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# Understanding The Problem of Control and Ownership of *Mojok.co*: Is It Still Alternative?

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***ABSTRACT***

*The development of digital technology in the past ten years has been transforming the media forms. New media are emerging and presenting its characteristics that blur the boundary between the sender and receiver. New media empowers the receiver to take part as content providers. Then, recently we can see there are new media platform produced by people who previously only became the contents recipients. This media can be an alternative in the dominance of large industrial media. De-professionalized, de-capitalized, and de-institutionalized are the characteristics of alternative media. Mojok.co is one of the examples of the alternative media. In order to maintain its existence, there are problems need to be concerned, especially financial issues. Mojok.co is also considerate to this issue, and once became the crucial case. As an alternative media, Mojok.co run into financial problem, that forced this site to accepted the fund from investor. The involvement of the investors to the media life encouraged the rethinking of the three characteristics of alternative media, which is already mentioned. Investment presents new problem, such as the problem of ownership and control. Those problems will provide many changes in the production of alternative media content. The investment of Tirto.co to Mojok.co implicated to the changes of Mojok.co. Mojok.co lost its independence. There are some requirements charged by Mojok.co, such as certain targets to achieve page views. By pursuing view, Mojok.co actually has no difference from others digital media assigning Alexa rank as the indicator of the achievement of the media. Ideologically, Mojok.co stated that this site would not take sides with certain ideologies. Accommodating all ideologies indicates that Mojok.co is trying to reach all targets. For this reason, a study of political economy needs to be done to understand the problem. Through the study of political economy, this research found the control mechanism, the shifting of editorial policies and the production practices of the Mojok.co after Tirto.co's investment. Commodification of content become a policy in editorial for gaining more readers.*

***Keywords****: Alternative Media, Ownership, Commodification, Mojok.co*

**ABSTRAK**

Perkembangan teknologi digital dalam sepuluh tahun terakhir telah mengubah bentuk media. Media baru bermunculan dan menampilkan karakteristiknya yang mengaburkan batas antara pengirim dan penerima. Media baru memberdayakan penerima untuk berperan sebagai penyedia konten. Lalu, belakangan ini kita bisa melihat ada platform media baru yang diproduksi oleh orang-orang yang sebelumnya hanya menjadi penerima konten. Media ini bisa menjadi alternatif dalam dominasi media industri besar. De-profesionalisasi, de-kapitalisasi, dan de-institusionalisasi adalah karakteristik media alternatif. Mojok.co adalah salah satu contoh media alternatif. Untuk mempertahankan eksistensinya, ada beberapa masalah yang perlu mendapat perhatian, terutama masalah keuangan. Mojok.co juga memperhatikan masalah ini, dan pernah menjadi kasus krusial. Sebagai salah satu media alternatif, Mojok.co mengalami masalah keuangan yang memaksa situs ini menerima dana dari investor. Keterlibatan investor dalam kehidupan media mendorong pemikiran ulang ketiga karakteristik media alternatif yang telah disebutkan. Investasi menghadirkan masalah baru, seperti masalah kepemilikan dan penguasaan. Masalah-masalah tersebut akan memberikan banyak perubahan dalam produksi konten media alternatif. Investasi Tirto.co ke Mojok.co berimplikasi pada perubahan Mojok.co. Mojok.co kehilangan kemerdekaannya. Ada beberapa persyarat

yang dibebankan oleh Mojok.co, seperti target tertentu untuk mencapai tampilan halaman. Dilihat dari sudut pandang, Mojok.co sebenarnya tidak berbeda dengan media digital lainnya yang menempatkan Alexa rank sebagai indikator pencapaian media. Secara ideologis, kata Mojok.co, situs ini tidak akan berpihak pada ideologi tertentu. Akomodatif semua ideologi menunjukkan bahwa Mojok.co berusaha untuk mencapai semua target. Untuk itu perlu dilakukan kajian ekonomi politik untuk memahami permasalahan tersebut. Melalui kajian ekonomi politik, penelitian ini menemukan bagaimana mekanisme kontrol, pergeseran kebijakan redaksi dan praktik produksi Mojok.co pasca investasi Tirto.com. Komodifikasi isi menjadi bagian dalam kebijakan redaksi untuk mendapatan pembaca yang lebih banyak.

**Kata Kunci**: Media alternatif, Kepemilikan, Komodifikasi, Mojok.co

## INTRODUCTION

Technology development has shaped the way we communicate each other. New media also built a new mode of communication (Kurnia, 2006). Terry Flew argue the idea of new media captures both the development of unique forms of digital media, and the remaking of more traditional media forms to adopt and adapt to the new media technology (Situmorang, 2012). Today generation is multimedia generation, who accessed internet in everyday life (Darwadi, 2017). They are actively try to get information in internet based on their needs (Nurrahmi & Farabuana, 2020; Rianto, 2016).

