



Investigating How the National Online Media Reported the LGBT Community During the COVID-19 Pandemic

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ABSTRACT

At the beginning of the Covid-19 pandemic, intolerance against sexual minority groups (SMGs) were recorded in online media. SMGs were accused of spreading the coronavirus. This study aimed to determine the extent to which online media took sides in reporting LGBT issues during the first year of the pandemic. News balance analysis was performed using the “Westerstahl” Concept of objectivity for the coverage of Republika, CNN, and Kompas online. The measurement of media balance was carried out by employing the content analysis method that is used for same-topic news, which also measures the sources of bias, news tendencies, and source’s representation. Previous research suggested that Republika chose to highlight LGBT’s negative sides. The results of the present study negate this assumption. It was also found that there was no discrimination against SMGs as has often been claimed in the comments on social media. This result may not be surprising for Kompas or CNN. It can even be said that when the outbreaks began, no media coverage associated the pandemic with SMG discrimination. The imbalance was found not in the online news pages but in what the viewers who chose to offer comments concerning the imbalance in LGBT news on social media had to say. At the same time, reader hesitation about offering comments on online media forums is interesting and calls for further research.



INTRODUCTION

Ever since the World Health Organization (WHO) declared Coronavirus Disease 2019 (COVID-19) a global pandemic on March 11, 2020 (World Health Organizations, 2021), people around the world have been facing challenges like never before (Bleckmann et al., 2022). They have been forced to adjust their way of life, especially those belonging to the sexual minority group (SMGs). One of the key implications of the pandemic has been the broadening of the gap SMGs face in their daily lives compared to their lives before the pandemic (Gibb et al., 2020; Kantamneni, 2020).

It was reported that during the pandemic, several individuals belonging to SMGs experienced discrimination and rejection in terms of accessing healthcare arrangements, including restrictions to services and limited access to safe spaces and other community-related support (Wilson & Cariola, 2020). Moreover, it was generally reported that some of the marginalized SMGs experienced economic issues (e.g., job insecurity or more significant financial barriers to health care) (Lavaysse et al., 2018; Lett et al., 2020).

It was even reported that notwithstanding their age, SMG members were even being persecuted for spreading the coronavirus (Greenhalgh, 2020). Several instances of intolerance wherein LGBT groups were the target were recorded in online media coverage, which amplified the negative sentiment of the community, considering that SMGs worked in places that were the most vulnerable during the pandemic and, hence, closed (Burriss et al., 2021). For example, in Ukraine, Orthodox church

leaders claimed same-sex marriage of males to be a source of COVID-19 (Utomo, 2020), and the spiritual leader of the Orthodox Jewish Cultural Center in Israel accused the gay pride parade of being the cause of the pandemic (Syalaby, 2020). In Indonesia, the struggles of transwomen were reported to have intensified further due to the impact of COVID-19, as getting treatment and finding a new job after being laid off became all the more difficult (Amindoni, 2020).

It has been more than 50 years now since the term LGBT has become familiar in society (Wayne, 2006), yet the media coverage concerning them is still considered imbalanced (Simarmata & Aji, 2017). The imbalance in reporting about SMGs mainly relates to the sources that journalists rely on the frequency of media criticism of SMGs (Ayuni & Syam, 2019). Instead of writing about their success or positive activities, the media tends to highlight sensational aspects about them through bombastic headlines that obscure sexual orientation and gender identity (Simarmata & Aji, 2017).

Indeed, not all media entities can be said to be similarly biased or unbiased, as each media institution has its own ideology for managing news content (Shoemaker & Reese, 2014). Media agencies play an important role in spreading their ideology, especially in shaping public opinion (Deuze, 2004). This certainly strengthens their position in society as a channel that is not value-free but driven by a certain point of view or even bias at times (Engel, 2013).

According to Engel (2013), media bias is characterized by the reconstruction of news such that the news written by journalists is no longer a reflection of



reality. The media is expected to function as a watchdog; as such, it can also be referred to as a supervisor (McQuail, 1994). McQuail explains that the characterization of journalists as a watchdog emerged from the classical liberal conception that relates to power relations between government and society in a democratic country. However, in some countries, sometimes, the media cannot carry out this function properly, and this significantly affects the performance of journalists (Iyengar & Hahn, 2009).

