

When news becomes entertainment: Representations of corruption in Indonesia's media and the implication of scandal

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In the current political climate, the Indonesian media is able to report openly on a range of previously taboo political issues (Sen & Hill, 2000; Kakiailatu, 2007; Tapsell, 2010). One issue that garners substantial attention is that of corruption. In stark contrast to the limited media reporting on corruption prior to 1998, it has been a stalwart issue for the press since the Reformation era (1998–), dominating both print and television media. This paper explores how corruption has been portrayed in the media, concluding that there is a clear tendency towards a 'politics-as-entertainment' depiction of corruption cases, as evidenced by the inclination towards 'scandalising' the issue. This paper argues that this format of reporting has broad implications for the anti-corruption movement in Indonesia because it trivialises a key political issue and can ultimately discourage meaningful public debate and engagement with the anti-corruption movement.

In the current political climate, the Indonesian media is able to report openly on a range of previously taboo political issues (Sen & Hill, 2000; Kakiailatu, 2007; Tapsell, 2010). One issue that garners substantial attention is that of corruption. In stark contrast to the limited media reporting on corruption prior to 1998, it has been a stalwart issue for the press since the Reformation era (1998–), dominating both print and television media. The increase in media attention has been driven by two main factors. First, following 1998, there were changes in legislation that subsequently

increased media freedom. Indonesia's Media Bill was redrafted in 1999 during the Habibie Presidency, terminating the watchdog activities of the Ministry of Information, which had previously served as a proxy mechanism for censorship (Sen & Hill, 2000, p. 7; Anwar, 2010). With these new laws, Indonesia's media became one of the freest in Asia (Anwar, 2010). Second, following 1998 there was a widespread proliferation of new media outlets, resulting in an increase in the absolute number of newspapers, television and radio stations and online news websites, inevitably leading

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to an increased quantity and availability of information.

The desire to report openly on corruption has become almost an obsession in Indonesia following decades of media censorship on the issue. The reason for this is twofold: it is the assertion of a commitment to holding those in politics accountable to the public and it forces improved transparency of the government. The media plays a key role in informing the public about political issues and providing information required by the general population so that they can make sound decisions and participate more meaningfully in the democratic process (Balkin, 1999; Street, 2001); therefore, it functions as a key mechanism for promoting political transparency and accountability. Moreover, the public appear intrigued with the corruption scandals that emerge, demanding more news on corruption while the media fuels this interest with provocative stories highlighting the scandalous nature of corruption cases.

In Indonesia, a broad spectrum of reporting styles exists, but the tendency towards reporting corruption as sensationalised political scandal is increasingly apparent (Margana, 2009). Front-page articles with dramatic headlines and paparazzi-style photographs charting the latest evidence and speculation as they emerge, are now commonplace.¹ Such reporting is a double-edged sword: it increases public awareness of corruption cases and the figures involved, but it also risks trivialising them in favour of overstated coverage that emphasises the dramatic elements of the cases rather than the underlying institutional and systemic causes of Indonesia's 'culture of corruption'.

This paper explores the nature of corruption reporting in Indonesia, drawing upon key corruption scandals that captured the media (and the nation's) attention in 2011–2012. It argues that media coverage of corruption issues has erred towards a 'politics-as-entertainment' format to attract readers and sustain interest in corruption scandals as they play out over an extended period of time in the political and judicial arenas. To this end, I

identify three key forms of reporting which aim to pique curiosity and intrigue: 'scandalisation' (*skandalisasi*), 'soap-operafication' and the reporting of banalities. These three modes of reporting play into the increasingly dominant trend of 'politics-as-entertainment', which has the potential to influence public opinion about corruption issues in a number of ways. While they generate interest, and sometimes even outrage, surrounding corruption issues, these modes of reporting are more likely to promote knowledge of particular personalities and cases rather than encouraging a deeper understanding of the political and structural reasons that underlie much of the corrupt behaviour of Indonesian public officials.

The Influence of Media on Politics

The influence of the media is normatively accepted as crucial in shaping public discourse and debate. Even though it has no formal authority to condemn the behaviour of public officials, a free mass media is widely understood to have an obligation to promote good governance and facilitate debates about corruption in several ways. These include raising public awareness about the causes, consequences and possible remedies for corruption (Rose-Ackerman, 2003, p. 73; Peruzzotti & Smulovitz, 2006). Indeed, some view the media as being one of the institutions capable of having widespread impact upon debates on corruption (World Bank, 2011).