In the era web 2.0, audience behavior changed. O'Reilly mentioned the characteristic of web 2.0 as follows: "...radical decentralization, radical trust, participation instead of pub-lishing, users as contributors, rich user experience, the long tail, the web as platform, con-trol of one's own data, remixing data, collective intelligence, attitude, better software by more users, play, undetermined user behaviour" (Fuchs, 2014). Public participation is an ideal activity in web 2.0, but previous Muria Endah Sokowati's previous research show it is not implemented yet when describing users' discussion and activism in social media. The users' voice and expression in social media are not public participation (Sokowati, 2019).

*Mojok.co* is an online-based news portal published on August 28, 2014, which has a unique characteristic. The uniqueness lies in how this media presents content with a differ-ent perspective from other media. *Mojok.co*'s content is fun, funny, sarcastic, and satirical. This unique characteristic is based on *Mojok.co*'s creative content strategy. The other strength of *Mojok.co* is the community engagement as its media strategy. Highlighting creative con-tent and community approaches makes *Mojok.co* known as an alternative media. As the implication, *Mojok.co* prioritizes the existence of content innovation, both in style, rubrics and graphical display.

The investment of *Tirto.id* resulted in some changes in the articles production of *Mojok.co*, such as the greater number of rubrics, expanded viewer segments, blur ideological posi-tions, and less satirical and humorous language styles. *Mojok.co* began to lose indepen-

dence in producing contents. Pursuing *Alexa* ranking and planning to sell spaces for advertisement is *Mojok.co*'s consideration that was previously unthinkable.

There are consequences for *Mojok.co* after the investment. First, *Mojok.co* should widen the viewer's target. Now, *Mojok.co* is targeting its product to viewers in the age range 18-24 years. Second, relating to the efforts to pursue *Alexa* web ranking, *Mojok.co*'s personnel are now working under certain targets. There are no more fun work routines, because everything is under quite tight targets. The investment of *Tirto.id* implied to *Mojok.co*'s independence: more contents, the change of *Mojok.co*'s character of the published articles, the different style of writing (become too serious), and also the indistinct ideological position. Those clues indicate *Mojok.co* begins to lose its independence.

Justifying *Mojok.co* as an alternative media or not is not simple, because it is not only about the independence of the media. John Downing stated that alternative media is often simplified as a media that is different from the mainstream media. He reminded that alternative media became difficult to categorize considering alternative media have different approaches and executions of storytelling and reportage. Kenix further explained that the definition of alternative media never fixes depending on the contemporary culture surrounding it. For this reason it is necessary to understand the cultural context to analyze alternative media (Kenix, 2006). New media become common platform for alternative media (Downing, 2001). In Indonesia, the utilization of cyber media by actor and political institution, and especially by the Indonesian people still not maximum, even cyber media give an opportunity for as communication media which "inclusive, egalitarian and liberal" (Adriana, 2013). Determination of technology allows democracy to present through mediated movements (Mirsel, 2004). Technology related to communication system. One of the real manifestations of the communication system is the significant work of communication media (Croteau & Haynes, 2000).

Considering the spirit and commitment of *Mojok.co* from the beginning up to the post-investment, it shows the alternative spirit. It refers to the commitment to engage with the community through its contents. Alternative media in disseminating its contents is more oriented to relations with the viewers' community rather than merely conveying information (Atton, 2006).

Commitment to community engagement has implications for the other character of alternative media: the commitment to innovation. Chris Atton stated that social media always puts innovation (Atton, 2006). *Mojok.co* has uniqueness in terms of content, starting from the rubrics, language style and graphic design as the means to get close to the viewers' community. These characteristics lead *Mojok.co* to still deserve mentioning as an alterna-

tive media. In addition, Chris Atton also mentioned that alternative media provides interpretations of events through different perspective from other media (Atton, 2006). It was also found in *Mojok.co* content.

The alternative media should be deprofessionalized, decapitalized, and deinstitutionalized (Hamilton, 2011). Of the three characters, only *Mojok.co* owns the first character, deprofessionalized. Most *Mojok.co*'s crews do not come from media professionals. According our interview with Mojok.co's, they had no formal background in the media before. Most of them are writers and bloggers. Sukmono and Junaedi's research show journalism practice in alternative community media was run by volunteerism (Sukmono & Junaedi, 2019).

