

Indonesian Online Media Coverage Regarding the Thorium-Powered Nuclear Power Plant: Media Conglomeration Practices for Reporting Nuclear Issues to the Public

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Abstract

This research examined how media conglomeration practices made the public aware of the construction plan issue of a thorium-powered nuclear power plant on Gelasa Island, Central Bangka Regency, Bangka Islands Province through the coverage in three news articles on *detikcom* and *KOMPAS.com* as online news media platforms out of media conglomerates in Indonesia, for the duration of 1 August 2022 to 31 August 2023. This qualitative research took the perspective of media theory and cultural political economy concepts, sharpened by the constructivist paradigm and news discourse analysis methods. This research showed that the discourse emerging from news articles on *detikcom* and *KOMPAS.com* supported the government to build a thorium-powered nuclear power plant in Indonesia. Based on the government's perspective used in the reporting narratives of these two online media, it can be seen that the media which are actually controlled by media conglomerates who are also involved in practical politics tend to support all the programs promoted by the government. This affects the coverage in the media under the control of the media conglomerates. It can be seen how media ownership as a political economic power structure can influence media production and distribution, thereby causing media conglomeration practices which play an important role in regulating public opinion.

Keywords: Media Conglomeration, Thorium-Powered Nuclear Power Plant, Gelasa Island, Coverage, News Articles, Online News Media, Discourse, Media Ownership, Public Opinion

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Introduction

Globally, the development of nuclear power plants (NPP) for Indonesia as the largest archipelagic country is very much in line with the energy transition in order to achieve the target of zero carbon emissions by 2060. It is because nuclear energy is a kind of clean energy as well as an alternative to fossil energy. The government needs to conduct a public campaign to increase the level of public acceptance of the use of NPP by educating the public to obtain accurate and non-misleading information regarding nuclear energy and NPP through the media.

One effective way to communicate the issue of the construction of NPP as a form of environmentally friendly nuclear technology to the public is through online news media. Online media is a new order that continues to develop along with technological advances, so it can become one of the media that will experience rapid development every year (Sari, 2020). This study used sources from *detikcom* (PT Trans Digital Media as the media owner) and *KOMPAS.com* (KG Media as the media owner). Based on the 2023 Digital News Report Data, *detikcom* was the most visited online media in Indonesia, while *KOMPAS* was the most trusted media in 2023 where *KOMPAS.com* is the online media under it (Reuters Institute & University of Oxford, 2023). In this case, *detikcom* and *KOMPAS.com* are the representation of media conglomeration because of their correlation with the political affiliation of the conglomerates or media owners. The NPP issue is very political and influences government policy, as well as the influence of media conglomerates on political parties or other politicians related to the portion of news coverage of the nuclear issue in the media they own.

Based on the topic of NPP in Indonesia in general on *detikcom* and *KOMPAS.com* from August 1, 2022 to August 31, 2023, there were a total of 19 news articles consisting of 12 articles on *detikcom* and 7 articles on *KOMPAS.com*. In accordance with the dynamics related to the plan of NPP construction in Indonesia in several years, there is a specific issue regarding Gelasa Island, Central Bangka Regency, Bangka Belitung Islands Province which is being studied as a pilot plant for the location of the construction of a thorium-powered nuclear power plant (thorium-powered NPP) starting in 2022. Thorium is a radioactive element that is included in nuclear raw materials and can be mined in Indonesia (Tim detikcom, 2023; Dahnur & Alexander, 2023; Dahnur & Arief, 2023). Therefore, a number of articles found on *detikcom* and *KOMPAS.com* were narrowed down to a specific scope regarding the plan to build a thorium-powered NPP on Gelasa Island, so that it is expected to provide a novelty through the current and prominent nuclear issue in Indonesia. In this case, there were 3 articles as data sources found: 1 article on *detikcom* entitled “Pulau Ini Dilirik Jadi Lokasi Pembangunan Pembangkit Bahan Baku Nuklir” and 2 articles on *KOMPAS.com* entitled “Bakal Jadi Percontohan se-Asia, Pembangkit Nuklir Thorium Rp 12 Triliun Dibangun di Babel” and “Indonesia Bakal Punya PLTN Thorium di Pulau Gelasa Babel”.

