

Digital Media, Public Pressure, and Corruption Exposure: An Investigative Journalism Perspective

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ABSTRACT

Background: Digital media has changed the practice of investigative journalism significantly, particularly in exposing corruption by public officers. Digital platforms have been built to enhance access to information and to involve the public. **Purpose:** The objective of this study is to examine the role of digital investigative journalism in exposing corruption from the perspective of digital media, public pressure and institutional accountability. **Methods:** This research employs qualitative method through literature study and instrumental case study in corruption case of Rafael Alun Trisambodo. The data were collected by analysis of documents of scientific literature, research reports and digital media sources. **Results:** The results of this study show that digital investigative journalism can accelerate the accumulation of evidence and improve the capability to set the agenda in the construction of public discourse. The intersection of open source intelligence, AI and big data facilitates journalists to better find obscure patterns and networks, while crowd-based investigations offer citizens a better chance to find corruption. We can observe that, in the analyzed cases, digital media also play an important role in the transformation of social events into opportunities for uncovering corruption. Misinformation, cyber attacks, issues of ethics, and gaps in online literacy can have dire consequences for the credibility of the research process. **Conclusion:** The case of Rafael Alun Trisambodo shows the power of investigative journalism, social media activism and public demand in the digital era to reveal corruption. The results demonstrate how digital media can transform non-corruption events into an opportunity to expose corruption and institutional accountability. **Implications:** Investigative journalism has improved transparency, accountability, and democratic oversight. It additionally emphasizes the need for ethical standards, mechanisms for verification and improved online literacy which are critical to the sustainability and reliability of digital research practices.

Keywords: corruption; digital investigative journalism; OSINT; public engagement

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INTRODUCTION

Investigative journalism has a long history of revealing evidence where wrongdoings such as criminal acts or abuse of power have occurred, and this includes corruption involving public officials. Investigative journalism can serve the public accountability of government institutions via detailed investigations, prompt verification of evidence and methodical reporting. In the present, advances in digital communication technology and social media have led to revolutionary changes of investigative journalism. With the universal availability of information, easy data collection and increased public engagement (including monitoring government accountability) a change has occurred.

The increasing extension of social media allows the public domain to expose more and more corruptions from public officials (Rifai et al., 2021, p. 444). Corruption cases including many officials that have been caught are indeed the power of law enforcement agencies in Indonesia, such as The Corruption Eradication Commission (Komisi Pemberantasan Korupsi - KPK), The Attorney General's Office of The Republic of Indonesian and other legal institutions or organs. But it is the media itself that has played a major role by offering widespread examples of observing and revealing previously obscured conduct, exposing corrupt officials working as well (Palau & Palomo, 2021, p. 5) to create spaces for discourses with diverse perspectives and arguments.

Social Media has managed to grow with the basic premise of changing interactions between the public, governance institutions and also public oversight. This is crucial change in Indonesia where social media has become the one of main channels public obtain news and political information. According to a report from 2024 by the Reuters Institute, median of 60% public consuming news content on social media (Newman et al., 2024). Today Social media is one of the public discussion forums and it has been used to keep track with how well governments are performing (Noorikhsan et al., 2023). Thus, in addition to a communication platform social media serves as an avenue for reporting malfeasance attention lobbying and accountability of public officials (DeLuca, 2024).

A case faced by Rafael Alun Trisambodo, who was later named a suspect by the KPK due to a corruption case that also involved the tax office. This case initially stemmed from an assault involving his son named Mario Dandy Satriyo, which then went viral on social media on February 20, 2023. From his actions, Mario Dandy Satriyo was then made a suspect by the police who were investigating the assault case against David Ozora (Suryo et al., 2024, p. 2).

The case provides an example of a direct link between non-corruption events and the exposure of corruption practices thru social media. The case of viral harassment has opened the door for the public to investigate the social and economic background of the perpetrator and his family (Brunetti & Weder, 2021). Social media is a collective investigation space where netizens gather to share and interpret information on the lifestyle and wealth of public officials (Rivaldi et al., 2022, p. 168). This phenomenon is proof that the exposure of corruption cases in the digital era does not always start with an official report. It might be triggered by social events that attract the public's attention.