More commonly, however, the media is seen to play a role in investigating and reporting the details of corruption cases as they unfold. These types of stories also act as a check on those in government, who presumably wish to maintain a positive public image in order to further or maintain their political careers. The symbolic capital of a 'good reputation' is something that politicians and public officials use to not only gain public support but also influence political decision-making (Sanders & Canel, 2006, p. 457). The potency of the media in discrediting politicians and exposing 'unacceptable' behaviour gives it unparalleled

power in shaping how these individuals are viewed by the public. Thus, the media has been identified as a core social accountability mechanism within democratic systems, providing a continuing check on political misconduct in between elections (Grimes, 2008, p. 4). As a source of knowledge for the public, the media is recognised as a key pillar of democracy, often referred to as the ‘fourth estate’, providing information to citizens upon which they can form opinions and make decisions relating to a range of political issues.²

While the media has an important role to play in monitoring governments, it is far from a panacea when it comes to accountability. There is a normative assumption that the media, as a purveyor of information and knowledge, automatically empowers its citizens and promotes transparency. However, this is at best a crude interpretation of a highly complex relationship (Street, 2001, pp. 231–232), the weaknesses of which are exposed by looking more closely at the metaphor of transparency itself. Literally, the term transparency “suggests a medium through which we view things” (Balkin, 1999, p. 394), which is conceptually separate from the ‘object’ being observed and which does not substantially alter the nature of the object itself. Yet the media is not conceptually separate from what it reports, as it has a deciding role in what is reported and how it is framed. Journalism is a structured activity shaped by sources, the publication’s interests and the availability of material resources (Street, 2001, p. 152–155). The media thus creates its own political reality by shaping public opinion on the issues on which it reports.

Even if journalists and editors believe that they are speaking to an existing audience (or audiences), they are in fact “imagining them and constituting them” (Street, 2001, p. 53). The relationship between media and audience can be viewed through the prism of ‘dependency’, where this dependency takes a range of forms. Ball-Rokeach and De Fleur (1976, p. 6) identified three such dependencies: (a) to understand the world around us; (b) to determine ways in which to act mean-

ingfully within that world; and (c) as a form of ‘fantasy-escape’ from everyday problems. In constructing its reporting for a specific audience and with a specific ‘dependency’ in mind, the media can alter various forms of cognition, feelings and behaviour within a specific setting. This conceptual framework allows for an assessment of media outside of its normatively-held role as an information provider. Accessing information provided by the media is not necessarily the primary reason that people are attracted to news stories: all forms of media, not just the tabloid media, embody a source of entertainment and potential escapism.

The media represents a powerful vehicle for shaping public opinion and consequently is prone to elite capture and commercial interests.³ These elites can come from within or outside of the government. Concerns related to government co-optation stem primarily in situations where freedom of the press is limited by government ownership of a large proportion of the media, which may become a vehicle for government propaganda and/or experience censorship (Djankov et al., 2001, pp. 2–3). The privatisation of the media is thus, on the one hand, promoted as a positive step for accountability. On the other hand, however, a privatised media is not necessarily the remedy for this problem, particularly in states where a small, wealthy elite class are able to capture the market or where the pressures of economic competition pit the maximisation of sales against fourth estate responsibilities.

Media ownership in Indonesia does reflect a level of elite capture, with wealthy business people and politicians among the owners of several high-profile media conglomerates in the country.⁴ For example, Aburizal Bakrie, the current chairman of the Golkar political party, owns a number of media outlets, both print (*Surabaya Post*) and television (ANTV and TVONE), as well as several online media sites. Another prominent example is Suryo Palo, who created his own political party, Nasdem, in 2010. He also owns the newspaper *Media Indonesia* and television channel MetroTV.

Ownership of the media by elites does not appear to have resulted in the suppression of reporting on corruption issues, indeed, such reporting appears to be at an all-time high; however, it does influence which stories are reported and how they are portrayed (Tapsell, 2012). In deciding what cases are covered, and the depth with which they are covered, elites hope to manipulate public perceptions of issues related to their interest, either by skimming over negative reports concerning their own interests, or by highlighting the weaknesses of rivals.

Why Scandal?

Scandals involving politicians or bureaucrats are a by-product of a free media, as the freedom to report on the private behaviour of public officials is often curtailed in cases where the media is restricted by the government (Achter, 2003, p. 65). However, the decision to expose and report on a scandal is one influenced by more than just the ability to do so: just because reporters *can* report on scandals, it does not mean they *must* do so. The reasons for reporting scandals can be considered within three broad categories: ethical, political and profit-driven. These reasons are not necessarily mutually exclusive; however, one of these reasons often provides the dominant motivation for publicising a story.

