital media contributed to coalition dominance, weakened opposition, and accelerated democratic backsliding during Indonesia's 2024 electoral cycle. Using a mixed-methods approach, quantitative analyses measure coalition dominance and opposition fragmentation alongside media bias, disinformation and polarization, while qualitative analyses explore narratives, strategies, and discourse that normalize transactional politics. Findings indicate that media-driven narrative control consolidates ruling coalitions, limits pluralistic public discourse, and intensifies polarization. The study highlights the duality of digital media as both a tool for political engagement and a mechanism that can undermine substantive democratic quality.

Keywords: Digital Media, Coalition Dominance, Democratic Backsliding, Polarization, Indonesia

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INTRODUCTION

Recent research on the “#IndonesiaGelap” phenomenon further illustrates how social media amplifies public dissatisfaction and intensifies polarization of opinion in Indonesia. A recent study finds that negative sentiment dominated online discourse and that emotionally driven content contributed to the fragmentation of public opinion, highlighting the role of digital platforms in shaping political narratives and polarization (Juditha 2025). Studies on Indonesia’s 2024 election further demonstrate how social media has intensified political polarization in the post-election period, with digital platforms facilitating the spread of emotionally charged narratives and reinforcing divisions among political groups (Fata et al. 2025). The rapid transformation of the contemporary media ecosystem has fundamentally reshaped the relationship between elections and democratic governance. Recent scholarship consistently shows that digital media simultaneously expand political participation while generating new risks for the quality of democracy.

This study builds on these recent contributions by close content analysis across major digital platforms, showing how digital media has contributed to and reflected coalition dominance, opposition weakening, and democratic backsliding in Indonesia’s 2024 electoral cycle. While earlier work has focused on the role of social media, there is little hard data in the Indonesian context supporting the claims of dominance of certain political parties in terms of content, and also the spread of disinformation. The study thus shows how the media has supported the agenda of political party capture to strengthen coalition dominance and to weaken the role of opposition parties.

In a broader context, research published in the *Journal of Communication*, *Political Communication*, and *New Media & Society* demonstrates that social media platforms have lowered barriers to political engagement, enabling citizens, particularly younger voters, to access political information, mobilize collectively, and participate in electoral processes at unprecedented levels (Boulianne 2015; Boulianne and Theocharis 2020; Tucker et al. 2018). However, these participatory gains are accompanied by structural changes in the information environment that challenge the deliberative foundations of democracy. The shift from centralized journalistic gatekeeping toward algorithmically curated information flows has produced a decentralized communication landscape in which political actors, platform algorithms, and networked users

jointly shape the circulation of political information (Kreiss and McGregor, 2017; Van Aelst et al. 2021).

A growing body of research highlights how this new media environment intensifies political polarization. Exposure to politically homogeneous networks and selective information consumption contributes to the formation of echo chambers that reinforce ideological and affective polarization (Barbera, P. 2020; Cinelli et al. 2021). Algorithmic amplification further exacerbates this dynamic by prioritizing emotionally charged and conflict-driven content, increasing the visibility of polarizing narratives during election cycles (Brady et al. 2017). As a result, electoral competition increasingly unfolds within fragmented information ecosystems that reduce cross-cutting deliberation and foster adversarial political identities.

Disinformation represents one of the most significant challenges to electoral integrity in the digital era. Prior studies have shown that misinformation spreads rapidly through social networks, shaping public perceptions and influencing trust in democratic institutions. For example, Moore et al.(2023) highlight that the scope and patterns of exposure to untrustworthy websites shifted between the 2016 and 2020 U.S. elections. Their findings indicate that overall exposure decreased, but older adults and conservatives remained the groups most affected, and the role of platforms like Facebook in distributing such content diminished. This suggests that the dynamics of misinformation consumption are changing over time, underscoring the need for nuanced approaches to electoral integrity. Coordinated disinformation campaigns often supported by bots, trolls, and targeted political advertising have become a persistent feature of contemporary elections (Guess et al 2020). The economic logic of platform-based attention markets further incentivizes the circulation of sensational and misleading content (Zuboff 2015). Consequently, scholars increasingly view the information environment as a critical arena of electoral competition.

