

From sadness to anger: Public perception over Covid-19 news coverage in Indonesia

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ABSTRACT

The Covid-19 pandemic has driven up news media consumption worldwide. However, the concomitant rise of misinformation and disinformation has disrupted the dissemination of verified information, particularly in the digital media. The role of the press has been challenged. This research aims to measure the public perception of Covid-19 reporting in Indonesia and how the public responds to the news. This research processes data using text analysis and cross-tabulation to understand the pattern and correlation between variables. Most respondents agree that the media has done a good job in reporting on Covid-19 and distributing the information to the public, with few leaning towards a more neutral tone. However, social media ranks first as the most popular platform to search for Covid-19-related information, followed by online media and television. Despite the generally positive assessment over the role of media and the quality of Covid-19 reporting during the pandemic, most respondents limit the amount of time they spend on and the quantity of Covid-19-related news they consume as they experience sadness, loneliness, disappointment, anxiety, and anger.

Keywords: Covid-19, media evaluation, news, public perception

INTRODUCTION

The Covid-19 pandemic has driven up news consumption from mainstream media platforms at the global level (Statista, 2021). Social restriction policies introduced by governments around the world early last year have encouraged people to browse the internet or watch television to get information on Covid-19 handling and other Covid-19-related updates. However, the dissemination of information has been distorted by the spread of misinformation and disinformation on various digital platforms (World Health Organization, 2021). A similar trend of spreading misinformation and disinformation has also been identified in Indonesia (Mufarida, 2021). The role of the press is being challenged.

It has been argued that the public tend to resort to traditional news outlets amid uncertainties in times of crises (Boukes et al, 2021; Van Aelst et al, 2021). The studies also highlight the public's propensity to seek news from sources that are more accessible and which provide immediate coverage, such as television as well as internet, a platform in which misinformation and disinformation are also widespread. Thus, the competition to reach the minds of the public is not only a matter of speed, but also trust in journalism and whether or not the public think news outlets as more reliable sources of information that can give them the certainties that they need the most during crises.

This study aims to measure public perception over this matter to find clues on how they perceive the work of the press during a critical juncture. Does the public think the Indonesian press can perform its role well in the middle of a global health crisis? How do they assess the performance of the press when reporting Covid-19? This study, which was commissioned and funded by the Press

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Council, aimed to identify the main sources of information about Covid-19 for respondents to In democratic societies, according to McNair (2003, p. 21), the media have to inform the public of what is happening, explain the meaning and significance of the facts, provide a platform for public opinions, serve as a watchdog, and serve as a channel for the advocacy of viewpoints. At the same time, an ideal environment for the press to be able to perform its duties is one in which they have a degree of independence. The Social Responsibility Theory of the Press (Siebert, et. al 1956) posits that the press should be able to responsibly perform its democratic functions without interference from governing authorities and ruling power.

The functions include:

Servicing the political system by providing information, discussion, and debate on public affairs; enlightening the public so as to make it capable of self-government; safeguarding the rights of the individual by serving as a watchdog against government; servicing the economic system, primarily by bringing together the buyers and sellers of goods and services through the medium of advertising; providing entertainment; and maintaining its own financial self-sufficiency so as to be free from the pressures of special interests. (Siebert et al., 1956).

Several studies have shown that media have become a major source of information on Covid-19 (Zhou, et al., 2020, Anwar et al., 2020, Hamidein et al., 2020). A number of reports also showed an increase in news consumption from traditional media organizations, or the press, at the outset of the pandemic. The Digital News Report 2020 released by Reuters Institute identified increasing news consumption in a number of platforms, including television and digital media, as well as declining consumption of newspapers within the same period across the globe (Newman, 2020). The latest report, which was published in 2021, reiterated the same trend, and specifically mentioned an increase in social media use to get information among the younger and the less educated segments of the population (Newman, 2021).

The rise of social media as a source of information during the pandemic has also been identified in Indonesia. A survey conducted in Indonesia published this year highlighted the popularity of social media platforms among the public, including for browsing information related to Covid-19 (International NGO Forum on Indonesian Development, 2021). The popularity of the platform overshadowed that of official sources of Covid 19-related information, including a hotline run by the Covid-19 taskforce.

