

# Digital Marketing Strategy as an Endeavour of Public Relations in the Online Media Business

## *A Study on Indonesian Online Media Tempo.co*

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**Abstract:** This research discusses the implementation of a digital marketing strategy in the competition between the mainstream online media industry and social media in Indonesia. The argument is that in the context of accessibility, the current generation seems to be more attracted by searching information in social media or aggregators rather than accessing the website of a particular online media. Consequently, these so-called contemporary channels have absorbed a big part of the media advertisement. This research argues that the mainstream media have been doing anticipation of maintaining the existence of their audiences. It was done by implementing a digital marketing strategy. The study discusses this phenomenon by employing the descriptive-qualitative methodology to look at the strategy of *Tempo.co*, one of the Indonesian popular mainstream mediums. The discussion was based on the assumption that the media must have a particular marketing strategy to attract many viewers. The study showed that *Tempo.co* has managed to collaborate with social media providers to attract the social media users. Arguably, *Tempo.co* has used its competitor to support its existence as well as build its corporate image. This media behavior is a significant implication on the development of online media studies in Indonesia.

## 1 INTRODUCTION

The current situation of the mass media industry is in a complicated state. This circumstance was a result of the vast development of public's awareness in searching and distributing information. It is fascinating to see the people, who were used to be the passive audiences, are now becoming more active. Not only as the information receivers, but the audiences are also now the producers too. However, this activation has brought people away from the mainstream media since they prefer the more social, faster, and sensational providers.

This contemporary development has undoubtedly affected the practice of journalism and mass media business, including the online media industry. The main impact of the circumstance is the change of audience's media preference, especially for the youth, who has shifted from subscribing conventional media (newspapers, radios or televisions) to accessing social media, instant publishers as well as news aggregators (Kolodzy, 2001: 1). Stuart Allan even emphasizes the change

of journalism and media business by quoting the statement of Richard Sambrook from BBC that the news organization is no longer "owning" the news because the audiences have already self-produced it. Even though journalists are still able to validate, analyze, and give an in-depth explanation about shared information among people, they cannot control and decide what people have to know anymore. The existence of the Internet has created the unlimited information source, where people have become gatekeepers for their selves (Allan, 2010: 9).

Many media companies in the world, including those in the US, have chosen to close their business because of their failure to survive the competition against social media (Kremer, 2016). The penetration of social media has not only absorbed their audience but also their potential advertisers. Because of its capability to attract many people, as well as the interactivity it provides, social media network has given more opportunities for advertising to grow. In other words, the improvement of social media in attracting advertisement has reduced mainstream media's revenues. As a result, mainstream media need to find

the best business strategy to survive this competition.

Within this technological advancement as well as the competition, one can argue that actually, the best strategy is not to avoid the competitors. On the contrary, the competitors must be utilized as a tool for survival. In this case, mainstream media need to find a way to take advantage of social media for their own good.

This idea is not an impossible strategy. In fact, with the existence of curation journalism method, mainstream online media can combine their news production with the information taken from social media postings. This attempt is not only to use social media as the information source but also to create social media as an alternative to the distribution channel. By sharing news content's links in social media, the mainstream media will be able to attract the attention of people who prefer to access their social media accounts rather than the online media's main websites. It means, there are chances for the media to regain their audience back to them.

Furthermore, by using social media channel, the mainstream media will be able to increase their positive image in the public's perspectives. The public will see that mainstream media are not left behind the advancement of contemporary communication technologies, as well as providing a broader place for public participation. This positive image, in turn, will attract the public to establish the engagement with the mainstream media.

Based on the thought above, this article argues that social media is actually a valuable device for maintaining the life of mainstream media. Furthermore, this article assumes that the particular phenomenon has been occurring in Indonesia as one of the countries with the most active people in social media. It is observed that many mainstream media in Indonesia have to face a significant challenge to attract the attention of Indonesian people, who at the same time are more likely to choose social media as their information source.

