

Inspiring Social Change through Independent Media: Case Studies on Bulatlat and Konde.co

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ABSTRACT

Considering independent media to be live social movements, this article examines the present development of the Philippines's Bulatlat and Indonesia's Konde.co and several key issues and challenges encountered by the dynamic independent media outlets in Southeast Asia. As media organizations/platforms founded by activists who strive to counteract the "dominant media" in a society, independent media provide the public with alternative news stories, facilitating media freedom and social progress. However, operating outside the establishment – the entire hierarchical structure representing power, independent media stimulate the sensitive nerves of conservative forces. For instance, certain members of Bulatlat witnessed frequent harassment and intimidation by state agencies; a public event held by Konde.co was interrupted by a fundamentalist cleric. Despite integrating their work with social media, Bulatlat and Konde.co are not free from external interference owing to their reliance on the Internet – a medium that is in fact invented and governed by political institutions. The two independent media cases show that it is necessary for independent media activists to develop new means of social movement practice for freedom of speech, by which the influence of established powers on their work can be minimized to the greatest possible extent.

Keywords: alternative journalism, freedom of speech, independent media, media freedom

INDEPENDENT MEDIA

Media Control and Its Impacts on Journalism

Media are instruments for enhancing communication and mutual understanding in diverse societies. Through reading newspapers, magazines, books, listening to radio, watching television, and using electronic mails, multimedia platforms, individuals can receive up-to-date news, acquire essential knowledge, and share innovative ideas. It is broadly acknowledged that media can shape our thinking and behavior (Applied Social Psychology, n.d.). Therefore, political powers and corporate businesses have invested a huge amount of capital in media industries to control the circulation of news and knowledge, resulting in the fact that media today “are largely controlled by governments and media corporations” (Castells 2015, 9). Indeed, this issue has been highlighted by a number of scholars since the early and middle of the twentieth century. For example, Max Horkheimer, Theodor Adorno, and Herbert Marcuse assert that the information produced by the state/business-led “mass media” can distract our attention from the root causes of social problems. In their view, “the mass media made people passive recipients of the dominant ideology” (Gorman and McLean 2009, 3), promoting the “ideological manipulation of the mass and the utilization and exploitation of the media by capitalist considerations” (Fourie 2001, 243-244).

Against this background, journalists who are expected to play a role as watchdogs become reluctant to take the risk of covering events against the interest of established powers. An example of how newsmen lose their competence in playing such a crucial role is given here: according to Erin Steuter and Deborah Wills (2009), “In the aftermath of 9/11, the media failed to ask the necessary hard questions” (178). In Dan Rather’s view, “fear of being labeled unpatriotic had caused American journalists to engage in ‘a form of self-censorship’” (176). As can be observed, the so-called ‘Fourth Estate’ – the press and public media – is functioning in a way that fails to meet the public’s expectation of truth-telling, to the detriment of people’s right to be informed and the formation of public opinion.

The Emergence of Independent Media and the Internet

To strive for media freedom that is “essential to the attainment of ‘truth’” (Burrett 2020, 16), activists across the globe have launched a great number of social movements since the 1990s. Independent media movement is a notable example of this. The reason is simple: independent media movement is one of the earliest social movements using the Internet – a free and open medium available to activists on a worldwide scale. According to John Downing, “The Internet is [...] a medium through which politics could be made truly participatory at both regional and international levels” (Downing 2001, 202). Manuel Castells maintains that the Internet “is a privileged platform for the social construction of

autonomy" (Castells 2015, 256). Furthermore, the Internet can, as Lance Bennett and Alexandra Segerberg note, help activists "reduce organizational costs of communication" (Bennett and Segerberg 2013, 196). Therefore, activists around the world who endeavor to report on protest activities from an alternative perspective and provide campaigners, dissidents, and citizens with leeway to express their opinions are anxious to work together to establish their own platforms – independent media via the Internet.

Definitions and Terminologies

Contemporary scholars are not unfamiliar with independent media. Iam Chong Ip maintains that "the term 'independent media' refers to media organizations that are independent of any governments, political parties, and business corporations, both financially and editorially. These media organizations are managed in a non-commercial mode of operation" (Ip 2009). Besides "independent media", some scholars use other terms to define the media "independent of any governments, political parties, and business corporations" (Ip 2009). For example, Chris Atton uses "alternative media" to label the media supporting "a range of media projects, interventions and networks that work against, or seek to develop different forms of, the dominant, expected (and broadly accepted) ways of 'doing' media" (Coyer et al. 2007, 3). These bottom-up media are also "labelled as activist (Waltz 2005), tactical (Atkinson 2004), autonomous or citizen (Rodriguez & El Gazi 2007) media" (Kenix 2011, 18). In any case, independent media are fundamental to public awareness and social enlightenment "not only because they allow for more issue-focused reporting, but also because alternative journalism tends to explicitly foreground 'the viewpoints of *ordinary people*'" (Poell and van Dijck 2015, 528).