Communication platforms and networking sites such as WhatsApp and Facebook have been found as main platforms that users refer to when getting that information. According to another report also released this year, there were 170 million active social media users in the country, or around 61 percent of the Indonesian population (Kemp, 2021). These findings should be taken into consideration and could be expanded in other relevant research, including this research, to measure how the public responds to information which affects the public and Covid-19 handling in Indonesia.

Previous research suggests that we need to evaluate media coverage and analyze public perceptions toward news on Covid-19 (Anwar et al., 2020). This study aims to fill the gap by measuring public perceptions of the national media coverage on Covid-19. The outcome can serve as a feedback for the media for future strategic planning on reporting pandemic or similar events.

At the heart of the debate over media consumption is the question about what encourages people to rely on news media outlets. Various studies around the world have looked into the matter and suggested that there is correlation between trust in news, or lack thereof, and media use. Van Aelst et al (2021) found that trust in news produced by legacy media had encouraged people who were worried about the pandemic situation to rely more on news.

A different survey conducted in 35 countries by Kalogeropoulos et al (2019) suggests similar findings, arguing that the level of trust in news corresponded with the media use. The research found that higher level of trust in news had motivated people to get news from both

alternative and mainstream news sources, while people with lower levels of trust in news resort to social media as the main source of news.

The impact of reliance over nontraditional sources of news such as social media has also been widely researched. It is believed that social media platforms, which churn out new stuff at a rapid

pace, were among the main distribution channels of disinformation and misinformation. A research published by Xiao et al (2021) had proven the danger of uncritical use of social media as a source of information. Their study found social media use was associated with higher conspiracy beliefs, noting that "social media news use was associated with more beliefs in long-standing conspiracy theories as well as recent conspiracy theories regarding Covid-19" (p.985). In Indonesia, Bafadhhal et al (2020) analyzed 174 items of disinformation during the Covid-19 pandemic and identified five main categories of disinformation; politics, health, foreign affairs, business, and crimes. The scholars also argued that the lack of effort to address the issues by the authorities would result in declining trust in scientific instructions and authorities.

RESEARCH METHOD

This research used quantitative approach to contribute to a body of literature on Covid-19 and its impact on our societies, through the lens of journalism study. This study aims to measure the extent of public perception over the performance of the Indonesian press, especially in reporting on the Covid-19 pandemic. The data were collected through an online survey. We opted to do an online survey because the survey model with direct interviews was not possible due to travel and social restrictions. An online survey, however, may not accurately represent certain demographic groups, particularly those without internet access.

This research used a non-random or non-probability sampling method. Non-random sampling is a collection of several sampling types, and this is different from probability sampling, which uses a single sampling type. We chose a non-random sampling method considering resources and time constraints. The type of non-random sampling used in this study is convenience sampling and quota sampling from the Jakpat Mobile Respondents population spread across Indonesia. In this case, Jakpat helped us distribute the questionnaires compiled through the Jakpat mobile application.

The limitations in using an online survey in this research included the possibility of respondents failing to complete the questionnaire. Field researchers must ensure that respondents have completed the questionnaire because a questionnaire that is not completed cannot be analyzed. Meanwhile, the survey conducted face to face allows enumerators to collect data completely. During the Covid-19 pandemic, online surveys are suitable to minimize the spread of the virus. On the other hand, affordability and efficiency of an online survey had been major advantages for researchers who conduct a quantitative study. When choosing to use an online survey, researchers need to create mechanisms and reference standards to ensure that the data is valid for analysis.

The questionnaire consists of 30 demographic profiles, questions about media preferences, and an evaluation of the media's role in reporting Covid-19. Questions to measure how respondents assess the work of the press were designed based on general presswork guidelines regulated in the 1999 Press Law, guidelines for coverage of the Covid-19 pandemic (International Media Support, 2020; Anwar, et al., 2020; Hamidein, et al., 2020).