Amongst many popular mainstream media in Indonesia, *Tempo.co* is one of the online media that still exists in this competition. Until this moment, *Tempo.co* is still trying to keep their business in distributing information through their website. However, people now also can find the name in various social media accounts. This article sees that this situation is an indication that *Tempo.co* has already tried to involve the public more in the news production. On the other hand, this attempt to include social media in the business could be seen as a marketing activity. This condition is an interesting

phenomenon, considering *Tempo.co* belongs to a media group that has a long history as a traditional media company. Involving social media is not a part of its core business.

This article discusses this business phenomenon through qualitative research. By employing a case study as a methodological approach, this article will expose in details the purposes and the implications of *Tempo.co*'s involvement with the social media.

## 2 LITERATURE REVIEW

Sabam Sinaga, a senior editor at *Media Indonesia* who also a member of the Indonesian Press Council, expressed his concern about the condition of the online media. He even predicted that in the near future, the online media would be in the same state with traditional media, which were abandoned by their audience because of the existence of social media and news aggregators (Kremer, 2016).

This development has made journalism and media studies need to redefine the relationship between mass media and the audiences. As Denis McQuail observes, in this era of Internet and interactivity, a significant change has happened regarding the form and the type of journalism, in which the audiences have been granted a broader chance to express their opinions (McQuail, 2013: 177). This situation has brought a new culture in the newsroom where the editors, reporters, as well as the audiences can communicate in different method and hierarchy. Furthermore, the impact was also felt by the advertisers who also search for the most economical way to distribute their messages, which in this case is through social media. It could be said that the changes in the economic structure, regulations, and technological aspects have affected the relationships among journalists and their supervisors, their audiences, their sources, as well as other journalists (Lee-Wright et al., 2012: 149-150).

Nasrullah (2015: 31) stated this circumstance happened because of the specific characteristic of social media as instant publishers for user-generated contents (UGC). For instance, photos or videos that were posted on *Instagram* about a holiday destination or food in a restaurant. According to one study by Buffer (2018), UGC has been proved as promotion devices that are more effective than the conventional advertising. Based on his research on *Instagram* publications about *Starbucks*, he concluded that UGC messages were seven times more trusted than traditional advertising, where 45% customers admitted to being inspired by the photos,

and 56% of the respondents stated their interest to buy the products after seeing positive messages in *Instagram*.

One of the reasons for these impacts is the openness of UGC in spreading information. According to Nasrullah (2015: 33), in the context of UGC in social media, the messages were not only produced by the account owner but also developed and distributed by the other users. The comment column, the thumb (like) icon or the share button are the examples of tools that would make the other users give their contribution in distributing the messages.

The benefits of social media and UGC have made these social communication channels accessible around the world, including in Indonesia. The data from *We are Social* (Kemp, 2018) shows that the social media users in Indonesia per January 2018 have reached 130 million from the total 265.4 million of the population. This statistical number has increased about 22.64% from the previous year. The same situation also happened regarding the use of mobile social, where the number has increased significantly as much as 30.43%. Figure 1 below shows the statistical comparison of digital media users in Indonesia between 2017 and 2018.

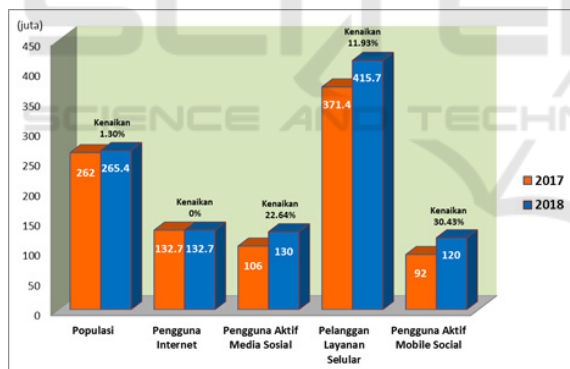


Figure 1: The comparison of digital users data in Indonesia (in millions) between 2017 and 2018. (Source: Modification of Kemp, 2018)

The high activity of Indonesian people in using social media can also be seen from the length of the use per day. As shown in Figure 2, the data from the *Global Web Index* (GWI) notes that people in Indonesia are in the fourth rank in the world as the country with the longest using time of social media in one day, which is about nine hours in average. From this data, it is clear that social media has become the most popular communication channel that was actively used by Indonesians. This

situation, arguably, is a major challenge for the mainstream online media industry.