Unlike state and corporate media, independent media are not subject to censorship. A key reason for this is that independent media are not part of the establishment, which is, as proclaimed by Henry Fairlie, "the whole matrix of official and social relations within which power is exercised" (Lane 2020, 166). As a highly complicated hierarchical structure, the establishment includes "politicians who make laws; media barons who set the terms of debate; businesses and financiers who run the economy; police forces that enforce a law that is rigged in favor of the powerful" (Jones 2014). Journalists employed by state and corporate media are therefore obliged to exercise their profession under orders from the dominant powers. Owing to the fact that "challenges to such power can only come from those situated squarely outside of its purview" (Kenix 2011, 20), activists for independent media strive to be stand-alone and distant from the establishment. To summarize, independent media are self-sustaining media organizations/platforms for the "viewpoints of *ordinary people*" (Poell and van Dijck 2015, 528); operators of independent media have complete control over decisions concerning editorial and financial matters. Finally, independent media are nonprofit-making and non-establishment.

Facilitating Social Change and Progress

What is the primary news content disseminated by independent media? The latest messages relating to human rights campaigns, anti-government protests, environmental protection demonstrations, public forums on LGBT+ topics, i.e., topics about lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and related communities that, as Luis Teodoro notes, “the dominant media does not provide” (Olea 2014) are just a few examples. On independent media platforms, everyone not only can access news stories regarding ordinary people’s hopes for a better society, they can also share their own news reports, articles, photographs, and illustrations with the public after registration. Therefore, independent/alternative media are widely considered conducive to social change and progress. As Linda Jean Kenix asserts, “alternative media have been a central force in social change” (Kenix 2011, 6). Chung-Hsiang Kuan also argues that “alternative media endeavor to foster a sense of reform in civil society, showing that the main objective of them is to achieve social progress” (Kuan 2014).

Nowadays, there are hundreds of newly established online news sites that can be viewed as “alternatives” to mainstream news media. However, they are not necessarily independent media as some of them may have compromised their professional principles for the purpose of gaining monetary support from privileged elites. Worse still, some of them are in fact operated by celebrities or journalists with complex political or business background, even though they sometimes launch work on controversial topics in order to attract a larger audience. For example, Newtalk, a Taiwan-based social-enterprise-model online news outlet that initially compiled and published the news from Wikileaks, was founded in 2009 and run by Cheng-Ping Su, former Director-General of the Government Information Office, Executive Yuan (branch) of the Republic of China (Wikipedia, n.d.). As Grace Leung Lai Kuen argues, “to build and operate an independent media platform is a social movement embodying the spirit of ‘Do-It-Yourself (DIY)’, ‘creating our media space with our own hands’” (Hsiung 2009, 11). Therefore, distinguishing them from independent media is of necessity.

Independent Media as Live Social Movements

Taking account of the aforementioned discussions, it is accurate to say that independent media have been delineated from diverse angles, including bearer (created and operated by activists), content (produced as alternative to those disseminated by “mass media”), form (digital, working via the Internet), and objective (for social change and progress). Undoubtedly, these angles to independent media can help facilitate a better understanding of independent media in an epistemological sense. However, they focus less on *why* independent media come into existence. Therefore, the first question is: why are independent media being established around the globe? A hint about the answer to this

question is given by Downing's theory of "radical media". Inspired by Antonio Gramsci's criticism on capitalism, Downing argues:

In a framework within which classes and the capitalist state are analyzed simply as controlling and censoring information, the role of radical media can be seen as trying to disrupt the silence, to counter the lies, to provide the truth. This is the counterinformation model (cf. Baldelli, 1977; Herman, 1992; Jensen, 1997), which has a strong element of validity, most especially under highly reactionary and repressive regimes. (Downing 2001, 15-16)

To be working for "counterinformation" is, according to Downing, "radical", and "Gramsci's perspective offers a fresh way of understanding such media" (Downing 2001, 15). Here, Downing's theory of "radical media" leads us to think of why "counterinformation" is of vital importance: inequality, injustice, monopoly, manipulation, and oppression are still severe problems of human society; and these severe problems of human society should be reflected by more people, no matter where they live in the world. Therefore, if we want to understand more about independent media, we should not view independent media as simply media. Instead, we should consider independent media to be live social movements for "counterinformation" that are penetrating different life worlds and turning into different forms of resistance against power, which represses people's fervent desire for the truth.

Conceptualized by Michel Foucault as a "decentred" force (Kelly 2009, 38), power is embodied in every corner of people's lives, making people believe that its existence is "inevitable" by tolerating moderate critical voices while standing firm in its domination over humanity as a whole. That is why independent media are born. When power corrupts politics, there are independent media for political change; if power manipulates media, there are independent media for media freedom; if power promotes exploitation, there are independent media for labor justice; if power is integrated with man-centered religions, traditions, and working cultures, there are independent media for women and sexual minorities. But how do activists for independent media sustain their activism? How do activists combat power through independent media? In order to understand independent media as live social movements, it is necessary to examine how activists for independent media begin, develop, and maintain their work and investigate the issues and challenges they encounter from their own standpoint. This inside-out approach to understanding independent media as live social movements allows us not only to rediscover the significant role of independent media in safeguarding the voices of the ordinary, but also to reveal the limitations of independent media in the age of the Internet.

