

Book Review: Tapsell, Ross, Media Power in Indonesia: Oligarchs, Citizens and the Digital Revolution

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Book Reviews

Tapsell, Ross (2017), *Media Power in Indonesia: Oligarchs, Citizens and the Digital Revolution*

London and New York: Rowman & Littlefield, (Series Media, Culture and Communication in Asia-Pacific Societies), ISBN: 9781786600356 (HB), 9781786600370 (ebook), 172 pages

The study of media, whether newspapers, radio, TV, or the internet, has for a long time attracted substantial interest amongst Asian Studies scholars, not least because of rapid changes in digital media technology, which has allowed for more participatory consumption and production by individuals, giving academics much food for thought. Ross Tapsell is a long-time observer of the media in Indonesia and has over the past seven years interviewed many movers and shakers, not only in Jakarta, so-called Twitter capital of the world, but also in a number of Indonesian provincial media hubs.

In his newest book, Tapsell provides not only a close-up and personal account of the main Indonesian media moguls but also a solid, well-referenced analysis of the impact of new media technologies on democracy, political economy, and power in Indonesia. His account is informative beyond this, as he offers a rich contextualisation of his findings within the broader political developments in Indonesia. The driving questions that frame his analysis are: 1) How is the digital revolution impacting the production of information? and 2) How has the excision of political power changed since the start of the digital era in Indonesia (which Tapsell pins down to 2004 (p. 18))?. The underlying hypothesis of every chapter is that, increasingly, “convergent media are creating a divergent society” in Indonesia (p. xxv).

Tapsell begins his book by engaging in an ongoing debate about the role of oligarchs in post-*Reformasi* Indonesia, in which it is often argued that democratic transition has enabled oligarchs to spread their power, diversify their business, and thus become even more influential in politics. Although he mostly agrees with this view, Tapsell also acknowledges the role of (and pins his hopes on) the “counter oligarchs,” citizen journalists, “netizens,” and “prod-users” who have used digital platforms tirelessly to advance their concerns and promote more reformist agendas in Indonesian politics.

In a succinct historical overview of the appearance of difference forms of media in Indonesia (Chapter 1), Tapsell recalls the main accomplishments of each as they pertain to the Indonesian consumer. He

starts with the spread of newspapers, which helped their educated readers to imagine their homeland as a nation, follows with radio, which served the new leaders of the independent state as the main propaganda tool against the reinvading colonial armies, and ends with state-owned television, which put cheap and cheesy entertainment out to the people while keeping a tight grip on political content with the help of strict censorship laws. When the internet finally arrived in Indonesia in the late 1990s, it entered a diversified media landscape and was met by rather ill-prepared state censors, thus contributing to the overthrow of the Suharto regime in May 1998. The reform period (*Reformasi*) saw the end of government media licensing and spurred a huge growth in new media outlets equipped with more freedom in form and content. Needless to say, quality journalism was not every media producer's cup of tea.

The opening up of the media sector allowed people such as Suryo Paloh, Hary Tanoesoedibjo, and Abdul Latief to buy media companies and TV channels that were previously owned by the family of former president Suharto. Once these people gained a foothold they developed their new acquisitions into empires and would not let go of them easily, despite the occasional financial setback. Indonesia currently has eight media conglomerates, which Tapsell also refers to as media oligopolies, and in Chapter 2 he explores how each of them made their fortune. In particular, he describes how each has undergone vertical and horizontal merges over the last decade. The recipe for their success lies in their multi-platform portfolio ("digital ecosystem," as Tapsell calls it), which goes beyond the production of news and increasingly connects news outlets to e-commerce, gaming, travel, and event management, as well as to housing, job, and communication portals (p. 39). Even though the presence of eight main players might suggest a certain diversity in content and business approach, Tapsell finds that this is not necessarily the case, to the detriment of the consumers.

Also touched upon in Chapter 2 are regional media outlets and Islamic media, both of which have struggled, often proving unable to make enough money to remain relevant. Regional media have failed to overcome Jakarta-centrism, mostly because of the centralised model of news production, and Islamic media have had no success in developing advertising models that are both commercially viable and religiously justifiable. Consumers have pressured media to embrace more religious themes, but this has often resulted in a commodification of religion, which has driven more radical adherents away from commercial news outlets into the less-controlled spheres of the world wide web.

Chapter 3 explores further how the media oligarchs interfere in Indonesian politics as “king-makers.” Although some of them had ambitions to become president themselves and used their media outlets for shameless self-promotion, none of them was popular with the voters in the first round of the election. To continue to exert power and influence, they then had to throw their lot behind one of the two remaining candidates (Joko “Jokowi” Widodo and Prabowo Subianto), hoping that the winner would reward their support later on. The main lesson of this chapter is that not only have the eight media oligarchs got even richer during the digital era, but most of them have now placed their sons in vital positions in their oligopolies, often in their media headquarters rather than in other business portfolios, which will guarantee their future meddling in politics.

Chapter 4 sheds light on the so-called counter-oligarchic media. As other media analysts have done before, Tapsell discusses a number of examples in which ordinary people have been able to trigger change in Indonesia with the help of social media. In several of his examples the broader public were able to “correct” legal injustices. However, unlike other media analysts who have been too hastily convinced by the positive forces of social media, Tapsell remains cautious, not only because “‘bottom-up’ participatory media are not always emancipatory and reformist,” but also because of the decay of quality reportage “in favour of short, click-bait news” (p. 103). Most remarkable in this chapter is Tapsell’s analysis of Jokowi’s media campaign in the run-up to the 2014 election, in which Jokowi very much relied on the many volunteers who gave him favourable media coverage, often for free. Yet, Tapsell also shows that this alone was not enough for Jokowi to win the election, as he also needed the support of some of the mainstream oligarchic media, who would then seek a share in political power by, for example, seeking a position in Jokowi’s cabinet.

Tapsell’s scepticism is further substantiated in Chapter 5, where he demonstrates the many limits of counter-oligarchic media activism. Although non-journalists can nowadays produce all sorts of media content, they usually prefer to offer opinions rather than original news coverage. If they are to be noticed, they are better off feeding their input into existing media infrastructures, but in that space looms the risk of censorship by the owners. Whereas the state has produced little legislation to control media oligarchs and the expansion of their digital ecosystems, which go beyond just producing news to offer a more complete infrastructure within the digital corporate world, ordinary citizens who have posted dissent online have faced the full force of the law. In particular, the 2008

Electronic Transactions and Information Law and the Laws on Blasphemy and Defamation have been used to put critics behind bars for rather trivial acts, such as raging online about traffic jams or poor services in hospitals, not to mention LGBTI people and members of religious minorities who face online and offline oppression and hate speech.

In many regards Tapsell's book is a sobering account that has come just at the right time – before a new media frenzy kicks in ahead of the 2019 presidential election. Last but not least, it is a well-written book and a pleasure to read.

Antje Missbach

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