Despite the rise of digital platforms, traditional news media continue to play a central agenda-setting role in elections. Empirical research shows that mainstream media remain influential in determining which political issues gain public salience, even as audiences fragment across multiple channels (Soroka 2012; Nathaniel and Joshua 2020; Kahne and Bowyer 2017). Kahne and Bowyer (2017) emphasize that exposure to diverse media sources and civic education can shape young people's understanding of political issues and their ability to critically evaluate

political information. This convergence of traditional and digital media has produced what scholars describe as a “hybrid media system,” in which political campaigns strategically integrate television, online news, and social media to shape voter perceptions (Chadwick 2013; Kreiss 2015). In this context, candidates increasingly communicate directly with voters through digital platforms, bypassing journalistic intermediaries and reshaping campaign strategies worldwide. The evolving media environment is closely linked to broader concerns about democratic backsliding.

Comparative research suggests that populist and incumbent actors often exploit digital media to disseminate anti-elite narratives, delegitimize opposition, and consolidate political support (Bennett and Livingston 2022; Blassnig et al. 2020). Nevertheless, recent studies also emphasize the potential of institutional responses, including fact-checking initiatives, media literacy programs, and platform regulation, to mitigate the harmful effects of misinformation and polarization (Nyhan et al. 2019). Taken together, contemporary scholarship portrays media as a double-edged sword: a driver of democratic participation and transparency, yet also a powerful source of polarization, disinformation, and democratic vulnerability during elections. This recent emphasis in the international media provides a useful framework for this study to assess the trends in the 2024 Indonesian electoral cycle. Indonesia’s multi-party system and the reliance on coalitions also provide a unique view of how these different media influence outcomes.

METHODS

This study employs an explanatory sequential mixed methods design to examine how mainstream media and digital platforms contribute to coalition dominance, opposition weakening, and democratic backsliding in Indonesia's 2024 electoral cycle. Quantitative analysis identifies structural patterns of coalition dominance using indicators such as the Seat Share Index, Cabinet Inclusion Index, and Opposition Fragmentation Index, while also measuring media bias and polarization, taking into account media ownership concentration and social media dynamics, including echo chambers and algorithm-driven content dissemination. Qualitative analysis uses thematic content analysis, document analysis, and discourse analysis to explore how media narratives, coalition strategies, and electoral regulations interact to shape political legitimacy, normalize transactional politics, and marginalize opposition voices. Units of analysis include political parties and coalitions, media organizations, electoral events, and political discourse.

Findings from quantitative and qualitative analyses are integrated through triangulation, producing a unified explanatory model linking coalition dominance, media driven narrative control, and democratic backsliding. Validity and reliability are ensured through data triangulation, team-based coding discussions, and thorough documentation, with ethical standards maintained by using publicly available data.

This study contributes novel insights by linking algorithmic amplification patterns with coalition dominance and opposition marginalization in the context of Indonesia's 2024 elections, extending prior studies that mostly focus on Western digital politics.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Algorithmic Amplification and Digital Echo Chambers: Structuring Political Visibility in the 2024 Election

A quantitative analysis of digital platform datasets particularly from X (Twitter) and Facebook shows that platform algorithms create non neutral patterns of news amplification and contribute to the narrative dominance of the Koalisi Indonesia Maju (KIM). Using engagement metrics such as retweets, likes, comments, and shares data from the January-April 2024 campaign period indicates that content associated with pro-KIM narratives received, on average, 2.5 to 3 times higher engagement than content promoting opposition narratives.

Natural Language Processing (NLP) results from more than 150,000 political posts suggest that platform algorithms do not merely reflect user preferences but actively amplify content that is provocative, emotional, and conflict driven, attributes that have been empirically shown to increase visibility within digital media ecosystems (Vaccari and Chadwick 2020). This underscores that digital agenda-setting is no longer shaped solely by major political actors, but is also structurally programmed by algorithmic logic that promotes the homogenization of information within polarized clusters.

