

The Money Runs Out: Media Commodification by the Government during the Covid-19 Pandemic in Indonesia

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Abstract

This study analyzes the relationship between Indonesian television media and the government during the COVID-19 pandemic, focusing on four television stations namely iNews, Metro TV, TV One, and Trans 7. Informants in this study include members of the Indonesian Journalists Association (AJI), editors-in-chief, and government officials. Using a political economy of media perspective, this study explores how collaboration between media and government affects journalists' independence in presenting news related to the pandemic. Through the concepts of commodification, this study evaluates the involvement of media, audiences, and media workers in the political and economic dynamics that occurred during the global health crisis. This study found that the collaboration that occurred between media and government during the pandemic limited the media's independence, especially in terms of the commodification of content, audience, and workers, turning collaboration into co-optation. The media faced challenges in maintaining editorial autonomy, while commercial demands and government interests often influenced the narratives conveyed to the audience. The results of this study concluded that although the media continued to play a role as a channel for public information, there were limitations in presenting narratives with critical nuances during the pandemic, which were influenced by economic and political pressures.

Keywords: media, political economy, co-optation, covid-19, pandemic, indonesia

1. Introduction

1.1 Background

The COVID-19 pandemic triggered a surge in television viewership in Indonesia, as the public sought timely and reliable information. Nielsen (2020) reported that audiences increased their television consumption by more than 40 minutes per day, particularly tuning in to news programs. Paradoxically, this increase in demand occurred alongside a sharp decline in advertising revenue. According to the Indonesian Private Television Association (ATVSI), advertising spending dropped by an average of 21%, with some broadcasters experiencing losses of up to 43% (Oxford Business Group, 2020). Under these financial pressures, many media outlets turned to government partnerships as a strategy to remain viable.

The Indonesian government, through the National COVID-19 and Economic Recovery Committee (KPCPEN), actively used mass media to disseminate public health information and policy directives (Kementerian Komunikasi Republik Indonesia, 2020). Programs like the *Fellowship Jurnalisme Perubahan Perilaku* (FJPP), a collaboration between the COVID-19 Task Force and the Press Council, offered financial support to journalists tasked with promoting behavioral change. While these programs helped address the economic challenges faced by media institutions, they also raised concerns about the erosion of editorial independence—especially when coverage touched on politically sensitive topics such as vaccine safety and public compliance.

This study employs the political economy of media perspective, particularly Vincent Mosco's (1996) framework, which outlines three key concepts: commodification, structuration, and spatialization. Commodification refers to the transformation of media content and labor into marketable goods shaped by economic and political interests.

Structuration analyzes the institutional arrangements that determine how media operates, while spatialization examines how media systems extend their influence across social and geographic spaces. These concepts provide a critical lens for analyzing how government-media relations unfolded during the pandemic.

The research draws on interviews with a range of stakeholders, including journalists, editors, and government officials. Supplementary data—such as field notes, photographs, recordings, and policy documents—were also analyzed to build a nuanced understanding of media operations during the pandemic. Findings reveal that government funding and influence often shaped editorial decisions, with some journalists reporting being instructed to soften or avoid critical narratives. This underscores the tension between economic survival and journalistic autonomy.

This research is timely and important because it highlights the precarious position of media institutions during a public health crisis. In democratic societies, the press plays a vital role in holding power to account and ensuring the public receives balanced, factual information. However, economic dependency on the state can compromise this role, especially during emergencies when transparency is most needed. By examining how Indonesian television media navigated these pressures, this study contributes to broader discussions on safeguarding media independence in times of crisis.

Focusing on four major stations—iNews, Metro TV, TV One, and Trans 7—this study explores how editorial autonomy was challenged by financial arrangements and policy alignments during the pandemic. The findings offer insights into the risks posed to press freedom when commercial interests and political agendas converge.

1.2 Literature Review

The COVID-19 pandemic created a complex and evolving landscape in which public communication, media economies, and social perceptions interacted in profound ways. (Marshall and Correa, 2020) frame the pandemic response through the lens of neoliberalism and disaster capitalism, arguing that crises like these serve as opportunities to expand market control over social spaces previously free from market intervention. This interpretation situates the pandemic as a catalyst for strengthening global financial elites' power while weakening public institutions and social cohesion, setting the stage for conflicts between market forces and public welfare.

(Sobande, 2020) critiques the commodification of care and community in brand marketing responses, emphasizing how corporations framed the pandemic as a collective experience through slogans such as “we’re all in this together”. However, these narratives often masked structural inequalities, echoing Marshall and Correa’s critique of neoliberalism. Sobande’s analysis also highlights the strategic use of emotional appeals to humanize brands, while simultaneously using social justice rhetoric to drive consumption—a tension between profit motives and social advocacy that illustrates the duality of brand behavior in crises.

