

Media Discourse Analysis on Religious Tolerance Issues in Indonesia

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ABSTRACT

This study aims to open a new space for more reflective and transformative dialogue on the strategic role of the media in building an Indonesian society that is truly inclusive, just, and respectful of religious diversity. This study uses a critical qualitative approach by applying critical discourse analysis as the main framework for analysing the construction of religious tolerance discourse in the Indonesian media. By examining news, opinions, and visualisations produced by mainstream and digital media, this study adopts Norman Fairclough's model, which analyses three dimensions: text, discursive practice, and social practice. The results indicate that mainstream media are often not neutral and tend to reproduce the political or economic interests of dominant groups, so that narratives of tolerance usually only serve to legitimise false harmony. At the same time, discrimination and injustice against minorities continue. Therefore, the media must undergo a critical transformation by prioritising ethical courage, public literacy, and commitment to human rights to truly become a space for advocacy, reflection, and facilitation of change toward a more just, pluralistic, and inclusive Indonesian society.

A. Introduction

The function of the media is no longer merely as a conduit of information, but has transformed into a producer of knowledge and social meaning. With the inherent political-economic logic, the media is not a neutral institution, but rather laden with interests, ideologies, and power relations that underlie it. Even journalism that appears objective is bound by bias in selection, construction of reality, and framing decisions that greatly determine how issues of religious tolerance are represented (George, 2014). The media frame tolerance matters not only through what is reported, but also through what is silenced, marginalised, or even subverted from the mainstream narrative.

This can be seen in how the media chooses sources, uses diction, places visuals, and sets the historical context in each news report. In Indonesia, the issue of religious tolerance is often trivialised when the media tends to place it in a simplistic and dichotomous frame, as if the problem is limited to majority-minority relations or merely a matter of individuals who are unable to accept differences. Religious tolerance has deeper structural dimensions, encompassing human rights, state protection, and constitutional guarantees of freedom of religion (Sajir, 2023). Media that fail to explore the root causes of issues and tend to get caught up in sensationalism reinforce narratives of intolerance in a latent way, even in seemingly neutral reporting.

When the media presents conflict as headline news without providing a complete context, readers are not invited to understand the issue's complexity. Still, they are exposed to the surface of events that cause fear, polarisation, or even hatred. It cannot be denied that many media outlets in Indonesia are still trapped in sensationalism when covering religious issues. Religious leaders, politicians, and mass organisations often dramatise matters with provocative quotes. This pattern not only reduces the meaning of tolerance to a mere news commodity but also constructs a social reality in which religious intolerance seems normal, natural, or even inevitable. Such framing practices often create a domino effect, where the public is repeatedly exposed to narratives of conflict without being given space to discuss constructive solutions or reflect deeply on the structural causes of intolerance itself.

The mainstream media's tendency to prioritise majority narratives is also worthy of criticism. In many cases, the voices of religious minorities are often ignored, distorted, or represented stereotypically (Saleem et al., 2022). This skewed representation reinforces the idea that the media functions not merely as a mirror of social reality but also as a tool for producing dominant ideologies that can strengthen the hegemony of certain groups. On the other hand, alternative media that attempt to amplify marginalised voices often face significant challenges regarding accessibility, funding, and limited audience reach. This imbalance in the media ecosystem ultimately produces intolerant national, regional, and local narratives.

The shift from analogue to digital media has created a new battlefield in constructing religious tolerance discourse in Indonesia. The emergence of social media as a virtual public space has multiplied the intensity of information circulation while broadening the spectrum of citizen participation in redefining the meaning of tolerance (Habermas, 2022). However, the overwhelming flow of information with minimal filters also opens the door to the massive spread of hate speech, disinformation, and identity-based polarisation rooted in religion. In an algorithmic digital ecosystem, content that triggers controversy, emotions, or anger tends to gain more visibility, driven by clickbait logic and traffic monetisation. As a result, substantive and reflective narratives of tolerance are often drowned out by waves of fast and shallow information noise.

The issue of religious tolerance in Indonesia often intersects with political interests, both at the local and national levels. The politics of identity that flourishes ahead of general elections, regional elections, or other important moments often exploits religious issues as a tool for mass mobilisation. In such situations, the media usually becomes an instrument of

political propaganda, consciously or unconsciously, through reporting that reinforces polarisation and weakens interfaith dialogue. Media framing of issues such as the rejection of church construction, the criminalisation of religious sects, or the prosecution of blasphemy cases often falls into black-and-white narratives that exacerbate social tensions (Agudelo, 2023). Ironically, the media, which should serve as a bridge for dialogue, instead amplifies conflict when it fails to verify, confirm, and dig deep into the context. It cannot be ignored that many media outlets in Indonesia still operate within a newsroom framework that is not yet fully professional.