For example, journalists and media practitioners in Kenya have always opposed reporting about homosexual, as homosexuality is not considered to be a part of African culture (Njoroge, 2020). This fact is corroborated by the findings of several research studies on newspapers coverage in Nigeria. Through their writings, journalists in Nigeria can incite readers and openly oppose any new way of life that they think will destroy African culture (Adegbola, 2019). In Malaysia, journalists are encouraged to be more careful when reporting news related to LGBT community. In Malaysia, the media coverage of LGBT issues must explicitly dwell on the human rights involved and include the views of politicians, religious leaders, and activists promoting humanitarian causes. It should also clearly present the state's official standpoint towards the LGBT community when reporting about them (Ting et al., 2021)

The aforesaid facts about Kenya, Nigeria, and Malaysia were not immediately applicable to the Indonesian national media event though the number of SMG communities in the country has increased (Yudiyanto, 2016). As reported

by Saiful Mujani Research and Consulting (2018), Almost 50% of the Indonesian population is aware of the existence of SMGs in Indonesia. Around 58% of them support the SMGs' right to live and opine that the members of these groups must be protected by the government like any other Indonesian citizens. The government does not explicitly prohibit SMG in Indonesia. Through the Ministry of Religion, the national government has conveyed that it prohibits all kinds of LGBT campaigns. However, this does not mean that SMGs must be separated from religion and religious communities in Indonesia, instead, they need to be embraced so that their behavior and sexual orientation no longer deviate from religious teachings (Kementerian Agama Indonesia, 2017).

This standpoint certainly invites criticism from some quarters and the support of others. Those who are pro-LGBT consider that the choice of sexual identity is part of the basic rights of citizens (Fatinova et al., 2019). Meanwhile, those opposing this viewpoint argue that the existence of LGBT people is more dangerous than terrorism and drugs (Novia, 2016). It is undeniable that such a situation triggers discrimination against LGBT people because of the stigmatization of this SMG which chooses to be different from the majority group (Ayu et al., 2013).

This situation also impacts national media reports in Indonesia, which are considered by the Alliance of Independent Journalists (AJI) to be imbalanced, unclear in reviewing problems, and have the potential to carry out symbolic violence against marginal groups in their reports (2016).



To find out how far the Indonesian national media took sides in Indonesia during the first year of the pandemic, an analysis of news balance was carried out on three well-known online media outlets in Indonesia, namely, CNN Indonesia, Republika Online (ROL), and Kompas.com. Online media was chosen because compared to other media types, this new type of media offers convenience for the public to read articles efficiently and effectively (Mubaraq, 2020).

Along with its development, online media has become the main source of information for society (Romli, 2018). In addition to the growing number which has exceeded 43,000 out of a total of 47,000 media outlets in Indonesia (Dewan Pers, 2020), online media has succeeded in replacing newspapers whose position has weakened because of a decrease in their circulation and advertising revenue (Barthelemy et al., 2011).

Nevertheless, online media adheres to the principles of journalism as newspapers do. As such, it provides citizens with the information they need to make the best decisions about their lives, communities, society, and government (Kovach & Rosenstiel, 2021). Indeed, there has been no specific definition of online journalism until today (Salaverria, 2019).

In fact, they still use different terms such as “digital journalism” (Kawamoto, 2003), “multimedia journalism” (Deuze, 2004), “online journalism” (Steensen, 2011) or “cyber journalism” (Díaz Noci, 2013). According to Kopper et al (2000), online journalism is a very new branch of journalism, and it is developing very quickly. The most significant difference between it and traditional journalism is the method and format of the media as

indicated by the three online media in this study.

Today, the evolution of online media is also very fast and intense (Salaverria, 2019). Its publication platform has also evolved from the World Wide Web (Darma & Shenja, 2009) to be compatible with tablets (Wulster-Radcliffe et al., 2015) and smartphones (Mitchell et al., 2012). In some cases, it even extends to devices such as voice assistants and various other tools that humans use in everyday life even though the use of these advanced tools was very difficult to even imagine until recently (Doyle, 2010; Quandt & Singer, 2009).

McQuail (2011) emphasized that objectivity is an important principle that media and journalists need to have as they are information centers for the public. But not all media can fully position themselves as neutral media. A neutral position becomes very important in upholding the element of objectivity in addition to ensuring the accuracy and completeness of information. The objectivity of journalists in producing balanced news is identified by Tuchman (2000) in four journalistic objectivity routines. These are issue dualism, supporting evidence, direct quotations, and standard story structure (inverted pyramid). Reporting is said to be balanced if there is no partiality, if it presents views taking into account all sources, and if it does not reduce or filter certain views before publication (Eriyanto, 2011). Eriyanto described being balanced in more or less its literal meaning, being comparable, commensurate, equally strong, or equal in weight. The news about the LGBT community in online media is also expected to always be balanced.