If we accept the premise that the media—for all its limitations—is a crucial component of a functioning democracy, it follows that informing the public of matters of national interest is a core responsibility of journalists. The reporting of political scandal is often framed in these terms: the media have a moral obligation to expose unethical behaviour by political figures because the public have a right to know how their elected representatives act when representing their interests. The media has a long history of exposing improper behaviour among public figures, and this information can ultimately be used to hold them to account, either by forcing resignation and/or by spurring prosecution and conviction.⁵ This tradi-

tion, however, is not easy to maintain. Corruption cases often involve complex legal, economic and financial dimensions, and ‘good’ investigative journalism assumes that journalists have the required legal and financial understanding to be able to analyse all aspects of the situation, which is not always the case (Ronning, 2009, p. 166). Journalists leave themselves open to defamation suits if they are not able to support their accusations with evidence. These considerations may ultimately deter the media from reporting certain cases or accusations, undermining the ethical responsibility to provide pertinent political information to the public. Consequently, the motivations to report on corruption scandals may be driven by other, less noble, factors.

Although media scandals are often based on exaggeration and sensationalism, they still can play a role in raising public awareness (Lull & Hinerman, 1997). Scandals that expose unacceptable behaviour by public officials (albeit not necessarily illegal activity) have implications for both their position and profile. Scandals are a manifestation of the ‘politics of shaming’ that can not only damage an individual’s reputation, but also serve as a social reminder that despite any legal outcomes, certain acts still constitute moral transgressions (Tumber & Waisbord, 2004, p. 1145). In cases of corruption where evidence can be brought against those accused, the scandals instigated by the media may potentially have tangible legal ramifications including investigations and/or convictions.

More fundamentally, the reporting of scandals raises deeper questions about a person’s moral integrity. Even if the person has not been found to have committed a crime, they may still be perceived to have transgressed social norms reflecting dominant conceptions of morality—what personal behaviour is acceptable versus what is unacceptable (Tumber and Waisbord, 2004, p. 1146). In this way, the reporting of scandals can open the door for public discussion about morals and values, stimulating debate about and public interest in the basic principles that underpin how

politicians act as individuals.

Reporting on political scandals may also be driven by competing political interests. The media is built upon links, networks and relationships that may sometimes blur the line between who is 'inside' and who is 'outside' (Ronning, 2009, p. 167). The interests of media organisations, businesses and politicians have the potential to blur, which can influence decisions about what stories to include and omit, what issues to report on and whose names to mention. The media is not apolitical, and personal, business and political relationships can influence reporting just as strongly as investigative journalism and ethics. In the political arena, the media can also be used as a tool for discrediting other politicians or parties. The exposure of certain 'unacceptable' behaviour may have follow-on benefits for other elites such as rival politicians or those with connected business interests. Gillespie and Okruhlik (1991, p. 88) contend that this kind of coverage is focused upon discrediting opposition rather than confronting corruption issues in any meaningful way. Reports of corruption scandals, particularly the targets of such reports and the intensity of the scrutiny, can thus be engineered to meet these political interests if media outlets or journalists have political links to specific parties.

Scandals for Profit

In the case of Indonesia, the trend towards the 'scandalisation' of corruption cases does represent a desire to increase audience numbers and therefore profits (personal communication with Ignatius Haryanto, 3 February 2012). This has a profound impact upon dominant media narratives.⁶ As a result, the media is now increasingly directed towards influencing consumers of the private sphere and less directed towards serving the needs of public citizens. This influences both the stories reported and the quality of reporting: corruption cases are portrayed in a dramatic fashion with a focus upon intriguing key players rather than on underlying structural reasons supporting corruption.

If profit-making is the primary *raison d'être* for a media outlet, the timely breaking of stories that capture public attention may be prioritised over thorough fact-checking, unbiased reporting and an overall commitment to quality journalism, sidelining the fourth estate role of providing news for the benefit of informing and educating the public (Tumber & Waisbord, 2004, pp. 1144–1145). The competing interests of democratic responsibilities and profit-making represent a dilemma for media outlets, which need to formulate their own priorities in relation to this nexus.