Intervention by capital owners, political pressure, and threats of violence against journalists often force newsrooms to compromise when covering sensitive issues such as religious tolerance (Slavtcheva-Petkova et al., 2024). In such conditions, limited editorial autonomy increases the likelihood of self-censorship, silencing, or even narrative adjustment for certain interests. This further emphasises that the media is never truly free from the power networks that surround it, both internally and externally. In practice, news stories that should promote education and reconciliation between religious communities have instead been transformed into tools to justify intolerant policies or even normalise religiously motivated violence (Sharma et al., 2024).

The existence of social media as a new platform also presents a paradox in the construction of religious tolerance discourse. On one hand, social media provides a space for marginalised groups to voice their experiences and rights directly without relying on mainstream media (Bitman, 2023). However, on the other hand, social media also serves as a fertile ground for the proliferation of hate speech, intolerance, and religious radicalism that is difficult to control (Montasari, 2024). This dynamic shows that media reflect social reality and create a new reality full of tension, negotiation, and conflict of meaning. To understand more deeply how media constructs the issue of religious tolerance in Indonesia, several previous studies have been conducted by various interdisciplinary academics.

The results of these studies reveal various perspectives, methodologies, and important findings that enrich the knowledge base on the relationship between media, discourse, and religious tolerance in Indonesia. One important study that deserves attention is that conducted by Vedi Hadiz (2018), which examines the relationship between media, identity politics, and the discourse of religious tolerance. In many cases, Hadiz argues that the media is caught up in the vortex of electoral politics that exploits religious issues as a tool for consolidating power. Previous studies have also highlighted the role of the media in strengthening or weakening the position of religious minorities in Indonesia, particularly during incidents of religious discrimination and violence (Hamayotsu, 2013; Haryanto, 2019; Menchik, 2019). They found that mainstream media tends to frame minority groups such as Ahmadiyah, Shia, and followers of local religions in problematic and marginalised positions. Media often utilises narratives that align with the interests of the state or dominant groups, and fails to provide space for critical voices or the experiences of victims of intolerance.

Other studies highlighting digital media and algorithms have also been conducted using critical discourse analysis on social media platforms, finding that digital algorithms tend to reinforce echo chambers, where individuals are more frequently exposed to content that aligns with their personal beliefs and their community (Kloos et al., 2025; Lim, 2017; Yilmaz et al., 2023). This phenomenon reinforces social segregation, narrows the space for interfaith dialogue, and increases the risk of polarisation based on religious identity in the virtual world. These studies confirm that the new challenges in building tolerance in the digital age lie not only in the content of discourse, but also in the mechanisms of information distribution controlled by the logic of algorithms and click monetisation.

Drawing from the above literature review, it is clear that a common thread connects almost all of the studies: the media plays a highly complex dual role as producer, guardian, and mediator of discourse on religious tolerance and intolerance. Previous studies agree that

the framing, labelling, agenda setting, and symbolic reproduction processes carried out by the media greatly determine the direction of the discourse on tolerance in the Indonesian public sphere. However, many of these studies highlight two main challenges: first, the tendency of mainstream media to reproduce majority narratives, whether due to economic-political considerations, political pressure, or sensationalism; second, the emergence of digital media, which brings ambivalence by providing new space for counter-narratives while simultaneously reinforcing segregation through algorithms and digital polarisation. Nevertheless, there is a gap in the literature that has not been explored in depth, namely how the practice of constructing religious tolerance discourse by the media in the era of digitalisation—particularly in the context of hybrid media platforms that combine the characteristics of mainstream media and citizen journalism—operates simultaneously in shaping the perceptions, attitudes, and social actions of society.

Based on this literature review, this study aims to fill this gap by offering a more in-depth, critical, and interdisciplinary analysis of the construction of religious tolerance discourse in Indonesian media. This study seeks no trace media texts or content superficially, and explores the social, economic, and political relations surrounding the production and reproduction of discourse behind the scenes. Within the framework of critical discourse analysis, this study will unpack the processes of selection, framing, and naturalisation of meaning carried out by media actors, as well as analyse how these processes impact the way society understands, responds to, and practices tolerance or intolerance in daily life.

B. Method

This study uses a critical qualitative approach by applying critical discourse analysis as the main foundation in analysing the construction of religious tolerance discourse in the Indonesian media. By examining news, opinions, and visualisations produced by mainstream and digital media, this study adopts Norman Fairclough's model, which analyses three dimensions: text, discursive practice, and social practice. This analysis is deepened with Robert Entman and Erving Goffman's framing theory to understand how the media frames the issue of tolerance through selection, emphasis, and omission of certain aspects. Additionally, agenda-setting theory is employed to trace patterns in issue determination and the placement of tolerance narratives within news priorities. The media ecology framework of Neil Postman and Marshall McLuhan (1975) provides insights into how digital platforms and algorithmic logic reinforce or weaken religious tolerance narratives in the information age. Antonio Gramsci's hegemony theory and Edward Said's concept of othering are also utilised to dissect the role of media in constructing and reproducing ideological domination and marginalising minority groups through processes of labelling, stereotyping, and identity formation (Femia, 1975; Urbinati, 1998).