The other two characters belong to *Mojok.co* before *Tirto.id*'s investment. *Mojok.co* had never pursued a certain profit or target. Writing articles for and managing *Mojok.co* was done independently. *Tirto.id*'s investment in *Mojok.co* brought *Mojok.co* to become both capitalized and instutituonalized. The *Alexa* ranking target burdens the *Mojok.co*'s crew in managing the media. *Tirto.id*'s consideration in many ways made *Mojok.co* no longer independent.

Reaching widen target of viewers lead to the indistinct position of *Mojok.co.* Mojok.co needs to consider to all perspectives of the viewers. Instead of being fair, the indistinct of *Mojok.co*'s position strengthened the assumption that *Mojok.co* played it safe so that it could get into all circles and not lose certain groups of viewers. The main goal again is to increase *Alexa* ranking.

Therefore, *Mojok.co* has no commitment to social change by supporting minority issues. This is certainly not an alternative media. Joshua Atkinson stated that the main characteristic of alternative media is having non-commercial sources and trying to have a critical social role and challenging existing power structures by supporting ideas such as anti-capitalism, consumerism, patriarchy and so on (Artkinson, 2006). Mentioning *Mojok.co* as an alternative media still applies to a number of things, but it doesn't fit in others. Thus the dualism of alternative vs. mainstream media is no longer relevant in the *Mojok.co* case. Previous research on local alternative media, namely Literasi.co, was build on self consciousness in marginalization of grass root issues by mainstream media (Maryadi & Adiprasetyo, 2018)

This study attempts to describe the implications of *Tirto.id*'s investment in *Mojok.co*. There are two things that are the focus of attention: the problem of control and ownership. By understanding these two problems, then this research will bring discussion to the question whether *Mojok.co* still deserves to be called alternative media?

## METHOD

There is mechanism of control as the implication of *Tirto.id*'s ownership of *Mojok.co*. Problems of ownership and control using the perspective of the political economy of the media will be the focus of this study. The study of the political economy of the media sees the media as political institutions and economic institutions that have the power to influence audiences. This study is a study of social relations, especially power relations relating to issues of production, distribution, and consumption, including communication (Mosco, 2009). As a result, media content is more determined by economic and political forces outside of media management. Factors such as media ownership, capital and media income largely determine the production of content of the media. Through the perspective of the political economy of the media, Mosco focuses on three stages: commodification, spatialalization, and structuration by media owners in making a profit. This research focuses more on the first stage, commodification (Mosco, 2009).

Commodification, according to Mosco, is a transformation process of valuable products to sell. It is the way of capitalism in achieving its aim to accumulate capital by transforming the use value into the exchange value. The media industry is one of the institutions that runs the production and distribution of messages to make capital accumulation using the practice of commodification (Mosco, 2009). The capitalist starts this process by purchasing valuable products, then resale it with the greater value than the value issued at the beginning of the investment. Any additional value or surplus value is reinvested to increase capital accumulation. In the study of political economy of communication, commodification focuses on content, audiences and labor in the industry of communications. Commodification of content relates to the issues of media content distributed to the public. Audience commodification associates the media ratings for advertisers' interests. Whereas the commodification of labor explains how the holders of media powers exploit media workers. Commodification is synonymous with commercialization.

Digital technology has brought a very different media landscape. Online media operates with very different organizational logic. If mass media is hierarchical, linear, centralized and one-way with media content from multiple producers to multiple recipients; online media is networked, non-linear, multi-directional. The logic of digital media is shaped by the quality and capabilities of digital technology, which is superior to mass media technology because digital technology is far cheaper and more efficient in several ways (Wittel, 2012): (1) It can mediate old forms of media such as text, sound, pictures and moving images as digital codes; (2) It can integrate communication and information, or communication media (letters, telephone) with mass media (radio, television, newspapers); (3) As the digital objects,

it can be endlessly reproduced at a minimum cost; and (4) This media can be distributed at the speed of light.

These advantages need to consider in conducting political economy analysis for online media. One important topic in online media is the issue of ownership of the production equipment. In the age of online media, the means of production have become more democratic. Users have easy access via computer and the Internet and basic computer skills have the potential to produce media content. But they don't have distribution facilities and online content storage facilities. They are in the hands of several media conglomerates. The media conglomerates, then, control the flow of information.

Therefore, in analyzing media content, Apuke emphasized that the product or content of media can be shaped by the interests of the company, the interests of the owner and the ruling class. For this reason, in online media, sources, content providers, and information producers upload content to protect certain interests or ideologies  (Apuke, 2017). So, although there is free access to information in online media; cultural industry, capitalism, and ideology will still influence it. All established cultural and community artifacts are filled with meanings, values, biases, and messages that shape power relations and subordination. There is no pure content without representation which is often detrimental to the class, gender, race, sexuality, and other categories and social groupings. Cultural texts are filled with social meanings, they produce political effects, reproduce or oppose the arrangement of social institutions and relations of domination and subordination. It implies that every message or information uploaded on the internet is influenced and driven by a force.

