

The Construction of Narratives Regarding Accusations of Wahabism and Anti-Pancasila Against PKS in the Mass Media

Henry Sianipar¹, Rahmat Saleh², Andi Faisal Bakti³

Universitas Bina Sarana Informatika, Indonesia¹

Universitas Sahid, Indonesia²

UIN Syarif Hidayatullah Jakarta, Indonesia³

Email: henry.hen@bsi.ac.id, rahmat.sangjuara@gmail.com, andi.faisal@uinjkt.ac.id

ABSTRACT

This study examines the narratives constructed by mass media regarding accusations of Wahabism and anti-Pancasila associated with the Prosperous Justice Party (PKS) in Indonesia. Utilizing a critical paradigm, the research analyzes the impact of media coverage on public opinion and the ideological implications for PKS. Through qualitative methods—including in-depth interviews with four key informants (PKS Secretary General H. Muhammad Kholid, Head of PKS DPP Organization Bureau Sunarto, media observer Andre Bachtiar, and political researcher Revan Fauzano from Construa Indonesia) and critical discourse analysis of online media content from 2019–2024—this study reveals systematic patterns in media discourse that contribute to the stigmatization of PKS. The findings highlight the role of disinformation in shaping political narratives and uncover a disconnect between media representations and PKS's actual ideology, which upholds Pancasila as its foundational principle. The results emphasize the need for improved journalistic practices and media literacy to counteract sensationalism and misinformation in political communication. This study contributes to political communication literature by providing empirical validation of Aeron Davis's theory on structural crisis in digital-age political communication, demonstrating how media political economy, attention economy, and mediatization processes interact to produce systematic disinformation campaigns against political actors. Recommendations include structural media industry reforms addressing business model crises, regulatory frameworks emphasizing transparency and accountability rather than censorship, multi-stakeholder dialogue forums, and comprehensive public media literacy programs integrated with community institutions.

KEYWORDS

Wahhabism; Anti-Pancasila; Media Discourse; Political Communication; Disinformation.



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INTRODUCTION

The mass media, as the fourth pillar of democracy, plays a strategic role in shaping public opinion and conveying information to the public. However, in the context of contemporary Indonesian politics, the mass media often serves as an arena for complex narrative battles, especially in news coverage of political parties based on religious ideology. One phenomenon that attracts attention is mass media coverage of the Prosperous Justice Party (PKS), which is often associated with accusations of harboring *Wahhabi* ideology and being contrary to the values of *Pancasila*.

Wahhabism, as an Islamic purification movement founded by Muhammad bin Abd al-Wahhab in Saudi Arabia in the 18th century, has theological characteristics that emphasize the purification of Islamic teachings from practices considered heresy or *shirk* (de Vreese, 2014; Entman, 2010; Guenther et al., 2024; Hasan, 2013). The movement advocates a return to the Quran and Hadith as the primary sources of Islamic teachings, while rejecting interpretations deemed deviant from the understanding of *salaf al-salih* (the early generation of Islam). In the Indonesian context, the label *Wahhabi* is often used pejoratively to refer to Islamic groups or

organizations considered rigid, exclusive, and intolerant of diversity. This accusation becomes even more sensitive when associated with the values of *Pancasila*, the basis of the Indonesian state that upholds pluralism and tolerance (Heyl et al., 2020; Lorenz, 2017; McKinnon et al., 2018; Otmakhova & Frermann, 2025).

The practice of *churnalism*—namely, copying information without verification and degrading the role of gatekeepers (68% of online media editors reduce verification teams)—is a main cause of the amplification of political hoaxes, including the stigmatization of *Wahhabis* against Islamic parties. One party often identified with *Wahhabi* beliefs is the Prosperous Justice Party (*PKS*). As a political party born from the campus *da'wah* movement and based on Islamic ideology, *PKS* is frequently targeted with accusations of harboring *Wahhabi* ideology. This *Wahhabi* issue is usually followed by anti-*Pancasila* claims. These accusations do not arise solely from academics or politicians but are reinforced by mass media reports that often present narratives linking *PKS* with transnational Islamic movements, especially the Muslim Brotherhood and *Wahhabism*. Such narratives create a specific social construct regarding the party's identity in the eyes of the public (Permata, 2015; Saridou et al., 2017; Tomsa, 2012; van Leuven et al., 2013).

