Journal of Social and Political Sciences

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The Asian Institute of Research

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How Media Narratives Shape Public Opinion on the Papua Issue: A Strategic Communication Approach

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Abstract

The discourse surrounding the Papua issue has been heavily shaped by media articulations such as *#BlackLivesMatter, #PapuaLivesMatter, #FreeWestPapua.* These media articulations have gained significant traction and hegemonic influence across both new and conventional media platforms. The media narratives are largely driven by non-state actors and pro-independence advocates, who have constructed dominant narratives, emphasizing human rights violations, racism, marginalization, and conflict, often portraying the Indonesian government in a negative and colonial light. Media framing, which is implied on both the domestic and international scales, plays a pivotal role in shaping public perception. It contributes to a hyperreality in which Papua is predominantly represented as a conflict-ridden region. The contestation discourse about Papua in the media reveals a significant imbalance in media framing, marked by the limited presence of the Indonesian government in shaping the narratives. This imbalance has strengthened negative public opinion and weakened Indonesia's bargaining position at both national and international levels. Strategic communication is therefore needed as a counter-narrative to clarify information. It can also encourage more peaceful interpretations of the Papua issue.

Keywords: Strategic Communication, Public Opinion, Media Framing, Papua

1. Introduction

1.1 Introduce the Problem

The Papua issue is one of the most sensitive and long-standing political and social issues in Indonesia. In recent years, the rapid growth of digital communication has changed how this issue is discussed and understood. Information about Papua now spreads quickly through social media and international media, which reaches audiences far beyond Indonesia. In this situation, the media not only deliver facts but also play a strong role in shaping public perception and opinion (Jamieson & Waldman, 2003).

When examined more closely, the Papua discourse is carried by many political actors who actively communicate their messages through various media platforms. However, data show that in content with high impact and

engagement, actors representing the Indonesian state tend to be relatively absent. Santoso (2022) found that among the top five actors who shape the Papua discourse in the media, government actors were barely visible. Instead, the discourse was dominated by pro-independence actors, led by Veronika Koman with 168.306 engagements, followed by Dhandy Laksono with 123.571, Tirto ID with 62.800, PapuaItuKita with 49.025, and Christ Wamea with 44.017. Four of these five actors consistently promoted pro-independence narratives, while only one conveyed information from the government's perspective (Santoso, 2022).

Media coverage of Papua has also become closely linked to global movements and hashtags such as #BlackLivesMatter, #PapuanLivesMatter, and #FreeWestPapua. These hashtags gained strong visibility, particularly during 2021-2022, and were repeatedly used in online campaigns and international media reports (Santoso, 2022). Pro-independence activists and non-state actors use these narratives to frame Papua as a space of racism, human rights abuse, underdevelopment, and marginalization. As Elisabeth (2017) explains, the Papua conflict is deeply rooted in issues of human rights, development inequality, and social exclusion. These issues do not remain local or static, but circulate widely through media channels. In media discourse, the dominant issue revolves around violence, racism, human rights violations, and land liberation (Santoso, 2022). Because pro-independence actors dominate this space, the narratives formed often carry negative sentiments toward the Indonesian government, portraying Indonesia as a colonial power, an exploiter of labor, and a source of ongoing socio-political problems.

The influence of individual actors further strengthens this discursive dominance. Veronika Koman, for example, is highly vocal in promoting referendum-related narratives and strategically uses the *PapuanLivesMatter* discourse to attract wider and more active audiences. Her influence is amplified by her multiple roles as an activist, legal advocate, visiting lecturer at an Australian University, and journalist. Santoso (2022) found that this multi-role positioning allows her to operate across different platforms and audiences, making it easier to dominate and sustain the Papua discourse in digital spaces.

