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Source of Information: between domination and threat to impoverish perspective of local public

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ABSTRACT

The use of information sources in the information gathering process for news media content is very crucial in the context of its role and function as an instrument in building citizen literacy. However, in cases where the local news media is relatively highly dependent on local government, a number of critical issues arise. Essentially, the relationship is symbiotic, but in reality, local news media is more dependent on local government. Local government almost functions as the backbone of local news media through its multiple roles; as the source of information, the source of income, and the main market for local media. Through a case study, this article describes this relationship from the perspective of local news media and the point of view of local government, its manifestation in reporting, and the critical issues that must be considered. The research object was 4 local newspapers in West Sumatra Province, one of 34 provinces in Indonesia. The research data were obtained through interviews with newspaper editors and government public relations officials, content analysis, and literature review. The findings indicate that the power imbalance in the relationship causes the minimum voice of ordinary citizens in media coverage based on the usage pattern of local newspaper sources. Information sourced from government elements dominates the content of local newspapers, followed by information sources from local elites. Primarily, this practice impoverishes the public's perspective and makes the content of local newspapers less relevant, thereby widening the distance between the local newspapers and the local public.

Keywords: citizen literacy, domination, information gathering, information sources, local news media

Introduction

The use of information sources in the information gathering process for news media content is very crucial in the context of its role and function as an instrument in building citizen literacy. The news media is an instrument for developing the knowledge and ability of citizens to participate effectively, both locally, regionally, nationally, even globally (Partnership for 21st Skills, 2009). The news media primarily acts as a provider of information, space and tools needed in making joint decisions for the common good in a democratic country (Papacharissi, 2009). However, in cases where the local news media is relatively highly dependent on local government, a number of critical issues arise.

Journalists and news media rely heavily on information sources to complete the news coverage. The determination of information sources depends on needs and tends to be pragmatic. However, the problem of determining information sources does not rely solely on the choice of journalists because there are dynamics of interests and tensions between the parties (Gans, 2004). Regardless of the turmoil in these dynamics, the main concern still lies in the public interest.

Enriching the public's perspective through information content is a function carried out by the news media in society. It is a provision for the public to develop discussions on public issues so that they can carry out their ideal function as citizens. In this context, the patterns of using primary or secondary sources in news media can explain various things, such as the construction of reality and validation efforts. They also present alternative views to the public (O'Neill & O'Connor, 2008). If a particular party of news sources exceeds the public's consciousness, it eventually will impoverish the public's perspective at a certain level.

The dependence of local media on local governments has led to the practice of content that depends on local governments. This article presents a case study on 4 local newspapers operating in West Sumatra, one of 34 provinces in Indonesia. The schemes of local media dependence on regional government at least consist of cooperation for socialization processes through news, advertisements, and subscriptions.

Local journalism as a geographical boundary is related to selected journalistic sources and orientation of community service (Napoli, Stonbely, McCollough, & Renninger, 2017). Local press or regional press is defined as a press company that is owned by residents, produces locally using local resources, reports on local issues, and is read or consumed by residents (Franklin, 2006). In this research, local press

refers to news media that are oriented towards serving certain regional audiences at the provincial, city, and regency level, and managed by local resources.

The scheme of cooperation between local news media and local government generally takes the form of exchanging space on newspaper pages with news related to local government and related elements. For that kind of news, the material is generally sourced from the local government, both from the official source of the local government and its other elements. When selecting information and news to use, the media should not be influenced by powerful sources or exclude marginalized or minority groups and their causes.

A news source is a place where news material comes from, which can be documents, events, and individuals selected based on the autonomy of knowledge and credibility. In this discussion, source means the origin of information obtained by journalists (Fisher, 2018) in various forms, such as experienced or observed events, documents, and individuals who represent themselves or institutions to then cite their statements in the news (Franklin, Hamer, Hanna, Kinsey, & Richardson, 2005; Berkowitz, 2020). Individuals as sources of information are called source persons and able to represent themselves or their institution (O'Neill & O'Connor, 2008). They consist of office officials, institutional sources, pressure groups (Shoemaker & Reese, 2014), eyewitnesses of an event, whisperers, public officials, police officers, politicians, business people, community and advocacy groups, and spokespersons (Fisher, 2018). Source persons are very crucial in the news production process (O'Neill & O'Connor, 2008) and to some extent, they determine the news (Sigal, 1973).