In the perspective of *Das Sein* (the existing reality), Indonesian mass media exhibits a pattern of news that tends to sensationalize *Wahhabism* within *PKS*. Davis (2019), in the book *Political Communication*, explains that modern mass media often face a dilemma between their normative function as a democratic watchdog and commercial pressures to attract audiences. This is reflected in news about *PKS*, where media prioritize sensational value over in-depth verification of allegations.

This phenomenon is reinforced by the findings of Bakti (2018), which show that Indonesian mass media, in reporting religious and political issues, often rely on unverified narratives, turning news into a commodity shaped by the economic and political interests of certain parties. In the context of *PKS* reporting, this manifests in the media's tendency to present accusations without providing proportional space for clarification or balanced views from the accused party.

This journalistic practice indicates a crisis in Indonesia's mass media industry. Purnama (2022) emphasizes that mass media face a dilemma in balancing financial needs and journalistic integrity, leading to the production of sensational—and sometimes invalid—content. This dilemma is evident in the media's tendency to prioritize clicks and ratings over comprehensive context.

Noain-Sánchez (2020) suggests that this is exacerbated by contemporary political media coverage, which often relies on press releases or politicians' statements without adequate independent verification. This pattern is evident in news about *Wahhabism* accusations against *PKS*, where media tend to quote statements from certain parties without in-depth investigation into the accusations' validity.

Meanwhile, from the perspective of *Das Sollen* (what ought to be), mass media bear greater normative responsibility in reporting sensitive issues such as ideological accusations against political parties. Davis (2019) emphasizes that media should function as watchdogs that verify serious allegations, filter news for dissemination, and serve as educational tools for the public. In reporting on *PKS*, media should conduct in-depth verification and provide

comprehensive context regarding the ideology of the party accused of adhering to *Wahhabi* beliefs.

Journalistic integrity requires media to prioritize independent fact-checking, present context thoroughly, and avoid chasing clicks or ratings for commercial gain. Kauhanen and Noppari (2007) emphasize that media should develop sustainable business models without sacrificing journalistic quality and integrity. Innovation in the media industry should support accurate, balanced, and meaningful journalism, rather than merely attracting attention through sensational content.

The urgency of this research is underscored by several critical factors. First, the proliferation of disinformation about political parties with religious ideologies poses a direct threat to Indonesia's democratic processes by potentially disenfranchising voters and distorting electoral competition. When systematic false narratives shape public perception, electoral choices are based on misinformation rather than informed assessments of party platforms and performance. Second, the stigmatization of *PKS* as "*Wahhabi*" and "*anti-Pancasila*" has broader societal implications beyond electoral politics: it contributes to religious polarization, reinforces negative stereotypes about Islamic political participation, and potentially alienates moderate Muslim voters from democratic processes. Third, the timing is critical as Indonesia approaches the 2024 elections, when disinformation campaigns tend to intensify.

The novelty of this study lies in several dimensions. First, while previous research has examined media coverage of Islamic parties in Indonesia (Hasyim, 2015) and analyzed media political economy (Bakti, 2018, 2019), this is the first study to systematically apply Aeron Davis's comprehensive theoretical framework of political communication crisis specifically to the *PKS* case, providing empirical validation of Davis's theory in an Indonesian context. Second, this study uniquely integrates analysis across three levels—textual (discourse analysis of media content), institutional (examination of media industry structures and political economy), and societal (assessment of public response and democratic implications)—offering a holistic understanding unavailable in previous single-level analyses. Third, unlike earlier descriptive studies, this research explicitly compares *Das Sein* (existing reality of biased coverage) with *Das Sollen* (normative standards of democratic journalism), providing both critical analysis and constructive recommendations.