Turning to government communication, (Rudianto & Hendra, 2021) and Herman (2021) both highlight significant challenges faced by the Indonesian government in managing public communication during the pandemic. The inconsistencies in messaging, fragmented coordination across media outlets, and lack of centralized authority all contributed to public mistrust and low compliance with health measures. While Sobande discusses how brands capitalized on collective identity, Herman critiques the government’s inability to create a shared national narrative. This failure resulted in public confusion and panic, exacerbating the challenges of managing the health crisis.

Saptorini et al, (2021) explore the impact of the pandemic on the material and symbolic dimensions of news production. They argue that the displacement of journalists from physical newsrooms weakened their symbolic authority and altered relationships with sources, particularly government officials. This disruption in journalistic routines underscores a broader theme: the erosion of proximity to power, which has historically been a foundation of journalistic credibility and influence. Saptorini’s findings resonate with Sobande’s argument about brands’ efforts to occupy symbolic spaces, as both analyses reveal the pandemic’s reconfiguration of public authority and trust.

Ytre-Arne and Moe (2021) focus on the phenomenon of “doomscrolling” during the early stages of the pandemic. They describe how people oscillated between compulsive news consumption and deliberate news avoidance as coping strategies. This behavior reflects the dual nature of crisis communication: while the public seeks accurate information, they also experience emotional exhaustion. Ytre-Arne and Moe’s findings align with Herman’s argument for compassionate communication, suggesting that both media producers and government communicators must balance information dissemination with empathy to mitigate emotional distress and foster trust.

Bagus et al. (2021) introduce the concept of mass hysteria, which they argue was amplified by the interplay of sensationalized media coverage and state-driven narratives during the pandemic. They emphasize how mass hysteria, fueled by social and digital media, created a feedback loop of anxiety and policy errors. This analysis complements Marshall and Correa’s neoliberal critique by highlighting how both state and media institutions can exploit public fear to consolidate control. Bagus et al.’s notion of mass hysteria also reflects Sobande’s critique of commodified emotional

appeals, revealing how fear and anxiety are weaponized across both political and commercial spheres.

Finally, Carlini and Bleyer-Simon (2021) analyze the economic consequences of the pandemic for European media outlets, revealing a paradox: while demand for digital news surged, traditional revenue streams such as print sales and advertising collapsed. This crisis accelerated the decline of the traditional news business model, prompting many outlets to experiment with new revenue streams such as digital subscriptions. The authors also discuss how some governments intervened with financial support to sustain media viability, raising questions about the role of public funding in preserving independent journalism. This mirrors broader tensions in crisis communication between public intervention and market forces—a theme explored by Marshall and Correa as a defining feature of neoliberalism.

This study aims to provide empirical evidence of state interventions in news content, illustrating how government influence constrained critical narratives about vaccine safety and pandemic management. These findings enrich discussions of media vulnerability to state and market forces, as outlined by Marshall and Correa, and offer new insights into the operational realities of Indonesian media during times of crisis. Employing the concepts of commodification, structuration, and spatialization, this study provides a critical framework for understanding mediated public communication in similar crisis contexts around the world.

2. Method

This research uses the case study method, which is a comprehensive description and explanation relating to aspects of individuals, groups, organizations, programs, or social situations. Case study research aims to investigate and reveal "how and why" contemporary events occur (Robert K. Yin, 2018). The selection of this single-instrument case study focuses on a particular issue or concern that is used as an instrument to describe in detail (Creswell, 2013). The data in this study were obtained mostly through interviews. This research was conducted with research subjects including iNews, Metro TV, TV One, and Trans 7. The selection of these media was based on the consideration of the percentage of coverage duration related to COVID-19 from March 1 to June 10, 2020.

Table 1. Informant list

No.	Initials	Informant Description	Category
1.	MMD	Coordinating Minister for Political, Legal and Security Affairs (2019-2024)	Government
2.	HT	Head of Public Communication of BNPB's COVID-19 Task Force	Government
3.	TS	Deputy Editor-in-Chief of TV One during COVID-19	Professional
4.	US	Chairman of the Inter-Agency and Foreign Relations Commission of the Press Council (2019-2022)	Professional
5.	TR	Editor-in-Chief of CNN Indonesia TV and Trans 7	Professional
6.	RRZ	Deputy Editor-in-Chief of CNN Indonesia TV	Professional
7.	AM	Metro TV News Bulletin Producer	Professional
8.	MGY	Content curator on Changing Behavioral Patterns at BNPB	Professional
9.	RH	iNews (News Management Producer)	Professional
10.	KN	Journalist (IJTI Representative)	Professional
11.	IW	Content curator on Changing Behavioral Patterns at BNPB	Professional

Description: The informants in this study consisted of several layers, including the government, actors from the media industry, and journalists. All names in this study are given initials. The table above illustrates the positions held by the informants.