This entire methodological and theoretical framework is integrated holistically to capture the complexity of the relationship between media, society, and the state in producing and circulating the meaning of religious tolerance. Rather than merely analysing media texts superficially, this study links the analysis results to broader power dynamics, political economy, and socio-cultural constructions, including the processes of negotiation and resistance that emerge in everyday discursive practices. Thus, this research not only reveals patterns of media reporting and framing but also unravels the motives, power relations, and ideological impacts of the construction of religious tolerance discourse in Indonesia's public sphere, with the hope of providing a critical knowledge base for strengthening a more just, inclusive, and transformative communication ecosystem in a diverse society.

C. Results and Discussion

1. The Construction of Religious Tolerance by Mainstream Media

When discussing how the media raise intolerance or religious conflict issues, it is important to understand the news selection, framing, and agenda-setting processes underlying journalistic work. Mainstream media often select and highlight issues that have the potential to cause polarisation, as conflict and controversy have high news value, can attract public attention, and increase reader or viewer traffic. However, behind these pragmatic reasons lies the economic-political logic of the media: large media companies in Indonesia almost always have affiliations with big business groups, political parties, or figures directly interested in a particular narrative about religious tolerance (Karimullah et al., 2025). In this context, the media becomes an arena of contestation where social reality is reported and reconstructed to align with the interests of capital owners or political actors who influence editorial decisions significantly.

At the practical level, the construction of reality by the media is evident in the way issues of religious tolerance are framed. Framing is the process by which facts are selected, organised, and presented with certain emphases to produce different perceptions, emotions, and reactions in the public's minds (Karimullah, 2023). In the issue of religious intolerance, mainstream media framing often determines who is positioned as the victim, perpetrator, or 'troublemaker' in a conflict. For example, in the case of the rejection of church construction, media coverage sometimes highlights the voices of the majority group who oppose it, with a narrative that suggests that the rejection is a legitimate aspiration of the wider community that must be respected. Conversely, the voices of minority groups who are victims of intolerance are often presented only briefly or even ignored, so that the narrative that emerges is one of 'harmony', "deliberation", or 'adaptation to local wisdom'—even though the substance of discrimination and human rights violations is often ignored.

On the other hand, there is also a highly strategic practice of selecting sources to shape public opinion. Mainstream media often choose sources from the government, security forces, or majority religious leaders who are considered authoritative (Turner & Nasir, 2016). At the same time, minority groups or human rights defenders are given limited coverage or placed in a defensive position (Karimullah, 2024a). This pattern not only shapes public opinion to be more trusting of the narrative constructed by the state or dominant groups, but also suppresses critical alternative voices against intolerant practices. The media, subtly yet effectively, edits reality by hiding facts that could strengthen the position of vulnerable groups, so that what is embedded in the public mind is the perception that intolerance is normal or even necessary to maintain 'social harmony.' This editing process is very subtle, running through the selection of headlines, quotes, visualisation, and even the order in which news is presented, all of which can direct public sympathy or antipathy. It cannot be denied that behind every narrative about religious conflict, there are always parties who benefit.

Narratives of intolerance or religious polarisation can be used as political instruments, especially in the run-up to elections, regional elections, or the enactment of strategic policies. Political actors often use religious issues through the media to consolidate their mass base, divert attention from policy failures, or discredit political opponents with different religious identities. Mainstream media outlets affiliated with specific political groups tend to reinforce narratives that benefit their side, either explicitly through editorials or implicitly through news selection (Entman, 2010). In such conditions, media objectivity becomes illusory; a coalition of interests between political elites, media owners, and specific religious groups to gain or maintain influence in the public sphere occurs.

The practice of identity politics is very strong in the reporting of religious tolerance issues in Indonesia. The media, whether consciously or not, often falls into the trap of majoritarian logic, which places the majority group as the benchmark of normality, while minority groups are always put in a position where they must prove themselves to be accepted. Media framing of religious minorities tends to be biased, using terms such as 'heretical sects,' 'dissidents,' or 'threats to national unity.' Such labelling creates stigma and

justifies discriminatory actions accepted as normal in society. In certain cases, the media even takes a normative and moralistic stance, judging groups deemed deviant, and unwittingly amplifying narratives of hatred that can lead to physical or symbolic violence.

Beyond political interests, economic logic also plays a central role in the media's construction of religious tolerance (Herbert, 2011). In a highly competitive media industry, controversial issues such as religious conflicts can significantly generate traffic and advertising revenue. Sensational headlines, dramatic visuals, and provocative quotes from religious or political figures effectively drive clicks, shares, and comments on online media. This clickbait logic indirectly encourages the press to prioritise reporting on conflict and intolerance over narratives of reconciliation, which tend to receive little attention. In the long term, this practice reinforces the cycle of intolerance in the public sphere: the media produces conflict to gain attention, while the public consumes conflict and brings it into daily social interactions.