TWO CASE STUDIES

Bulatlat

Based in the Philippines where “the independence [...] of the press has been continually undermined by political and business elites” (Coronel 2020, 214), Bulatlat is a distinctive independent media organization that represents independent media as live social movements against politics corrupted by power. According to its website, Bulatlat “fight[s] against all forms of oppression [,] abuse and misuse of power by the country’s top political leaders [and] seek[s] to reflect the people’s views and stand on issues that affect their lives and their future” (Bulatlat, n.d.). Danilo Araña Arao, Associate Editor of Bulatlat, proclaims:

Bulatlat is inspired by alternative news media outlets that belong to the so-called “legacy media” established in the Philippines during the period of Martial Law (1972–1986) [...]. Bulatlat was officially founded in February of 2001, immediately after the ouster of impeached President Joseph Estrada, who was accused of corruption. At the onset of Estrada’s impeachment trial, we started having meetings with like-minded journalists and planned to create a new news website where credible sources of information and our views on the political event can be published independently and free from the dictates of the dominant media [...]. In 2001, we operated as a weekly. The succeeding years saw the need to update our website more frequently so we began working on the production of breaking news. (Arao 2021)

Political corruption can be a sensitive topic, particularly in countries where the press is enormously influenced by the apparatus of the state. As Arao implies, the “dominant media” censored the news about what was regarded by the political ruler as “sensitive”. In this context, journalists who worked for the “dominant media” had no room for truth-telling, and the public’s right to know was therefore violated. To effectively secure their freedom to inform, activists and media workers with progressive ideas, like Arao and his colleagues, were working together to establish their own media platform for truth-telling purposes. Established as an independent media organization, Bulatlat not only empowered journalists and gave them ways to freely express their opinions on the corruption case, but also enabled the public to better understand the political scandal in the Philippines during the year 2001. Thereafter, Bulatlat became a mature online news provider able to work on the production of breaking news.

Despite the low Internet penetration rate in the Philippines at the time of our establishment, we saw the Internet as the quickest and cheapest way to publish journalistic outputs. Our strategy was to use our existing contacts in the press and

broadcast media to reprint our news articles upon a free-of-charge basis. Through this approach, we can disseminate the news content we want to share with the public and attract a wider readership. (Arao 2021)

During the new millennium, the Internet was considered an emerging medium that opened “a new form of public space since its decentralized nature allows many voices to be heard” (Raman 2015, 194). However, Internet coverage in the Philippines in that period was comparatively low. Therefore, the authorities – different from today – were not anxious about the Internet being used by activists or journalists to write about issues that implied its impotence in providing quality governance. That is why Bulatlat had enough space to implement their strategy to publish news releases to widen their readership at the beginning of its media social movement.

As of today, we never abandon our work for in-depth news stories, including investigative reports, explanatory texts, and feature articles, in which we highlight the issues of exploitation and oppression of the marginalized sectors of society. Suffice it to say that we also conduct podcasts (Twitter Spaces, Kumu), online lectures, and live streaming of selected unfolding events [...]. As part of the alternative media community – AlterMidya, we can pursue perspectives that the dominant media may not want to touch, such as the comprehensive discussions of why state forces are primary human rights violators and why the government has totally weaponized the COVID-19 pandemic in order to oppress the people. (Arao 2021)

Besides working on breaking news items, Bulatlat exerts efforts to carry out investigative reporting. The aim of such a journalistic practice is, as Arao remarks, to awaken public opinion on the adverse consequences of the dominance of the political power, such as “exploitation and oppression” (Arao 2021). Using the podcast and live streaming functions provided by social media, Bulatlat strives to reveal the crux of the matter that is seldom discussed in public: the state government is in fact not a protector but a “violation” of the people’s basic rights, especially during the COVID-19 pandemic that “has had a ‘devastating’ effect on freedom of expression” (Dege 2022).

It is noteworthy that Bulatlat is one of the members of AlterMidya – an autonomous media network that includes several independent media organizations based in the Philippines. As reported by Bulatlat’s Ronalyn V. Olea, AlterMidya aims “to strengthen the cooperation and coordination among alternative media outfits, harness the capabilities of independent media organizations in amplifying the voice of the marginalized sectors” (Olea 2014). AlterMidya supports Bulatlat’s activism and enables Bulatlat’s journalistic works to be known to a wider audience.