So why would a media group choose to focus on scandals? Aside from any political advantages the reporting of corruption may hold, scandals themselves are also a profitable genre of news (Tumber & Waisbord, 2004, p. 1147).⁷ Some authors argue that scandal appeals to an innate human characteristic, identified by the German concept of *schadenfreude*—taking pleasure in the misfortune of others. However, there is debate about the extent to which this can adequately explain the popularity of reporting on scandal (Thompson, 2000; Achter, 2003, p. 67). Other authors identify the essential function of scandal as revealing the humanity and human frailty of others, "to strip off the impersonal masks donned by those in authority" (Moodie, 1990, p. 881). Whatever the reason, scandals sell, and the rise of 'politics-as-entertainment' as a format for reporting is reflected in the increasing popularity of sensationalised news coverage. As competition between media outlets increases, scandals that attract public interest are used as a means to stimulate audience numbers, subsequently boosting corporate profits.

As the line between news and entertainment is increasingly blurred, reporting on scandals becomes less about informing citizens for the public good and increasingly about catching and retaining their attention as consumers. In their assessment of the influence of the Clinton-Lewinsky scandal in the United States, Carpini and Williams (2001, p. 178) argue that national politics "has been reduced to a sometimes amusing, sometimes mel-

odramatic, but seldom relevant spectator sport” and diverts the attention of the government and the public away from more substantive issues. The rise of ‘politics-as-entertainment’ is also dangerous because media scandals are designed to pique and retain interest and do not necessarily lead to truth, revelations or depth of coverage (Balkin, 1999, p. 407; Street, 2001, pp. 44–45). If the media’s focus is on generating interest and not on the reporting of ‘truth’, then it is no longer fulfilling its public interest role and meeting the expectations of its function as the fourth estate.

The changing media landscape has also put pressure on media outlets to produce 24-hour coverage of breaking scandals. The urgency to ‘produce’ news can lead to a disregard for journalistic practices, as media outlets scramble to ‘scoop’ their competitors. Moreover, the 24-hour news cycle puts pressure on journalists to find new angles for stories (Tumber & Waisbord, 2004), which can result in the reporting of ‘banalities’ merely in order to keep a story in the spotlight.⁸ This focus on breadth, as opposed to depth, has also led to an incessant need for political commentary, with scrutiny resembling that of the paparazzi rather than hard-hitting investigative journalism aiming to uncover the root of the case. Instead of reporting purely on facts, coverage tends to frame political scandals as soap operas or even situational comedies (depending on the nature of the scandal at hand), encouraging sensationalism and speculation, which serves to extend the shelf life of a particular story. Coverage of political corruption within the media in Indonesia is voyaging into this territory.

Media, Corruption and the Case of Indonesia

Prior to the New Order (1966–1998), the Indonesian media had a history of reporting on corruption issues.⁹ Concern over the number of corrupt colonial officials emerged during the latter years of the Dutch colonial regime (Wertheim, 1963). In the early Sukarno period, corruption featured

as a key political issue, and was widely reported in Indonesia’s newspapers, with several Ministers and bureaucrats being accused of corruption, even though the number of criminal convictions remained low (Setiyono et al., 2012). Anti-corruption reporting was much more subdued during the New Order, alternately being suppressed and co-opted by the government for political gain (Smith, 1971, pp. 437–439; Margana, 2009). During the Reformation era, the focus on particular cases has waxed and waned, but corruption has been a dominant theme that shows no sign of fading.

Incidences of corruption from the national, regional and local levels were frequently reported in the media in the twelve months between mid-2011 and mid-2012. However, the media focused most intensely on issues that emerged as a result of the conjecture and discussion surrounding the appointment of a new head for Indonesia’s Corruption Eradication Commission (Komisi Pemberantasan Korupsi, KPK) in December 2011. With the anticipation of the appointment of a new KPK chief, media coverage focused on three particular corruption cases that had been identified as priority cases for the KPK.¹⁰ The first of these was ‘Centurygate’, the case in which the government approved a Rp. 6.7 trillion bailout package under suspicious circumstances for the privately-owned Bank Century. The bailout package was allegedly a far larger sum than required and there are indications that a substantial proportion was siphoned off and channelled towards other political interests, including political campaigns.¹¹ The second of the cases was the Wisma Atlet scandal that emerged out of construction contracts for the Southeast Asian (SEA) Games held in Jakarta and Palembang during 2011. Members of the House of Representatives (*Dewan Perwakilan Rakyat*, DPR) were accused of accepting bribes in return for favouring certain contractors in the procurement process for the games. Though several key member of the Democrat Party have been implicated in the scandal, the majority of media attention has focused upon former beauty queen-turned-

politician Angelina Sondakh. The third was the Cek Pelawat scandal in which Nunun Nurbaeti was accused of distributing approximately Rp. 20.65 billion to members of the DPR in return for the appointment of Miranda Goeltom as deputy chairperson of the Bank of Indonesia. Media reports about each of these scandals abounded, closely following new developments and the lives of the key corruption figures involved. Even before being resolved, the scandals had taken their toll upon public opinions of corruption and the government.

