

Local Media Independence in Environmental Coverage in Central Sulawesi Province

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ABSTRACT

Economic growth in Central Sulawesi driven by the nickel and mining industries has raised concerns about the negative impacts on the environment and society. This study highlights the challenges of local media and journalists in reporting environmental issues amidst corporate pressure. The focus is on the dynamics of media resilience in providing information about the environmental impacts of industries, such as mining, while they are in a dilemma between corporate interest pressures and journalistic independence. By utilizing the perspective of Media Political Economy theory, this study analyzes the power between local media and companies in the context of environmental reporting. Qualitative methods are used to explore the strategies implemented by local media in maintaining their independence amidst corporate pressures. This study aims to understand the complex relationship between local media and corporate interests in environmental journalism practices in Central Sulawesi. The results are expected to provide an in-depth understanding of how local media maintain their independence in reporting environmental issues in the context of economic growth that impacts the environment and society.

Keywords: Local media, Environmental coverage, Environmental journalism

INTRODUCTION

The rapid industrialization of nickel, gold, gas, and other materials in Central Sulawesi has been a driver of economic growth but has also raised concerns about its environmental and social impacts. The Central Sulawesi Economic Report, August 2022 Edition from Bank Indonesia, noted significant economic growth, mainly driven by the processing and mining industries.

The increase in the capacity of nickel smelters and other material mining in Central Sulawesi is a major factor in economic growth. The nickel industrialization process in Morowali, which initially only involved mining and exporting ore in the 2000s, has developed into a nickel processing industry and its derivative products since 2014. However, the impact of deforestation associated with the expansion of nickel mining has been highlighted, especially related to land loss and natural disasters such as flash floods in several areas.

Environmental groups, such as WALHI, have consistently voiced their concerns about the negative impacts of nickel mining on income, high unemployment rates, and loss of livelihoods in Sulawesi. In addition, reports from various international organizations and media such as the BBC, VOA, and Mongabay have also highlighted the detrimental environmental impacts of this industrial expansion. While local media have great potential in informing the public about the environmental impacts of industrial activity, there is a dilemma. They must consider corporate pressure and influence, which can sometimes affect the independence and accuracy of environmental reporting.

Environmental journalism has a crucial role to play in addressing the environmental impacts of industrial activity. However, pressure and challenges from corporate interests can undermine the independence of

environmental reporting. The complexity of environmental issues, their polarized nature, the strong interests associated with the fossil fuel industry, and the amount of disinformation circulating on these topics make reporting on environmental topics extremely challenging, but they also underscore the need for strong, independent institutions for environmental journalism in the public interest.

While concerns remain about the potential impact of corporate interests on the integrity and objectivity of environmental reporting, this calls for an exploration of the strategies used by local media to counter and counter such influence. In the contemporary media landscape, local journalists and media face increasing pressure and challenges from corporate interests, which have the potential to impact the accuracy and independence of environmental reporting.

This study aims to identify, analyze, and understand the various strategies implemented by local media to uphold the integrity and autonomy of their environmental reporting amidst corporate influence. This study aims to uncover local media strategies in reporting environmental issues related to industry, amidst the dynamics of corporate economic interests and demands to maintain independence in providing accurate and balanced information to the public. The Political Economy of Media Theory is the basis for understanding the relationship between local media, companies, and environmental news content. Understanding the political economy of media provides insight into how economic interests, ownership structures, and market power can shape media content, including reporting on environmental issues.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Media independence and independence are the subject of debate due to their different focuses. Media independence includes aspects of independence, including freedom to choose news topics, perspectives, and narratives, and freedom from external pressure. Media independence focuses more on freedom from interference that influences the editorial process and the delivery of information.

The issue of media independence and independence is an important debate among academics and practitioners. Robert W. McChesney, in his work "The Political Economy of Media: Enduring Issues, Emerging Dilemmas" analyzes how economic and political structures affect the function of the mass media and the challenges in the era of technological change (McChesney & McChesney, 2008). He highlights the impact of political policies and commercialization on media independence. The concentration of media ownership by a few large companies is a concern, reducing the diversity of information conveyed and the critical role of the media in democracy.

McChesney emphasizes the need for appropriate regulation to maintain a balance between media business interests and the need for diverse and independent information. The impact of media ownership concentration on independence is manifested in the decline in public trust in the media, as analyzed by Jay Rosen in his book "What Are Journalists For?" Rosen highlights that consolidation of media ownership can reduce the diversity of opinions and information, and raises the risk of news being centered on certain corporate or political interests. As a result, public trust in the media decreases due to doubts about their objectivity and independence (Rosen, 1999).

