

## **Independence and Neutrality Journalists Ahead 2024 Indonesian Presidential Election in Perspective Media Conglomerates**



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**ABSTRACT:** This research explains the independence and neutrality of journalists ahead of the 2024 Presidential Election from the perspective of media conglomerates. The independence and neutrality of journalists are urgently needed during the 2024 presidential election so that the resulting news products do not harm society. However, in mid the practice of media conglomeration, there is a phenomenon where media owners are active in politics and use the media for their interests. This conglomeration practice threatens the independence and neutrality of the journalists working in the media. In the end, society is the party that loses the most because journalists and the media can lead to uniform opinions due to media conglomeration. This research aims to illustrate the threat to the independence and neutrality of journalists ahead of the 2024 Presidential Election due to the practice of media conglomeration. The study uses a qualitative descriptive approach through primary data from in-depth interviews with six journalists from different media representing five media groups to get an overview of the independence and neutrality of journalists in producing journalistic products for the 2024 presidential election, which is threatened by media conglomeration. The result of the research is that the independence and neutrality of journalists make reporting on the 2024 presidential election in newsrooms difficult to achieve due to media conglomeration. Journalists who work in media whose owners are affiliated with political parties are not independent and neutral in carrying out their duties and functions. The higher the position of media owners in political parties, the more independence and neutrality of journalists and the mass media will collapse, because their relationship is very dependent on media owners.

**KEYWORDS:** Journalist, Independence, Neutrality, Media Conglomerate, Presidential Election, Mass Media

### **INTRODUCTION**

The Democratic Party will soon be held in Indonesia. In the simultaneous general elections to be held on 14 February 2024, there will be elections for the candidates for President and Vice President of Indonesia in 2024, Regional Head Elections (Pilkada) in 2024, and also Legislative Elections (Pileg) in 2024 to elect members of the DPR. DPR, DPD, DPRD provincial level to district/city level. Reflecting on the 2019 and 2014 elections, which were quite controversial due to heated political overtones, especially during the presidential election (Pilpres), the media and journalists, in particular, were asked to prioritize independence and neutrality in carrying out their duties in the 2024 presidential election reporting process.

We certainly don't forget how the media competed in publishing news about the presidential election in 2014. There were at least two national television stations that were in the spotlight at that time, namely TV One, owned by Aburizal Bakrie, which carried Prabowo Subianto's presidential candidate and Hatta Rajasa, and Surya Paloh's Metro TV, which was part of Joko Widodo's presidential and vice presidential candidate coalition with Jusuf Kalla. The two news television stations are considered not independent and neutral in carrying out their duties because each report only sides with the presidential and vice presidential candidates supported by the media owner involved in practical politics in different political parties.

At that time, Aburizal Bakrie was the chairman of the Golkar Party, a coalition party that supported Prabowo Subianto and Hatta Rajasa. Surya Paloh, the owner of Metro TV, is also the founder and general chairman of the NasDem Party. The Indonesian Broadcasting Commission (KPI) has also issued warning letters and given administrative sanctions warnings to TV One and Metro TV for disproportionately broadcasting the activities of the presidential and vice presidential candidates. KPI even recommended the two television stations be evaluated for Broadcasting Operations Permits (IPP). The KPI recommendation was given to the Ministry of Communication and Information Technology (Kemenkominfo). According to KPI member Iddy Muzzayad, based on data from the General Elections Commission (KPU) in the period 19-25 May 2014, the Metro TV television station gave more news to the presidential and vice presidential candidates, Joko Widodo and Jusuf Kalla, a total of 187 times. This figure is unequal compared to the news broadcasts of the presidential and vice presidential candidates, Prabowo Subianto and Hatta Rajasa, which were only 110 times. On the other hand, the TV One television station broadcasted news on Prabowo

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Subianto and Hatta Rajasa 153 times in the same period. In contrast, news on Joko Widodo and Jusuf Kalla only appeared 79 times (Alamsyah, 2018, p. 21).

The media and journalists play a big role in shaping public opinion on the image of certain presidential and vice presidential candidates through the reporting framework. TV One and Metro TV are competing to broadcast the activities of the two pairs of presidential and vice presidential candidates carried by the media owners to form a positive image of the two pairs of presidential and vice presidential candidates in public opinion. This is one of the roles of the mass media, which is to influence the attitudes and behavior of individuals or certain groups of people and society. The mass media influences public views in the process of building public opinion. According to Burhan Bungin, the mass media is a powerful weapon for fighting over an image (Choiriyati, 2015, p. 23).

The media is often used as a weapon to build or even destroy and spread the image of a certain figure or group in Indonesia, especially during elections. The close relationship between the mass media and the political image in Indonesia has even been investigated in a study written by Putri Azzahra Anwar, Fitrih Cahaya Amalia, Husnil Khatimah and Amalia M Gappar. A study conducted by Muh Zulkifli Tahir, Hafied Canggura, and A. Alimuddin Unde also stated that the media was a tool for building the political image of the candidates for Regent and Deputy Regent during the regional elections in Takalar in 2012. As well as Munadhil Abdul Muqsih and Prima Mulyasari's study which illustrates how the new media, Twitter, can be a tool to build socialization messages for the Prosperous PKS party to build the party's image.