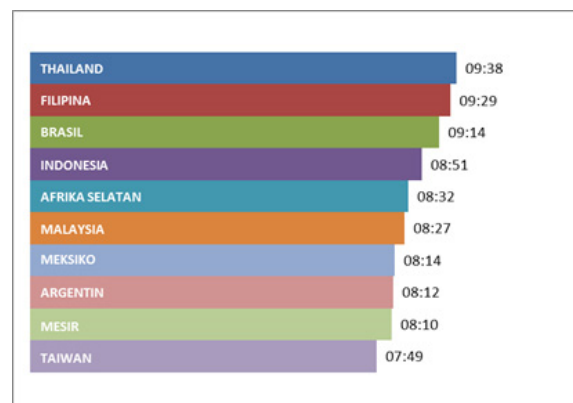


Figure 2: The top 10 countries with the longest social media use in 2018.

(Source: Global Web Index, modification from Kemp, 2018)

With this situation, the mainstream media have two sides of challenges. On the one hand, they have to survive the competition and gain as many revenues as possible. On the other side, the media still own the function to protect the public's need for the factual information. This function is in the same track with the theory of social responsibility, which states that the media must have the freedom to find information and at the same time own a particular responsibility when distributing the news to the society (McQuail, 2010: 170-172). It means the information could be taken from anywhere, but the media have to maintain the credibility of the source as well as the truth of the facts.

Nevertheless, the mass media industry is still a business with tight competition. It has to be admitted that the media depend on the market to gain the audience, to get much information, and to receive much money from advertisers. Within this competition, the main thing besides having financial benefits as much as they can is to keep their audiences. However, this is an arduous task because the mainstream media often lost their audiences who trust UGC and social media more.

This circumstance surely needs the right marketing strategy and public relations action, primarily to build a positive image of the industry. The image in the public relations studies is defined as a message that is projected by an organization, which is then received and interpreted by stakeholders outside the organization (Cheney and Vibbert, 1987: 176). From this definition, it could be understood that image building needs to be done by

two parties, the organization, and the stakeholders. This duality proves that image building is not a result of one-way communication.

The concept is supported by the theory from Massey (2003:10-11) about the *organizational image management*. The management was a process when a particular organization attempted to build, maintain, and regain its image in the perspective of the stakeholders. The organizational image refers to the understanding, behavior, knowledge, and opinion of the stakeholders about an organization that has been spread and influenced by the strategic communication of the organization (Moffit, 1994).

These explanations show the significance of image building in the effort of sustaining the media's existence within the competition. In this case, it could be argued that the public relations efforts need more attention rather than the publication itself. However, there is a considerable possibility that the image building effort and the main task of media as an information publisher can be made in a synergic action. This idea is the main focus of the case study in this article.

### 3 METHODOLOGY

The research in this article used a descriptive method with an approach of an instrumental case study. This method lays on the paradigm of qualitative research, which as stated by Glesne (2006), is an effort to understand a particular phenomenon from various perspectives, put context on the involved subjects, and in some cases, to create a social change (Devadas, 2016: 119-120). A descriptive method has a specific purpose, that is to describe a phenomenon as well as its characteristics. The focus is on the outcome, not the process. However, as happened many times in this kind of research, an in-depth discussion about the process was often unavoidable (Nassaji, 2015: 129-130).

Regarding the data collection, this research employed the case study method. Even though a case study could be done in the scheme of quantitative measurement, it also can produce subjective output that needs a qualitative analysis. Creswell calls this method as "a type of design in qualitative research that may be an object of study, as well as a product of the inquiry" (Creswell, 2013: 97).

