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The Transformation of the Colonial Press System into the Modern Era: A Qualitative Approach to the Role of the Media in Social Change

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ABSTRAK

Transformasi sistem pers dari era kolonial menuju era modern merupakan salah satu aspek penting dalam perubahan sosial yang terjadi di Indonesia. Sejarah perkembangan pers di Indonesia tidak hanya mencatat bagaimana media berkembang dalam menyampaikan informasi, tetapi juga bagaimana media berfungsi sebagai alat perjuangan dalam mengubah struktur sosial dan politik masyarakat. Artikel ini menggunakan pendekatan kualitatif untuk mengkaji peran media dalam perubahan sosial selama transisi dari masa kolonial ke pasca-kolonial. Dengan memanfaatkan analisis historis dan studi literatur, penelitian ini menemukan bahwa media tidak hanya berfungsi sebagai sarana komunikasi, tetapi juga berperan sebagai agen perubahan yang menggerakkan transformasi sosial di Indonesia. Proses ini melibatkan pergeseran dari media yang dikontrol kolonial menuju media yang lebih bebas, demokratis, dan berfungsi sebagai alat kritik terhadap pemerintah serta pembentukan identitas sosial dan politik masyarakat Indonesia yang lebih inklusif.

Kata Kunci: Transformasi sistem pers, media, kolonialisme, perubahan sosial, Indonesia, pendekatan kualitatif.

ABSTRACT

The transformation of the press system from the colonial era to the modern era is one of the important aspects in the social changes that occur in Indonesia. The history of the development of the press in Indonesia not only records how the media develops in conveying information, but also how the media functions as a tool of struggle in changing the social and political structure of society. This article uses a qualitative approach to examine the role of the media in social change during the transition from colonial to post-colonial period. By utilizing historical analysis and literature studies, this study finds that the media not only functions as a means of communication, but also acts as an agent of change that drives social transformation in Indonesia. This process involves a shift from a colonial-controlled media to a more free, democratic, and functioning media that serves as a tool for criticism of the government and the formation of a more inclusive social and political identity of Indonesian society.

Keywords: Transformation of the press system, media, colonialism, social change, Indonesia, qualitative approach.

Introduction

The development of the press system in Indonesia is a reflection of the long journey of this nation's social, political, and cultural history. From the Dutch colonial period to the post-independence era, the media has played an important role in shaping political consciousness, social identity, and laying the foundation of democracy in Indonesia (Adam A, 1995). Although often faced with various forms of restraint and control, the national press was still able to thrive and play a key role in the various social changes that occurred in

society. One of the major transformations in Indonesia's press system is the shift from a system controlled by colonial forces to a more free press system that functions as an agent of social change (Sen. K, 2000).

During the colonial period, the media in Indonesia functioned more as a propaganda tool managed by the Dutch colonial government to strengthen their political and economic dominance. Newspapers, magazines, and other print media were used to spread colonial narratives and suppress the emergence of nationalism awareness among Indonesian people (Hill, 2006). In this context, press freedom is almost unknown, as mass media is used to control information and spread colonial ideology, which directly hinders the independence movement. However, entering the early 20th century, the spirit of nationalism began to grow along with the increasing political consciousness among the Indonesian people. This development was also influenced by the emergence of local media such as *Medan Prijaji*, *Soeara Rakyat*, and *Bintang Hindia*, which not only disseminated information, but also became a tool of struggle to criticize colonial policies, arouse the spirit of resistance, and build national identity (Yulianti, 2016).

Despite the risk of censorship and pressure from the colonial government, the media at this time began to fight for the interests of the people and became an important part of the struggle for independence. The biggest transformation in Indonesia's press system occurred during the Reformasi period, precisely after the collapse of the New Order regime in 1998. This period was a turning point for press freedom in Indonesia, as it opened up a wider space for democracy and freedom of speech (Nugroho, 2012). The mass media not only functions as a disseminator of information, but also as a social force that is able to control the course of government, voice civil rights, and fight for pluralism and political participation of the community (Sen. K, 2000).

In this context, the media plays a vital role in the process of democratizing Indonesia. However, the major changes in the press system did not happen instantly. Many challenges must be faced in the process of transitioning from a media controlled by colonialism and authoritarianism to a more democratic system. This transformation process is influenced by various factors, such as the development of information technology, the improvement of education, the growth of political awareness, and changes in the socio-political structure in Indonesia (Hill, 2006). Therefore, this study aims to examine how a centralized and repressive colonial press system can be transformed into a free, diverse, and democratic modern press system. The qualitative approach in this study will focus on the role of the media in encouraging social change, fighting for independence, and building post-colonial democracy in Indonesia.