Beyond new media, international mainstream media also play a major role in shaping public opinion on Papua. Outlets such as *The New York Times* frame the Papua conflict as a crystallization of longstanding human rights violations, relying heavily on sources who support Papuan independence (Zarwan et al., 2022). Similarly, Reuters portrays the Indonesian government as authoritarian by highlighting issues such as media control, internet shutdowns, and incidents of racist treatment toward Papuan students by security forces (Widyaningsih & Lestari, 2020). British media have also published provocative headlines that frame Papuan independence as a progressive step in the struggle of the Papuan people (Martianto & Isnaini, 2021).

Such international media framing has consequences beyond image-building. It contributes to negative global perceptions of Indonesia and increases the risk of public reactions that may threaten national unity (Harvey, 2015). Hayes et al. (2007) argue that media should not only be seen as a tool for transmitting narratives or information (Meyers, 2007), but also as a medium that mediates and shapes the information circulating in the public sphere. As Entman (1993) argues, human action is strongly influenced by interpretations shaped through media framing. In the Papua context, international media framing tends not to reduce conflict but instead sharpens tension by focusing on resistance rather than peace-building narratives (Martianto & Wahid, 2021). This condition reflects the logic of hyperreality, in which media representations become more powerful than actual social conditions on the ground and guide how audiences understand reality (Baudrillard, as cited in Santoso, 2022).

Although often absent in dominant media narratives, the Indonesian government has not remained entirely passive. One major effort is the implementation of Special Autonomy (Otonomi Khusus) through Law No. 21 of 2001, which grants Papua broader authority to manage its own governance. This policy was intended to address political grievances and reduce separatist activities (Lefaan, Nugroho, & Mudiono, 2012). However, special autonomy has also produced unintended effects. Some Papuan political elites interpret special autonomy (*Otonomi Khusus)* as a form of ethnic-based self-determination, leading to policies that require regional leaders to be indigenous Papuans. This has encouraged ethnocentric political mobilization, intensified ethnic-based conflicts, and worsened security conditions in areas such as Jayapura (Lefaan et al., 2012).

In this context, the imbalance of media narratives, the dominance of hyperreal representations, and the weak presence of state actors in high-impact discourse have significantly shaped public opinion. Domestically and internationally, public perceptions tend to follow dominant narratives, which weakens Indonesia's bargaining position and increases social and political polarization (Elisabeth, 2021). In response to these challenges, strategic communication becomes a crucial tool. Strategic communication enables the state to manage information, counter exaggerated or misleading narratives, and promote more balanced and peace-oriented interpretations of the Papua issue (Tatham, 2010; Fredriksson & Pallas, 2015).

2. Method

A constructive paradigm is employed, viewing social reality as the result of interpretation and meaning-making rather than as an objective and fixed entity (Kuhn, 1962; Friedrichs, 1970). Drawing on Popper's concept of the three worlds, reality is understood as the interaction between material conditions, subjective interpretations, and human-produced knowledge, including media discourse (Popper, 2026). Within this framework, media representations of the Papua issue are treated as socially constructed narratives shaped by political, cultural, and communicative contexts rather than neutral reflections of reality.

A qualitative approach with exploratory and explanatory designs is applied to examine the formation of public opinion on Papua through media narratives (Yin, as cited in Santosa, 2021). A total of 4,684 news articles were collected using web scraping techniques from major national and international media outlets, including Detik, Tribun, Kompas, and Tirto.id, CNN, Reuters, Al Jazeera, and Green Left. The collected texts are analyzed using Computer Assisted Qualitative Data Analysis Software (CAQDAS) with NVivo 12. Hierarchy charts are used to identify dominant events and discourses related to Papua, followed by thematic and cluster analysis to examine emerging topics and their correlations across media narratives. In-depth interviews are conducted to identify public opinion regarding the Papua issue and to understand how media discourse influences audience perceptions. Data selection and reduction are carried out to distinguish relevant from non-relevant information, enabling analysis of how Papua is constructed in public consciousness. Based on these analytical findings, a formulation of counter-narrative strategies is developed to support the reconstruction of public opinion through strategic communication.

