Audience Characteristics in the Dominance of Celebrity Political Podcast in Indonesia

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The Asian Conference on Media, Communication & Film 2025
Official Conference Proceedings

Abstract

Audiences in the digital ecosystem become active actors in public discussions by providing engagement, expressiveness, and collaboration in the digital space. Digital media commodifies audiences by utilizing attention as a commodity. In addition, Audiences indirectly work by receiving and distributing content in digital media, including podcast content. Podcasts are an alternative digital media that provides freedom of discussion in the digital space. In Indonesia, podcasts are often dominated by political information from celebrities, especially on YouTube. Celebrities upload political podcasts on YouTube based on consumption patterns that match the characteristics of the audience. This article aims to examine how the characteristics of the audience contribute to giving space for public discussion, which is now dominated by political celebrities in podcast media. This study adopts the theory of audience labor by Fisher (2015), focusing on the audience as a commodity that works under the influence of media algorithms and as gatekeepers. This research uses a netnography approach by combining virtual observation of YouTube political podcast channels. The findings indicate that the audience tends to have characteristics of consuming viral and sensational content. This characteristic is a form of audience labour that is commodified by political celebrities. Furthermore, the audience works as a gatekeeper in controlling information flows. Thus, audiences play a role in strengthening celebrity dominance, especially in political podcasts.

Keywords: audience characteristic, audience labour, celebrity, gatekeeper, political podcast

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Introduction

The understanding of audiences has changed with the advancement of digital technology. The role of audiences has become more active in the media environment, shifting from being passive recipients of media effects to active actors interpreting messages. More recently, audiences have been understood as active agents in the political and economic context of media, with the assumption that audiences on social media are producers of data that generate value. Fisher (2015) explains that audiences on social media are engaged, expressive, and collaborative. Audiences demonstrate involvement in the interaction process on social media (such as liking, recommending, or commenting). In addition to active engagement, audiences demonstrate self-expression through the production and distribution of content (such as providing opinions, sharing experiences in the form of text, images, or videos). Finally, audiences with collaborative characteristics work together to spread messages.

Audience characteristics on social media become data that is continuously processed by the media system and forms an algorithm. The algorithm is formed based on data on audience consumption patterns on digital media, such as viewing history, engagement time, click frequency, and social interactions (likes, comments, shares). By collecting this behavioral data, the algorithm system builds a user profile that is then used to deliver personalized and customized content. Fuchs (2014) argues that algorithms act as surveillance by collecting audience interaction data, and as predictive by suggesting content that will interest users based on previous interactions. This suggests that algorithms play a significant role in transforming audience segments into profitable commodities for digital media and advertisers.

Communication studies on the relationship between audiences and digital media continue to develop, using various approaches. One such approach is the concept of audiences as both commodities and workers within the political economy of media. Canada Dallas Smythe (1981) argues that audiences generate "audience power," which involves the work of concentration and attention. However, this concept still fails to define the audience that has evolved in digital media, where attention and time are no longer traded values. This concept was later expanded with the emergence of the concept of audience labor in digital media, where audiences perform more tasks beyond just attention in the form of viewing. Audiences act as "laborers" through participation and interaction, which are processed into data by media companies.

In addition to consuming content, audiences also participate by receiving and producing content on digital media, including podcasts. Audiences are not limited to a passive role, but actively expand and shape the meaning of the content. A content creator is responsible for all information provided to a specific target audience through digital media, and they strive to fulfil content objectives such as promotion, education, entertainment, or information, as well as adapting the content to the chosen platform. YouTube is often used by creators because it is considered free without censorship or strict rules. This makes podcasts an alternative digital medium that is more familiar and closer to its audience. The development of podcasts on media like YouTube has become an alternative form of digital media that can be used by anyone to broadcast from home using online video (Meidina, 2023).

Podcasts have grown rapidly in Indonesia, driven by technological advancements, a growing digital industry, the creativity of content creators, and social adoption. Podcasts are recognised as a new alternative medium for practicing journalism (Muslimah, 2022) and a valuable tool for developing communication skills and disseminating information, including for educational purposes, across various digital platforms. This growth reflects a public desire for greater free

speech and on-demand features, indicating that audiences are seeking greater control over their media consumption and more personal connections with content creators.