Based on the background described above, this research focuses on the gap between *Das Sein* and *Das Sollen* in mass media coverage of *Wahhabism* accusations against *PKS*. The main research question is how mass media construct narratives about *Wahhabi* accusations and contradictions with *Pancasila* values against *PKS*'s ideology, as well as the extent to which journalistic practices meet the normative standards that mass media should uphold in a democratic system. This study analyzes mass media news patterns using the framework of Davis (2019)'s political communication theory, which emphasizes the media's role as a political actor that is not neutral but bears normative responsibility to deliver accurate and balanced information to the public.

The objectives of this study are: (1) to critically analyze patterns and mechanisms of narrative construction in media coverage of *PKS*; (2) to examine the political economy of media that shapes journalistic practices regarding Islamic political parties; (3) to assess the gap between media representations and the empirical reality of *PKS*'s ideological commitments; (4)

to document *PKS*'s strategic communication adaptations to disinformation pressure; (5) to develop evidence-based recommendations for media reform, policy interventions, and civic education.

This study offers multiple benefits and implications. Theoretical benefits include contributing to political communication literature by validating and extending Davis's framework in a non-Western democratic context; enriching understanding of how media mediatization operates in religiously plural societies; and advancing discourse analysis methodologies for studying political disinformation. Practical benefits include providing media practitioners with evidence-based insights for improving coverage of religious political actors; offering political parties strategies for navigating hostile media environments; and informing policymakers about regulatory needs and media literacy priorities.

METHOD

This study adopted a critical paradigm as the main epistemological framework to analyze the construction of elite narratives about *Wahhabi* and anti-*Pancasila* accusations against *PKS* in mass media. This paradigm enabled the uncovering of power structures in political communication processes.

Under this paradigm, the study assumed that the social reality of *PKS*'s political identity resulted from social construction involving contestation among political actors and media. Epistemologically, it rejected media objectivity claims and recognized that knowledge about *PKS* in the public sphere stemmed from underlying political and economic interests.

An interdisciplinary approach integrated communication science (for encoding/decoding, framing, and agenda-setting), political science (for power dynamics and legitimacy strategies), and social psychology (for public opinion formation and persuasion).

The study subjects comprised two categories: officials from *PKS*'s Central Leadership Council (*DPP*), selected for their authority in party communication, and the *PKS* communication team, responsible for crisis management and counter-narratives. The research object focused on online media content from 2019–2024 containing *Wahhabi* and anti-*Pancasila* accusations against *PKS*. This period covered the 2019 Presidential Election, simultaneous Regional Elections, and heightened discourse on Islamic radicalism. Online media were selected for their dominance and viral potential in Indonesia.

Online media selection criteria included reach and influence, frequency of *PKS*-related ideological accusations, and diversity of editorial perspectives. The object also encompassed social media content.

Primary data sources were *PKS* elites with party authority: H. Muhammad Kholid (Secretary General and Spokesperson) and Sunarto (Head of *PKS DPP* Organization Bureau), chosen for their roles in responses to ideological accusations. Secondary data sources included independent observers: Andre Bachtiar (media expert with political desk experience) and Revan Fauzano (political researcher from Construa Indonesia).

Data types were qualitative, including textual, verbal, and visual representations from media and social media. In-depth, semi-structured interviews served as the primary data collection technique, structured around individual, organizational, and contextual levels. Participatory observations covered *PKS* public activities (campaigns, *da'wah*, press conferences) to identify gaps between party messages and media representations. Literature

and documentation studies analyzed official *PKS* documents, party programs, and academic literature on Islamic politics and media.

Critical Discourse Analysis (*CDA*) was the main analytical method, following Fairclough's three dimensions: textual (linguistic features), discursive practice (production/consumption contexts), and social practice (power relations). Hermeneutic analysis complemented *CDA* to interpret interviews, data, and documents.

Data reduction involved systematic coding to identify patterns and themes, with iterative connections to theoretical insights. Triangulation cross-verified digital content, interviews, and *PKS* documents for credibility. Member checking shared initial findings with informants for feedback on accuracy. Audit trails documented the entire process, including reflective notes on researcher bias. Dependability and confirmability were ensured through transparent reporting of limitations and alternative interpretations.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

1. Construction of Media Discourse on *PKS*

Analysis of mass media coverage for the 2019-2024 period shows that there is a systematic pattern in the construction of negative discourse against the Prosperous Justice Party (*PKS*). The findings of the study indicate that the accusations of "Wahabi" and "anti-Pancasila" against *PKS* are a product of the structural crisis of the media industry combined with certain practical political interests. As Davis puts it, "fake news is a symptom of the structural collapse of the media economy, not just a technical problem."