Because of our news coverage on political corruption and public issues, we have experienced consistent harassment and intimidation by state forces, such as red-tagging. For instance, I was accused of being part of a conspiracy to oust Rodrigo Duterte, the [former] President of the Philippines [...]. Not only are we being red-tagged, my colleagues, including Frenchie Mae Cumpio (Eastern Vista) and Lady Ann Salem (Manila Today), have been arrested and detained [...]. The dangers faced by members of alternative news media organizations have become more serious under the Duterte regime. (Arao 2021)

Nowadays, activist journalists can conveniently use the Internet to make their work known to the public. However, political authorities can also use the Internet to monitor the circulation of online information and locate the source of what they deem to be negative news. Working against political exploitation and oppression, several members of Bulatlat, as Arao (2021) points out, are targeted “by state forces (most recently the Philippine Army)”. Clearly, the authorities aim to deter Bulatlat’s members from continuing their work. Moreover, Arao (2021) adds that “Bulatlat and other alternative news media organizations/networks (e.g., Pinoy Weekly, Kodao, and AlterMidya) have been subjected to cyber-attacks in an attempt to silence us”. A number of the challenging experiences encountered by Bulatlat and other independent media outlets in the Philippines are evidenced by a recent report from the Center for Media Freedom and Responsibility, the Philippines (Estella and Löffelholz 2020). Despite the authorities’ attempt to frighten independent media activists and journalists in the Southeast Asian country, Bulatlat still adheres to its social movement values and continues its journalistic activities:

There are a lot of journalistic projects we have pursued, including [...] our human rights reporting project and COVID-19 special coverage. These reporting projects show how human rights issues can be covered from a progressive perspective and how our work can be free from the influence of corporate and political interests [...]. Many people are becoming aware of alternative media, including Bulatlat. Our influence on society has been increasing throughout the past few years. (Arao 2021)

With a view to creating a progressive public opinion and demonstrating that alternative journalism is feasible and workable, Bulatlat endeavors to execute diverse news projects for public awareness-raising. In Arao’s view, the news projects with regard to human rights and COVID-19 pandemic issues are the most noteworthy ones. For example, in the news article titled *Plea for Food not A Crime, Court Rules in Favor of QC Residents*, Anne Marxze Umil, author at Bulatlat, writes:

A Quezon City court dismissed the cases against 21 residents of sitio San Roque, North Triangle in Quezon City who protested amid strict lockdown in Metro Manila in April of 2020 [...]. In a statement, urban poor group Kadamay said that the dismissal of the

cases against San Roque 21 is justice not only for them but for all those whose rights were suppressed by what they described as a “fascist state.” “This decision affirms that the government has fundamental shortcomings in meeting the basic needs of citizens amid lockdowns,” the group said [...]. (Umil 2022)

Media control is often practiced by political powers for social domination. When news about misconduct or wrongdoings by the political is filtered from public knowledge, social power against the political is not possible to be formulated. Highlighting the court’s “dismissal of the cases against San Roque 21”, the above Bulatlat coverage reveals the absurdity of the authorities’ lock-down policies that caused problems of food access and civil protests during the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020. Informed by the coverage, the public is free to have their judgment on the matter, and the formation of social power can have more opportunity to take place. This example of Bulatlat’s journalistic works proves that Bulatlat plays a key role in facilitating social enlightenment in the Philippines. Another noteworthy example of Bulatlat’s alternative news coverage is shown as follows:

The recent arrests of human rights defenders reflect continuing criminalization of their work under the Ferdinand Marcos Jr. administration. Human rights group Karapatan denounced the arrests of Makabayan-Bicol coordinator and former Bayan Muna fourth nominee Marites Pielago on 28 July and the Pangadas brothers on 25 July [...]. Groups are calling for the immediate release of Pielago and the Pangadas brothers. Karapatan also reiterated their call to end the criminalization of human rights work. (Umil 2022)

The change of political leadership gives citizens hope for a better life and future. However, the change of political leadership does not necessarily lead to an actual improvement of human rights. For example, Rodrigo Duterte, the former president of the Philippines who was hostile to activist journalists, stepped down on 30 June, 2022. However, his successor, Ferdinand Marcos Jr., is still a political leader against human rights advocates. According to the above news report by Umil, the human rights defenders Marites Pielago and the Pangadas brothers were arrested during late July 2022. This incident shows that the difficult human rights situation in the Philippines is not alleviated due to the change of political leadership in 2022. Reporting on the incident, Bulatlat shows its untiring commitment to anti-human rights violation.

Owing to Bulatlat’s significant efforts into the work of truth-telling, Bulatlat has earned its reputation as an influential independent media organization in the Philippines. Besides being the winner of the 7th and 10th Hildegard Awards (Ellao 2013; Ellao 2016), Bulatlat was also “‘long-listed’ in [...] One World Media Awards” (Kodao Production 2019). Overall, Bulatlat demonstrates its determination and sense of mission by committing to an independent media movement against corrupt politics. As Arao (2021)

concludes, “despite political oppression, Bulatlat will continue to exist. We have to provide a voice for the voiceless in the Philippines.”