Thus far, the performance of local governments has been in the spotlight because, in some ways, it is quite alarming. Local media are perceived to be less independent, less professional, and less promising in business (Nugroho, 2011). At the same time, there are doubts about the function of local media as guardians of democracy in the regions (Haryanto, 2011). Meanwhile, in the Indonesian context, the local press is quite significant because around 90% of the press institutions are regional press (Dewan Pers Indonesia, 2020).

The pattern of resource use also shows the use of forces on social issues and debates as a result of the source person's power within the play of news agenda (O'Neill & O'Connor, 2008). Besides, the use of primary or secondary sources explains how reality is constructed, validates efforts, and presents alternative views to

the public. Relying heavily on particular sources will undermine the independence of journalists (McQuail, 1992).

This paper is an attempt to explain the usage of information sources within the practice of information gathering for news media content, the critical issues of the circumstances based on the local news media relationship with the local government. In the end, it is supposed to enrich the discussion regarding the use of information sources and the implications for the relations between news media and audiences and its function as the instrument in building citizen literacy of local audience as the primary orientation of its services.

Method

This article is based on a case study about the use of information sources in the process of information gathering for news content under such circumstances of the relationship between local newspapers and local government. The research location is West Sumatra Province, one of 34 provinces in Indonesia with 19 city and regency level governments under it. There are 4 main daily newspapers as research subjects, namely *Harian Haluan*, *Harian Singgalang*, *Pos Metro Padang*, and *Padang Ekspres*. The research data were obtained through various data collection techniques, comprising in-depth interviews with the chief editors of the newspapers and local government public relations officials. In addition, researchers also collected data by analyzing newspaper content and reviewing the literature relevant to the research issue. The research period lasted for 1 year, from November 2019 to November 2020.

Results

The Relationship between Local Media Local Government

For local media, local government is the main source of their income. The first revenue stream is from cooperation in reporting or socializing local government programs and activities to the community. Concretely, the media provide a special space for the results of journalists' coverage for local governments, both level 1 (province) and level 2 (city or regency). The special space is found in the form of a page or a section specifically provided for each region based on the initial agreement regarding the provided space, the choice of publication days, and the publication frequency. Information comes from journalists' coverage or release materials from the public relations office of each local government office.

The subscription market for local newspapers is dominated by local government offices, both level 1 (province) and level 2 (city and regency). This research took place in West Sumatra, one of the 34 provinces in Indonesia. In West Sumatra Province, there are 19 level-2 regions. Local government offices, both level 1 and level 2, including the sub-national offices or local government work units (SKPD), are the subscription market for major local daily newspapers. The proportion of the subscription market between local governments and the general subscription market ranges from 60% - 80% of subscription from government offices, 20% - 30% of general subscription, to 10% - 20% of the retail market sales. This data show how local government offices contribute more revenue from subscription funds than from the general subscription and retail sales of local newspapers in West Sumatra. For example, Harian Haluan is printed around a maximum of 5,000 copies per day. Of this circulation, roughly 80% is for the subscription market and 20% is for the retail market. Of the 80% for the subscription market circulation, between 70% and 80% are subscriptions from the local government and the 19 local government agencies or work units (SKPD) at the regency or city level and the provincial government (R. Akbar, direct interview, 2019, December). A quite similar picture is also seen from the 3 other research object newspapers, namely Padang Ekspres, Posmetro Padang, and Singgalang.



Figure 2. Special pages for the City Government of Payakumbuh and Agam Regency in Daily Haluan Newspaper
 Source: Circulation section of Haluan newspaper, January 2020).

News cooperation and subscriptions have implications for the source of information on news content in local daily newspapers. As an illustration, all of the cooperation pages contain the results of coverage of activities or programs held by local government offices. The events as the sources of information are local government activities or programs. Then, the sources come from elements of local government officials or staff as the organizer of the activity. When reporting government policies to be presented on the cooperation page, the source of information automatically comes from policy documents prepared by the regional government, including the regional representative council. The source persons to complete policy-related information also come from local government officials or members of the local legislature.