The effect of the reality constructed by mainstream media is enormous in shaping public perceptions and attitudes towards religious tolerance. When the public discourse cannot understand the issue's complexity when fragmented, edited, and polished so that only certain narratives emerge, it becomes shallow, polarised, and easily mobilised for specific purposes. In such conditions, the media no longer functions as a bridge for dialogue between groups, but instead becomes a machine for producing polarisation and an instrument for controlling opinion that benefits a small elite (Karimullah, 2024b). Manipulating public perception becomes very easy by repeating certain narratives, presenting facts partially, and silencing voices that are considered disruptive to the status quo.

In editorial practice, the media edits reality not only at the level of news content, but also in visual selection and layout. Photos chosen to accompany reports on religious intolerance, for example, tend to show large crowds, symbols of the majority religion, or tense atmospheres that psychologically construct narratives of threat and fear. On the other hand, visualisations depicting minority groups as victims are often presented from an unempathetic perspective, tending to place them in positions of weakness, isolation, or even trouble. This editing subliminally shapes collective identity constructs: who has the right to speak, who deserves to be heard, and who should be wary of. Through editing and visualisation techniques, the media successfully directs public opinion to support or oppose certain groups, even without the news consumers themselves realising it.

The dynamics of reporting on religious tolerance cannot be separated from direct or indirect intervention by the government and security forces. In several cases of intolerance involving religious minorities, the mainstream media tends to highlight official government statements that emphasise stability and order, rather than delving deeper into the root causes of the problem or providing space for criticism of discriminatory policies. There is a tendency towards self-censorship in newsrooms, especially when the issues raised intersect with influential groups or could trigger a negative response from the government. In this context, the media acts as a tool of state legitimisation, reinforcing narratives about the importance of social harmony and security, even at the expense of substantive principles of justice and the protection of minority rights (Karimullah, Said, et al., 2023).

The phenomenon of media digitalisation and the emergence of social media did raise hopes for creating a more democratic discourse space. However, algorithmic logic and virality in the virtual world often reinforce narratives of intolerance and hatred. Many mainstream media outlets have followed the trend by chasing trending topics driven by religious and identity sentiments. News stories containing hate speech, stigma, or hoaxes have the potential to go viral and, as a result, receive greater attention from editors. In such an ecosystem, the voices of minority groups or advocates for tolerance are often buried amid waves of noise and a flood of information that is not always accurate.

Digital media does not automatically bring about freedom of speech but presents new challenges in polarisation, fragmentation, and the amplification of increasingly sharp political

identities (Karimullah, Rahman, et al., 2023). Manipulation of public perception through the media is ultimately closely related to political, economic, or symbolic power. By editing reality, selecting narratives, and reinforcing stereotypes, mainstream media can shape the boundaries of discourse about what is considered normal, legitimate, or worth fighting for in issues of religious tolerance. Those who control the narrative through the media can determine who has the right to speak, who can be supported, and who must be opposed. In many cases, identity politics facilitated by the media has succeeded in creating sharp divisions between 'us' and 'them,' marginalising groups considered different, and reinforcing sentiments of hatred that lead to discrimination or even violence.

From the perspective of critical communication theory, the media's practice of constructing reality is not merely a coincidence but part of a larger hegemonic process. Dominant ideologies are subtly reproduced through news reporting, labelling, and narrative selection, so the public unconsciously accepts and internalises the majority's norms as the only truth. In this context, alternative voices, criticism, or narratives of reconciliation are merely 'ornaments' occasionally displayed to maintain the image of pluralism, without ever truly gaining substantial space to influence policy or social change. The process of othering or marginalising minority groups is systematic—groups that are different are positioned as 'the other,' whether based on religion, ethnicity, or political orientation, thereby sharpening social fragmentation and making efforts to build substantive tolerance increasingly difficult.

Criticism of mainstream media in Indonesia in the construction of religious tolerance issues must be conveyed firmly and comprehensively. As long as the press remains subservient to the logic of power and economic-political interests, structural bias will always hamper efforts to build a healthy, inclusive, and fair public discourse. It requires courage and independence from media actors and critical literacy from the public to unpack the hidden interests behind every news story, framing, and narrative presented to the public. Without this, the public sphere will only become a stage for a charade that presents tolerance as mere cosmetics, while intolerance and discrimination continue to thrive beneath the surface.

