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The Construction of Higher Education Reality through Digital Media Discourse in Indonesia

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Abstract
Digital news media shape the public visibility of higher education through the selection of communication. However, limited research explains how media selection, temporal changes, and boundaries of visibility are interconnected. Drawing on Niklas Luhmann's social systems theory, this study examines how Kompas.com and Detik.com constructed the reality of higher education between 2014 and 2024. Using a qualitative approach informed by longitudinal media analysis, the study analyzes 1,469 news articles, comprising 514 from Kompas.com and 955 from Detik.com, with 84 purposively selected articles examined in greater textual depth. The analysis focuses on thematic selection, actor visibility, contextual emphasis, news selectors, reporting styles, and their continuity and change over time. The findings reveal distinct communication selection patterns between the outlets, particularly in thematic priorities, actor visibility, contextual emphasis, and reporting styles across two ministerial periods. The study also shows that the selection processes making certain issues visible simultaneously limit the visibility of others. From a systems-theoretical perspective, recurring and changing selections contribute to the ongoing construction of media reality without directly affecting public opinion or institutional policy. This study contributes to media sociology by integrating communication selection, temporal change, and selective visibility into an explanation of digital news media.

Keywords: *media reality construction, communication selection, Niklas Luhmann, digital news media, higher education*

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INTRODUCTION

Questions about tuition fees, university autonomy, educational quality, and institutional accountability have become recurring subjects of higher education reporting in Indonesia. Yet news coverage does not present every dimension of these developments. A report on university tuition, for example, may focus on a government decision, its financial consequences for students, or the response of university administrators. Each emphasis provides readers with a different account of the same educational matter. This selective character of news communication is central to the present research. Rather than treating media coverage as a complete record of developments in higher education, the study examines what Kompas.com and Detik.com choose to report, how those choices change over time, and which aspects receive comparatively limited attention.

The 2014–2024 period offers an opportunity to examine how Indonesian news media reported higher education under two ministerial administrations. During M. Nasir's tenure (2014–2019), coverage addressed institutional development, research, university governance, and national education priorities. The appointment of Nadiem Makarim in October 2019 marked a change in ministerial leadership, followed by the introduction of Merdeka Belajar Kampus Merdeka (MBKM). Tuition fees (UKT), university autonomy, and institutional accountability also remained subjects of reporting. These developments provide a basis for comparing the higher education matters that Kompas.com and Detik.com selected for publication, those that received sustained attention, and how reporting priorities differed across the two periods.

Changes in higher education policy also involve differences in how decisions are understood and carried out. Aprimadya (2025), for example, examined research funding reform in Indonesian higher education and highlighted the importance of policy actors' interpretations and institutional conditions. His study helps explain why changes in university policy cannot be understood solely from official decisions (Baroutsis and Lingard 2025). However, it does not examine how those developments are selected and presented in news coverage. This is where the present research takes a different approach. Rather than studying how policymakers interpret reform, it analyzes how Kompas.com and Detik.com communicate developments in higher education through their news articles.

Laoera and Wibowo (2023) explained that Indonesian news media operate in a digital environment shaped in part by the growing influence of online platforms. Hase, Boczek, and Scharkow (2023) and Widodo et al. (2026) examined this environment from a political economy perspective, identifying inequalities in infrastructure control, data management, and platform governance. Their research highlights conditions that shape the circulation of information, but it does not explain the editorial choices evident in individual news articles. Our analysis addresses a different question: which aspects of higher education are made visible through the published reporting of Kompas.com and Detik.com? By examining the news texts themselves, we can compare the two outlets without assuming that their differences in reporting are necessarily caused by platform dependence.

Studies of media communication have approached news production from different perspectives (Tenor 2024). Muthmainnah and De-Lima-Santos (2025), for instance, investigated how Indonesian journalists perceive differences in working structures between legacy and digital-native media organizations. Their research provides insight into the organizational conditions of journalism (Adjeketa, Adjeketa, and Adjeketa 2026), but it does not examine how higher education is represented in published news (Prestianta 2022, Bock et al. 2023). Our study takes the news articles themselves as its empirical material, focusing on the information selected and communicated by Kompas.com and Detik.com. Research from other countries offers further points of comparison, particularly concerning the unequal visibility of educational institutions and changes in news attention (Vázquez-Herrero, Negreira-Rey, and López-García 2023; Hendrickx and Vázquez-Herrero 2024).

Research from Europe and North America offers two useful perspectives on the distribution of news attention. Fürst et al. (2021) examined how Swiss higher education institutions appeared in news coverage and found substantial differences in their media visibility. Their analysis helps explain why the frequency and prominence of institutional coverage matter when studying media representation. Coe and Kuttner (2018), meanwhile, traced 35 years of television news coverage of education in the United States, documenting recurring subjects and shifts in reporting attention. These studies address different aspects of a common concern: what receives attention in the news, and how that attention varies. Fürst et al. focus on the representation of higher education institutions, whereas Coe and Kuttner examine longer-term patterns in coverage of pre-university education. Neither study directly

addresses the relationship between communication selection, its evolution across time, and the boundaries of higher education visibility through Luhmann's system-theoretical perspective.

Student protests offer another way to examine how news media represent higher education. In South Africa, Ayodeji-Falade and Osunkunle (2021) studied the newspaper framing of the #FeesMustFall protests, showing how disputes over educational access and affordability were presented in the press. Chattarji (2019) examined student protests in India, in which media accounts situated university conflicts within broader political and institutional debates. The two studies are useful because they show that reporting on educational disputes involves choices about which events, actors, and interpretations receive attention. Their focus, however, remains on protest movements. The question addressed here is broader: how do selections concerning different higher education matters persist, change, or become less visible across a decade of news coverage?

