Serving the Margins, Shaping the Narrative: Project Multatuli and the Role of Alternative Media in Advancing Environmental Governance

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Abstract. This study examines how Project Multatuli, an Indonesian nonprofit alternative media outlet, contributes to environmental governance by amplifying marginalized voices and challenging extractive development narratives. Using a qualitative-descriptive approach, the analysis draws on Gayatri Spivak's subaltern critique and Jürgen Habermas's communicative rationality to examine selected investigative stories on ecological injustice affecting coastal communities, Indigenous groups, and youth. The findings show that Project Multatuli combines open syndication, multilingual reporting, civic coalitions, and participatory storytelling to create dialogical spaces in which affected communities become knowledge-producing actors rather than passive subjects. This model supports deliberative environmental governance by broadening access to environmental knowledge, encouraging civic engagement, and contesting dominant representations of development. The study concludes that independent alternative journalism can strengthen climate and social justice agendas in the Global South, although its sustainability depends on institutional support, media freedom, and long-term financial resilience.

Keywords: alternative media; environmental governance; subaltern studies; deliberative democracy; ecological justice.

1 Introduction

The contribution that media can make to the creation of the knowledge about the environmental crisis and the participatory governance has never been more important than today due to the escalating ecological crisis and the growing social inequality [1]. However, the voices of people who are directly impacted by environmental degradation, in particular Indigenous communities, coastal people, rural residents, and women in unequal power dynamics, are not always reflected in mainstream media in Indonesia [2]. These are silenced constituencies; the so-called “subaltern”: constituencies that are structurally deprived of the hegemonic discourses. Most of the time, the subaltern remains silent and unacknowledged when they do speak within the dominant-capitalist logics of media, which place the elite views and urban interests first [3].

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In 2021, Project Multatuli was created as a response to this systemic marginalization. The platform identifies itself as as “journalism for the underserved,” and aims to reverse the existing trends in Indonesian media, which are Jakarta-centric, male-dominated and elite-serving. Project Multatuli released 224 journalistic pieces during May 2021-December 2022: 148 articles, 27 photo essays, 47 opinion pieces, and 2 rights-of-reply. These articles were mostly on Jakarta only in 14.7 percent, with 58 percent covering Java outside of Jakarta and outside of Java--areas that are regularly ignored by the mainstream media [60].

The platform is gender equitable in media production, in terms of sources and authorship. Approximately 45.1% of its publications featured female or trans women as the primary source, and 1.3% primarily featured non-binary voices, which is far better than the industry average of 11% of all sources in general news reporting [60]. Moreover, women had written 39.7% and non-binary 3.6% of their content [60]. These characters highlight the structural concerns of Project Multatuli in disruption of epistemic orders and the advocacy of pluralistic narratives.

This research is theoretically based on two important frameworks. First, the subaltern conceived by Spivak highlights the need to have mediated platforms, such as Project Multatuli, as enunciative apparatuses where marginalized groups would be able to express their situated knowledges [4]. Second, based on the theory of rational communication and the public sphere formulated by Jurgen Habermas (1984), the paper considers digital journalism as not only a means of disseminating information, but a possible place of deliberation in which the other is allowed to enter into dialogic spaces, as opposed to being objectified through techno-bureaucratic or commodified media logics [5].

They are vividly exemplified by the effective campaign Project Multatuli created under the name of the campaign, which is called as #PercumaLaporPolisi (Reporting to the Police Is Useless), and which documented cases of sexual violence and police negligence in remote areas, such as Luwu Timur and Baubau). The stories were based on the mothers whose children were raped and then turned in or accused by the authorities, creating national outrage. The open syndication approach of Project Multatuli resulted in its mass republication by dozens of media outlets, such as Tempo, Suara.com, and VICE Indonesia, as well as even prompted parliamentary and Chief of the National Police responses [60]. According to media scholar Ignatius Haryanto, this case was the first time in the history of Indonesian journalism that the use of digital censorship was met with organized republication [60].