The model of the case study in the research was the instrumental case study from Robert E. Stake (Stake, 2005: 447, Creswell, 2013: 99-100). This Stake's version is very close to qualitative research. The primary purpose of this model is to create an

understanding or generalize a concept about a particular issue. The case in this study is not the main object of research but is used as a device to explain a broader concept. The choice of the case was meant to enrich the understanding of a problem outside the case. Therefore, a case study usually chooses a specific case after formal research was initiated. The best understanding would depend on the right case choice (Patton, 1990; Vaughan, 1992; Yin, 1989 in Stake, 2005: 450).

In this article, the assumptions taken from previous studies about online media strategy within the media competition in Indonesia need to be proven and generalized. In this case, the hypothesis that the mainstream media have used social media as their supporting device of news production, as well as public relations and marketing, was proven through a real case at *Tempo.co*. As one of the most popular online media in Indonesia, this research was expected to represent the general condition of the condition of mainstream mass media in Indonesia.

The study collected the data through observing the news and interviewing the newsroom team as well as the social media staff. The interview was conducted to reveal real information about how *Tempo.co* treats social media and the contents of its business. It was done in 2016, a few months after the incident of "the Jakarta Bombings" on January 14th. This moment was chosen because, at that time, the bombing report was very crucial and involved many inputs from the public around the location. Even though the timeframe was happening two years ago, the situation at that time was to some degrees similar to the current circumstances. Consequently, the result of this study would be still relevant to represent the today's phenomenon.

### 4 FINDINGS AND DISCUSSIONS

*Tempo.co* is one of the most widely accessed news portals in Indonesia. Even though the latest data from *Alexa.com* shows the popularity ranking of *Tempo.co* is below other Indonesian news sites, this website is one of the pioneers of the converged online media that was developed by a large media group, namely *PT. Tempo Inti Media, Tbk*. This group was known as a reputable media corporation that published the first news magazine, *Tempo*.

In the case of "Jakarta Bombings" on January 14<sup>th</sup>, 2016, *Tempo.co* was one of the first media to cover the incident with a detailed chronological report. Together with this media, we could find reports from some international media such as CNN, *The Telegraph*, and *The Guardian*, as well as other national news websites like *Kompas.com* and

*Viva.co.id*. However, different with the international media that involved public's reports in social media, *Tempo.co* seemed to be more comfortable with its own reports. As observed in the case study, *Tempo.co* did not take people's voices from social media as part of the story. Even the photo documentation was created by its reporters. Only a few photos and videos were taken from the public's social media account.

Apparently, *Tempo.co* still prefers the conventional method of journalism to cover the crisis such as the bombings. It could be concluded from the case study that social media contents have not become part of the news structure for *Tempo.co*. This situation is an interesting phenomenon, considering *Tempo.co* has actually been equipped with high technologies to engage with the social media development.

Gendur Sudarsono, Editor in Chief of *Tempo.co*, stated there are historical aspects of the business as well as some problematic issues regarding human resources that make this media has not involved public's participation in the news. As mentioned before, *Tempo* group had a reputation as the first news magazine publisher. The tradition of this magazine was writing investigative reports, which required many skillful and professional journalists. Now, there is also a newspaper with the same tradition of writing. At this moment, the media still focuses its human resources on supporting the magazine and the newspaper. According to Sudarsono, *Tempo.co* as the online version of the business does not have enough human resources to develop more sophisticated online news report.

I think we will improve the online content in the future. If we have not done it now, it is just because of human resources, opportunities, etc. This hesitancy is not a matter of allowed or not allowed.

(Gendur Sudarsono, *Tempo.co*, interviewed on 27<sup>th</sup> April 2016)

Moreover, Sudarsono evaluated that with the current Indonesian condition, with the intellectuality that is unlike western people, the public's involvement in news production is still tricky. The quality of people's opinion is not strong enough to be quoted in the news. Let alone the thought of involving them to determine news topic or angle. *Tempo.co* has not ready to risk its reputation as a serious and in-depth investigator.

On the other hand, practically, *Tempo.co* has a strong relationship with social media like *Twitter* and *Facebook*, as well as news aggregators such as *Googlenews* or *Yahoo! news*. The media also open the opportunity for the public to share information or

opinion through a unique channel so-called *Indonesiana*. This channel is actually a blog, managed by *Tempo.co* and designated for publishing people's voices. Kurniawan, the editor of *Indonesiana*, admitted that the activity of people in expressing their opinion through mass media is a valuable development in democracy, and need to be maintained and facilitated.