Pro coalition digital media actors, operating through dense and interconnected account networks (dense network clusters), further reinforce dominant narratives, forming echo chambers that marginalize opposition voices. This phenomenon aligns with findings by Garret (Garret R.K. 2009), who argues that social media algorithms intensify narrative bias through filter bubbles, a

condition in which users are predominantly exposed to content that reinforces their existing views while encountering minimal opposing perspectives.

In the Indonesian context, this dynamic goes beyond the mere frequency of political messaging: pro-KIM narratives, shaped by algorithmic optimization, appear more frequently, spread more virally, and are perceived as more legitimate by digital users, thereby reinforcing their dominance in online public discourse.

Table 1.

Platform	Total Posts	Average (Like/Share/Retweet/Comment)	Engagement	Narrative Dominance	% Pro-KIM Content	% Opposition Content	Notes
X (Twitter)	80.000	Pro-KIM:2,500/Opposition: 1,000		High	68%	32%	Dense network clusters pro-KIM; echo chamber terbentuk
Facebook	50.000	Pro-KIM:3,200/Opposition: 1,200		High	65%	35%	Postingan pro-KIM lebih viral, reaksi emosional tinggi
Instagram	15.000	Pro-KIM:1,800/Opposition: 700		Medium	62%	38%	Visual pro-KIM lebih menarik dan sering dibagikan
YouTube	10.000	Pro-KIM:4,000/Opposition: 1,500		High	70%	30%	Video pro-KIM mendapat views tinggi, algoritma rekomendasi memfavoritkan konten pro-KIM

TikTok	5.000	ProKIM:2,000/Opposition: 900	Medium	60%	40%	Konten pendek pro-KIM lebih viral, terutama isu kontroversial
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Patterns of Engagement and Political Narrative Dominance on Digital Platforms (2024 Campaign Period)

Table 1 presents the distribution of content and engagement levels across major digital platforms, including X (Twitter), Facebook, Instagram, YouTube, and TikTok, during the campaign period. The data reveals a consistent dominance of pro-KIM narratives across all platforms, both in terms of content volume and average engagement. Quantitatively, the proportion of pro-KIM content ranges from 60% to 70%, accompanied by significantly higher engagement levels compared to opposition content.

This disparity indicates an asymmetrical pattern of amplification, in which pro-KIM content achieves greater visibility within the digital ecosystem. Such dominance is further reinforced by platform-specific dynamics, including algorithmic recommendation systems on YouTube and Facebook, as well as the presence of dense, interconnected account networks on X (Twitter), which accelerate the diffusion and reinforcement of dominant narratives. Thus, Table 1 confirms that information distribution on social media platforms is not neutral, but is shaped by the interaction between algorithmic logic and network structures, which collectively reinforce the dominance of pro-KIM narratives in the online public sphere.

Sentiment and Framing Dynamics: Polarization of Political Discourse in Digital Media

As noted, quantitative analysis of political content across digital platforms, including X (Twitter), Facebook, Instagram, YouTube, and TikTok, reveals a consistent dominance of pro-Koalisi Indonesia Maju (KIM) narratives across all platforms, both in terms of post volume and engagement levels. For instance, on X (Twitter), pro-KIM content achieved an average engagement of 2,500 per post compared to 1,000 for opposition content, while on Facebook, pro-KIM posts reached an average of 3,200, nearly three times higher than opposition content. The

share of pro-KIM content is also higher across all platforms, ranging from 60% to 70%, whereas opposition content accounts for 30%–40% (Table 1).

This dominance is not merely a matter of quantity. Notes in Table 1 indicate that interconnected pro-KIM account networks (dense network clusters) and algorithmic recommendation mechanisms on platforms such as YouTube and Facebook amplify content distribution, create echo chambers, and increase the visibility of pro-KIM narratives. Opposition content, by contrast, tends to have lower reach and engagement, suggesting that algorithms do not simply reflect user preferences but actively amplify content that is viral and emotionally charged. This imbalance cannot be understood solely as a reflection of public preference; it is also the result of algorithmically structured framing dynamics. Framing analysis indicates that issues such as government stability, experience, and mature leadership are more frequently attached to pro-KIM narratives, while opposition content is often framed around conflict, performative criticism, or internal dysfunction, without equal articulation of alternative policy proposals.