Thus, in conducting an analysis of political economy in online media, it should pay attention to the issue of ownership of the production equipment and the content. The analysis of those issues will help to understand the problem of ownership and control as focus of this research.

Data collection was carried out through three main methods: in-depth interviews, observation, and document study. To obtain data on the problem of the ownership of the production, we used all the three data collection methods. The main data source was obtained through an interview with the editor of *Tirto.id* as the investor of *Mojok.co*. In addition, observations at the *Tirto.id* institution were also conducted. As secondary data, study of related documents was also needed. Meanwhile, for data of media content, we used document study as the main method. We collected the selected *Mojok.co* contents as the objects of analysis. The choice of several contents was adjusted to the assumptions of this study.

## DISCUSSION

### The Control Mechanism

*The Relationship Between Mojok.co and Tirto.id*

*Mojok.co* and *Tirto.id* are online media that are quite popular among the internet users. *Mojok.co* first came to be known as a media that contained the opinions of the authors presented in a sarcastic style. "*Sedikit Nakal, Banyak Akal*" (A Little Naughty, A Lot of Sense) is the slogan used by *Mojok.co*. In accordance with its slogan, *Mojok.co* accepts articles written out of the box, instead of accepting articles written in a standard style of writing. The writing style of *Mojok.co* is relaxed, humorous, and similar to a coffee shop chat. It is not common for the media to use satirical language styles contrasting the mainstream per-spectives.

*Tirto.id* is a news, article, opinion, and infographic website in Indonesia. This site first displayed its content in February 2016, and was inaugurated on August 3, 2016. *Tirto.id* was initially known for its controversy. On April 19, 2017, *Tirto.id* published a story entitled "*Investigasi Allan Nairn: Ahok Hanyalah Dalih untuk Makar*" (Investigation of Allan Nairn: Ahok Is Only a Reason for Makar), a translation of a news article published by *The Intercept* entitled "*Trump's Indonesian Allies in Bed with ISIS-Backed Militia Seeking to Oust Elected President*". In the article, Nairn mentioned the involvement of the Indonesian military to mobilize the masses in a demonstration against Basuki Tjahaja Purnama (former governor of Jakarta province) over the blasphemy case, such as the TNI Commander General Gatot Nurmantyo, Deputy Speaker of the House of Representatives Fadli Zon and Hary Tanoesoedibjo as the supporters of treason. This paper finally involved the Press Council because the names mentioned reported *Tirto.id* to the authorities. The Press Council finally stated that this press dispute was not brought to justice. *The Intercept* fully supports *Tirto.id* to undertake journalistic work that is free from intimidation or retaliation.

A brief description of the two media shows that both media have high commitment to their idealism. Putut EA (editor in chief *Mojok.co*) and Zen RS (editor in chief *Tirto.id*) were known as literacy activists. The relationship between *Mojok.co* and *Tirto.id* cannot be sepa-rated from the friendship relations between persons working for the two media. Thus the integration of the two media related to the history of the friendship relations in the past.

Puthut EA was a prominent writer at the growth of alternative publishing in Yogyakarta. Establishing a community called the *Kelompok Belajar EA* (KBEA/EA Study Group) then trans-mitted his writing skills. This community is a space for young writers in Yogyakarta and other cities to learn writing articles. There were some student press activists became the participants at KBEA. *Ekspresi*, a student press published by students of Yogyakarta State

University (UNY), became the contributors to the training participants at KBEA, and Zen RS was one of them. KBEA Alumni spread in various media, especially digital media, such as *Tirto.id, Kumparan* and of course *Mojok.co*. From this student press and writer's circle, there was connection between Zen RS and Puthut EA.

During the interview, both Puthut EA and Zen RS both stated that the *Tirto.id*'s acquisition of *Mojok.co* based on their friendship relations, and the commitment to continue to run the alternative media. At the beginning, Putut EA became a funder for *Mojok.co* operations, until 2017 *Mojok.co* closed its site due to funding problems. *Mojok.co* in 2018 reappeared after receiving funds from *Tirto.id*. Thus, the relationship between *Tirto.id* and *Mojok.co* is created more a friendship relationship, instead of editorial intervention. The emotional closeness between the editors of *Mojok.co* and *Tirto.id* is getting stronger with the close relationship between Puthut EA and Zen RS.