Local media, in this case, daily newspapers, make local government offices a source for various aspects of media management. Primarily to be a source of income from both news and subscription collaborative streams. Local newspapers also make local governments their main source of content because most of the information from local governments comes in various forms; events, releases, policy documents, and source persons.

On the other hand, the local government views local media, including local daily newspapers, as a very strategic partner. Local governments need local media as a channel to socialize their development programs and various government activities to the local community.

Head of Public Relations of Bukittinggi City Government argued that newspapers are still a reference for public information in West Sumatra. His party did not carry out a systematic survey but, his opinion was based on observations and daily experiences (Yulman, direct interview. 2019, December 30). The opinion that local newspapers are still a reference for most sections of the community was also expressed by the government public relations officials in West Sumatra who were interviewed by the researchers.

The position of the mainstream media is very significant for local governments. An interviewed provincial government public relations official admitted that the network of local newspaper reporters is a very important source of information. According to him, journalists are like his eyes and ears. Journalists usually know information ahead of the general public. It is not uncommon for his party to acquire suggestions on the performance of local government work units or

offices from media networks through their field journalists. The information or report is followed up internally by the local government, which is also an effort to confirm it (Jasman, direct interview. 2019, December 31). In this case, newspapers are also a kind of communication medium for local government offices or work units (SKPD). This last function is deemed important because some local governments no longer manage internal media which are the connecting channels between local government offices or work units.

Partnerships in the form of news and outreach cooperation have persisted even though all local governments already have official websites and several social media accounts. The local government public relations office that manages the local government website admitted that the quality of its content and performance is still in the development period. According to a public relations official of Payakumbuh City Government, limited human resources are a major obstacle, both in terms of the quantity of staff who specifically handle websites and the quality or the ability of the staff to prepare and manage content with good standards (Irwan, direct interview. 2019, 18 December).

Local government also views local media as a party that can provide suggestions. The position of local media resembles a partner in exchanging ideas and opinions on various problems in the regions, including the process of formulating public policies. Local government can accept suggestions, even criticisms from local media, as control over the tasks and functions carried out. This control is recognized as needed as a counterweight in government. However, local governments still remind them that suggestions or criticisms should be based on accurate and accountable data or information, or in other words, in accordance with journalistic principles.

"Partnership (with local media) is like a friend. We need friends who remind us when we work. When we jump, remind us to be careful. When we walk too fast he reminds us, likewise if we walk too slow, he reminds us, 'Eh, why are you too slow? Walk a little faster.' This means that the media is our true friend" (Jasman, in-person interview. 2019, December 31).

The cooperation scheme between each local government and each media is different due to several factors based on both the perspective of newspapers and local governments. From the media's point of view, normatively, the cooperation scheme depends on the circulation of each newspaper. Newspapers with large circulation will receive a greater allocation for cooperation compared to newspapers with less circulation. Circulation determines the priority order of cooperation. Furthermore, the

distribution of issues depends on the characteristic of each newspaper. For example, education news tends to be distributed to *Harian Haluan* because this media focuses more on educational issues. Business and trade news is more suitable for the *Padang Ekspres* newspaper because it is in line with the orientation of the media coverage, considering it is a part of the *Jawa Pos* network. Meanwhile, culture news is a part of *Harian Singgalang* newspaper, which is wise to protect Minangkabau customs and culture.

The consideration in determining the cooperation scheme is also based on the performance report of each media. Public relations officials of Bukittinggi City Government said that the news performance was not good; for example, the delay in publishing releases from the local government. Some local newspapers published a release 2 days after the release was issued without any content updates. This trend is more common in regular releases, while advertorial news or paid news can be published more quickly (Yulman, direct interview. 2019, December 30).

The Dominance of Government Information Sources in Local Newspaper Reporting

Various forms of cooperation between local mass media and local government have implications for the news content of these media. One of which is the domination of news about the government with information sources coming from the government in the pages of local newspapers. Generally, the news reports the official (formal/ceremonial) activities of the government and the head of the government, the informal activities of regional heads, local government policies, and so on.