Theoretically, these findings reinforce the argument that digital media function not merely as a distribution arena but also as active frame setters shaping political reality. Research by Cristian Vaccari (Cristian Vacarri 2022) demonstrates that social media algorithms tend to amplify content that triggers high emotional responses, which often correlates with more extreme and simplistic framing. Other studies by Boulianne (e.g. Boulianne 2015) highlight that algorithmic logic contributes to heightened affective polarization, where users not only hold divergent opinions but also develop stronger emotional attachments to particular political groups.

Moreover, this phenomenon is closely linked to the concepts of filter bubbles and echo chambers, where users are systematically exposed to narratives that reinforce their preexisting beliefs. In this context, the positive framing of pro-KIM content, continuously reproduced and reinforced through algorithmic interactions, creates a perceived majority, influencing public perceptions of political legitimacy. Recent studies in digital political communication also indicate that legitimacy generated through high visibility and engagement is often interpreted by users as a proxy for credibility and electability (Nyhan et al. 2019).

In the context of Indonesian democracy, the implications of this dynamic are significant. The consistent and positive framing of pro-coalition content not only strengthens the position of

certain political actors in digital spaces but also potentially narrows the space for healthy public deliberation. The opposition, which normatively functions as a checks and balances mechanism, becomes marginalized discursively due to limited visibility and constructive framing. Consequently, algorithm-mediated polarization impacts not only individual preferences but also the overall quality of democracy, particularly regarding diversity of discourse and equitable competition of ideas in the digital public sphere.

Network Structure and Partisan Clustering: Fragmentation and Information Flow in Digital Spaces

Network mapping of social media accounts engaged in the 2024 political contest reveals sharply delineated clusters: the pro-Koalisi Indonesia Maju (KIM) cluster exhibits higher network density, multiple central connectors (hubs), and broader reach compared to the opposition cluster. Graph analysis of 23,486 accounts participating in political conversations shows that information favorable to KIM propagates through a relatively centralized topology dominated by highly connected influencers acting as content amplifiers, whereas the opposition cluster remains comparatively fragmented into smaller, loosely connected subclusters with limited cross-linkage. In the context of political communication network theory, such configurations reinforce hub and spoke information flows that facilitate narrative dominance, while low structural diversity in opposition networks impedes the effective diffusion of alternative narratives (Vaccari and Chadwick 2020).

Recent empirical studies corroborate that network topology, including metrics such as density, modularity, and inter-cluster connectivity, significantly shapes the effectiveness of political messaging and its influence on public opinion formation (Allcott et al. 2019; Weismueller et al. 2023). Allcott et al. (2019) show that the diffusion of content from fake news websites is highly sensitive to platform structures, with Facebook exhibiting a decline in user engagement with misinformation after 2016, while Twitter continued to amplify false content. This demonstrates that the platform-specific network architecture and user interaction patterns can either mitigate or exacerbate the spread of misleading political information. While international studies show that negative campaigning is often costly and strategically calculated (Maier Jürgen et al. 2024), in the Indonesian digital ecosystem, actors may similarly employ disinformation and

strategic framing to dominate online narratives, sometimes irrespective of normative democratic costs.

Weismueller et al. (2023) complement this structural perspective by demonstrating that highly clustered and polarized networks facilitate rapid diffusion of homogeneous political content within like-minded communities, reinforcing echo chambers and limiting exposure to diverse viewpoints. Moreover, dense and centralized networks increase the likelihood of agenda capture by advantaged actors in digital public spheres, a pattern observed across comparative studies of electoral information environments.

Together, these findings suggest that the interaction between network topology and platform-specific diffusion dynamics critically shapes the visibility and persistence of political misinformation. Platforms with dense, modular, or highly clustered structures not only accelerate the spread of like-minded content but also determine how effectively misinformation is checked or amplified, with important implications for public opinion formation, political polarization, and democratic deliberation.

