

Architecture of Populism: Online Media and the Rise of Popular Common Politicians in Indonesian Political Landscape [†]

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Abstract: Populist figures were anything but a new phenomenon in Indonesian politics albeit in its short history as a modern state. However, in accordance with the recent development of news dissemination technology, the pattern of populist figure emergence was transformed. Not only in recent years we saw a considerable number of politicians, especially heads of local governments and ministers, attaining public popularity in ways unthinkable within the past political landscape. It is also unpredictable that the current president, who hardly had any strong political establishment, would rise into a legitimate candidate in the 2014 election without being underpinned by a novel and peculiar pattern of information and news circulation. This research aims to unravel the relationship between the current online media regime and the emergence of such populist figures. Additionally, as we follow the online news editorial process, we realized that we would not come to a satisfying conclusion, given that we disregard the materiality of the new media. Therefore, communication and media scholars should consider the importance of the agency of things, a conceptual apparatus proposed by scholars of Actor-Network Theory (ANT).

Keywords: online news; mass media; political popularity; Indonesia; ANT



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1. Background

Indonesian political landscape is no stranger to figures whose power is backed by popular support. One could refer to Sukarno, the first president of Indonesia, as a prime example of this. He considered himself to be the “mouthpiece of the people” and considering the political reality of the time, this epithet was nothing short of an exaggeration. The rise of popular-backed politicians became a more common phenomenon when democracy was established in the country. After 32 years of manufactured elections under the New Order regime, Megawati was nominated as a legitimate candidate for the presidency. She welded popular support, as she was widely depicted as Sukarno’s daughter. After she was appointed as the fourth Indonesian President—following the removal of Abdurrahman Wahid from power—she was succeeded by Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono, an army general, whose figure was favored by the public due to his communication skills, intellectual image, and charismatic persona.

Notable differences in the pattern of popular figures’ emergence, however, can be found nowadays. The first striking difference is that the figure needs not to be the central personality of traditionally important establishments in the Indonesian political landscape, such as parties, the military, prominent Islamic organizations, or even influential families. Additionally, in contrast to the figure of Jusuf Kalla, who was the vice president of the state as well as a business tycoon from Makassar, it is also not necessary for the figure to lead a powerful business and capital to build their image. Joko Widodo, the current

Indonesian president, is an example of such a figure. He was unknown by many people until, in 2008, *Tempo* magazine listed him as one of the top ten Indonesian mayors. He did not practice the conventional means to erect himself as a bona fide candidate for bigger political competition.

Joko Widodo's almost sole asset, at the beginning of his expeditious career, was the story about how he persuaded hundreds of street vendors from Banjarsari to approve their relocation into the new area, Pasar Kliwon (Kliwon Market). However, during that time, the relocation of street vendors was often conducted through force. The fact that the relocation could be conducted in a democratic way, gave away the impression that the mayor was an exceptional leader. Why did such a story, in a sense, appear to be all that was needed for Joko Widodo to thrive in the gubernatorial, and later, the presidential election? Why did a politician such as the previous Governor of Jakarta, Basuki Tjahaja Purnama, who due to his identity as a minority would be easily doubted in the past would even have a career as a politician, admitted by almost every journalist we interviewed as the most popular politician and during the period of our research holding the highest electability for the upcoming gubernatorial election?

To make sense of the situation, one thing that has to be taken into account is the emergence of new information technology which allows the materialization of novel patterns in news production, distribution, and consumption. It is a fact that to obtain a large readership, news no longer has to be circulated through papers that are printed on a daily basis. Currently, news can be instantly and directly transmitted to our gadgets. As simple as it may seem, it is something that significantly altered the pattern of how politicians are brought to the public's attention and, consequently, the political arrangement which relies on the popular vote. Aside from Habibie, who succeeded Suharto after his removal, Joko Widodo's presidency is the first regime in Indonesian history, where the president does not hold any central authority in his party. It is possible to trace the intricate relation of this situation with the newly emerged online media regime.