The portrayal of these three corruption cases during the case study period was diverse; however, through an analysis of newspaper, magazine, and television coverage, there were discernible trends in how they were reported. Scandals naturally lend themselves to reporting genres that draw on sensationalism, soap-operafication and banality, all of which are apparent in the Indonesian media's coverage of these cases. Sensationalism relates to the ability of media coverage to use presentation, content and language to attract attention and provoke an emotional response (Vettehen et al., 2005). It can manifest itself in several ways, for example the placement of the news story on the front page of a newspaper or running it as the primary breaking news report on television, particularly if the topic is not necessarily a new one. The use of images, including title font, photographs, graphics and even bright colours also attracts audience attention. Articles about Angelina Sondakh and Nunun Nurbaeti were commonly accompanied by photographs of the women. Television coverage featured camera shots following the corruptors as they arrived at the airport in Jakarta (as with the case of Nunun), as they arrived at and left the KPK, or during other public outings. The images often had a paparazzi-like quality, resembling images one might expect to find in a gossip magazine.

The primary aim of sensationalised reporting is to pique interest rather than to inform. Reports about the extravagant lifestyles of those accused of corruption are a prime example, contrasting the

rich, immoral corruptors with the honest, hard-working average Indonesian. Having fled the country, Nunun was recognised while out shopping in Bangkok and subsequently extradited to Indonesia in December 2011. By emphasising the circumstances around her arrest, the media highlighted that she had been living a life of luxury while in hiding from Indonesian authorities.¹² In the case of Angelina Sondakh, referred to affectionately as 'Angie' by the Indonesian press, the corruption suspect is presented as a beautiful woman with a tragic family history and a bright young recruit for the Democrat Party.¹³ Her fall from grace through her embroilment in the Wisma Atlet scandal is used to exemplify the ultimate moral transgression: someone who had it all but still put selfish interests ahead of the public good. This form of sensationalism aims to provoke a strong emotional response that will compel readers to follow the case with more interest in future.

The term 'soap operafication' describes the inclination to portray scandals as unfolding dramas with lead characters, both on the side of good and evil. As the soap opera begins, the lead characters and their support cast are introduced, with other actors entering the show as the story proceeds, and the audience is made familiar with all aspects of their personal and political life. Alongside the establishment of these characters, we are introduced to the broad premise of the drama, though we do not know all the details. The mystery follows the key actors through the soap opera, with the ultimate goal of determining whether these characters are indeed guilty of corruption. This form of reporting draws upon human curiosity and voyeurism, exemplified by the popularity of tabloid reporting and paparazzi journalism.

The Cek Pelawat scandal, in which parliamentarians were bribed to support the election of Miranda Goeltom as deputy head of the Bank of Indonesia, lends itself particularly well to this style of reporting because several key aspects of the case remain unexplained. First, the motivation for Nunun in becoming embroiled in the distri-

bution of money to DPR members was unclear. Nunun had no direct political link to Miranda Goeltom, nor did it appear that they had close personal relationship (although photographic evidence did eventually emerge indicating that they had previously met at social functions). This implies that Nunun was working on behalf of another party, whose identity was unknown. Second, the source of the funding was a mystery: who would have an interest in ensuring that Miranda Goeltom was elected? Third, Miranda herself denied any knowledge of the transactions, despite the fact that witnesses attested that they had been paid off in return for supporting her appointment as Vice-President of the Bank of Indonesia. Miranda refused to acknowledge any culpability in the payments, which challenged the very basis of the bribery case. Finally, like all good soap operas, this case also included what was ostensibly a case of amnesia. Nunun's ability to recall details was allegedly inhibited by a serious brain affliction, limiting her memory and ability to recall details. This prompted the KPK to order independent medical tests in an effort to refute the assertion she could not be called as a witness in the court proceedings related to this case.¹⁴ Media coverage of the events speculated upon each of these enigmas in headlines, opinions pieces, readers' letters and through cartoons, fuelling the conversion of politics into a form of entertainment.