As for what is meant by, political image, it is the reputation or image that is built regarding a political party or someone who has a career in politics that is perceived by the public. This political image is usually formed through the formation of mutual trust, values and expectations that are manifested in the form of personal opinion, to develop into public opinion (Siregar et al., 2020, pp. 1015–1016). The political image of a political party or a politician is usually obtained directly through interpersonal communication or mass communication or the mass media is used as a political communication tool. The media is indeed the latest tool to disseminate information or political messages.

A positive image of the community needs to be achieved during socialization and political campaigns. This is one of the strategies to get votes (Muqsih & A., 2019, p. 4). It's not surprising that the imaging business using advertising channels eventually mushroomed in the mass media during the election. On the basis of business cooperation, the mass media and journalists use their ability to polish the image of a candidate or party participating in an election in order to get a place or even be voted for by the public.

The ability of the mass media in question is to influence public acceptance of certain candidates or political parties through news coverage. The mass media is indeed seen as a force that can influence society (Gora et al., 2022, p. 217). The ability of journalists in question is to produce and distributing news content or broadcasts that can enhance the image, or even destroy the image of certain candidates who do not have a cooperative relationship with the mass media.

In fact, both the media and journalists, in particular, are asked to be independent and neutral in broadcasting news, including political news such as the presidential election. The newsroom of the mass media, which has been considered a holy temple, must be free from various interests because the mass media, whose newsroom is not sterile, will not be able to carry out its function as a reliable information transmitter (R. Ritonga, 2021, p. 27).

### **1. Media and Political Participation**

The mass media is known and needed by the public because of their job of voicing correct information while at the same time promoting the principle of independence. Information disseminated by the media can even encourage public participation in politics, including in general elections.

According to Gazali, there is a significant relationship between the world of politics and the media. In the relationship between the two, the media not only has the ability to convey a variety of information but is also able to influence. Information disseminated through the media is not only something that must be known by the public, but also able to change attitudes, opinions and beliefs of each individual about the political process, power and legitimacy through various news products or media broadcasts (Samsuri, 2016, p. 19).

So that at the moment of elections as a form of implementing democracy, it is important for the media to be able to prioritize independent and neutral principles. If the media and journalists take sides due to media conglomeration, public trust will collapse. Trust is not only in the media and journalists, but in politics as a whole. As a result, public political participation, in this case voting during general elections, may not be realized. This can be seen from how much the public may not vote.

The principle of independence is built through journalists who work professionally. Journalists, starting from the scope of news seekers in the field, editors, up to the highest structure, namely the editor-in-chief, must have independence and freedom in working, not be bound to certain groups and have independence. Independent is defined as both journalists and the mass media must be free from all forms of interference by anyone (Susanto, 2021, p. 24).

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The principle of independence must also align with the principle of neutrality. In order for the mass media to have a neutral attitude, the journalists in the newsroom must also hold the same principle. Neutrality is defined as a journalist's attitude that is balanced, accurate in presenting news, and does not side with certain groups except for the interests of the wider community. The principles of independence and neutrality must be carried out in journalism and journalistic activities. However, it is currently known that a number of media owners are active politicians. They do not only hold positions in certain political parties, and some even act as founders of political parties (Poentarie, 2015, p. 2).

This condition causes journalists and the mass media to be influenced or become victims of commodification for political and economic interests only. Media owners getting involved in practical politics affects the performance of journalists working in the mass media. Even though journalists, as the spearhead of creating trusted journalistic products, must be free from interference. Reporting is material consumed by the public for events outside their knowledge, so the quality of news is important and needs to be supported with accountable accuracy. So journalists who have independence and neutrality in determining the direction of media coverage are needed. According to McQuail, freedom as a working principle of the media is independent of gaining audience trust (Susanto, 2021, p. 26).

Several previous studies have discussed a lot about independence and neutrality, but only within the scope of the mass media from an economic perspective. The researchers discuss how mass media companies take many strategies to maintain their existence, one of which is by setting aside the independence and neutrality of the media companies themselves. Rajab Ritonga's study (2021) discusses how the independence of mass media companies in Medan, North Sumatra, collapsed by tying contracts with certain agencies to broadcast advertorial news and provide paid news services to survive amid the onslaught of the Covid-19 pandemic.

Elik Susanto's research (2021) discusses how the editorial staff of Tempo maintains the principle of independence in its newsroom as part of its media business strategy to survive in the digital era. This research illustrates the conflict between the editorial division and business interests, where a heated situation occurred when the Tempo editorial room authority had to deal with other organizational units, such as the advertising, marketing, and business development departments. Meanwhile, Darajat Wibawa's research (2020) discusses the knowledge or understanding journalists possess in the city of Bandung regarding what media neutrality is and the triggering factors so that media neutrality can be implemented. So what is the effect of implementing media neutrality on journalists?