3. Results

3.1 Media Narratives on the Papua Issue

Identification of how the media frames issues related to Papua in shaping public opinion can be conducted by examining the topics most frequently discussed in news coverage about Papua. These topics include armed conflict, infrastructure development, government policies, and human rights. Based on data collected from news reports on Papua, which are published by major national and international media outlets such as Detik, Kompas, and Titro.id, CNN, Reuters, Al-Jazeera, and Greenleft, a total of 4.684 articles were gathered. The articles were collected using a web scraping method to compile Papua-related coverage from these media sources. A detailed breakdown of the number of articles discussing Papua is presented in the diagram below.

Articles total : 4684

Figure 1. The percentage of articles published by each media outlet

Source: Researcher, 2023

The pie chart shows the percentage distribution of 4,684 articles across media outlets. Detik leads with 25.9 percent, followed by Tribun at 23.3 percent and Kompas at 20.5 percent, indicating the strong dominance of major national media. Tirto contributes 11.1 percent and CNN 9.8 percent, while international media such as Reuters account for 8.5 percent. Green Left and Al Jazeera contribute only a very small share. This distribution suggests that coverage of Papua is largely shaped by a few major media outlets, which may influence the dominant narratives presented to the public.

Further analysis of articles published between 2020 and 2023 shows that Papua is a highly prominent topic, with the word Papua appearing 14,971 times. Word cloud analysis using NVivo 12 highlights the most frequent and dominant themes in the coverage, revealing how media attention repeatedly centers on Papua and frames key issues related to the region. This pattern reflects the media's role in constructing and reinforcing public perceptions through repeated emphasis on certain themes.

Figure 2. Word Cloud of Main Themes Related to the Papua Issue in the Media

The word cloud shows how media narratives about Papua are mainly shaped by state involvement. Dominant terms such as *Papua*, *government*, *TNI (Indonesia Armed Forces)*, *health*, and *development* indicate that media coverage strongly emphasizes government policies, military presence, public services, and infrastructure projects. This framing often presents Papua as a region under close state control, with the government and TNI positioned as the main actors responsible for managing security, development, and social issues.

At the same time, the presence of words like *conflict*, *violence*, and *independence* highlights ongoing political and social tensions. Media narratives frequently link Papua to instability and resistance, while issues such as health inequality, environmental impact, and uneven development reflect deeper structural problems. Overall, the word cloud suggests that media coverage prioritizes political and security perspectives, while social, environmental, and local community voices receive comparatively less attention.

3.2 Actors Reported in Media Coverage

In media coverage of the Papua issue, several key actors are frequently mentioned or highlighted. These actors include government officials, civil society groups, international organizations, and figures or groups associated with Papua-related issues. Among the most prominent are the government, civil society organizations, Papuan figures, international organizations, and human rights institutions, as well as regional government leaders in Papua, as illustrated in the following graph.
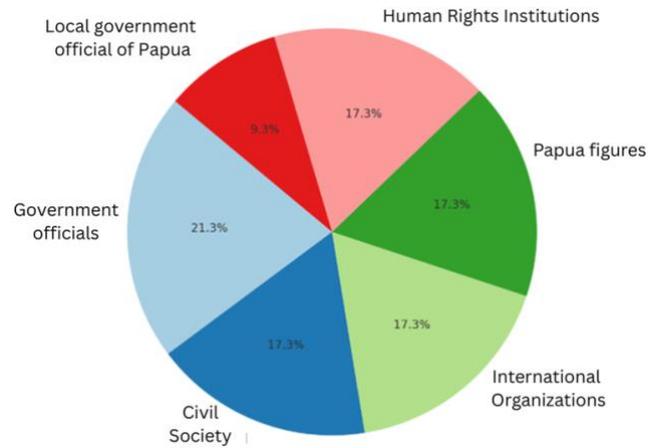
Figure 3: Distribution of Actor Mentions Related to the Papua Issue in National and International Media

