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Visual Bias in Indonesian Platform-Based Journalism: Media Ownership and Instagram Coverage in Radar Cirebon

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Abstract. This study examines how visual bias is articulated in local digital journalism by analysing Radar Cirebon's Instagram coverage during the 2024 mayoral election in Cirebon, Indonesia. Employing a qualitative content analysis, eighty-two Instagram posts published during the official campaign period were examined using Denis McQuail's framework of media performance, focusing on presentational features such as personalization, dramatization, stereotyping, juxtaposition, and accuracy. The findings reveal a consistent pattern of visual and textual alignment that favoured the media owner–affiliated candidate, expressed through evaluative captions, aesthetic personalization, and emotionally charged imagery. Rather than manifesting through explicit misinformation, bias operated at the level of representation and interpretation, shaped by both ownership structures and the platform logic of Instagram. Situated within debates on platformization and the political economy of media, the study highlights the particular vulnerability of local journalism in Indonesia, where close proximity between media ownership and political actors can blur editorial boundaries in digital contexts. By repositioning McQuail's media performance framework within platform-based journalism, this research contributes to visual communication scholarship and underscores the need for stronger ethical safeguards to protect editorial independence in local digital media ecosystems.

Keywords: digital journalism; Instagram; local journalism; media ownership; visual bias; platformization.

1. Introduction

Media ownership has consistently been identified as a structural factor shaping journalistic orientation and editorial decision-making. Classical and contemporary political economy approaches argue that ownership structures influence news agendas, ideological tendencies, and patterns of inclusion and exclusion in media coverage, often through indirect and routinized mechanisms rather than explicit editorial intervention (Herman & Chomsky, 1988; McChesney, 2004; Freedman, 2014). These dynamics are often more visible in local media systems, where organizational scale is limited and institutional separation between business interests and editorial functions is relatively weak (Baker, 2007; Pickard, 2020).

Empirical studies in Southeast Asia and Indonesia suggest that local media outlets are particularly vulnerable to owner influence during periods of political contestation, when electoral stakes heighten pressures on journalistic autonomy (Tapsell, 2015, 2017; Hanitzsch et al., 2018).

While much of this literature focuses on print and broadcast journalism, journalistic practice has increasingly shifted toward digital platforms over the past decade. News organizations now routinely produce and distribute political content through social media, which has become an integral part of journalistic work rather than a supplementary channel. Scholars of digital journalism emphasize that platform environments reshape not only the circulation of news but also its form, style, and normative orientation, including how journalistic independence is enacted in practice (Hermida, 2010; Deuze, 2008; Carlson, 2015). As a result, established concerns about media bias and ownership influence re-emerge in new configurations that demand renewed analytical attention.

Instagram occupies a distinctive position within this transformation. As a platform oriented toward visual storytelling, affective engagement, and algorithmic visibility, Instagram encourages representational modes that differ markedly from conventional news formats. Research on visual political communication and platformization shows that such environments tend to privilege personalization, dramatization, and emotional appeal, often at the expense of contextual depth and critical distance (Grabe & Bucy, 2009; Olausson, 2018; Nieborg & Poell, 2018). In this context, political bias in journalistic content is less likely to appear through explicit editorial opinion and more likely to be embedded in visual framing, narrative emphasis, and patterns of selective visibility.

This study examines Instagram coverage during the 2024 mayoral election in Cirebon, Indonesia. The research focuses on a local news organization whose owner was directly involved as a candidate in the same electoral contest. This configuration provides a critical empirical context for analysing how political interests, media ownership, and journalistic practices intersect within a platform-based environment. Rather than assessing electoral effects or audience responses, the study concentrates on identifying patterns of visual and textual representation through which political reality is constructed in journalistic Instagram content.

Instagram is treated here as part of journalistic output, not as a peripheral promotional space. The account under study is institutionally managed by the newsroom and was actively used to publish political news throughout the campaign period. Accordingly, its content is analytically understood as editorial production subject to journalistic norms such as independence, balance, and accuracy. This approach enables a systematic examination of how these norms are negotiated and potentially reconfigured under platform conditions. Instagram is not merely an auxiliary distribution channel for local media, but a site where representational strategies are reconfigured under platform affordances that privilege personalization, emotional appeal, and visual proximity. Examining visual bias on Instagram therefore allows this study to capture a distinct layer of editorial influence that cannot be adequately observed through website-based journalism alone. This study addresses this gap by analysing how media ownership is articulated through visual presentation in local platform-based journalism.