The selection of government officials was carried out to obtain direct perspectives from those involved in the setting and implementation of policies related to COVID-19 reporting. These informants are expected to provide insight into how decisions are formed and implemented at the government policy level that affect media coverage. Meanwhile, media professionals were selected because they have practical experience in managing and reporting news during the pandemic. By involving them, the author can gain a deeper understanding of the dynamics of the editorial team, the editorial decision-making process, and the challenges and pressures they face in reporting on sensitive issues such as COVID-19. The diversity of backgrounds of the informants was considered to provide a broader perspective on the collaboration between the government and the press during the pandemic. By examining the impact of this collaboration on press independence, the author can identify patterns or pressures that may influence how the media reports news related to public health and government policies.

Through a case study with a critical paradigm, oral information was obtained through informants selected using purposive sampling technique, which is sampling based on several considerations. On this research, purposive sample consisted of individuals who had in-depth knowledge and direct experience of the event and were able to articulate it well.

The author conducted two steps of data analysis and interpretation in case study research: 1). Description which describes all research findings which are then described so that they can be sorted out according to the research objectives, 2). Theme analysis is an attempt to find various existing categories. Furthermore, a "construction building" can be arranged on the object of social research so it becomes clearer. The research aims to examine how the Indonesian government collaborated with iNews, Metro TV, TV One, and Trans 7 during the COVID-19 pandemic end up co-opted them. It explores how media content and labor were commodified due to commercial and government pressures. It also investigates how financial programs, such as the FJPP, affected journalistic independence.

3. Results and Discussion

3.1 Commodification of Pandemic News Content

The COVID-19 pandemic brought significant changes to the Indonesian media landscape, especially in terms of content commodification. Vincent Mosco's (1996) political economy of media theory highlights how power relations influence the production, distribution, and consumption of media. During the pandemic, media outlets faced a steep decline in revenue due to reduced advertising from private companies. The government stepped in by purchasing advertising slots, effectively using media as a channel to communicate public health messages and policy updates.

This government-media relationship was driven by necessity. With private-sector revenues falling sharply during the economic downturn, media companies had limited options for survival. Many television stations, such as TV One, offered government agencies special program proposals tailored to cover COVID-19-related topics. These proposals included predetermined durations and broadcast frequencies, indicating that news coverage had been transformed into a product for sale. Media no longer served purely as a source of public information but also as a commercialized platform with its content dictated by financial agreements.

The commodification of content had direct implications for the diversity and quality of media coverage. As profitability became the primary concern, media outlets often sacrificed in-depth and varied reporting. Instead, they gravitated toward content designed to capture larger audiences and attract more advertising. This led to a homogenization of narratives, where unique perspectives and critical voices were sidelined in favor of content aligned with mainstream interests. The result was a narrowing of public discourse, with fewer opportunities for alternative viewpoints to be presented.

An example of this was the absence of other major news stories during the height of the pandemic. According to TS, a Deputy Chief Editor of TV One, the COVID-19 crisis dominated news coverage due to the lack of other significant events, such as natural disasters or accidents. This focus on a singular narrative not only limited the scope of public knowledge but also amplified the commodification process. News outlets capitalized on the pandemic as a "force majeure" event, producing content that resonated with public fear and curiosity to maintain high viewership and sustain advertising revenue.

Negotiations between the government and media companies further revealed the commodification of COVID-19 content. Media outlets often proposed dedicated programs for COVID-19 coverage, which were evaluated based on their financial viability. For instance, TV One reportedly received twenty seven billions of rupiah in government funding to air pandemic-related news. This dynamic reflected a broader social drama, where the government and media collaborated to frame the pandemic narrative. According to Morgan (2020), crises often lead to meaning-making struggles among various actors, and in Indonesia, the government sought to shape public perception through media partnerships.