News discourse can be understood as a sociocognitive process involving sources, journalists and audiences operating in a shared cultural world and based on socially defined roles (Pan & Kosicki, 1993), so is the delivery of news related to this topic on *detikcom* and *KOMPAS.com* which also framed the news discourse. In the issue of the construction of a thorium-powered NPP in these two online media, there is a practical side of media conglomeration through the emerging discourse. Therefore, this study attempted to answer one main question related to how the practice of media conglomeration made the public aware of the issue of the construction plan of a thorium-powered NPP on Gelasa Island, Central Bangka Regency, Bangka Belitung Islands Province through reporting in three news articles on *detikcom* and

KOMPAS.com as online news media platforms from media conglomerates in Indonesia, during the duration of August 1, 2022 to August 31, 2023.

With the aim of examining the practice of media conglomeration regarding the issue of the construction plan of a thorium-powered NPP on Gelasa Island in these two online media, this study used a qualitative approach, which usually functions to obtain detailed data and contains actual data (Sugiyono, 2015). The constructivist paradigm used in this study emphasizes that knowledge does not depend entirely on objective reality, but is constructed through subjective interpretation and individual mental construction, where reality is seen as the result of complex interactions between individual experiences, thoughts, and social contexts.

This study is expected to provide significance as an effective communication strategy for the government in educating the public through news related to nuclear issues in online media, as a substitute for mainstream media. In addition, the results of this study can also support the policy-making strategy by the government and actors in the issue of NPP development in Indonesia. It should be noted that the issue of NPP is political and cross-institutional, namely regulators including the legislative council and related government agencies; and operators in this case government research institutions in the context of nuclear technology.

Media Theory and the Concept of Cultural Political Economy

This study took the perspective of media theory by Hesmondhalgh (2010) and the concept of cultural political economy by Sum & Jessop (2013). Understanding the concept of media ownership in media theory with the concept of cultural political economy opens up the connection between actors, including individuals, organizations, and the media in influencing how nuclear technology issues are reported by the media, and how these issues are understood and criticized by actors. The perspective of media theory related to the media industry and production that recognizes the important role of media ownership in shaping views, ideologies and understandings in society, and the concept of cultural political economy shows how media ownership as a political economic power structure can influence media production and distribution. This leads to media conglomeration, which plays an important role in regulating public opinion. Therefore, this study argued that conglomeration in the media can influence how nuclear issues, in this case the construction of NPP in Indonesia, are conveyed to the public, and the same media owners are able to influence the dominant narrative about the technology.

Media conglomeration is a phenomenon in which a large number of mass media such as television stations, newspapers, radio, and news websites are owned or controlled by a small number of large companies or groups. This relationship can have a significant impact on how information is delivered, accessed, and processed by the public and how scientists understand the role of media in society. With the influence of conglomeration in the media and its relation to the economic, political, and cultural contexts, there is a risk of concentration of power and media ownership in the hands of a large number of media companies (Fachrudin, 2022). This can shape the way news and information are delivered to the public, and will limit the diversity of perspectives on content choices in the media (Khumairoh, 2021). Especially if the owners of large media companies have significant political influence, because they have a platform to influence the views of the public and politicians (Teguh Priyo & Nurtyasih Wibawanti Ratna, 2023). In turn, this phenomenon determines how large the portion of scientific information on nuclear science issues is in the media, including online media, which also has an impact on the acceptance of nuclear science issues for the public.

Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA)

The author used the critical discourse analysis (CDA) method to analyze the news discourse in the online media *detikcom* and *KOMPAS.com*. CDA is a method for analyzing both spoken and written discourse, where aspects of language and the accompanying context are both examined. This means that the language is used for certain purposes and practices (Silaswati, 2019; Ismail, 2008).

In general, the steps commonly taken in CDA begin with identifying news sources; analyzing the text structure which usually includes the title and lead, word choice, and sources or informants; analyzing social and political context; identifying power relations through narrative power by examining how articles balance between government narratives and criticism; evaluating discourse impact. Therefore, this CDA provides an understanding of how pro-government media conglomerates can shape and direct news narratives to support government policies, especially related to the construction of thorium-powered NPP as the main issue.