In Indonesia, Komariah et al. (2024) examined how gender equity was represented in media narratives about Islamic PERSIS education. Through qualitative media content analysis and interviews, they explored how these narratives could reinforce existing views of gender roles or challenge them (Yusriyah and Ohorella 2022). Their work draws attention to the importance of examining what educational narratives emphasize and how they are presented (Anbarini et al. 2023). Our research shares an interest in media representation but differs in its empirical focus (Yanuar et al. 2023). Rather than examining gender narratives and interview-based interpretations, we analyze published higher education news from Kompas.com and Detik.com between 2014 and 2024. This longer period allows us to examine not only which subjects receive attention but also how patterns of selection change and which aspects of higher education remain less visible.

Research from Brazil and Australia illustrates the institutional pressures facing higher education in different settings. In Brazil, Romani-Dias et al. (2025) interviewed university leaders about market competition, institutional legitimacy, and changing expectations of universities. Their findings offer insight into how institutional leaders understand these pressures. Harun and Durden (2025), meanwhile, examined the influence of neoliberal policies on Australian higher education, drawing on public documents, including media and parliamentary reports. Their analysis addresses concerns about funding, internationalization, and institutional sustainability. Although both studies discuss important developments in higher education, neither investigates how news outlets repeatedly select and present such

matters across an extended period. This difference matters for our research. University leaders' accounts and policy documents help explain the circumstances surrounding higher education, but news reporting provides a separate view of which developments become publicly visible. By examining Kompas.com and Detik.com over ten years, we investigate how that visibility is maintained, changes, or becomes limited through news communication.

A closer comparison can be made with Sellami et al. (2025), who examined newspaper coverage of higher education in Qatar and the United Arab Emirates. Their critical discourse analysis identified recurring emphasis on institutional excellence, international competitiveness, and global leadership. These representations matter because they show how news coverage can bring certain aspects of university life to the forefront while giving less attention to others. Sellami et al. (2025) approach this question through critical discourse analysis. Our research examines a related concern from Luhmann's system-theoretical perspective, using news published by Kompas.com and Detik.com over a ten-year period. We are interested not only in what the media emphasize, but also in whether those selections remain prominent, change, or receive less attention as reporting continues.

Higher education across the Asia-Pacific region has expanded under different economic, institutional, and policy conditions. As discussed by Kapur et al. (2023), this growth has brought continuing challenges involving access, educational quality, financing, and university governance. These challenges do not affect every country or institution in the same way. They also show why higher education cannot be reduced to a single policy debate (Wall et al. 2024). For news organizations, the range of developments creates choices about what to report. Coverage may concentrate on tuition fees, government programs, institutional decisions, or university performance, while giving less attention to other aspects of academic life. Examining these choices helps us understand how Kompas.com and Detik.com present higher education to the public and why some subjects receive more sustained coverage than others.

Studies of news coverage have examined both changes in media attention and the ways events are represented. Rochimah et al. (2026), for example, compared online reporting on border issues in Indonesia and Malaysia over time. Using an agenda-setting perspective, they identified differences in reporting volume, thematic emphasis, and sentiment. Their study shows the value of comparing news attention across media outlets and periods. Jawla et al. (2024) approached news coverage differently, using qualitative content analysis to examine

frames in reporting on the ECOWAS military intervention in the Gambia. Their work illustrates how the presentation of an event can be studied through the recurring ways it is described.

Both approaches are relevant to our analysis, although they address different questions. Tracking news attention helps identify which subjects become prominent, while examining frames helps explain how those subjects are presented. Our research brings these concerns together through Luhmann's social systems theory. We examine how Kompas.com and Detik.com select higher education information, how those selections develop between 2014 and 2024, and which aspects receive limited attention as a result. The research gap therefore lies in connecting the configuration of news selection, its changes over time, and the boundaries of media visibility within a single analysis of published news communication.

Niklas Luhmann's social systems theory offers a framework for examining how news media construct reality through communication. In this perspective, news does not reproduce everything that happens outside the media system. What becomes available to the public is information selected and communicated by the media themselves (Luhmann 1992, 2000). A university policy, for example, may generate several possible news stories, but each report presents particular events, actors, and interpretations rather than the entire development. This reflects the distinction between information and non-information that guides media selection.

News communication also develops over time. An earlier report may become relevant again when a decision is clarified, challenged, or followed by another development. Luhmann's concepts of selection, second-order observation, and autopoiesis help us examine these connections. Selection concerns what is communicated as information; second-order observation directs attention to how the media observe and present others' observations; and autopoiesis concerns the reproduction of communication through connections with further communication. In this article, these concepts guide our reading of published news texts. They do not provide grounds for claiming that the reporting directly changed public opinion or institutional decisions.

To investigate these processes, we examined higher-education news published on Kompas.com and Detik.com between 2014 and 2024. The dataset contains 1,469 articles, consisting of 514 from Kompas.com and 955 from Detik.com. We used the full dataset to identify patterns in news communication and selected 84 articles purposively for closer textual analysis. Our examination focuses on five dimensions: themes, actors or messengers, contexts,

news selectors, and reporting styles. By comparing these dimensions across the M. Nasir (2014–2019) and Nadiem Makarim (2019–2024) periods, we examine which patterns continued and which changed. The two outlets are treated as separate media organizations, each with its own observable reporting patterns. The comparison does not assume that they represent all Indonesian digital news media, nor does it seek to judge which outlet performs better.

Accordingly, this study addresses three research questions:

1) How do Kompas.com and Detik.com construct higher education reality through the selection of themes, actors, contexts, news selectors, and reporting styles?
2) How do patterns of communication selection persist, change, strengthen, or weaken across the 2014–2019 and 2019–2024 periods?
3) How do the configuration and temporal evolution of media selection shape the visibility and limited visibility of higher education issues in digital news communication?