The pie chart shows how actors in the Papua issue are represented in national and international media. Central government officials dominate the coverage with 21.3 percent of mentions, indicating that media coverage of Papua is most frequently associated with central government officials. Other actors, including Papuan figures, civil society, international organizations, and human rights institutions, each account for 17.3 percent, showing that non-state and global perspectives also receive notable attention. In contrast, Papuan local government officials appear far less frequently at 9.3 percent, suggesting limited media focus on local leadership. Overall, the pie chart shows which actors are most often mentioned in news about Papua in national and international media. This can help explain how the public sees those actors.

3.3 Dominant Topics in Media Coverage

Papua, a region rich in natural and cultural resources yet frequently affected by social, political, and economic issues, has attracted significant attention from both national and international media. Media representations of Papua play an important role in shaping public opinion and influencing broader public perceptions of the region. To gain deeper insight into how Papua is portrayed, a thematic hierarchy analysis was conducted to identify the main themes and subthemes dominating media coverage.

The thematic hierarchy visualization shows that media coverage of Papua extends beyond political issues as the primary focus and also addresses health, environmental, and economic concerns. These themes are interconnected, reflecting the complexity and multi-dimensional nature of the challenges faced by Papua. The following figure visualizes the thematic hierarchy of how Papua is portrayed in the media.

Figure 4: Thematic Hierarchy of How Papua Is Portrayed in the Media

The thematic hierarchy analysis shows that political and security (environmental, social, health, and economic) issues dominate media coverage of Papua. Topics such as government policy, state authority, conflict, and military involvement appear most frequently, indicating that Papua is often framed through a lens of control, stability, and governance. This emphasis reinforces perceptions of Papua as a region requiring strong state intervention.

Beyond politics and security, media narratives also highlight issues of medical, development, biodiversity, poverty and deforestation. These themes reflect ongoing challenges related to public services, infrastructure development, and resource management. However, they often appear as secondary narratives that support or contextualize the dominant political framing rather than standing as independent issues.

Overall, the thematic hierarchy reveals that media representations of Papua are shaped by interconnected topics that emphasize state-centered responses while placing social and humanitarian concerns in a supporting role. This pattern illustrates how media framing contributes to a particular construction of Papua that influences how the region is perceived and discussed in the public sphere.

4. Discussion

4.1 Public Opinion on Papua based on Media Consumption

Through semi-structured interviews, findings show how public opinion on Papua is formed through media exposure. Respondents rely on several media sources as references for understanding situations in Papua. These sources are broadly divided into two main categories, namely digital media and traditional media.

Digital media include internet-based and contemporary sources such as social media, online news, and YouTube. Traditional media consist of more conventional sources such as television and radio, newspapers, and news websites. The diagram indicates that both digital and traditional media play important roles in disseminating information about Papua, although they differ in approach and audience reach. Social media and YouTube tend to be more interactive and dynamic, allowing audiences not only to receive information but also to participate in

discussions and content sharing. Online news serves as a more structured and formal source, combining journalistic pratices with digital accessibility.

Traditional media such as television, radio, and newspapers mainly operate through one-way communication, delivering information from institutional sources to the public with limited interaction. News websites, although internet-based, are categorized as traditional media because they generally maintain conventional journalistic formats and standards. Together, these media sources interact in shaping public perceptions of Papua, with digital media offering speed and interactivity, while traditional media provide credibility and legitimacy.

Although online news ra nks second as a direct source of information for respondents, its influence on public opinion remains strong. Online news combines rapid information dissemination with journalistic credibility, enabling wide and fast circulation of narratives about Papua at both national and international levels. Articles from online news portals are often shared across social media and referenced by other media, amplifying their impact. As a result, public discussions and opinions frequently originate from narratives first constructed by online news.

