THE MAPPING OF INDONESIAN AND MALAYSIAN ALTERNATIVE MEDIA

Kanina Ramaniya Kalyana[1], Hapsari Dwiningtyas Sulistyani[2]

Email: kaninaalya@gmail.com

Departemen Ilmu Komunikasi

Fakultas Ilmu Sosial dan Ilmu Politik

Universitas Diponegoro Jl. Prof. H. Soedarto, SH Tembalang Semarang Kotak Pos 1269 Telepon (024) 7465407 Faksimile (024) 7465405

Laman: http://www/fisip.undip.ac.id email fisip@undip.ac.id

ABSTRACT

This research addresses the often-overlooked role of alternative media due to its "alternative" ethics, goals, and standards. This research argues that alternative media's roles in providing space for counter-narrative to mainstream discourse should be investigated further. The objective of this study is to understand the structural conditions and challenges faced by alternative media outlets in Indonesia and Malaysia, both in its formative years and in contemporary era. The research uses a life history approach to explore the evolution of these media platforms, particularly in the digital age. The findings show how alternative media in both countries challenge mainstream media by focusing on underreported political, positioning partisanship for certain groups they viewed as marginalized, and advocating for social change and accountability. Despite limited resources, and sustainability concerns these outlets managed to influence public discourse. Challenges such as political bias, corporate interests, and restrictive legal regulations persist to limit the broader impact of alternative media.

Keyword: alternative media, life history, journalism

Abstrak

Penelitian ini membahas peran media alternatif yang seringkali diabaikan karena etika, tujuan, dan standarnya yang "alternatif". Penelitian ini berpendapat bahwa peran media alternatif dalam menyediakan ruang untuk narasi yang berusaha menangkal narasi dari *mainstream media* seharusnya diteliti lebih lanjut. Penelitian ini bertujuan untuk memahami kondisi struktural dan tantangan yang dihadapi oleh outlet media alternatif di Indonesia dan Malaysia, baik pada masa-masa awal berdirinya maupun di era kontemporer. Penelitian ini menggunakan pendekatan *life history* untuk mengeksplorasi evolusi platform media alternatif, khususnya di era digital. Hasil

penelitian menunjukkan bagaimana media alternatif di kedua negara tersebut menantang media *mainstream* dengan berfokus pada isu politik yang terpinggirkan, memosisikan keberpihakan untuk kelompok-kelompok rentan, serta memperjuangkan perubahan sosial dan akuntabilitas. Meskipun menghadapi keterbatasan sumber daya dan kekhawatiran tentang keberlanjutan, media dalam penelitian ini berhasil memengaruhi wacana publik. Tantangan seperti bias politik, kepentingan perusahaan, dan regulasi yang membatasi terus membatasi dampak lebih luas dari media alternatif.

INTRODUCTION

Historically, alternative media have often been overlooked in broader discussions of media studies, as they haven't been categorized as "news media" or considered important enough to be included (Ihlebæk et al., 2022). Di Salvo (2020) argues that "alternative journalism" is often excluded from media discussions because of their exclusion from the mainstream media circuit, different origins, goals, ethics, audiences, degree of professionalism, and, their position as amateur or semi amateur. A recurring concern with alternative media is its tendency to adopt unconventional editorial policies, potentially risking their adherence to journalistic professional standards (Sulkhan, 2022). However, the perceived lack of professionalism within alternative media has evolved, with many alternative media outlets professionalizing as they gain influence and credibility as agenda-setters (Rae, 2021). Some scholars also argue that the presence of former legacy media environmental correspondents now working for alternative digital-native news platforms (Painter et al., 2016). In turn, their presence ensures compliance with necessary journalistic standards and ethical guidelines. Schäfer and Painter (2020) characterize three interrelated shifts to alternative media: (1) the decline of mainstream news outlets' use, (2) the proliferation of the internet and social media, and (3) the broadening spectrum of voices and content in public discourse.

In Southeast Asia, the decline of mainstream media platforms is mirroring global trends. According to the Reuters Institute's Digital News Report 2023, public trust in mainstream media remains generally low, with the Philippines ranking lowest in trust in mainstream news (38 percent), followed by Indonesia (39 percent), and Malaysia (40 percent) (Newman et al., 2023). This trend is consistent with the most successful alternative media in the region being Malaysia's MalaysiaKini and the Philippines' Rappler.