The case shows that there is a real connection between the assault case and the corruption case exposed thru social media. The viral attack has allowed the general public to dig up the identities, backgrounds, wealth and lifestyles of the families of the offenders thru social media. Public investigation has its hub in social media where the lifestyles and sources of wealth of public officials are searched, examined and concluded. This case proves that corruption issues can be exposed thru social events that generate public interest and attention in the digital era (Rivaldi et al., 2022).

KPK has come under intense public pressure to immediately investigate the sources of Rafael Alun Trisambodo's wealth following his son Mario Dandy Satriyo. Suspicion among the public surfaced due to the elite class lifestyle of this family, which is not commensurate with Rafael's civil servant and tax collector profession. Mario Dandy's luxurious lifestyle that often appears on social media has further raised public attention and calls to investigate the agency (Salim, 2024). This leads to a new dynamic in law enforcement with public pressure that is generated through social media. Law enforcement today does not work strictly through established channels anymore; it is increasingly at the behest of a sovereign citizenry demanding accountability. The opulence then displayed on social media raises eyebrows and questions how public officials earn their living. Here, social media becomes a medium for contrasting official revenues with the lifestyle promoted (Kuldova et al., 2024; Suwarno, 2023).

Al-Shami (2020) is an example of how research on investigative journalism highlights the different breaches in corruption. Four issues with the most frequent attention by investigative journalism are administrative and financial corruption, legislative (and judicial) corruptions or abuse of power political influence through bribery, lobbying; health care sector. It is indicative of a broader trend wherein investigative journalism serves as public scrutiny against systemic transgressions and tyranny.

Corruption is a complex construct, which can have varying parties involved, in various fields (Yusoff et al., 2023). Along with the expanding categories of actors in investigative journalism practices, civil society had also participated in the very first data gathering and information distribution (Anbarini et al., 2023, p. 52). It assists the process of corruption disclosure and needless to say allows more citizens participation in power supervision.

Enikolopov et al. (2018) indicate that social media is also helping to control corruption, even in countries with highly limited political competition and censored traditional media. As a result, they report that social media breaks down information boundaries and allows citizens to access, share with others on the internet about corruption issues openly. MacCarthy (2020, p. 5) also supports these results by contending that digital social media platforms are an avenue to improving transparency because they may facilitate greater public access and weaken existing structural barriers limiting the extent of public oversight.

Research conducted by Tahitu et al. (2021) discovered that Tempo follows a recognizable narrative structure with clear opening patterns (83% setting usage), well-developed and difficult characters, and systematic evidence contribution. Digital transformation has led to the adaptation of presentation formats through multiplatform content (92% mobile adaptation) and interactive elements. Tempo's investigation has led to an impressive range of outcomes: three officials resigned, seven faced official investigations and four policy changes occurred.

This research points to the fact that the media's power is the way it is presented and the narrative that is built. The combination of investigative journalism and digital technology increases the public's access and improves the social impact of the report presented (Wahyudi & Sujoko, 2024, p. 193). A compelling narrative and evidence can quickly change public opinion and prompt institutional responses on social media (Manoli & Bandura, 2021, p. 12).

Table 1 summarizes the focus and main findings of the three studies. Table 1 shows that the media job toward corruption is structural in social control formulation. Al-Shami (2020) after his research came up with the concept showing that function of investigative journalism is a tool to hold power accountable. Given the various political institutions and traditional media contexts that have been repressed, this serves as additional validation of the position that social media can fill in for formal oversight. The study of Tahitu et al. (2021) at the same time points out that the construction of investigative media narratives has implications in

Table 1. Media and exposure to corruption: findings from previous research

Authors and Year	Study Focus	Main Findings
Al-Shami (2020)	Investigative journalism and corruption exposure	The media plays a role in exposing administrative, legislative, political, and medical corruption
Enikolopov et al. (2018)	Social media and corruption control	Social media can reduce corruption even in politically restricted and censored environments
Tahitu et al. (2021)	Narrative construction in investigative journalism	Investigative media narratives shape public perception and influence policy responses.