Notably, this case also highlights a larger ethical issue, which media should not objectify the misery of humanity or the world [6, 7]. Instead, it must bring forth empathy, civic action and dialogic solidarity. Project Multatuli describes their journalism as frequently going “beyond reporting” to provide material assistance to sources, enlist legal aid groups and organize public donations to defend the victims [60]. These practices are well echoed by Habermas call to communicate based on mutual recognition and Spivak call to representational space gatekeeping by an elite.

Such journalistic strategies contribute to redefining these communities not as mere victims or as an abstract term stakeholder but as primary agents of knowledge, resistance, and justice [8]. The examples of media coverage of environmental injustice provided by Project Multatuli (land grabbing in Kalimantan, water insecurity in eastern Indonesia) show how media can

dismantle extractive discourse and initiate a discussion about the ecological impact of development, corruption, and state inaction [9].

The study presented in this paper is that Project Multatuli fulfils the dual purpose of voice-amplifier of the subaltern (Spivak) and a participatory medium of rational communication (Habermas). Based on the few environmental research works that the platform posts within the period of 2021-2025, this paper considers how alternative media can change not only what we know about environmental degradation- but also who is authorized to discuss it, and in what circumstances.

2 Theoretical Framework

The two theoretical lenses mentioned in this paper are interconnected because they help us to comprehend how alternative journalism, namely Project Multatuli, operates within the wider landscape of environmental governance. The former is a subaltern theory by Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, which questions the epistemic order that renders the marginalized communities silent [10]. The second one is the theory of communicative rationality and the public sphere by Jurgen Habermas, which preconditions the normative position of dialogue and deliberation in the democratic society [11]. Collectively, these views permit us to consider the alternative media as a representational and participatory apparatus, which does not only talk on behalf of the subaltern, but also speaks to them.

2.1 Spivak and the Problem of Representation: Who Speaks for Whom?

In her landmark 1988 essay, Can the Subaltern Speak? Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak has been one of the most critical of the constraints of representational politics in postcolonial and intellectual speech [10]. Spivak reveals the organization of the production of knowledge, in particular, in Eurocentric academic, political, and media institutions, the systematic silence or misrepresentation of those who do not belong to the dominant intelligibility paradigms [54, 55]. The subaltern, in her construction, is not just a synonym of the marginalized, but refers to those so disempowered that they lack the entitlement to express themselves and to be recognized in the hegemonic discourses [10].

Spivak separates two aspects of representation, vertreten (political representation or speaking on behalf of) and darstellen (epistemic or symbolic representation) [56]. The former is the practice of advocacy and the latter deals with the manner in which a subject is framed, comprehended and built into knowledge systems [56]. In either sense, she states, the subaltern is frequently represented, not empowered to speak, and this results in a deadly feedback loop where elite actors either, acting as colonial administrators, state functionaries, or liberal intellectuals, steal the voice of the subalterns, and at the same time, negate their agency [53, 10].

This conceptual framing is especially acute in situations where environmental injustice is observed [32]. Indigenous peoples, rural women, traditional fishers, and informal workers are usually the victims of the ecological exploitation but seldom have the narrative power to shape their own experiences [33]. Such actors are not subjects of situated knowledge, but passive victims or abstract stakeholders in most mainstream Indonesian media. This “ontological

erasure" corresponds to the subalternity diagnosis offered by Spivak: it is not only being unheard, but being unhearable in the current media and epistemic regimes [52].

The editorial practices of project Multatuli push right in the opposite direction. Instead of simply covering the plight of the marginalized, it creates the infrastructures of journalism that puts their voice at the center [60]. Among the most intriguing ones is its reporting on gender-based violence in remote Sulawesi, which is featured in the campaign Reporting to the Police Is Useless (#PercumaLaporPolisi). The publication gave narrative priority to the testimony of the mother and reframed the story through the lens of her own experience instead of using experts or institutional responses [40]. It was not abstracting her pain, but still keeping her as the speaker object even when it involved subverting legal bodies and risking cyber assault.

