

Media Transformation and Citizens' Collective Consciousness in The Era of Digital Democracy

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Abstract: This study examines the transformation of media and its impact on the collective consciousness of citizens in the era of digital democracy in Indonesia. Democracy is not only realized through electoral procedures but also through processes of deliberation and state oversight. The transformation of media from traditional mass media to digital media has altered the ways in which citizens construct social realities and political solidarity. This article analyzes the role of media in shaping collective consciousness, from the homogenization of information during the New Order era to the fragmentation of information in the digital era. In this context, digital solidarity emerges through collective emotions rapidly disseminated via social media platforms, such as hashtags that instantly mobilize the masses. The article also addresses challenges posed by the power of social media and algorithms in shaping public opinion, which is often affective and episodic. Using a social constructionist theoretical framework, this article aims to understand how media transformation influences the quality of democracy and collective consciousness in Indonesian society.

Keywords: *Media Transformation; Collective Consciousness; Digital Democracy; Social Media*

INTRODUCTION

Democracy is fundamentally built upon the principle of the separation of powers among the executive, legislative, and judicial branches. These three functions must operate in balance to ensure that public rights are protected according to prevailing law (Gálvez, 2017; Peceny, 1999). Within this framework, there are at least three fundamental aspects that need to be safeguarded. First, democracy must guarantee the personal autonomy of each citizen as the foundation for the right to self-determination. Second, democracy demands equal treatment of all citizens within the political community, which simultaneously underscores the importance of citizenship as a collective identity. Third, democracy necessitates the maintenance of a neutral public sphere that serves as a link between civil society and the state, and as a meeting point between the processes of opinion formation (*Meinungsbildung*) and the formation of collective will (*Willensbildung*) (Gálvez, 2017). Thus, democracy is not merely a political procedure but also a system that ensures individual freedom, social equality, and a communicative public space that enables the formation of shared legitimacy.

Citizen participation constitutes the core of democracy in executing the functions of the political system. A large, collective population with a sense of shared purpose is necessary to advocate for public interests and monitor power (Freeman, 2000). The democratic principle of equality, which considers every individual as equal—whether professor, teacher, entrepreneur, farmer, or laborer—presents a challenge for democratic practice. The main issue lies in citizens' awareness of their role and the level of political competence each citizen possesses.

"Vox Populi, Vox Dei"—the voice of the people is the voice of God—illustrates how democracy relies on the people as the ultimate holders of power in a democratic state (Freeman,

2000). But what if the voice of the people is misguided? What if the people lack competence in understanding state affairs? Ideally, democracy is exercised by entrusting power to political representatives while maintaining oversight of state implementation (Harnecker, 2009). Transactional and corrupt politics that prioritize vote-buying over debate and representation of interests has become commonplace. An unnoticed threat arises when voters delegate authority to political actors to make decisions on their behalf, yet the influence of voters over representative actions remains relatively low, resulting in voter apathy.

The most immediate consequence is a decline in motivation to vote and a disregard for exercising citizenship rights. Democracy reduced to mere electoral cycles risks becoming an empty ritual (Kamitake, 2007). In such conditions, democracy can easily deteriorate into its worst form. According to Polybius, the worst form of democracy is termed ochlocracy, often referred to as mob rule (Hasanović, 2015). Ochlocracy represents power in the hands of a repressive or intimidating mass, wherein governance is controlled by mass movements lacking political knowledge and understanding of governmental management (Gálvez, 2017; Kamitake, 2007).

Democracy serves as a method of collective decision-making. It functions to prevent the abuse of power when politicians manipulate the populace for personal gain. Poor governance provides space for corruption, shadow economies, and ochlocracy to infiltrate politics. Such threats can be mitigated by enhancing collective consciousness, building oversight mechanisms, and strengthening deliberative democracy that emphasizes dialogue (Freeman, 2000). Collective consciousness provides a moral foundation for social cohesion; as Durkheim posits, societies require a shared normative structure to maintain integration (Belvedere, 2023).

In the context of Indonesian democracy, the nation has experienced a long and dynamic political history. The practice of democracy in Indonesia was once constrained by the repressive hegemony established by those in power (Tapsell, 2017). Eventually, collective mass awareness successfully seized governance, giving rise to the Reformasi era. Collective consciousness serves as the moral foundation to maintain social cohesion. Democracy without collective awareness easily devolves into electoral formalities and can even slide into modern ochlocracy when public voice is guided more by mass emotion than rational deliberation.

Knowledge of political reality is a crucial component citizens must possess to exercise their oversight functions. Political knowledge has traditionally been constructed through language and social interaction between individuals and the social events they experience (Adoni & Mane, 1984). Demonstrating against policies that have long harmed the public represents a simple way in which citizens' political knowledge is formed. Mass media then accelerates this process of political knowledge construction through its capacity to disseminate information widely and extensively.