Likewise, studies related to media conglomeration have previously been carried out. The researchers discussed how this media conglomeration impacts democracy in Indonesia. Jaduk Gilang Pembayun's research (2015) discusses how media conglomerates are formed due to intense competition in the mass media industry, causing the consolidation of mass media players and forming large groups. In the end, media conglomeration affects the content and programs delivered to the public, where the contents of media coverage only represent the economic interests of media owners.

Anggia Valerisha's study on the Impact of Media Conglomerate Practices on the Achievement of Democratic Consolidation in Indonesia explains how monopolistic practices in the mass media have affected the democratic process in Indonesia. The mass media is described as a tool for media owners to have the ability to buy political influence. This can be seen through the content of the media, which issues the agenda of the political elite, makes news a mere commodity, and so on. From these previous studies, more discussed how the independence and neutrality of newsroom can be threatened by the business activities of media companies. As well as the impact of the practice of media conglomeration which is mostly associated with the independence and neutrality of the mass media, not specifically for journalist. Unlike these previous studies, this research looks at how journalists maintain their independence and neutrality in the newsroom ahead of the 2024 presidential election when confronted with the media conglomerate where they work.

### **2. Media Conglomerate in Indonesia**

There are currently various threats to independence and neutrality for journalists. One of them, according to the author, is interesting to discuss ahead of the 2024 presidential election, namely the threat of independence due to media conglomeration, or media ownership that directly intersects with certain rulers or political parties, causing the news that is produced and distributed to the public to only have an impact on the benefits of the media. and rulers or political parties that have direct contact with the owners of the media themselves (Pembayun, 2015, p. 111).

Definition of a conglomerate is a group of conglomerates that invest shares in a company in one coordination and cause all the main management policies to be determined only from one door. The power of a conglomerate is so great that it can provide benefits for the perpetrators; the benefits in question are the ability to set inter-company transaction prices or be able to avoid taxes, it is very easy to beat its competitors, it can provide cross-subsidies between business units within it so that prices can always be competitive, has the power to bargain. (Khumairoh, 2021, p. 68).

The practice of media conglomeration, in essence, occurs when media companies merge and form a larger company. This one big company will oversee many media with various platforms, print, television, radio, online, and others, and can also network in

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many areas as part of its business. Media conglomerates can be realized in several ways, from buying shares, mergers, or joint ventures, to acquisitions or takeovers. Media conglomeration causes unhealthy business competition between mass media owners, which can lead to several changes, especially in creating news content or broadcasts that are subjective and full of certain interests.

These changes are closely related to the benefits obtained by the mass media owner, for example, the popularity that the media owner might get through news content or broadcasts made by media journalists. If there is no diversity in broadcasting content and diversity in media ownership, it is highly likely that uniform public opinion will occur. This is certainly contrary to the principles of independent, neutral, objective and honest media and journalists (Triputranti, 2023, p. 28).

The uniformity of public opinion and the power of political business held by the dominant media is a threat to press freedom and media democratization. Currently it is known that there are eight groups of giant mass media players. These media corporations were formed as a result of intense mass media business competition, resulting in media consolidation which resulted in a concentration of mass media ownership or also called media conglomeration.

**Table 1: Media Conglomerate in Indonesia**

MEDIA	OWNER	TV STATION		RADIO STATION	PRINT MEDIA		ONLINE	OTHER BUSINESS
		NATIONAL	OTHERS		NEWSPAPER	TABLOID		
Kompas Gramedia Group	Jakob Oetama	Kompas TV	KTV	Ria FM Solo, Serambi FM, Radio Palupi FM, etc	Kompas	Citra etc	Tribunnews.com, Tribunbatam.id, Kompas.com, etc	Education, Hotel, Book Store, Property, Retail and Publishing etc
Elang Mahkota Teknologi (EMTEK) Group	Eddy Kusnadi Sariatmadja	SCTV Indosiar	OChanel	-	-	-	Liputan6.com, kapanlagi.com, etc	Digital wallet, market place platform, production house, etc
Lippo Groups/B Universe	Mochtar Riady	Berita Satu	-	-	-	-	Liputan6.com, kapanlagi.com, etc	Digital wallet, market place platform, production house, etc
Viva Group/Bakrie & Brothers	Aburizal Bakrie/Anindya Bakrie (Golkar Party)	TVOne, ANTV	Channel (V)	-	-	-	Viva News	Telecommunication, Property, Gas and Oil, Coal
Media Group	Surya Paloh (Nasdem Party)	Metro TV	-	-	Media Indonesia Lampung Post, Borneo News	-	Media Indonesia	-
MNC Group	Harry Tanoe (Perindo Party)	RCTI, GTV, Inews TV MNC TV	MNC Sky Vision, Oke Vision, Top TV, Sun TV Network	Okezone Radio, Trijaya FM, Radio Dangdut etc	Koran Sindo	High End, Genie, etc	Okezone.com, Sindonews.com etc	IT, content production and distribution, talent management