In designing the set of questionnaires, we considered a number of contemporary guidelines to further define the main responsibilities and the expected role of press during the unprecedented global health crisis like the Covid-19 pandemic. We referred to the 1999 Press Law to lay out the legal framework of the work of the press in the country. The Press Law, also locally known as Undang-Undang No.40/1999 tentang Pers, stipulates that the press must "carry out its functions to monitor, criticize, correct, and offer insights to the handling of public matters." We then elaborated on the press' main responsibilities and expanded its definitive role during a health crisis using a framework set by Anwar et al. (2020), who argue that the Covid-19 pandemic "highlights multiple social, cultural, and economic issues arising from the media's arguable role," thus specify some technical and substantial principles that newsrooms must address while covering Covid-19. The emphasis on multidimensional issues which emerge during a global health crisis is very important and it highlights the pressing issues that the worldwide media should tackle against the rise of digital communication platforms and the inevitable repercussions.

We also insert questions to assess the impact of consuming news coverage on Covid-19 on respondents to measure the psychological effects on individuals. We based the set of questions on the survey framework set by Hamidein et al. (2020) on “How people emotionally respond to the news on Covid-19: An online survey.” It is related to how the press is expected to present its news coverage on distressing issues like the pandemic, which has claimed millions of lives around the world and affected many more. We referred to the Covid-19 Reporting Guidelines released by the International Media Support (2020), which covers guidance on visualization and photo and video presentation in the media, in ways that are considered politically correct in light of growing racism and prejudice against certain nationalities.

Lastly, we designed a number of questions to assess the role of mass media as a public health communicator which is expected to campaign for behavioural changes at the individual and society level. Such behavioural changes may significantly contribute to wider efforts to tackle the pandemic, as Anwar et al. (2020) argues, mass media “can provide a unified platform for all public health communications, comprehensive healthcare education guidelines, and robust social distancing strategies while still maintaining social connections.”

We conducted face validity test to ensure that respondents understand the question points of the questionnaire in the Jakpat mobile application. Jakpat has 768,445 respondent panels. With a 95% confidence level and below 3% margin of error, at least the respondent must get 1,066. This study obtained 1,119 respondents aged 15 years and over. Respondents in this survey represent the Indonesian population with internet access based on the description of the Indonesian Internet Service Providers Association (APJII, 2020) in 2019-2020 (Q2).

We conducted face validity test to ensure that the respondents understood the questionnaire's question points in the Jakpat mobile application. The online survey was conducted from May 6, 2021, to May 29, 2021. The survey covered 1,119 respondents (margin of error <3%) aged 15 years and above, consisting of 624 male and 495 female respondents. The respondents in this survey represent the Indonesian population with access to the internet based on the sample population data of the Indonesian Internet Service Providers Association (APJII, 2020) in 2019-2020 (Q2).

We performed descriptive data analysis and cross-tabulation analysis of the data we obtained. We use this analysis method to identify correlations or relationships between one variable and another. We performed data reduction on the answers to open-ended questions in the questionnaire. Data reduction aims to classify and organize the data to achieve research objectives. Clustering was done using the Python programming language. The method uses the formula string contains and regex (regular expression) to come up with the frequency of selected words. The words were selected after reading or analyzing the entire initial answers in a CSV format table. The count for the selected word is commonly used, especially when analyzing the texts. After the count appears in Python's new list, we calculate the data using the addition formula. The results of the data analysis were then visualized using Infogram, Pandas, and Adobe Illustrator.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

We distributed and grouped answers based on age to identify trends and propensities among different age groups, mainly Baby Boomers (57-75 years old), Gen X (45-56 years old), Gen Y (26-44 years old) and Gen Z (11-25 years old).

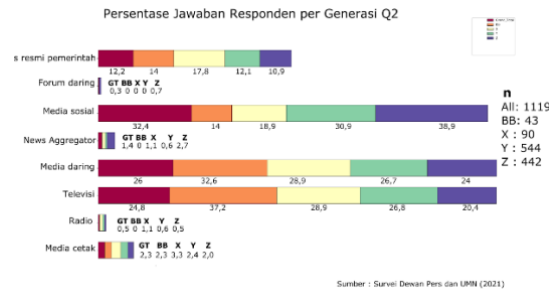


Figure 1. Respondents' preferences when looking for Covid-19-related information

As many as 32.4% respondents mentioned social media as the most preferred medium when looking for information on Covid-19. The figure represents the highest aggregate, followed by news portal (26%) and television (24.8%). Official websites run by authorities such as the Covid-19 taskforce and the World Health Organization, were chosen by 12.2% of respondents. Meanwhile, only 0.5% and 0.3% respondents chose radio and online forum (such as Kaskus and Kompasiana), respectively.