However, it is too naive if we only see the friendship relations as the reason of integration between *Mojok.co* and *Tirto.id*. There are still business considerations that create the basis of integration of the two media. As activists who have used to work in the digital platform for a long time, Putut EA and Zen Rs understand vary well how to manage digital media so that it can still exists. The business consideration initially was not to make a profit, but only for maintaining its existence. But when they run the business of media, there are still economic calculations or considerations underlying the operational of the media they manage.

There are business considerations, which then change *Mojok.co* before and after investment. These changes include: (1) There is different performance of *Mojok.co*'s products. There is more contents, a change in the character of *Mojok.co*: the way of speaking is too serious, and the indistinct ideological position indicate that *Mojok.co* is starting to lose its independence; (2) Forcing to reach viewers aged 18-24 as a *Mojok.co*'s segment. It brings to ambiguity in *Mojok.co*'s articles: there is shifting style of writing, from humorous to more serious; the confusing ideological position of the articles which is sometimes to the left stream, sometimes to the right ones. The obscurity of the position of *Mojok.co* actually reinforces the assumption that *Mojok.co* plays it safe so that it can get into all circles and not lose a certain group of readers; (3) *Mojok.co*'s ambition towards *Alexa* ranking leads *Mojok.co* to widen its segment of viewers. The number of articles distributed per day is also getting bigger so it needs to increase the number of personnel.

*Online Business Strategic: The Controller*

Both Putut EA and Zen RS stated that there is no intervention from *Tirto.id* on the editorial policy of *Mojok.co*. But as literacy activist in digital platform, they cannot ignore the performance of the digital media business. There are two digital media business strategies implemented by *Mojok.co*: creative content and community engagement. Zen RS emphasized, in managing digital media, the creative content production and engagement are very important.

*Content creation* is a type of business that gives priority on content, or content as its main strength. This type of business seeks to build connections with viewers through stories they like. Creative content is a medium for connecting business entities and viewers. *Content Creation* is the product made by *Content Creator in the form of audio, visual, and texts via the internet. Content Creation has the potential to become viral because it is considered unique, inspiring the viewer so that the viewers will like it. The qualified content will increase the SEO (Search Engine Optimatization), the technical* process to increase the quality of traffic and attract the web visitor maximally. Creative content can be indexed quickly and get higher rankings than low value content in SEO.

The creative content is the spearhead of *Mojok.co*. The fun, humorous and coffee shop chat writing style, with the use of satirical language, contrasting the mainstream media writing styles is the implementation of the creative content strategy. *Mojok.co* conducts a fairly strict curation process. The editorial team receives the manuscript from the contributors. Furthermore, the editorial secretary will select the qualified articles, and then the editor will edit them. Editing is done to match the articles with the character of *Mojok.co*. In one day there are about 6 to 7 articles published. The articles are also free from SARA (Suku Agama Ras dan Antar Golongan/Ethnicity, Religion, Race, and Inter Group) based contents. It must state clear, strong and reasonable arguments, not just agree or disagree.

Community engagement is a business strategy utilizing the solid community it has. According to Lommerse (Tiwaree, Lommerse, & Smith, 2014) community involvement is the process of working with the community to overcome a better life, crossing the boundaries of scientific disciplines and utilizing knowledge. Community involvement has a very important role in online business, because community involvement can increase brand awareness. A community can be a marketing channel that has higher involvement value than other marketing channels. Communities that are able to be managed well make a brand can become viral to other communities.

Community involvement is able to be a source of information about trends that occur and develop. In addition, community involvement can also be a source of feedback for pro-

ducers. In addition, community involvement is also used to attract sponsors through community activities conducted online and offline.

The pride strategy of *Mojok.co* is its commitment to establish closeness with the community. If the increasing views become the focus of the current business strategy, then in the future *Mojok.co* will prioritize the community engagement. The success of *Mojok.co*'s strategy of community engagement is proved by the strong figure of the *Mojok.co* editorial team. Figures of writers such as Puthut EA, Agus Mulyadi, also Iqbal Daryono were identical with *Mojok.co*.

*Mojok.co* used several strategies to manage community engagement. First, *Mojok.co* conducted event called *Jamboree*, an event to bring together the writers communities, in order to strengthen the community. Second, *Mojok.co* had program visiting certain communities to gain their opinions. The results of the visit were written in the *Bertamu Seru* (Exciting Visit) rubric. Third, *Mojok.co* needs to create its persona on social media. Since its establishment, *Mojok.co* already has writers who have engagement with the viewers. They have account on *Facebook* or *Twitter* with large number of followers, post statuses, tweets, or comment. It becomes effective means of building that persona.