Political podcasts as a long-form conversation format offer an intimate feel, time flexibility, and a more relaxed communication style than mainstream journalism. In Indonesia, political podcasts on YouTube can be broadly divided into two categories. The first category consists of celebrity-owned or artist-owned channels in which political content is embedded within a broader repertoire of entertainment, lifestyle, and personal branding. The second category includes dedicated political or news podcast channels that focus primarily on in-depth political content, policy analysis, and issue-based discussion. While both categories address political themes, they are differently marked in style, framing, and the centrality of entertainment value.

An interesting phenomenon is the emergence of the dominance of political podcasts owned by celebrities, such as Deddy Corbuzier with *Close The Door* and Denny Sumargo with *CURHAT BANG!*, which often invite politicians, public officials, or political sources for dialogue. On the other hand, there are political channels that specifically focus on policy issues and political dynamics, such as Total Politics and Podberita. Even though they both contain political content, the performance of these two types of channels is very different.

Celebrity-owned political podcasts tend to attract far higher numbers of views, likes, comments, and shares than their more conventional political counterparts, even when discussing similar issues. Programs hosted by high-profile figures such as Deddy Corbuzier and Denny Sumargo regularly reach tens of millions of views for politically themed episodes, far exceeding the reach of specialized political channels that focus more on substantive policy discussions. This imbalance raises an important question: to what extent is the dominance of celebrity political podcasts driven not only by celebrity power and platform design but also by the characteristics and practices of audiences themselves?

This paper aims to analyse how audience characteristics shape, and even drive, the dominance of celebrity political podcasts in Indonesia. It pays particular attention to three interrelated audience characteristics: engagement, expressiveness, and collaboration. These characteristics are examined through the lenses of audience labour theory and audience-as-gatekeeper theory, within a political podcast landscape marked by the growing centrality of celebrity figures. By doing so, the study seeks to contribute to scholarly debates on political communication, digital labour, and the political economy of platformised media.

Literature Review

Audience Labour Theory

In the context of digital media, this active audience is further redefined as a productive force. Audiences don't just interpret content; they comment on it, share it, combine it, and use it as raw material for ongoing social interactions. This has given rise to concepts like "prosumption," where production and consumption are intertwined (Ritzer & Jurgenson, 2010), as well as a renewed interest in the economic value generated by audience activity, particularly in the data-driven platform economy (Fuchs, 2014; Gillespie & Boczkowski, 2014).

Active audiences have the following characteristics: (a) Engaged audiences are highly attentive and engaged. They watch long-form episodes, follow series consistently, and respond quickly

to new uploads. Engagement is seen in metrics such as retained views and watch duration (McClure, 2020). (b) Expressive audiences articulate their opinions, emotions, and identities in the comments section and through other interactive features. They debate, support, criticise, or ridicule political actors and podcast hosts, often using humour, sarcasm, or moralising language. (c) Collaborative audiences coordinate with each other, explicitly or implicitly, to amplify specific content. This can include encouraging others to like or share, participating in collective comments, or migrating discussions from one platform to another (Jenkins, 2006).

Audience labour builds on the work of the political economy of communication, particularly Dallas Smythe's discussion of the "audience commodity." In an advertising-supported media system, audience attention is packaged and sold to advertisers, making the audience itself the primary commodity. Under digital capitalism, this logic is intensified: audiences don't just watch; they click, like, comment, and share. These activities generate data that can be analyzed, targeted, and monetized on a massive scale (Mosco, 2009). Recent audience studies have argued that audience participation constitutes a form of unpaid labour. Fisher proposed the concept of "audiencing as marketing" to demonstrate how audiences perform marketing work through participation and interaction. Terranova (2000), in "Free Labour," emphasizes that value production in the digital economy often relies on the free labour of user communities. In the context of political podcasts, audience labour. This is the key to why certain content is more dominant than others.