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CT Group	Chairul Tanjung (Demokrat Party)	Trans TV Trans 7	Telkom Vision	-	-	-	-	Bank, Insurance, Retail, Property (Resort, Mal)
Jawa Pos Group	Dahlan Iskan (Demokrat Party)	-	Batam TV, Riau TV, Fajar TV etc	Fajar FM Makassar	Jawa Pos, Indo Pos, Rakyat Merdeka, Radar, etc	Mentari, Liberty, etc	Jawapos.com, batampos.co.id, etc	Biro Travel, Power Plant

Source: Processed by the author, 2023

This media conglomeration can negatively impact journalists' independence and neutrality in processing reporting on the upcoming 2024 presidential election. At worst, the situation in the 2014 presidential election may repeat itself. Journalists and media workers may be forced or voluntarily sell their idealism when producing and distributing news content regarding the 2024 presidential election to the public later. Ahead of the 2024 elections, political parties and politicians, both individuals and groups, are trying to use the mass media to influence public opinion by suppressing the weaknesses of journalists and media workers. According to Habibie, it is necessary to prevent the influence of political interests on press members, including issues related to media ownership or conglomeration, especially for press members who work for media whose owners are actively involved in the political arena. The independence and neutrality of journalists deserve more attention so that the resulting presidential election news is not solely for the benefit of journalists, certain politicians, or media owners but for the benefit of society as a whole. (Pembayun, 2015, p. 110).

By looking at the phenomenon of media owners or media conglomerates engaging in practical politics, this research will look at the extent to which media conglomerates threaten journalists' independence and neutrality in newsrooms before the 2024 presidential election. So the purpose of this research is to produce an overview of the independence and neutrality of journalists ahead of the 2024 presidential election from the threat of the media conglomerate where they work. Will the journalists' efforts to maintain their independence and neutrality during the 2024 presidential election be realized amid the threat of media conglomeration?

### RESEARCH METHODS

This research will use a critical paradigm with a qualitative descriptive approach to understanding the phenomenon of media conglomerates involved in practical politics threatening the independence and neutrality of journalists working in their media, and criticizing them becomes the conclusion of the research. The object of research in this study is the pros and cons of the possible threat of intervention in the newsroom during the 2024 presidential election through the perspective of media conglomerates. The research subjects are informants who are journalists with both the status of field reporters and editors from six different media companies representing the five giant media groups today. This qualitative descriptive research will focus on efforts to answer or describe the independence and neutrality of journalists in the 2024 presidential election in the newsroom can be realized if they see the threat of media conglomeration.

Departing from this thought, this research is not oriented towards certain theories as is commonly done in pragmatic studies (Patton, 2014). Data collection was carried out by interviewing the six informants as sources of primary data and secondary data obtained from various sources such as national journals and books relevant to the research topic. The questions asked in the interview were unstructured and in a free situation so that informants were more flexible in telling stories about the research topic. The data from the interview results will be analyzed qualitatively.

The six informants were selected based on purposive sampling. According to Sugiyono, purposive sampling is a sampling technique with certain criteria or considerations, so that the selection of informants in this study is based on the criteria of whether the journalist understands the information regarding the research focus (Mukhsin et al., 2017, p. 190). The six informants have the following criteria: (1) have worked as journalists for more than five years; (2) work in media that is part of a network of eight media conglomerates; (3) experienced in reporting in executive and legislative agencies; and (4) having a network among executive and legislative officials.



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**Table 2: List of Informant**

LIST OF INFORMANTS			
NAME	POSITION	MEDIA	MEDIA GROUP
Informant 1	Editor	KOMPAS	KOMPAS GRAMEDIA GROUP
Informant 2	Journalist	TRIBUNNEWS.COM	KOMPAS GRAMEDIA GROUP
Informant 3	Editor	Medcom.id	MEDIA GROUP
Informant 4	Journalist	TVONE	PT VISI MEDIA ASIA Tbk (BAKRIE GROUP)
Informant 5	Journalist	MNC GROUP	MNC GROUP
Informant 6	Journalist	LIPUTAN6.COM	ELANG MAHKOTATEKNOLOGI (EMTEK) GROUP

The selection of informants was deliberately carried out from the perspective of field journalists and journalists working inside or editors, in order to get a clearer picture of the independence and neutrality of each of these journalists when they work in processing news related to the presidential election. Are the independence and neutrality of each journalist threatened from the side of the media conglomerate? As is known, even though the presidential election will still be carried out legally starting in February 2024, these media have started to process special coverage for the 2024 presidential election from now on.

## RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Journalism is a profession that is considered to have an important role for the wider community, especially in the current era of globalization of information technology. The role of journalists through the mass media is to complement the realization of democracy; this can be seen from its position as the fourth pillar of democracy after the legislative, executive, and judicial institutions of government. Without journalists, the public will not be able to obtain truth-tested information. Especially during the current era of information overload, information circulating in society can be biased or even wrong if journalists do not verify it as part of their work.