Building on this structural perspective, Kelm et al. (2023) emphasize that exposure to like-minded content, rather than algorithmic selection alone, is a key driver of both attitude polarization and affective polarization. Their findings indicate that while algorithms can amplify exposure in certain contexts, the predispositions of users largely determine the intensity of polarization, highlighting the interaction between network architecture and individual-level mechanisms.

Complementing this, Lewandowsky et al. (2012) highlight the cognitive mechanisms that render misinformation resilient, noting that repeated exposure to strategically distorted content interacts with memory, belief systems, and prior worldviews, often diminishing the effectiveness of corrective interventions and sometimes producing backfire effects. Islam et al. (2020) further demonstrate that computational approaches, particularly deep learning, can detect misinformation across multiple categories (false information, rumors, fake news, disinformation), but effective mitigation also requires attention to contextual and cognitive factors, not only algorithmic filtering.

Together, these perspectives suggest that structural features of digital networks, user-level content exposure, and cognitive vulnerabilities jointly shape political communication outcomes. Dense, modular networks and tightly clustered communities facilitate the propagation of

homogeneous and strategically distorted information, which in turn can erode epistemic trust and constrain deliberative engagement.

Understanding these interdependencies is therefore critical for assessing digital media's impact on democratic quality, particularly in contexts like Indonesia, where political actors exploit both structural advantages and strategic content manipulation to shape public opinion. The predominance of pro-coalition network structures in this context underscores that social media as a political communication field is not neutral; rather, it can produce structural advantages for actors endowed with greater social, political, and financial capital, enabling them to engineer higher cohesion and coordination within digital networks. Such structural asymmetries have implications not only for information flow but also for the resilience of political ecosystems to diversification and deliberative contestation.

Disinformation and Manipulative Content: Undermining Competition Through Strategic Messaging

Consistent with observed patterns of framing and network structure, content analysis of digital political communication also reveals tangible traces of disinformation aimed at undermining the legitimacy of opposition actors. Disinformation categories were identified through systematic linguistic markers, the invocation of highly sensitive sociopolitical issues (e.g., identity, religion, ethnicity), and strategic perception-engineering tactics that appear disproportionately within pro-KIM clusters. In a quantitative content analysis of 150,000 political posts, approximately 5.6% were classified as exhibiting high disinformation attributes based on established markers of misleading content (e.g., false causation, manipulated context, emotive distortions), and these attributes were significantly more prevalent in pro-coalition interactions than in opposition clusters.

Methodologically, these classifications draw on validated computational approaches that combine natural language processing (NLP) with human-validated coding frames, a hybrid technique increasingly standard in disinformation research (Hertwich, R. et al. 2022; Pennycook, G., and Rand 2021; Islam et al. 2020). In particular, Islam et al. (2020) highlight that automated misinformation detection (MID) in social networks encompassing false information, rumors, spam, fake news, and disinformation requires not only sophisticated algorithmic models but also

careful contextualization to account for the complex, socially embedded nature of information flows. Their work emphasizes that while deep learning and other computational approaches provide scalable and accurate detection, the challenges of context sensitivity, data quality, and interpretability remain critical for real-world applications.

International scholarship has documented that strategic disinformation is often mobilized by political actors to reinforce dominant narratives and erode the credibility of competing voices. Some associations, such as increased political participation and information consumption, are likely to have beneficial effects for democracy and are often observed in autocracies and emerging democracies. Other associations, such as declining political trust, rising populism, and growing polarization, are more likely to be detrimental and are more pronounced in established democracies. Importantly, as Islam et al. (2020) and Tucker et al. (2018) note, the effects of digital media are highly context dependent: the same platform can facilitate cross-cutting exposure in one setting while amplifying echo chambers and misinformation in another.

While the impact of digital media on political systems is contingent upon specific variables and institutional contexts, existing scholarship suggests patterned yet not universally consistent associations across key dimensions of democratic life. Rather than supporting deterministic claims, the current body of evidence points to a complex, multi-layered, and socially mediated relationship between digital media and democratic outcomes, warranting both sustained scholarly attention and cautious policy engagement (Lewandowsky et al. 2012; Tucker et al. 2018; Islam et al. 2020).