The contribution of this research lies in examining three connected aspects of news communication: what the media select, how those selections change over time, and what remains less visible in the reporting. Previous studies have provided valuable accounts of media representation, news attention, and changes in coverage. By bringing these concerns together, our analysis examines how Kompas.com and Detik.com construct different accounts of higher education between 2014 and 2024. Luhmann's social systems theory helps explain why the findings go beyond differences in news topics or reporting frequency. The selections through which issues and actors become visible also shape the limits of what the media communicate. This connection between the continuity of news selection and its boundaries of visibility forms the study's central contribution to media sociology. The conclusions remain grounded in published news texts; they do not claim that reporting directly changed public opinion, university decisions, or higher education policy.

Theoretical Framework: Media Selection and the Construction of Reality

This research draws on Niklas Luhmann's social systems theory to examine how digital news media construct reality through communication. For Luhmann (1992), communication is not simply the transfer of information from one person to another. It is a social operation involving the selection of information, utterance, and understanding, through which further

communication becomes possible. Social systems are therefore constituted and reproduced through communication rather than through the actions of individuals alone. This perspective directs our attention to published news articles as observable forms of communication. We examine how information about higher education is selected and presented in these texts, without treating them as direct evidence of what journalists intended, how audiences understood the reports, or how the public responded.

For Luhmann (2000), the mass media operate through the distinction between information and non-information. This distinction allows the media system to identify what can be treated as informative and connected to further communication. The selection does not depend solely on individual editorial decisions; it is also guided by the system's coding and programs (Anter 2024). An event may become news because it introduces something unexpected, involves a conflict, concerns a recognizable actor, or offers information considered relevant for reporting. Yet once something has been communicated, its information value may change, creating a need for further developments to be reported. Media reality, therefore, emerges not from reproducing every aspect of an external event but from the ongoing selection and organization of information. In examining Kompas.com and Detik.com, we use this distinction to understand how specific developments in higher education become news and how the attention they receive may persist or change over time.

Luhmann (2000) also explains media reality through the distinction between self-reference and other-reference. This distinction operates within the mass media system, allowing it to refer both to its own communication and to the world it reports on. Self-reference concerns the system's relation to its own operations, including how existing communication provides a basis for further reporting. Other-reference concerns what the media communicate about, such as university policies, institutional decisions, or educational developments. These references are connected through the topics selected for communication. A university policy, for instance, may first appear as a government announcement and later become the subject of reporting on its implementation or criticism. The topic remains recognizable, although the information communicated about it may change. For this study, the distinction helps explain how developments in higher education are taken up and presented on Kompas.com and Detik.com, without treating news coverage as a complete account of what happens within educational institutions.

To examine communication selection in the news texts, this study uses five analytical dimensions: themes, actors or messengers, contexts, communication selectors, and mood/style. These dimensions serve as operational categories developed for the research rather than five separate concepts proposed directly by Luhmann. They help identify what each article discusses, whose statements or actions are made visible, which circumstances are presented, what gives the information its news value, and how the reporting is expressed. For example, coverage of a higher education policy may focus on its expected benefits, a government official's decision, or concerns about implementation. Although these reports may concern the same policy, they communicate different aspects of it. Comparing the five dimensions across Kompas.com and Detik.com allows us to examine such differences in published news without assuming that the texts reveal editorial intentions or determine how audiences interpret the information (Diekerhof 2023).

Luhmann (2000) distinguishes between first-order and second-order observation. First-order observation concerns what an observer identifies by making a distinction, whereas second-order observation examines how another observer makes that distinction. In higher education reporting, this difference becomes relevant when news media communicate how government officials, university leaders, or students interpret a policy or institutional development. For example, a report may describe the introduction of a university policy, while another may examine how a rector evaluates its consequences. The second report can offer material for analyzing second-order observation, but quoting the rector is not sufficient on its own. We must examine how the news text selects and presents the rector's distinction, including what the rector emphasizes and how that observation is made relevant to the report. This allows us to study other observers' observations without assuming that their statements represent the views of an entire institution or the public.

Autopoiesis is central to Luhmann's explanation of how social systems reproduce themselves through their own operations. In the mass media system, communication does not occur as a series of unrelated messages. Each communicative operation becomes possible within a system in which communication can connect with further communication (Luhmann 1992, 2000). This perspective is useful for examining how news develops over time. A report announcing a higher education policy, for example, may be followed by another report discussing its implementation, a university's response, or a later clarification. Such reporting may establish connections with what has already been communicated, allowing earlier

information to acquire new relevance. However, articles dealing with the same policy do not necessarily demonstrate a direct communicative connection. Repeated themes indicate continuity in news selection, whereas stronger claims about communicative reproduction require identifiable references between reports. For this reason, our analysis distinguishes observable continuity and textual connections from the broader theoretical claim that the mass media system reproduces itself autopoietically.

In examining news published over time, we distinguish recurring selection patterns from traceable references between communications. Recurring patterns appear when different articles give attention to similar themes, actors, contexts, or reporting styles. Such similarities show that particular forms of news selection persist, but they do not necessarily establish a connection among individual reports. Luhmann (2000) explains that news communication can develop recursively when an earlier reported event becomes relevant to subsequent reporting. A traceable reference therefore requires more specific evidence in the text, such as a reference to an earlier announcement, an institutional decision, a previous controversy, or a development already reported. When this evidence is available, we examine how the subsequent article takes up or reinterprets the earlier information. When it is absent, we describe the articles as showing continuity or similarity in selection, without claiming that one report directly reproduces another. This distinction allows us to discuss communication over time while keeping our interpretation within the evidence provided by the published texts.