Audience activity in consuming, interacting, and sharing content can be interpreted as a form of audience labour that generates economic value not only for the platform but also for the creator. Forms of audience labour, such as likes and reactions, reviews and mentions, comments and replies, shares and resharing, and interactions, are forms of active engagement that generate data that is then utilized and exploited by podcast creators.

Audience as Gatekeeper

In platformed media ecosystems, algorithms play a central role in determining which content is recommended, surfaced, and made visible to users. owever, algorithmic visibility is closely tied to audience behaviour. Engagement metric, such as watch time, likes, comments, and shares are central signal that algorithms use to rank content (Couldry & Meijas, 2019). As a result, audiences effectively participate in the process of gatekeeping, collectively pushing certain content into prominence while relegating other content to oblivion.

Ttraditional gatekeeping theory media focuses on media professionals deciding what information enters the public sphere. In the digital environment, audiences become gatekeepers of distributed systems that shape the public agenda through their interaction patterns (Napoli, 2011). At the same time, algorithmic personalization and the logic of maximization engagement can contribute to echo chambers, sensationalism, and prioritization of emotionally charged content over nuanced discussion. Technological advancements have made audiences themselves gatekeepers who actively participate in shaping the flow of information and online dynamics based on what they find interesting or important.

Methodology

This research employs a qualitative netnographic approach. Netnography is a form of ethnography adapted to online environments, focusing on naturally occurring interactions and cultural practices in digital communities. This approach was chosen to study audience behavior

on platforms like YouTube, where most activity occurs in the comments section, engagement metrics, and cross-platform sharing. The study is designed as a multiple-case netnography, examining four political podcast channels on YouTube: two celebrity-owned channels and two dedicated political channels. This comparative design allows for the identification of patterns that distinguish audience labor and gatekeeping in celebrity political podcasts from those in more traditional political talk shows. The research subjects are four YouTube channels actively producing political podcasts:

1. Deddy Corbuzier – *Close The Door* (celebrity podcast)
2. Denny Sumargo – *CURHAT BANG!* (celebrity podcast)
3. Total Politics (political channel)
4. Podberita (political channel)

These channels were selected based on subscriber numbers, frequency of political content, and their prominence in public discussions about politics on social media. Within these channels, episodes dealing with salient political events, such as public demonstrations, parliamentary controversies, or high-profile political debates, were purposive sampled for closer analysis.

Data collection in this study was conducted over three months, from August to October 2025, using a netnographic method that combined virtual observation with in-depth interviews. The primary data source consisted of three complementary components. First, virtual observation was systematically conducted on selected political podcast episodes and YouTube comment sections. Researchers watched episodes with high political relevance, qualitatively read comments, and recorded metrics engagement which is visible in the number of views, likes, and shares. This observation includes not only verbal content but also visualization of thumbnails, titles, and interaction patterns that develop in the comments column.

Second, in-depth interviews were conducted with a number of active audience members who regularly interact with political podcast content. Participants were recruited using purposive sampling based on the criteria of frequency of interaction and active engagement in the comments section. These semi-structured interviews explored their motivations for watching celebrity podcasts versus dedicated political podcasts, their perceptions of political discussion in these formats, and the engagement practice they perform in everyday media use (Creswell, 2014). Data analysis techniques use thematic analysis to explore audience characteristics that influence audience labor and the dominance of political content produced by celebrities.

Results and Discussion

Throughout the observation period, celebrity-hosted political podcast episodes consistently achieved far higher visibility and engagement than episodes with comparable political themes on dedicated political channels. This is evident in Figure 1, which shows that political episodes on Deddy Corbuzier's channel received tens of millions of views, with significantly higher likes and comments.

Figure 1
Political Content by Celebrity-Host Podcast

Source: Denny Sumargo's Youtube Podcast

Different from Figure 2. This shows the views number of channel Total Politics, which tend to have a more limited audience, even though the topics discussed are similar or even more in-depth.