The study is guided by two research questions: (1) how is visual bias constructed in the Instagram content of a local news organization whose owner has political affiliations; and (2) how do media ownership and platform affordances interact to shape editorial independence in local digital journalism?

Theoretically, this research adapts McQuail (1992) media performance framework, focusing on presentational features such as personalization, dramatization, stereotyping, linking/juxtaposition, and accuracy. Although developed in the context of conventional mass media, these indicators are employed here as normative evaluative tools rather than technology-specific categories. By repositioning McQuail's framework within contemporary debates on digital journalism and platformization (Jenkins, 2008; Carlson, 2015; Van Dijck et al., 2018), the study conceptualizes media independence as a communicative construct shaped by both institutional arrangements and digital infrastructures.

By focusing on local journalism, visual political communication, and platform-based media practices, this study contributes to broader debates on media ethics and democratic accountability in Asia. It demonstrates that the challenges confronting digital journalism are not merely technological but structural, rooted in enduring tensions between ownership interests, journalistic norms, and political power within localized media ecosystems.

2. Theoretical Framework and Literature Review

2.1. *Media Independence, Ownership, and Platform-Based Journalism*

Research on media ownership and political bias has long been dominated by political economy perspectives that emphasize structural constraints on journalistic autonomy. Herman & Chomsky (1988) propaganda model demonstrates how ownership, advertising, and elite interests systematically shape news agendas and representations. Subsequent studies refine this argument by showing that ownership influence is rarely exercised through overt intervention, but is instead embedded in organizational routines, professional norms, and editorial cultures (McChesney, 2004; Freedman, 2014).

Empirical research further indicates that ownership effects are particularly pronounced in local media systems. Baker (2007) and Pickard (2020) argue that smaller media organizations face heightened economic vulnerability, limiting their capacity to resist owner pressure. In Southeast Asia, Tapsell (2015) documents how media oligarchies blur the boundary between journalism and political power, while Hanitzsch et al. (2018) show that journalistic role perceptions vary significantly under different ownership regimes. In Indonesia, Nugroho et al. (2012) and Lim (2011) demonstrate that local media are deeply embedded in political and economic networks, rendering editorial independence especially fragile during electoral periods.

Together, these studies establish media ownership as a critical structural condition shaping journalistic bias. However, they largely conceptualize bias at the level of institutional arrangements and editorial policy, offering limited insight into how ownership influence is translated into everyday news representations, particularly within visual and platform-based journalism.

Recent empirical work that specifically examines newsrooms' Instagram output shows that news organisations routinely adapt storytelling and presentation to platform affordances, producing highly visual, engagement-oriented items that differ in form and function from text-based news stories (Al-Rawi et al., 2021; Perreault & Hanusch, 2024; Saks & Hopkins, 2024). Building on these perspectives, Shoemaker and Reese's Hierarchy of Influences Model is relevant for explaining how ownership interests shape editorial decisions across multiple levels, from routine newsroom practices to representational choices in published content (Shoemaker & Reese, 2014). In platform-based environments, gatekeeping is no longer limited to editorial authority but is shared with algorithmic systems

that prioritize visibility, engagement, and affective signals. This hybrid form of gatekeeping suggests that ownership influence may manifest less through direct intervention and more through routinized preferences, selective emphasis, and tacit editorial alignment within visual political content. Thus, using the Hierarchy of Influences, this study argues that ownership effects on Instagram are most plausibly mediated at the organizational and routine levels (e.g., image selection rules, posting schedules) rather than through explicit directives; these meso-level processes produce observable visual patterns in the feed.

A second body of literature examines journalism's role in electoral politics, emphasizing the media's capacity to construct political reality. Entman (2007) conceptualizes framing as a process through which media define problems, diagnose causes, and assign moral evaluations. Comparative research on election coverage further demonstrates that media representations significantly affect political legitimacy, issue salience, and candidate visibility (Aalberg et al., 2012; Esser & Strömbäck, 2014). In the Indonesian context, studies of regional elections reveal that democratic competition is deeply shaped by clientelism, elite networks, and unequal access to media resources (Aspinall & Berenschot, 2019). Local journalism often operates under intensified political pressure, where neutrality is not assumed but continually negotiated. Yet, much of this literature treats media primarily as transmission channels within electoral competition, rather than as sites where political bias is communicatively produced through representational practices. As a result, while local elections are recognized as politically sensitive contexts, existing research has not sufficiently examined how journalistic independence is enacted or compromised at the level of content, especially when election-related journalism increasingly circulates through digital platforms.