In relation to public opinion, the data also reveal the presence of different respondent clusters, indicating diverse views on Papua. Cluster analysis conducted using NVivo 12 identifies several groups with distinct perspectives, as illustrated in the chart below.
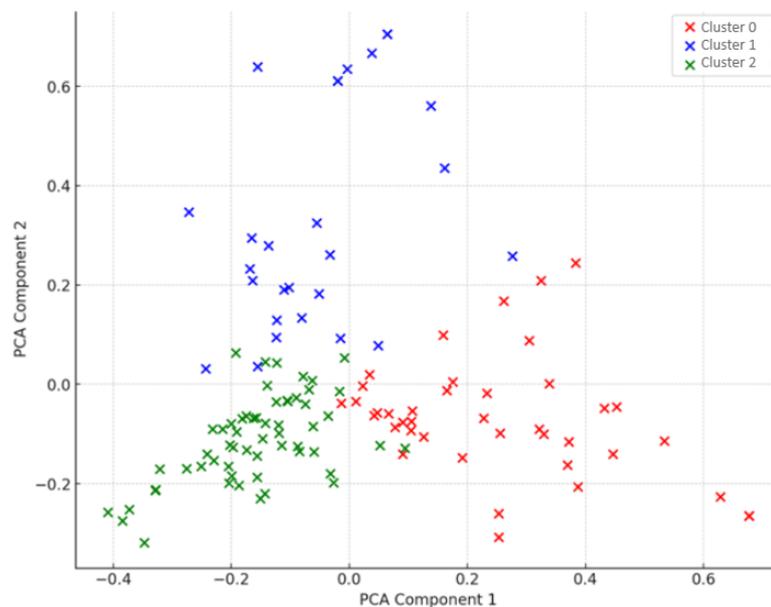

Figure 5: Cluster Analysis of Public Opinion on Papua

The chart presents the results of a cluster analysis of public opinion on Papua, with the data reduced using Principal Component Analysis (PCA) . This technique generated two main components, PCA Component 1 and PCA Component 2, which serve as the horizontal and vertical axes of the two-dimensional plot. Three primary clusters are identified and distinguished by color: Cluster 0 in red, Cluster 1 in blue, and Cluster 2 in green. Each data point represents an individual or group opinion regarding Papua.

Cluster 0, shown in red, is concentrated in the central right and upper areas of the plot, indicating that the opinions within this group share similar characteristics that differentiate them from the other clusters, particularly Cluster 2. Cluster 1, shown in blue, is positioned more centrally but extends upward, suggesting relatively higher variation along the second component while remaining distinct from Cluster 0. Cluster 2, shown in green, is densely located in the lower left area, indicating a more homogeneous set of views that differ substantially from the other two groups. The clear separation among clusters suggests significant variation, and potentially polarization, in public opinion regarding Papua.

PCA Component 1 can be interpreted as representing the primary dimension of opinion differences. Based on the supporting textual data (word cloud, actor mentions, and thematic hierarchy), this axis may reflect a spectrum from critical or anti-government framing to more supportive or state-aligned perspectives. PCA Component 2 captures a secondary dimension, which may relate to the intensity, emotional tone, or focus of the discourse (for example, security-focused versus humanitarian-focused narratives).

Cluster 0 represents a group whose discourse is relatively more critical of the government, as indicated by the frequent appearance of terms related to human rights, militarization, and state violence in the word cloud, as well as references to civil society actors and international organizations. Cluster 1 can be interpreted as a more moderate or mixed group, combining both critical and institutional language, suggesting a more balanced or ambivalent stance. Cluster 2 appears more aligned with pro-government or state-centered narratives, reflected in a stronger emphasis on national stability, security forces, and official institutions in the actor distribution and thematic hierarchy.

Overall, the figure demonstrates that public opinion on Papua is segmented into three structured groups shaped by competing narratives. The main division lies along a spectrum between critical and state-centered framings, with a moderate cluster positioned between them. This suggests the presence of discursive polarization, though not complete fragmentation.