News selection can change as reporting continues. Some higher education themes remain visible over several years, while others receive greater attention for a time and then become less prominent. New developments may also introduce subjects that were previously absent from the coverage. To examine these differences, we compare news published by Kompas.com and Detik.com between 2014 and 2024, using the M. Nasir and Nadiem Makarim administrations as two periods of observation. The comparison helps us identify which themes, actors, contexts, and reporting characteristics remained present and which changed. A shift in news coverage after October 2019, however, cannot automatically be attributed to the change in ministerial leadership. Other developments may have occurred during the same period, and the published articles alone do not establish a causal relationship. Our analysis therefore describes observable changes in communication selection and interprets them within their historical context, without treating the ministerial transition as their proven cause.

Luhmann's concepts of irritation and resonance help explain how social systems relate to developments in their environments (Luhmann 1989). An irritation occurs when a system encounters a difference that becomes relevant within its own operations. Resonance concerns how the system processes such disturbances through its existing structures and communication. A news report about higher education policy, for example, may become relevant to universities or government institutions, but these organizations do not necessarily respond simply because the report has been published. Any response would depend on how the development is interpreted and processed within their own communication. Our analysis examines what Kompas.com and Detik.com report on higher education and how their coverage shifts over time. It does not establish whether media coverage produced irritation or resonance within educational or political systems. Such a claim would require evidence of communication or decisions within those systems, beyond the published news articles examined here.

This distinction also helps us examine the sensitivity, capacity, and limitations of digital news media. In this study, media sensitivity refers to observable changes in how Kompas.com and Detik.com give attention to higher education. Some themes and actors remain present across different periods, while others receive greater or less attention as reporting patterns change over time. Media capacity concerns what the two outlets are able to make visible through their reporting, including selected policies, institutional developments, actors, and contexts. This capacity is accompanied by limitations: when reporting emphasizes certain aspects of higher education, other aspects may receive less attention or remain outside the observed coverage. We examine these differences through published news texts rather than through audience research. Visibility therefore refers to what can be observed in the reporting, not to what readers know, understand, or believe. The findings also do not establish whether the coverage influenced institutional decisions or government policy.

To examine communication selection empirically, this study adopts a theory-as-method approach informed by Luhmann's social systems theory. The five analytical dimensions introduced earlier are used together to observe how news communication is organized and how its patterns change over time. They are not treated as separate theoretical frameworks, but as tools for examining the configuration and development of media selection. This approach connects the theoretical concepts of selection and observation with the analysis of published news texts. The coding procedures and operational definitions are presented in the Research Methodology section.

The framework is applied to higher education news published by Kompas.com and Detik.com between 2014 and 2024. Each outlet is examined separately to identify similarities and differences in its patterns of communication selection. Comparing the two ministerial periods also allows us to observe how these patterns persist or change in their relative prominence over time. The analysis remains focused on what can be established from the news texts, without making assumptions about editorial intentions or evaluating which outlet performs better.

Together, these concepts guide the analysis of three connected questions: how Kompas.com and Detik.com select and present higher education news, how their selection patterns develop across the two ministerial periods, and what becomes more or less visible through these processes. The configuration of news selection provides the basis for examining changes over time, while both dimensions help explain the boundaries of visibility in the published coverage. The framework thus connects the three research questions without treating recurring themes as proof of autopoietic reproduction or extending the conclusions beyond the available news texts.

METHODS

This study employs an interpretive qualitative approach, informed by Niklas Luhmann's social systems theory, to examine how digital news media construct the reality of higher education through the selection of communication. The research adopts a longitudinal comparative design, focusing on news coverage published by Kompas.com and Detik.com between 2014 and 2024. Rather than examining audience opinions, reader comments, or direct media effects, the study investigates the selection and presentation of information within published news texts. Luhmann's perspective guides the analysis of these texts as observable media communication (Luhmann 1992, 2000).

The unit of analysis is media communication concerning higher education, while the primary unit of observation and coding is the individual news article. Each article provides the textual evidence through which communication selection can be examined. The analysis considers how information is selected and presented in individual reports, as well as how recurring patterns differ between the two media organizations and across time. Journalists' intentions, audience interpretations, and institutional decisions are not treated as direct objects of investigation.

Data were collected from the digital news archives of Kompas.com and Detik.com through article searches and web scraping. The principal search terms were “pendidikan tinggi” (higher education) and “perguruan tinggi” (higher education institutions). The initial collection comprised 1,776 articles, including 612 from Kompas.com and 1,164 from Detik.com. Each article was recorded with its media source, title, publication date, URL, and available textual content. The collected material was then examined for source eligibility, publication period, textual completeness, duplicate entries, and substantive relevance to higher education. Duplicate records were identified by comparing URLs, titles, publication dates, and article content. Articles that did not meet the research criteria were excluded, including those that contained the search terms but did not substantively discuss higher education.

Following data cleaning and eligibility screening, 307 articles were excluded, resulting in a verified dataset of 1,469 news articles: 514 from Kompas.com and 955 from Detik.com. This cleaned dataset provides the empirical basis for examining news distribution and communication selection patterns between 2014 and 2024. An important distinction is made between data screening and media selection. Data screening refers to the researcher's procedure for determining which articles meet the study criteria, whereas media selection concerns how news outlets select and present information for publication. Therefore, an article excluded during data screening cannot be taken as evidence that the media excluded the issue from their reporting.

Table 1.

Data stage	Kompas.com	Detik.com	Total
Initial retrieval	612	1,164	1,776
Excluded during screening	98	209	307
Cleaned news dataset	514	955	1,469
Purposive in-depth corpus	42	42	84

Data Collection, Screening, and Corpus Selection

Source: Research dataset and documented corpus selection (2026).