A growing body of scholarship addresses the transformation of journalism in the digital era. Deuze (2008) conceptualizes journalism as a professional ideology that persists across technological change, while Hermida (2010) demonstrates how social media have become institutionalized spaces of journalistic production. Carlson (2015) further argues that digital platforms challenge journalistic authority by reshaping boundary work between journalism and other communicative practices. Building on this, Nieborg & Poell (2018) introduce the concept of platformization to describe how digital infrastructures increasingly shape news production, circulation, and monetization. Van Dijck et al. (2018) similarly show that platform logics — such as algorithmic visibility, engagement metrics, and datafication — reconfigure editorial priorities and news values. Empirical studies further indicate that platform environments alter the visibility of partisan and non-partisan news sources, often privileging emotionally resonant or polarizing content (Nielsen et al., 2023).

Empirical studies show that platform logics (algorithmic visibility, engagement metrics) shape newsroom routines on Instagram — from image selection and captioning to posting schedules — so that representational choices become part of normalised production practices rather than occasional departures from editorial norms (Perreault & Hanusch, 2024; Guo & Sun, 2023). Recent studies on platform-based journalism further argue that Instagram is not merely a distribution outlet but a space where editorial authority is reconfigured by platform logics such as algorithmic curation, visibility ranking, and engagement-based valuation (Larsson, 2023; Trevisan et al., 2019; Parmelee & Roman, 2020). These dynamics encourage a shift from text-based public justification toward visual cues, personalization, and symbolic alignment, making editorial bias traceable at the level of representational practice rather than explicit argument. This is particularly important for

assessing local journalism where ownership, political competition, and platform infrastructures intersect.

Research on news consumption via social media suggests that platforms such as Instagram are no longer peripheral to journalism. Studies show that following news on social media is associated with increased political knowledge and engagement, underscoring the role of platforms as central spaces of political information (Shehata & Strömbäck, 2021). However, this line of research has focused primarily on audience effects, paying less attention to news organizations as producers of political content under platform conditions.

Another relevant strand of literature examines visual political communication. Grabe and Bucy (2009) demonstrate that images shape political perception by conveying emotional cues and symbolic meaning, often operating below the threshold of explicit argumentation. Coleman (1999) and Olausson (2018) further show that visual framing can subtly guide political interpretation while maintaining an appearance of neutrality.

With the rise of Instagram, scholars have increasingly examined the platform as a space for political communication. Empirical studies show that political interaction on Instagram is structured by selective exposure and affective engagement, reinforcing confirmation biases among users (Parmelee & Roman, 2020). Analyses of political discussions on Instagram during elections in Brazil and Europe further reveal distinctive interaction patterns characterized by visual emphasis, fragmented deliberation, and networked communities (Trevisan et al., 2019; Ferreira et al., 2021). Together, these studies suggest that journalistic content distributed via Instagram differs normatively from conventional news formats, as platform logics privilege visual appeal, personalization, and emotional resonance over analytical depth. Large-scale analyses of news sharing on social media additionally demonstrate that negative and emotionally charged news content is more likely to circulate widely, raising concerns about representational bias in platform-based journalism (Watson et al., 2024).

Despite these insights, most existing studies focus on political actors, influencers, or audience behaviour. News organizations are rarely analysed as institutional producers of political imagery on Instagram, and questions of journalistic independence are seldom addressed explicitly within this body of work.

2.2. *Repositioning McQuail's Media Performance Framework in Platform-Based Journalism*

Within this fragmented literature, McQuail's discussion of media performance provides a normative foundation for examining media bias through features of news presentation rather than through overt factual distortion. McQuail argues that what is commonly labelled as 'sensationalism' in news content often consists of a high degree of personalization, emotionalism, and dramatization, supported by distinctive presentational devices designed to attract audience attention, such as prominent headlines, photographic illustration, and visual or audiovisual material (McQuail, 1992: 233). These features operate at the level of representation and interpretation, indicating that bias may emerge through how news is shaped, framed, and displayed, even when factual claims remain formally intact.