Methods

This research uses a historical literature review to analyze the transformation of the press system in Indonesia from the colonial period to the modern era, as well as its role in the process of social and political change. This method was chosen because the research focuses on collecting, reviewing, and interpreting secondary data from various sources such as books, scientific articles, historical archives, and policy documents (Adam, 1995). This approach does not involve direct field data collection such as interviews or observations, but rather aims to reconstruct the chronological and analytical development of the Indonesian press system by emphasizing the relationship between media, power, and society (Yulianti, 2016). In this way, the research seeks to understand the media not only as a communication channel but also as a social actor that plays a role in shaping public opinion, strengthening national identity, and promoting the democratization process (Sen, 2000).

Furthermore, this literature review analyzes the internal and external dynamics that influence the development of the press system, such as changes in political structure, state policies, advances in information technology, and public political awareness (Nugroho, 2012). Using a historical framework, this study provides a contextual understanding of the dialectical relationship between media and social structures in various periods of Indonesian history.

Results and Discussion

The Colonial Press and Its Influence on Society

During the colonial period, the press in Indonesia functioned as a propaganda tool that was heavily controlled by the Dutch colonial government. The mass media was used to introduce and defend the ideology of Dutch rule, as well as to direct public opinion in accordance with the interests of the colonial rulers. The Dutch colonial government established various newspapers and magazines that not only served as a means of communication, but also to introduce the Dutch language, government policies, and European culture to the indigenous people. These media outlets were mostly accessed by the colonial elite and educated natives, which resulted in a highly selective and hierarchical information flow. In this sense, the colonial press reflected what (Herman et al, 1988) later conceptualized as the "*propaganda model*" where media serves as an instrument to reproduce dominant ideology and maintain power structures.

Nevertheless, the colonial press was not entirely monolithic or passive. It also became a space where educated indigenous intellectuals could contest colonial narratives. Newspapers such as *Medan Prijaji*, founded by Tirta Adhi Soerjo, raised issues of racial injustice, discrimination, and inequality that were deliberately silenced by colonial-owned media. This phenomenon can be analyzed using Jürgen (Habermas, 1962). Theory of the public sphere in which *Medan Prijaji* and similar indigenous presses functioned as early "*counter-public spheres*." These spaces allowed the emerging Indonesian middle class to articulate alternative discourses, formulate the concept of equal rights, and sow the seeds of nationalism.

From the perspective of social change theory, the press during this period played a dual role: agent of social control and agent of social transformation. As an agent of social control, the colonial press reinforced hegemony in the Gramscian sense shaping indigenous consciousness to accept European superiority and internalize colonial order. Media content often normalized Western cultural values, portraying European modernity as a model to be emulated, thereby subtly influencing indigenous identity formation. On the other hand, as an agent of transformation, the emergence of indigenous-owned media disrupted this hegemony by creating spaces for critical consciousness (*conscientização* in Paulo Freire's terms). These publications challenged the colonial narrative, enabling readers to recognize systemic injustice and encouraging collective mobilization for change.

The press also contributed to the early stages of political socialization and nation-building. It provided a platform to disseminate nationalist ideas, build solidarity among the educated elite, and articulate a shared identity beyond local and ethnic boundaries. According to modernization theory (Lerner, 1958), media plays a central role in "*awakening*" traditional societies to modern political participation by broadening their "*empathy*" and sense of belonging to a wider community. In Indonesia, this process catalyzed the transition from fragmented, locally based resistance to a national liberation movement. However, the influence of Western cultural values through colonial media should not be underestimated. The press created a cultural dualism where segments of the indigenous population admired European culture while others became increasingly critical and sought to revive and defend local traditions. This tension shaped the character of Indonesian nationalism, which combined modernist ideas such as constitutionalism and civil rights with a strong emphasis on cultural authenticity.