Balanced news has an important role, especially in the publication of sensitive information, and it has a major influence on people's lives. Moreover, during the COVID-19 pandemic, all the audience wanted accurate and reliable news. This includes news concerning the issues related to the LGBT community as well, whose news coverage always has a negative connotation. Journalists' interference sometimes affects news content when they produce stories. Journalists need to avoid any bias when using an interpretive lens for a story, and use inputs from experts who are impartial and possess factual knowledge, simply to ensure "compensatory legitimacy" (Albæk, 2011).

Not all balances will be perfect, and there is still a possible tendency among journalists to dramatize news (Boykoff & Boykoff, 2004). It is not surprising that even though journalists try to pay attention to the norm of balance, their journalistic product can lead to the formation of citizen opinions on certain issues (Cohen, 2003). How often the media present influential sources of information is also important to the media balance. But in practice, journalism is not only about reporting issues, but also the media formats and ideologies (Shoemaker & Reese, 2014).

The balance intended in the code of ethics is that all parties get equal opportunities. Journalists must also be able to verify information they convey before it is spread widely so that there is no confusion in the future (Haryanto, 2014). That said, in reality, the time taken to perform verification is often more than required for the information to spread in the virtual world (Hamna, 2017).

As stated in the Press Council journal, a journalist in Indonesia is required to uphold human rights, and not open himself to being easily influenced by an ism or opinion that will lead to injustice or misunderstanding. In detail, this discussion has been regulated in Article 1 of the Journalist's Code of Ethics, where Indonesian journalists are required to be independent, produce news that is accurate, balanced, and does not have bad intentions (Dewan Pers, 2017).

So far, the media in Indonesia is one of the most powerful carriers of public opinion (Sobur, 2001). This shows how the media can very easily lead the public's attention and opinion (Soalohon & Hedi, 2017), or play an important role in spreading or opposing hate speech against certain groups such as the SMG (Baider, 2018).

Does the national media tend to be positive in reporting SMG or the opposite? Has the COVID-19 pandemic had a significant impact on SMG reports in the national media? This study aims to determine the extent of online media's partiality in Indonesia during the first year of the pandemic in reporting issues related to LGBT. The analysis of news balance is carried out using the Westerstahl's objectivity concept, where the focus of media balance on the three national online media is measured through content analysis of news with the same topic.

METHODOLOGY

This study was designed as qualitative research. It concerned the news texts containing reports related to LGBT that are published by the three national online media. The first one was CNN Indonesia (which has been present in Indonesia since August 17, 2015). It is the business



expansion of an American news television channel in the form of a website. It could compete with other media in a short time as a source of reliable news, in line with its slogan "news we can trust" (CNN Indonesia, 2022).

The second one was Kompas.com, which was founded on September 14, 1995. Drawing on the credibility of Kompas newspaper for decades, Kompas.com is considered capable of presenting information objectively, independently, and without any bias by political, economic, or other vested and powerful interests. The reports are per its slogan "seeing the world clearly" (Kompas, 2022).

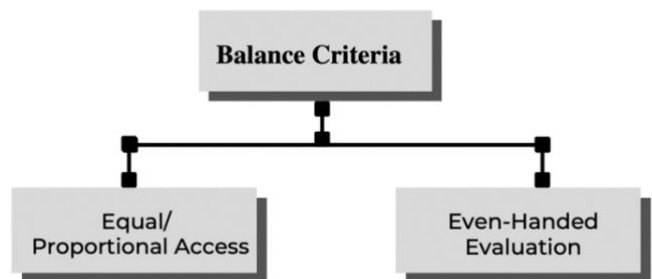
The founders of the third media entity studied, ROL, have a strong Islamic background. Although it is not the only media outlet with a history that is closely linked to the Islamic revivalism movement in the country, people easily identify ROL as a media outlet powered by Islamic politics. Additionally, ROL is a pioneer of online media in Indonesia that gathers information in the form of text, audio, and video, through its website www.Republika.co.id. It has been doing so since August 17, 1995 (Republika Online, 2022).

Through the content analysis method, the three media outlets were identified systematically, independently, and in a replicable manner (Eriyanto, 2011) by focusing on the balance in their reports concerning SMG. The balance in their coverage of SMG-related news was measured, using Westerstahl's objectivity that has been simplified by McQuail (2015) to find out whether the results will be the same as those of the previous

studies or if there has been a change as far as media partiality is concerned.