McQuail further identifies stereotyping and linking or juxtaposition as additional presentational practices with significant interpretive consequences. Stereotyping involves the recurrent treatment of individuals, groups, or political actors according to simplified attributes that are neither neutral nor necessarily aligned with empirical reality (McQuail, 1992: 234). Linking and juxtaposition, whether through narrative association or spatial

arrangement of news items, can alter the apparent meaning of separate elements by establishing particular interpretive moods or associations (McQuail, 1992: 234–235). As illustrated by studies of political propaganda cited by McQuail, such presentational strategies have historically been used to associate political actors with alarm, crisis, or moral threat without explicit argumentative claims (Durán & Urzúa, 1978). Together, these indicators conceptualize media bias as a representational condition embedded in news discourse rather than as a simple deviation from factual accuracy.

Although McQuail's media performance framework originates in an earlier media environment, this study does not apply it as a comprehensive theory of social media journalism. Instead, McQuail's contribution is used selectively, limited to its presentational indicators, which remain analytically relevant for examining how news content is visually and narratively arranged. These indicators are not employed to explain media behaviour in isolation, but are embedded within Shoemaker and Reese's hierarchy of influences, which provides the structural explanation for how ownership shapes editorial decisions. In this sense, McQuail functions as an analytical lens for identifying representational patterns, while ownership influence is theorised through contemporary political economy and newsroom sociology.

Repositioned within a platform-based media environment, McQuail's framework remains normatively relevant but requires contextual translation. Instagram, as a visually oriented and algorithmically curated platform, amplifies precisely those presentational dimensions — personalization, dramatization, symbolic association, and selective visibility — that McQuail identified in conventional news media. In this study, McQuail's indicators are therefore treated not as abstract evaluative criteria, but as observable dimensions of journalistic representation within social media content. Personalization is examined through the visual and textual prominence of individual political actors relative to policy substance. Dramatization is assessed through emotional imagery, expressive language, and narrative emphasis on spectacle or urgency. Stereotyping is identified through recurring visual or textual attributes that reduce political actors or social groups to simplified, evaluative roles. Linking and juxtaposition are analysed through associative framing within single posts or across sequences of posts, including visual montage and caption framing. Accuracy, finally, is evaluated not only in terms of factual correctness, but through patterns of omission, imbalance, and selective emphasis that shape interpretive meaning.

By repositioning McQuail's media performance framework in this way, the study treats Instagram content as a form of journalistic output subject to normative evaluation. This approach allows qualitative content analysis to function as a means of assessing how media independence is enacted — or compromised — through representational practices under platform conditions, without claiming to capture the full institutional performance of the media organization. Instead, the focus remains deliberately on how bias becomes visible at the level of news presentation in a digital, visually driven environment.

3. Methods

This study employs a qualitative content analysis as part of an exploratory qualitative research design to examine how visual and textual bias is constructed in platform-based journalistic content. It seeks to interpret how meanings, values, and political orientations are embedded in journalistic representations disseminated via social media. As emphasized by Krippendorff (2019), qualitative content analysis enables researchers to systematically interpret communication artifacts by situating them within their social, political, and

institutional contexts. In this study, content analysis serves as an interpretive method for examining how ownership interests, platform affordances, and journalistic norms intersect in shaping political representation. This study relies exclusively on qualitative content analysis of Instagram posts and does not incorporate interview data; therefore, all interpretations are grounded solely in observable textual and visual elements.

The data corpus consists of all Instagram posts published by the official newsroom-managed account @radarcirebon during the official campaign period, from 25 September to 23 November 2024, as regulated by the Indonesian General Election Commission (KPU). A total corpus approach was applied, meaning that no sampling was conducted. A dominant and recurrent pattern across the corpus consisted of evaluative expressions, emotional framing, and aesthetic personalization that positioned the owner-affiliated candidates favourably. In total, 82 posts were analysed, comprising 59 static image posts and 23 video-based posts. The inclusion of dozens of posts reflects the natural output of journalistic activity during the campaign period rather than an arbitrarily constructed sample.

All posts were collected manually through systematic digital documentation. Each post was captured via screenshot and archived chronologically to preserve visual composition, caption text, and contextual cues as they appeared on the platform at the time of publication.

Each Instagram post (image, carousel, or reel) was treated as one unit of analysis. The procedure followed a two-stage coding process commonly used in interpretive media studies (Saldaña, 2013). In the first stage, each post was described at the surface level without interpretation: who appeared, how the camera framed the scene (close-up, medium, wide), and what tone was used in the caption (informative, emotional, or promotional). In the second stage, posts were interpreted using indicators adapted from McQuail (1992) concept of presentational bias, including personalization, dramatization, selection/omission, and verification. Although originally developed for traditional media, these concepts remain applicable when operationalized for platform-based environments such as Instagram (Bucher, 2018; Cotter, 2023). An indicator was applied only when clear and observable evidence was present in the post. If meaning depended on how posts appeared in sequence, several posts before and after were compared to identify recurring patterns.