When we grouped respondents based on generations, Generation Z (11-25 years old) shows the highest propensity to choose social media as the main source of information on Covid-19 at 38.9%. The percentage declines in older generations, especially among Baby Boomers (57-75 years old). The data shows that the younger the users get, the higher the tendency to resort to social media when searching for Covid-19-related information.

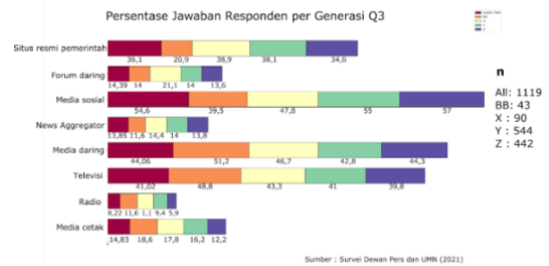


Figure 2. Respondents' preferences when following up on first information on Covid-19

In a multiple-answer question, social media remains the most preferred medium for respondents who want to follow up on Covid-19 information at 54.6%, followed by online news portals (44.01%) and television (41%). The pattern is relatively consistent when compared to the answers to the previous question. However, the number of respondents who choose official websites run by authorities increased to 36.1% regardless the age group, suggesting that the respondents have the awareness to verify information through primary sources of data and information.

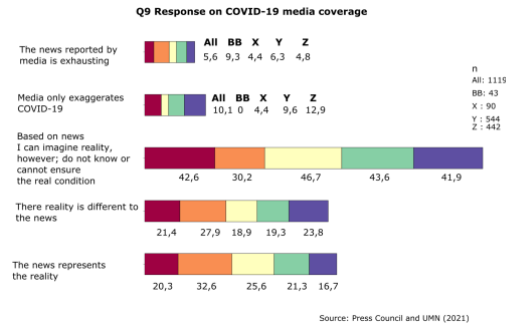


Figure 3. Respondents' assessment over media coverage of Covid-19

In general, respondents gave positive responses when asked about news coverage on Covid-19 in mainstream media. However, the level of satisfaction over Covid-19 news reporting slightly declines among the youngest respondents, namely Gen Z (11-25 years old). The results also indicated that Gen Z was the group who refers to social media as the main source of information regarding Covid-19. On the contrary, Baby Boomers showed the highest level of satisfaction over news reporting on Covid-19.

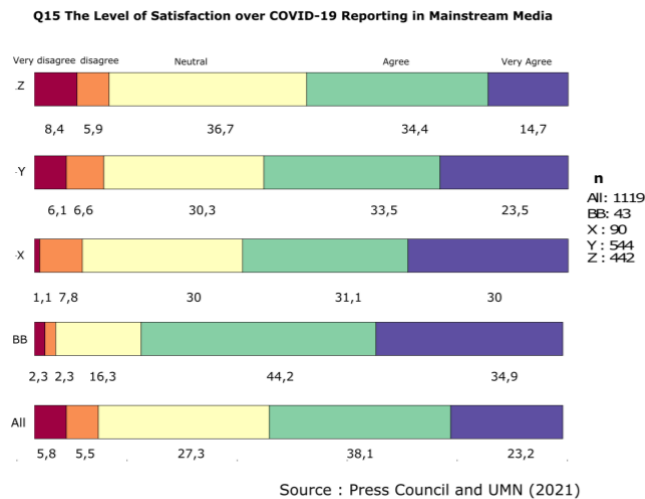


Figure 4. The level of satisfaction over Covid-19 reporting in mainstream media

Respondents showed a high level of satisfaction over the quality of Covid-19 reporting with an average of 4 (from the scale 1 to 5 with 1 indicating disappointment and 5 satisfaction). When the answers were distributed based on age group, Baby Boomers (57-75 years old) expressed more positive assessment towards the Covid-19 reporting at 79.1% of the Baby Boomers population, higher than other age groups. Gen Z (11-25 years old) is the age group which was the least satisfied with the Covid-19 reporting at 49.1%, the lowest among all age groups.