People of Indonesia love to make comments. They are very talkative in social media. And it is a good thing in terms of building a discussion environment. Now the only issue is to provide a right platform to facilitate them to express their opinions freely.

(Kurniawan, *Tempo.co* journalist/*Indonesiana* editor, interviewed on 27<sup>th</sup> April 2016)

However, because of the quality of the voices, *Tempo.co* could not include *Indonesiana* as one of its journalistic products. It is still problematic for *Tempo.co* to find a reasonable and responsible author among the *Indonesiana* users because there are only a few writings on the blog that talks about serious issues. This condition is also the reason why public's participation in social media and a blog format like *Indonesiana* were treated more as marketing strategies than as parts of the news production.

As a marketing device, *Tempo.co* sees the social media activation as a valuable channel. The most significant contribution of it is to improve the public's engagement with the media to maintain their loyalty. This contribution is the background why the relationship is more handled by "social media staff", a particular group of people under the marketing division, not the newsroom.

One of the functions of social media staff is to share *Tempo*'s headlines and some additional information in social media accounts. Based on the interview, it was found that there are at least four main activities of social media division: social listening, social influencing, social networking and social selling. *Tempo.co* as news publisher ideally runs two of them: social listening and social influencing. However, Thahjono Heru Laskar, one of the social media staff, admitted that *Tempo.co* was so far dominant at social influencing. It could be understood that its focus is to build the media's authority among the public by continually sharing *Tempo*'s most robust news topics such as the economy, social and political issues, as well as other additional information.

We constantly share them to our social media accounts on *Facebook*, *Twitter* and *Google Plus*, so people will trust *Tempo* as the best news

media for that kind of topics, which are actually our strong points.

(Tjahjono Heru Laskar, *Tempo.co* Social Media Staff interviewed on 28<sup>th</sup> April 2016)

Laskar argues that as a marketing division, the main objective of the social media staff is to improve the audience's traffic to access *Tempo.co*'s website. The team did that by sharing *Tempo.co*'s news products on social media account on a regular basis and attracting potential partners to involve with the media's activity on social media.

There are two main tasks we have in social media team, internal services and external services. Internal services, as our services for the company, are done by sharing *Tempo*'s news and make it viral. We also run the online activities with the public. While external services, or our services for the parties outside the company, are done by building collaborations with *Tempo*'s business partners to promote their events on our social media accounts.

(Tjahjono Heru Laskar, *Tempo.co* Social Media Staff interviewed on 28<sup>th</sup> April 2016)

Regarding the activity of the audiences on social media, as well as their involvement in the relationship with *Tempo.co*, the marketing division, and the newsroom agreed that it had not been used as an element on the *Tempo.co* news publication. The activity was only appeared on social media accounts, not on the main website. According to the social media staff, the only contribution from the public on social media is to recommend trending topics, which can be followed up by the reporters. Again, the journalistic procedures were done in the conventional way of journalism.

The contribution of social media was made through the staff's representative on the "superdesk". Superdesk is a special section in the news department to collect and sort information from reporters and resources. Interestingly, in one perspective, the presence of social media staff on the desk could also mean that the public is actually involved in some parts of news production.

When we have social media representative on the superdesk, it means the public will be able to read more about the issue they have already known and heavily talked. So, indirectly, the public has given their topic recommendation to the news people.

(Ferdinand Akbar Harahap, *Tempo.co* Social Media Staff interviewed on 28<sup>th</sup> April 2016)

Despite the involvement of the public in the news production, it is clear from the discussion that *Tempo.co* uses the social media channel and public activity as devices to promote the company. The main idea is to keep the audience's loyalty and attract potential business partners, while at the same time, to maintain the company's positive image as a reputable news publisher.