4. Results & Discussion

4.1. Patterns of Radar Cirebon's Performance

This section first presents a qualitative summary of patterns identified across the full corpus of Instagram posts. Table 1 synthesizes the dominant presentational features observed in the dataset, illustrating how personalization, dramatization, stereotyping, and linking or juxtaposition recur across posts and how these patterns relate to media ownership structures. The table draws directly from the coding of all 82 posts and serves as an analytical bridge between raw data and interpretive discussion.

Table 1. *Operationalizing McQuail's Indicators for Instagram Coverage*

McQuail Indicator (1992)	Operational Definition for Instagram (Platform-Specific)	Unit of Analysis	Observable Visual/ Textual Cues in Posts	Example Coding Label
Personalization	Prioritizing the candidate as a central subject through individualized visual focus rather than issue-based reporting.	Single post (image, carousel, or reel)	Close-up portraits; solo images of candidate; captions invoking personal appeals ("support me", "pray for us"); absence of institutional actors.	PERS-01
Dramatization	Presenting political activities as emotionally heightened events to amplify momentum or spectacle.	Image or audiovisual framing	Wide-angle crowd shots; emotional overlays; "historic moment" language; cinematic transitions in reels; applause or mass gathering images.	DRAM-02
Stereotyping / Simplification	Reducing social groups or opponents to simplified symbolic roles that serve narrative interest rather than informational balance.	Visual motif across multiple posts.	Repetitive portrayal of certain groups (e.g., mothers, youth, religious communities) in predictable supportive roles; reduction of opponents to single negative traits.	STERO-03
Selection / Omission	Favouring events or actors that benefit a preferred figure while excluding comparably relevant alternatives.	Chronology across feed	Coverage of certain events without parallel coverage for opponents; selective absence of controversy; exclusive posting of achievements or positive activities.	OMIT-04
Linking / Juxtaposition	Creating associative meaning by placing posts in a sequence that implies alignment or contrast.	Post adjacency (preceding/following posts).	Back-to-back posts pairing candidate achievements with rival shortcomings; celebratory moments contrasted with neutral/negative portrayal of others.	LINK-05
Verification / Accuracy	Degree to which claims are accompanied by corroborating information or source attribution.	Caption + visual	Presence/absence of citations to officials, institutions, or data; screenshots without source; unverifiable numbers; ambiguous claims in text overlay.	ACCU-06
Balance / Counter-Frame	Inclusion of alternative voices, competing claims, or opposing viewpoints.	Feed-level pattern	Multiple actors represented; statements from rival candidates; contextual comparison; nonpartisan informational posts.	BAL-07

Source: Author, 2025

As summarized in Table 2, the data reveal that visual bias in Radar Cirebon's Instagram coverage operates primarily through presentational strategies rather than overt misinformation. The recurrent use of personalization, emotional dramatization, and symbolic association indicates that political alignment is embedded in how news is visually and narratively constructed. These patterns are consistent with McQuail (1992) argument that bias often emerges through forms of presentation that shape interpretation rather than through explicit distortion of facts. The following sections examine these indicators in detail, situating the findings within broader debates on media ownership, platformization, and local journalism.