Journalists can be interpreted as someone who carry out journalism activities, namely individuals who search for and write news regularly, and the results of their writing are then processed in the editorial room until finally published through the mass media regularly to be conveyed to the public (Haurissa et al., 2020, p. 26). Making news in the mass media cannot be separated from journalists who carry out journalistic work, from finding news material, writing, and editing process to being published in the mass media and distributed to the public. Journalists and their journalistic work cannot be separated from the mass media.

The mass media is information media related to the public and is generally used to communicate with the wider public so that its management is carried out professionally to make a profit. There are various mass media that the public can now access, from television, radio, newspapers, magazines, and tabloids to new media such as online news sites that take advantage of advances in internet technology (Haurissa et al., 2020, p. 30).

According to Kovach and Rosenstiel, it is emphasized that the main obligation of journalists is, to tell the truth, and their loyalty is only to society. This obligation makes journalists have to work professionally. Journalists who are aware of their obligation to be loyal to the truth for the community are certain to be able to work professionally and have the courage to fight for the truth for the benefit of the wider community (Haurissa et al., 2020, p. 27).

But unfortunately, the social reality is that people often find journalists who make mistakes and harm the public. Through the Press Council and the Indonesian Broadcasting Commission, many people complain about journalistic works that disturb the public interest. These journalistic works include those related to the presidential election. These disturbances can be in the form of fake news, unethical packaging, the emergence of groups of people who feel isolated or disadvantaged and others. Fake news, which is incorrect information conveyed from news sourced from official media, can affect democracy. Fake news can even be used as a political weapon (Muqith & Muzykant, 2016, p. 310). Then what if these mistakes arise due to threats from within the mass media itself?

The Job of journalists cannot be separated from the mass media. Unfortunately, at the same time, today's mass media cannot be separated from the so-called media conglomeration. Not a few of these media owners also founded political parties or became part of the board of certain political parties. They take advantage of the media to build their image or promote certain candidates. Moreover, entering the current election season, usually the mass media will increasingly feel partiality towards certain candidates. Will history repeat in the 2024 presidential election that certain journalists and mass media are not independent and not neutral? The answers to these questions will be illustrated by analyzing the author's interviews with informants.

According to the author's interview with the six informants, eight months before the 2024 presidential election, the condition of the newsroom was still relatively conducive. Journalists are still seen to be able to uphold their independence and neutrality; this is due to several reasons. Among other things, because media owners are not directly involved in politics, those involved in practical politics have not yet specifically determined their political agenda.

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According to informant K, where the media work has a strong culture of control so that the independence and neutrality of journalists in the newsroom are still maintained. This strong control culture where ordinary people or journalists without positions hold higher power. Kompas Culture also always holds editorial meetings daily to discuss the contents of the 2024 presidential election column. The editorial meeting becomes the official control forum so journalists who hold positions such as editor, editor, online manager, and print manager may not take sides against a particular candidate.

Through editorial meetings, both at the journalist level and at the editor level, if an oddity is found, in this case, partiality or an attempt to encourage the editorial team to side with a particular candidate in directing news content, the meeting participants will voice it out so that all editorial divisions know about it. It is known that making news, including political news in the mass media, is not easy and is influenced by five factors, including editorial meetings.

Five factors influence the process of forming news: Individuals, Media Routines, Media Organizations, Extras Media, and Ideology. The implementation of editorial meetings is included in the second level of forming news in the mass media, namely the routine level. This level means that how news is made and published is a routine activity at the editorial desk. The routine includes planning meetings, the reporting process, determining the sources to be interviewed, and choosing the angle or angle for reporting. The routine that repeatedly occurs at the editorial desk gives a certain color to the journalistic products produced. (R. Ritonga, 2021, p. 29). The following are five factors that surround the news formation process:

### a) Individual

In the first factor, news is generated within the scope of individual journalists or journalists whose job is to collect data and then process it at the editorial desk, so that the background of these individuals, such as age, gender, education to political orientation, will influence the news written.

### b) Media Routines

The second factor is the routine or habits of the media, meaning how news is made and published is actually a routine activity that occurs at the editorial desk. The routine includes planning meetings, the reporting process, determining the sources to be interviewed, and choosing the angle or angle for reporting. The routine that occurs repeatedly at the editorial desk gives a certain color to the journalistic products that are produced.

### c) Media Organization

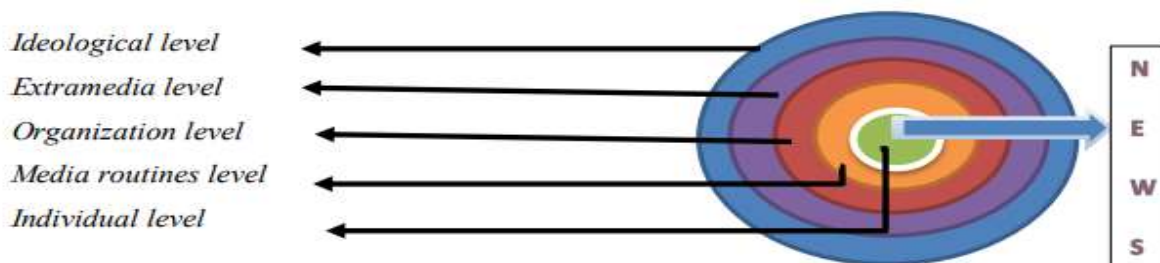
The third factor is media organizations, where the organization of personnel in the newsroom will affect the news produced. The editorial personnel in question start from the bottom, namely journalists or journalists who work in the field to collect information and write it, then editors or editors who process the results of information obtained from the field, editor-in-chief as the final examiner in the newsroom to media owners. Outside the editorial room there are also a number of other organizational units, including the advertising, marketing, printing, and other divisions. Among these organizational units do not always have the same interests, they can even conflict with each other.