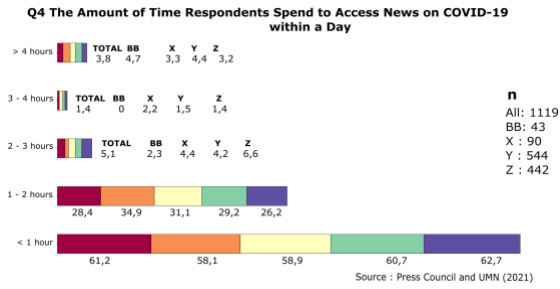


Figure 5. The amount of time respondents spend to access news on Covid-19 within a day

The majority of respondents, 61.2% of the total respondents, spent less than an hour a day accessing information on Covid-19. When distributed based on age group, the propensity is consistent among all generations, reaching above >58%.

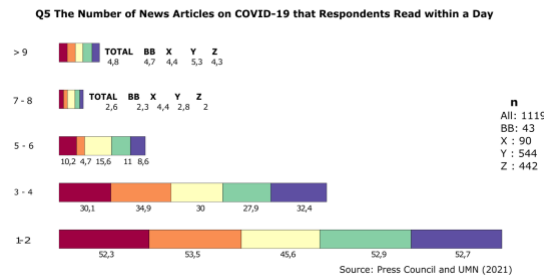


Figure 6. The number of news articles on Covid-19 that respondents read within a day

Practical, comprehensive information that is easily accessible and well organized, verified and easily shared through popular platforms will be easier to reach the wider public. The pandemic and infodemic have affected societies across the world, hence, Covid-19 handling and policies at the local and national level, mapping of problems and information needs at the local level, even the community can no longer be considered a problem that is too small for newsrooms, the public, and ultimately for the authorities who have access to the State Budget and mandate to overcome the pandemic that has claimed the lives of tens of thousands of Indonesians.

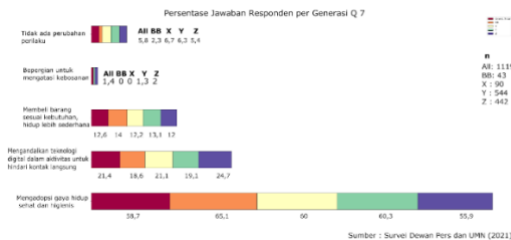


Figure 7. Behavioral changes after reading Covid-19 reporting

As many as 58.7% respondents picked up a more hygienic lifestyle and healthier habit after being exposed to Covid-19 reporting. Meanwhile, 21.4% respondents chose to adopt digital technology to resume daily activities to avoid direct physical contact that might expose them to the coronavirus. Gen Z (11-25 years old) is the age group with the highest adoption of digital technology at 24.7%. Meanwhile, 12.6% respondents said that they had adopted a more modest lifestyle while limiting their consumption.

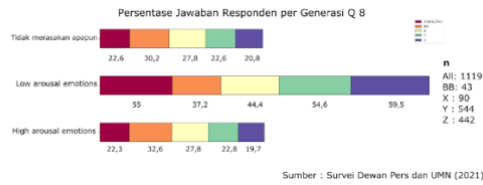


Figure 8. The impact of Covid-19 reporting on respondents’ affection

The survey also measured the impact on Covid-19 reporting on respondents’ affection. More than half of the respondents, or 55%, said media reports on Covid-19 had triggered low-arousal emotions, including homesickness, sadness, loneliness, fatigue, and disappointment, within them. Up to 22.6% of respondents said that the reports did not affect their affection in any way, while 22.3% respondents said they had experienced high-arousal emotions, including anxiety and anger. Baby Boomers were the most affected, psychologically, among all age groups, with 32.6% of respondents belonging in the age group admitting they were anxious and angry. Meanwhile, Gen Z is the age group which experienced low-arousal emotions the most.

Despite generally positive responses over news reporting on Covid-19 in the mainstream media, social media remains the most popular platform from which respondents fetch the information regarding Covid-19, especially among the youngest respondents, namely Gen Z (11-25). Social media remains the most referred platform when respondents want to find additional information on Covid-19.

In an open-ended question, respondents were asked to mention their media preferences when looking for information regarding Covid-19. Popular social media platforms and networking sites, including Facebook, Instagram, YouTube, Line Today and search engine Google made it into the top 20 of the most mentioned “media” by respondents.