*Mojok.co* is not only functions as media, which deliver the content, but also share information, and the most important is to establish certain relationships with viewers. It is the engagement, the way to bond the media to its viewers.

As a common digital media business strategy, Putut EA has been living up to it while managing *Mojok.co*. So, this strategy ideologically controls him in conducting the production process of *Mojok.co*. It performs when he manages *Mojok.co* after the investment. As a consequence of the *Tirto.id*'s investment, *Mojok.co* needs to show its performance assessed from the web ranking, in this case *Alexa* was chosen as a web performance rating agency. Creative content and community engagement are still the preeminence strategies to improve the performance.

After *Tirto.id*'s investment, it seems clear that *Mojok.co* is too ambitious to pursue *Alexa* ranking. In March 2018, *Mojok.co* was ranked 149, while in July 2018, the rank raise to 138. At that time it was still too difficult to *Mojok.co* to break through the top 100, as *Mojok.co*'s target. But a year later, in July 2019 *Mojok.co* managed to penetrate the top 100, even it was able to reach at number 82. It was a proud achievement for *Mojok.co*, so that Puthut EA felt the need to celebrate and write specifically about that achievement in the article published in *Mojok.co* on June 26, 2019, titled "*Cara Kru Mojok Merayakan Masuk Ranking Alexa 100 Besar* "*Cara Kru Mojok Merayakan Masuk Ranking Alexa 100 Besar* (How the Mojok Crew Celebrates Entry to the Top 100 *Alexa* Ranking). For *Mojok.co* this is a proud achievement

considering that *Mojok.co* is not a big media with a large capital. This success allowed *Mojok.co* to align itself with the major media, which had already been ranked in the top 100 of *Alexa*.

The achievement of *Mojok.co* is the success story in managing online business strategies that are actively carried out after the acquisition process. The integration of the two media is not done in order to loosen competition as is commonly done by the big media that form a media conglomeration (Burton, 2017). Integration is merely done to revive media, which are considered as alternatives because they are different from mainstream media. For this reason, *Mojok.co* needs to show its performance among mainstream media that are equally competing in the *Alexa* ranking.

## Managing Engagement, Commodifying Viewer

In managing online media, engagement becomes very important. Engagement is a measure of online media performance. Engagement is the amount of interaction that takes place with content in the media. Jason Falls in *Social Media Explorer* explained that *engagement is communicating well enough that the audience pays attention*. Engagement is a communication activity that raises the attention or response of the audience (Fall, 2020).

Engagement can be simply interpreted as two-way communication. Wilbur Schramm refers to two-way communication as interactive communication, or interactional, that is, communication that takes place in a circular manner, where the communicator sends a message to the communicant, then the communicant responds, then responds again, and so on (Schramm, 1954). The key in interactive, interactive, or circular communication is feedback or response to the message, because it allows the sender of the message to know the response to the message, whether the message sent can be understood or not.

This feedback is underlined by Falls, that in communication, the attention of the public is an indicator of the success of ongoing communication activities. In activities on social media, for example, engagement is measured based on existing interaction features. These features are: *conversation* between users, for example through comments and replies; *amplification* or the activity of spreading or expanding messages, such as share, send to and retweet; and *applause* or short response activities with certain icons, such as likes.

In online media, feedback as an engagement indicator is not always a conversation. Attention can be expressed through amplification or applause. Even a click can mean attention. Falls asserts communication engages those who see the information and pause to click or print (Fall, 2020). This has caused engagement to occur even if a passive user only sees, reads, studies, and fills their minds with information conveyed by the media, even if

only for an instant and then they leave the web in participatory culture. Henry Jenkins stated that the participatory culture has shifted the literacy's point of view, from individual expression to community involvement. To show the focus on community involvement, Jenkins then classified the participatory culture into four forms: affiliations, expressions, collaborative problem solving, and circulations (Jenkins, 2006).

Falls concluded, "*to engage an audience is to hold their attention*" (Fall, 2020). This is the key in engagement or performance indicators of an online media. As a result, online media producers will pursue this indicator. Indicator is created by agencies doing web performance ranking, or web ranking, for example *Alexa* or *Comscore*. The ranking is measured based on the page view or the visit of users to a particular website. Page view is the lowest level of engagement. Many page views describe the traffic (web visitors) that occurs in the media/web. This traffic then becomes the significance for the media/web. The media will focus their attention to get substantial traffic.

*Mojok.co* also follows quite the same logic with the objective to increase *Alexa* ranking. Engagement is something that must be achieved. To get a high rating, *Mojok.co* must have a fairly high engagement rate by undertaking the two strategies/business models: creative content and community engagement. The success of *Mojok.co* through the top 100 *Alexa* ranking is the proof of *Mojok.co*'s success in managing engagement.