The internet has also facilitated the establishment of alternative digital-native media, solidifying their presence in media discourse. The rise of alternative digital-native journalism and their unconventional takes on editorial policies allows news websites focusing on niche interests such as environmental issues to grow (Burgess & Hurcombe, 2019; Buschow, 2020). Alternative and independent media platforms have emerged to report on a range of environmental concerns without holding back (Sanal & Aram, 2024). Consequently, these new media platforms tend to bring significant and refreshing changes to the voices, thematic focuses, values, and perspectives of environmental coverage compared to mainstream media (Hansen, 2020).

However, only a small minority of audiences were aware of some alternative media sites. Their use of alternative media was also not regular on a weekly basis (Newman et al., 2019). Their reach relies on key moments, meaning that stories covered by alternative media can garner wider circulation across Twitter and Facebook than those from mainstream news outlets. This also implies that audiences of alternative media typically consume content that aligns with their specific ideology, political leanings, or interests, such as environmental topics (Vara-Miguel, 2020). Due to their limited resources, reliance on key moments or controversial stories, and unconventional organizational and funding models, alternative media outlets are often at risk of not being sustainable. Their potential for reaching a broad audience base is constrained, and they frequently depend on the enthusiasm and loyalty of small groups of audiences (Buschow, 2020; Vara-Miguel, 2020).

In pinpointing a definitive explanation of what exactly is alternative media, this paper adopts the definition from Holt et al. (2019) who describe alternative media as "proclaimed and/or (self)-proclaimed corrective, opposing the overall tendency of public discourse emanating from what is perceived as the dominant mainstream media in a given system." Similarly, Fuchs (2010) describes alternative media as "mass media that challenge the dominant capitalist forms of media production, media structures, content, distribution, and reception." This definition focuses on two key aspects: actor-oriented elements, which involve further investigation into journalists and their practices, as well as the audience and their behaviors, and structure-oriented elements,

which include the structures of media products, media organizations, and media distribution. In alternative media, there is collective ownership, decision-making by consensus, equal distribution of power, no external private ownership, and economic self-management.

Ihlebæk et al. (2022) offer a comprehensive explanation of why these characteristics of alternative media facilitate resistance. From a content standpoint, counterbalancing or challenging perceived systemic imbalances through politically or socially/culturally radical content and style serves as a crucial editorial claim that provides a platform for opposition and resistance. From worker's standpoint: (1) Embracing a persistent activist perspective among individuals engaged in alternative media – audiences and the workers – who strongly align with the core values of deliberative and participatory democratic ideals, including offering alternative narratives, empowering ordinary citizens, and sometimes valuing impartiality; (2) Reporters and editors involved in alternative media often align themselves not necessarily as "alternative" media workers, but rather as proponents of deliberative and participatory normative ideals in journalism, with a strong commitment to promoting subaltern and marginalized narratives. From an organizational standpoint: (1) While editorial routines within larger alternative media outlets may become more professionalized, the editorial culture and self-identification among journalists remain firmly rooted in participatory, progressive, and inclusive ideals; (2) At the organizational level, the expansion of staff and establishment of hierarchical structures supports editorial commitment to ensure efficient production processes and mitigate the risk of misinformation.

Within newsrooms, co-workers align on deliberative and participatory values with strong commitment to bring the marginalized narratives to the front (Ihlebæk et al., 2022). Such values in the newsroom will reduce individual competition as they focus more toward achieving collective goals (Dowling, 2021) with such goals being producing quality investigative journalism, fulfilling watchdog role, serving public interest, and advocating for the marginalized. From a content perspective, Hansen (2020) argued that alternative media offers novel changes in thematic focus, values, perspectives, and voices relative to mainstream media particularly for environmental stories. Alternative media content has been cited as more exploratory,

niche and radical (see for example, Burgess & Hurcombe, 2019; Buschow, 2020; Ihlebæk et al., 2022; Sanal & Aram, 2024).

Structurally, alternative media often operate with symmetrical power relations (see for example, Holt et al., 2019; Scire 2020; Ihlebæk et al. 2022;) and maintain a non-commercial stance which ensures greater independence from external influences (see for example Holt et al 2019, Price 2020, Patterson et al, 2022). These structural characteristics allow media workers to focus more on doing their roles without succumbing to profit-driven agendas (Patterson et al., 2022).