Media has undergone extensive transformation, from traditional media to mass media, and now to social media. Media plays a critical role in shaping citizens' collective consciousness. In the mass media era, public opinion was often centrally formed and heavily influenced by government hegemony through information control (Bungin, 2015; Tapsell, 2017). The advent of digital media shifted this pattern toward horizontal communication with active citizen participation. Couldry and Hepp (2017) term this change "deep mediatization,"

where digital media transforms into social infrastructure rather than merely an information dissemination tool.

We have entered an era in which the public sphere extends into the cyber or digital public sphere. Online communities have significantly transformed in how they engage in the era of digital democracy (Berg & Hofmann, 2021; Glassman, 2021). The digital public sphere encompasses four typologies of virtual political public spaces: expertise within the digital political public domain, inclusivity ensuring that all those affected by policies have access to digital media, deliberation, and digital design facilitating public communication (Levine, 2018). These virtual political public spaces serve as the new arena where public demands can be articulated within the digital democracy system.

Indonesia provides an important example of media transformation dynamics. With 229 million internet users and 143 million active social media users, Indonesia is among the largest digital societies globally. Platforms such as TikTok, YouTube, Instagram, and Twitter/X serve as arenas for politics as well as entertainment. Citizens can voice aspirations, organize actions, and monitor the government. The #ReformasiDikorupsi phenomenon in 2019 demonstrated how thousands of students from various regions could connect within hours through a single hashtag. Social media broadens political participation, accelerates mobilization, and strengthens public oversight.

Citizens' realities and knowledge of political situations are built upon their memories, connections, experiences, and authentic solidarity. Citizens construct their realities mediated by the media they use, whether traditional or digital. This article presents how media has transformed and significantly influenced the construction of social realities among citizens, and how media builds solidarity in the era of digital democracy.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This study employs a descriptive qualitative approach with a literature review method, analyzing social construction theory and the dynamics of democracy in Indonesia. Data were obtained through a comprehensive review of relevant literature and recent research on social media and digital democracy. This research also includes the analysis of cases pertinent to the practice of digital democracy in Indonesia, such as the #ReformasiDikorupsi movement and the "No Viral No Justice" phenomenon, in order to understand how social media has become a new arena for shaping collective consciousness and its influence on democratic practices.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Media Transformation in Constructing Social Reality within Democratic Spaces

The transformation of media in modern human development plays a crucial role in shaping how societies perceive the social world. Media is not merely a neutral channel but represents a profound social process. The shift from traditional media forms, such as newspapers, radio, and television, to digitally-based social media marks a turning point in reshaping human relations with reality.

Social reality, as explained by Berger and Luckmann, refers to the quality of understanding phenomena that we recognize as independent beings exercising our own will. For Berger and Luckmann (2018), reality is inseparable from knowledge; indeed, the reality

surrounding individuals can be understood as knowledge itself. Each actor or individual possesses a distinct understanding; what is considered real by the public may not be perceived as real by the government. In social life, the existence of such dual realities is entirely possible.

Berger and Luckmann emphasize that social reality does not emerge spontaneously but is constructed through a continuous process of externalization-objectification-internalization within interpersonal interactions (Berger & Luckmann, 2018; Sriningsih, 2010). Language plays a critical role in this process, as it mediates subjective experience into an intersubjective understanding (Berger & Luckmann, 2018). Although Berger and Luckmann did not explicitly address media in the modern sense, their focus on social institutions—such as family, religion, education, and law—provides the understanding that social reality is the result of collectively constructed, institutionalized processes.

In the Indonesian context, democracy does not operate in a vacuum. Democracy can be understood not only as an institutional system that is “objective” in nature but also as a reality constructed through interaction, language, and shared practices. Democracy exhibits consistent patterns, including rules, the concept of popular sovereignty, and freedom of expression, all of which are social constructs that emerge in discursive public spaces (Peceny, 1999). The legitimacy of democracy is inseparable from social processes that provide meaning, standardize practices, and reinforce the existence of democratic institutions within society.

Bungin critiques Luckmann and Berger by extending the discourse of social reality construction to mass media. Bungin adapts the threefold process of externalization-objectification-internalization by incorporating mass media, emphasizing that media information can establish meanings that are subsequently internalized by audiences (Bungin, 2015). The extensive reach of mass media exerts a broader and deeper social constructional power than direct social interactions mediated purely by language, as suggested in the theory of Luckmann and Berger. However, mass media tends to centralize information, leading to homogenization that reduces deliberative spaces. Consequently, media literacy and platform diversification become essential prerequisites for reopening inclusive meaning negotiation processes and preventing the domination of singular narratives in social reality formation.