News coverage related to local governments uses various sources and techniques of extracting information. For government activities, journalists usually come to report based on an invitation from the government public relations office. Some of the news content comes from releases and documents that are also issued by local government offices, specifically the public relations office. Sources of information from local elites tend to fill local newspaper content, whereas sources of information from pressure groups and ordinary citizens appear to be minimal. Table 1 below illustrates a brief comparison of the use of these information sources in two local newspapers in West Sumatra; *Harian Singgalang* and *Harian Haluan*.

Newspaper	No. of Pages	Local News Items	Source of Information					
			Executive	Legislative	Judicative	Pressure Groups	Elites	Commoners
Harian Singgalang	20	60	44	8	5	0	26	4
Harian Haluan	16	44	28		1	2	17	8

Table 1. Comparison of local information sources in the Monday, 20 January 2020 edition of local newspapers

Source: Research results, 2020

It is said that more than half of the contents of local newspapers revolve around the activities or issues related to local government or local elites. Analysis of the information sources of each local newspaper can at least illustrate and prove this opinion. Table 1 is a simple attempt to map local newspaper reports and the sources of information they refer to. Regional news was taken from Harian Singgalang and Harian Haluan newspapers on the edition of Monday, January 20, 2020. The two newspapers are two prominent and historic publications in West Sumatra Province. Harian Haluan was first published in 1948, while Harian Singgalang was born in 1968.

Information sources in news content are divided into groups or elements of local government, local elites, pressure groups, and ordinary citizens. The executive sources of information consist of regional heads (mayors, deputy mayors, regents, and deputy regents), heads of local government offices at the city or regency level, members of the Regional People's Representative Council (DPRD) at the city or regency level, the police, and the National Armed Forces (TNI). Meanwhile, the regional elite consists of leaders of community organizations, traditional leaders, and school principals. The pressure groups that emerge as sources of information are local NGO officials. Meanwhile, ordinary citizens are the common people and they rarely appear as the main source of news.

Of the total 60 regional news items in Harian Singgalang, there are 87 sources of information. As many as 65% of these information sources came from elements of the local government (executive, legislative, and law enforcement), 30% from local elites, and 0.46% from ordinary citizens. No information was found from pressure groups in the newspaper, which consists of 20 pages on weekdays.

Meanwhile, on Harian Haluan, 57 regional news reports were recorded to have their source of information analyzed. This newspaper used more ordinary citizens (14%) as a source of information than Harian Singgalang although the percentage is

still minimal compared to information sources from government elements (52%). However, ordinary citizens were used as the main source of several regional news stories in *Harian Haluan*. There are also sources of information from the pressure group, which amounted 0.35% of the total sources of information used.

The dominance of government elements as information sources is not surprising if the description in the previous section is taken into account. The relationship that exists between local newspapers and local governments in reporting and socialization cooperation makes the above phenomenon a logical consequence. From this relationship, each regional government in West Sumatra, consisting of 1 provincial government and 19 governments at the city and district level, disbursed funds originating from the regional revenue and expenditure budget following the cooperation scheme.

Crucial Points for Using Information Sources within The Process of Information Gathering for News Media Content

The relationship between local media and local government as described above raises a problematic situation. For most of the local press in Indonesia, local governments are like the backbone to maintaining the sustainability of the press. Local governments are a source of information, content, and income. At the same time, it becomes a target market. In this pattern of relationship, the greatest attention is focused on the normative role and function of local journalism works. Journalism is enable democratic emphasis on free speech, free will, and collective decision-making (Papacharissi, 2009). The extent to which local public information services are fulfilled is as important to be noticed, so the public can carry out their ideal function as citizens.

The relationship between journalists and information sources has always been a topic of discussion in journalism studies given their significance. The position of the source is in the context of social institutions that influence mass media content (Shoemaker & Reese, 2014). Today, the development of digital media has resulted in a shift in the relationship between journalists and news sources. The level of need for news sources for mainstream media to deliver publications and socialization decreases due to the availability of various digital platforms that news sources can run autonomously (Fisher, 2018). The degree of news source shifting towards the

mainstream media varies among different cases, but the dependency trend leads to a decline.