For critical discourse analysis (CDA) related to media conglomeration in reporting on the issue of thorium-powered NPP in Indonesia, especially in online media that support the government, the author correlated the thoughts of two figures who are very relevant in this case. **The first** is Fairclough's thinking which sees language as a social practice and connects linguistic analysis in texts with social, political, and ideological contexts; introduces the concept of 3-dimensional analysis involving texts, discourse practices, and social practices; and emphasizes that discourse not only reflects reality, but also shapes and changes it (Fairclough, 2013a; Fairclough, 2013b). CDA with Fairclough's thinking examines how discourse in the media contributes to the formation of power and domination, and how language is used to legitimize or challenge the status quo.

The second is Van Dijk's thinking which focuses on the relationship between discourse, power, domination, social injustice reflected in the text, and ideology; develops an analysis model that combines discourse structure with cognitive and social context; and emphasizes the importance of studying macro (themes and topics) and micro (sentences and words) structures in the text (Van Dijk, 2015; Van Dijk, 2013). As a linguist and sociologist, Van Dijk has done a lot of research on minority representation in the media and how discourse can function to reproduce social injustice. Van Dijk argued that the media is often a tool for reproducing dominant ideologies, so CDA analyzes how discourse and language structures reflect or reinforce power. This analysis includes cognitive structures, discourse access, and social cognition related to information control and ideology.

Fairclough and Van Dijk have a very suitable approach to analyzing how media discourse is shaped and also shapes power and ideology (Susilo et al., 2021; Cenderamata & Darmayanti, 2019; Humaira, 2018; Munfarida, 2014; Fauzan, 2013).

Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) Results

As an initial stage, the author identified 3 news articles on *detikcom* and *KOMPAS.com* as follows:

Data Source Identification

Article 1: news source from *detikcom* (March 20, 2023)

Article 2: news source from *KOMPAS.com* (March 30, 2023)

Article 3: news source from *KOMPAS.com* (June 12, 2023)

Text Structure Analysis

Article 1 from *detikcom*

1. Title: “Pulau Ini Dilirik Jadi Lokasi Pembangunan Pembangkit Bahan Baku Nuklir”
2. Lead: information that currently a pilot plant is being studied on Gelasa Island for a Thorium Power Plant (the words “pilot plant” give a positive impression)
3. Word Choice: Indonesia's contribution, renewable energy, new energy barn, cheap, tin sand, accessory minerals, more advanced industry
4. Source Person: Ridwan Djamaluddin
5. Affiliation: government official (Acting Governor of the Bangka Belitung Islands)

Article 2 from *KOMPAS.com*

1. Title: “Bakal Jadi Percontohan se-Asia, Pembangkit Nuklir Thorium Rp 12 Triliun Dibangun di Babel”
2. Lead: information that the results of the ecological study provide a positive signal regarding the realization of the construction of the Thorium Power Plant on Gelasa Island, Bangka Belitung Islands Province. If it is built, then the Thorium Power Plant in Bangka Belitung will be the first in Indonesia, as well as being a national and Asian example (the words “ecological study results” give a positive impression).
3. Word Choice: environmental impact analysis, spatial changes, benefits, cheap electricity, many experts, positive impacts, risks can be avoided
4. Sources: Bob S. Effendi, Ridwan Djamaluddin
5. Affiliation: representative of company supporting the thorium-powered NPP project, (Director of Operations of PT Thorcon Power Indonesia), government officials (Acting Governor of the Bangka Belitung Islands)

Article 3 from *KOMPAS.com*

1. Title: “Indonesia Bakal Punya PLTN Thorium di Pulau Gelasa Babel”
2. Lead: information that the plan to build a Nuclear Power Plant (NPP) in the Bangka Belitung Islands (Babel) continues to roll (the word “continues to roll” has a positive impression).
3. Word Choice: the importance of energy for Indonesia, nuclear energy to boost the economy, education for the community
4. Source: Agus Puji Prasetyono, Suganda Pandapotan
5. Affiliation: both government officials (Member of the National Energy Council, Acting Governor of Bangka Belitung)

Article 1 from *detikcom* was released on March 20, 2023, article 2 from *KOMPAS.com* was released on March 30, 2023, and article 3 from *KOMPAS.com* was released on June 12, 2023. In general, the political background in Indonesia throughout 2023 was still around the hustle and bustle of preparations for the 2024 General Election, including the Presidential Election and economic conditions influenced by inflation and post-pandemic recovery and their impact on political stability. On the other hand, the context of Indonesian foreign policy at that time focused on Indonesia's important role in ASEAN and in various international forums related

to global issues, relations and opportunities for cooperation with major countries such as the United States, China, and Russia.