### d) Extra Media

In the fourth factor there are extra media, namely other parties outside the mass media company. These include advertisers, sources from the news itself, as well as other external parties such as the government, pressure groups, politicians' groups, business groups and so on. At this level, these outsiders can have a significant influence on the news production process because they have the ability to influence the news production and publication process.

### e) Ideology

In the last factor there is ideology as a certain source of reference. The ideology in question is the ideology that is owned by journalists in the newsroom and media managers in seeing the reality that takes place in society. This ideology will give a certain color or influence in a news report in the mass media.



**Figure I : The Five Circles of Influence on Media Content**

Source: (Musfialdy, 2019, p. 25)

The Kompas editors also have a resistant attitude if there are efforts from other organizational groups who want to intervene in the contents of the presidential election news. This resistance was seen in the gubernatorial election in 2012, where the editorial section protested against covert political advertisements in checkered motifs on the head of the Kompas newspaper. It is known

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that the plaid motif at that time was identical to the candidates for Governor and Deputy Governor of DKI Jakarta, Joko Widodo and Ahok. Since then, the editorial has implemented strict control over election reporting.

K explained that currently, in the special column for the 2024 Presidential Election, Kompas presents news on the presidential candidates in a balanced manner. Candidates whose names are revealed as presidential and vice presidential candidates, such as Prabowo Subianto, Ganjar Pranowo, and Anies Baswedan, receive the same portion of the news. If Prabowo Subianto's candidate makes the headlines on Monday, the other candidates will make headlines the following day. K said this had become an unwritten consensus in Kompas.

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To maintain its independence, Kompas uses the results of the Kompas R&D survey to explain the public's desire for the 2024 presidential candidates. K said that the public's will for certain candidates would be seen through the results of the R&D survey, and the editors only need to direct the news to the will of the community as a form of loyalty to the public. The attitude of the Kompas journalists is in line with the fourth element of journalism, as Bill Kovach and Tom Rosenstiel expressed that journalists must remain independent from the parties they cover. This independence implies the attitude or stance of journalists following their professionalism considerations and bearing in mind that reporting must be for the public interest only (Haurissa et al., 2020, p. 33).

According to K, the results of the Kompas R&D survey were also independent and neutral. This can be measured through one case, namely the decline in the electability of Ganjar Pranowo after he stumbled on the case of Indonesia being canceled as host of the U-20 World Cup some time ago. Whereas previously, the name Ganjar Pranowo was at the top of the results of Kompas R&D results, and now it has changed to Prabowo Subianto at the top.

Informant T, who works at Tribunews, revealed that field journalists have indeed been assigned to follow the activities of several presidential and vice presidential candidates who are expected to fight in 2024. Each journalist was also asked to collect and write news material as it is without being biased.

According to T, it is the duty of journalists to write anything about news sources, regardless of good or bad. According to him, this is a form of independence and neutrality for journalists in their work. Referring to the Journalistic Code of Ethics (2006), it is stated in Article 1 that Indonesian journalists are independent. This article can be interpreted if Independent is defined as reporting events or facts in accordance with conscience, without interference and coercion or the intervention of other parties. (Haurissa et al., 2020, p. 34).

T said that so far, the business policy at the company where he works cannot forbid writing about a bad event that might occur regarding certain presidential and vice presidential candidates. On the contrary, according to T, the business policy is usually carried out by candidates to increase the quota of positive news. T also explained that if the news he wrote collided with certain interests so that it was not published or the narrative changed, it was the editor's policy in the editorial room that was far from his reach.

T's statement implicitly explains that the independence and neutrality of Tribunews journalists can shift if there are other interests from organizational groups within a much larger company. However, this cannot be achieved by field journalists with the smallest editorial authority.

T said it was a mistake if field journalists did not write sources that had news value before them. However, the publication is entirely part of the editor's authority and above. The same thing was also expressed by D, a journalist for Liputan6.com, that the issue of independence and neutrality of journalists as a whole would be very difficult to achieve this presidential election season. D revealed that political economy factors make mass media owners choose to cooperate with certain candidates, causing an unequal portion of the news.

This unbalanced portion is exemplified by D if there are two pairs of presidential and vice presidential candidates; if the first pair cooperates, they will get more portions than the second pair, who may not cooperate with their media company. Even so, the news remains true and does not discredit other couples who do not cooperate.



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D stated that the issue of independence and neutrality of journalists is usually returned to the policies of each mass media editor. In their work, field journalists are not required to write only good things about certain candidates, but publication issues are other things that field journalists cannot control.