Differences among these clusters may be influenced by several interconnected factors, including sources of information, occupation, and educational background. Information sources are particularly influential. Individuals who rely on social media may encounter more diverse and less filtered content, including highly subjective perspectives. In contrast, those who depend on online news portals or traditional media are more likely to consume information that has undergone editorial processes, even though bias may still be present. As a result, audiences exposed to different media environments may develop differing interpretations of the Papua issue, ranging from supportive views of government policies to more critical perspectives shaped by independent or international reporting. See the following diagram.
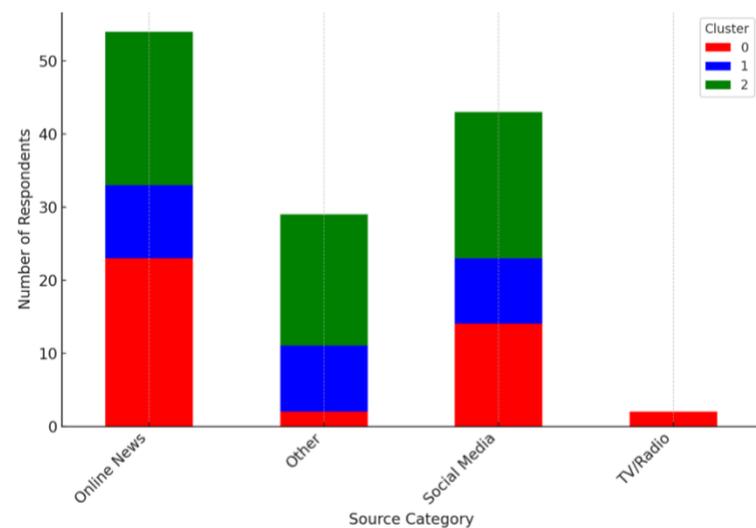

Figure 6: Cluster Comparison Based on Sources of Information

This bar chart illustrates the distribution of information sources used by respondents to understand the Papua issue. The sources are grouped into four main categories: Online News, Social Media, Other, and TV or Radio. Respondents are also classified into three opinion clusters, namely Cluster 0 shown in red, Cluster 1 in blue, and Cluster 2 in green. The data reveal a clear correlation between the type of information source accessed and differences in public perspectives on Papua.

Online News is the most dominant source, with Cluster 2 representing the largest proportion of respondents, followed by Cluster 1 and Cluster 0. This pattern suggests that more critical or progressive views on Papua are more commonly found among those who rely on online news. Digital news platforms provide fast and diverse access to investigative journalism, in-depth analysis, and international perspectives, which may encourage more open and critical interpretation of the issue.

Social Media also shows a significant distribution, again dominated by Cluster 2, although Clusters 1 and 0 are also represented. As an interactive and less regulated space, social media facilitates the rapid spread of diverse narratives and public debate. In contrast, TV or Radio has very limited respondents and is associated only with Cluster 0, indicating that those who depend on traditional media tend to hold more conservative or government-aligned views. The Other category, such as blogs, academic journals, or community discussions, also leans toward Cluster 2, suggesting that individuals who seek alternative or specialized sources may develop more independent perspectives.

In addition to information sources, occupation also appears to influence public opinion. Professions such as army personnel (TNI AD), teachers, and students tend fall within Cluster 2, possibly due to direct experience or exposure to critical and intellectual environments. Meanwhile, civil servants and private sector employees are commonly associated with Cluster 0, which may reflect more structured work environments and exposure to official or formal narratives. These patterns can be observed in the following diagram.

Figure 7. Cluster Comparison Based on Occupation

The bar chart above presents a comparison of public opinion clusters on Papua based on respondents' occupations. Three opinion clusters are identified and marked in red, Cluster 0, blue, Cluster 1, and green, Cluster 2. The data provide insight into how professional background influences perspectives on the Papua issue.