Table 2. *Qualitative Summary of McQuail Indicators*

McQuail indicator (repositioned for Instagram)	Empirical pattern (data insert) — what is visible in the corpus	Illustrative example (date & short description — link)	Interpretive link to media ownership
Personalization	Candidates foregrounded as individuals; visuals and captions prioritize close-up, relational imagery (handshakes, smiling with citizens, religious gestures) over substantive policy discourse. This pattern recurs across the corpus and is frequently paired with affective captions that solicit trust/support.	13 Nov 2024 — Post showing the owner-affiliated candidate presenting a 'free school uniform' program to villagers; caption frames a relational appeal and a programmatic promise. (Screenshot archived; available on request.).	Personalization converts candidates into recognizable, sympathetic figures — a presentational choice that privileges visibility and emotional connection. When the owner is also a candidate, such personalization is consistent with an alignment between representational routines and owner interests, although it does not constitute direct proof of editorial instruction
Dramatization (aestheticization)	Frequent use of spectacle language and crowd photography; event posts labelled as grand, historic, or full and presented with large-scale crowd shots or energetic reels. Platform affordances (visibility/engagement) appear to encourage spectacle.	23 Nov 2024 — Series of posts/reels from the large campaign rally at Lapangan Kebon Pelok described as 'kampanye akbar' with wide-angle crowd footage. (Screenshot archived; available on request.).	Dramatization amplifies perceived momentum and legitimacy. In a context where the outlet's owner is a candidate, dramatized coverage serves both platform imperatives (engagement) and owner-aligned publicity (legitimation through spectacle).
Stereotyping	Recurrent portrayals reduce some social groups to symbolic roles (e.g., women as emotional supporters; youth as passive or symbolic). Visual/textual patterns repeatedly frame particular demographics in narrow, affective terms.	Multiple posts, e.g. captions invoking 'Ibu-ibu penuh semangat mendukung kandidat' (framing female volunteers as emotive supporters). (Screenshot archived; available on request.).	Stereotyping simplifies plural social roles into reassuring symbols for the preferred candidate (emphasizes loyalty/affect). This representational economy reduces critical complexity and aligns with an owner-friendly narrative that foregrounds safe, non-challenging civic images.

Linking/ Juxtaposition	Implicit comparative framing: owner-affiliated events are placed in sequences or page-style juxtapositions that make them appear more active/legitimate than competitors (e.g., vivid coverage of 'Beres' events alongside sparser or neutral mentions of rivals). Poll or popularity items are presented to emphasize owner-aligned advantage.	11 Oct 2024 and 28 Oct 2024 — Polls / popularity figures emphasizing candidates lead (poll summary post). (Screenshot archived; available on request.).	Juxtaposition works as a presentational device to produce an interpretive frame (momentum/ inevitability). When repetition of such juxtapositions favours the owner's candidate, the composition itself performs a pro-owner editorial alignment.
Accuracy (omission/selective verification)	Captions often assert success/impact claims without citation (e.g., 'Cirebon siap maju bersama Beres') or repost unverified social-media artifacts (e.g., screenshots of WhatsApp messages presented as newsworthy). Fact-checking signals are infrequent; verification traceability is weak in many posts.	21 Nov 2024 — Screenshot of an alleged WhatsApp message involving a KPU official is posted and reported; subsequent KPU denial appears in the same narrative chain (example reel/p). (Screenshot archived; available on request.).	Selective verification favours visibility and narrative coherence for the owner-aligned candidate; omission of sourcing reduces accountability and functions as a soft promotional tactic rather than rigorous reporting. This pattern aligns with 'liquid journalism' tendencies in platformized news work.

Source: Author, 2025

The qualitative evidence summarized in Table 2 demonstrates that bias in @radarcirebon's Instagram coverage is primarily articulated through presentational practices rather than through explicit editorial opinion or factual falsification. Across the corpus of 82 posts, personalization and dramatization emerge as dominant representational strategies, consistently foregrounding the owner-affiliated candidates as emotionally relatable, morally grounded, and socially embedded political actors. This pattern aligns closely with McQuail (1992) observation that bias often operates through modes of presentation — such as emotionalism and dramatization — rather than through overt distortion of facts. Although such alignment should be interpreted as indicative rather than demonstrative, as the available data do not evidence direct instruction or owner-driven intervention.

The prominence of personalization reflects a broader transformation in journalistic storytelling under platform conditions. As Enli (2017) and Kreiss (2016) argue, digital platforms encourage personalized and performative political narratives that blur the boundary between journalism and political communication. In the Radar Cirebon case, personalization is not merely an adaptation to platform affordances but also intersects with ownership interests. The repeated visual centrality of the owner-affiliated candidates suggests a representational alignment in the feed; however, this pattern is indicative rather than proof of intentional editorial instruction, as the corpus does not provide direct evidence of owner-level directives. However, this pattern should not be interpreted as evidence of

direct editorial intervention. The data indicate alignment at the level of routine representational choices rather than demonstrable causal influence or instruction. In other words, the findings point to structured tendencies instead of proof that ownership actively determines content decisions. This finding resonates with political economy perspectives that emphasize how ownership influence is embedded in everyday editorial practices rather than exercised through direct intervention (Herman & Chomsky, 1988; Freedman, 2014).

Dramatization constitutes a second key indicator shaping the representational bias observed in the dataset. Campaign events are frequently framed as spectacular, historic, or emotionally charged, supported by wide-angle crowd shots and celebratory visual cues. Such aestheticization corresponds with McQuail (1992) characterization of sensationalism as a presentational strategy designed to attract attention through emotional appeal. In the context of Instagram, dramatization is further intensified by platform logics that reward visually striking and affective content with greater visibility (Nieborg & Poell, 2018).