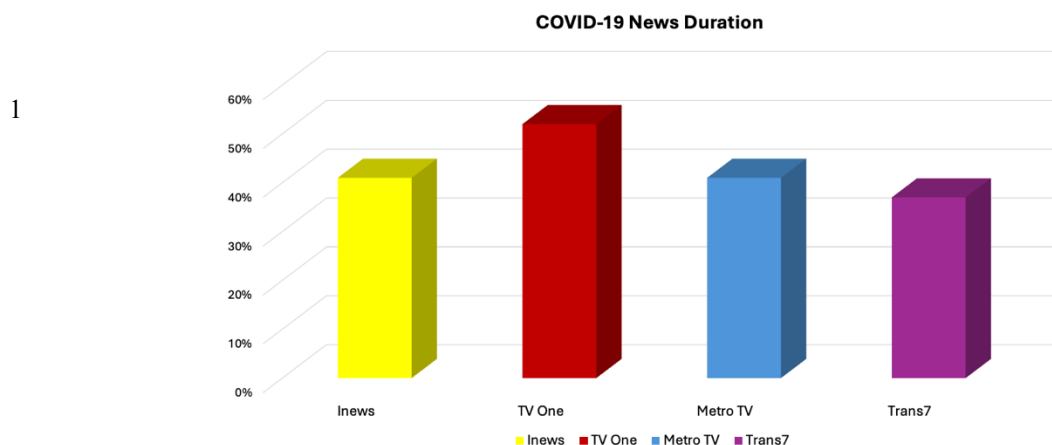


Figure 1. Amount of Media Fundings from Government during Pandemic

Description: Data gathered from the press council, 2023

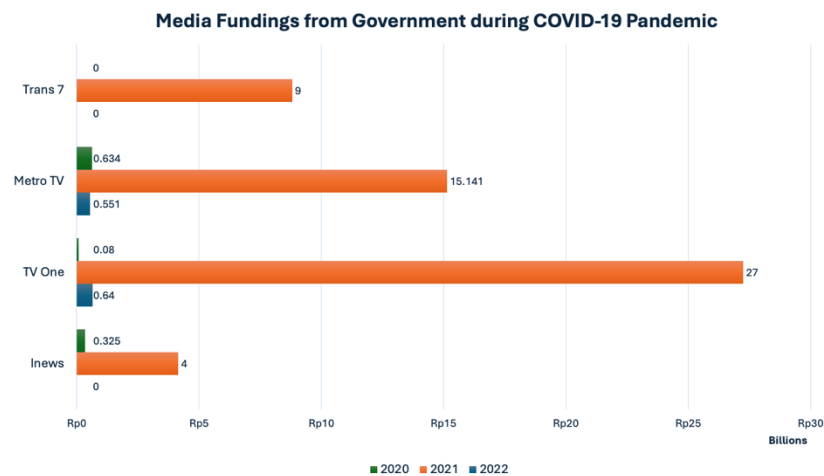


Figure 2. COVID-19 News Duration

Description: Data gathered from the press council, 2023

The financial arrangements were not without controversy. AM, a News Bulletin producer, highlighted how certain news stories were flagged as “must-air” because they were backed by the Ministry of Health. Large-scale vaccination events were often given priority, not solely for their informational value but because of financial agreements tied to their coverage. This practice blurred the line between journalistic independence and commercial interests. MGY, a content curator at BNPB, revealed that the government also “entrusted” the media with stories meant to inspire public optimism. These narratives emphasized resilience and small business struggles to foster hope, showcasing how the government’s messaging was crafted to influence public sentiment.

One of the more complex issues during the pandemic was the blurring of editorial independence and marketing. Media executives acknowledged that the traditional “firewall” between editorial and marketing decisions was no longer as rigid. Instead, a more flexible “demarcation line” was employed, allowing for collaboration during emergencies. This collaboration often took the form of native advertising—content designed to look like news but sponsored by external parties. Native ads were particularly prevalent in pandemic coverage, raising ethical concerns about transparency and the public’s ability to distinguish between unbiased reporting and paid promotions. IW expressed concerns about how native ads were often not labeled clearly, leading audiences to consume potentially biased content without realizing it.

RRZ, Deputy Chief Editor of CNN Indonesia TV, noted that only media-savvy audiences could identify subtle signs of native ads, such as font changes or bumper placements. He acknowledged the challenge of maintaining transparency while still meeting financial obligations. Meanwhile, TR, Editor-in-Chief of CNN Indonesia TV and Trans 7, emphasized editorial caution when working with government agencies. She cited instances where misinformation was avoided by fact-checking government-provided content, underscoring the delicate balance media outlets had to maintain during the pandemic.

Financial dependency also played a critical role. HT, Head of Public Communications for BNPB’s COVID-19 Task Force, disclosed that the government’s fiscal support came through creative placement and native ads rather than direct subsidies. Over 200 media outlets benefited from this arrangement, creating a situation where financial dependencies could compromise journalistic independence. KN, a journalist from IJTI, described this dependency as a “soft violation” of journalistic ideals, where financial pressures made it difficult to uphold editorial integrity. He further noted how smaller media outlets were disadvantaged because government contracts were often awarded to media with higher viewership.

Audience commodification also became a central issue. TV One, which dominated the Indonesian television audience with a 24.4% share, received the largest portion of government funding during the pandemic. This mutual reliance between the government and media underscored how viewership became a valuable commodity, dictating the flow of financial support and further complicating the transparency of public information campaigns.

The selective framing of COVID-19 narratives also became apparent. Stories that supported government campaigns, such as vaccination efforts, were prioritized, while dissenting voices were downplayed. Media outlets were incentivized to maintain good relations with the government, which provided much-needed advertising revenue during the crisis. This editorial alignment often led to limited scrutiny of government policies, as media companies balanced financial needs with their role as public information providers.