METHODOLOGY

This research employs a life history approach (Cole & Knowles, 2001) to explore how personal and professional lives unfold within institutional constraints and broader social, political, economic, and technological transformations. The method provides a bottom-up perspective, focusing on everyday lived experiences rather than elite narratives, revealing how individuals navigate structural conditions and power dynamics. In-depth interviews are conducted to see detailed narratives, emphasizing emotions, identities, and adaptive strategies of alternative media workers. Individual accounts are contextualized within sociocultural and professional frameworks, highlighting the interplay between personal experiences and systemic changes. This approach uncovers emotional responses to precarization, structural conditions, and the challenges of thriving under industry upheaval, offering insights into collective transformations (Wahl-Jorgensen, 2019).

HISTORICAL SITUATEDNESS AND THE MAPPING OF CONTEMPORARY INDONESIAN ALTERNATIVE MEDIA

The coincidence of the early introduction of the Internet with the early phase of Indonesia's political crisis in the 1990s quickly sparked hope that the Internet could serve as a liberating medium where state interference is absent (Lim, 2003). The first problem quickly arose with only 1% of Indonesians having access to the Internet. Could something so new, underdeveloped, and elitist bring such significant change? As Lim (2003) argues, information confined to a small elite loses its ability to mobilize the masses against hegemonic power.

The advent of the Internet in Indonesia suddenly gave Indonesians access to information that had previously been out

of reach. For instance, they could now find alternative perspectives on the Indonesian Communist Party (PKI) and Soeharto's corruption. One of the most notable pieces of classified information that newly became accessible was George Aditjondro's "Daftar Kekayaan Soeharto," which translates to "list of Soeharto's wealth". This information was comprised of "Yayasan-yayasan Soeharto: cakupan, dampak, dan pertanggungjawabannya," which translates to "Soeharto's foundations: their scope, impacts, and accountability" (Lim, 2003).

During this time, the most popular distribution form for classified information was the mailing list. Information about Soeharto's list of wealth was distributed initially from George Aditjondro to John MacDouggal—the moderator of Apakabar—and then shared with colleagues and friends. Early recipients of this initial mailing list include Munindo, Pijar, and SiAR (Lim, 2003). Many websites followed along by republishing the content with some modifications, such as editing the title, paraphrasing, and summarizing. The information was distributed widely, with printouts being spread, posted on announcement boards, and photocopied. Newspaper sellers and vendors even sold photocopied versions of the text.

The majority of these pioneers–Apakabar, SiAR, Pijar, and Munindo–were based abroad. Despite them being headquartered and operated overseas, most underground content was still written in Bahasa Indonesia. This phenomenon was also the inception of citizen journalism, where individuals could contribute in real-time although much of the information was still professionally developed. To ensure the safety of those involved, most materials were published anonymously.

Apakabar was a key online platform for public discourse on Indonesian social and political issues, featuring diverse perspectives ranging from pro-democracy activists to intelligence officers (Tedjabayu, 2010; Asia Centre, 2022). It operated through mailing lists, discussion groups, and websites, safeguarding contributor anonymity and reaching an estimated 13,000 recipients, primarily Indonesians in the country and abroad (Hill & Sen, 2005). The platform shared uncensored and unedited content, including news from global outlets, commentaries, and political gossip, mostly in Bahasa Indonesia. Apakabar became vital for activists and scholars, offering critical insights into Soeharto's regime and political figures. During the Kudatuli incident in 1996, it distributed urgent, eyewitness-based

reports of protests. MacDougall characterized its editorial policy as "pluralism," representing the diversity Indonesia lacked domestically. Despite its importance, Apakabar was abruptly shut down in September 1996, marking a significant moment in Indonesia's digital media history (Hill & Sen, 2005).

The Centre for Information and Reform Action Network (PIJAR), founded in 1989 by student activists, was committed to a democratic struggle and became Indonesia's first explicitly reformist group. Through its unauthorized publication, *Kabar dari PIJAR* (KdP), the organization promoted political and social justice despite lacking the government-required SIUPP license. KdP operated illegally during heightened repression, supported by former student press activists and senior members. In 1995, its editor, Tri Agus S. Siswowihardjo, was imprisoned for two years for insulting the President (Hill & Sen, 2005).

After crackdowns in 1995 hindered street distribution, PIJAR transitioned KdP online as KdPnet in 1996, using an international server from the Association for Progressive Communications. KdPnet, with an estimated 5,000 subscribers, extended PIJAR's reach to NGOs, expatriates, and human rights organizations. Following Apakabar's shutdown, KdPnet filled its void but lacked archives due to fears of government raids (Harizuandini et al., 2022).