As illustrated in figure 1, the aspect of balance is simply tested through two criteria, namely "equal or proportional access" and "even-handed evaluation" (McQuail, 2015). In "equal or proportional access", the aspect of balance is analyzed based on the amount of "space" and "time." Balance is then calculated through three units of analysis, including sources of bias (McQuail, 2015), trend factors, and representation of pros and cons (Rahayu, 2006). While the *even-handed evaluation* is evaluated based on the indicator of "tone" of positive, negative, or neutral news (McQuail, 2015).

Figure 1. Scheme of Westerstahl's Objectivity News Balance



Source: Simplified by McQuail (2015).

The news used as the objects of this research was online news published during the COVID-19 pandemic, a total of 25 news articles. The news was selected based on the similarity of topics published by three national media.

Table 1. List of News Analyzed for its Balance

Data	Date	Media	Title
Data 1	2 September 2020	Kompas	The Police Arrest 56 Men Having Same-Sex Party in Apartments in South Jakarta
Data 2	2 September 2020	Kompas	The Organizers of Same Sex Party in Apartments Have Made 6 Similar Events
Data 3	2 September 2020	Kompas	The Police Say Organizers of Same Sex Party in South Jakarta Learned Directly to Thailand
Data 4	2 September 2020	Kompas	A Suspect of Same-Sex Party in Apartment Affected by HIV
Data 5	3 September 2020	Kompas	6 Facts on Same-sex party in Apartment Raided by the Police
Data 6	3 September 2020	Kompas	9 Suspects Demonstrate 26 Scenes in Same-Sex Party Reconstruction
Data 7	2 September 2020	CNN	Gay Party at Kuningan Apartment in South Jakarta Raided by the Police
Data 8	2 September 2020	CNN	Gay Party in Kuningan, Police Named 9 Suspects
Data 9	2 September 2020	CNN	Chronology of Raided Gay Party in Kuningan
Data 10	2 September 2020	CNN	The Police Say One Suspect in Gay Party Is HIV Positive
Data 11	3 September 2020	CNN	Roles of 9 Gay Party Suspects, Some Take Off Clothes
Data 12	2 September 2020	ROL	Gay Party in South Jakarta Just For Fun
Data 13	2 September 2020	ROL	Gay Party Suspects Threatened 10 Years Prison
Data 14	4 September 2020	ROL	Gay Party, MUI: Don't Be Like The People of Prophet Luth
Data 15	6 September 2020	ROL	Heavy Punishment for Same-sex Perpetrators in the Hereafter According to Islam
Data 16	19 January 2021	ROL	Call Foreigners to Bali during Pandemic, Kristen Gray is Deported
Data 17	20 January 2021	ROL	Viral on Twitter, Kristen Gray Is Deported
Data 18	21 January 2021	ROL	Noisy on Illegal Visa & LGBT, Kristen Gray Deported by Bali Immigration
Data 19	19 January 2021	Kompas	Kristen Gray's Journey from the United States to Living in Bali, Known for Her Viral Tweet on Twitter
Data 20	19 January 2021	Kompas	Who is Kristen Gray, a Foreigner in Bali Whose Thread Has Gone Viral on Twitter?
Data 21	20 January 2021	Kompas	7 Facts about Kristen Gray's Case and Tweets about Bali, 8 Hours Interrogated, Deported with Her Female Spouse
Data 22	20 January 2021	Kompas	Kristen Gray's Story, From Viral Invitation to Bali, to Being Deported for Tweeting about LGBT
Data 23	19 January 2021	CNN	Chronology of American Caucasians Calling for Living in Bali, Immigration Version
Data 24	19 January 2021	CNN	Chronology of US Citizen Kristen Gray Deported from Bali
Data 25	29 January 2021	CNN	Kristen Gray's Apology and Clarification After Deportation



Source: News Coverage published on ROL, CNN Indonesia, and Kompas.com (September 2020 – January 2021).

The representation of analysis units in the news texts from the three media that have been analyzed becomes the research reference. First, the source of bias was analyzed by quoting opinions from sources interviewed by journalists to check whether it referred to only one source or whether it gave s opportunities to other sources that were contradictory or involved neutral sources other than the two previously mentioned sources (McQuail, 2015).