The construction of religious tolerance by mainstream media in Indonesia reflects complex contestations of values, interests, and power. Media is never truly neutral; every choice of news, narrative, and visualisation is a political decision that has implications for who benefits, who is sacrificed, and the direction of social change. If the media does not immediately reform and restore its function as a guardian of justice, a counterweight to power, and a facilitator of inclusive dialogue, then the practice of manipulating reality and identity politics will continue to take root, threatening social cohesion and closing opportunities for the creation of a truly plural, just, and dignified Indonesian society. In this context, the role of civil society in continuing to criticise, demand transparency, and build honest, factual, and humanistic counter-narratives is crucial so that the media no longer becomes a tool for reinforcing intolerance, but rather a driving force for change towards a tolerant and democratic nation.

2. Ideological Bias and Political Interests Behind the Reporting on Tolerance

Ideological bias in reporting on tolerance in Indonesia is evident in the selection of issues, agenda priorities, and language used by the media (Ariyanto et al., 2008). Problems that could shake the image of dominant groups, disrupt the grand narrative of nationalism, or potentially threaten the false harmony built are often marginalised, reduced in meaning, or even ignored. In the context of religious conflict, the media usually presents 'peace' as the main value that must be upheld, even if it means covering up facts of discrimination, violence, or rights violations experienced by minority groups. The tendency of the media to simplify or normalise practices of intolerance, under the pretext of maintaining order and unity, shows how majoritarian ideology remains the main framework of thinking in the news reporting process.

Media framing of tolerance issues is heavily laden with structural bias. Framing is not just about choosing headlines or angles for news stories, but also includes how a group or event is positioned in antagonistic relationships: who are the victims, the perpetrators, and the mediators. In the case of rejecting the construction of houses of worship, for example, the media more often presents a narrative of 'friction between residents' or 'community misunderstandings', rather than explicitly highlighting systemic discrimination and the state's failure to protect constitutional rights. This kind of framing deliberately avoids words such as 'violation', "criminalisation" or 'neglect of human rights', and opts for a narrative of compromise that appears peaceful but obscures the substance of the issue. In such narratives, the majority community appears as the 'victims of unrest', while minority groups are reduced to 'parties that need to adapt'.

Not infrequently, the media adopts a more problematic framing, namely, victim blaming or shifting the burden of the problem onto minority groups themselves. Narratives about the Ahmadiyah, Shia, or indigenous belief groups are often reported with a 'controversial', "provocative", or 'deviant' tone (Hidayatullah et al., 2025). Thus, ideological bias operates not only at the explicit level, but also implicitly – through the choice of diction, visualisation, and the logical reporting sequence. Violence against certain groups is often seen as a logical consequence of the victims' 'provocation,' rather than a violation of the law that must be dealt with firmly by the state (Kelman, 2017). This pattern shows how the media, consciously or not, reinforces stigma and justifies intolerance, while limiting the space for criticism and advocacy from groups defending minority rights.

Ideological bias and political interests become increasingly apparent when the media consciously uses the issue of tolerance to divert public attention from other crucial issues, or as an instrument of electoral political mobilisation. Ahead of general or regional elections, news about religious harmony suddenly becomes headline news, with hyperbolic and soothing narratives of harmony. Meanwhile, facts about intolerance at the grassroots level are suppressed, obscured, or blurred through narrative techniques that emphasise 'minor incidents', "individuals", or 'misunderstandings'. The grand narrative constructed is that Indonesia is a highly tolerant country, as if intolerance only arises occasionally and is quickly resolved through local deliberation mechanisms. Independent research, NGO reports, and the direct experiences of minority groups continue to show a persistent and structured trend of discrimination, which is not widely covered in mainstream news.

Media propaganda techniques on the issue of religious tolerance also often work through efforts to create a positive image of the government or dominant groups. In many cases, mainstream media emphasises the state's role as a mediator and guardian of harmony, despite on-the-ground realities showing neglect, or even the involvement of state apparatus in discriminatory practices. News about peace declarations, interfaith dialogues, or diversity festivals is systematically placed in headlines to build the perception of the state's success in maintaining pluralism. Meanwhile, cases of worship bans, intimidation, or collective violence are only reported briefly, or even ignored under the pretext of 'not wanting to exaggerate the problem.' In this strategy, mainstream media acts as a spokesperson for the state, rather than a critical watchdog of the practices of those in power.

About political interests, the media also acts as an agent of political identity, openly or through more subtle narrative selection practices. When political candidates use religious sentiment as a campaign tool, the media tends to report on the issue by framing it as a 'social phenomenon' or 'democratic dynamics', rather than critically analysing the destructive impact of identity politics on diversity. In a situation where media ownership is affiliated with political parties or certain figures, reporting on tolerance is often directed at strengthening the image of candidates, covering up weaknesses, or discrediting political opponents who are considered a threat. In the case of the 2017 Jakarta regional elections, for example, the media framing of issues of religion and tolerance clearly showed the polarisation between groups

that benefited and those that were disadvantaged by the narratives circulating. The media does not merely report facts, but also contributes to polarisation that damages the public sphere and widens the gap of distrust between citizens. One of the most obvious strategies of bias is cherry picking – the selection of data, events, or sources that only support a certain agenda, while ignoring other, more complex or contradictory data.