This attempt of the social media staff has demonstrated the power of the UGC as pointed by Nasrullah (2015) and Buffer (2018). From the marketing point of view, the UGC strengthen the audience's bond with the company. By giving opportunities to the audiences to publish their opinions or information within the social channel of the media, they have become part of the media content even though they only appeared in the media's social accounts. Furthermore, the company can also maintain the frequency of people's access to visiting *Tempo.co*'s main website. There is even the potential to increase the number of the audience by opening new registries. The registered accesses and profiles of readers will affect the number of web metrics in the analytical systems, which in this case is obtained through *Google Analytic*. This statistical figure is instrumental for the company to attract advertisers.

In addition to the financial benefits derived from this marketing strategy, *Tempo.co* also conducts image-building activity towards the audiences as well as advertisers. By opening the relationship with the audiences through social communication, *Tempo.co* create an image as a modern media company with the openness to the public space, democracy, and social communication technology. Consequently, with this image, *Tempo.co* will be able to maintain its existence in cyberspace, while at the same time, keep the loyalty of the audiences. This effort is on the same track with the theory of organizational image management by Massey (2003).

In line with this study's hypothesis in the earlier part of this article, the best strategy for dealing with the competition against social media is actually by using the competitor's channel. In this case, *Tempo.co* must bring itself to be part of the social media industry. By doing this, *Tempo.co* will be able to be closer to the audiences who are more involved in social networks than to access the main website.

There is a consequence to face by *Tempo.co* as a mainstream media company. Its activity on social media will inevitably benefit the social media providers. What used to be the main source of its revenue now must be shared with the social media companies. In today's competitive situation, it seems unavoidable. However, for the mainstream media, social media is also becoming a way to reach a

wider audience and to attract them to access the main website. It means the utilization of social media is proven to provide other benefits concerning *Tempo.co*'s marketing effort.

By conducting this marketing, *Tempo.co* shows its public relations activity to keep the audience as well as build a right image in the perspective of the stakeholders. It can be argued that *Tempo.co*, in some degrees, has changed the attitude of traditional mass media by adjusting the pattern of relationships between the media and its audiences. As revealed by Lee-Wright et al (2012), changes in various social and technological structures have shifted the relationship between media and stakeholders to be more interactive. Even though the editors prefer to use the conventional way of journalism in collecting data and information, *Tempo.co* inevitably have to change its paradigm. It is not merely a dominant provider of information, but furthermore, it is also open contents produced by the audience.

## 5 CONCLUSIONS

The existence of social media has brought a major challenge for the mainstream media companies. Its capability in facilitating user-generated content (UGC) has drawn the public's attention to actively using it and slowly abandoning traditional platforms. On one side, this situation is a positive development regarding the democratization of the public. However, on the business side, this threatens the existence of mainstream media.

This article provides a case study that describes the situation of mainstream media in Indonesia that have to compete with the social media penetration. The study is based on the research of media marketing policy in one of the famous online news companies in Indonesia, *Tempo.co*. Two objectives concern this research. The first one was the position of social media in the newsroom and the second one was its position in supporting the efforts of corporate image building.

The findings of the study showed that *Tempo.co* as a representative of mainstream media have actually been encouraged to exploit the existence of its competitor to maintain its presence. Based on the results, it can be concluded that the use of social media in *Tempo.co* has not become a major element in the news production. The news editors seemed to be persistent in maintaining their dominance in the conventional way of journalism. However, regardless the risk of losing some advertising opportunities, social media turns out to be a potentially useful factor in the areas of marketing

strategy and corporate image building. The study showed that *Tempo.co* has actually succeeded in maintaining the loyalty of its audiences, while at the same time building a positive image as a modern, convergent, and active company in social media networks.

By looking at the existence of *Tempo.co* as one of the most popular media, as well as the current conditions of social media activity in Indonesia, these two conclusions can be an overview of the current state of the online media business in the country. Therefore, as a recommendation based on the results of this study, the mainstream mass media need to take more seriously the presence of social media as a survival device in the media business competition within this era of contemporary communication. This position should be taken into consideration, regarding the popularity of social media is increasing significantly, which demonstrates the potential to drown the existence of the mainstream media.

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