Cluster 2 dominates many occupational categories, particularly among Indonesian Army personnel, teachers, university students, and private sector employees. Its strong presence among Army personnel may reflect shared training, field experience, or direct exposure to conditions in Papua, leading to more consistent viewpoints. Among teachers and students, the dominance of Cluster 2 may indicate the influence of academic environments that encourage critical discussion and exposure to diverse information sources.

Cluster 0, although less dominant than Cluster 2, appears significant among civil servants, private employees, and medical doctors. Among civil servants, this pattern may reflect perspectives that align more closely with government policies, given their institutional roles. In the case of private employees and doctors, Cluster 0 may represent more cautious or stability-oriented views, possibly shaped by formal information channels and professional responsibilities.

Cluster 1 is distributed across various occupations without clearly dominating any single category. Its presence among teachers, students, and private employees suggests a more moderate stance, potentially influenced by both digital and traditional media. This cluster may represent individuals who are open to multiple perspectives but do not strongly align with more polarized positions.

Certain professions, such as editors, quality assurance staff, and administrative roles, have fewer respondents but show distinct tendencies. Editors, for example, may hold more critical or independent views due to their role in managing and evaluating information. Meanwhile, housewives, entrepreneurs, and freelancers are largely represented in Cluster 2, though Cluster 0 also appears significantly, indicating that broader social and economic dynamics shape their perspectives.

Overall, the chart suggests that occupation plays a meaningful role in shaping views on Papua. Professions closely linked to government institutions tend to be more represented in Cluster 0, which may reflect more conservative or status quo-oriented perspectives. In contrast, occupations in education, the military, and parts of the private sector show stronger representation in Cluster 2, which may reflect more critical or progressive views. The presence of Cluster 1 across many professions highlights the complexity and diversity of public opinion.

Educational level also significantly influences how individuals interpret information and form opinions. Those with higher education tend to have broader access to academic literature, critical discussions, and diverse information sources, which may enhance analytical and critical thinking skills. This may explain why individuals with higher educational backgrounds are more frequently found in Cluster 2. Conversely, individuals with lower educational attainment may rely more on easily accessible sources such as television or radio, which may correspond with the more conventional or official perspectives reflected in Cluster 0. See the diagram below.
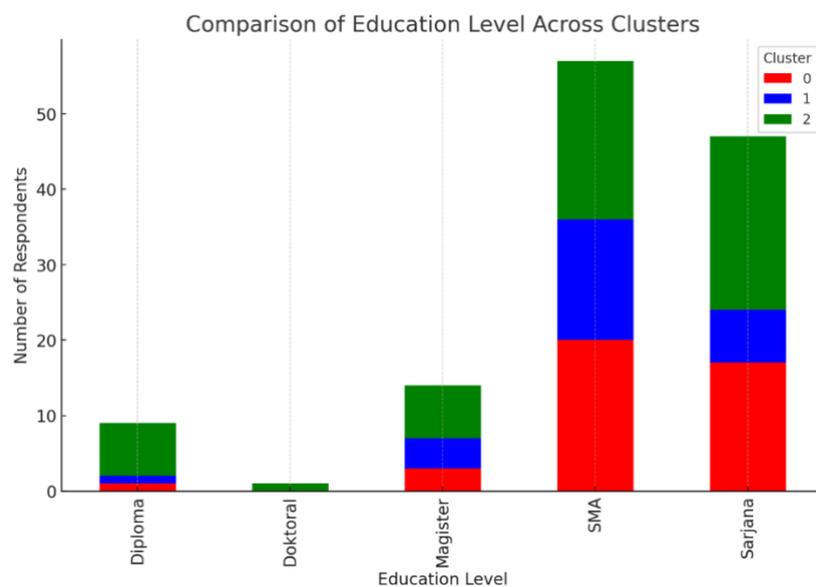

Figure 8: Cluster Comparison Based on Educational Level

The bar chart above illustrates the distribution of public opinion clusters in Papua based on respondents' educational levels, which are grouped into five categories: Diploma, Doctoral, Master's, Senior High School, and Bachelor's. Each education level shows how opinions are distributed across three identified clusters: Cluster 0 in red, Cluster 1 in blue, and Cluster 2 in green. This comparison provides insight into how educational background shapes the way individuals understand and evaluate the Papua issue.