This paper is intended to provide a clear look at the intricate relations between the newly emerging online media and the ascendant of contemporary popular politicians. This will be conducted by following the rise of several politicians to popularity and unraveling the economic logic of online media which allows the commodification of their persona in a way that never occurred before. We also have to emphasize that this study does not in any sense, downplay other aspects which contribute to the emergence of such figures. Many are already aware that the popular vote system has made public favorability a great political asset, allowing the rise of unprecedented contenders in numerous elections [1–3]. Nevertheless, much lesser attention was given to the role of the media and technology and, particularly, online news, in those figures' emergence. Our study, therefore, is an attempt to fulfill this absence.

2. Theoretical Considerations

In this study, we owe the theoretical insight to Bruno Latour [4,5] who proposes to put human and nonhuman agencies on the same standing. Non human presence, whether it is animal, technology, or even a raindrop, according to Latour and his ANT colleagues, has to be considered constitutive and human in shaping the assemblage of our social life. Action is not an exclusive property of human agency. Computer interfaces, webpages, and printed paper act as a response to actions directed toward them and caused them to transform in a particular way. Everyone or— to be more precise—everything, carries their own interests and establishes their presence by being incorporated into networks of human and non human actors, which eventually made what we casually termed a 'society.'

This, perhaps, sounds rather generic which did not help us to understand the intricate subject of this paper. However, we have to understand that Latour's 'sociology of association' was being proposed amid the social sciences' inclination to undermine aspects that are external to human actions, intentions, or human collective dynamics, even though they actually play an irreducible role in the establishment of a particular social formation. The

widely accepted norm is that an event or phenomenon is always shaped and determined by societal dynamics such as conflict of interest, representation of aspiration, hegemony and the establishment of integration. This predominant attitude in social sciences led many of the inquiries to elucidate patterns of social life heavily focused on finding ‘how the perpetual structure of a common life manifested’ yet disregarded how the situations were constituted by connectivity [6], always being rearranged due to the unprecedented involvement of non human variables such as, in our case, the mediation of internet-based news platforms.

A brief look at notable and still influential studies of news media will give us a clear overview of the point we have just mentioned. The studies conventionally view that the production of information, which eventually affects public life, is determined by intricate social affairs such as the readers’ expectation of reality [7]; ownership, profit orientation, and the political and economic interest of the holder [8]; production and reproduction of hegemony [9]; discursive practice [10]. The role of non human aspects, especially the introduction of new technology, rarely became the centerpiece in the accustomed media studies readings which could be reflecting the influence of social science in general. For instance, some research [11] only provides a slight information on how to properly study the influence of information technology and computerized communication in media and communication practice.

Domingo [12] noted that there were three waves of research in online journalism. Yet, even though online technology was the focus of attention, it was assumed that the new media established its presence by serving whether as a prospective novel means to deliver news or as an innovation that potentially advances the interests of certain actors, groups, or structural conditions. The assumption that a human affair carries primacy over non human agencies still holds. Domingo attributing himself as part of the third wave perspective, for instance, criticized the first wave which suggests that technological change will bring a profound transformation in the nature of journalism. He thought that such a technological determinist attitude is unrealistic and inherent to capitalist societies’ ideology.

Another mapping of contemporary online journalistic research by Siapera and Veglis [13] noted the strand which focuses its attention on the technology consisting of three main perspectives; the diffusion of innovation approach, the Actor-Network Theory (ANT) approach, and the social construction of technology approach. The diffusion of technology approach regards online journalism as an innovation that has a pattern of adoption determined by how it provides a relative advantage to a certain news media in delivering its news. The social constructivist perspective, meanwhile, is no different than the social constructionist strand we have mentioned before. It heavily criticizes the first approach which considered new technology to bring optimization in news production and deliverance but dismissed the emerging social and cultural dynamics surrounding it. Finally, ANT is the perspective that will be employed for this research.

In our case, the dramatic development of online news partly constitutes a certain pattern of popular politicians’ emergence which changes the political dynamics of the country. It is rather unproductive to think that the online journalism technology effect was determined by the predominant existing structure that came beforehand, for instance, in terms of its exploitation by the logic of capitalism [14]. Nonetheless, it is true that the pre-established social conditions or dispositions shaped how society would embrace the technology, and it is actually difficult to even say that online journalism would thrive without benefiting the media industry and setting a new standard of immediacy in news deliverance. Hence, we think, it is fruitful to make sense of the situation through logic, which was elaborated by Latour and his colleagues or, as some would say, ANT.