Meanwhile, informant F from Medcom. Id openly said that political news in his media carried more news about the interests of the NasDem Party. According to F, without needing to cover it up, the public already knows that the media where he works is indeed affiliated with the NasDem Party because the owner of the media where he worked with the founder of the NasDem party is the same person, namely Surya Paloh.

According to F, this made him personally and Medcom.id editorial staff, whether he likes it or not, have to provide support for the political party's reporting ahead of the 2024 Presidential Election. Even though the Medcom. Id editorial room does not form a special team to accommodate NasDem Party news; every agenda and release regarding the party's activities must be published. The editor only has the authority to package the released news and the activity agenda per the journalistic template and change the angle and title to attract readers' attention more.

Apart from that, usually, journalists who publish releases or activity agendas related to the NasDem party also enrich their writing by including the views of certain political observers. However, these efforts were carried out by journalists with one aim, namely, to strengthen the position of the party and the candidate being promoted to be more positive in the eyes of the public.

F said this was more about free publication for the NasDem Party on all media platforms belonging to the Media Group, such as Medcom.id, Media Indonesia, MetroTv, and so on. The free publication of the NasDem Party on the Media Group network negatively impacts the practice of media conglomeration, where there is uniformity of news content regarding certain presidential and vice presidential candidates, which ultimately creates uniformity of public opinion. The news of the 2024 presidential election in the media under the auspices of the Media Group has the potential to become subjective and full of interests, namely the interests of Surya Paloh and his affiliates through the image formation of the particular presidential and vice presidential candidates he supports (Khumairoh, 2021, p. 68).

F said that other presidential and vice presidential candidates who are not on the radar or the interests of the NasDem Party can still be reported in Media Group's media. However, the portion of news coverage is much smaller, and only accommodated those that are considered to have big news value or have binding cooperation. The collaboration in question is like advertising collaboration, as he exemplified when there was news content on a special interview with Ganjar Pranowo. Meanwhile, big news stories usually include major events that occur within political parties or other candidates for the Presidential and Vice-Presidential candidates, for example, reporting on the National Working Meeting of other political parties outside the NasDem. Statement F can be interpreted if the independence and neutrality of journalists at Medcom.id is something that is impossible to achieve due to threats from media conglomerates. F stated that if his media business works to get money from Surya Paloh as the founder of NasDem, then efforts to support the media conglomerate must be carried out. The practice of media conglomeration in reporting on the 2024 presidential election on Medcom.id is in stark contrast to the principle of the media as an independent, objective, honest and neutral institution.

Conglomeration and concentration of media ownership in the end also jeopardizes the professionalism of journalists. In the modern era, this mass media finally only sees the interests of the conglomerates behind it without prioritizing a code of ethics and the principles of independence, objectivity, honesty and neutrality of journalists in it (Laksono, 2019, p. 57).

In A's statement, the tvOne journalist also almost agreed with what was expressed by F. A said that currently, the television media where he works has not specifically directed journalists in the field to cover political parties or presidential-vice president candidates from any party, including Golkar. It is known that the owner of tvOne is a politician from the Golkar party. According to A, this is most likely because the Golkar Party has not yet decided which presidential and vice presidential candidate it will support in the 2024 presidential election.

Apart from that, according to A, the media owners where he works no longer hold high positions in the Golkar Party. Hence, the movement of the newsroom is currently very conducive. A believed that the media conglomerate had influenced the tvOne editorial room during the 2014 presidential election. However, A believes this will most likely not happen again in the upcoming 2024 Presidential Election because Aburizal Bakrie, the owner of tvOne, now only serves as an adviser to the Golkar Party.

A also emphasized that the Golkar Party belongs not to Bakrie but to the public. A did not deny that during the 2014 presidential election, Bakrie's political agenda became the main news item on the tvOne media. Every political journey of Aburizal Bakrie in several regions in the effort to win Prabowo Subianto-Hatta Rajasa at that time always became mandatory news on tvOne. In A's opinion, this cannot be separated from the position of Aburizal Bakrie, who served as chairman of the Golkar Party in 2014, so the element of interest is increasingly felt in political reporting in his mass media networks.

Meanwhile, journalist O from the MNC Group stated that from the media where he worked, it was implied that he had been directed to participate in the activities of the leading presidential candidates. It is known that the Perindo Party, which Harry Tanoe founded as the owner of the MNC Group, has indeed signed a political cooperation contract with the Indonesian Democratic Party of Struggle (PDI) to support the presidential candidate Ganjar Pranowo in the 2024 presidential election.

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O said that if the editor's orders from the media to work to explore the activities of the presidential and vice presidential candidates supported by the Perindo Party did not exist in writing, however, he was obliged to cover if there was a request from the editorial room, through the head of the MNC Group bureau that oversees his work area. Usually, according to O, the activities of the Perindo party are mandatory coverage for journalists in the regions. Especially if the General Chair, Harry Tanoe, attended the event.