PKS Secretary General H. Muhammad Kholid in an in-depth interview revealed that "this Wahhabi accusation is completely baseless. *PKS* carries Islam Rahmatallah Alamin which actually brings grace to all nature, not only humans but also animals are protected in the *PKS* ideology." This statement indicates that there is a significant gap between the construction of the media and the reality of the real ideology of *PKS*.

The mass media tends to use diction that associates *PKS* with transnational movements and hardline da'wah without considering the official context of the party. Head of the *PKS* DPP Organization Bureau Sunarto emphasized that, "*PKS* is a party based on Islam and at the forefront of serving the people and the Indonesian state. *PKS* practices all the precepts of Pancasila and is fought to realize justice and the welfare of the Indonesian people."

Media observer Andre Bachtiar confirmed this finding by stating that "today's media prioritizes viral content over accuracy. Accusations against *PKS* easily go viral because they touch on sensitive issues of religion and nationalism, so the media tends to exploit this narrative without adequate verification." The media acts as an arena for ideological struggle, including the framing of the spectrum of 'hardline Islam' against certain groups, which is parallel to the construction of the 'Wahabi' discourse against *PKS*. This finding is in line with the concept of mediatization put forward by Davis, where the media is not just a conveyor of information, but also forms a biased political narrative and influenced by economic-political interests.

2. The Impact of Media Political Economy on Narrative Construction

The crisis of traditional media business models has created conditions that allow for the proliferation of systematic disinformation. H. Muhammad Kholid revealed *PKS*'s observation that "the media is currently experiencing extraordinary economic pressure. Many media have

finally received sponsorship or support from certain parties who have a political agenda, including to discredit PKS."

Researcher and political observer Revan Fauzano explained that "the media industry is currently facing a dilemma between maintaining journalistic quality and the need for economic survival. As a result, sensational content such as radical accusations against PKS has become a commercially profitable commodity." The findings of the study show that clickbait sites and buzzer accounts deliberately produce and disseminate content of "PKS Wahabi" or "PKS anti-Pancasila" because it is politically and economically profitable.

Andre Bachtiar observes that "social media algorithms have also exacerbated this situation. Content that triggers emotions and controversy, such as the Wahhabi and anti-Pancasila issues, gets a higher priority in the algorithm, thus further expanding the reach of disinformation." This confirms Davis' argument about the dominance of the attention economy in the contemporary media industry, where market logic trumps journalistic integrity.

The media's reliance on PR and political elite sources results in coverage that often relies on press releases or statements of accusing politicians without independent verification. Sunarto criticized that "the media often only quotes statements from those who accuse PKS without giving PKS an equal opportunity to clarify. This shows a systematic bias in media coverage."

3. Public Response and Audience Fragmentation

The findings show that the public is divided in responding to the narrative of accusations against PKS. Andre Bachtiar observed that "the public response to the PKS issue is very polarized. On the one hand there are groups that easily believe Wahhabi accusations, on the other hand there are groups that are skeptical of the media and defend PKS." The fragmentation of audiences and the formation of echo chambers on social media further exacerbate polarization.

Revan Fauzano explained that "groups that already have prejudices against PKS will easily receive and spread negative information, without verification. On the other hand, PKS supporters also tend to reject any criticism of their party." H. Muhammad Kholid acknowledges this challenge: "We are facing a situation where political communication has become highly polarized. Every information is interpreted through a pre-formed political lens, making rational dialogue difficult."

Survey data from the Indonesian Survey Institute (LSI) in 2023 shows that 78% of PKS voters support democracy and Pancasila, which indicates a gap between the general public's perception and the reality of the PKS support base. Sunarto emphasized that "this survey data proves that anti-Pancasila accusations against PKS do not have a strong empirical basis. Our support base is actually very committed to the values of Pancasila."