Konde.co

Konde.co is an active independent media organization based in Indonesia. Because of its specific concerns over women, LGBT+, and social minorities’ rights, Konde.co has developed its individuality and received widespread approval since its foundation. According to the homepage of its website, Konde.co is “a media organization that works on news projects to promote women and minorities groups’ perspectives [...]. The main focus of our work lies in publishing news articles, producing video clips/films, and spreading new information/knowledge” (Konde.co 2022). Luviana Ariyanti, who worked as a journalist at Metro TV and is now Editor-in-Chief of Konde.co, notes:

There were public discussions, press documents, and community activities against the authorities that ignored the issues regarding women, laborers, the urban poor, the disabled, and the LGBT+ in Indonesia. However, they were not reported by the [mainstream] media [...]. Konde.co was founded and financially supported by a group of women activists, male feminist activists, and activist journalists who dedicated themselves to supporting the marginalized by spreading campaign-related news through online websites and social media. (Ariyanti 2021)

Before the foundation of Konde.co, the media sector in Indonesia was powerful enough to create an illusion that there were no critical voices against the authorities that paid little attention to sexual and other social minorities’ rights. The aim of Konde.co is therefore to remove the illusion: using the Internet and social media, a group of like-minded activists and journalists jointly established Konde.co as a web-based information hub for the publication of news stories and messages with regard to “women, laborers, the urban poor, the disabled, and the LGBT+ in Indonesia” (Ariyanti 2021). The emergence of Konde.co validates that independent media are not just media but live social movements against media manipulation.

Konde.co was born on 8 March, 2016, when a large number of online media in Indonesia distributed undesirable information in which women were described as characters that can be exploited and sensationalized [...]. Meanwhile, few media outlets fought for the rights of marginal social groups because oligarchs and economic/political figures have monopolized the media market in Indonesia [...]. Konde.co is now based in Jakarta, and has 6 permanent staff members, 4 part-time

staff members, and several voluntary contributors. We keep updating the website of Konde.co with 3 to 4 new articles every day. (Ariyanti 2021)

Because of the authorities' long-term national policies before the late 1990s, the overall situation of women in Indonesia is relatively fragile. Kathryn Robinson argues that "Suharto's New Order exercised gendered power through policies such as family planning and state control of women's organizations in a familial model that registered male authority" (Robinson 2009, 68). This policy results in the fact that Indonesian women are in general regarded as "subordinate to men within the family and the state" (68). Also, the media environment in Indonesia is being complicated by diverse religious forces. For example, according to Tina Burrett, "Indonesian journalists and others who question the tenets of Islam or the teachings of conservative Muslim scholars are targeted by religious activists and forced to apologize, and are sometimes subject to violence" (Burrett 2020, 22). Undoubtedly, this phenomenon causes not only tensions between peoples who have different religious beliefs, but also a sharp deterioration of the media environment in Indonesia. Despite shouldering the burden of the complex social reality, Konde.co has developed as a sizeable independent media organization able to sustain regular production of news articles since its establishment. Representative examples of Konde.co's news items include, first, *Not Recognized as A Worker: 18 Years of Domestic Workers Neglected by the State*. Written by Ariyanti and Utami, this news article sheds light on the current situation of female domestic workers in Indonesia and the advocacy work initiated by the National Network for Advocacy for the Protection of Domestic Workers (JALA PRT):

Sagan is a "headquarters" for those who are members of the Yogya Women's Discussion Forum (FDPY) [...]. On 11 July, 2004, they officially established the National Network for Advocacy for the Protection of Domestic Workers (JALA PRT), whose task is to organize domestic workers and advocate for the bill on the protection of domestic workers [...]. But in fact, this does not guarantee certainty that this bill will be passed into law [...]. Unable to [make the bill] become law in Senayan, [the] JALA PRT then tried another method: advocating for the domestic worker's [rights] in Regional Regulations (Perda) and Mayor Regulations. However, it turns out that this has not been effective [...]. For 18 years the state has neglected [the rights of] domestic workers. (Ariyanti and Utami 2022)

Indonesia is a leading exporter of domestic care services in Southeast Asia. Ironically, the rights of female domestic workers are not protected by law. Therefore, there are advocacy groups in Indonesia devoted to lobbying for a well-defined policy to protect the rights of female domestic workers. The JALA PRT, as shown in the above news article, is a prominent example. Highlighting how the JALA PRT put effort into encouraging the legislation at different government levels, the news article implies that the authorities was conservative in preventing its citizens from being exploited by domestic care

services traders by means of legislation. Reporting from the JALA PRT's perspective, the Konde.co's news article provides a wider, broader scope for the public to reflect on the issue concerning the rights of female domestic workers in Indonesia.