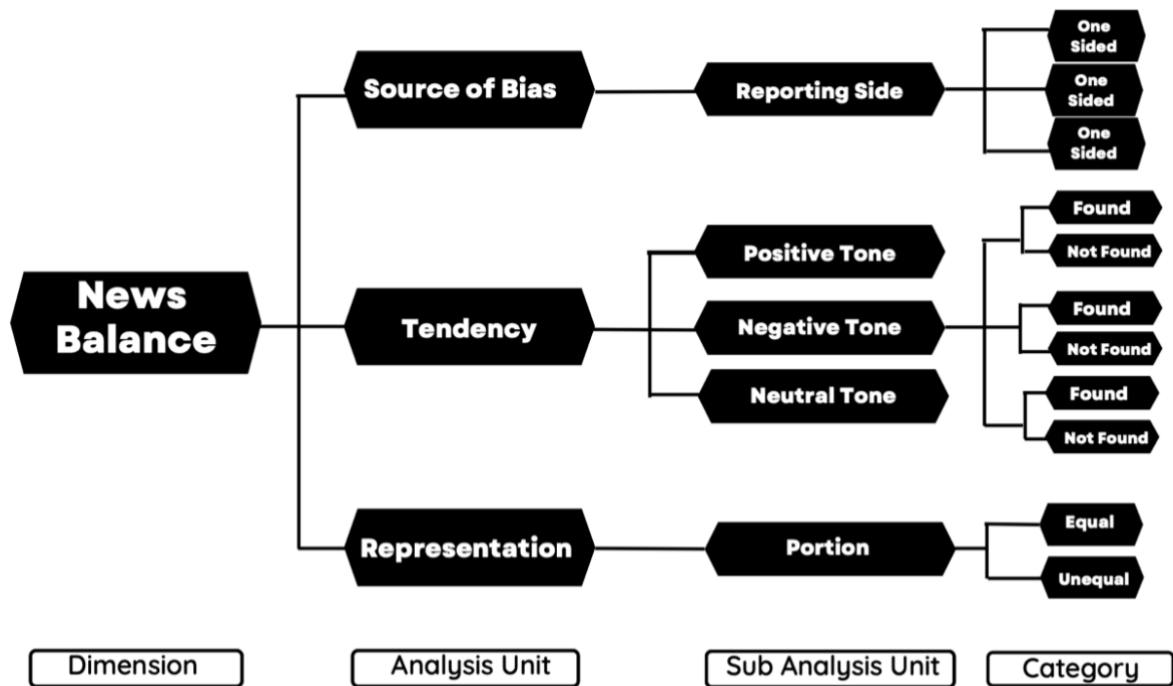
The reporting side has three categories, namely "one-sided" in which it is clearly evident that journalists took sources only from one side (e.g. news agency or by only using interview techniques). The "two-sided" category shows journalists' interviews to two opposing parties simultaneously. This is often referred to as a report that meets the cover of both stories. The "multi-sided" category is defined as one where journalists collect information and facts from several sources (Rahayu, 2006).

Second, the balance of reporting is seen in the media's tendency factor in journalistic coverage. This is measured by observing the

news reports to check whether the journalist tended to side with certain values or conveyed the other standpoint too in writing the news. Media tendencies are simply seen from the *tone of the media*. "Tone" assesses the views of the targeted audience after reading the entire content of the news (Eisenmann, 2012).

Third is the space provided by the media outlet concerned with "representing the pros and cons." This is analyzed based on the representation of the news source being interviewed (Rahayu, 2006). Meanwhile, the equal portion is analyzed through the number of paragraph portions containing the sources' statement. The easiest indicator is to examine the number of sentence clusters from sources that have both supporting and opposing comments. Since the news content in online media is short, i.e., around 4-5 paragraphs, the researcher sets that the portion is equal if pro and con speakers are given equal paragraph 1:1, and it is unequal if there is a paragraph that is not balanced with a 1:2 composition (Rahayu, 2006)

Table 2. Analysis Unit and Category of Research



Source: extracted from the concept of McQuail (2015), Eisenmann (2012), and Rahayu (2006). Processed by the author (2022).

RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

Health issues became the main headlines of all national media when the government announced the case of COVID-19 in Indonesia. Starting from the announcement of two Indonesian citizens who were positive for the coronavirus (Ihsanuddin, 2020) to the various public opinions related to the slow handling of the COVID-19 prevalence rate in the country (Sumartiningtyas, 2020). Further, the media was busy reporting news related to *panic buying* of health and personal protection products (Christiyaningsih, 2020). During this period, unlike the points highlighted in the introduction, there was not a single tendentious report relating the COVID-19 pandemic to the existence of SMGs in Indonesia, except for cases that occurred in other countries.