A development in the Centurygate scandal also demonstrates the emphasis on drama in media coverage of the case. In August 2012, former KPK chief Antasari Azhar, in prison for complicity in a murder, alleged that Indonesian president Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono and a number of other high profile officials met in October 2008 to discuss the legal ramifications of the Bank Century bailout. Antasari accused the President of personally approving the bailout plan, in direct contradiction to statements from the President himself that he was not involved in the decision. While these allegations themselves are unsubstantiated, the ensuing media coverage has the hallmarks of soap-oper-

ated reporting. The President, Yudhoyono, is the main character in the drama, with Antasari Azhar playing his adversary. The mystery to be uncovered is who is lying and who is telling the truth. To this end, a high-profile supporting cast has also been brought in, such as Hatta Rajasa, coordinating minister for the economy and leader of the Partai Amanat Nasional (National Mandate Party, PAN) political party, and Denny Indrayana, the deputy minister for law and human rights. Both were supposedly in attendance at the meeting and issued press statements to the effect that a meeting did occur but there was no discussion of the Bank Century bailout.¹⁵ The ensuing speculation is typified in an article in online news site, *Tempo Interaktif* (10 August 2012), which ventured that the swift denial by the President was indicative of deeper concerns: "Oddly enough, the President seemed to feel the need to reinforce the denial. It creates the sense that the issue is very worrying for the President". The analysis of the President's response and the extrapolation that it implies guilt stimulated further development of the narrative from a different angle, providing a new direction in which the soap opera can progress, and room for further speculation on who was involved and who knew what in relation to the case.

A third aspect of scandal reporting in the Indonesian media is its focus on banalities—namely the reporting of news on corruptors that is neither central to the case nor relevant to understanding the underlying motives for corruption—through in-depth coverage of trivial aspects of the corruptors' lives that are unrelated to the charges they face. The focus on Angelina Sondakh's personal life, including accusations that she had an affair with her late husband's brother and persistent coverage of her relationship with a former KPK investigator, are more akin to gossip and tabloid reporting than hard-hitting journalism. For example, an article in the *Jakarta Globe* (26 July 2012) ran the headline 'Angelina asks boyfriend to visit late husband's grave with children'; it reported that Angelina had asked her boyfriend to visit her late

husband's grave with her children for *Idul Fitri* while she was in detention—a story that had no relevance to the corruption charges Angelina was facing and no obvious public interest value. This genre of reporting, focusing on the minutiae of Angelina's private life, draws upon public curiosity about her personal activities rather than the implications of her actions as a lawmaker and parliamentarian who has allegedly acted against public interest by accepting bribes.

Another example of such reporting was the keen media interest in the conditions of detention for Nunun Nurbaeti in the Cek Pelawat case. One example of this reporting was provided by *Seputar Indonesia* entitled 'Nunun is without special facilities' on 12 December 2011, following her transfer to Pondok Bambu gaol in East Jakarta. This particular article occupied almost two pages of the newspaper, with large photographs of the room, other inmates and the front gate of the prison, as well as brief details on what she was being fed and her anticipated daily routine. It did not include any reference to a statement from Nunun about her new living conditions, or a discussion of the significance of her detention. While *Seputar Indonesia* may have scooped its competitors, this new information was far from pertinent to the serious issue of corruption.

These three modes of reporting—scandalisation, soap-operafication, and the reporting of banalities—play into the increasingly dominant trend of 'politics-as-entertainment', which has the potential to influence public opinion about corruption issues in a number of ways. While they generate interest in corruption issues, and sometimes even outrage, they are more likely to promote knowledge of particular personalities and cases rather than deeper understandings of the political and structural reason that underlie much of the corrupt behaviour by public officials.

Implications

The pervasive coverage of corruption issues in Indonesia's media has one clear outcome: the

prominence of corruption in the government is thoroughly underscored for the Indonesian public. What is less straightforward are the potential impacts of the reporting trends, the sensationalism of cases and the focus on banalities on popular attitudes towards anti-corruption efforts and the movement as a whole. The positive effects of the media coverage are, put simply, increased public awareness of the problem through the broadcasting of case progression, public statements by those in power and condemnations of corruption. Several scholars and institutions propose that without widespread social support, governance and anti-corruption reforms will have little success (for some examples see Galtung, 1998; Johnston, 1998, p. 124; USAID, 2010; World Bank, 2011). However, as Danang J. Widyoko of Indonesian Corruption Watch (ICW) notes, the majority of Indonesia's anti-corruption activists are well-educated, middle-class citizens, and thus the question for the movement becomes how to engage 'ordinary' Indonesians (personal communication, 20 January 2012). Consequently, the impacts of media coverage upon public perceptions of corruption take on a key significance, particularly as combating corruption is continually highlighted as a key political issue in Indonesia.