In addition, Project Multatuli is aware of the danger Spivak cautions about-the propensity of the elites to "ventriloquize" the subaltern [10]. It avoids that pitfall with its decentralized authorship (enabling people in the impacted areas to contribute), the decentralization of power through Creative Commons licensing, and the need to make editorial decisions based on moral considerations as opposed to market values [34, 60]. This conforms to the subsequent explanation by Spivak that, although the subaltern might not be able to speak in the language of the dominant system, there can be a form of interruptive spaces where subaltern articulation can be heard without being borrowed [57].

Project Multatuli does not suffer the same fate as critics of activist journalism believe to be the extraction of narrative or the audience-seeking or donor-seeking use of the subaltern sufferings. Instead, its tales tend to continue even after the publication phase: it has helped provide legal assistance, organized safe locations to victims, and kept in touch with communities after reporting [60]. This *solidarity over spectacle* ethic re-figures journalism as a communal practice of witnessing and structural support [61].

The theory by Spivak therefore assists us in reading Project Multatuli not as a medium of information but as a counter-hegemonic site that disrupts the representations of the dominant space, creating a space of relations where the subaltern can start speaking out (but always through complicated mediations) [50]. As pure representation is nonexistent, and subaltern speech is in perpetual danger of being distorted, *conditions of possibility* of such speech can be ethically scaffolded [10]. In that regard, Project Multatuli is more of a spokesperson than a spokesperson, a location of ethical interaction that does not profess to represent, but labors to enhance and safeguard the circumstances in which the silenced can speak at all [51].

2.2 Habermas and the Ethics of Communicative Action

The theory of communicative action and the public sphere by Jurgen Habermas provides a normative approach to how the media institutions can be used in the democratic governance [43] and in this case in societies where social and environmental injustices are rife [23]. The core of Habermas project is a separation between two forms of rationality; *instrumental rationality* which is concerned with the control and efficiency and *communicative rationality* that aims at understanding each other by means of dialogue [44]. The hegemony of the former, most notably in market-driven media sectors where political influence and coercion prevail, obstructs the ability of the public discourse to produce a consensus founded on reason, and not coercion [12].

The conceptualization of the public sphere by Habermas entails a place where the citizens freely uncoerced can discuss issues of common interest. To make this deliberation legitimate, the deliberation must meet the requirements of what he refers to as ideal speech situation; a communicative setting in which everyone has an equal access to speak, be heard and to contest claims on the basis of validity claims (truth, rightness, sincerity) [12]. Although Habermas invented his theory in the background of bourgeois liberal society, it has since been extended to digital spaces, marginalized groups, and environmental politics by academics [13, 14, 15].

Mainstream media usually do not meet these expectations. Instead of enabling a rational discussion, it is often appropriated by political elites and commercial interests, which place greater emphasis on spectacle, clickbait, and crisis-centered framing over substantive involvement [16]. In this case, the environmental issues especially are frequently depoliticized or technocratized into discussing the metrics of the climate without taking into account the lived experience by the frontline communities [62]. Additionally, the institutional voices, such as government officers, corporate spokespersons, and urban-based NGOs, are more likely to be covered by the media than the voices of someone who shares a direct, embodied experience of ecological degradation [17, 18]. This is an active reflection of what Habermas refers to as the colonization of the lifeworld by system imperatives [19].

Against this backdrop, Project Multatuli emerges as a significant intervention. It offers not just an alternative source of information, but an alternative *model of communication* [20]. By foregrounding testimonies from Indigenous peoples, fishers, women, and youth in peripheral regions, the platform reconstitutes the terms of public deliberation. These actors are not inserted into the conversation as passive victims but as dialogical agents whose voices shape the agenda, language, and affective tone of reporting.

In this context, Project Multatuli can be seen as an important intervention. It not only provides an alternative source of information, but also an alternative model of communication [20]. The platform reinstates the conditions of popular discourse by pre-empting Indigenous peoples, fishers, women, and youth testimonies in marginal areas. These are not actors who are imported into the discussion as a passive victim but rather as dialogical actors whose voices influence the agenda, language, and the affective tone of reporting.