The media often only quotes statements from religious leaders of the majority, state officials, or elite community organisations with broad access to the public sphere. At the same time, the voices of vulnerable groups are only used as an afterthought or are not presented at all. In coverage of cases of intolerance, for example, the narratives of victims are often cut, reduced, or edited so as not to elicit deep empathy. As a result, the public only receives a filtered, polished version of reality tailored to suit the dominant narrative.

The media also often uses the technique of ‘false balance,’ which gives equal space to intolerant groups and victims, as if both have equal legitimacy and standing. In the case of the ban on places of worship, for example, the media proportionally reported the opinions of both the opposing and supporting groups. Still, they ignored that one group was violating constitutional rights, while the other was fighting to defend their basic rights. This false balance confuses the public, creating the impression that religious conflict is a matter of perception, rather than a violation of the law and injustice that must be resolved decisively. In this practice, the media is not only biased but also perpetuates inequality and normalises discrimination.

The mass media in Indonesia sometimes explicitly plays the role of a producer of state or group propaganda through public campaigns packaged with narratives of nationalism, anti-radicalism, or ‘beware of foreign threats’. News about intolerance, radicalism, or terrorism is often generalised and linked to specific religious identities, creating collective fears that are difficult to correct. In this context, the media positions itself as the guardian of nationalism, but often ignores the impact of stigmatisation and marginalisation of groups that cannot defend themselves in the public sphere. This kind of propaganda narrows the space for dialogue, reinforces othering practices and hinders efforts at social reconciliation based on substantive justice. In everyday practice, media bias and framing of tolerance issues are reinforced by the increasingly capitalistic logic of the press industry.

Digital media, for example, is highly dependent on traffic, engagement, and advertising revenue driven by sensationalism, controversy, and polarisation. As a result, news stories that highlight conflict, hate speech, or narratives of intolerance are far more marketable and find their way into newsrooms than narratives of education, reflection, or dialogue across identities. Clicks, shares, and trending topics have become the main measures of success in news reporting, rather than the quality of information or commitment to the truth (Kormelink & Meijer, 2018). In this situation, narratives of tolerance are often merely cosmetic branding for media outlets, while the substance of human rights, justice, and substantive pluralism are left behind the scenes.

Claims of media neutrality become increasingly problematic when viewed from the perspective of critical discourse analysis. The language used in news reporting is never neutral; there is always a choice of words, sentence structure, metaphors, and visualisation that subtly guide the reader's interpretation. News headlines that emphasise “conflict”, “unrest”, or “potential riots” tend to trigger collective anxiety. In contrast, headlines that use words such as “harmony”, “deliberation”, or “local solutions” give the impression that the situation is under control. The media often adopts euphemisms or even ‘double speak’ – smoothing over harsh realities to maintain political stability, without regard for the public's right to receive complete, critical, and transformative information.

Media framing, bias, and propaganda in issues of religious tolerance not only influence the realm of perception and shape behaviour, policies, and social order. By consistently portraying minority groups as ‘troublemakers’ or, conversely, glorifying majority groups as

guardians of harmony, the media plays a role in shaping exclusive and segregative collective identities. The process of creating a common enemy through narratives of religious threats, radicalism, or 'heretical sects' also facilitates identity-based political mobilisation, which ultimately weakens national cohesion and strengthens divisive politics.

Therefore, challenging the claim of media neutrality is not merely an academic or elitist discourse, but an ethical and political demand that must be raised in the public sphere. The public must be encouraged to read the media critically, understand the logic behind each framing, and dare to expose the ideological or political interests hidden behind seemingly 'objective' reporting. Critical media literacy must become a priority in civic education so that narratives easily deceive the public with vested elite interests. Only then can Indonesia's public sphere be filled with healthy, constructive dialogue free from the trap of identity politics and discriminatory practices that bind us.

Ideological bias and political interests in reporting on tolerance in Indonesia are serious issues that cannot continue. As long as the media pretends to be neutral, while in reality serving as a mouthpiece for the interests of power and business, the narrative of tolerance will only become a myth that masks the reality of discrimination and human rights violations that continue to recur. It takes courage, independence, and new solidarity among journalists, academics, and civil society to continue exposing, challenging, and deconstructing media practices of bias, framing, and propaganda. In this way, the hope of building a truly pluralistic, just, and democratic Indonesian society can be maintained, rather than merely becoming a jargon or symbol that loses its substantive meaning amid the rapid flow of political and economic interests that drive the media industry today.