Independen, formerly the Independent Journalists Forum (FOWI), was established in 1993 and became a prominent voice against press restrictions following the 1994 bans on *TEMPO*, *Detik*, and *Editor*. In its sixth bulletin edition, FOWI rebranded as Independen, the publication of the Alliance of Independent Journalists (AJI), created by journalists and students to resist government control. Unlicensed by SIUPP, Independen faced government scrutiny for addressing politically sensitive topics, leading to the 1995 imprisonment of members for spreading "hatred" and the arrests of AJI's chairman and secretary general (Harizuandini et al., 2022).

Independen published bold critiques, such as "Tommy's Car Policy" and "Broadcasting Bill, Arrogance of Power," which mainstream outlets avoided. Despite launching an online version in mid-1995, activists also distributed up to 30 daily copies by motorbike. Following the July 27, 1996, crackdown, AJI ceased operations

after the arrest of printer Andi Syahputra and the disappearance of Secretary General Satrio Arismunandar.

SiAR, a resilient alternative media outlet, founded SiARlist as an "alternative news agency" to uphold journalistic standards undermined by New Order censorship. It supported regional sub-lists like Bergerak (PRD activism), MateBEAN (East Timor independence), MeunaSAH (Aceh), and MamberaMO (West Papua) (Hill & Sen, 2005).

The immediate trigger for Reformasi in Indonesia was the 1997 Asian Financial Crisis. But earlier events such as the 1994 shutdown of three critical magazines—TEMPO, Detik, and Editor—also played a key role in mobilizing opposition to the government. These closures led to the rise of alternative media and pushed journalists, artists, students, and others to confront Indonesia's lack of press freedom. Lim (2003) argues that this marked the beginning of mass-scale resistance identities that eventually led to the overthrowing of Soeharto's 32-year authoritarian regime. Other observers, however, believe that the Internet was just an escalating factor but could have never alter the outcome (Hill & Sen, 2005). Information about the alternative

media that helped mobilize the masses during the end of Soeharto's rule was poorly archived, likely due to safety concerns that required minimal documentation and frequent platform changes. However, their presence surely opened up a new path for alternative voices and pioneered the practices of citizen journalism in the country.

Much like in Malaysia, the Indonesian government initially underestimated the political potential of the Internet. The previously banned TEMPO magazine reappeared online on March 6, 1996, as "TEMPO Interaktif," without immediate government intervention. There was also an attempt by ABRI (the Indonesian Armed Forces) to spread online propaganda through "HANKAM/ABRInet," but it quickly failed due to a lack of credibility and popularity (Hill & Sen, 2005). This showed that the loosening of online media presence has more to do with the government's lack of preparedness to deal or regulate the Internet in its initial phase.

Post-Reformasi, Indonesia's media landscape expanded significantly. The country now boasts diverse media outlets, with over 100,000 journalists and a large number of TV stations and newspapers

(Newlands, 2020; RSF, 2023a). However, media ownership remains concentrated among politically connected figures, shifting censorship power from the state to corporate interests (Tapsell, 2020). Despite the 1999 press law dismantling Soeharto-era censorship, challenges persist for journalists. The ITE Law criminalizes vague offenses like defamation and hate speech, putting reporters at risk of imprisonment. Additionally, recent legal changes, including the 2022 penal code and the ongoing revision of the Broadcasting Law, threaten journalistic freedom, particularly around sensitive issues like corruption and LGBT content (RSF, 2023a; Reuters, 2024). The Internet continues to play a crucial role in media democracy, but its influence is now shaped by complex legal and political dynamics.

The 2014 Presidential Election marked a shift in Indonesia's media landscape, with many formerly independent outlets like *Tempo*, *Detik*, and *The Jakarta Post* publicly supporting specific candidates. This media bias became evident when *Detik.com* was sold to Chairul Tanjung in 2011, and *The Jakarta Post* openly endorsed Joko Widodo (Jokowi) by criticizing his opponent, Prabowo Subianto, for perpetuating New Order-style politics.

Similarly, *Tempo* expressed support for Jokowi, focusing on his alignment with human rights values. Despite regaining a critical stance in the 2019 elections, these outlets have struggled to restore their independence and journalistic rigor, with outlets like *Detik.com* and CNN Indonesia still topping trust rankings in 2023 (Tapsell, 2020).