Importantly, as emphasized by Tucker, the literature on social media, political polarization, and disinformation remains fragmented and methodologically constrained, with significant limitations in data access, platform coverage, and causal inference. Consequently, widely cited claims regarding the detrimental effects of digital media should be interpreted with analytical caution, as empirical findings often vary across platforms, user groups, and political contexts.

Building on this, (Lewandowsky et al. 2012) provide a complementary perspective by highlighting the cognitive and psychological mechanisms that make misinformation particularly resilient in public discourse. They demonstrate that coordinated messaging campaigns and algorithmically amplified content not only distort information exposure but also interact with individuals' memories, belief systems, and prior worldviews, reducing the effectiveness of

corrections. In particular, misbeliefs can persist even after retractions or fact checks, and under certain conditions, corrective efforts may backfire, inadvertently strengthening erroneous beliefs. This insight underscores that the impact of digital media cannot be assessed solely in terms of structural or network effects; the interplay between content, cognitive biases, and user psychology is central to understanding how misinformation shapes democratic trust and deliberation.

Consequently, while Islam et al. (2020) emphasize the potential of computational tools, such as deep learning, for automated misinformation detection, Lewandowsky et al. (2012) remind us that technical interventions must be complemented by strategies that consider human cognitive vulnerabilities, such as the design, timing, and framing of corrections, to effectively mitigate the erosion of epistemic trust. Together, these perspectives suggest that research and policy on digital media and democracy require an integrated approach, one that addresses both technological mechanisms of information dissemination and the cognitive susceptibilities of users within socio-political contexts.

Taken together, these findings point not to a singular causal pathway, but to an evolving informational environment in which digital media infrastructures, user behavior, and political strategies interact in complex ways. This reinforces the need for more systematic, cross-platform, and context-sensitive research, as well as for institutional vigilance among governments and civil society actors in responding to the democratic risks posed by digital communication systems. The implications for democratic quality are profound.

Disinformation does not merely degrade the factual basis of public discourse; it also amplifies affective polarization and entrenches adversarial attitudes, thereby shrinking the space for ideologically plural and substantive competition (Lewandowsky et al. 2017; Marwick and Lewis 2021). This dynamic demonstrates how digital media can function not only as informational conduits but also as instrumental tools for consolidating political power not by persuading through rational argumentation, but by manipulating perception, seeding distrust, and amplifying polarizing content to disadvantage opposition actors.

Table 2.

Platform	Total Posts	% of Posts with High Disinformation	Dominant Cluster	Key Disinformation Tactics/ Observations
X (Twitter)	80.000	5.8%	Pro-KIM	Central influencers amplify misleading content; identity-based framing (SARA); emotional appeals
Facebook	50.000	6.2%	Pro-KIM	Algorithmic promotion of polarizing posts; selective framing undermining opposition
Instagram	15.000	4.5%	Pro-KIM	Visual manipulation; sensationalist captions targeting opposition credibility
YouTube	10.000	5.0%	Pro-KIM	Video content emphasizing negative framing

				of opposition; influencer-driven amplification
TikTok	5.000	4.8%	Pro-KIM	Short form videos with emotionally charged messaging; rapid viral spread within clusters

Distribution of Disinformation Across Digital Platforms and Network Clusters

Table 2 presents a quantitative overview of disinformation prevalence and network dynamics across major digital platforms during the 2024 electoral campaign. Using a mixed-methods approach that combines natural language processing (NLP) for content classification with social network analysis (SNA) for mapping account interactions, the table demonstrates that disinformation is disproportionately concentrated within pro-Koalisi Indonesia Maju (KIM) clusters. Approximately 4.5–6.2% of posts across platforms exhibit high disinformation markers, including misleading linguistic cues, identity-based framing (SARA), and emotive or sensationalist appeals.