Furthermore, the results of the general analysis above are correlated with the thoughts of Fairclough and Van Dijk as a whole, so that the following results are obtained:

Fairclough's Approach

In this case, the author examined the news text by considering 3 dimensions of Fairclough's analysis, namely: text, discourse practice, and social practice.

1. Text Analysis

At the text level, this analysis looks at how thorium-powered NPP is reported in terms of word choice, sentence structure, and narrative construction. Then, *detikcom*, owned by PT Trans Digital Media, presented news in a more to-the-point journalistic style and used language that is easily digested by the general public. In reporting thorium-powered NPP, *detikcom* focused on the economic benefits and technological advantages of thorium power plants compared to uranium-based NPP, used words such as "Indonesia's contribution", "renewable energy", "new energy barn", "cheap", "tin sand", "accessory minerals", and "more advanced industry". The choice of words can form the perception that thorium power is a positive choice that is beneficial and does not carry many risks.

Furthermore, *KOMPAS.com* as part of KG Media, used more analytical language and provided a broader perspective on the implications of thorium use, such as potential environmental impacts, government policies, and public resistance. *KOMPAS.com* used more neutral or critical language, considering the pros and cons of this technology.

2. Discourse Practices

At the discourse practice level, this analysis examines how the news is produced, who the news sources are, and how the information is structured. The news about the thorium NPP on *detikcom* more quoted government or corporate parties involved in the development of this technology. This shows a pattern of discourse that supports the narrative of development and modern technology. The discourse that is constructed tends to support the thorium NPP project as a national energy solution, by highlighting the economic side or technological achievements. Such a discourse practice shows the tendency of *detikcom* to position itself as a media that supports modernization and national development, which is often in line with the interests of the government or large investors.

In contrast, *KOMPAS.com* presented a more balanced discourse by presenting various perspectives, including those from environmental activists, scientists, and the government. This discourse practice can reflect the efforts of *KOMPAS.com* to balance the narrative that supports the thorium NPP project with concerns regarding social, environmental, and political impacts. By citing various sources, the discourse constructed on *KOMPAS.com* can encourage readers to consider broader aspects of thorium energy development. For example, in article 2 *KOMPAS.com* presented the views of energy companies that highlight the potential for Indonesia's lack of readiness in terms of initial thorium processing, thus requiring technology transfer from foreign countries. In article 3 *KOMPAS.com* also highlighted the many negative stigmas in society related to the construction of NPP, thus requiring education.

3. Social Practices

At the level of social practices, CDA looks at how this discourse relates to the broader social context, including the economic and political interests of media conglomerates that influence reporting. As part of a media conglomerate that has close ties to various industries, the reporting by *detikcom* is influenced by the economic interests of large corporations or governments that invest in new energy technologies such as thorium. In this context, *detikcom* promoted the narrative that thorium-powered NPP is an innovative, safe energy solution that can strengthen Indonesia's position as an energy-independent country. This discourse is in line with the interests of conglomerates that have ties to the government and large industries. This social practice shows how *detikcom* can support the discourse on national development that prioritizes advanced technology and large infrastructure projects, without highlighting too many negative impacts.

On the other hand, *KOMPAS.com*, which is known to be more independent and has a reputation as a credible media, focused more on the social and environmental impacts of thorium-powered NPP. The social practices built through this discourse can reflect the commitment of KG Media to critical journalism by digging deeper into issues related to sustainability, development ethics, and local community rights. This is in line with KG Media's efforts to maintain their reputation as a media that prioritizes balance in reporting, although they are also not free from the influence of large corporations. In a broader social context, *KOMPAS.com* helped readers to not only see the economic and technological benefits of the thorium-powered NPP project, but also understand its potential impacts on the environment and society.