As of February 2024, the Indonesian Press Council verified 1,819 media outlets, with digital platforms accounting for nearly half. Among the most notable alternative media outlets are Project Multatuli and Narasi, both of which have made significant impacts on the media landscape.

Project Multatuli (founded in 2021) focuses on underreported issues, aiming to amplify marginalized voices and hold power accountable. It covers topics such as labor rights, gender justice, environmental degradation, and state violence. Project Multatuli operates independently of media conglomerates and relies on reader support and grants from organizations like the Open Society Foundation. Their investigative work, such as exposing police misconduct and systemic injustice, has led to viral stories, including the #PercumaLaporPolisi (#NoUseReportingtoPolice) hashtag. These

stories have sparked social media mobilization and direct donations to affected communities, highlighting the outlet's influence on both public awareness and action. By emphasizing social impact over profit, Project Multatuli is reshaping the narrative around traditional journalism metrics (Achyansyah, 2022; Tivany, 2022).

Narasi (founded in 2018 by journalist Najwa Shihab) has established itself as a prominent digital media outlet through multi-format news delivery, including text, graphics, and video. It distributes its content mainly through platforms like Instagram and YouTube, focusing on issues such as elections, the environment, and feminism. Narasi's approach combines investigative journalism with pop culture references, making complex issues more accessible to a broader audience. It promotes pluralism, tolerance, and critical thinking while encouraging youth engagement. Narasi TV also emphasizes collaboration and citizen journalism, particularly in its coverage of the 2022 Kanjuruhan tragedy, where it used user-submitted content to reconstruct the events leading to mass deaths. Additionally, Narasi's success in mobilizing fundraising efforts, such as for COVID-19 victims, demonstrates its ability to leverage digital platforms for social good (Kencana & Djamal, 2021; Qadzafi, 2022).

Both Project Multatuli and Narasi play pivotal roles in the contemporary media landscape by offering critical perspectives often overlooked by mainstream outlets. Their commitment to rigorous journalism, community engagement, and social reform positions them as key players in Indonesia's evolving media ecosystem. These outlets challenge dominant narratives and prioritize public interest over corporate or political ties, making them vital in shaping the future of media in Indonesia.

HISTORICAL SITUATEDNESS AND THE MAPPING OF CONTEMPORARY MALAYSIAN ALTERNATIVE MEDIA

Since Malaysia's independence in 1957, traditional media has largely been controlled by the Barisan Nasional (BN) coalition, which maintained government influence through ownership and repressive laws, limiting independent journalism (Kow & Khoo, 2023). The rise of the Internet in the 1990s posed a challenge to the government, as it became essential for the economy but also threatened to disrupt government control over public discourse. In response, Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamad launched the Multimedia Super Corridor in 1996, promising no censorship to attract

foreign investment. This promise spurred the growth of alternative media, including print outlets like *Harakah* and *Aliran*, followed by digital platforms such as *Malaysiakini* and *Free Malaysia Today*.

The sacking of Anwar Ibrahim in 1998 and the subsequent Reformasi period fueled a decline in trust toward mainstream media, which was seen as overly pro-government. This lack of trust persisted, leading to financial struggles for BN-affiliated media organizations, such as *Utusan Malaysia* and *Media Prima* (Malek, 2020). As public demand for alternative media grew, independent outlets filled the gap by offering critical and investigative journalism. This shift led to widespread distribution of alternative news, even in rural areas, where information was shared through photocopies or by younger generations guiding older ones online (Kow & Khoo, 2023).

Despite the government's initial no-censorship promise, the media faced suppression through post-publication defamation and sedition charges, as evidenced by the 2003 raids on *Malaysiakini* and the blocking of *Malaysia Today* (George, 2019). However, the continued success of outlets like *Malaysiakini* shows

the Internet's transformative impact on Malaysian political discourse.

Harakah, launched in 1987 as a newsletter for Malaysia's opposition party PAS, quickly gained popularity for its alternative voice. By 1998, its circulation surged from 75,000 to 345,000, challenging UMNO's dominance. However, due to restrictions under the Printing Presses and Publications Act (PPPA), it was forced to reduce its frequency and limit sales to party members. Despite this, Harakah continued to sell openly, prompting further restrictions on distribution. Over time, Harakah became more of a party mouthpiece, with its strong Islamic perspective limiting its appeal to non-Muslim and Chinese audiences. In 2000, editor Zulkifli Sulong and printer Chia Lim Thye faced sedition charges, and the publication was threatened with closure unless it complied with government terms. Harakah's transition from an alternative outlet to a party-driven publication marked the challenges faced by independent media in Malaysia.