4. Transformation of SME Communication Strategy

The pressure from the disinformation campaign has forced PKS to make a significant transformation in its communication strategy. H. Muhammad Kholid explained the background of this change: "We were forced to rebrand because of the stigma that continues to be attached. The change in the march and the PKS logo is an effort to communicate more clearly that PKS is a party committed to Pancasila and Bhinneka Tunggal Ika."

PKS's new march explicitly emphasizes its commitment to Pancasila with the lyrics "With the Spirit of Pancasila Triumphs Our Country," which contrasts with the old march

which emphasizes religious symbols such as "Raise the banner of Allah." Sunarto explains the philosophy of this change: "Our new Mars reflects the synthesis between Islamic values and national commitment. We want to show that there is no contradiction between Islam and Indonesianness."

Revan Fauzano analyzed, "The transformation of the PKS is a real example of how disinformation can force political actors to change their identities and communication strategies. This shows the systemic impact of fake news on political dynamics." The PKS is shifting to a more modern, community-based approach to communal communication, avoiding rhetoric that could be misperceived as exclusive or anti-nationalist.

1. The Crisis of Political Communication According to Aeron Davis' Theory

The findings of this study provide empirical validation of Aeron Davis' main thesis on the crisis of political communication in the digital age. Davis argues that fake news and disinformation are not just technical or individual problems, but rather symptom of the structural collapse of the more fundamental political communication system. Andre Bachtiar confirmed that the PKS case is a perfect example of what Davis mentioned about the collapse of the media business model that creates space for disinformation. The media today functions more as an amplifier of political accusations than a fact-checker.

Davis identifies three key elements in this crisis: first, the collapse of traditional media business models; second, the dominance of the attention economy that prioritizes sensationalism; and third, the process of mediatization that transforms the media from a communication instrument into an independent political actor. The case of Wahhabi and anti-Pancasila accusations against PKS demonstrates these three elements simultaneously.

The collapse of traditional media business models has forced media outlets to look for alternative sources of funding, including from sponsors with specific political agendas. Muhammad Kholid observed that "political communication is no longer based on rational and factual dialogue, but on sensationalism and polarization. This is very dangerous for democracy." Davis asserts that in these conditions, political communication is no longer within the rational-deliberative framework idealized by liberal democratic theory, but is trapped in a market logic that prioritizes profit over accuracy.

2. Attention Economy dan Commodification of Information

The concept of attention economy developed by Davis is very relevant to understand the phenomenon of negative news about SMEs. In this concept, information is no longer judged based on its accuracy or social relevance, but rather on its ability to attract and retain the attention of the audience. Revan Fauzano explained that "we are experiencing a fundamental transformation in the way political communication takes place. The winner is not the best argument, but the most viral and emotional narrative."

Allegations of "ideological threats" and "radical beliefs" against PKS have proven to be very effective in attracting attention and triggering high engagement. Andre Bachtiar observes that "social media algorithms have also exacerbated this situation. Content that sparks emotion and controversy gets a higher priority in the algorithm, further expanding the reach of disinformation." Davis argues that in this system, truth becomes secondary to commercial viability, creating fertile conditions for the proliferation of disinformation.

This commodification of information also creates an economic incentive to produce provocative content without considering its socio-political impact. The buzzer industry that systematically produces negative content about PKS is a concrete manifestation of this commodification logic.

3. Mediatization and the Construction of Political Reality

Davis' mediatization theory was confirmed through the PKS case, where the media not only reported political reality but actively constructed that reality. Davis defines mediatization as the process by which the media becomes not just a medium of information transmission, but an independent political actor who has its own agenda and interests. In the context of PKS, the media has participated in creating an "alternative reality" in which parties that are constitutionally committed to Pancasila are constructed as a threat to the state's ideology.