The fact that the platform has aimed at being a source of “journalism to the underserved” also gives me the feeling that Habermas insists that democratic legitimacy is based on the inclusion of all voices who are in the process of deliberation [21]. An example of this is that environmental governance cannot be valid when it omits people whose land is taken, whose water is contaminated, and whose culture is under threat. Project Multatuli offers communicative infrastructure to enable the marginalized groups to oppose dominant narratives and suggest alternative visions of development through its coverage of land struggles in Kalimantan, water scarcity in NTT and opposition to extractive industries in Sulawesi and Maluku.

Furthermore, Multatuli is not only informative, but it begs to be answered. Readers can not only be encouraged to take part by commenting or sharing on social media, but also by providing donations or solidarity and attending follow-up campaigns. It is an interactive model of journalism that resembles the vision of Habermas of a dialogical polity as citizens do not consume news but they are co-constitutors of the discourse [22]. Examples of deliberative

media effecting communicative rupture in institutions include the use of hashtags such as the one that spawned the national discussion on police accountability, generated by the use of hashtags like #PercumaLaporPolisi (Reporting to the Police Is Useless), which provoked institutions to act through communicative disruption.

Project Multatuli is not exempt of restrictions. It functions in a space where the freedom of media is at stake, where online bullying is a common occurrence, and where the interest of people is unstable [24]. However, its editorial decisions indicate a normative adherence to the ethics of communicative action: it is more focused on sincerity, accessibility, and reflexivity rather than virality or monetization. By so doing, it resists the instrumentalization of journalism and recaptures its role as both a moral and deliberative agent in society. In such a way, the Project Multatuli could be perceived through the Habermasian prism as a renewal of the public space that is digital, pluralist and ecologically sensitive. It reinvents media as a form of collaboration, a vehicle of mutual understanding, democratic legitimacy, and environmental justice in a society characterized by intense power/voice asymmetries.

2.3 Related Studies: Media, Subalternity, and Environmental Governance

This intersection of media, subalternity and environmental governance has received growing academic interest over the past few years, as the wider sense of environmental crises as less ecological or technical than communicative, epistemological, political [25, 63]. In other settings, theorists have questioned how mainstream media reifies power imbalances by prioritizing state-centric, corporate, or technocratic discourses at the expense of other ways of being in the world, especially those that are Indigenous or rural and other ecologically embedded people [26].

The place of alternative and community media in combating such exclusions has been explored by one of the powerful currents of literature. In one example, Atton defines the alternative media as a platform whereby the disempowered will re-take their voice, and whereby the production is decentralized, something that is participatory, and where the vernacular knowledge is glorified [27]. Downing also emphasize the potential of radical media to overcome ideological hegemony through the subversion of dominant codes and structures of representation [28]. In Southeast Asia, Lim), Nugroho, Siregar, and Laksmi record how digital and grassroots media campaigns in Indonesia have contributed to the formation of counter-publics that challenge authoritarian legacies and mobilize civic action [29, 30].

In the sub-discipline of environmental communication, epistemic politics of ecological stories have been examined by various scholars. Dryzek lists a variety of environmental discourses, such as administrative rationalism and green radicalism, which have their own presuppositions regarding the knowledge, power, and involvement [14]. But he adds that hegemonic discourses tend to be based on technocratic rationality of the experts, which silences localized voices and non-Western cosmologies. Likewise, Escobar criticizes the way the development and environmental governance usually silences other ontologies, especially Indigenous relations to land, water and nonhuman beings, in the name of modernization [31]. These observations have a resonance with the theory of epistemic violence presented by Spivak. The refusal to grant narrative legitimacy to local environmental actors, is not a dispassionate omission; it is a discursive policy that justifies dispossession and extraction of the environment.