Mass media plays a role in creating relatively homogeneous realities. Society receives the same horizon of information through news channels (Sen & Hill, 2000). This homogenization reinforces social cohesion but tends to limit the diversity of viewpoints (Sen & Hill, 2000).. Mass media is relatively centralized, as it controls which issues are considered important, how issues are framed, and who is legitimized to speak (Castells, 2021). Within Bungin’s framework, mass media functions as a force capable of directing public opinion while simultaneously reinforcing hegemony.

The rapid development of digital technology challenges the traditional framework of social reality construction. Couldry and Hepp, in *The Mediated Construction of Reality*, argue that reality is now mediated by media (Couldry & Hepp, 2017). Media devices have become fundamental infrastructures for modern social life. They term this phenomenon “deep mediatization,” a condition where all aspects of life—both personal relationships and societal structures—operate through social media. Examples are abundant: ordering food via mobile devices, communicating through gadgets, and even organizing demonstrations through digital platforms (Couldry & Hepp, 2017). In this deeply mediatized condition, media is not merely a

communication facility but also shapes human life structures. Digital platforms actively determine what is visible, what can be understood, and the meanings that are constructed (Couldry, 2015). Therefore, social reality is not only shaped by human interaction but also constructed by media.

Fundamental differences emerge when comparing these three frameworks. Berger and Luckmann view reality as a social product built through institutions and language without directly addressing media (Berger & Luckmann, 2018). Bungin emphasizes the active role of mass media as a construction agent, shaping public opinion and creating meaning homogeneity (Bungin, 2015). Couldry & Hepp (2017) update this framework by showing that media now constitutes the infrastructure of social life, where reality is constructed through algorithmic logics, producing new fragmentation and complexity.

This transformation illustrates the shift from institutional construction to homogeneous construction, and ultimately to algorithmic construction. In the first stage, reality is institutionalized through traditional institutions. In the second stage, mass media functions as a symbolic institution that homogenizes public meaning. In the third stage, social media and digital platforms operate as infrastructures that algorithmically distribute reality. Each stage carries distinct implications for how collective consciousness is formed and how democracy is practiced.

Thus, understanding media transformation cannot be separated from the development of social reality construction theory. Berger provides the epistemological foundation, Bungin adapts it to mass media, and Couldry and Hepp expand it to the digital domain. Through this comparison, it becomes evident that changes in media are not merely about communication technology but about how society constructs the social world it inhabits.

From Mass Media Homogenization to Digital Solidarity

Democracy is a political system that places power in the collective strength of citizens. The role of citizens is central in ensuring the direction of the state in guaranteeing the realization of national objectives. Therefore, collective awareness of society regarding its role as citizens is a primary ability that must be possessed in a democratic society (Belvedere, 2023). Durkheim emphasized that society cannot survive on individual contracts alone. He explained the existence of a larger moral dimension, namely collective consciousness, which functions as a shared normative and moral structure (Belvedere, 2023).

Collective consciousness, in Durkheim's view, is a bond of solidarity that transcends individual minds and is formed on the foundation of communal life. In traditional societies, this collective consciousness typically relies on shared norms, rituals, or beliefs (Belvedere, 2023). In the context of democracy, collective consciousness provides legitimacy beyond electoral procedures. In practice, democracy is not merely the counting of votes but a practice of communal life that requires a shared horizon of values in the form of beliefs about the importance of politics, control over power, and the pursuit of public interest (Gálvez, 2017; Hasanović, 2015; Kamitake, 2007). Weak collective consciousness leads democracy toward mere proceduralism and vote counting, neglecting moral responsibility in political processes.

Habermas adds a new dimension to understanding collective consciousness in modern society. His theory complements the framework of collective consciousness by explaining the importance of the public sphere (de Vera, 2014). According to his theory, the public sphere is an arena where citizens discuss shared interests rationally and critically. Ideal democracy can only be realized when society engages in rational discourse, where arguments, ideas, and consensus are achieved through open communication. The public sphere allows collective consciousness to move beyond shallow agreement and develop toward deliberation. However, changes in media make this condition difficult to achieve. Homogenization of mass media is one of the most significant challenges because the plurality of public voices is often replaced by dominant narratives. Media are often not neutral as they act as gatekeepers filtering issues, shaping agendas, and distributing meaning. In the Indonesian context, although post-1998 media have become more plural, media ownership is often controlled by political figures, and news is frequently dominated by the political hegemony of those in power. In other words, traditional homogenization has weakened, but collective consciousness is still controlled by the market, creating an imbalanced public sphere and limited deliberation.