In this discussion, source refers to the origin of information obtained by journalists (Fisher, 2018), such as experienced or observed events, documents, and individuals who speak on behalf of themselves or their institutions in the news (Franklin et al., 2005; Berkowitz, 2020). Individuals as sources of information are called source persons. These source persons can represent themselves or their institution (O'Neill & O'Connor, 2008) and consist of official officials, institutional sources, pressure groups (Shoemaker & Reese, 2014), eyewitnesses of an event, whisperers, public officials, police officers, politicians, business people, community and advocacy groups, and spokespersons (Fisher, 2018).

This article focuses on individual sources or sources whose role is more than merely a source of information. The selection of sources in the news production process is based on several qualifications or criteria. Source persons are chosen because they have knowledge authority and autonomy to speak. Official source persons or officials from government agencies are the sources most frequently visited by journalists for information on news materials. They are always there and relatively always have important information to share regarding public affairs. Therefore, journalists make statements or information originating from government institutions as facts (Shoemaker & Reese, 2014).

Government sources are among the most frequently quoted. Extracting information from government sources is relatively easier and cheaper than other sources due to the place and time to find it. However, because of this, government sources also have a greater chance to implement various strategies, such as monopolizing journalists' time so that they do not have the opportunity to find alternative views.

The choice or use of sources to complete information in reporting depends on the needs and tends to be pragmatic. In certain terrorism threats, for example, the security forces or the police are more influential in conveying details than sources from government officials. In the discourse on terrorism in the media, the use of sources has undergone a further shift in light of public concern on how official sources or government officials communicate information on terrorism threats (Matthews, 2013).

The relationship between journalists and sources is established through interactions in the news production process where journalists contact sources to complement their news materials. This relationship has various patterns, such as regular source person, incidental, and some get paid by journalists to obtain information, although this practice created ethical problems (Franklin et al., 2005). In certain circumstances, the relationship between journalists and sources is institutionalized that is manifested in this case study on journalists and local governments. Both parties are bureaucratic machines; each of which is engaged in producing news.

The relationship between journalists and source persons is dynamic. Gans uses the metaphor of partner dance or tug of war to describe the dynamics of this relationship (2004). In tango dance, a pair of dancers move side by side with the same movement in one part, then in another part one dancer follows the movements of the other. The mutual attraction between players in the tug of war is also a metaphor for the relationship between journalists and sources, which is eventually manifested in the news.

In the reporting process that involves the tug of war of power and influence between journalists and sources, the news is produced as a construction of reality through a narrative compilation. Berkowitz uses a sociological perspective in examining the relationship between journalists and source persons as a framework to understand the position of each party when interacting. The interaction between journalists and source persons takes place in the form of hostility, influence, exchange, and negotiation. It is a long-term process, which can build cultural meaning and ideological strength (Berkowitz, 2020).

The impact of the dynamic relationship between journalists and source persons in the coverage can be unintentional, invisible, and sometimes unpredictable. However, the relationship between journalists and source persons is a real relationship that involves power and influence, especially for the press (McIntyre & Gyldensted, 2018). According to Berkowitz, there are three assumptions regarding the position of journalists and source persons in news production. First, the relationship between journalists and source persons is the result of combining several elements, including adversarial and symbolic interactions in a continuum. There is a constant and dynamic tug of war between the two sides. Second, this relationship is highly dependent on a number of contexts, namely the time, the press system where journalists and source

persons meet, as well as the gender and ethnicity of both parties. Third, the reasons for assessing which party is more dominant, as mentioned above, are taken into account as efforts to monitor the image of the news, the formation of public opinion, and the ability to exercise power over social issues and social debate (Berkowitz, 2020).

Each party in the relationship between journalists and source persons plays their strengths. According to Berkowitz, journalists have three types of strength, namely 1) experience (in the dimensions of space and time), 2) a track record of impactful work, 3) strength in media organizations (intra-organizational strength) relating to the freedom to determine news and deadlines. Meanwhile, the strength of source persons comes from 1) structural knowledge authority and speaking autonomy and 2) the ability to promote issues or news agendas (2020).