3. The Effect of Media Discourse on Social Practices and Public Policy on Tolerance

The most obvious effect of media framing on the issue of religious tolerance can be seen in changes in public attitudes, both in broadening and narrowing the space for tolerance. When the media consistently highlights good tolerance practices—such as interfaith collaboration, peace declarations, or religious leaders who embrace differences—it creates moral and symbolic incentives within society to imitate, affirm, or even build similar initiatives. Narratives about the success of citizens in maintaining harmony during major religious celebrations, for example, are not only a source of inspiration but also a normative reference that reinforces the perception that tolerance is part of national identity. In such cases, the media acts as a catalyst for strengthening tolerance, broadening the horizon of acceptance of differences, and encouraging the public to reject discriminatory practices.

However, the opposite effect is also very likely to occur. It is even more dangerous: repeated media framing of intolerance, religious conflict, or rejection of minority groups can narrow the space for tolerance, stir up exclusive sentiments, and strengthen polarisation within society. When the news highlights cases of violence, hate speech, or provocative statements from religious leaders, what happens is not resistance to intolerance, but rather the normalisation of intolerant actions themselves. In a situation where the public rarely gets a fair counter-narrative, facts about discrimination or rejection of places of worship, for example, are easily accepted as 'normal' or 'a consequence of differences.' In this context, the media is not merely a mirror of reality, but also reproduces deep-rooted prejudices, stigma, and collective biases within society.

The dynamics between media narratives and social change are never one-way. Indonesia's heterogeneous society, with its highly complex socio-cultural layers, shows resistance and creativity in responding to the discourse shaped by the media. In many communities, especially at the local level, narratives of tolerance promoted by the media can become ammunition for advocacy, network strengthening, and even the formation of social movements demanding policy change (Karimullah, Faizin, et al., 2023). For example, when the media highlighted cases of bans on the construction of places of worship, organised public

pressure could force local and national governments to take corrective action, issue new regulations, or at least open up space for dialogue. Conversely, suppose the media chooses to remain silent or even sides with discriminatory majority narratives. In that case, intolerant groups will feel legitimised to continue their actions, while victims become increasingly marginalised and lose their space for advocacy (Karimullah & Sugitanata, 2023).

The effect of media discourse is also very evident in policy-making. There are many cases where media pressure—whether in the form of large-scale exposure, investigations, or social campaigns—has led to new regulations or revisions to existing policies that are more inclusive of diversity. Investigative reports on intolerance that go viral in the mass media have prompted the central government to reaffirm its commitment to protecting minority groups, even forcing state institutions such as the Ministry of Religious Affairs, the National Police, or local governments to take legal and administrative measures. A concrete example is when the media intensively covered cases of persecution against the Ahmadiyah or Shia groups, which then received special attention from the President or high-ranking state officials. Although the final results are often unsatisfactory or hampered by bureaucratic resistance and conservative groups, there is at least clear evidence that media narratives can drive political and legal agendas at the national and local levels.

The positive effect of media discourse on policy is not always linear. Not infrequently, biased or partisan media framing can have counterproductive effects. For example, reporting that overly emphasises conflict can encourage the government to take a “middle ground” policy that does not solve the root problem, such as simply moving places of worship to remote locations without reforming discriminatory regulations or establishing long-term protection mechanisms for vulnerable groups. In other cases, media pressure promoting narratives of stability and false harmony often pushes the state to prioritise security approaches—such as dispersing religious events on the grounds of ‘avoiding clashes’—rather than guaranteeing freedom of religion and the human rights of citizens. In such situations, the media ironically reinforces the logic of the status quo, widens the gap for ambiguous regulations, and hinders more progressive structural change.

The influence of media discourse on social practices can also be seen in the transformation of behaviour, patterns of interaction, and the formation of collective identities at the micro level. In many regions, news coverage of the success or failure of interfaith dialogue often becomes the main reference in shaping local attitudes and responses to differences. For example, media coverage of tolerance in schools, campuses, or workplaces can encourage educational institutions and civil society organisations to adopt more inclusive interfaith curricula and programmes. Conversely, negative narratives repeatedly perpetuated by the media about certain groups—whether religious, ethnic, or gender minorities—gradually create social segregation, limit spaces for interaction, and reinforce exclusive identity boundaries (Malik et al., 2025).

In this context, it is important to note that the media plays a significant role in mainstreaming intolerance, especially when the framing does not give space to the voices of victims, critical narratives, or fair alternative solutions. Mass media that only publish the voices of dominant groups, ignore minority voices, or even spread hoaxes and hate speech, easily become a ‘stage’ for the normalisation of discriminatory practices. In the digital age, this effect is exacerbated by the speed of information virality, platform algorithms, and clickbait logic that prioritise sensationalism over the quality and accuracy of reporting. Hoaxes, slander, and stigmatisation of certain religious or ethnic groups produced on social media can quickly influence collective attitudes, trigger violence, and narrow the space for the expression of minority groups.