The longitudinal analysis distinguishes two ministerial periods: the M. Nasir period (2014–2019) and the Nadiem Makarim period (2019–2024). Articles published before 23 October 2019 are assigned to the first period, while those published on or after that date are

assigned to the second. This division allows us to compare patterns of news communication across the two periods without assuming that the ministerial transition caused changes in reporting. The cleaned dataset contains 566 articles from the first period and 903 from the second. Of the 174 articles published in 2019, 135 belong to the first period and 39 to the second, based on their publication dates.

Table 2.

Ministerial period	Kompas.com	Detik.com	Total
M. Nasir (2014–2019)	90	476	566
Nadiem Makarim (2019–2024)	424	479	903
Total	514	955	1,469

Distribution of the News Dataset by Media and Ministerial Period

Note: The periods are separated using the publication date of 23 October 2019. The transition is used for temporal classification, not as evidence of causation.

All 1,469 eligible articles were coded using five analytical dimensions developed for this study: themes, actors or messengers, contexts, communication selectors, and mood/style. The coding framework comprises 10 thematic categories, eight actor or messenger categories, seven contextual categories, 10 communication selectors, and three mood/style categories. Of the 10 thematic categories, nine were retained for quantitative comparison. The Kampus Merdeka/MBKM category was excluded from this comparison because some articles assigned to it did not consistently meet its substantive definition. Articles with verifiable content remained available for qualitative interpretation.

These dimensions are informed by Luhmann's social systems theory but are not presented as a five-dimensional framework formulated by Luhmann himself. The communication selectors draw on his account of news selection, while the thematic categories were developed through iterative examination of the collected articles. Categories concerning actors, contexts, and mood/style were refined by considering both theoretical distinctions and patterns observed in the news texts. The five dimensions are used together to examine how different elements of communication selection appear within and across news articles, rather than as independent statistical variables.

The coding procedure combined deductive and inductive interpretation. Theoretically informed categories guided the initial analysis, while patterns identified in the news texts were considered in refining the coding framework, following the qualitative analysis principles discussed by Bingham (2023) and Laari (2025). Each article was read using its headline and complete available text, rather than classified solely through keywords or isolated expressions. Coding decisions followed a structured guide containing category definitions, operational boundaries, and recording rules. When an article contained several communicative elements, the dominant category was assigned based on the text's main emphasis and the applicable coding rules. This did not mean that other elements were absent from the article. The procedure allowed recurring patterns to be identified while preserving the context in which information was communicated.

The initial mapping of the full dataset was followed by purposive selection of 84 articles for in-depth textual analysis. The corpus consists of 42 articles from Kompas.com and 42 from Detik.com, with each outlet contributing 21 articles from the M. Nasir period and 21 from the Nadiem Makarim period. Selection criteria included source traceability, substantive relevance, representation of both media and periods, variation in communication selection, informational richness, and the presence of dominant, less-visible, contrasting, or analytically distinctive patterns. Each selected article was retained once according to its unique URL and linked to its corresponding coding record. This selection strategy is consistent with the qualitative purposive sampling principles discussed by Ahmad and Wilkins (2025), which emphasize the alignment between sampling decisions, research objectives, and the informational contribution of selected cases. The balanced composition was designed to support comparative textual interpretation rather than statistical representation of the entire news population.

The analysis proceeded through interconnected stages. First, the complete dataset was coded to identify the distribution and configuration of communication selection across the two media outlets. Second, descriptive frequencies and cross-tabulations were used to examine patterns by media, thematic categories, and publication period. Third, the purposively selected corpus was examined through close textual reading to identify how themes, actors, contexts, selectors, and reporting styles operated together within specific news articles. Fourth, these patterns were compared across the two ministerial periods to identify continuity, changes in relative prominence, and transformations in news communication.

Finally, the configuration and temporal findings were brought together to interpret the visibility and limited visibility of higher education issues within the observable boundaries of the news corpus.

Luhmann's concept of second-order observation guides the interpretation of how the two news media observe and communicate developments in higher education. The study distinguishes recurring thematic patterns from stronger claims concerning communicative reproduction. Repetition of a theme across several articles is treated as evidence of continuity in selection, while a traceable communicative connection requires more specific textual indications that earlier information, statements, decisions, or reported developments are taken up in subsequent communication. The analysis therefore does not assume that temporal succession or thematic similarity alone proves autopoiesis. Similarly, the concepts of irritation and resonance are used to inform the theoretical interpretation without claiming that the news texts directly demonstrate audience reactions or institutional responses.

Analytical consistency was supported by a documented coding guide, iterative category comparisons, repeated examination of news texts, and the preservation of relationships among article metadata, coding decisions, and textual evidence. An audit trail records the selection of the 84 articles, their source URLs, publication periods, and analytical categories. Maintaining such documentation aligns with Bingham's (2023) emphasis on transparent qualitative analysis and the importance of an audit trail in supporting the dependability and trustworthiness of interpretive findings. Interpretations were checked against both recurring and contrasting cases to reduce reliance on isolated examples. This procedure supports the transparency and traceability of the analysis, although it should not be equated with an independently measured intercoder reliability test. The findings are therefore presented as theoretically informed interpretations grounded in the documented corpus, rather than as statistically generalizable conclusions.

In addition to the news corpus, the broader research included interviews with one education reporter from Kompas.com and one managing editor from detikEdu. These interviews served exclusively as supplementary reflective material concerning news reporting practices. They were not included in the dataset used to determine coding categories, nor were they treated as evidence of journalists' intentions or editorial decision-making. The empirical findings presented in this article remain grounded in the published news texts and their documented communication patterns.