The structural properties of pro-KIM clusters, including higher density, the presence of central hubs, and greater connectivity, facilitate rapid and extensive dissemination of manipulative content, creating a hub and spoke pattern that amplifies narrative dominance. In contrast, opposition networks are fragmented into smaller, less cohesive subclusters, limiting both reach and engagement. This alignment of content characteristics with network topology underscores that digital platforms are not neutral intermediaries; algorithmic affordances and user interaction patterns interact to reinforce pro-coalition messaging while constraining the visibility and influence of oppositional narratives. Methodologically, the integration of NLP and SNA allows for both systematic measurement of disinformation prevalence and empirical analysis of structural amplification mechanisms, providing robust evidence that strategic messaging, network centrality, and platform-specific dynamics collectively shape the online political information ecosystem.

Digital Media, Public Perception, and Democratic Quality in Indonesia

The cumulative effects of algorithmic curation, sentiment dynamics, network structures, and disinformation in digital media have significant implications for the quality of democracy in Indonesia. Survey data indicate that over 65% of Indonesians rely on online media, including social media platforms such as X (Twitter), Facebook, Instagram, WhatsApp, YouTube, and TikTok as a primary source of political information, while only about 31% perceive these sources as neutral or unbiased (BPS 2024; Steele 2025). This paradoxical situation reflects a high degree of informational dependence coexisting with growing public awareness of bias, selective exposure, and narrative manipulation, highlighting the complex interplay between platform use, trust, and the quality of political discourse.

A substantial body of scholarship in democratic theory and media studies demonstrates that highly polarized digital information environments erode deliberative capacity and public accountability, core dimensions of democratic quality, by fostering deliberative deficits and undermining trust in the epistemic integrity of the public sphere (Sunstein, 2021; Merchán Javier Martín, and Motos, Carlos Rico). However, such effects should not be treated as uniform across digital platforms. Existing research has disproportionately concentrated on algorithm-driven public platforms, which, despite their filtering mechanisms, may still facilitate incidental exposure to heterogeneous viewpoints. In contrast, private, non-algorithmic messaging platforms operate through strong-tie, homophilic network structures that are more likely to reinforce in-group cohesion, limit cross-cutting exposure, and intensify fragmentation (Merchán Javier Martín and Motos Carlos Rico; 2026).

Sunstein's concept of information cocoons elucidates how algorithmically curated environments constrain exposure to diverse perspectives. Extending this line of critique, Martín Merchán and Rico Motos argue that private communication spaces such as messaging applications may further entrench sectarian patterns of interaction, thereby amplifying polarization in ways that remain insufficiently theorized and empirically examined. This analytical shift is particularly important, as it challenges the prevailing assumption that algorithmic amplification constitutes the primary driver of polarization, instead highlighting the role of socially embedded, closed communication networks.

In the Indonesian context, where private messaging platforms constitute a central infrastructure for everyday political communication, these dynamics risk exacerbating identity-based fragmentation and narrowing the conditions for meaningful cross-cutting dialogue. Such tendencies pose a substantive threat to democratic quality, given that cross-cutting deliberation remains a foundational requirement for sustaining a resilient and deliberative polity (Dryzek 2000; Norris 2001). Moreover, the relative lack of systematic research on private digital communication in Indonesia suggests a critical empirical gap, with important implications for both democratic theory and policy-oriented interventions. Such patterns underscore that digital media infrastructure does not merely transmit political content but shapes the conditions of democratic engagement, affecting not only what citizens know but how they relate to political others within the public sphere.

To summarise, this study has provided both empirical and theoretical contributions by elucidating the mechanisms through which digital platform algorithms, account network structures, and political content jointly produce systemic imbalances in political visibility within Indonesia's online ecosystem during the January-April 2024 campaign period. Analysis of over 150,000 posts across X (Twitter), Facebook, Instagram, YouTube, and TikTok indicates that pro-Koalisi Indonesia Maju (KIM) content consistently achieved 2.5–3 times higher engagement than opposition content, disseminated through dense, centralized account clusters, and amplified by algorithms favoring provocative, emotional, and highly shareable content. By contrast, opposition content remained fragmented, with high modularity and limited algorithmic exposure, producing structural asymmetries in information distribution.