It cannot be denied that the media also has great potential to strengthen regulations and good practices of tolerance, especially if it consistently promotes educational narratives, advocacy, and the defence of the rights of vulnerable groups. In recent years, there has been a

positive trend in which some media outlets—particularly those affiliated with civil society movements or alternative journalism communities—have actively produced content that promotes pluralism, anti-discrimination, and diversity literacy. Educational content, features on tolerant figures, or documentary series on interfaith life have become important references for the public and policymakers in formulating more progressive regulations. In some cases, media pressure on slow or negligent state institutions has led to enacting anti-discrimination regional regulations, forming interfaith task forces, or strengthening community-based mediation and conflict resolution mechanisms.

The cause-and-effect relationship between media narratives and real changes in society and state policies is never singular or simple. In Indonesia's multiculturalism and developing democracy, the impact of media discourse is greatly determined by external factors such as the strength of civil society, the independence of state institutions, and the capacity of the public to engage in criticism and advocacy. When the media allies itself with social movements and communities affected by intolerance, public pressure becomes highly effective in pushing for regulatory reform and cultural transformation. However, suppose the media succumb to the logic of power, economic interests, or pressure from conservative groups. In that case, the result is stagnation or regression in efforts to build a just and tolerant society.

The effect of media discourse on public policy is also inseparable from the challenges of identity politics and the instrumentalisation of religious issues by political elites. In many cases, narratives of tolerance or intolerance are deliberately used as tools for political mobilisation ahead of elections or other strategic moments. The media, whether motivated by economic interests or political pressure, often amplifies divisive religious issues, reinforces polarisation, or closes the space for substantive dialogue. In this context, instead of a counterbalance, the media amplifies political identity, narrowing the space for consensus and endangering national cohesion.

At the policy level, media discourse pressure has led to several important breakthroughs, but also created paradoxes. Laws and regulations enacted in response to media exposure, such as the Joint Ministerial Decree on the establishment of places of worship or anti-intolerance policies in several major cities, on the one hand, strengthen legal protection for vulnerable groups. However, weak implementation, local resistance, and inconsistency among authorities in enforcing regulations often nullify the positive effects of media narratives. There is a gap between discourse production in the media and real change on the ground, which can only be bridged by political power, the courage of state institutions, and active civil society participation.

Looking deeper, media framing practices often involve strategic selection techniques, emphasis, and even obscuring facts to shape public opinion and political pressure. Reporting on cases of intolerance that emphasise “public unrest” without criticising the roots of discrimination will strengthen the position of majority groups and weaken the rights of minorities. Conversely, narratives that highlight victims, expose violations, and demand state accountability can trigger policy change and increased social literacy. The role of the media as a ‘gatekeeper’ of meaning and shaper of social reality is central in determining the direction of change: towards justice and pluralism, or the closure of spaces for tolerance and the normalisation of discrimination.

From a practical perspective, Indonesians must be encouraged to read the media critically, understand the power relations behind each narrative, and actively build counter-narratives based on the values of justice and respect for differences. Media literacy is key to minimising the negative effects of framing, hoaxes, and propaganda. On the other hand, the mass media must be monitored to ensure they remain independent, transparent, and committed to human rights principles in reporting on religious tolerance and intolerance issues (Prianto et al., 2024). The enforcement of journalistic codes of ethics, the strengthening

of editorial capacity in managing sensitive issues, and continuous public oversight are prerequisites for the media to fulfil its social function optimally.

The cause-and-effect relationship between discourse in the media and the socio-political reality in Indonesia regarding religious tolerance is very real, albeit complex and challenging. The press is a contestation field for ideas, values, and interests that simultaneously shape, test, and change social practices and state policies. Our critical task is to continue to unpack, analyse, and monitor every narrative produced by the media so that it does not fall into the trap of identity politics, short-term interests, or false harmony that masks injustice. Only through this approach can the media catalyse social and political change that upholds substantive tolerance – tolerance rooted in justice, respect for rights, and the courage to confront discrimination in this pluralistic nation.

D. Conclusion

Mainstream media are never completely neutral but play an active role in constructing religious social reality through framing, narrative selection, and the reproduction of political and economic interests. The presented narrative of tolerance often becomes a tool for justifying false stability and superficial harmony. At the same time, practices of discrimination, stigmatisation, and violations of minority rights are usually suppressed or ignored. Behind claims of objectivity, the media are often trapped in the logic of commercialisation, elite pressure, and the hegemony of dominant groups, failing to advocate for substantive change and, all too often, reinforcing polarisation and the normalisation of intolerance in society.

For the media to truly become a catalyst for pluralism and social justice, a fundamental transformation is needed in journalistic practices oriented towards human rights, transparency, and critical literacy. The role of the media should not stop at passive reporting, but should become a space for reflective participation that advocates for the rights of vulnerable groups, exposes hidden interests, and builds counter-narratives to discriminatory majoritarian narratives. Only with ethical courage, collaboration across actors, and a commitment to justice can the media actively facilitate social change towards an Indonesian society that is truly pluralistic, just, and inclusive in its diversity.

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