Aliran, founded in 1977 as a social justice NGO, began publishing its monthly English-language magazine in 1980. It aimed to address issues overlooked by mainstream media and advocated for

political and social reforms, a free press, and justice. Aliran's non-ethnic, non-partisan approach helped it avoid government crackdowns, and its reliance on donations ensured economic sustainability. By 1989, it had a monthly circulation of 25,000, with an estimated readership of 90,000, bolstered by photocopies circulated in rural areas. However, government restrictions hindered its growth. It was banned from publishing a Malay-language version, limiting its reach among Malay speakers. Despite this, Aliran's focus on multi-ethnic civil society and its independence made it a key alternative voice, although its impact was limited by unclear reform strategies and the government's control over media narratives (George, 2007).

Free Malaysia Today, founded in 2009, is a pioneering internet media outlet that aims to provide alternative, high-quality news in response to biased "official media." Non-partisan, it advocates for political reform and encourages Malaysians to take control of their political future. Offering content in both Malay and English, it gained significant user engagement, especially during election periods. Originally a blog by opposition members, it has since grown to include 27 media workers. Funded by undisclosed investors, Free Malaysia Today remains independent, targeting both Barisan Nasional and Pakatan Harapan equally, and emphasizes expanding political discourse.

The 14th General Election of May 2018 marked a significant political shift in Malaysia, with the ousting of the Barisan Nasional (BN) government and the formation of a new Pakatan Harapan (PH) government. This change also prompted a shift in the Malaysian media landscape, as the new government sought to fulfil campaign promises to foster a freer media environment. PH proposed reforms, including repealing repressive laws like the Printing Presses and Publications Act (PPPA) and the Sedition Act, both of which had been used to suppress media freedom (George, 2019; Kow & Khoo, 2023). However, despite these intentions, implementation has faced challenges. The PH government, although controlling media laws, has not fully addressed the issue of media ownership, much of which remains under BN's influence. Additionally, Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamad's controversial past regarding press freedom complicates the media landscape, as his ties to media moguls with vested interests in industries like logging and plantation limit true media independence (George, 2019).

Despite constitutional guarantees of freedom of speech and press, Malaysia's media environment remains restrictive, often criminalizing content under the pretext of race, religion, and royalty (the 3Rs). The 2023 proposal to impose civil penalties for 3R sentiments highlights the continued manipulation of laws to suppress critical media. Furthermore, PH has stalled on fully repealing the Sedition Act, citing national security concerns. In 2023, the government also blocked access to pro-opposition media outlets, undermining its earlier promises for a more open media environment (Kam, 2023). These actions reveal that media reforms are superficial and politically motivated, with the state manipulating laws to protect the interests of power holders (Kow & Khoo, 2023).

The restrictive media environment has fueled the growth of alternative media. With mainstream media losing credibility due to bias, many Malaysians have turned to online outlets like Harakah, Aliran, Free Malaysia Today, and Malaysiakini for alternative viewpoints. However, the early phase of Malaysia's alternative media was limited by a small internet user base, concerns over the accuracy and credibility of information, and challenges in sustainability. Despite these limitations, online alternative media continues to play a crucial role in providing a space for dissent and diverse political discourse, shaping Malaysia's media landscape moving forward.

Malaysia's media landscape has evolved significantly, with contemporary media consisting of two main news agencies—Bernama and AFP—state-owned TV networks, private commercial TV stations, and numerous radio stations. The digital media sector is also growing, with 59 digital-native outlets identified in a 2020 survey (Newlands, 2020). The media scene has undergone significant shifts since the Reformasi era, marked by government-dominated media and stringent regulations that limited press freedom. During this period, alternative media outlets like *Malaysiakini*, *Free Malaysia Today*, *Harakah*, and *Aliran* emerged, offering more independent reporting. However, recent changes have led to concerns about the independence of some outlets. For instance, *Free Malaysia Today*, once seen as independent, has become aligned with senior political leaders (Nain, 2023). *Malaysiakini*, the most prominent independent outlet, also saw its founders, Steven Gan and Premesh Chandran, leave in 2022, raising questions about its future editorial independence (Tan, 2023). Despite these changes, *Malaysiakini*

and *Sinar Harian* continue to maintain editorial independence, playing key roles in providing diverse perspectives.