Another representative example of Konde.co's coverage is the news report titled *Poor Women: We Are Not Lazy People and Don't Want to Work*. Certain content of this news report is extracted as follows:

Women workers have been fighting for their rights since 1910 [...]. But in Indonesia, until now, they are still trapped in poverty, such as debt [...]. The low wages become the ultimate push for many women workers to go into debt. According to them, debt is one of the best ways they have taken to solve real-life's problems, even though many moneylenders who ensnare them with [...] up to 100% of the interest [...]. Meanwhile, the government never dared to order [loan] companies to issue audits of their financial conditions transparently [...]. Ideally, the guarantee of increasing labor welfare in the next year [...] can be the mitigation for this problem. (Ariyanti and Nasution 2022)

Women in Indonesia are easy to become members of economically disadvantaged groups. Owing to the challenging labor environment, Indonesian women workers have no choice but to request assistance from loan companies to satisfy their daily needs, according to the above news report. Clearly, the above news report unveils the truth that the authorities in Indonesia do too little to regulate the lending market on the one hand, and fail to improve the labor conditions on the other. Like the previous news item produced by Konde.co, the above news report is written from the perspective of the underprivileged, attempting to draw public attention to the serious issue facing women workers in Indonesia.

Besides composing and publishing news stories, Konde.co actively participates in various public events with regard to gender equality and media freedom, because Konde.co "views media as an advocacy platform for policy change" (Ariyanti 2021). Concerning this aspect, Ariyanti elaborates:

As a media representative, Konde.co delivered a public speech on media ecology and women's lives in Indonesia when we visited the office of the National Commission on Women (Komnas Perempuan) and the National Human Rights Commission, where we met Zeid Ra'ad Al Husein, the former United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights in 2018 [...]. Since 2019, Konde.co has become an expert resource base for research on gender and media issues, which is jointly held by the Press Council and the University of Indonesia [...]. Konde.co's coverage of public activities held by LGBT and minority groups is powerful enough to urge the government sector to provide

assistance to victims of sexual violence and marginalized people of the society.
(Ariyanti 2021)

In the public imagination, independent media are “‘fringe’ by definition” (Lievrouw 2011, 214). However, Konde.co’s recent developments are against the imagination. For the purpose of effectively advocating women and sexual minorities’ rights, Konde.co strives to work closely with governmental agencies and academic institutions at national and international levels. In addition to the aforementioned events, Konde.co “made contributions to a report of the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW), a report of the Beijing+25 Women’s Conference, and an annual report of the Beijing International Women’s Conference Platform for Action” (Ariyanti 2021). Funded by the National Commission on Violence against Women, Konde.co also “did research on how the media report on sexual violence” (Ariyanti 2021). The result of the Konde.co’s investigative work pinpoints the root cause of the problem: “[T]here is no specific law or policy to protect women from being sensationalized in public media, resulting in discrimination, stigmatization, and sensationalism against women in Indonesia” (Ariyanti 2021).

Konde.co is not only an expert resource base, but also a social movement player. For example, Konde.co was a leader engaged “in the advocacy campaign for the banning of the Indonesian Broadcasting Commission’s circular letter against the LGBT in 2016” (Ghina 2016). Konde.co also “initiated a public campaign against violence and harassment in the world of work” (Nurhadi 2020), not to mention its efforts to produce a number of campaign films, such as *More than Work* – “a film about the image of female Indonesian workers in public media, which was nominated for the Documentary Film Festival (Festival Film Dokumenter, FFD) in 2019” (Ariyanti 2021). Recent studies, including the journal article “Gendered Digital Citizenship: How Indonesian Female Journalists Participate in Gender Activism” by Monika Swasti Winarnita et al. (2020), have shown that “Konde.co is a key media organization that inspires women to participate in the ‘Me Too’ Movement in Indonesia.” Therefore, it is clear that Konde.co is capable of exerting considerable influence on public opinion as well as the policy agenda of the authorities.

However, Konde.co’s media social movement is not exempt from tough challenges from opposition forces. One notable example is that there were fundamentalist Islamic activists who publicly protested against Konde.co due to Konde.co’s reportage of mut’ah marriages – a brief marriage that “is contracted for a limited or fixed period and involves the payment of money to the female partner” (Encyclopaedia Britannica, n.d.) – in Islamic boarding schools in 2016. Thereafter, this incident became a case submitted by the Jakarta Legal Aid Institute and Konde.co to the Press Council and the National Anti-Violence against Women Commission (Ariyanti 2021). Another notable example is that a forum activity concerning alleged sexual violence held by Konde.co at an Indonesian university was disrupted by “a young cleric suspected of committing sexual violence” (Ariyanti 2021) in 2020. Furthermore,

Konde.co's Twitter account was hacked because of the independent media organization's focus on sexual and other social minorities' rights (Winarnita et al. 2020). Despite these complicated situations, Konde.co still continues its work, taking up a role as "a liaison agency between civil movement campaigners and alternative media outlets" (Ariyanti 2021) in order to build a deeper, stronger relationship with competent journalists and other comparable media organizations in Indonesia:

Konde.co cooperates closely with professional journalists through the Alliance of Independent Journalists (AJI) – a public organization consisting of 2000 journalists who work in 40 cities across Indonesia [...]. Currently, Konde.co collaborates with a number of independent media organizations, including Projectmultatuli.org, Remotivi.or.id, Indoprogess, IDJN, and Pantau. We act as an independent media network that helps extend each other's work, such as managing the newsrooms, inviting the student press to report on media issues, etc., in spite of the fact that we are not officially recognized by the government as "media organization". (Ariyanti 2021)

Unity can create strength against challenges and constraints. Therefore, activists and journalists, including the ones for independent media, are anxious to act collectively. Like Bulatlat, Konde.co is, according to Ariyanti, working with multiple independent media outlets as a media network for expanding the scope of its activism. Receiving enough support from like-minded media organizations in Indonesia, Konde.co is able not only to further develop its journalistic and social movement work, but also to withstand adverse social conditions in Indonesia, including being protested by fundamentalist religious sects and not being "recognized by the government as 'media organization'" (Ariyanti 2021).

Overall, Bulatlat and Konde.co share certain common characteristics as independent media organizations. These common characteristics include the following: (1) activist, which means that Bulatlat and Konde.co, including their operators, such as Arao and Ariyanti, are anxious to make an influential social movement (i.e., independent media movement); (2) self-reliant (in terms of their journalistic and activist practices); (3) affiliated with social media; and (4) Internet-based. The first two common characteristics are important because they can be used as basic criteria for determining whether a media organization is independent. However, the last two common characteristics give us hints about certain setbacks for the future development of Bulatlat and Konde.co.

ISSUES AND CHALLENGES

Funding

According to Burrett (2020), “media always work within economic, legal and political limits” (17). Independent media are no exception. In order to continue their work without detriment to social movement ethics, activists for independent media generally refuse to request financial support from established parties (e.g., state governments and business corporations). Rather, they incline to raise funds from the public directly. However, public donations, as can be expected, are not sustainable enough to assist them in ensuring long-term growth of their media social movements. Bulatlat and Konde.co, for example, have reported that they are disturbed by the lack of funds. Bulatlat’s Arao notes that “we do face problems in terms of funding [...]. So far, we have been successful because we manage to finance our overhead expenses like domain name registration and web hosting” (Arao 2021). Konde.co’s Ariyanti also remarks that “Konde.co has received [financial] support from international NGOs, associations, foundations, and advertising businesses for the next three years. However, we are searching for new ways to get more funding because of a lack of income from advertising” (Ariyanti 2021). Therefore, besides raising funds from the public, some independent media activists have engaged in limited business activities for the purpose of stabilizing their income situation, e.g., members of Konde.co. Independent media activists can decide how they get involved in commercial matters; nevertheless, this type of “resource exchange” between them and business operators may increase their dependence on non-activist parties.

Social Media Usage

Another key issue relating to independent media is whether independent media can achieve widespread popularity. Some critics have argued that independent media were fringe media organizations established by minority groups (Lievrouw 2011), and their online platforms should only be regarded as a few experimental media products that were neither able to make citizens pay more attention to public problems nor to motivate them to participate in social movements. To tackle this issue, independent media activists, including those from Bulatlat and Konde.co, have begun using social media (e.g., Twitter and YouTube) to increase their visibility in the eyes of the public. As asserted by Ariyanti, “social media are beneficial to Konde.co because [...] through the use of social media Konde.co can reach more readers” (Ariyanti 2021). Arao also argues that social media “effectively help expand [our] readership” (Arao 2021).

However, despite their effectiveness in the formation of public opinion and the generation of protest power, social media are technologies “not designed to facilitate activism” (Poell and van Dijck 2016,

227). Indeed, “the technological architectures and user policies of social media are primarily informed by commercial considerations” (227). This fact implies that independent media activists’ rights of free speech can be sacrificed when social media corporations make choices concerning conflicts of interest between independent media activists and political powers. Current research has shown that social media today have become “a key driver of authoritarianism and repression” (Aim and Tapsell 2021, 3).

Moreover, social media are open to every individual or institution, including government agencies. Social media have “given the increased possibilities for monitoring by state security apparatus” (Morozov, qtd. in Gerbaudo 2012, 8), posing risks for activists, protestors, and citizens who engage in communication through the commercial platforms. For instance, Facebook users are facing censorship from state authorities through Facebook: “In Vietnam, [t]he government employs online ‘opinion shapers’ who recognize the importance of Facebook in the daily lives of Vietnamese citizens – and exploit that by monitoring and reporting them” (York 2014). Regarding this situation, George Chen, Facebook’s Public Policy Director for Hong Kong, Taiwan, Mongolia, and Central Asian Countries, explains that “although Facebook’s ‘Community Standards’ have been formulated for the prevention of the dissemination of inappropriate content, extra checking and blocking systems would be implemented with reference to national laws and regional situations in different countries around the world” (Taro News 2018). This example shows that social media corporations have developed various management mechanisms to monitor online content, and these management mechanisms, as Thomas Poell argues, “give state agents and regime supporters the instruments to battle activist social media content” (Poell 2015, 198) and curb the free expression of opinions “in order to protect the powerful and to limit the spread of ideas and information harmful to their interests” (Kingston 2020, 3). In fact, Konde.co had a comparable experience when dealing with Twitter: “Konde.co was briefly restricted in its use on Twitter when distributing news articles about Indonesian women who refuse to follow the omnibus law” (Ariyanti 2021).