Empirical research on social media news dissemination supports this interpretation. Large-scale studies demonstrate that emotionally charged and negative news content is more likely to be shared on social media, reinforcing the incentive for media organizations to privilege affect over contextual depth (Watson et al., 2024). Although Radar Cirebon's coverage largely avoids overt negativity, its reliance on positive dramatization — glorifying rallies and mass support — serves a similar function by amplifying emotional resonance. This strategy enables the media outlet to maintain a veneer of journalistic civility while simultaneously performing political legitimation, a pattern also observed in studies of hybrid journalism in digital environments (Deuze, 2008; Carlson, 2015).

Beyond personalization and dramatization, subtler indicators such as stereotyping and linking/juxtaposition further shape interpretive frames. The recurrent portrayal of women and youth primarily as emotive supporters reflects what McQuail (1992) identifies as stereotyping—simplified representations that are communicatively efficient but normatively problematic. These visual and textual reductions align with Entman (1993) notion of framing through symbolic condensation, whereby complex social actors are reduced to emotionally legible symbols.

Juxtaposition operates through both spatial and narrative sequencing across posts, implicitly contrasting the vibrancy of owner-affiliated campaign activities with the relative invisibility or neutrality of competitors. This mechanism echoes findings from earlier studies on media bias showing that comparative framing can influence perception without explicit evaluative language (Grabe & Bucy, 2009). In the Radar Cirebon case, juxtaposition functions as a cumulative effect across the feed, reinforcing a sense of political momentum and inevitability associated with the preferred candidates.

The indicator of accuracy reveals another critical dimension of platform-based journalism. While outright misinformation is rare, many captions rely on assertive claims lacking clear sourcing or verification. This pattern reflects what Carlson (2015) terms 'liquid journalism', in which the boundaries between reporting, promotion, and social media discourse become increasingly porous. Under such conditions, accuracy is not abandoned but selectively negotiated, often subordinated to visibility and narrative coherence.

Research on social media news consumption suggests that audiences increasingly encounter news in fragmented and decontextualized forms, where verification cues are weak or absent (Shehata & Strömbäck, 2021; Nielsen et al., 2023). Within this environment, the omission of sourcing in @radarcirebon's posts does not necessarily undermine audience engagement but does erode normative standards of journalistic independence. When

coupled with ownership interests, such selective verification amplifies concerns about the structural conditions under which local digital journalism operates.

4.2. Media Ownership and Visual Bias

Taken together, the patterns are consistent with structural alignment between media output and owner interests. Nevertheless, the evidence permits only tentative inference: the alignment may result from routine newsroom practices, platform incentives, or other contextual factors rather than explicit instruction. This interpretation remains indicative rather than definitive; the evidence identifies patterned alignment but does not establish a direct causal mechanism linking ownership to specific editorial decisions. This supports long-standing political economy arguments that media ownership shapes news through structural alignment rather than direct control (McChesney, 2004; Pickard, 2020). However, the platformized context introduces an additional layer: algorithmic incentives that normalize affective, personalized, and dramatized representations.

The eventual electoral defeat of the candidate associated with the outlet's owner suggests that Instagram-based representational bias did not guarantee electoral success in this case. This outcome should be interpreted as indicating the limits of symbolic media influence within a fragmented local digital environment, rather than as evidence of a causal relationship between media bias and voting behaviour. Consistent with recent scholarship, this case suggests that while platform-based journalism can shape visibility and discourse, its capacity to determine electoral behaviour is constrained by audience fragmentation and alternative information sources (Aalberg et al., 2012; Aspinall & Berenschot, 2019). Media influence thus operates symbolically rather than deterministically, shaping narratives without guaranteeing political success.

The consistency of these representational patterns across the entire corpus cannot be understood as isolated editorial choices. Rather, they reflect a structural alignment that is consistent with ownership-linked interests, although the present data cannot determine whether such alignment emerges from routine newsroom culture, platform incentives, or deliberate organizational preference. This alignment should be read as a pattern of representational convergence rather than definitive proof of prescriptive owner control. Rather, it is consistent with what gatekeeping literature describes as multi-level structural influence, where ownership interests may shape representational tendencies without leaving traceable evidence of instruction or explicit interference (Shoemaker & Reese, 2014). As predicted by political economy approaches (Herman & Chomsky, 1988; Freedman, 2014), ownership influence is rarely exercised through direct instruction but becomes normalized within editorial routines. In this case, the persistent favourable depiction of the owner-affiliated candidates across Instagram posts suggests an institutionalized bias embedded in routine news presentation under platform conditions.