The influence of increased public awareness of corruption issues could have several potential outcomes. On the positive side, it may spur locally-based campaigns, attendance at anti-corruption rallies, the signing of petitions, donating funds to or volunteering for anti-corruption organisations and other expressions of solidarity with the anti-corruption cause. However, increased awareness has not automatically produced such outcomes in Indonesia. Anti-corruption rallies remain the bastion of NGOs and student groups, failing to appeal to a broad cross-section of Indonesian society. Donations from the public to anti-corruption NGOs also remain low, with organisations such as Indonesia Corruption Watch (ICW) assembling 'mobile marketing' teams to sign up individuals as regular donors in an attempt to subsidise their

regular funding.

The nature of media reporting on corruption has raised a number of concerns about how people perceive the issue of corruption and has consequences for overall public attitudes towards the issue. Assuming that there is no such thing as 'bad publicity' in the case of raising awareness about corruption issues contradicts observations of how anti-corruption sentiment plays out on the ground in Indonesia. There is concern that the scandalised nature of reporting is fostering interest towards corruption that is based on intrigue and entertainment rather than on consideration of corruption as a serious political topic.¹⁶ Corruption cases, particularly those discussed in the previous section, attract public attention because of their drama, rather than their reflection of a system that is not functioning as it should; they are soap-operas rather than a serious indictment of a dysfunctional political system. Moreover, the over-arching interest in hair styles, fashion and relationships (Amiruddin, 2012) is testimony to the fact that corruption reports sometimes tend to focus on aspects that are unrelated to the crime itself.

In diverting the focus of these cases from the crimes to unrelated aspects of the personality or appearance of the accused, the portrayals stop highlighting the detrimental aspects of the crime for the wider public. Ball-Rokeach and DeFleur (1976, p. 17) contend that media messages not linked to an individual's social reality may have little effect on altering their behaviour. Scandalised depictions of cases which fail to relate cases back to the reality of regular people, or put forward a sense of how these cases have real impacts for the public, are thus unlikely to change the behaviour of the general public who are not already involved in the anti-corruption movement.

A second concern is that the extensive coverage of corruption cases in the media is leading to perceptions of the anti-corruption movement as being ineffective. In a study on the impact of negative reporting about unions and its correlation to public support for the union movement, Schmidt

(1993) concluded that media coverage that highlight the negative aspects of the union movement, namely strikes, led to a decrease in public support among non-union members. Similarly, those who are not already involved in the anti-corruption movement may feel less inclined to take action as a result of incessant media reporting, which rarely reports successes. The cases, particularly if they are not resolved in a timely manner, contribute to the sentiment that the fight against corruption is an 'unwinnable' war and thus not worth the investment of personal time. In reporting all the obstacles facing the investigation and prosecution of corruption cases in meticulous and unrelenting details, the media does nothing to help overcome the impression that corruption is an entrenched part of Indonesia's political culture, and that even professionals tasked with overcoming the problem are struggling to do so. The increased apathy towards corruption issues will do little to boost public interest or support for the anti-corruption movement, even if the progress made by the anti-corruption movement is admirable given the sheer size of the task.

Conclusion

The media is crucial in shaping public discourse and attitudes towards political issues. As the Indonesian media is now able to report openly and freely on corruption, dissecting and understanding the impact of this coverage takes on a new importance. This paper has analysed some of the trends in the Indonesian media coverage, drawing upon reports on three major corruption scandals between 2011 and 2012. The Indonesian media appears to be reporting on corruption with vigour, enthusiastically covering scandals to the point that the problem saturates publications and television programming. This, in itself, is not a bad thing, as these reports serve to inform and educate people about events and actions in the political arena, providing them with access to information that they might not otherwise have.

The concern, however, lies in the depiction

of the stories. The dominant ‘politics-as-entertainment’ format, with its focus on characters and intrigues, encourages a cosmetic interest and a superficial understanding of corruption issues facing the Indonesian government. This, in turn, leads to a diminished quality of political discourse in which “political arguments are trivialized, appearances matter more than reality, personalities more than policies, the superficial more than the profound” (Street, 2001, p. 185). Moreover, it undermines optimism in the anti-corruption cause and discourages people from investing time in a cause that they see as an unwinnable war. With its key democratic role as the fourth estate, the media has a responsibility to inform citizens in a way that not only provides oversight, but also fosters meaningful debate about issues facing the state. In this way, the framing of corruption scandals as entertainment in Indonesia poses a risk to the anti-corruption movement, encouraging interest but not necessarily meaningful action.