In sum, the colonial press played a paradoxical role: it was both a mechanism of domination and a platform for emancipation. Its existence accelerated the development of political consciousness, encouraged the emergence of nationalist leaders, and facilitated the articulation of collective aspirations for independence. The dual nature of the colonial press illustrates the dialectical relationship between media and power—media can perpetuate hegemony but also serve as a vehicle for counter-hegemonic struggle. This dynamic is crucial for understanding how Indonesian society transitioned from colonial subjugation to independence, with the press acting as one of the most strategic catalysts for social and political change (Siregar, 2006). With the development of a bolder national press, the media began to make a major contribution to the formation of political and social consciousness of the Indonesian people. The emergence of newspapers that openly opposed colonialism accelerated the transition to a period of independence. The press became a bridge for the community to voice the aspirations of freedom, formulate a national identity, and organize resistance to colonialism (Rahardjo, 2009).

Transition to the Modern Era

After Indonesia's independence, the press underwent a profound transformation from being a colonial propaganda apparatus into a platform for articulating national identity and democratization. The shift toward more open media reflects what media scholars term the *social responsibility model*, distinguishing it from the old authoritarian model (as discussed recently in analyses of democracy and media ownership in Indonesia). For example, a 2025 study by Firman on *Media Ownership and Democracy Processes in Indonesia* finds that concentrated media ownership continues to threaten the diversity of perspectives, suggesting that the normative ideal of social responsibility remains an ongoing struggle (Firman, 2025). This shift illustrates what Denis (McQuail, 2010) describes as the *normative theory of the press*, particularly the transition from the *authoritarian model* to the *social responsibility model*. Post-independence media no longer served as a mouthpiece for colonial rulers but instead became a central pillar in nation-building, educating citizens, and facilitating public participation in political life. From a sociological perspective, this transition can be interpreted through Anthony Giddens' theory of structuration, where media is both shaped by and shapes social structures. The newly independent Indonesian press was not merely a passive observer of national events; it was an active agent that constructed discourses on citizenship, rights, and responsibilities. By informing the public about government policies, exposing corruption, and providing a space for debate, the press contributed to the creation of what (Benedict, 1983) termed an "*imagined community*" a shared sense of belonging among diverse groups within the new nation-state.

However, this idealistic vision of a free press has faced serious challenges under successive regimes. In the New Order era (1966-1998), the government exercised tight control via licensing (e.g., SIUPP), censorship and suppression of dissenting voices, exemplifying the authoritarian model. Even in the Reformasi era and under more democratic administrations, recent studies (e.g. *Media Under the Law: Press Freedom Challenges in Indonesia*, 2024) show legal instruments (like the ITE Law, Broadcasting Law) and political-economic pressures still limit press freedom (Susanto, 2024). The New Order era (1966–1998) marked a partial regression toward an *authoritarian press model*, where the government maintained tight control over content through licensing systems (SIUPP) and censorship. This period reflects Antonio Gramsci's concept of *cultural hegemony* media was used to normalize the regime's ideology (Pancasila Democracy) and marginalize dissenting voices. At the same time, a limited "subaltern counter-public" (Fraser, 1990) persisted through alternative media and underground publications that provided counter-discourses, keeping the spirit of resistance alive.

Critically, though, the expansion of press freedom and media pluralism carries tensions: commercialization, concentration of media ownership, risk of self-censorship, and political interference. Studies indicate that the oligopolistic structure of media ownership and the economic fragility of journalistic institutions can limit autonomy and diversity of discourse (Siregar, 2025). During the Asian Financial Crisis, mainstream and alternative media together created what (Habermas, 1962) would call an expanded *public sphere*, amplifying student movements' calls for reform and delegitimizing the Suharto regime. The ability of media to mobilize collective action highlights the press as a catalyst for social change, consistent with modernization and development communication theories (Lerner, 1958), which emphasize the role of mass media in political participation and social mobilization. In the Reform Era (Post-1998), Indonesia experienced an unprecedented expansion of press freedom, which led to media pluralism and the proliferation of private TV stations, online journalism, and citizen media. This aligns with Manuel Castells' theory of the *network society*, where information flows are decentralized, allowing for more diverse narratives and bottom-up participation. Nevertheless, the new era also introduced challenges such as media conglomeration, commercialization, and the rise of disinformation, which risk undermining the emancipatory potential of media. In conclusion, the transition to the modern era demonstrates that the Indonesian press is both a product of political transformation and a driver of social change. Its historical trajectory illustrates a dynamic interplay between freedom and control, hegemony and resistance, where media continuously negotiates its role as a watchdog, educator, and

mobilizer of public consciousness. This critical perspective allows us to see the press not just as a neutral institution but as a powerful actor that shapes and is shaped by Indonesia's evolving democratic landscape.