The business model that emphasizes engagement as an objective is generated from the concept of commodification of the audience and is based on the idea of viewing users as a source of tradable assets. The audience's attention and actions are assets. Attention and action is engagement. This is a performance that *Mojok.co* shows to investors and sponsors; as well as the viewer, which ultimately affects the engagement itself. It is the commodification of the audience, or in this case the commodification of viewers.

The concept of commodification of the audience comes from the political economy of communication. According to Smythe, media content will be the lure of recruiting potential audiences and to maintain their attention (Smythe, 1977). He introduced the idea of commodity audiences to analyze media advertising models, where audiences were sold as commodities to advertisers (Smythe, 1977). The main function of the media is to produce audiences who are ready to become obedient consumers (Arvinson & Bonini, T, 2015).

Smythe applies Marx's ideas about media as a communication tool. According to Smythe, what advertisers buy is the attention of the public. This audience is a commodity. Producers and buyers (advertisers) handled audiences are in the market as a commodity. In essence, the media industry is based on an audience that is a commodity that can be sold to advertisers

Viewers are audiences, even though the actual concept of the audience is not entirely right to describe the characteristics of the viewer. Audiences are targeted by passive consumption, while viewers are not. For this reason, this concept was later extended to the study of contemporary business models, for example in the case of *Google*. *Google* treats users as a commodity for advertising. Kang and McAllister argue that *Google* generates profits from advertising by accommodating its wide and transformative users, and through its unique features as a place for advertising (Kang & McAllister, 2011). This practice is even more intensive in accommodating users than traditional media. *Google'*s success in maximizing profits has driven innovation in business development (Osterwalder & Pigneur, 2010).

Commodification can be used as a tool to produce value. They argue that new technology increases the power of media and business giants to accommodate the audience and sell it to advertisers. However, given that contemporary business model audiences have more active characteristics, where they can simultaneously act as producers and consumers, Manzerolle proposes the expression "commodification of prosumer" to explain user participation in this process as well (Manzerolle, 2010). Hearn has a critical perspective and debate about self-commodification under various digital work practices. In any case, using new technology, users take actions that make them more easily commodified by business (Hearn, 2008). That is, prosumer who is seen as a more empowered audience (active not only consumes but also produces). For example Jennes who rejects the negative impression of the commodification of the audience by introducing the concept of "audience empowerment" and argues that digital technology can also enable users to control their environment (Khajeheian, Audience Commodification: A Source of Innovation in Business Models, 2016). However, it turns out that what happens is that the audience actually has more potential to be used by the media. Mojok readers can promote himself by writing in User Generated Content platform, namely Terminal Mojok. Previous research by Arif Saha Widodo show phenomenon in using internet for freelance (Widodo, 2019).

*Mojok.co* utilizes viewers, who act as prosumer, not only their consumption role, but also their producer role. To invite viewers to visit the *Mojok.co* website, the *Mojok.co* team created accounts on social media: @mojokdotco on *Instagram* and *Twitter*, and @mojok on *Facebook*. Based on interviews conducted by Puthut EA and Zen RS, it is currently very difficult to expect viewers to directly visit the web or application. The viewers actually visit the page by sharing posts by the user through social media. For this reason, *Mojok.co* prioritizes on visits to the web through the share of their followers or friends on social media.

It is the important role of creative content. Creative content will encourage the writing/ article in like, comment, and even share. Through creative content, *Mojok.co* controls its viewers to increase engagement so that it will raise *Alexa*'s ranking as *Tirto.id*'s "demands" as investors and sponsors. We deliberately used the term "demands" (with quotation marks) because neither *Tirto.id* nor *Mojok.co* mentioned verbally that there were certain demands after investment. But we see that in the logic of online media business, that is something that cannot be avoided.

Besides, the viewers are also being used by *Mojok.co* to become a content creator. *Mojok.co* invites viewers to become freelance writers at *Mojok.co*. Indeed the publication of writings from freelance writers goes through a rigorous process of curation. However, utilizing the viewers to be content creators in this case is also commodification. This is means of gaining engagement, which is obtained through the commodification of the viewer.

**Questioning Alternative Media: Between Business and Idealism**

*Mojok.co*'s business model that utilizes creative content and community engagement for *Alexa* ranking will improve *Mojok.co*'s performance whereas it becomes important for *Tirto.id* as the investor. Thus the *Mojok.co* and *Tirto.id* collaboration are business agreement.

Nevertheless, *Mojok.co* and *Tirto.id* in some respects continued to show their consistency over their idealism and goals to make the media they manage remain different from the mainstream media, especially those with big capital. There are some operational works carried out both by *Tirto.id* and *Mojok.co,* which are different from the mainstream media. It keeps both *Tirto.id* and *Mojok.co* could run their idealism.