Project Multatuli is a unique initiative in the Indonesian context because there are few spaces where subaltern theory is explicitly incorporated into the journalistic agenda as well as deliberative communication. In contrast to most mainstream sources, where the emphasis is on crisis-oriented, event-driven environmental coverage, Multatuli prioritizes what Masurier describes as slow journalism: the desire to go deep, provide context, and have a long-term commitment with communities [36, 35]. This will not just create complexity in the narratives, but will aid in establishing trust with the marginalized actors who have over the years been misrepresented or overlooked by the media. Therefore, this paper is part of an increasing body of literature that views alternative journalism not only as a counter-narrative, but an emergent form of environmental governance, dialogual, distributed and responsive to the worlds and voices of the subaltern.

3 Methodology

The research takes a qualitative-descriptive design based on the critical theory of media and environmental communication [37, 38]. Its main objective is to explore the way in which Project Multatuli, which is a non-profit Indonesian alternative media platform, serves as a representation resistance (Spivak) and participatory communication (Habermas) in the greater context of environmental regulation. The research is based on the interpretive insights of how journalistic practice constructs meaning, power, and agency in the environmental narrative, especially among historically disadvantaged groups in mainstream media and policy debates [39, 40].

The research adheres to constructivist epistemology as research that assumes that knowledge of the environment is not neutral or value-free, but is co-produced in the process of discourse, media framing, and social context. This study follows Fairclough and socio cognitive approach by van Dijk in that media texts are not viewed as fixed information but rather, as the locus where power, knowledge and identity are negotiated [41, 42]. The paradigmatic case of counter-hegemonic environmental journalism is chosen to be Project Multatuli. Its stated purpose to serve the underserved, or give voice to the margins, is not considered an ideological imperative, but a discursive practice to be critically interrogated. The paper questions the way Multatuli chooses, frames, circulates, and maintains its narratives and how such practices overlap with larger democracies and ecologies of imagination.

The main sources used in this study are a purposive sample of environmental and social-ecological coverage on the topic of the Project Multatuli published on its official site (https://projectmultatuli.org). This encompasses long form investigations, photo essays and impact updates on ecological confrontations in different Indonesian peripheries. Some of the highlights include industrial dislocation of the Suku Laut community in Bintan, land grabbing and mining opposition in Wawonii, water deficit in East Sumba and infrastructural development pressures on smallholder farmers and coastal communities in Central Java and Kalimantan.

Most of these narratives are posted as a thematic hashtag, #ProyekSengsaraNasional, a framing mechanism that critiques the development projects led by the state and the socio-ecological effects. This hashtag is also not a digital tag but a narrative tool that connects fragmented stories to a larger story of critique about the *Proyek Strategis Nasional* (National

Strategic Projects) and the developmentalist paradigm of the state. The thematic and seriality of this tag mark the strategic editorial procession of Project Multatuli to transform the discursive landscape, to relocate the individual examples of ecological degradation to the targeted structural level of critique of state-corporate collusion and ecological dispossession. In this respect the hashtag turns into an empirical location of the study of how counter-public media perform what Fraser calls “subaltern counter publics” [13].

The research includes coverage intersecting with other subaltern issues—such as gender-based violence, labor exploitation, and community policing—that are frequently framed in relation to ecological injustice. Included among such stories as “Dua Putri Saya Dicabuli, Saya Lapor ke Polres Baubau, Polisi Malah Tangkap Anak Sulung Saya (My Two Daughters Were Molested. I Reported It to the Baubau Police, but They Arrested My Eldest Son Instead)”, and the wider campaign around the hashtag #PercumaLaporPolisi (Reporting to the Police Is Such reports also produced concrete civic reactions, such as mass republication, parliamentary discourse and internal reflection within the police machine– a testament to the platform finding a wider audience than its readership.

Critical discourse analysis informs the analytical process, addressing the language, narrative structure, the positioning of testimonials, and visual framing. Of specific interest is the manner in which Project Multatuli mediates the voices of communities who are affected, the manner in which it navigates its role as a mediator and ally and the manner in which it forms a public of concern around issues that are otherwise made invisible within mainstream discourse. Theoretical advice is informed by Spivak conceptualization of subaltern silencing and Habermas conceptualization of communicative action, which form the basis of the question as to how voice, legitimacy and recognition are made or prevented within the context of environmental journalism.