Consolidation of media ownership can lead to the dominance of certain viewpoints while other important viewpoints are not well represented. This creates doubts about the reliability and independence of the media, especially when concerns about political or commercial bias arise. In conclusion, concentration of media ownership can contribute to a decline in public trust in the mass media.

While environmental journalism discusses environmental issues such as climate change, sustainability, and pollution, providing in-depth information about the impact of human activities on the environment. Playing a crucial role in providing a more complete understanding of the impact of industry and helping sustainable decision-making. Local media engage in debates presenting balanced and relevant coverage while maintaining editorial independence. Conflicts of interest between independence and business needs often arise in environmental coverage (Lester, 2010).

Abrar points out the challenges of environmental journalism practice, including corporate pressure, lack of resources, and limited access to information. He highlighted the importance of environmental journalism in providing reliable information, encouraging behavioral change, and influencing policy.

Abrar emphasized the independence of journalists in reporting the truth about environmental impacts, also supporting collaboration between journalists, environmental organizations, and the government for broader coverage and better policy influence (Abrar, 2016). Abrar's views highlight the importance of quality, independent, and collaborative environmental journalism in addressing complex environmental challenges in Indonesia.

Political Economy of Media Theory discusses the influence of economic and political structures on mass media, including environmental coverage. The contributions of Dallas W. Smythe, Herbert I. Schiller, Robert W. McChesney, and Noam Chomsky help understand the relationship between media, politics, and economics in influencing the information conveyed to the public (Fuchs, 2015).

Local media refers to media that operates at a local or regional level, usually with an audience that is more focused on the local community. Local media refers to media platforms such as newspapers, radio stations, television, or online outlets that focus on coverage and information at a regional or local level. Local media usually targets an audience in a specific geographic area and is often more connected to issues that are relevant to the local community.

Characteristics of local media include more in-depth coverage of news and events that occur at the local level, stronger engagement with the community, and a focus on issues that are important to local residents. Local media also often encourage community participation in the delivery of information and various community activities, businesses, politics, or other parties that can influence the narrative or information presented.

Local media play a central role in disseminating relevant information to local communities, maintaining regional cultural identity, and encouraging citizen engagement in local issues. In the context of environmental journalism, local media have better access and sensitivity to environmental issues affecting their communities.

Discussions about their role often highlight the extent to which they can maintain editorial independence in reporting local environmental issues without commercial or political pressures (Anderson, 2014; Harte & Matthews, 2021; Takahashi et al., 2018). Scholars have also examined how local media can combine global and local perspectives in their coverage of environmental issues (Lester, 2010).

Scholars such as Ana Abrar in Indonesia have studied the role of local media in environmental journalism, focusing on corporate pressures in reporting environmental issues. In various countries, other researchers have also highlighted the role of local media in the environmental context, according to the issues relevant in each region (Abrar, 2016).

Research Methods

This study uses a qualitative approach method. According to (Creswell, 2014), qualitative research is a method that investigates a social phenomenon and human problems. Researchers create a complex picture, examine words, detailed reports from respondents' views and conduct studies in natural situations. According to Sugiyono (2011) this method is also called a constructive method because with qualitative methods scattered data can be found, then constructed into a more meaningful and easy-to-understand theme. Qualitative research methods are often called naturalistic research methods because the research is conducted in natural conditions.

The research location is in Palu City and Luwuk Regency, Central Sulawesi. The research subjects were determined through purposive sampling techniques where informants were selected based on previously determined criteria, namely: Leaders and Editors of Local Media, Journalists covering environmental issues and the Journalist Association in Central Sulawesi.

The stages in this research process were designed within a period of 12 months by considering the achievements and outputs of the research. For research, it can be described as follows: In-depth interviews, observation and

content analysis. The analysis technique in this study refers to qualitative analysis techniques with direct data collection in the field.

The results of the data obtained in the field are then narrated and then grouped and sorted into data that is considered to be a reference in the data analysis process, including: Data Organization, Thematic Analysis and Data Triangulation: Combine data from various sources to ensure the accuracy and reliability of the results. Based on the research objectives that have been explained previously, the author will use qualitative data analysis techniques according to Miles and Huberman. The steps in analyzing the data that has been obtained based on Miles and Huberman's data analysis (Kriyantono, 2011), include: Data reduction, Data Display, and drawing conclusions.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

Background of Environmental Issues and Coverage in Palu

The role of the mass media in overseeing environmental issues in Central Sulawesi is crucial. Unfortunately, local media are often caught up in complex political and economic dynamics, so that their coverage of environmental issues tends to be uncritical and in-depth. As a center of the mining industry, Central Sulawesi faces various serious environmental problems. Nickel, gold, gas, and C mining activities have caused pollution, ecosystem damage, and threatened public health. However, these issues are often ignored by the mass media, unless there is a major event that attracts public attention.