The Entire Digital Complex

Visibility is crucial to independent media activists. For them, when more people know the truth, more sympathizers and supporters can be made. However, it is certain that “visibility means exposure and makes way for control and surveillance” (Melgaço and Monaghan 2018, 9). Recent studies have demonstrated that social media corporations are in collaboration with state governments and telecommunication companies on matters regarding surveillance. For instance, Poell (2015) posits:

State-led surveillance is made possible by corporate collaboration: telecoms and social media companies provide access to a wealth of user data, whereas the security industry delivers the necessary surveillance technology (Fuchs 2013; Hayes 2009). The

rise of this security-industrial complex is by no means restricted to the US, as surveillance technologies are exported globally, and virtually every national state tries to force internet companies to cooperate with its surveillance programs. (Poell 2015, 192)

Concerning the matter of government surveillance, Edward Snowden, a former employee of the USA National Security Agency (NSA), reveals that “the US has developed several extensive online surveillance programs, of which PRISM and UPSTREAM are the most well known” (Poell 2015, 190). For instance, through the PRISM program, “the NSA could systematically fetch user data from the major centralized services (Facebook, Google, Microsoft, Yahoo, and others) and could query this data at their own discretion” (Bosk et al. 2018, 79). Obviously, these state-led surveillance programs violate the digital services users’ privacy rights, which are represented by anonymity that “may liberate a user to explore and impart ideas and opinions more than she would [be] using her actual identity” (Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights 2015).

The evolution of social movement is based on free transmission of information, by which freedom of speech can be fully embodied. To defend this fundamental freedom, independent media activists, such as those from Bulatlat and Konde.co, are operating their own platforms, composing news reports, and publishing latest messages for grassroots communities on the Internet. They consider this approach to social movement practice feasible to uphold freedom of speech, for the reason that this approach can, as Castells maintains, facilitate “the construction of the autonomy of the social actor, be it individual or collective, vis-à-vis the institutions of society” (Castells 2015, 7).

A number of scholars believed that the Internet could still be a hotspot of information competition. Mohamed Zayani (2018) argued that “the Internet became the main battleground between various factions and between the state and independent voices” (226). Some also maintained that the medium was a conflict zone “between repressive governments that would censor content and those who advocate free access for all” (Tkacheva et al. 2013, iii). However, these scholars overlook the key role of the USA government in inventing, developing, and governing the Internet (Downing 2001). Moreover, as Downing (2018) further notes, “the global telecoms infrastructure – ocean cables, cellphone towers, satellites, etc. – is privately owned, or in some cases state-owned, [...] giving inordinate power to the owners in terms of policies, access and content” (27). For example, “The Internet ‘domain name system’, operated by the Internet Network Information Center (InterNIC) [...] under the guardianship of the National Science Foundation (NSF) [...], has been privatized” (Flash, n.d.), implying the non-public supervision of the Internet and the centralized control of worldwide digitized information. This digital reality suggests that the Internet is hard to be seen as a purely neutral medium where different parties can compete with one another on an equal basis. Nowadays, various social movements, including independent media movement, rely largely on the Internet to enlist support from the public. Their

reliance on the Internet could undoubtedly become an obstacle to the sustainable growth of them, especially when state governments worldwide have imposed tougher restrictions on the use of the medium (Safenet 2021). The reason is simple: national authorities have a prior interest in investigating how the Internet is used to “protect national political [...] goals, often to the detriment of the speech rights of their own citizenry” (Stein and Sinha 2006, 417).

CONCLUSION

Given the above analysis, it is reasonable to argue that independent media are still playing a crucial role in providing the public with alternative (or even radical) opinions against established institutions. Independent media activists, such as those from Bulatlat and Konde.co, have occupied the best position in performing dynamic media social movements by refusing to be silenced by hegemonic powers. However, their reliance on the Internet, as pointed out before, is the question under consideration. Furthermore, the majority of ordinary people today could have been overwhelmed by excessive misinformation (mostly disseminated by social media). Suffering from the saturated coverage by state and corporate media, they find it difficult to relate to current social, economic, and political problems. Therefore, independent media activists may have to start to develop new means of social movement practice that does not depend on any technologies that are invented and governed by established institutions, in spite of the fact that independent media activists have successfully increased their influence in the real world where ordinary people are conscious of the seriousness of media control, rather than being distracted by new technological gimmicks.

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