3.2 Audience Commodification during Pandemic

Audience commodification is a key aspect of the political economy of media. Dallas Smythe (1977) emphasized that audiences are the primary commodity for mass media. Media companies not only provide information but also produce audiences, which they then sell to advertisers. In the digital age, audience attention has become even more valuable. Technological advancements have enabled media companies to monetize audience engagement, such as sharing content and commenting. These actions generate data that can be sold to advertisers, enabling more targeted marketing efforts.

The pandemic saw a sharp increase in media consumption. A 2021 survey by the Indonesian Press Council revealed that 32.4% of respondents relied on social media as their primary source of COVID-19 information, followed by online news portals (26%) and television (24.8%). Younger generations, particularly Gen Z, were more likely to use social media, while older generations leaned towards traditional media. This trend illustrated the shifting dynamics of information consumption, highlighting social media's growing role in shaping public discourse during the pandemic.

However, media outlets largely failed to conduct audience surveys to assess public information needs. Instead, they relied on third-party data without independently verifying its accuracy. KN criticized this practice, stating that media companies should have conducted their own investigations to ensure the validity of information. By relying solely on external data, media outlets effectively relinquished their role as public information providers, instead becoming mere conduits for government messaging.

Native advertising played a central role in audience commodification during the pandemic. Native ads are designed to blend seamlessly with editorial content, making it difficult for audiences to distinguish between objective news and paid promotions. IW, a content curator at BNPB, acknowledged the prevalence of native advertising, particularly in television media. He raised concerns about the lack of proper labeling, which could mislead audiences. KN went further, criticizing native advertising as a "useless stupidity" that eroded journalistic integrity by blurring the lines between news and marketing.

The government's financial support for media during the pandemic came in various forms, including subsidized electricity, tax relief, and public service announcements (PSAs). According to TS, Deputy Chief Editor of TV One, these measures were intended to prevent media outlets from collapsing during the economic downturn. While the government did not explicitly control news content, the financial dependency created subtle pressures on media outlets to align their narratives with government messaging. KH, a journalist representing IJTI, described this relationship as a "soft violation" of press freedom, as media outlets were compelled to prioritize government-sponsored content.

The commodification of audiences was further evident in how media companies leveraged audience size to secure government contracts. Media outlets with higher viewership received more government funding, creating an uneven playing field. This dynamic incentivized media companies to produce content that maximized audience engagement rather than ensuring diverse, high-quality reporting. Additionally, the government selected specific spokespersons, often from within its ranks, to be featured in news segments. AM, another media informant, confirmed that most interviewees during the pandemic were government officials or health experts.

The rise of unofficial news sources, particularly social media platforms, posed another challenge to traditional media. Many audiences turned to non-conventional news portals for more engaging, less homogenized content. However, these sources often lacked verification processes, leading to the spread of misinformation and hoaxes. The 2021 Press Council survey found that trust in social media platforms ranged from 35% to 50%, with YouTube ranking highest at 50.9%. While these platforms provided alternative viewpoints, they also risked undermining public trust in accurate information.

Economic stability was a significant concern for media companies during the pandemic. The government's financial interventions were seen as a lifeline, helping media outlets maintain operations amid declining advertising revenues. IW noted that public service announcements became a key revenue source for many media outlets. However, this dependency also raised questions about the independence of journalistic content. KH warned that the close relationship between media and government could compromise the media's role as a watchdog, reducing their ability to critically evaluate government policies.

3.3 Commodification of Journalists during COVID-19 Pandemic

The COVID-19 pandemic had a profound impact on the Indonesian media industry, particularly on the commodification of journalists. In the context of digital capitalism, labor commodification refers to the treatment of workers as resources that can be bought and sold, often leading to exploitation and increased control. From a Marxist perspective, this process reduces laborers to mere tools for profit rather than dignified individuals. Journalists, in this case, faced pressures to conform to market demands, resulting in unstable working conditions, low wages, long hours, and diverse responsibilities. These factors raised ethical concerns regarding journalists' rights and welfare, highlighting how

exploitation often disregards their dignity and autonomy.

During the early months of the COVID-19 pandemic, media played a critical role in disseminating information and keeping communities connected. According to research by the World Economic Forum, approximately 80-90% of people consumed news and entertainment almost 24 hours a week during the crisis. In Indonesia, television became the most trusted source of information amid uncertainty. As stay-at-home policies took effect, viewers began exploring new content and entertainment platforms. With more time at home, audience preferences shifted, leading them to consume a wider variety of shows.

Media consumption habits changed significantly during the pandemic, with a notable increase in television viewership. Reports from Comcast indicated a rise in news viewership during late March 2020, as global COVID-19 cases reached one million. Drama series saw a 30% spike in popularity, followed closely by news at 29%, comedy at 28%, and reality shows at 15%. These trends reflected how audiences sought both information and entertainment to distract themselves from pandemic stress. In Indonesia, Nielsen data revealed a rise in television ratings from 12% to 13.8% in March 2020. Despite this increase, the average viewing time remained lower than in other countries, underscoring cultural and economic differences in media consumption.