For example, the news that links the spread of the coronavirus with clubs is frequently read by gay community in South Korea. In contrast to CNN International which explicitly wrote "Virus outbreak linked to Seoul clubs popular with LGBT community stokes homophobia," (Kwon & Hollingsworth, 2020), the news published in CNN Indonesia only contained the prohibition of nightclubs from operating and the number of club visitors infected with the virus (Dea, 2020). Of the three stories published in CNN Indonesia, one of them quoted AFP about the South Korean government's efforts to track gay nightclubs as reported on May 12, 2020 in the following manner: "The government is trying to track down the thousands of people who have been to the Itaewon entertainment district,

including to several gay nightclubs. However, many visitors are believed to be hesitant to report themselves because of the stigma attached to homosexuals.”

Responding to the same issue, Kompas.com wrote three stories. Like the typical style of Kompas which provides rich sources, news in Kompas.com also provides an equal portion. In fact, in the news dated May 17, 2020, Kompas.com deliberately wrote the subtitle "Prevent Discrimination and Stigmatization" to underline the message related to LGBT, which is as follows: “The first case that occurred in the cluster occurred in a nightclub that is said to be a gathering place for homosexuals. This then triggers the concern that LGBT people will be discriminated against. This is not impossible, because homosexuality in South Korean society is still a taboo subject.”

ROL surprisingly published complete reports which showed discrimination against SMG in South Korea. Even though ROL only wrote two stories, the news entitled "South Korea Investigate Corona virus spreading in nightclub" (Aini, 2020) can be categorized as having a very positive tone, as shown in the following sentence: “Homosexuality is not considered illegal in South Korea, and there is increasing public acceptance of LGBTQ relationships. However, discrimination is still widespread and some gay people suffer from hate crimes.”

Nevertheless, it would be too early to conclude that ROL has narrowed the results of previous studies regarding that tends to highlight the negative side of SMG, and even call for the public not to accept the existence of LGBT people in this country (Syam et al., 2021). Other researchers also said that ROL's reports on LGBT contained symbolic violence. It can be seen from the selection of titles' emphasis or words, statements, pictures and selection of sources (Karunia &

Rusdi, 2017). The above news is in contrast to ROL's writing style which usually has negative stereotypes against LGBT (Prastiwi, 2021).

News that tends to be pro-SMG is found in CNN Indonesia (Hidayat, 2018). However, CNN Indonesia is less assertive in framing LGBT news, as shown in the incompatibility between the leads and news endings, and the news content (Prabowo, 2018). On the other side, Kompas.com describes SMG as a group that is always oppressed and discriminated against (Rokhmansyah, 2020).

However, Kompas.com also puts itself in the same position as most Indonesian people who see LGBT behavior as wrong because it is contrary to the state ideology and religious values. However, through its reports, Kompas.com seeks to provide a portion of sources who are pro to the LGBT. Therefore, people consider reports on LGBT on Kompas.com to have a high level of objectivity, and the content of the news is not sensational (Rafi, 2020). The readers understand that Kompas.com do not generalize LGBT as perpetrators of sexual harassment or violence (Faturachman et al., 2022).

During the early period of the pandemic, there were three news topics related to SMG that are interesting to study. First, the struggle of trans-women to get health services during the pandemic. Second, same-sex parties during the pandemic raises public concern. Third, an invitation to visit Bali easily from a foreigner named Kristen Gray during the strict lockdown policy in Indonesia. The third piece had gone viral and sparked reactions from various public following Gray's tweet on Twitter saying Bali a very LGBT-friendly place. The last two issues will be discussed in detail in this section, but the news about trans women



cannot be analyzed because only Kompas.com wrote it.

News on Gay Parties during Pandemic

We can say this is the most sensitive case related to LGBT community during the pandemic. When the public reduced their activities following the social distancing policy, the media reported two same-sex parties from different perspectives. Kompas.com and CNN Indonesia both paid attention to the gay party in an apartment in Jakarta, from the point of view of law enforcement related to pornography in Indonesia. Regarding Data 1 to Data 7, it is certain that the news sources focused on the information from the police. The news was written in a straight news style with short sentences.