Van Dijk's Approach

In this case, the author examined the news text by considering 4 aspects, namely: structural analysis, discourse access, social cognition, and reflected ideology.

1. Structural Analysis (Macro and Micro Structures)

Macro Structure (Main Theme)

In reporting on thorium-powered NPP, *detikcom* focused on the technological advantages and economic benefits of developing thorium as an energy source. The main theme raised is "Thorium-powered nuclear power plants as a cheap energy solution and Indonesia's contribution to renewable energy". This theme showed an emphasis on positive aspects, which supports the narrative of the government or corporations that want to encourage the use of new and renewable energy. In Van Dijk's analysis, this reflects a pro-development and pro-modernization ideology, in accordance with the interests of the media owner (PT Trans Digital Media).

Meanwhile, *KOMPAS.com* raised a more balanced theme, covering the pros and cons of thorium use. The main theme raised in article 2 is "Thorium-powered nuclear power plant development: national independence or foreign dependence?". This theme showed a diversity of perspectives, reflecting the media ideology that seeks to be a bridge between pro-government views and critical views from civil society or environmentalists.

The main theme raised in article 3 *KOMPAS.com* is "Thorium Nuclear Power Plant Development: Public Acceptance or Negative Stigma?". This theme similarly showed a

diversity of perspectives, reflecting the media ideology that seeks to be a bridge between pro-government views and critical views from civil society or environmental experts.

Microstructure (Text Detail)

At the microstructure level, *detikcom* used simple sentences and positive, evocative words, such as “Indonesia’s contribution”, “renewable energy”, “new energy barn”, “cheap”, “tin sand”, “accessory minerals”, and “more advanced industry”. This creates a narrative that supports the development of thorium-powered NPP without highlighting too much of the possible risks. In this case, the use of optimistic language is a way to strengthen an ideological position that supports government or large corporate policies.

In contrast, *KOMPAS.com* used more neutral or sometimes more critical language in presenting the news. In article 2, words or terms such as “longer time”, “gradual processing itself”, “funds”, “presidential regulation” appeared to describe the balance between positive potential and concerns about the development of thorium-powered NPP. This reflects a more complex approach in explaining this issue to the public.

In article 3, words or terms such as “in the early stages”, “along with the operation of the power plant”, “ecological study”, “synergize”, “education”, “negative stigma” appeared to describe the balance between positive potential and concerns about the development of thorium-powered NPP. This similarly reflects a more complex approach in explaining this issue to the public.

2. Access to Discourse

Van Dijk emphasized that access to discourse is influenced by who has control over the information. In this context, access to news coverage of the thorium-powered NPP on *detikcom* and *KOMPAS.com* can be greatly influenced by media conglomeration and relationships with sources of power, such as the government or large companies.

As part of PT Trans Digital Media, *detikcom* has close ties with industry and government. This can influence access to discourse, where pro-technology development parties such as government officials, academics who support the thorium-powered NPP, or representatives of the energy industry are more often used as news sources or informants. The sources who support this policy will be prioritized in news coverage, and those who are critical may appear less frequently or only be mentioned briefly.

The article 1 *detikcom* cited a local government official as the sole source, in this case the Acting Governor of the Bangka Belitung Islands (Ridwan Djamaluddin).

In contrast to *KOMPAS.com*, although it is also under a large media conglomerate, it often provides wider access to various parties, including groups that are critical of the government or certain policies. This access to discourse is reflected in the variety of sources, such as environmental experts, critical academics, and civil society groups. This shows an effort to create a more balanced and representative discourse.

The article 2 *KOMPAS.com* quoted 2 sources with different backgrounds: the Director of Operations of PT Thorcon Power Indonesia (Bob S Effendi) and the Acting Governor of the Bangka Belitung Islands (Ridwan Djamaluddin).

The article 3 *KOMPAS.com* also quoted 2 sources with different backgrounds: the Member of the National Energy Council/DEN (Agus Puji Prasetyono) and the Acting Governor of Bangka Belitung (Suganda Pandapotan). Some examples are as follows:

3. Social Cognition

Social cognition refers to how people's views are influenced by the discourse in the media. In this case, the coverage of the thorium NPP by *detikcom* and *KOMPAS.com* can shape public understanding of the risks and benefits of this technology, as well as who benefits from its development.