O's statement does not rule out the possibility that if there are activities of Ganjar Pranowo in his working area in the Riau Islands, he will have to cover them later. Even so, O emphasized that his political coverage remains balanced for all candidate candidates. However, according to O, news publication is the full authority of the editor, which cannot intervene.

From the results of the author's interviews with journalists from six mass media representing five media conglomerate groups, from the perspective of media conglomerates, it turns out that journalists cannot be completely independent and neutral as their idealism is. This is because journalists, in their work, are very attached to the mass media, while the mass media are bound and influenced by the interests of their owners. The three are interrelated and cannot be separated from one another, so it is not uncommon for media owners to participate in determining the contents of news or broadcasts to be published or broadcast according to their interests.

The interests in question range from political and ideological to business and economics. These three interests will color mass media news content, especially before the 2024 Presidential Election. The mass media is vulnerable to being used as a weapon of power in a political interest. Media conglomerates determine control over the mass media, which in time, will determine the content of the media itself. According to Altschull (1984), the second law of journalism is that media content often reflects the interests of those who fund it. (Musfialdy, 2019, p. 26).

The picture of the attachment between journalists and the mass media that depends on political economy interests reflects that the contents of media content always reflect the interests of the funding group. Media owners can do this because they are aware of the important role of the media as a force to lead to shaping public opinion. Several ways are done by creating an agenda setting or framing the news coverage of certain candidates that can build or even destroy the image of that candidate.

Bernard C. Cohen interprets the agenda setting theory as a theory which states that the mass media is the center of determining truth with its ability to transfer two elements, namely awareness and information on the community agenda by directing public awareness and attention to issues that are considered important by the mass media. Stephan W. Littlejohn and Karen A. Foss said that the agenda setting theory is that the media forms an image or an important issue in people's minds because the mass media selects and makes choices about what needs to be published and how to publish it (E. Y. Ritonga, 2018, p. 34).

The media's power in determining society's agenda is influenced by its relationship to the center of power. That power is the goal of media owners. The power of the media can direct the public to side with which candidate in the 2024 presidential election. With their ability, the mass media can build discourse, drive changes in beliefs, and move the public to vote for certain candidates. Even though the power of its agenda setting, the media also has the advantage of increasing or decreasing the electability of certain presidential and vice presidential candidates according to the interests of media ownership.

These advantages make media owners intervene to direct journalists through the mass media in making reports that support the political parties or certain candidates they carry. The interests of the media conglomerates ultimately threaten the independence and neutrality of journalists in their work during the 2024 presidential election. Society or the wider public eventually become victims and are greatly harmed through the contrivance of opinions created by journalists and the media according to the wishes of media owners.

The consequence of a media conglomeration that can manage, own and distribute mass media in many places in the formation of ideological uniformity for the media audience. Media conglomerates have systematically amputated the independence and neutrality of journalists and the media, contrary to the concept of freedom of the press. For journalists to be free from the influence of the political interests of their owners, one way that can be done is by revising the Broadcasting Law, particularly regarding the ownership of a business group over several media. Special rules need to be made if the owner of the media network is actively involved in politics. It is necessary to prevent the influence of political interests on journalists, including those concerning media conglomeration issues, especially if media owners are involved in practical politics, such as establishing political parties or holding active positions in certain political parties.

### **CONCLUSION**

From the results of interviews with key informants, it was concluded that the independence and neutrality of journalists ahead of the 2024 Presidential Election from the perspective of media conglomerates is difficult because journalists and the mass media are dependent on media owners. In the end, the independence and neutrality of journalists are returned to each journalist; in the scope of field journalists, these two things can be implemented.

Because, in principle, a journalist's job is to find and write news for the benefit of the audience without exaggerating or understating it. However, field journalists do not have full control or power over the news material they write in processing the

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news. The role of the editor, news manager, and the editor-in-chief's decision also influence whether the news is worth broadcasting or not, with many reasons behind it.

An editorial room that is free from the political intervention of media owners can only be realized if the editorial staff has a strong control culture, resistant to the interests of company owners, as well as the background of the founders of the companies themselves, whether they are involved in politics or not. In reality, the higher the role of media owners in a political party, the independence, and neutrality of the journalists working in their media will certainly diminish in producing news content or broadcasts regarding the upcoming 2024 presidential election. Media conglomeration will have a very visible effect on the independence and neutrality of journalists if the media owner is the founder of a certain political party and or holds strategic positions in the management of his political party, such as General Chairperson, Secretary General to General Treasurer.

Journalists' non-independent and non-neutral actions in the 2024 Presidential Election could occur not only for business or economic reasons but also for political reasons for the media owners. This condition has made it difficult for journalists to work and ultimately impacts the wider community through reporting on the 2024 presidential election. This condition, which has been repeated since the 2014 Presidential Election, needs to be given more attention. Prevention efforts need to be made by making new rules or revising existing rules regarding broadcasting institutions, especially those whose owners are involved in politics so that the work of journalists can be carried out according to their ideals of upholding complete democracy. The press, as the fourth pillar of democracy, will not function if the independence and neutrality of journalists die due to media conglomeration.

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