However, the media industry's reliance on advertising revenue was severely disrupted. Many advertisers withdrew or postponed campaigns due to the uncertain economic environment. Nielsen data showed a significant decline in advertising spending during the early months of the pandemic, although a 17% increase was observed in July 2020. Despite increased media consumption, advertisers hesitated to invest, leading to financial struggles for many media companies. These economic challenges led to layoffs and salary cuts for journalists. AJI reported that from March to November 2020, 150 labor cases involving journalists were filed, with 50 cases related to layoffs. Other cases included delayed salaries, unpaid bonuses, forced early retirements, and job reassignments.

The Fellowship for Behavioral Change Journalism (FJPP) program became a crucial government initiative during the pandemic. The program aimed to support financially struggling journalists while promoting behavioral changes related to COVID-19 prevention. Journalists participating in the program were tasked with producing content emphasizing health protocols such as mask-wearing, handwashing, and social distancing. FJPP, funded by the COVID-19 Task Force and the Ministry of Communication and Informatics (Kominfo), also aimed to combat misinformation and promote accurate, educational content. Nearly 7,000 journalists participated, receiving monthly remuneration in exchange for submitting a set number of behavioral change articles.

Despite its intentions, FJPP raised concerns about journalistic independence. KN, an informant, highlighted how financial support from the government could influence journalists' editorial choices. FJPP content had to be approved by curators to ensure alignment with government narratives. KN expressed concern that this arrangement risked turning journalists into agents of government propaganda, eroding their independence. Similarly, HT noted that journalists were required to submit a quota of 15 articles per month to receive payment. These requirements created a situation where journalists felt compelled to produce content that aligned with government messaging, further blurring the line between journalism and advertising.

The commodification of journalists also impacted the quality of news content. With limited resources and access to information, many journalists relied heavily on government sources for COVID-19 updates. This over-reliance led to more accommodative reporting that often lacked critical perspectives. According to Prayudi and Sagita (2021), the government's dominance over COVID-19 data made it challenging for journalists to provide balanced, independent coverage. Furthermore, pandemic restrictions forced journalists to rely on virtual interviews and secondary sources, reducing the depth and accuracy of their reporting.

The pandemic also accelerated the digital transformation of journalism. Journalists increasingly used government websites as primary data sources and conducted interviews through video conferencing platforms. While these adaptations allowed for continued news production, they also created new challenges. Journalists faced heightened risks of misinformation and struggled to verify facts remotely. The shift to digital reporting demanded new skills and resources, pushing media companies to invest in training and technology. Despite these challenges, many journalists remained committed to providing accurate and timely information to the public.

Economic pressures further weakened the bargaining power of journalists. The pandemic-driven layoffs and financial instability forced many to accept editorial directives without question. KN described how some journalists became dependent on government funding, compromising their ability to report objectively. This dependency created an environment where critical stories were deprioritized in favor of content that aligned with government narratives. As a result, the media's role as a watchdog of democracy was severely undermined.

The relationship between government funding and journalistic independence was particularly evident in television

media. Kominfo allocated substantial funds to four major television stations—TV One, Metro TV, iNews, and Trans 7—between 2020 and 2022. TV One, for instance, received a total of 27.97 billion rupiah over three years, with funding peaking in 2021 during mass vaccination campaigns. However, as the pandemic's impact lessened in 2022, funding dropped significantly, reflecting a decreased demand for COVID-19-related content. The fluctuating funding patterns highlighted how government financial support was tied to public health messaging priorities.

Additionally, the pandemic highlighted how the government exerted influence through financial incentives to control media narratives. The commodification of journalists became evident in how media houses navigated editorial policies to align with government programs. KN argued that many journalists were treated as “content creators” for government-sponsored campaigns rather than independent reporters. As more government funds were tied to editorial quotas, the media's capacity for independent, investigative journalism diminished. This created a landscape where public trust in the media could be eroded over time.

Beyond government influence, journalists also faced increased digital pressures to meet content quotas across various online platforms. Many outlets adopted multi-platform strategies to keep pace with evolving audience habits, requiring journalists to produce additional digital content alongside traditional reporting. This rapid increase in content production led to journalist burnout and lower-quality news. HT described how the race to fulfill digital quotas further compromised fact-checking and editorial review processes, amplifying the risks of misinformation in public discourse.

3.4 Structuration and Spatialisation

One of the most notable aspects of media restructuring during the pandemic was the intensified co-option between the government and the press. The government provided financial support, including subsidies for paper and electricity, tax reductions, and public service announcements (PSAs). MMD, an informant from the government, emphasized that the funding was intended to help media outlets avoid collapse during the crisis. MMD clarified that the collaboration was not a direct form of media buying but rather a mutual effort to disseminate essential public health messages. Despite this framing, the government still maintained influence over media narratives through sponsorships and curated sources.