The news published in CNN Indonesia is almost the same. CNN treated the news like ordinary criminal news. There is nothing special about the incident of arresting deviant sex perpetrators occurred during a pandemic. There is also no special emphasis on previous reports at the beginning of the pandemic regarding the persecution of LGBT community as spreaders of the coronavirus. However, in Data 7, there was one comment from a citizen (Udin_jtot's account) which contained the text "*Party with Corona?*" No one has responded to this comment.

The comment section provided in the online media is one of its unique characteristics, aimed at opening a wider space for public participation, including minority groups. The feature is called "relationship with reader", where readers are allowed to directly and freely interact with journalists, as they do in social media (Ward, 2002). This relationship is meant to build common understanding about the news text written by the journalist so that the readers

would not misunderstand the writing (Parker, 2011).

It can be assured that no other sources have been questioned except the police in CNN Indonesia and Kompas.com. In other words, all news was reviewed in a one-sided manner, with a neutral tone, and without representing the pros and cons. The strength of the CNN and Kompas news formats that make them interesting to the public is their integration of short video materials for television versions.

The two media have the opportunity to relate the same-sex male parties with sexual health cases during the *social distancing* or with the issue of spreading the virus among SMG themselves. However, neither of the media used the opportunity. The citizen did not even too responsive to this incident and did not associate it with the COVID-19.

The discriminatory issue of SMG as one of the causes of the COVID-19 pandemic is automatically resolved. This is the power of agenda-setting in the media. When journalists do not place important objects that relate the gay parties with the spread of the coronavirus, the public's attention will be diverted (McCombs & Shaw, 1991). Neither of the two media has demonstrated its power to influence the agenda of other media (McCombs & Reynolds, 2009). More in-depth coverage is shown by the television version of these two media.

Likewise, the ROL interestingly wrote two stories with another point of view according to Data 14 and Data 15 in Table 1. From the title, readers can easily remember the distinctive style of ROL's news reports. Through the headline "Gay Party, MUI: Don't Be Like the People of Prophet Luth" and "Heavy Punishment for Same-sex Perpetrators in the Hereafter according to Islam," ROL strengthened its position as the media with strong Islamic elements. Almost



all of the reports involved the views of ulama and MUI, apart from law enforcement officers. ROL strictly does not give the same portion to SMG representatives, in this case the perpetrators and LGBT activists, to cast their votes.

Even on Data 15 (Table 1.), ROL journalist included the hadith of the Prophet Muhammad SAW in Arabic writing complete with its translation as follows: "Rasulullah SAW said there are seven groups that on the Day of Resurrection Allah will not look at (with a view of mercy) and they will not be purified (no good will be attributed to them), but they will be put into the fire of hell."

However, both news seems to be separated from the news series of same-sex male parties that are published in ROL as criminal news, same as Kompas.com and CNN Indonesia. This shows that ROL's standpoint as a media institution towards LGBT issues remains the same and has not changed since its establishment. It is regretted that the news is not related to health issues considering that the COVID-19 pandemic was holding sway.

For example, concerning the social distancing campaign that was being promoted by the government due to the possibility of coronavirus transmission among the party guests. On the contrary, social media accounts of the three media show the opposite. Besides hate speech, many netizens are relating the disease outbreaks and the spread of the coronavirus to their actions. As a matter of fact, some account owners show their surprise at the increasing number of SMG members.

Meanwhile, the balance from other sources such as law enforcement officers is written by ROL through the threat of punishment quotes from the Criminal Code, instead of the Islamic law. This refers to

Indonesia's position as a legal state, not a state based on any one religion, which is as follows: "For their actions, the nine suspects are subject to Article 296 of the Criminal Code and or Article 33 in conjunction with Article 7 of Law 44 of 2008 concerning Pornography with the threat of a minimum of one year in prison and a maximum of 10 years in prison."

News on Kristen Gray's Case

Almost all media in Indonesia paid serious attention to reporting the case of Kristen Gray, an LGBT person from the United States. The three national media selected for this study deployed their respective teams of journalists and provided reports on the case for more than two weeks. This is similar to the concept of news reports where journalists act as a *watchdog* agency (Iswara, 2015), and the press carries out independent investigations (Kovach & Rosenstiel, 2011) through collecting, interviewing, and doing in-depth observations for the sake of balance reporting on all selected sources (Santana, 2003). Journalists are also the investigators, whereby in the reporting process nothing is hidden or kept secret (Kovach & Rosenstiel, 2021)

Reports regarding this case were published for several days in January 2021. Kompas.com published 16 stories by providing a balance of sources in each report. Or in other words, Kompas.com's coverage tends to be multi-sided, such as in Data 22. Although this was the earliest coverage, Kompas.com tries to cover both stories, as shown in a paragraph that gives a portion to the representative of the institution that handled the case, i.e., the official state institutions at the provincial level in the following manner: "The Bali Regional Office of the Ministry of Law and Human Rights has decided to deport Gray and his girlfriend



from Indonesia. This decision was taken after both of them underwent an examination at the Denpasar Immigration Office for 8 hours, on Tuesday (19/1/2021).”