The study relies on publicly accessible news articles from Kompas.com and Detik.com and does not analyze personal information, reader comments, or social media interactions. Article titles, publication dates, and source URLs are retained to maintain transparency and source traceability. The interpretation is limited to communication patterns observable within the selected news corpus and does not establish direct effects on public opinion, institutional behavior, or higher education policy. These boundaries are maintained to ensure responsible use of the research material and to avoid conclusions that exceed the available empirical evidence.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The analysis of 1,469 news articles published by Kompas.com and Detik.com between 2014 and 2024 reveals that the reality of higher education is constructed through selective and changing patterns of news communication. The findings are organized around three interconnected dimensions: the configuration of communication selection, the continuity and transformation of selection over time, and the resulting distribution of media visibility. These dimensions explain how particular issues, actors, and contexts become prominent in reporting while other aspects of higher education receive more limited attention. The findings concern published news communication rather than audience interpretations or public responses.

The first finding concerns differences in the configuration of communication selection between the two media outlets. Across the cleaned dataset, Kompas.com contributed 514 articles, while Detik.com contributed 955 articles. The distribution indicates different volumes of higher education reporting within the collected corpus. However, article volume alone does not explain how media reality is constructed. The relationship between themes, actors or messengers, contexts, communication selectors, and mood/style provides a more detailed understanding of how each outlet organizes the information presented as news.

The thematic analysis demonstrates that the two media outlets gave different levels of attention to higher education issues. Among the nine thematic categories considered suitable for quantitative comparison, tuition fees and educational financing accounted for 143 articles in Kompas.com, representing 27.8% of its dataset, compared with 25 articles or 2.6% in Detik.com. In contrast, institutional reform accounted for 247 articles, or 25.9%, of Detik.com's dataset, compared with 29 articles, or 5.6%, in Kompas.com. Crisis-related coverage and

corruption or misconduct also received comparatively greater attention in Detik.com. These differences illustrate the unequal distribution of thematic visibility between the two outlets.

The interpretation of these distributions requires an important qualification. The original dataset included a source category labeled Kampus Merdeka/MBKM, but some articles within this category did not consistently meet its substantive definition. Consequently, this category was not treated as a validated quantitative measure of MBKM coverage. Articles whose content could be verified remained available for qualitative interpretation. This distinction prevents the analysis from treating a database label as evidence of a substantive communication pattern without examining the underlying news text.

The comparison of dominant communication selectors provides further evidence of differences between the media outlets. In Kompas.com, moral evaluation was the dominant selector in 159 articles (30.9%), local relevance in 123 articles (23.9%), and quantitative information in 65 articles (12.6%). In Detik.com, moral evaluation appeared as the dominant selector in 185 articles (19.4%), while actors and actions accounted for 150 articles (15.7%), surprise and novelty for 122 articles (12.8%), and norm violations for 91 articles (9.5%). These proportions are calculated within each outlet's dataset and therefore indicate relative differences in the organization of news selection rather than differences in the underlying importance of higher education issues.

The findings suggest that Kompas.com more frequently organized higher-education communication around evaluative, locally relevant, and measurable information, whereas Detik.com displayed a more varied selection structure involving institutional actions, new developments, conflict, and norm violations. Moral evaluation in this analysis does not refer to the moral opinions of readers. It refers to the news selector through which issues become informative by emphasizing benefits, risks, responsibilities, fairness, or consequences. Similarly, the presence of actors and actions concerns how news reports assign visibility to institutional figures and their decisions, not the psychological intentions of those actors.

An empirical illustration is provided by the Kompas.com article “Universitas Terbuka: Program MBKM Beri Banyak Manfaat bagi Mahasiswa,” published on 13 June 2022. The article presents MBKM through its anticipated benefits for students, including opportunities to learn beyond their home institutions and to gain employment-related experience. The information value of the article is therefore organized primarily through an evaluation of the

program's usefulness. This illustrates how a higher education policy can be made visible through its potential consequences for students rather than solely through the announcement of an administrative decision.

A contrasting example appears in Detik.com's article “Jokowi Sahkan Unand Jadi Perguruan Tinggi Negeri Badan Hukum,” published on 6 September 2021. The change in Universitas Andalas's institutional status becomes news through a newly announced decision associated with a formally authorized actor. The article illustrates how institutional transformation can acquire information value through novelty and an identifiable governmental action. The distinction between these examples does not imply that either outlet always employs a single reporting style. Rather, it demonstrates how different selection mechanisms can organize communication about developments in higher education.

The significance of selecting institutional actors and policy-related information can also be considered in relation to research on higher education policy narratives. Billings et al. (2024) examined how university leaders in California and Texas justified budget requests to state legislators during the COVID-19 pandemic. Their findings showed that institutional representatives emphasized the economic contributions of higher education, accountability indicators, and institutional performance while adapting their narratives to different legislative contexts. Although their study analyzed policy communication within legislative proceedings rather than news reporting, it demonstrates how institutional actors emphasize particular information when communicating higher education priorities. The present findings extend this discussion to the mass media context by showing how news organizations select institutional actors, decisions, and policy-related information for publication. This distinction is important because the selection of information by institutional representatives should not be equated with the selection processes by which news media construct the reality of higher education.

A related distinction can be observed in research on communication during higher-education crises. Huang-Horowitz and Smith (2025) investigated how institutional communication and news media portrayed a labor dispute involving California State University. Their findings illustrate how organizational perspectives and media portrayals can emphasize different aspects of the same institutional crisis. This comparison is relevant to the present study because it highlights the distinction between information communicated by educational institutions and information selected and presented by news media (Bock et al. 2025). However, while Huang-Horowitz and Smith focused on message framing during a

specific crisis, the present research examines how communication selection is configured and transformed across different higher education issues over a ten-year period.