Source: Al-Shami (2020); Enikolopov et al. (2018); Tahitu et al. (2021)

both how the public perceive and responds to policy. From the perspective of communication sociology, Rafael Alun Trisambodo's case can be interpreted as an empirical manifestation of the intersection between digital media with public pressure and accountability power.

The case of the abuse made a ruckus in Ministry of Finance, especially at the Directorate General of Taxes and position Minister to Sri Mulyani Indrawati even ordering an internal investigation against Rafael Alun Trisambodo who is Mario Dandy father. As a result, Rafael Alun Trisambodo was removed from his position as Head of the General Affairs Section of South Jakarta Regional Office of Directorate General of Taxes. The court eventually determined that Mario Dandy Satrio was guilty. Asset seizure and auction of Mario Dandy Satriyo's luxury cars went viral in Indonesia The case is about the KPK, which was designated to investigate it as Rafael Alun Trisambodo's assets and involvingu00a0Rafael in giving bribes (Salim, 2024).

This series of events demonstrates how social media outcry can prompt the institutions working within a state to act decisively. This case is noteworthy for the study of corruption as it demonstrates how in an era with significant digital exposure, not all contamination has roots solely cultivated by formally legal institutions but instead a catalyst was formed through investigative journalism and connection via social media reliance and public engagement. This helps elucidate the case of Rafael Alun Trisambodo as an example to explain how digital media can shift corruption from being a covert bureaucratic issue into one that becomes public, which needs state institutions transparency. Therefore, this study addresses the following research questions: What is the role of digital investigative journalism in exposing corruption of public officials? How does social media participation influence public pressure and the response of legal institutions in corruption cases? What are the challenges for digital investigative journalism in reporting corruption with accuracy, ethics, and accountability?

RESEARCH METHOD

The qualitative research method used in this study consists of literature review and instrumental case study design (Patel & Patel, 2019). The qualitative approach was appropriate as it aims to understand the interactive aspects of systemic corruption exhibited by how digital investigative journalism works in revealing that corruption through interaction between the domains of public participation, media (digital) present and institutional response. This research uses an instrumental case study approach since the case of Rafael Alun Trisambodo is not a main focus in itself. An empirical research setting to show changes around the practice of digital investigative journalism (Abdussamad, 2021; Assyakurrohim et al., 2022).

The current study focuses on the digital investigative journalism model in terms of how corruption cases are covered. It particularly focuses on the use of digital media, social media

engagement Open Source Intelligence (OSINT) and other forms of cyber equipment that lead to corruption exposure and public accountability. This particular case study is the corruption case of Rafael Alun Trisambodo because it tells how a viral social media issue became a complexed legal process involving criminal investigation.

The data were divided into 2 categories. The first category was academic sources, including books, journal articles and research reports or related field papers. The second type was documentary sources ranging from investigative journalism to information online and in digital media relating closely with the case of Rafael Alun Trisambodo. To bolster the case analysis, five media investigative reports were purposefully selected as they contained a considerable amount of information on the chronology of exposure in this incident including steps taken by journalism to investigate options for publication; public reaction through social media commentary and blogs; institutional response from conservative groups (Fadli, 2021).

Data were collected by means of document analysis and literature review. A literature review was performed through the identification, selection and examination of relevant academic resources for digital investigative journalism and anticorruption. This involved collecting and analysing media stories, research publications and public documents related to the case studies. The analysis of the data was done in four stages: (1) data reduction, document and literature selection; (2) categorizing according to communication theory framework Agenda Setting, Public Sphere, Uses and Gratifications, Framing and Communication Ethics; (3) comparative study; (4) conclusion (Hasan et al., 2022; Phillips et al., 2024).

The study was conducted in a digital and academic context. Academic materials were retrieved from databases of peer-reviewed journals, books or research repositories. Databased documentary materials were collected from digital news resources and open-access online archives. These translate digital investigative journalism into a functioning entity through empirical and conceptual evidence for understanding the operation of digital investigative journalism in contemporary corruption reporting.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Digital Investigative Journalism in Uncovering the Rafael Alun Trisambodo Corruption

The research found that the exposure of the corruption case involving Rafael Alun Trisambodo was not from a formal anti-corruption investigation. But, it started from the viral case of the assault by Mario Dandy Satriyo on social media in February 2023. The circulating digital footprints on social media made the public's initial attention to the violence case gradually shifted to the luxurious lifestyle of Mario Dandy and his family.