Kristen Gray was also given an equal portion to provide clarification. "I am innocent, my visa is not overstayed, I am not making money in Indonesian rupiah." ROL published reports on Kristen Gray's case over a longer period, starting from January 19 to January 24, 2021. This online medium published 5 news stories. In its first report on January 19, 2021, ROL's news only contained one source who represented the government's position. This can be seen in the paragraph containing the information: "US citizens named Kristen Antoinette Gray are subject to immigration administrative action in the form of deportation (expulsion)."

Other news contained only the following information from the Bali regional office of the ministry of law and human rights: " The Bali Regional Office of the Ministry of Law and Human Rights urges foreigners to comply with the current COVID-19 pandemic situation and follow the correct procedures regarding visa processing and while in Indonesia.”

The same thing was also done by a ROL journalist in reporting the same case in Data 18. ROL has not given a portion to other sources, especially LGBT actors, other than government representatives. This can be seen in the following paragraph: "This foreigner uses a visit visa with the aim of having a vacation in Indonesia. Then, all this time she is suspected of conducting business activities through the sale of e-books and the charging of tourist consultation rates on the Island of the Gods."

CNN Indonesia provided a larger portion than ROL, through 7 news stories, equipped

with 4 other coverage videos from the television version of the media. On average, CNN Indonesia's reports on this issue only provide one-sided reports without presenting other sources. CNN Indonesia gives a portion of Kristen Gray's statement, even though it was not the result of a direct interview. CNN Indonesia journalist quoted Gray's tweet in her social media, which can be seen in the following paragraph: "For this incident, Gray conveyed an apology and explanation through her Facebook account 'Kristen Gray' on the Ubud Community Facebook homepage. CNN Indonesia has requested permission to quote the statement. "I made a mistake, I made a lot of mistakes, ..., I'm very sorry and apologize to the Indonesian LGBTQIA+ community for exposing all of you with baseless statements. I apologize to the Balinese people.”.

CONCLUSION

It can be concluded that during the COVID-19 pandemic in Indonesia, there was no national online media report that tendentiously related the COVID-19 pandemic to the existence of SMG. Nevertheless, the media still publish news regarding the pandemic and SMG lives from other countries while still adhering to the principle of journalism. This publication proves that online media continue to function as a “watchdog” by providing facts.

In this research there are at least three issues highlighted in news reports related to SMG and COVID-19 during the first year of the pandemic in this research. Unfortunately, the issue of trans women's struggle to get health services during the pandemic, which was considered by the researcher to attract interest against responses as had happened in other countries; this did not get the attention of the three online medias studied in this research.



Surprisingly, the news related to SMG such as same-sex male parties and a foreigner's online action promoting Bali as an LGBT-friendly destination during the strict social distancing policy in Indonesia are also written as ordinary criminal news. The research found the similarity of titles and contents of three medias, including the presentation of pictures.

All of the news listed in table 1 has a positive tone toward SMG, both in terms of the title and content of the news. There is no discrimination against SMG as they have often claimed. For Kompas.com or CNN Indonesia, this might not come as a surprise. However, for ROL, which has been perceived to have always written LGBT news with negative connotations, the assumption has been broken. Although ROL published two articles containing opinions of the ulama and other majority religious figures reminding its readers about God's punishment for SMGs, the tone of the news remains very positive. There is no hate speech from one religion or certain religious group against the SMG in ROL's news coverage. The news title also seems more like the ulama's advice for the common people.

Meanwhile, the comment section provided by three media agencies is not as full as the comment section in their social media account. However, The readers of the three media who are active on social media have spread hate speech against SMG in the comments column of their social media. The research on the reluctance of online media readers to comment on the facility and their preference to give comments in the online media column should be an interesting topic for further research.

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The author did an independent conceptual draft, methodology, data curation, draft compilation, investigation, reviewing, and editing. Neither party was supervising the researcher.

DECLARATION OF COMPETING INTEREST

I certify that there is no conflict of interest with any financial, personal, or other relationship with any of the organizations which is related to the material discussed in this article.

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