Founded in 1999 by Gan and Chandran, *Malaysiakini* became one of Malaysia's most influential online news platforms. Initially operating from a cybercafé, it faced early financial challenges but continued to grow due to its commitment to independent reporting, untainted by government control. *Malaysiakini* stands out for its investigative journalism, particularly in covering controversial issues like the 1MDB scandal. In a study comparing *Malaysiakini* with the government-aligned *The Star*, the former's aggressive coverage demanded accountability from the government, while *The Star* adopted a more cautious approach (Murudi & Ting, 2019). Despite challenges such as police raids, cyberattacks, and lawsuits, *Malaysiakini* has maintained a strong readership, with over 500,000 daily visitors and millions of social media followers. It publishes in multiple languages and has managed to secure a financial model that ensures independence, relying on a combination of seed capital and grants, while keeping grants below 10% of its budget to avoid dependency (Murudi & Ting, 2019).

Established in 2006, *Sinar Harian* is another key player in Malaysia's media landscape, distinguished by its commitment to balanced reporting. It serves a wide audience, with about 85,000 daily copies and over 60 million online views per month (Tiung et al., 2016). Owned by Karangkraf Group and led by Hussamuddin Yaacub, *Sinar Harian* positions itself as neutral, offering fair coverage of both the ruling and opposition parties, often publishing accusations and claims from opposition figures, a rarity in Malaysian media. Hussamuddin's experience in the publishing industry, including the success of Karangkraf, has been pivotal in maintaining *Sinar Harian's* independence. The newspaper emerged at a time when alternative media was gaining traction, offering a less propagandistic alternative to the mainstream media dominated by government interests. As a result, *Sinar Harian* has attracted a large readership, with significant online followings and a reputation for independent reporting (Kasmani, 2016). Its editorial independence is one of its core strengths, contrasting with mainstream outlets that often downplay sensitive issues to avoid government backlash.

In contemporary Malaysia, media content is often shaped by the sensitivities surrounding issues such as Islam, the monarchy, and Malay identity. The mainstream media tends to downplay these issues to avoid ethnic and religious tensions, while alternative outlets like *Malaysiakini* and *Sinar Harian* continue to address them more directly, though sometimes with sensationalism (Murudi & Ting, 2019). Trust in Malaysian media remains low, with a 2023 survey showing it ranked third-lowest in the region (Newman et al., 2023). This lack of trust is compounded by the growing trend of political alignment within the media, including digital-born outlets like *Free Malaysia Today* (Nain, 2023). However, *Malaysiakini* and *Sinar Harian* remain committed to providing diverse viewpoints, with *Malaysiakini* particularly

known for its aggressive investigative reporting and *Sinar Harian* for its neutral stance in covering political issues (Fong et al., 2020).

In addition to the challenges posed by political influence, these outlets face the constant threat of legal actions and cyberattacks. *Malaysiakini*, for example, has been the target of police raids and DDoS attacks, particularly during politically charged events like the Bersih rallies and state elections (Malaysiakini, 2012a, 2012b). Despite these challenges, both *Malaysiakini* and *Sinar Harian* remain crucial to the evolving media landscape in Malaysia, offering independent reporting in a country where mainstream media often falls short in providing balanced coverage.

CONCLUSION

Alternative media in Indonesia and Malaysia has evolved significantly, especially with the rise of digital platforms, playing a vital role in challenging mainstream media dominance. These outlets provide marginalized voices with a platform for activism, social change, and underreported issues, focusing on political and environmental coverage. Despite facing challenges such as limited resources,

sustainability concerns, and audience loyalty, outlets like MalaysiaKini, Project Multatuli, and Narasi have influenced public discourse and advocated for accountability, transparency, and justice. In Indonesia, the media landscape has become more diverse post-Reformasi, but corporate interests and political biases still affect journalistic integrity. Similarly, in Malaysia, historical government control and censorship set the

stage for platforms like Malaysiakini and Free Malaysia Today to thrive. While these outlets maintain independence through alternative funding models and editorial autonomy, political alignment within some, like Free Malaysia Today, raises concerns about sustainability. Additionally, the reach of alternative media is often limited to specific ideological groups, restricting broader impact. Overall, despite challenges, alternative media remains crucial in promoting democratic values and offering fresh perspectives, highlighting its significance in regions where mainstream media often falls short.

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