The advent of the digital era brings a profound transformation, replacing mass media homogenization with digital connectivity, where information is widespread and decentralized. Castells (2021) refers to this phenomenon as the "network society," where information flows are rapid and layered, so public solidarity is not formed by homogenization but through network mechanisms connecting digital symbols such as hashtags, memes, or other viral images. Digital solidarity emerges from shared emotions disseminated through networks. These shared emotions resonate and create instant cohesion mediated by algorithms that accelerate the spread of collective emotional content.

One of the mediators of digital solidarity is the use of hashtags (“#”) as a tool for specific issues (Miller et al., 2016). Hashtags can serve as temporary collective identities, giving individuals a sense of being part of a larger digital movement with just a click (Koulopoulos, Thomas; Keldsen, 2019). These hashtags are effective when they gain collective and massive attention, allowing the discussed issues to spread widely and gain justification from social media users. Digital solidarity can operate quickly and widely but often loses momentum when public attention shifts to other issues. This reflects both the strength and the weakness of social media. A key requirement for this solidarity is trending topics, whose determination is algorithm-driven and prioritizes engagement over truth.

Collective Consciousness in Digital Democracy Practice

Collective consciousness is an essential element for the sustainability of an ideal democracy. Democracy cannot thrive if celebrated merely through electoral procedures. Democracy requires citizens' togetherness to courageously monitor and ensure the state follows the correct path according to the constitution. This reality shows that citizens must trust shared values and act to shape and uphold that awareness. In the mass media era, media are centralized and hierarchical, while in the digital media era, collective awareness is formed through networks that are more fluid and quickly connected. The history of democracy and media in Indonesia demonstrates how the transformation from information homogenization to

digital algorithms has shaped collective consciousness and emphasizes that the quality of democracy is linked to the mediating structures supporting it.

Information homogenization can be seen during the New Order period, which systematically implemented SIUPP, suppression, and censorship, placing media under the hegemony of the rulers (Tapsell, 2017) Narratives of development and stability were repeatedly reproduced, showing how the press was tightly controlled to ensure uniform public discourse (Sen & Hill, 2000). The 1998 reform movement is a concrete example of reality construction before the digital era. Public awareness had grown significantly but required a long period. Mobilization of student and civil society groups, preparing logistics, pamphlets, and interactions between groups reflect actions relying on formal structures and leadership. From Durkheim's perspective, this pattern represents organic solidarity because people from various backgrounds united for the same goal. From Habermas' perspective, this can be seen as an attempt to open previously closed public spaces and restore rational discourse as the basis of political legitimacy.

Collective consciousness before the digital era required considerable time and infrastructure, differing from post-digital era collective consciousness. The digital era mediates in a unique and simple way based on algorithmic functions in social media networks (Castells, 2021; Glassman, 2021). With just a tagged post like #ReformasiDiKorupsi or #Peringatandarurat with an image of a white Garuda on a blue background, thousands of people can be mobilized (Arianto, 2022). These events demonstrate how social media can mobilize masses rapidly and on a massive scale, driven by shared concerns over injustices affecting citizens broadly.

Digital solidarity arises from the resonance of shared memories moving quickly through digital networks. The #Reformasidikorupsi event shows the activation of collective memory through mass media (Arianto, 2022). This hashtag triggered reform memories for a new generation, most of whom never experienced the 1998 events (Erll et al., 2008; Tapsell, 2017). The hashtag translates memory into a digital symbol that is easily shared and disseminated. The advent of the digital world has significantly transformed media in the context of democracy (Castells, 2021). Both mass media and social media can mobilize the masses, but they differ in reach and depth of reality construction.

Media transformation has emphasized how collective consciousness in democratic practice is deeply mediated by social media and its algorithms. Hashtags, symbols, and virality are primary drivers of social cohesion in digital spaces. Social media serve as new tools for remembering, generating emotion, and conveying arguments. The future challenge is to build digital collective consciousness to support a stronger and more ideal democracy, rather than relying on temporary viral surges.

CONCLUSION

The transformation of media from traditional to digital forms has significantly changed the way society forms collective consciousness in the context of democracy. Social media, through algorithms and digital platforms, accelerate public mobilization and broaden political participation. However, its impact on democracy is complex. While digital solidarity can accelerate collective action and oversight of power, it can also exacerbate polarization and extremism due to its affective and episodic nature. Supporting an ideal democracy requires the

development of stronger digital collective consciousness based on inclusive deliberation, not just momentary virality. Understanding media transformation in this context is crucial for comprehending changes in Indonesia's social and political structures and the challenges faced in strengthening substantive democracy in the digital era.

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