The Role of Media in Social Change in the Digital Era

Entering the digital era, Indonesia has experienced a paradigm shift in the way information is produced, distributed, and consumed. The emergence of the internet and social media has created a *networked public sphere* (Surjatmodjo, 2024) where communication is more decentralized and participatory. Platforms such as Facebook, Twitter (X), Instagram, and TikTok have transformed the public from passive information receivers into active content producers. This shift aligns with the concept of *participatory culture* (Masduki, 2021) in which citizens engage in co-creation, remixing, and sharing of media content, thereby amplifying their role in shaping social and political discourse. The role of media in social change is no longer limited to transmitting information but has expanded to become a *driver of collective action*. Social media has facilitated the rapid mobilization of public opinion, as seen in movements such as #ReformasiDikorupsi and online campaigns advocating for gender equality, human rights, and environmental protection. These phenomena can be explained by Manuel Castells' notion of *mass self-communication*, which enables bottom-up mobilization and bypasses traditional gatekeepers like state-controlled media. In this way, the digital media landscape contributes to the formation of what (Habermas, 2006) calls a "deliberative public sphere," where citizens deliberate and contest state policies more openly.

However, this transformation is not without contradictions. The openness of digital media has also given rise to a new set of challenges, such as the spread of misinformation, echo chambers, and polarization. From a critical theory perspective, this situation reflects what (McChesney, 2013) describes as the *commercialization of digital media*, where algorithms and platform logics often prioritize sensational content over verified information, thereby shaping public discourse in ways that may undermine democratic deliberation. Moreover, the digital divide between urban and rural areas creates unequal access to participation, reinforcing Pierre Bourdieu's idea of *cultural capital*: groups with greater access to technology and education have more power to influence discourse, while marginalized communities risk being left behind. Another critical issue is the question of data privacy and surveillance. Drawing on Foucault's concept of *panopticism*, the digital ecosystem can be seen as a new form of surveillance society where citizens are constantly monitored, both by corporations and state actors. This raises concerns about digital authoritarianism, where data can be weaponized to suppress dissent or manipulate public opinion. Although Indonesia has enacted the Personal Data Protection Law (PDP Law), its implementation and enforcement remain limited, leaving users vulnerable to privacy violations.

Despite these challenges, digital media remains a powerful force for democratization and social transformation. It provides a platform for marginalized voices, fosters civic engagement, and enables new forms of activism. From the perspective of modernization and social change theory (Lerner, 1958), digital media has expanded political participation and accelerated the process of social awareness. Yet, to fully realize its emancipatory potential, media literacy must be strengthened to help citizens critically evaluate information and resist manipulation. In conclusion, the digital era illustrates the ambivalent nature of media as both a liberating force and a potential tool of control. On one hand, it democratizes access to information, empowers grassroots movements, and enables participatory governance. On the other hand, it introduces new risks of disinformation, inequality, and surveillance. Therefore, critical engagement with digital media supported by robust regulation, public education, and ethical platform governance is essential to ensure that media continues to function as an agent of positive social change rather than a new instrument of domination (Yilmaz et al., 2024).

Conclusion

The transformation of the press system in Indonesia from the colonial era to the modern era shows a long journey full of challenges and dynamics. This major change not only reflects the development of communication technology, but also its impact on social, political, and cultural changes in Indonesia. In this journey, the press plays a role as one of the main pillars in the formation of a more democratic, independent,

and rights-conscious society. The process of transforming the press system was increasingly felt with the emergence of digital technology and social media at the end of the 20th century. The digital era has brought enormous changes in the way information is disseminated and received by society. Social media allows people to share information quickly and widely, creating new spaces for various social movements and accelerating the spread of ideas that may have previously been difficult to reach through traditional media. This digital media has provided an opportunity for the public to not only access information more freely, but also to participate in social and political decision-making discussions and processes. The role of media in social change in the digital era is enormous. Social media and other digital platforms serve as channels for voicing criticism of government policies, shaping public opinion, and providing a platform for marginalized groups to voice their voices.

The transformation of the press system from the colonial period to the modern era also reflects changes in the structure and dynamics of power in Indonesia. The press not only functions as a tool of social control or information distribution, but also acts as an agent of social change that helps people to be more critical of government policies, fight for social justice, and encourage democratization. In colonial times, the media was nothing more than a tool of colonialism; But now, in the modern era, the media has become a great force that is able to drive social change, encourage the development of democracy, and maintain equality in society.

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