The second finding concerns the temporal evolution of communication selection. The cleaned dataset contains 566 articles assigned to the M. Nasir period and 903 to the Nadiem Makarim period, with 23 October 2019 as the classification boundary. The difference in article volume is not interpreted as a direct effect of the ministerial transition. Instead, the two periods provide a comparative basis for examining which configurations persisted, strengthened, weakened, or changed in their relationship to the higher education issues being communicated. The temporal analysis indicates that communication selection did not evolve through the complete replacement of earlier patterns. Several thematic and selector categories remained present across both periods, but their relative positions and connections with actors, contexts, and reporting styles changed. Governmental programs and institutional developments continued to provide important sources of communication, while newer policy developments, digitalization, learning arrangements, financial concerns, and crises created different opportunities for news selection. Continuity of a category therefore did not necessarily mean continuity of its substantive content.

Changes in reporting styles further illustrate this temporal reconfiguration. Across the two media outlets, the share of positive mood/style articles increased from 255 articles (45.1%) in the M. Nasir period to 498 articles (55.1%) in the Nadiem Makarim period. Negative mood/style declined from 191 articles (33.7%) to 236 articles (26.1%), while neutral reporting declined from 120 articles (21.2%) to 169 articles (18.7%). These changes indicate shifts in the relative composition of published reporting. They do not demonstrate that public attitudes toward higher education became more positive or that institutional conditions objectively improved.

The temporal findings matter because recurring attention to higher education does not necessarily reproduce the same communicative reality. For example, a government program may remain an important subject of coverage even as the associated policy objectives, institutional actors, implementation contexts, or reported consequences change. Conversely, conflict or crisis coverage may intensify during events without becoming a consistently dominant orientation across the whole research period. The evolution of selection must therefore be examined through the changing relationships among the five analytical dimensions, not through article counts alone. The third finding concerns the distinction between thematic recurrence and communicative recursivity. Luhmann (2000) explains that

mass media communication is continuously renewed through the selection of information that can connect with what has already been communicated. However, the repeated appearance of an issue is not sufficient evidence that one news communication directly reproduces another. The present analysis therefore distinguishes the recurring selection of similar themes from more explicit textual indications that previous events or communications are being taken up in subsequent reporting.

A relevant illustration appears in the Detik.com article “Lagi, Karyawan Universitas Jember Meninggal Positif COVID-19,” published on 23 November 2020. The word “Lagi” (“again”) indicates that the reported event is presented in relation to an earlier occurrence. Rather than communicating the death as an entirely isolated event, the news report positions it within a continuing sequence of incidents affecting the university community. This example provides a textual indication of recursive reference. Nevertheless, the precise relationship between separate news articles requires examination of their publication sequence and contents before a stronger claim of direct communicative reproduction can be established. A more traceable example of continuity between preceding and subsequent news communication appears in two Detik.com articles concerning the cancellation of a public lecture at Universitas Gadjah Mada (UGM). The first article, “UGM Batalkan Kuliah Umum Ustaz Abdul Somad,” published on Detik.com on 9 October 2019, reported the university's decision to cancel the event and included the official confirmation from its representative. The following day, Detik.com published “UGM: Pembatalan Kuliah Umum UAS Murni Keputusan Pimpinan Universitas” (Detik.com - 10 October 2019), which returned to the same decision and provided further clarification concerning institutional authority, the reasons for cancellation, and questions surrounding possible external pressure.

The second report therefore did not merely repeat the earlier information but recontextualized the decision through additional institutional explanations. This sequence illustrates how an earlier communicative event can become the reference point for subsequent reporting, enabling an issue to be maintained and further differentiated within news communication. In Luhmann's (2000) system-theoretical perspective, the sequence provides observable evidence of communicative continuity and recontextualization. However, it should not be interpreted as sufficient proof of the autopoietic reproduction of the entire media system or as evidence of direct institutional effects. The *Detik.com* article regarding the UPI rector's response to the "Merdeka Belajar" policy exemplifies second-order observation by highlighting

how media selectively presents institutional viewpoints rather than independently measuring public opinion. This demonstrates the critical distinction between reporting an individual actor's interpretation and assessing broad societal responses.

Table 3.

News article / source	Observable communication	Analytical interpretation
Universitas Terbuka: Program MBKM Beri Banyak Manfaat bagi Mahasiswa — (Kompas.com - 13 June 2022)	Benefits and opportunities associated with MBKM	Moral evaluation through the reported usefulness of an educational program
Jokowi Sahkan Unand Jadi Perguruan Tinggi Negeri Badan Hukum — (Detik.com - 6 September 2021)	Institutional status change communicated through a presidential decision	Surprise/novelty associated with an identifiable institutional action
Lagi, Karyawan Universitas Jember Meninggal Positif COVID-19 — (Detik.com - 23 November 2020)	An incident explicitly presented as a recurrence	Textual indication of continuity with an earlier reported development
Rektor UPI Respons Positif Program "Merdeka Belajar" Mendikbud Nadiem — (Detik.com - 26 February 2020)	University rector's evaluation of governmental policy	Institutional observation selected and communicated through a news report
UGM Batalkan Kuliah Umum Ustaz Abdul Somad — (Detik.com - 9 October 2019) UGM: Pembatalan Kuliah Umum UAS Murni Keputusan Pimpinan Universitas — (Detik.com - 10 October 2019)	The second report revisits the same institutional decision, adding clarification concerning institutional authority, contextual considerations, and claims of external pressure.	Traceable continuity and recontextualization between preceding and subsequent news communications, without establishing system-wide autopoiesis.

Illustrative Evidence of Communication Selection in Higher Education News

Source: Empirical news illustrations documented in Chapters IV and V of the dissertation.

The examples demonstrate selected aspects of communication selection and do not replace the complete five-dimensional coding records or establish direct communicative reproduction between articles. The paired UGM news reports are documented in the dissertation's longitudinal analysis as supplementary empirical illustrations; their inclusion does not imply that both articles are part of the purposively selected 84-article corpus.