The willingness of source persons to provide information is more than a mere addition to news material. The informants also have certain interests and agendas, which can be demonstrated clearly or hidden. For example, release materials or statements from government public relations officers are well-structured as a part of a propaganda strategy. This tactic, called "spin", can cause the relationship between the media and the government to be sensitive and complicated (McQuail, 1992).

Various tactics are used by source persons in dealing with the media for specific purposes. In a study on criminal case reporting, for example, it was revealed that the police's willingness to present criminal cases to journalists is part of a budget submission strategy. The rise of crime reports in the media is used to show an increase in criminal cases so that program proposals become legitimate and thereby increasing the budget (Shoemaker & Reese, 2014). Likewise, interest groups or pressure groups often use the media according to their agenda, such as by making the media a channel or tool to influence policy-making and rules as well as public opinion and attitudes. The standard method used by interest groups is to mock events (Boorstin, 1971), "by designing and hosting events that will be covered by the news media such as demonstrations or protests" (Wolfs-feld, 1984). The media, especially journalists, must be smart in observing the strategies launched by the sources and responding to them skillfully.

It becomes clearer that resource persons have an active role in news narrative, more than just as a source of information. Domingo and Le Cam used two approaches in explaining this phenomenon, namely the actor-network theory and dialogism.

Epistemologically, the actor-network theory (ANT) serves as a comprehensive tool for exploring all matters relating to social practice. In journalistic studies, ANT can be used to analyze news production without highlighting traditional categories that refer to certain roles. Actors are seen based on their actions in interacting with other people, and more precisely, actors are what they do. The researcher explored the roles and network relationships among the actors. In ANT's perspective, maintaining a hegemonic position requires relocating some resources and the support of other actors.

When elements of a local government dominate the information sources and content sources of local newspapers, the local public perspectives are also the poorest. It occurs because the local public only receives the perspective of events and reality from one source. The diversity of sources with different views adds to the richness of the perspective of news audience or consumers, which in turn enriches the interpretation framework in addressing various public issues (O'Neill & O'Connor, 2008). The news media is an instrument for developing the knowledge and ability of citizens to participate effectively, both locally, regionally, nationally, even globally (Partnership for 21st Century Skills, 2009). Meanwhile, to some extent relying on limited information sources will further threaten the independence of journalists (McQuail, 1992), especially if news sources also act as a source of income and a market as is the case described in this article.

The pattern of using sources in the media at a certain level illustrates the orientation of the media and the embodiment of the ideal role of the media in society. Indeed, sources are fundamentally more than only a source of material during the information gathering process and naturally, the pattern of using sources means more than that. Furthermore, O'Neill and O'Connor revealed that the pattern of source usage also shows the employ of forces on social issues and debate as a result of the power of the source persons in playing the news agenda (2008). In addition, the use of primary or secondary sources explains how reality is constructed, validates efforts, and presents alternative views to the public. If sources from ordinary citizens are more prominent, at least the gap between media content and the public will tighten and the media feel relevant to them. It may also occur if the source is a weak voice in resource control but has relevance and significance (McQuail, 1992). When choosing information and news to use, the media should not be influenced by powerful sources or by excluding marginalized or minority groups and their causes. In the end, if the

media are indeed focused on the public, then the public's voice must emerge more often by making it a source.

Conclusion

The discussion on the dominance of information sources in the process of information gathering for local news media content goes beyond the discussion on the criteria for credibility and authority of the information sources. Furthermore, mass media information sources play a significant role in building citizen literacy through narrative construction for the public. When mass media content is dominated by certain parties, in this case, elements of local government and local elites, it has the potential to impoverish the public's perspective. The dominance of the government and local elite elements as sources in local media content can cause the gap between the public and media content to widen so that in turn, it will result in indifference because the public feels that media content is less relevant to them. For this reason, despite the very high dependence of local news media on local government, it is necessary to evaluate the practices of determining sources to expand opportunities for ordinary citizens to emerge and become news subjects. Local news media can find creative ways to make local media content always have strong relevance to the local public because substantially, they are the orientation of media services.

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