The government's funding mechanisms, while framed as supportive, risked compromising media independence. Although MMD denied any direct government orders to prevent criticism, journalists were encouraged to prioritize government narratives. The distribution of government-selected sources and pre-approved messaging effectively influenced news coverage. Media outlets produced pandemic-related content, including case updates, health guidelines, and vaccination campaigns, which shaped public perceptions. Platforms like TV One, Metro TV, iNews, and Trans 7 also curated content from social media, amplifying both official narratives and public experiences.

During the pandemic, public frustration over slow government responses and inconsistent policies also became a focus of media coverage. Social media played a key role in amplifying voices critical of government actions. For instance, the #IndonesiaTerserah movement emerged as a viral expression of disappointment, particularly from healthcare workers. Mainstream media amplified the hashtag, sparking widespread discussions about public policy and societal responsibility. Despite government control over certain narratives, social media remained a relatively uncontrolled space for dissent, highlighting the tension between government influence and public discourse.

Media's role in social mobilization was also significant. Television and social media platforms served as amplifiers for solidarity campaigns and social initiatives during the pandemic. Movements like “Bersama Lawan COVID-19,” which raised donations and support for affected communities, gained widespread media coverage. This amplification not only informed the public but also encouraged more people to engage in social action. However, the dissemination of misinformation about COVID-19, vaccines, and health policies posed challenges. R, an informant, stressed the media's critical role in countering misinformation and providing verified, accurate information to the public.

The spatialization of media, as explored by Mosco, highlights how large corporations concentrated media ownership, leading to the dominance of well-funded outlets over smaller ones. This power dynamic mirrored Noam Chomsky and Edward Herman's (1988) Propaganda Model, which explains how media serves the interests of political and economic elites. In Indonesia, the pandemic intensified this issue, as government-funded campaigns favored major networks. The Ministry of Communication and Information (KOMINFO) allocated 57.5 billion rupiah across four major television stations—TV One, Metro TV, iNews, and Trans 7—over three years. This financial dependency heightened concerns about editorial independence and content control.

Government intervention extended to the Fellowship for Behavioral Change Journalism (FJPP), which supported over 3,500 journalists with monthly stipends in exchange for producing behavioral change articles. H, an informant, explained that participants were required to submit 15 articles per month to qualify for funding. While the program provided financial relief, it also imposed editorial constraints. Journalists were expected to align their content with government narratives on health protocols and vaccination campaigns. KN described the system as a form of “soft

coercion,” where financial incentives shaped editorial decisions, limiting journalistic autonomy.

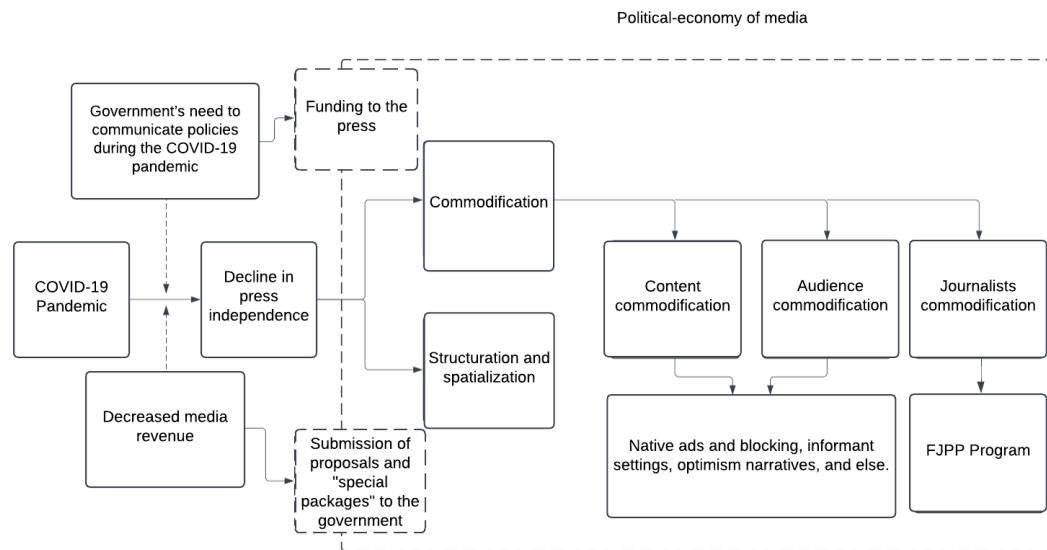


Figure 3. Political-economy of Media during COVID-19 Pandemic

Media independence became a critical concern during the pandemic. The Press Freedom Index (IKP) showed slight improvements during the pandemic, but underlying issues persisted. Economic dependence on government funding hindered editorial freedom, as highlighted by the stagnation of indicators related to independence from strong interest groups. Even as transparency and access to information improved, media outlets struggled to resist external pressures. The categorization of certain stories as mandatory content further restricted editorial autonomy. KN noted that journalists faced supervision and pre-approval processes for pandemic-related stories, leading to tensions between their ideals and the financial realities of their roles.