An environmental journalist said that environmental issues only become the focus of the media when there is a conflict or natural disaster. This condition is very unfortunate, because the cumulative impact of industrial activities on the environment requires more sustainable attention. Coverage of environmental issues tends to be reactive and inconsistent. Public attention to these issues is also inconsistent. "Environmental issues are often only raised in the mass media when there is a conflict and riot or a natural disaster that claims victims. This condition is very unfortunate, actually" (Informant 7, Journalist).

Although the environmental impact is significant, attention to this issue is often ignored by the government, which is more focused on investment and job creation. The construction of nickel smelter factories, for example, is often carried out without consulting local residents, so that many productive lands are taken over by mining companies. This issue causes damage to agricultural land and the community's economic resources. As a result, "the damage to agricultural land and the community's economic resources, especially in mining locations, is getting worse" (Informant 2, Editor).

After the COVID-19 pandemic, local media face major financial challenges. "After the pandemic, it was very difficult for us to maintain operations. Most of the revenue from print advertising was lost, and even though we switched to digital, our readers were not willing to pay for online news" (Informant 4, Journalist). In this condition, many media were forced to change their coverage strategies, focusing on viral content and ignoring in-depth coverage. "Many media were forced to increase viral content, even though it meant abandoning in-depth investigative news" (Informant 5, Editor).

Weak financial conditions also make local media more vulnerable to the influence of big business and political interests. An informant, a local journalist, shared his experience when his coverage of the environmental impact of a large mining company was withdrawn by his editorial team because the company was a major advertiser. "This situation illustrates how business interests often dictate the media's news agenda" (Informant 6, Journalist).

In addition, multinational companies use another strategy to dampen criticism from the media, namely by recruiting journalists who were previously critical of them. For example, a journalist who used to be very vocal about the negative impacts of mining company activities is now recruited by a large gas company in Central Sulawesi to become an official in charge of media relations. There are many cases where former journalists and activists are recruited by mining companies for various company management positions. This shows that external influences can limit media independence, especially in covering environmental issues.

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Local Media Strategies in Navigating and Resisting Corporate Influence to Maintain Integrity and Independence in Covering Environmental Issues

Local media in Palu City and Luwuk Regency face major challenges in maintaining integrity and independence when covering environmental issues, especially those related to large companies, such as mining. One strategy adopted by local media is to strengthen investigative journalism practices. In-depth investigations allow media to dig up more comprehensive information and present more accurate data, although mining companies tend to be non-transparent in conveying information regarding the environmental impacts of their activities. A senior journalist explained, "We have to conduct in-depth investigations because a lot of information is hidden by mining companies. Our commitment is to ensure transparency and accountability" (Informant 1, Journalist).

In addition, local media have generally expanded their reach by utilizing digital platforms, especially social media, to distribute news. In this way, they can reduce their dependence on advertising revenue from the mining companies they cover, which often affects editorial independence in various ways. One editor stated, "We use social media to spread our news, it helps us reach a wider audience without having to rely on advertising from companies that may have a conflict of interest" (Informant 4, Editor).

However, despite their efforts to maintain independence, local media still face significant financial pressures. The majority of local media revenue still comes from advertising, with mining companies being among their main advertisers. This dependence creates potential conflicts of interest that can hinder critical reporting on environmental issues. One journalist said, "Many local media rely on revenue from advertisers or parties with economic interests, including mining companies" (Informant 5, Journalist). Despite these pressures, local media continue to strive to maintain independence by balancing their revenue from other sources, such as through collaboration with local communities and NGOs.

Local Media Approaches to Reducing Corporate Pressure and Ensuring Strong and Accurate Reporting on Environmental Issues

In addition to the challenge of financial dependency, local journalists and editors face a number of challenges in covering environmental issues. One of the biggest challenges is limited access to valid data and information on the environmental impacts of mining activities. Companies are often not transparent, and local governments do not always provide the data they need. This forces journalists to seek alternative sources to obtain credible information. It is not easy to obtain information from mining companies, but some media outlets with strong networks with NGOs and local communities are quite helpful in collecting relevant data.