Figure 2
Content by Political Podcast Channel

Source: Total Politik's Youtube Podcast

Celebrity-hosted episodes on contentious topics such as parliamentary controversies or public protests regularly reached multimillion-view counts within weeks, whereas similar topics on political channels tended to attract far fewer views. This pattern was mirrored in likes and comments. Celebrity podcasts generated not only larger absolute numbers of reactions and comments but also denser, more continuous discussion threads. Comment sections remained active longer, with users continuing to discuss episodes weeks after publication. Political channels, while generating substantive exchanges, often had less intense and more short-lived engagement.

Importantly, the main content of celebrity podcasts is not exclusively, and sometimes not primarily, political. Political episodes often appear alongside entertainment-focused content

featuring actors, athletes, or other public figures. However, when celebrity hosts address political issues, these episodes disproportionately benefit from the channel's pre-existing audience base and its algorithmic momentum.

Audience Characteristic: Engaged, Expressive, Collaborative

Analysis of comments and interviews revealed three main characteristics of celebrity political podcast audiences:

1. Engaged: Audiences watch long episodes and follow series regularly. Many commentators mention rewatching certain segments, especially those deemed "irritating," conflict-filled, or controversial. This contributes to the highwatch time, one of the main indicators of the algorithm.
2. Expressive: Audiences use the comments section as an arena for expressing political opinions, emotions, and identities. They praise, criticize, or ridicule guests and hosts using expressive, humorous, or even aggressive language. These expressions often take the form of short narratives, memes, or pop culture references that other users can easily respond to.
3. Collaborative: Audiences encourage each other to boost the algorithm for specific episodes ("like to increase," "help trend"), share clips on other platforms, and suggest specific parts to watch through timestamps. These practices create a collective effort that significantly increases a video's visibility.

Pattern of Audience Labour

Audience labour was evident in the celebrity podcast channels. Viewers did more than simply watch, they actively worked to increase the reach and impact of the episodes they considered entertaining, emotionally resonant, or politically validating. Several forms of audience labour were evident. Intensive viewing and rewatching, some users reported watching long episodes more than once, especially when specific political statements or confrontational exchanges went viral. This reinforced watch time metrics that are crucial for algorithmic promotion. Likes, reactions, and emoji-based responses, Audiences habitually use likes and emoji reactions to signal approval, amusement, or outrage. These signals were particularly concentrated around moments of emotional drama, humour, or perceived authenticity.

Commenting and replying, Comments often functioned as micro-essays, jokes, or arguments that extended the content of the episode. Users respond to one another, creating multilayered threads that further increased engagement statistics. And sharing and resharing, Viewers shared links and short clips across platforms such as X, Instagram, and messaging apps. Some explicitly described their sharing as a way to "spread awareness" or "make this go viral," blending political intention with fan-like promotion. These labour practices generated a dense field of engagement around celebrity podcasts, which was then processed by the platform's recommendation system into greater visibility and, ultimately, greater economic value for the celebrity hosts and the platform.

The findings indicate that the dominance of celebrity political podcasts cannot be fully explained by celebrity status or platform algorithms alone. Audience labour is a crucial intermediary. Through sustained viewing, intensive interaction, and cross-platform promotion, audiences collectively transform celebrity-hosted episodes into highly visible and economically valuable content.

From a political economy perspective, this labour is largely unpaid and unrecognised. Yet it is essential to the monetisation model of both platforms and celebrity creators. Advertising revenue, sponsorship deals, and brand partnerships all depend on the level of audience activity surrounding a channel. In celebrity podcasts, where hosts often already possess strong personal brands, audience labour multiplies this advantage and further marginalises less glamorous but more substantively political channels. This dynamic suggests that audiences, far from being mere beneficiaries or victims of celebrity-dominated political discourse, are deeply implicated in structurally sustaining that dominance. Their preferences, emotions, and interaction strategies help determine which formats and framings of politics become hegemonic in the digital sphere.