According to media reports, social media users were actively collecting and disseminating information on luxury vehicles, expensive personal items and family lifestyles. This digital footprint then sparked public suspicion for seemingly out of sync with Rafael Alun Trisambodo's position as a public official in the Directorate General of Taxes. Thus, the digital platform was an initial area of investigation for information to be collected, analyzed and widely discussed by the public before KPK stepped in.

According to the Agenda Setting theory, this case proves the role of social media in the transformation of a personal issue into a public issue. The issue rose and went viral following discussions and debates in social media, from a criminal assault to a discussion about corruption. According to Palau and Palomo (2021), media exposure is a channel for information dissemination and a mechanism for public supervision. Similarly, Al-Shami (2020) noted that that Investigative journalism disclose corruption by exposing hidden patterns of power and institutional violations to the public.

Investigative journalism has experienced rapid development along with the advancement of digital technology. In the past, it relied solely on manual methods and took a long time, whereas now, with the help of technology, everything has become easier in conducting investigations. In the past, journalists relied solely on very limited sources to uncover major cases, facing various obstacles regarding resources, time, and data access. Therefore, their ability to deeply investigate issues involving people with power and strong connections is difficult to touch by the law.

This reflects the limitations of manual investigative journalism resources, which heavily rely on physical access, elite networks, and sometimes closed internal sources. These limitations then cause many rulers who abuse their power to remain undisclosed to the public. This is relevant to the background of the absence of violations, but due to limited access to information and weak public control mechanisms. Therefore, manual investigative journalism is often vulnerable to political and economic pressure.

However, the presence of digital technology, investigative journalism offers something new and more cost-effective or efficient. Modern technologies such as OSINT provide great opportunities for journalists to gather in-depth, extensive, and comprehensive information. Journalists today can access information that was previously hidden or inaccessible, such as data from leaked documents or public data already available on the internet. This facility then provides a great opportunity to uncover major and controversial cases, which can affect many circles.

As explained in the background, this change shares features with existing problems—notably with issues that people had ignored before—and relates to how social media and digital technology can aid new corruption forms. As a result, journalists no longer use internal sources to inform their reporting; instead they access digital traces left by power actors made available via OSINT and leaked documents e.g. access to big data. In other cases, for instance corruption scandals or the reported instances of public officials unusual wealth through digital media it will be an entry point to deeper probe. Hence, the digital investigative journalism enhances transparency and public trust.

However, it does not operate unilaterally. It deals with public participation on social media. The public responds is also include in to provide, answers and pressures against legal institutions and statal agencies. Since that deviant behavior of officials, which goes viral on social networks is a gateway for investigations by law enforcement agencies. Therefore, digital investigative journalism provided a core role which was connecting public concern to the infrastructure of law enforcement institutions.

However, such changes and transformations of information put pressures on digital investigative journalism. The so-called verification problem is a challenge for digital investigative journalism, since social media largely serves unverified information, and thus very clearly carries the risk of misinformation. Hence, the need for caution in digital investigative journalism even when information is very easy to obtain on many different digital platforms. Because sorting and verifying done by digital investigative journalism has a great influence on public opinion, the effect reaches wide empirical data-processing practices in these competitive environments with aspects of media institutions. When it comes to exposing corruption, incorrect information could amount to media trials and tarnishing someone without going through a legal process, as well as affecting public confidence in the media. Thus even though digital has provided the ease in obtaining data that were never available before, journalistic ethics and caution of reporting non-verified information still is a primary basis to continue to fall back at.