Notes

1. Personal communication with Dr Meuthia Rachman, Professor of Sociology at Universitas Indonesia (17 January 2012); J. Danang Widoyoko, Director at Indonesian Corruption Watch (20 January 2012); and Ignatius Haryanto, Director of the Centre for Press Development in Jakarta (3 February 2012).
2. As Schultz (1998, p. 1) notes, the term ‘fourth estate’ has become so popular that it continues to be used even though “most people have forgotten—if they ever knew—what the first, second and third estates were”.
3. Elite capture and media bias do not inevitably lead to negative impacts for the citizenry. Corneo (2006, p. 39) asserts that a biased media has the scope to improve the political equilibrium if there are distortions in reporting across the media sector as a whole. However, Corneo also argues that while such an outcome is possible, the general tendency is for elite capture to be targeted at manipulating public opinion in a way that overwhelmingly benefits the interests of the elite who own the media.
4. For further reading on the issue of media ownership and its impacts in Indonesia, see Tapsell (2010).
5. One commonly cited example of this scenario is the Watergate scandal in the early 1970s, in which American President Nixon was ultimately forced to resign over links to an attempt to break into the Democratic National Committee headquarters. The outcome of this case is seen as an example of the triumph of investigative journalism in holding public officials to account (Heidenheimer et al., 1990, p. 6).
6. For a useful discussion of the impacts of commercialisation of media upon public accountability, see Habermas’ seminal work, *The structural transformation of the public sphere* (1989). Habermas contends that the rise of the media has led to the commodification of information and opinion, and that the media no longer serves the public good, but instead aims to influence consumers in the private sphere.
7. While there is little investigation into the exact financial gain related to the reporting of scandals within Indonesia, studies into the Clinton-Lewinsky scandal in the United States have demonstrated that television stations, particularly 24-hours cable news channels, generated huge increases in audience and revenues as a result of coverage (Tumber & Waisbord, 2004, p. 1147).
8. I thank Ignatius Haryanto for his insight in this respect and credit him with sharing with me his concept of ‘the reporting of banalities’ in the Indonesian media (personal communication, 3 February 2012).
9. Corruption issues were commonly discussed in the media in the years leading up to 1965, though little academic work has been published on this topic. One rare example of historical reporting on corruption in Indonesia is a recent edition of Indonesian language magazine *Historia* (2012), which published a collection of articles on prominent corruption cases during the 1950s.
10. This is not to suggest that no other cases have been the target of media coverage. What sets these cases apart, however, is prevalence, consistency and the breadth of coverage.
11. For a complete account of the Bank Century case through to 2011, see Soesatyo (2012, pp. 131–174). Soesatyo is connected with the Golkar political party and this may influence some of the conclusion he presents, but the facts of the case (as they were known at the time of publication) are presented clearly and concisely.
12. Some examples of coverage include *Tempo*’s article ‘Seperti apa rumah mewah nunun di Bangkok?’ (*Tempo Interaktif*, 19 December 2011) and a piece in the *Jakarta Globe* (27 December 2011) that described Nunun as having

- been on “a nine-month shopping spree in Singapore and Thailand”.
13. Angelina Sondakh was crowned Miss Indonesia in 2001. Her late husband, also an MP, died suddenly of a heart attack in February 2011, leaving her widowed with one child and two stepchildren.
 14. Examples of coverage include articles on memory loss such as: ‘Nunun’s memory fine, but not her ankle: Golkar’ (*The Jakarta Globe*, 16 June 2011), ‘Nunun questioning will prove truth about memory loss: KPK’ (*The Jakarta Post*, 20 December 2011) and ‘Memahami otak Nunun Nurbaeti’ [Understanding the brain of Nunun Nurbaeti] (Kompas.com, 18 July 2011).
 15. For examples of coverage, see ‘Hatta rajasa bantah ada rapat century di istana presiden’ (*Berita Satu*, 13 August 2012) and ‘Denny Indrayana: Antasari Azhar berbohong’ (Tempo.com, 10 August 2012).
 16. I would like to thank writer and activist Hartono Sutejo for our discussion and his insights in this respect (personal communication, 19 January 2012).

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