Figure 9. Top media brands in the minds of respondents

Legacy media such as Kompas, including its digital subbrand *kompas.com*, and Tempo are among the top 20 most mentioned media, with Kompas ranking first in the list. The findings offer at least two clues: that the notion of “media” has been expanded and the term media is not exclusive to traditional news organization. The term “media” is loosely understood as sources of information and that information does not have to come from news organizations.

Media	Total
Kompas	146
<u>Detik(dot)com</u>	138
Facebook	67
<u>Kompas(dot)com</u>	66
Tribun (Tribun Timur, Tribun Jakarta, Tribun, Tribun(dot)com)	66
CNN Indonesia	65
Instagram	58
YouTube	58
TV One	29
Kompas TV	24
Google	23
Twitter	19
Metro tv	18
Kemenkes	17
Satgas Covid	17
Kumparan	15
<u>Covid19(dot)go(dot)id</u>	14
Line today	14
Tempo	13
CNBC	12

Table 1 The top 20 most mentioned 'media'

The findings also raise a question: if respondents believe that the press has done its job well, why does social media remain popular as a source of information on Covid-19? Although practically every media organization has an active social media presence to disseminate and promote their news content, social media is also vulnerable to false information. Various studies have shown how social media became a center of misinformation sharing during the Covid-19 pandemic (Islam et al 2020, Park et al 2020, Gallotti et al 2020, Melki et al 2021; Fernandez-Torres et al 2021).

First, the questionnaire was designed to find out *how* respondents search for and get information regarding Covid-19. The questions set out to find out the most convenient way for respondents to get the information. The answers reflect the access that respondents have, including gadgets, internet connection, television set and antenna, and radio set. Social media and online news media remain the most popular platforms to seek information, but this finding cannot represent the segment of the population without access to the internet. However, we will still look at social media and online news media as the most preferred platforms in the context of the majority of Indonesian population who have access to the internet for a number of reasons.

Previous studies and surveys have revealed the popularity of social media platforms, including Instagram, YouTube, and Facebook among Indonesian internet users. A report published by We Are Social revealed that the number of social media users in Indonesia had reached 170 million by January 2021, up by 10 million or 6.3 percent since 2020. The figure represents 61.8 percent of the total population of Indonesia in the same period. A study which surveyed social media use--among others--funded by the APEC found that 59 percent of respondents still prefer social media to seek

information for its diversity, despite knowing that social media is prone to misinformation and disinformation (Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation Secretariat, 2021). Despite the popularity, however, the lack of regulatory framework on social media use in Indonesia has been argued to be a major driver of many ethical violations on social media platforms (Fensi, 2018).

Social media has long been a popular platform for internet users to share and seek information. A recent study showed mushrooming “local news sites” in Instagram which share information at the city or regency (kota/kabupaten) level (Tapsell and Dewi, 2021). The growth is important in the context of media convergence, in which media is concentrated in Jakarta and increasingly becoming Jakarta-centric (Tapsell, 2017), as well as in the context of increasing needs of reliable information on Covid-19 handling, vaccination drive and other relevant information. While respondents give a positive response over Covid-19 reporting in the mainstream media, social media offers a number of advantages which encourage them to go to social media as the first platform, from which they fetch the information that they need.

First, mainstream media outlets have social media accounts and ensure their online presence on platforms like Facebook, Instagram and YouTube. They also actively share their news content and engage with readers on social media. Health authorities and other relevant bodies regularly share updates on Covid-19 handling and related policies. Civil society groups, including Covid-19 data initiatives like KawalCovid, as well as individuals with specific expertise or public officials also use social media to share information, answer questions, debunk false information or simply share their thoughts on Covid-19 pandemic. The trend has made social media a one-stop platform for internet users to seek as much information as possible to then select items that they need or accounts they want to follow. Social media users can also choose information specific to their needs, location, and time using keywords or hashtags. Using keywords or hashtags can be helpful for users who need to get real-time information such as those on vaccination schedules, availability of medicines, healthcare facilities, and oxygen tanks. Not only general internet users, journalists also use social media to get story ideas and even to get potential sources (Yuniar, 2021).