News media is the assemblage of these mutually constituting actors—editors, reporters, readers, shareholders, and even printing machines. They are, in a sense, being exploited by others, and yet the others are also simultaneously exploiting them. There are no actors in the association that act as the subject in the traditional sense because their agency lays in transforming other actors’ agency, and through it, they establish themselves

as an irreplaceable part of the whole arrangement; journalists transform actual events into news, readers read them and through their acts of financing the newspaper, printing machines make the news possible to be circulated to a large audience. Online connectivity, in this case, is a new actor whose recent involvement in this network is being exploited by the news media to provide more immediate reports while significantly altering the pre-existing relations between media and the wider establishment. It does not only diminish the importance of the printed press and promote programmers to be an inseparable node of the news media industry; it also enlisted what previously would be considered common politicians into highly read news topics and transformed them into prominent popular figures, political contenders, and power holders.

3. Research Method

This study used a case study method. The case study is an intensive study of a single case where the purpose of that study is—at least in part—to shed light on a larger class of cases [15]. Case study research, through reports of past studies, allows the exploration and understanding of complex issues. It can be considered a robust research method particularly when a holistic, in-depth investigation is required [16]. “How” and “why” questions are the focus of the study [17]. In this research, we use reading and observation of media text (online and mainstream media) during the 2014–2015 period and interviews with journalists.

4. Research Finding

A New Space

One of the first government officials, whose almost every daily activity attracted journalists’ attention, even his petty comments could become most read stories, was no other than Joko Widodo. It is evident that in a mere six months after his election as the governor of Jakarta, online media coverages of him were not only abundant but also multifarious, on a scale that even coverage of the president could not closely compare. It ranges from the story of how Metallica’s gift to him was extorted by the Corruption Eradication Commission; his appearance at a metal band concert in Jakarta; funny jokes that he frequently told reporters; to what was considered a more serious matter, such as his *blusukan* (impromptu visits) to Jakarta poor areas; his solution for the city’s chronic problems of flood and traffic jam and the possibility of his presidential candidacy.

Most of the coverage on Jokowi is in the period from his election as governor to mid-2013—his coverages leaned toward the prospect of his participation in the 2014 presidential election—this would not obtain the space he needed in the print media. Besides the printed media’s space for text is limited, incessant coverage of a particular figure would also be inappropriate despite invoking the interest of the audience. It is an accepted editorial practice that the printed media should carefully consider its coverage based on the importance of the issue. This fact is evident, given *Koran Tempo*, one of the leading newspapers in the country, rarely put Jokowi as its headline, except a few times when he led the popular poll for the 2014 presidential election. *Tempo* rarely published stories of his casual activity, since the basis of its urgency could not compare to other political issues. Hence, they never ran two stories about him or his policy on the same day.

Online media, on the contrary, possesses the advantage to push against such limitations. Online media can run more pressing topics such as the strife between two state agencies or political scandals; it simultaneously still ran stories as much as it could obtain from accompanying Joko Widodo throughout his daily activities. A great quantity of coverage on him would not appear imbalanced since the media would also run a number of other interesting stories. Moreover, their website’s interface always highlighted the most popular stories in considerable variety and proportion. It is a fact worth noticing that in general, online media felt the need to publish as many articles as it could.

5. From Eccentricity to Popularity

Though Jokowi's meteoric rise to popularity that led him to the presidency occurred at the height of internet penetration in Indonesia, which means his coverage was having a significant role in determining the pattern of online news popular politicians coverage, it is actually another public figure, Susi Pudjiastuti, who provides us with a more comfortable look upon the mutualistic relation now established among the online news and popular politicians. The reason for Susi's emerging popularity is a relatively recent phenomenon. Although previously known as the owner of Susi Air—a small airline that provides flights to destinations that are unreachable by major airlines—her reputation was never widely known to the public before she was appointed as the Minister of Marine and Fisheries.