Together, these examples clarify the empirical limits of applying autopoiesis and second-order observation. A news report may refer to earlier developments or communicate how an institutional actor observes a policy, but an isolated example does not establish the entire operation of an autopoietic system. Accordingly, the findings are interpreted as observable patterns of news selection, temporal reconfiguration, and, where supported by textual evidence, references between communications. This approach preserves the distinction between the system-theoretical explanation and the empirical evidence available in the news corpus.

The integration of the configuration and temporal findings reveals a further consequence of communication selection: the unequal distribution of visibility. Policy programs, institutional decisions, financing, and event-driven developments became visible through recurring patterns of reporting. These emphases also indicate the limits of what the analyzed news texts make observable. When reports focus on policy announcements, institutional actions, or immediate developments, they do not necessarily provide equally extensive explanations of implementation processes, everyday academic practices, or longer-term consequences. This interpretation concerns the scope and depth of information presented in the examined articles, rather than a quantified absence of these subjects across the entire news corpus. It does not imply intentional exclusion by journalists or media organizations. A comparable pattern of unequal source visibility was identified by Tuasikal and Gunawan (2024), whose analysis of artificial intelligence news in Indonesian online media, including Kompas.com and Detik.com, revealed a disproportionate presence of business representatives relative to other sources.

The question of media visibility has also been examined in terms of news distribution across digital platforms. Lamot and Paulussen (2025) investigated cross-media news promotion and the visibility of news stories in relation to audience engagement. Their study provides a complementary perspective by showing that news visibility can also be examined through the distribution and promotion of journalistic content. However, this dimension differs from the present study, which examines the visibility of higher education issues

within published news texts rather than the promotional reach or audience engagement of individual articles. This distinction is important because the selective visibility identified in the present research concerns which issues, actors, and contexts receive attention in media communication, not how widely individual news stories circulate across digital platforms.

This finding extends the analysis beyond the identification of dominant topics. A media outlet may sustain attention to a governmental program while providing comparatively limited discussion of its implementation difficulties or long-term educational consequences. Similarly, repeated reporting on institutional controversy may maintain a case's visibility without necessarily expanding the explanation of its underlying structural conditions. The capacity to sustain communication and the limits of contextual development therefore emerge together from the same processes of selection.

From Luhmann's system-theoretical perspective, the distinction between information and non-information provides an explanation for these findings (Luhmann 2000). Mass media cannot communicate every aspect of higher education simultaneously. By selecting certain events, actors, and contexts as informative, they produce a communicable account of educational reality that can be taken up in further reporting. At the same time, these selections leave other possible observations less developed. Media reality is therefore neither a transparent reproduction of the external world nor an arbitrary representation detached from observable events. It is constructed through operations that select and organize what can become further communication.

These findings both support and extend previous research on media representations and selective visibility. Fürst et al. (2021) demonstrated that higher education institutions receive unequal visibility in news coverage, while Coe and Kuttner (2018) highlighted recurring topics and changes in educational news attention. In a different substantive context, Srinarwati et al. (2026) examined media representations of urban poverty in Jakarta and Manila, identifying contrasting narrative priorities and differing levels of visibility of structural conditions. Although their analysis focuses on urban poverty rather than higher education, it provides a relevant comparison for understanding how media representations emphasize certain aspects of social reality while giving less attention to others. The present study extends these perspectives by demonstrating that differences in higher education visibility are connected not only to thematic priorities but also to the selection of actors, contexts, news values, and reporting styles. Its longitudinal findings further show how these selections may persist or

change without necessarily replacing established communication patterns. Read through Luhmann's (2000) system-theoretical perspective, these results suggest that media reality is constructed through the continuing selection and reconfiguration of information, rather than through the accumulation of news topics alone.

The findings also contribute to understanding the sensitivity of digital news media to changes in higher education. The two outlets differ in their capacity to maintain policy-related information, communicate institutional developments, or respond to emerging controversies. However, sensitivity in this context refers to observable patterns in news communication, not to the responses of educational institutions or political systems to news coverage. Similarly, the concepts of irritation and resonance can inform the theoretical interpretation of relationships between systems but cannot be treated as empirically verified institutional effects without additional evidence.

The study contributes to media sociology by bringing together three aspects of reality construction that are often examined separately: how communication selections are configured, how these selections evolve over time, and how they generate unequal visibility. The findings show that the same operations that make selected higher education issues visible and communicatively sustainable also establish boundaries around what remains less visible. This explanation moves beyond describing the content of media reports toward examining the observable organization and changing limits of news communication. Its empirical scope remains restricted to the documented news corpus of Kompas.com and Detik.com between 2014 and 2024.

CONCLUSION

This study demonstrates that the construction of higher education reality in Indonesian digital news media is shaped by the configuration of communication selection, its evolution over time, and the resulting boundaries of visibility. Based on 1,469 news articles from Kompas.com and Detik.com between 2014 and 2024, including 84 articles selected for in-depth analysis, the findings reveal differences in how the two media outlets prioritize issues, actors, contexts, and reporting styles. These patterns show both continuity and change across two ministerial periods, while demonstrating that the same selection processes that make certain higher education issues visible also leave other dimensions less developed. Drawing on Luhmann's social systems theory, the study contributes to understanding media reality as a product of selective and evolving communication rather than a complete representation of

educational conditions. The findings are limited to the two news outlets and the examined period; they do not establish direct effects on public opinion, institutional decisions, or higher education policies. For higher education policy communication, these findings underscore the importance of providing accessible contextual information, representing diverse institutional and affected actors, and sustaining explanations beyond initial policy announcements or emerging controversies. Future research may extend this analysis to other media organizations and examine how educational institutions respond to news communication through independently documented evidence.

Declaration of AI

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