Social media platforms allow the dissemination of real-time information at the community level, regardless of the validity of the information. Members of the public are also faced with plenty of options in a high-choice media environment. The Covid-19 pandemic has also prolonged the needs for practical information, such as the availability of hospital beds and ambulances, vaccination schedule in a certain vicinity, homecare facilities for those in self-isolation, and so on. Local news site initiators captured these needs and facilitated the exchange of information, growing its own followers and expanding their communities in doing so. Locally based Instagram accounts such as @tangsel_life and @infodenpasar have followers in the hundreds of thousands, while accounts based in bigger cities like @jktinfo even managed to gain at least 2.7 million followers. The high number of followers reflected the growing needs of community-level information and information exchange.

Another context that needs to be taken into account is a gap in access to real-time data at the subnational level (Mashabi, 2021). In an effort to overcome the data discrepancy and to push for transparency, several members of the society, some of whom are experts in their respective fields, launched various data initiatives. Problems surrounding access to real-time data have also been identified during a series of discussions in Data Computational Journalism 2021 conducted in six cities across the country from February to August 2021, in which a member of the research team, Utami Diah Kusumawati, is a trainer. Local journalists shared similar complaints about accessibility to real-time data at the local level, as local authorities rely on approval from central authorities before releasing the data requested by the local press. By the time the approval was gained, the data was no longer representative of the latest condition.

The needs of information, particularly real-time data, in the middle of the devastating pandemic have become fundamental public needs around the globe. In a high-choice environment such as now, such needs are not exclusively provided by the traditional mass media. The good news is, however, that respondents still think that the Indonesian press has been doing their job quite well while reporting the ongoing Covid-19 pandemic, an indicator that public trust towards the press remains relatively high. Our word cloud analysis shows that established media organizations top the

majority of respondents' minds when asked about their preferred media to seek information regarding Covid-19. One possible answer to this conundrum is that the public still trusts the press, but there is a gap in meeting certain information needs that can be fulfilled by other non-pres providers. The gap may include substantive issues such as the lack of easily accessible data or problems in organizing and delivering the data itself.

The biggest challenge in Indonesia today is that newsrooms and health authorities have common enemies: hoax producers who distribute false and unverified information, both deliberately or unintentionally. Public trust toward the press should be maintained and we need a systematic effort to counter false information like what a fact-checking initiative Cek Fakta has done. Cek Fakta is a coalition of members of the press and concerned civil society groups which sets out to debunk false information. A massive and systematic effort to boost media literacy is also a task that relevant stakeholders must intensify in the long run.

Another noteworthy finding from this survey is that respondents have resorted to limiting the amount of time they spend reading news articles on Covid-19 and the number of articles. Respondents mention fatigue, anxiety, and sadness as the emotional impact of reading news articles on Covid-19. The pandemic has been going on for over a year and research suggests that it may continue for quite some time until our lives return to normal. Without reducing the role of the press as a watchdog of the government in handling Covid-19, journalists can also focus on producing long-form content and the quality of reporting, instead of quantity.

CONCLUSION

Our findings suggest that the public generally maintain a healthy level of trust toward the Indonesian press, although we must pay more attention to the younger generation - deemed as a more tech-savvy and digitally literate population compared to the older generation. However, the trust does not translate into a higher level of news consumption from mass media vis-a-vis social media. Such public trust also does not reduce the popularity of social media as a platform for sharing and getting information as critical as those on Covid-19. We suggest that public health communicators, including the mass media, must take this into account and find approaches that amplify the best parts of all platforms to maximize the impact of mass communication during crises. We also suggest that future research look into the relationship between public trust and media use.

The survey was conducted online due to time and access limitations amid government-sanctioned social restrictions. An online survey may not accurately represent certain demographic groups, particularly those without internet access. The result of this quantitative survey may not accurately reflect the non-digital news consumption. This survey asks respondents about their preferred platforms to get information related to Covid-19, one of which is social media. However, this survey does not capture the kind of sources respondents refer to on social media. Questions were not designed to specifically identify the sources of information on social media that are used as a first or second reference (to get additional information). So there are several possibilities that will not be captured definitively, for example whether the respondent received information from mass media accounts or official accounts of health authorities on social media.

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