Through the coverage that tends to highlight the positive side of the thorium NPP, *detikcom* plays a role in shaping social cognition that supports modernization and new energy technology. The public will tend to see this project as part of a national agenda that is important for the progress of the country, without considering too much of its environmental or social impacts. This discourse can create the perception that such a project is necessary to achieve Indonesia's energy independence.

In terms of its impact, the public exposed to news by *detikcom* may be more accepting of the thorium NPP project as something that is not too controversial, and part of national technological progress.

Conversely, with more critical and balanced coverage, *KOMPAS.com* can shape social cognition that is more aware of the implications of the thorium NPP project. *KOMPAS.com* readers may be more likely to question the long-term impacts, both environmental and social, and demand greater transparency and accountability from the government and companies involved.

In terms of impact, the public exposed to news by *KOMPAS.com* may be more critical of the project, considering both the benefits and risks, and more likely to encourage open public debate.

4. Reflected Ideology

The ideology reflected in the reporting of *detikcom* is pro-development and pro-technology, where the narrative around the thorium-powered NPP emphasizes the benefits and modernization aspects. This is in accordance with the position of the media which often supports the agenda of the government and large corporations, which focus on economic and infrastructure progress. In this case, *detikcom* plays a role as a reinforcement of the development ideology, where criticism or risk tends to be minimized.

In contrast, the ideology that emerges from the reporting of *KOMPAS.com* focuses more on balance and social responsibility. By highlighting the positive and negative sides, *KOMPAS.com* reflects a more independent and critical media ideology, where the public is invited to consider the broad impact of each policy or major project.

Therefore, through the CDA results of these 2 figures, the main question has been answered regarding how the media conglomeration practices made the public aware of the issue of the construction plan of a thorium-powered NPP on Gelasa Island, Central Bangka Regency, Bangka Belitung Islands Province through reporting in three news articles on *detikcom* and

KOMPAS.com as online news media platforms from media conglomerates in Indonesia, during the duration of August 1, 2022 to August 31, 2023.

Conclusion

From a CDA perspective, according to Fairclough, *detikcom* and *KOMPAS.com* can influence the public's perspective on thorium-powered NPP through their choice of words, news framing, and the discourse they construct. Moreover, *detikcom* tends to support the narrative of development and modernization that is in line with the interests of the government and industry. Meanwhile, *KOMPAS.com* tends to be more critical and tries to provide a more balanced view, inviting the audience to consider various aspects of the development of this technology. The influence of media conglomeration is seen in how the news is structured and pushed, which ultimately influences how the public understands important issues such as nuclear energy.

Using Van Dijk's approach, we see that *detikcom* tends to support the dominant narrative that benefits the government and corporations through pro-modernization and pro-technology news related to thorium nuclear power plants. Meanwhile, *KOMPAS.com* emphasizes balanced news, by opening up space for various parties, including those critical of the project. Different access to discourse in these two media influences how the public understands the issue of thorium-powered NPP, where *detikcom* promotes acceptance of this project, while *KOMPAS.com* encourages critical and balanced discussions.

This study showed that the discourse that emerged from the news articles on *detikcom* and *KOMPAS.com* supports the government to build a thorium-powered NPP in Indonesia. Based on the government's perspective used in the news narratives of these two online media, it can be seen that the media which are actually controlled by media conglomerates who are also involved in practical politics tend to support all programs carried out by the government. This affects the news coverage in these media or media that are under the control of these media conglomerates. In this case, it can be seen how media ownership as a political economic power structure can influence media production and distribution, resulting in media conglomerates playing an important role in regulating public opinion.

Based on Fairclough's approach, it can be seen how news texts are specifically designed to support the government's views and how media conglomerates facilitate the spread of these views. Meanwhile, by applying Van Dijk's theory we understand how the media frames a thorium-powered NPP as a solution to national energy problems, and may ignore the risks or criticisms that come from independent parties. These two CDA figures provide a very effective analytical tool for understanding how news discourse can be shaped by wider political and economic forces, especially in the context of media conglomerates that have common interests with governments.

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