The salient characteristic of Susi, clearly, invokes readers' interest. In many online news stories, coverages of her were among the most browsed stories, where attempts to reproduce more articles about her were evident. One day, after her appointment as the Marine Minister, reporters were already waiting for her to come to her new office. She did not attend her office on her first day as a minister, and her absence resulted in many online news stories. During her first several weeks, there were a number of interesting occasions involving Susi, that could not be thought of as important political matters. Nevertheless, some online news stories continually covered them. One of them is a story about a woman who came to the Ministry of Marine office to personally meet Susi and was hugged by her. On another occasion, the media ran stories about her initial policies such as moving the work hour of her ministry earlier to help reduce traffic congestion and writing them as a "breakthrough." They also ran a story about her confusion on why Jokowi chose her, her past reminiscence of collecting fish from fishermen by riding a bike, her remark that her wage as minister is just one percent of her wage in Susi Air, and even about the image of her tattoo—one online news obtained the image from zooming and cropping her photo while she was giving a speech. Compared to the attention which the other new ministers receive from journalists, Susi's case is a rather rare one. They clearly attempted to write everything they could write about the figure of Susi.

However, her fame did not reach its height until the media ran coverages of her policy to sink trespassing foreign fishing boats. Thanks to this policy, she was perceived as the defender of Indonesian sovereignty. Framing her policy in the discourse of sovereignty was, in fact, what her reputation needed all along. Before she was identified with the act of sinking a foreign vessel, her differences from other ministers were apparently still associated with her interesting eccentricity. The words "Minister Susi sinks foreign boats again" became a routine title that ran in the online news from November 2014—the month when this policy was initiated—until September 2015 when we started to write this paper.

6. From Readers to Clickers

The emergence of online news technology, therefore, provides a reason for why a few peculiar government officials continually obtain the exposure they need to be folk heroes. As the financial resource of online media depends on the number of its website's visitors—which can be counted without any considerable effort—they are not supposed to have much hesitation in making sure that the particular topic (which ticks readers' interest) is continually written. Provided that a certain government official spontaneously arouses the readers' interest in online news or social media newsfeed, the aforementioned figure will continually be the topic of news that is produced by online media.

This does not mean that the print media never consider the readers' interest at all. One of the oldest editorial considerations for producing and reproducing news is the number of readers. This particular principle stays true for online news, as what they commoditize are still their readers. However, as the mediation process between news and readers is being radically altered, now the media could identify the very news which is visited most by readers and their visitors' referral sites. As they come to hold the data which show the specific topics which arouse general readers and the referral traffic sources which led them

to the news, they could utilize this to determine the keyword, issues, style of writing and even the visualization that will keep visitors coming to their site.

It is worth noticing how journalists incorporated this significant change by how they regard online news readers in a different light from print news readers. Amongst online journalists, the term they use to refer to readers is “clickers.” This intriguing and particular term, “clickers,” we notice, helps journalists to engage fittingly within the online environment. It made them aware of ways readers are present in this new circumstance which have to be mediated by the computational technology they own and other sites on which they spent much of their online time such as Google and Facebook. Therefore, it made journalists aware of what matters, which made it possible for their media to generate revenue, which is never merely the news itself. They have to make their news “Google-able,” and “Facebook-able”—just to cite two websites where readers obtain most of their information from. They have to think about how their news presentation would attract people to click it, by making their interface interesting on potential visitors’ PCs, smartphones, tablets, social media, or chatting applications.

The online media usually assign their journalists to stay at a government body or to follow government officials to obtain stories. If the particular ministry or agency they are working in does not announce an interesting policy, they could write either an amusing feature, such as stories about a government official’s personal life, or ask them to comment on the currently trending issue, even though the particular issue does not fall within their range of authority. This is why many journalists that we were talking to are fond of popular government officials who are outspoken when being asked for commentary. By effortlessly sharing their thought on a certain matter, officials actually help the online media to obtain a potentially attractive story for their site.

Yet, the benefit obtained by the online media is immediately turned into a benefit for government officials themselves, as their coverages help foster mass imagination on how well they perform and accomplish their obligation to serve the people. Certain popular officials could just comment on the current trending issues or share their ideas on how to improve citizens life quality and, although their idea is improbable, by reading online media coverages of their statement— especially coverages that occur frequently—the public would easily perceive that the particular officials are working hard to deliver their mandate.