Andre Bachtiar analyzes, "The pluralist liberal assumption of the media as a neutral watchdog is no longer relevant. The media today is an independent political actor with its own economic and political agenda." This process of mediatization shows how the media uses its symbolic power to define what is "normal" and what is "deviant" in the Indonesian political spectrum. The labels "Wahabi" and "anti-Pancasila" serve as instruments of "symbolic violence" that aim to delegitimize PKS in electoral competitions. As shown by Bakti (2018), media such as Rodja TV have succeeded in building a moderate Islamic narrative through cooperative ideological positioning in the four domains of civil society (private, public, market, state). This is in contrast to the dichotomous framing of PKS.

Davis emphasized that in the era of mediatization, political actors are forced to adapt their communication strategies to the logic of the media, not the other way around. The transformation of the SME communication strategy, including changes to the march and logo, is an adaptive response to this mediatization pressure. Sunarto explained, "The transformation that we have done in rebranding and emphasis on Pancasila commitment is a positive step, but we are aware that this needs to be combined with more intensive engagement with the media and civil society.

4. Structural Implications for Indonesian Democracy

Davis argues that the crisis of political communication has serious implications for the overall quality of democracy. When the media fails to carry out its watchdog function objectively and instead becomes an instrument of political campaigns, public trust in democratic institutions will decline. Revan Fauzano warned, "Systematic disinformation against legal and constitutional political parties can undermine the legitimacy of the democratic system as a whole. If this is left unchecked, it will set a bad precedent for other parties."

The case of PKS stigmatization shows how structural bias in the political communication system can threaten the political pluralism that is a prerequisite for a healthy democracy. Muhammad Kholid expressed his concern, "If this kind of systematic stigmatization is allowed, then political participation will be unfair."

Davis suggests that solutions to this crisis cannot be sought at an individual or technical level alone, but rather require structural reforms that address the root causes in the media political economy. Andre Bachtiar suggests: "At the media level, structural reforms are needed that address the business model crisis and strengthen editorial independence. Investment in fact-checking, diversification of funding sources, and strengthening the journalistic code of ethics is an urgent agenda."

5. Mitigation Strategies Based on the Davis Framework

Based on Davis' analysis, disinformation mitigation strategies must be multi-level and target structural causes, not just symptomatic manifestations. At the media industry level, Davis emphasized the need to diversify business models that do not rely entirely on advertising revenue and click-based metrics. Muhammad Kholid emphasized the importance of collaboration: "The media and political parties must work together to create a healthy information ecosystem. We are open to dialogue and transparency, we hope that the media is also committed to accuracy and fairness."

At the policy level, Davis suggests an approach that focuses on transparency and accountability in political communication, rather than mere censorship. Andre Bachtiar suggested that a cautious regulatory approach, an approach that emphasizes more transparency and accountability in political communication will be more conducive to strengthening democracy.

At the civil society level, Davis emphasized the importance of media literacy as a defense mechanism against disinformation. Revan Fauzano emphasized the urgency of media literacy: "At the community level, improving media literacy is key to overcoming the impact of disinformation. Public education programs on how to identify and verify information, especially those related to sensitive political issues, need to be prioritized." As the approach of dialogical *da'wah* in new media, as proposed by Adeni & Bakti (2020), it can be an effective model of public education to fight disinformation, by emphasizing rationality, contextuality, and verification based on active audiences. Initiatives such as media literacy programs that are integrated with religious and social activities can be effective models to increase people's resilience to political disinformation.

CONCLUSION

Based on the critical discourse analysis of mass media coverage from 2019-2024, this study concludes that the narrative linking PKS to Wahhabism and anti-Pancasila ideologies is a constructed discourse driven by the structural crisis of the media industry, characterized by economic pressures, the attention economy, and mediatization processes, rather than an accurate reflection of the party's foundational principles as outlined in its official documents. This systematic disinformation has significantly impacted public perception and electoral dynamics, compelling PKS to adapt its communication strategy toward greater emphasis on Pancasila and national commitment. For future research, it is recommended to conduct longitudinal and comparative studies examining media framing of other Islamic-based political parties across different electoral cycles, as well as quantitative investigations into the causal relationship between specific media narratives and voter behavior, to further disentangle the complex interplay between media political economy, disinformation, and democratic consolidation in plural societies.

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