As explained in the previous section, engagement is the power of online media. The aim is to catch up on traffic, so that it can improve its web ranking. In web analytics, traffic sources are a kind of report that provides an overview of the various types of sources that send traffic to certain websites. At least there are several sources of traffic that are commonly known:

1. Direct Traffic. It refers to the visits from people who type directly the website address in the browser because they already know the domain name;

2. Referral Traffic, i.e. visits from visitors who clicked on a link from another website;

3. Social Media. It is the same as referral traffic, originating from social media, such as *Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, etc.*;

4.  Search Traffic. It is traffic coming from visitors who click on search results on search sites, such as *Google*.

Meanwhile, there are two kinds of search traffic:

1.  Organic search, which is searches originating from non-paid searches; and

2.  Paid Search, which is derived from Pay Per Click (PPC) advertising programs, for example *Google Adwords* (Indosmart Digital, 2017).

*Mojok.co*, and also *Tirto.id* count on traffic originating from Social Media, but they do not rule out the possibility of referral traffic or search traffic. Since direct Traffic is too difficult to do, *Mojok.co* and also *Tirto.id* do not have so much expectation to get attention from this traffic. Social Media became the main strategy, because *Mojok.co* and *Tirto.id* pursued Organic search.

*Tirto.id* and *Mojok.co* as non-large capital media don't do Paid Search like the large capital media do. Therefore, *Tirto.id* and *Mojok.co* depend on the organic engagement (organic search). *Tirto.id* and *Mojok*.co share the articles published through social media, such as *Facebook, Twitter* and *Instagram*, done by the admin. The more *Tirto.id* and *Mojok.co* are accessed by the viewers, and then in the Search Engines of the names of the two media will be in the initial choices. This is what organic search does.

Applying on humans, and not robots (all by machine as paid search does) becomes the idealism of *Tirto.id* and *Mojok.co*. This is a "real" community engagement. Engagement is originally obtained based on the personal nature of the relationship between the media and its viewers. If robot builds engagement, there is no personal relationship. If the tendency of the mainstream media to do paid organic, through machines/robots, then *Tirto.id* and *Mojok.co* do not do it. Not solely because they do not have large capital, but it has become a commitment of *Tirto.id* and *Mojok.co* to establish closeness with the viewers, so the engagement created is a humanist engagement, not virtual.

It is this spirit to contrast the large-capitalized mainstream media that according to our opinion makes *Mojok.co* still deserves to be alternative media. Pursuing *Alexa* ranking does not only make *Mojok.co* have ambitious to become a big media in the same class as *Tribunenews, Detik*, or *Kompas*. *Mojok.co* only needs to prove its existence as a reputable media even with modest capital. *Mojok.co* runs online media business strategy in the framework of that interest, utilizing business strategy to carry out its idealism.

## CONCLUSION

Friendship and business relations motivate *Tirto.id's* control over *Mojok.co*. Digital media, which was originally built as a realization of the passion of its managers, gradually experienced monetization. The relationships built to maintain and manage the passion, in the end cannot avoid the business strategies. How *Tirto.id* controls over *Mojok.co*'s production and distribution process based on that rationality. Creative content and community engagement as *Mojok.co*'s business strategy is designed based on *Mojok.co*'s idealism. Both strategies guide *Mojok.co* to manage engagement. One proof of the success of engagement management is the achievement of *Mojok.co* ranking in the top 100 *Alexa*. For this purpose, *Mojok.co* carried out the commodification of the viewer.

The business strategy implemented by *Tirto.id* and *Mojok.co*, which result in integration of the two is not in the context of conglomeration to loosen competition in the media business. The integration was precisely carried out in order to preserve and maintain the idealism of the *Tirto.id* and *Mojok.co* crew. By understanding this commitment, both media try not to play in the same path as the mainstream media. *Mojok.co* even challenged the mainstream capital media with large capital. The achievement of *Alexa* shows the success of *Mojok.co* in building its existence as a reputable media even though it is not built with large capital. Reflecting on the *Mojok.co* case, defining alternative media becomes more complicated. If the definition of alternative media is not fixed, then alternative media redefinition is needed to explain media such as *Mojok.co*. Alternative media is innovative media. Its innovation makes it different from the mainstream media. Alternative media has passion to challenge mainstream media by managing alternative strategies, in this case by the loyalty to build engagement organically. As a result, even though *Mojok.co* has been institutionalized and capitalized, it does not necessarily make it lose its alternative.

## ACKNOWLEDMENT

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