From the Table 1, we can see that the title of popular government officials’ coverages has the potential to incite the public’s imagination that they are exceptionally dedicated to serving their constituents. However, in practice, the situation is much more likely that they were doing a favor to journalists who needed their statement as material for online news and they were certainly providing a statement that would also foster their good image.

Table 1. Online media framing of popular politicians and the possible actual situation.

Subject	Source	Headline	Framing	Possible Actual Situation
Susi Pudjiastuti	Okezone	Returning the Remaining Rp2 Trillion Ministry Budget, Minister Susi Did Not Want Indonesia to go Bankrupt Like Greece	Minister Susi, unlike the other ministers, was wise to save the budget of her ministry to prevent Indonesia bankruptcy.	Susi was asked by reporters about the failure of her ministry to spend the entire ministry budget.
Joko Widodo	Kompas	Jokowi Will Build Modest Flats on the Floating Village	Joko Widodo was working on a certain plan to improve the livelihood of his citizens.	Joko Widodo was doing impromptu visit and stating his idea for the village. The feasibility of the plan was never mentioned further.
Basuki Tjahaja Purnama (Ahok)	Detik	Ahok: The Biggest Fear in My Life is if I Cannot Hold a Mandate	Ahok was appointed as the governor of Jakarta and boldly stated his commitment to be a good governor—a statement that many people hold to be true.	Ahok was interviewed intensively by the online news after he replaced Joko Widodo as the governor. The statement was just one answer among many of other questions

Now, let us take an example from another popular figure—Basuki Tjahaja Purnama who is more commonly known as Ahok. Ahok, the governor of Jakarta during the time we wrote this article as well as the first Chinese descendant who assumed the position, certainly was a popular figure. According to polls during the height of his popularity, he was the most electable candidate for 2017 Jakarta's gubernatorial election. Ahok was previously the vice governor of Joko Widodo. Although he was the associate of the exceptionally liked Joko Widodo, in the beginning, people thought it was unlikely he would ever be popular given the persistent negative image of Chinese descendants in Indonesian politics and his willingness to publicly show his hot-headed attitude. The public initially noticed this attitude from a YouTube video that showed him being furious towards his incompetent subordinate in a meeting. However, instead of damaging his reputation, the exhibition of his grouchy manner erected him as one of the rare-straightforward politicians who would never hesitate to show his anger in order to reform the bureaucracy. The most popular media wrote stories about his involvement in a quarrel with another politician, a cadre of his own (now former) political party, or occasions where he said profane words while commenting on certain public issues. His involvements in controversial events were great material for online news and it certainly helped that many of the common audience were fond of him.

At this point, we see that the development of technology and new types of connect-edness among people became a certain establishment that has considerably changed a substantial part of our social life. Public internet-mediated sensibility became one aspect that greatly dictates the production of mass information through online news and it also allows certain politicians and government official figures to emerge in an unprecedented way. In the exemplary case of Jokowi, indeed, it could go as far as such coverages gave him the momentum that he needed the most to win the presidential election.

7. Conclusions

The reason why certain government officials became popular is due to the fact that they appeal strongly to the public's senses—either by showing great care toward the people or giving them a sense of hope amidst the seemingly rampant corruption in the government. They were considered as greatly achieving figures in comparison to their colleagues or other government officials. This particular expectation from the people is nothing that could be regarded as new. Its existence long precedes the emergence of online news. However, online news provides opportunities for more common politicians to acquire the people's attention and obtain their affection. The most popular politicians nowadays, which people thought will be nominated by their party as vote-getters in important regional elections, previously did not hold a strategic position among their political holdings or institutions.

Throughout this paper, the association between online media and new patterns of popular politicians' emergence in the Indonesian political establishment is already made evident. It is also evident that one particular technology that mediates people's perception and the information producer, the online media, is never actually neutral. It is far from merely a more effective means to deliver information to the audience. It never only mediates the messages according to particular actors' or groups' sole interests but dramatically transformed the fundamental assemblage between the actors themselves. Emerging fittingly amidst the context of post-authoritarian Indonesia, online news became a distinguished agency in its own right—unsettling the already established entanglement between politicians, persona commodification, news production, and political arrangements.

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