The pandemic accelerated the convergence of traditional and digital media, reshaping the spatial distribution of information. Increased reliance on digital platforms, such as social media and news portals, expanded the media's reach but also opened the door to greater corporate and government influence. The shift from editorial to advertorial content became more prominent, reflecting the merging of journalism and marketing interests. This transformation highlighted the media's vulnerability to external pressures, as economic survival often took precedence over journalistic integrity.

Co-optation between the government and the press, though framed as necessary for public welfare, blurred the lines between information dissemination and propaganda. A, an informant, acknowledged that while some content was beneficial for public awareness, the merging of marketing and editorial agendas compromised transparency. Native advertising, a blend of sponsored content and news, became a common practice. This shift reduced the media's watchdog role, as outlets prioritized government-funded narratives over independent investigative reporting.

The loss of media independence also stemmed from the government's dual role as regulator and financier. By controlling both the funding and the narratives, the government effectively positioned itself as a gatekeeper of public information. This dynamic mirrored Karppinen and Moe's (2016) definition of independence as the absence of external control. The allocation of funding based on compliance with government messaging created a business model that prioritized government interests over public accountability. As such, the media's ability to act as a critical voice in society was significantly weakened.

The structural and spatial changes brought about by the pandemic underscore the critical relationship between media, government, and corporate interests. While collaboration aimed to address public health challenges, it also led to the commodification of information and the erosion of media independence. Moving forward, ensuring editorial autonomy and resisting external pressures will be essential for preserving democratic values in the media landscape. As media outlets continue to adapt to post-pandemic realities, fostering transparency, accountability, and ethical journalism will be key to rebuilding public trust and safeguarding the integrity of the press.

The findings of this study yield critical managerial implications for the media industry in Indonesia, particularly in post-crisis recovery and long-term sustainability. First, media organizations must build resilience by diversifying their revenue streams beyond state funding and advertising. This includes exploring crowdfunding, philanthropic support,

and membership models, as these can reduce financial dependencies that threaten editorial autonomy (Pickard, 2020). Second, media houses should implement stronger editorial guidelines that establish a clear boundary between journalistic content and sponsored material. During the COVID-19 pandemic, native advertising blurred these lines and compromised public trust. Establishing internal ethics committees can help ensure that all externally funded content undergoes rigorous review, upholding transparency and integrity (Carlson, 2015). Third, investments in data-driven audience research are essential. As reliance on third-party metrics proved insufficient, media managers should prioritize in-house analytics to better understand audience needs and curate relevant, independent content. Fourth, capacity building through training on crisis communication, digital literacy, and misinformation management should be institutionalized. This ensures journalists are equipped to respond with agility and uphold professional standards in emergencies. Lastly, collaborations between media associations, academia, and civil society can foster knowledge exchange and collective action to defend press freedom. A regulatory framework led by independent bodies such as the Press Council can standardize norms for government-media cooperation during crises, ensuring transparency and accountability. As Indonesia's media landscape evolves post-pandemic, these strategies are vital for rebuilding trust, maintaining democratic functions, and safeguarding journalistic independence in an increasingly complex information environment.

4. Conclusion

This study examined the commodification of Indonesian media during the COVID-19 pandemic, focusing on how financial dependencies and government collaborations influenced the editorial autonomy of four major television stations: iNews, Metro TV, TV One, and Trans 7. The findings demonstrate that economic pressures and state interventions reshaped news production in ways that undermined journalistic independence.

Commodification occurred at multiple levels. News content was transformed into commercial products shaped by government contracts and advertising interests. Audience attention became a traded commodity, and journalists were positioned as extensions of state messaging campaigns. These dynamics collectively constrained the media's critical function, narrowing the space for public scrutiny and balanced reporting.

While the media continued to play an essential role in public information dissemination, its capacity to challenge dominant narratives was significantly weakened. The government's strategic use of financial support—through creative placements, subsidies, and behavioral journalism programs—blurred the line between public communication and propaganda. Native advertising and editorial mandates further complicated the audience's ability to distinguish between news and promotion.

In light of these developments, the study underscores the need for systemic reforms to safeguard media independence in times of crisis. Media institutions must diversify revenue sources, strengthen internal editorial guidelines, and establish ethical boundaries between journalistic content and sponsored material. Moreover, policy frameworks should promote transparency and ensure that government support does not compromise democratic accountability.

As Indonesia transitions into a post-pandemic environment, restoring public trust in the media will depend on the sector's ability to uphold its watchdog role. Strengthening editorial autonomy, investing in journalistic capacity, and fostering multi-stakeholder collaboration are crucial steps toward a resilient, independent, and democratic media ecosystem.

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