



If media influences society, who is influencing media in Indonesia today?

Buried in a haze of numbers, the evolving media scene in Indonesia would not raise many eyebrows. It would seem that people around the country have a healthy appetite for media and their diet seems well balanced. But is it?

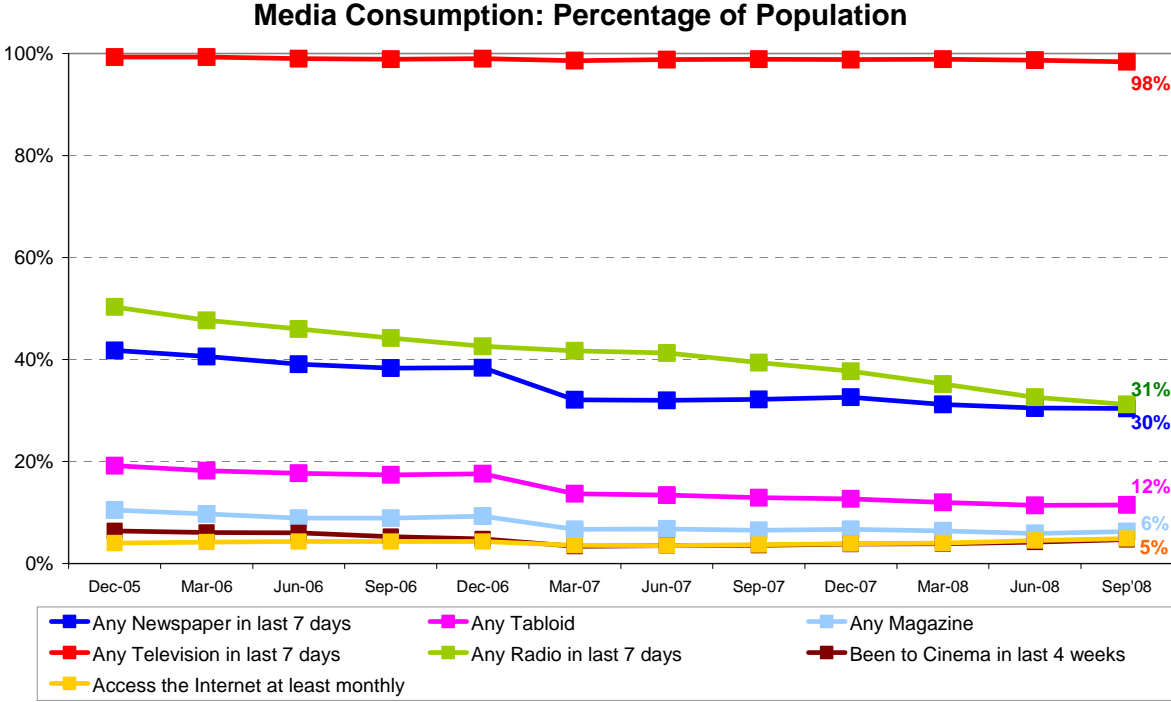
Not surprisingly, almost everybody watches television regularly. In the 16 densely populated provinces that are home to almost 90 per cent of all Indonesians, 98 per cent have watched the small screen in the last seven days. There is a wide dispersion of viewership across genres, ranging from highly-rated news and religious programs, to the more entertaining reality shows and *sinetrons*. The current situation is good, the future looks bright for the moveable feast that is television. The visual advantage is also taking its toll on radio, down to 31 per cent having listened in the last seven days.

The future of the printed media is of course the big question being debated the world over. The venerable Chicago Tribune is bankrupt, the New York Times owes billions of dollars. In Indonesia, the decline of print continues visibly, albeit at a slow rate. Now, only 30 per cent of the population 14 years and older has read a newspaper in the last seven days, down from 42 per cent just three years ago. Tabloids are down from 21 to 12 per cent in the same period. Magazines have fared no better, declining from 11 to a steady 6 per cent today.

The continuing slide of the printed word is not worrying in itself. In many countries, the internet is rapidly picking up the slack. Some newspapers, including the Sydney Morning Herald for example, have in fact grown in combined readership, including online readers who more than make up for the loss in readers of the printed version. The common assumption is that the young and penniless are staying away from the printed copy they would have to buy. Shattering that myth is the growing number of busy, affluent, older readers online who have diversified their sources of information beyond the traditional old favourite of yesteryear. Several quick bites of information from an array of different experts in their field, every day or every week, is rapidly becoming the new media diet for many.

The real challenge facing publishers of the venerable newspaper, anywhere in the world, lies in managing the transformation from paper to screen in a commercially profitable way. That transition is the source of heartaches for the old guard, resisting change and refusing to invest in the future. Many of them cling to disconnected facts, like growth in circulation, refusing to accept a concurrent dip in readership made real by the decline in pass-along readers per copy. With fewer people interested in the printed version than before, a growing middle class may be buying more newspapers, but fewer people than before are reading each copy bought.

In Indonesia, that phenomenon is not occurring at an equal pace to its Asian neighbours. Caught in the spiral of rising prices of fuel and food since September 2005, the middle class here has not grown in real terms as steadily as their counterparts in China and India, even as GDP grew. Compounding that reality is a major worry for local publishers: the internet. Technology is not the enemy, it is an ally for publishers. But internet penetration in Indonesia is not growing at a rate equal to the decline in readership, unable to neutralize the shortfall



The Indonesian internet service provider association, APPJI, claims that there are 2 million “subscribers” and 25 million “users” today. There are no sources attributed to these claims. In sharp contrast, Roy Morgan Single Source reflects a slow but gradual climb with only 5 per cent of the population having “accessed the internet at least monthly”. That would translate to less than 8 million “users”, 14 years and older, even if we included the sparsely populated provinces with limited access to the internet. Even with that latitude, the difference of 17 million “users” between claim and reality is substantial.

Therein lies a major hurdle for Indonesian publishers, looking to the future. Believe what you wish to, but these conclusions are based on regular insights gathered from across the country. Roy Morgan Single Source watches society, media, products and consumers, every week. With almost 27,000 respondents annually, it is projected to reflect the views of almost 90% of the population 14 years and older, both urban and rural. The reports are updated every 90 days. The statistical reliability of the data is not easily challenged.

Convergence of media is a long way away, even for the affluent minority in Indonesia. Access, affordability and speed remain major constraints, holding the country back. Investment in the internet, by technology companies and media owners in unison is a critical need today. Cost of access needs to come down, enabling more people to reap its limitless offerings. More eyeballs will always translate to more advertising revenues, with digital media and better research making the business of communication more cost effective for all. With that digital dawn will come a greater democracy in public opinion, the ability to influence no longer concentrated in the hands of a few media moguls, as in Indonesia today.

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