Taken together, the findings suggest that ownership-aligned representational tendencies can be observed in platform-based local journalism, particularly through visual personalization and spatial dominance on Instagram. These representational patterns indicate alignment at the level of published content; however, they do not constitute direct evidence of editorial instruction or owner intervention. The analysis therefore demonstrates routine presentational tendencies rather than proof of deliberate editorial directives.

By operationalizing McQuail's media performance framework within a platform-based environment, this study demonstrates the continued relevance of classical normative theory for analysing digital journalism. McQuail's emphasis on presentation, interpretation,

and representational bias proves particularly apt for Instagram-based news, where meaning is constructed visually and affectively. The findings suggest that media independence in the digital era must be understood not solely as a matter of factual accuracy or balance, but as a structural condition shaped by ownership, platform affordances, and visual communication norms.

The absence of interviews does not undermine the analytical scope, but it does limit the explanatory reach. The findings indicate patterns of representational alignment, yet they cannot be taken as evidence of intentional editorial coordination. In this sense, the study identifies what is visible in the output rather than why such output is produced.

5.   Conclusion

This study has examined how media performance is articulated through visual and textual presentation in platform-based local journalism by analysing Instagram coverage produced by @radarcirebon during the 2024 Cirebon mayoral election. Using McQuail's media performance framework as a lens for evaluating presentational bias, the analysis demonstrates that bias in this case does not primarily operate through overt misinformation or explicit editorial endorsement, but through systematic patterns of personalization, dramatization, stereotyping, and associative framing embedded in everyday journalistic output.

The findings show that Instagram functions not merely as a distribution channel but as a structuring environment that reshapes journalistic presentation. Visual prominence of owner-affiliated candidates, emotionalized representations of campaign activities, and repeated symbolic associations collectively produced a favourable interpretive climate. These patterns align with McQuail's argument that media influence often works at the level of form and presentation rather than through direct distortion of facts. In a platformized context, such presentational features are further intensified by algorithmic incentives that privilege affective visibility and narrative immediacy over informational balance.

Crucially, the study situates these representational patterns within the political economy of local media ownership. The overlap between media ownership and electoral candidacy created a structural condition in which editorial autonomy was compromised not through explicit intervention, but through routinized presentational choices. Consistent with Herman and Chomsky's political economy perspective, ownership influence manifested as institutional alignment embedded in news routines rather than as overt propaganda. However, this influence was mediated — and partially constrained — by platform logics that fragment audiences and decentralize media authority.

At the same time, the case reveals the limits of media influence in contemporary local politics. Despite consistent presentational bias in favour of the owner-affiliated candidates, the electoral outcome did not correspond with the media narrative. This disjuncture underscores a broader transformation of media power in the digital era: local journalism may still shape symbolic visibility and discourse, but it no longer monopolizes political meaning-making. Offline networks, interpersonal mobilization, and alternative information sources increasingly mediate electoral behaviour.

Theoretically, this study contributes to media performance scholarship by demonstrating the continued relevance of McQuail's framework when repositioned within platform-based journalism. Bias should not be understood solely as deviation from factual accuracy, but as a structural condition produced through the interaction of ownership interests, journalistic routines, and platform affordances. Methodologically, the study

illustrates how qualitative content analysis, when applied to a bounded corpus of digital news output, can generate analytically robust insights without claiming institutional exhaustiveness.

Several limitations must be acknowledged. The analysis focuses on a single media outlet and one social media platform, and it examines journalistic output rather than newsroom decision-making or audience reception. Accordingly, the findings do not claim to capture the full institutional performance of Radar Cirebon, but focus deliberately on representational practices observable in platform-based journalistic content. Future research could extend this approach through comparative analysis across media organizations, platforms, or electoral contexts, as well as by incorporating interviews or audience studies to triangulate production and reception dynamics.

Overall, the Radar Cirebon case highlights a critical tension facing local journalism in emerging democracies: the need to maintain visibility and relevance within platform economies while upholding normative principles of independence and public accountability. Addressing this tension requires not only ethical commitment at the newsroom level, but also broader structural interventions in media ownership transparency and platform governance.

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