Conceptually, these findings are consistent with the digital democracy literature, which emphasizes that online media do not operate as neutral arenas but rather as complex ecosystems that can confer structural advantages to dominant political actors through algorithmic affordances, social network configurations, and selective exposure mechanisms (Chadwick 2013; Vaccari 2013; Kelm et al. 2023). Specifically, Kelm et al. (2023) argue that exposure to like-minded content, rather than algorithmic curation alone, can substantially increase both attitude polarization and affective polarization, indicating that individual user preferences and alignment with content serve as central drivers of online political asymmetries.

Pro-KIM dominance, reinforced through positive framing, sentiment amplification, and strategic disinformation, thus generates a structural advantage whereby certain narratives gain heightened legitimacy in the public eye, while opposition voices face visibility marginalization and constrained deliberative capacity. The integration of Kelm's findings suggests that algorithms interact with user predispositions, amplifying polarization under certain conditions but not acting as deterministic drivers across all topics. This nuance is critical for understanding how network topology, content characteristics, and cognitive factors synergistically shape public perceptions of credibility, electability, and democratic quality by narrowing discursive pluralism and deliberative engagement (Sunstein 2017; Nyhan et al. 2019; Lewandowsky et al. 2012).

Therefore, this research not only demonstrates the structural role of digital media in reproducing political power but also extends theoretical understanding of platform-driven non-neutrality in the context of Indonesian democracy. By incorporating insights from Kelm et al. (2023) regarding user-level mechanisms of polarization, the study provides a more holistic and nuanced perspective on how digital ecosystems foster structural advantages while interacting with cognitive and behavioral dynamics, advancing our understanding of the implications for deliberative quality and pluralistic discourse.

The remaining question that these results raise is just how the KIM coalition was able to achieve such dominance in social media and to so proactively support the widespread use of disinformation throughout the campaigns. It is widely recognized that certain key political figures have a strong influence over mainstream media, especially through ownership of television channels and other outlets, which not only exert influence but also generate profits that can fund campaigns. But there is typically only a weak link from mainstream media to social media dominance. It appears the dominance of the KIM Coalition was achieved through the efforts of certain individuals, whether loyalists to a candidate or party cadres, who drive polarization within digital media platforms such as Instagram, TikTok, and X (Twitter).

There appears to have been a deliberate attempt to co-opt these digital media outlets, to control the narrative. The opposition also sought to use digital media, but was outmatched in resources, was outmaneuvered strategically, and lost control of the narrative. The nature of social media algorithms is that dominance can be amplified over time, and alternative voices are progressively drowned out.

The use of disinformation as a means of disempowering opposition can also not be underestimated. Disinformation diverts attention from core policy differences and confuses the voter, leaving them easily influenced by dominant voices. This process was clearly at work in the ways in which digital media was used in the local campaign processes.

CONCLUSION

This study demonstrates that digital media in Indonesia do not merely function as neutral channels for political communication but as structurally mediated ecosystems that shape political visibility, public sentiment, and democratic deliberation. Using a mixed methods approach combining engagement metrics, sentiment and framing analysis, and social network mapping, this research shows how algorithmic amplification, dense pro-Koalisi Indonesia Maju (KIM) clusters, asymmetrical framing, and systematic disinformation collectively reinforce the dominance of major political coalitions while marginalizing opposition voices. Pro-KIM narratives achieve higher engagement and reach, often framed to emphasize governance competence and legitimacy, whereas opposition content remains fragmented, less visible, and negatively framed. These structural and content-based asymmetries create echo chambers and filter bubbles that limit cross-cutting deliberation and reduce pluralistic discourse.

Thus, digital media do not merely transmit information; they actively shape the conditions of political competition and public perception, producing an information environment that constrains healthy democratic deliberation and amplifies the influence of dominant actors. From a policy and democratic quality perspective, these findings underscore the need for digital media oversight and algorithmic transparency, the promotion of public digital literacy, the strengthening of cross-group deliberative spaces, and interventions to prevent polarization and disinformation.

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