Cluster 2 consistently dominates most education levels, particularly among Bachelor's and Senior High School graduates. This suggests that individuals in these groups tend to hold more critical or progressive views on Papua. For Bachelor's graduates, this may be influenced by greater exposure to academic literature, research, and diverse intellectual discussions that encourage critical thinking. Among Senior High School graduates, the dominance of Cluster 2 may reflect the influence of digital media and online news, which provide broad access to different perspectives even at earlier stages of formal education.

Cluster 0, which reflects more conservative or officially aligned views, appears notably among Senior High School and Bachelor's respondents, although it does not dominate. This indicates that even at higher education levels, some individuals may favor stability or established government narratives. Meanwhile, Cluster 1 is relatively evenly distributed across education levels, especially among Master's, Bachelor's, and Senior High School graduates. This cluster likely represents more moderate views or individuals who are still evaluating different perspectives before forming firm conclusions.

At the Master's, Diploma, and Doctoral levels, although the number of respondents is smaller, Cluster 2 remains dominant. This pattern suggests that higher levels of education are generally associated with more analytical and critical approaches to complex issues, such as Papua. Overall, the chart indicates that educational attainment plays a significant role in shaping public opinion, but it interacts with other factors such as information sources and professional background. Public views on Papua, therefore, emerge from a complex combination of access to information, critical thinking skills, and social experience, rather than from education alone.

4. Conclusion

This study examines how national and international media frame the Papua issue. The news often focuses on armed conflict, government policies, infrastructure projects, and human rights. Major media outlets such as Detik, Kompas, and CNN shape much of the narrative. Their reports mostly highlight the role of the central government and the military, which makes Papua appear mainly as a security issue. Local voices and humanitarian concerns receive less attention.

The findings show that central government officials are mentioned most often in news reports, while Papuan figures and civil society groups appear less frequently. This suggests that media coverage is not fully inclusive and does not always give enough space to local perspectives. Papua is also often described in connection with political tension, social problems, environmental issues, and health challenges.

Media attention usually increases during major events, such as armed clashes or controversial government policies. This shows that reporting is often reactive rather than consistent and in-depth. Public opinion is influenced by the type of media people use, as well as their job and education level. People who rely on social media tend to have more critical views, while those who use traditional media such as TV or radio are more likely to support official government narratives. Overall, the study shows that both media framing and personal background shape different views about Papua.

Among the various influencing factors, education emerges as a central determinant in shaping public interpretation of the Papua issue. Big investments in infrastructure or communication technology can make information easier to access. However, if the quality of education and critical thinking skills do not improve, these investments will not significantly change how people understand an issue. Hence, education functions to help people understand and judge the messages they receive from the media.

Author Contributions: All authors have approved the final version of the manuscript and agree to be personally accountable for their own contributions and to ensure that any questions related to the accuracy or integrity of any part of the work, even those not personally involving them, are appropriately investigated, resolved, and documented in the literature.

Funding: This study was conducted without external financial support. All research activities were funded independently by the authors.

Conflicts of Interest: The authors declare no conflict of interest.

Informed Consent Statement/Ethics approval:

Acknowledgments: In this section, you can acknowledge any support given that is not covered by the author contribution or funding sections. This may include administrative and technical support, or donations in kind (e.g., materials used for experiments). This section is optional.

Declaration of Generative AI and AI-assisted Technologies: This study has not used any generative AI tools or technologies in the preparation of this manuscript.

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