Table 2. Findings-Based Comparison of Conventional and Digital Investigative Journalism

Dimension	Conventional Investigative Journalism	Digital Investigative Journalism	Evidence from the Rafael Alun Trisambodo Case
Data Access	Relies primarily on confidential sources, interviews, and field investigations	Utilizes OSINT, social media content, digital footprints, and online databases	Public scrutiny began through social media posts displaying luxury lifestyles
Investigation Process	Conducted mainly by journalists and media institutions	Involves journalists, digital communities, and citizen participation	Netizens actively collected and shared information related to wealth and assets
Speed of Information Flow	Relatively slow due to verification and publication cycles	Rapid and real-time dissemination through digital platforms	Information spread widely within days after the assault case became viral
Public Participation	Public acts mainly as news consumers	Public contributes to information sharing, verification, and discussion	Social media users participated in identifying digital evidence
Agenda-Setting Capacity	Gradual influence on public attention	Immediate and viral influence on public and institutional agendas	Public pressure encouraged investigations by the Ministry of Finance and the KPK
Main Challenge	Limited access to information and institutional secrecy	Misinformation, verification difficulties, and digital manipulation	Journalists were required to verify information circulating on social media

Source: Thematic analysis of literature and documentary sources related to the Rafael Alun Trisambodo case, 2025

The agenda-setting theory is relevant for this research. It posits that the media has the power to determine which issues can attract public attention. Nowadays, digital media can quickly highlight major issues that were previously considered unimportant and received no attention, which then immediately become the center of attention.

In regard with this research, the Agenda Setting theory explains how digital media and investigative journalism play a role in bringing corruption issues from the private sphere to the public sphere. Digital media that continuously highlights a case will not only make the issue a topic of public discussion but also pressure a state institution to respond to the issue promptly. This can be reflected in how news coverage and the virality of cases on digital media become public priority agendas and also state policy agendas, so that these viral cases will receive great legal and political attention.

Digital Investigation Techniques

Investigative journalism in the digital era has undergone significant changes with the introduction of various new techniques or methods that can help journalists delve deeper into information and, of course, be more efficient. One of the most prominent techniques is OSINT, which can utilize public data, social media, and even satellite imagery to uncover hidden facts. It can be used by journalists to gain access to information available on the Internet and to obtain important data from a variety of sources in a short time and at a low cost in comparison with more traditional investigative practices. This can also help in opening great opportunities to trace various information that was very difficult to access directly before as it was closed or hidden.

Another way is that digital investigative journalism has benefited from big data analysis. Journalists who study transaction patterns and large-scale digital interactions. Using technology, journalists can read data on various other digital media. This provides new profound understanding of the interactions between people or organizations, which used to be very hard but now a days become easy. Using such big data sets, journalists have been able to find far more elaborate stories — corruption is one of the most difficult details to get thru a traditional way.

AI technology has a very prominent place in digital investigative journalism. AI enables journalists to perform larger data analyses easier and faster. AI identifies patterns that are hard to spot using traditional methods. Its ability to handle and process huge amounts of data in a short period enables journalists to see important information that would otherwise be missed using conventional methods. Thus, AI technology has emerged as one of the important tools that enable journalists to speed up their investigations.

Journalists also use crowd-based investigative methods, a process of data collection and fact-finding that involves the community. Journalists obtain diverse data and information through crowd-based investigations. The community receives a lot of information through various digital platforms and is also active in the investigation process and uncovering social issues. In line with the public sphere theory proposed by Habermas (1991), the importance of open public spaces is to provide room for the community to participate directly thru discussion spaces and decision-making processes that can influence their lives.

While the aforementioned techniques can really add to digital investigative journalism, there are undoubtedly some inputs / critiques that we could suggest here; for example around public space theory. The public sphere theory stresses the role of society in creating a public opinion and participating directly is an open dialogue on social issues. In the days of social media, while members of the public have a platform to be part of an investigation, they do not all have been trained in collecting and analyzing data correctly. For this reason, it is said that the theory can be criticized in a certain sense as not everyone within society will gather data first hand or actively seek out to verify any truth of information when both are available for free. This is why digital divides such as lack of access to technology or data analysis competences can restrict the phenomenon and thus limit the space for action both on a personal basis and in public together. Thus, while digital platforms open up access and voice to the public in every nation, limited access ability or poor digital literacy results in unequal participation quality that might defeat effectiveness & neutrality of information dissemination.