Limited human and financial resources are another barrier for local media to conduct in-depth investigative reporting. Many local media outlets do not have enough journalists with specific training in environmental

journalism, so reports tend to cover only the surface of issues. "Limited human and financial resources make it difficult for local media to carry out in-depth coverage and investigations," said one of the administrators of AJI (Alliance of Independent Journalists in Palu City (Informant 3, Journalist Member of the Association). Collaborative coverage involving national media networks and sponsoring institutions also helps local media in investigative reporting.

The safety risk for journalists is also a significant challenge, especially when covering sensitive issues such as mining activities. The threat of intimidation and retaliation from parties who feel disadvantaged by critical reports often makes journalists feel pressured. "Covering mining issues often invites risks for journalists. Our journalists often receive threats," (Informant 5, Editor). The risk of these threats is increasing along with the massive opening of mining land and industry in Central Sulawesi.

To overcome these challenges, journalists and editors in local media rely on collaboration with civil society organizations and NGOs to obtain more in-depth data, and to establish closer relationships with local communities. "We don't just report, we also engage directly with the community, listening to them, and ensuring that their aspirations are voiced in our reports" (Informant 6, Editor-in-Chief).

This community-based approach allows local media to produce more relevant and impactful reports, and build trust among audiences. Through these strategies, despite facing various challenges, local media in Central Sulawesi continue to strive to maintain integrity and ensure that environmental issues are reported accurately and transparently, for the benefit of the public and the sustainability of their media operations.

This study reveals the challenges and strategies faced by local media in Central Sulawesi in covering environmental issues. These findings are in line with the literature on environmental journalism and media independence, especially in the context of areas affected by the mining industry, such as Central Sulawesi, especially in Palu City and Luwuk Regency. The role of the media as a public watchdog in overseeing environmental issues is very important, but research shows that economic and political realities often limit critical and in-depth media coverage.

As expressed by Anderson, Bell, & Shirky (2014), in the context of post-industrialization, the media faces great pressure to adapt to changes in the economic landscape. This is reflected in the situation of local media in Central Sulawesi which have to struggle to survive financially after the COVID-19 pandemic. The loss of revenue from print advertising, as expressed by one of the research informants, has made many local media shift their focus to viral content in order to attract audience attention. This condition forces the media to ignore deeper investigative coverage, which requires greater resources, as described by Kovach and Rosenstiel (2021) in *The Elements of Journalism* that the quality of coverage is often sacrificed for profitability.

Furthermore, this study shows that local media are often trapped in the dynamics of conflicts of interest, where mining companies, as major advertisers, can even influence news content. This phenomenon is consistent with the analysis of Singer et al. (2011) which states that editorial independence is often threatened by external pressures, especially in a media environment that relies on sources of income from interested parties. In this context, the influence of mining companies on local media in Central Sulawesi shows how business interests can limit the media's ability to carry out its oversight function effectively.

However, this study also identifies efforts by local media to maintain their integrity and independence. One strategy used is strengthening investigative journalism, where the media digs deeper to ensure the accountability of mining companies. This strategy is in line with the views of Bradshaw and Rohuma (2017) who emphasize the importance of investigative skills in digital journalism to face modern challenges, including limited access to data and company transparency. Local media also utilize digital platforms and social media to distribute news, thereby reducing dependence on advertising revenue from companies, which potentially have conflicts of interest.

This study also highlights the challenges faced by journalists in covering environmental issues, including physical threats and safety risks. These threats show how sensitive coverage of extractive industry activities is, especially in areas filled with tensions between economic interests and environmental sustainability. This is in

line with literature discussing the challenges of environmental journalism in areas exposed to large-scale industrial activities, as outlined by Brennen (2021) in his analysis of the ethical challenges of journalists in reporting on issues that are potentially dangerous for reporters.

In addition, collaboration with civil society organizations and NGOs is one of the solutions taken by local media to obtain more in-depth and credible information. This approach strengthens the relevance of the findings of this study with the views of Nasrullah (2022) and Abrar (2016) on the importance of media engagement with local communities to support more accurate and impactful coverage. Collaboration with NGOs and communities allows local media to maintain trust and strengthen their position in countering corporate influence.

CONCLUSIONS

This study reveals the challenges and strategies faced by local media in Central Sulawesi in covering environmental issues. These findings are in line with the literature on environmental journalism and media independence, especially in the context of areas affected by the mining industry, such as Central Sulawesi, especially in Palu City and Luwuk Regency. The role of the media as a public watchdog in overseeing environmental issues is very important, but research shows that economic and political realities often limit critical and in-depth media coverage.

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