Audience labour in celebrity podcasts is strongly oriented toward emotionally charged, sensational, and conflict-driven content. Episodes that feature confrontation, dramatic revelations, or provocative statements tend to generate the highest engagement. In turn, audiences reinforce these tendencies by rewarding them with likes, comments, and shares, often framing them as "brave," "honest," or "entertaining." This creates a feedback loop. As creators observe which episodes perform best, they have incentives to reproduce similar formulas: inviting controversial guests, emphasising personal drama over structural analysis, or simplifying complex issues into moral tales or interpersonal conflicts. Audiences, in turn, focus their labour on these emotionally salient elements, sidelining more nuanced and demanding discussions.

The audience also played a gatekeeping role in determining which issues and framings gained prominence. In celebrity podcasts, comment sections frequently elevate particular segments, such as emotional reactions, confrontations, or controversial statements, by repeatedly referencing them, quoting them, or time-stamping them. Other users would then go directly to these "highlighted" segments, bypassing more complex or nuanced parts of the discussion.

Audience members effectively curated their own "best moments" within episodes, narrowing attention to clips that were most entertaining or emotionally charged. Political channels, by contrast, tended to centre more on policy substance and institutional processes, which generated less meme-able or quotable content. While their audiences were often knowledgeable and engaged, they did not match the scale or intensity of emotional amplification found in celebrity channels.

Furthermore, audiences in celebrity podcasts often acted as de facto defenders of their favourite hosts, pushing back against criticism, reframing political issues in ways favourable to the host, or dismissing more complex viewpoints as "too complicated" or "boring." In this sense, gatekeeping did not simply mean selecting which topics mattered but also shaping the tone and direction of political interpretation. In celebrity podcasts, audience gatekeeping tends to privilege sensational, personalised, and emotionally resonant narratives. This form of gatekeeping contributes to content homogenisation. Political discussion is increasingly filtered through similar templates: charismatic host, emotionally engaging storytelling, and simplified framing of complex issues. More diverse or complex forms of political talk, those that might challenge comfort zones, require sustained attention, or foreground unpopular perspectives, struggle to break through.

The dominance of celebrity political podcasts, as co-produced by platforms and audiences, has several implications for political communication in Indonesia. On the one hand, these podcasts can broaden access to political information by attracting audiences who might not otherwise

watch traditional news or political programmes. They can also humanise political actors and make abstract issues more relatable.

On the other hand, the form of politicisation they promote is often shallow, personality-driven, and heavily mediated by entertainment logics. Structural issues, long-term policy debates, and perspectives from less mediatised actors may be underrepresented. The risk is that public understanding of politics becomes increasingly shaped by emotionally resonant anecdotes and celebrity narratives rather than by sustained engagement with institutions, processes, and competing policy options. Moreover, the concentration of visibility and influence in the hands of a few celebrity hosts raises concerns about pluralism and accountability. When a small number of personalities become primary gateways to political discourse, their personal biases, commercial interests, and relationships with political actors can have outsized effects on public opinion.

Conclusion

This research shows that the dominance of celebrity political podcasts in Indonesia cannot be understood solely as a result of individual popularity or the platform's technical superiority. Audience characteristics and practices play a central role in sustaining this dominance. Celebrity political podcast audiences are engaged, expressive, and collaborative. Through audience labour such as watching, commenting, and sharing, audiences create economic and algorithmic value that strengthens the position of celebrity podcasts over dedicated political channels. At the same time, audiences function as algorithmic gatekeepers, prioritizing emotional and sensational content, thus encouraging the homogenization of entertainment-oriented political content.

The main implication of this research is the need to recognize the structural role of audiences in the digital political communication ecosystem. Efforts to improve the quality of political discourse require more than just requiring media and creators to be "more educational," but also encouraging audiences to understand that their engagement practices have political consequences.

This study has limitations, such as limited channel coverage and a focus on YouTube alone. Further research could expand the study to other platforms (e.g., TikTok, Instagram) and examine how demographic variables or audience political orientation influence engagement patterns.

Declaration of Generative AI and AI-Assisted Technologies in the Writing Process

Generative AI was used as an assistant in creating writing points according to guidelines, including support for paraphrasing and language refinement. The author used perplexity.ai for the generative AI. The author reviewed, edited, and approved the final manuscript and is fully responsible for its content.

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