In respect of digital investigative journalism, public sphere theory has been critiqued by acknowledging that while social media and other digital platforms give opportunity for the public to participate: The conclusion is gold standard public participation will never happen (Cohen, 2023, pp. 16–18). A large section of the general population monopolized access, and has IT skills but those who do not have strong understanding with digital literacy are pushed to margins. That means, everyone should get same level of access to technology and they have good digital literacy.

Participation in Social Media and Institutional Response

This study also found that public participation speeds up the response of institutions. Their public discussions caused a considerably direct pressure on government institutions, especially the Ministry of Finance and KPK as evidenced by an analysis of documentary sources. The growing dissemination of data about Rafael Alun Trisambodo's wealth highlights the demand for transparency and accountability.

The findings prompt an understanding of social media as a collective means through which citizens monitor the behavior of public officials, essentially acting as a digital form of public sphere. Information is not only gathered but users are also involved in the investigative process by seeking online evidence, sending copy and pasting documentation as well cross-referencing public information against corporate financials. Our results are in accordance with the work done by Enikolopov et al. (2018), that social media serves as a useful aid for counter-corruption by reducing information barriers due its ability to increase public scrutiny.

That ramped public pressure comes with profound institutional implications. An investigation has been conducted internally by the Ministry of Finance and Rafael Alun Trisambodo was being fired. Subsequently, the KPK filed an investigation which led to a court process. This is an example of how public digital participation can shape the institutional agenda to initiate formal accountability systems.

This case illustrates how the revelation of corruption in our digital age is increasingly driven by a triad involving investigative journalism, social media engagement and institutional response interactions. They are not different things. They are messy groups of accountability and engagement whose process can funnel an informal complaint into full blown inquiry.

The Challenges of Digital Investigative Journalism in Uncovering Corruption

Digital investigative journalism is potential for exposing corruption, but data on the field tells a different kind of story. The first task is information verification. If, in the case of Rafael Alun Trisambodo easily a lot information were circulating on digital platforms. However, when it fails to realize that not all the information comes from reliable sources and opens doors for misinformation and wrong conclusions by the public.

A second challenge focuses on ethics & privacy. Public investigations usually involve releasing private data, photos and digital documents. While this information might lead to greater transparency, the trend towards more publication is incumbent on journalists to put reporting practices in place that adhere both do be content with our professional ethical standards and not harm those persons who are wholly uninvolved with any alleged misdeeds.

Third is the problem with poor comprehension of technology and unequal engagement. Some citizens are unable to make better use of social media and critically examine information on the basis of evidence (Salsabila et al., 2025). According to the Public Sphere Theory, this after-effect of technology and unevenness in obtaining digital skills can impede meaningful participation as well as make individuals more susceptible to manipulations or false information.

The findings show that the success of digital investigative journalism depends on verification procedures, ethical safeguards and online literacy of journalists and citizens. Thus, technological innovation is not the solution itself unless combined with mechanisms that guaranty accuracy, credibility and accountability in journalism research.

CONCLUSION

The research concludes that the exposure of the corruption case of Rafael Alun Trisambodo was obtained thru significant changes in investigative journalism practices in the digital era. The results demonstrate that the exposure of corruption cases is no longer driven by formal law enforcement agencies alone but rather by the interaction space between investigative journalism, participation on social media and public pressure. In the case of Rafael Alun, the issue of viral attacks became the door to public scrutiny of wealth, lifestyle and accountability which then invited institutional responses from the Ministry of Finance and KPK. The research also finds that digital platforms have upgraded the role of citizens from passive consumers of news to

active players in the collection, dissemination and public surveillance of information. These results emphasize the role of digital investigative journalism in linking public concern with institutional accountability. Therefore, the contribution of this research is how clarity in social media can turn unrelated events into a bridge to uncover corruption and formal investigations. There are enormous opportunities, but the effectiveness of digital investigative journalism still depends on information verification, ethical responsibility, and the capacity of journalists and citizens to critically evaluate digital information all the time.

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