Although it is an interpretive and non-comparative study, it is empirically based on the textual analysis of publicly available materials and documented socio-political reactions that they caused. It is narrowed down to publications since 2021, focusing on stories that illustrate the environmental concerns, community expression and editorial opposition. The findings are not intended to be used to generalize about all Indonesian media, but to preempt the possibilities of other forms of media such as Project Multatuli to be participatory actors in environmental governance- taking part in reframing development, representing subaltern voices, and supporting deliberative publics.

4 Discussion

4.1 Project Multatuli as Alternative Environmental Journalism

Project Multatuli is a major breakthrough in the paradigms of mainstream Indonesian journalism. The platform was established on the premise of serving the marginalized and keeping track of power, which is coupled with a strong ethical imperative to give voice to communities that are usually absent in the state and mainstream media logic [60]. This has been demonstrated in its editorial content as well as in its organizational philosophy, syndication model, funding mechanisms as well as in its relations with the civil society in terms of collaboration.

As a nonprofit, public-interest journalism project, Project Multatuli reports extensively, based on their field and data research, in both Bahasa Indonesian and English. Its editorial policy focuses on narrative richness, intersectional justice, and agency of the grassroots. The platform embraces a collaborative culture, not just between and among newsroom departments (among reporters, editors, visual storytellers, data journalists), but also with external stakeholders (such as NGOs, researchers, local networks of communities). This can be seen in its strategic collaboration with over 30 civil society organizations, as well as in its strategic collaboration with over 20 national and local media outlets between May 2021 and December 2022, such as Greenpeace Indonesia, JATAM, AJAR, Change.org, and Tempo [60].

The name "Multatuli", which means "I have suffered much" in Latin, and was inspired by the pen name of the anti-colonial writer Eduard Douwes Dekker, a Dutch author, indicates a symbolic inheritance of anti-authoritarian and anti-colonial traditions [60]. Project Multatuli as a discursive institution place itself as an eyewitness to structural suffering, and as a site of political expression. It has continuously covered the most susceptible to systemic injustice: Indigenous peoples, poor urban and rural populations, victims of gender-based discrimination, and youth deprived of their democracy by extractive capitalism.

The platform entrenches its environmental reporting within a broader narrative framework that questions the prevailing development paradigm in Indonesia. Project Multatuli not only critiques the violent impact of the *Proyek Strategis Nasional* (National Strategic Projects), but also rewrites infrastructural and extractive projects as dangerous zones of struggle through serial structures like the hashtag Project Multatuli, which is also known as the Suffering of the Nation Project. These elements of narrative are not labels, they are bridging tissue between geographically and thematically disparate reports, through which the public can identify system patterns of dispossession and resistance.

Project Multatuli uses an open-licensed publishing approach through Creative Commons, where it can be widely syndicated and re-published by local, national, and even international editors. This horizontal form of knowledge sharing has been particularly successful during crisis situations. To illustrate, after the report on sexual violence in Luwu Timur (first overlooked by the law enforcement) was published in 2021, more than 50 media outlets, such as Kompas.com, Tempo, and VICE Indonesia, republished it as a way of collective action against digital repression [60]. Project Multatuli also received a lot of recognition due to such editorial audacity. The site won the Tasrif Award 2022 at the Aliansi Jurnalis Independen (AJI) and was a winner at the Indonesian Data Journalism Awards with its series, Coal Oligarchs [60]. It also won several international awards, including the Digital Media Award at One World Media, the SOPA Awards, and the Free Media Pioneer Award, sponsored by the International Press Institute [60]. It has received a silver award at the Asian Press Photo 2023 in the photo report on the Kanjuruhan tragedy, and its environmental documentary Sailum: Song of the Rustling Leaves was chosen in the Festival Film Bulanan by the Ministry of Tourism and Creative Economy [60].

Its membership program "Kawan M", which was introduced in November 2021, is also important. This project goes beyond transactional forms of subscribing by developing an affective and political community of readers that not only pay but are also involved in the editorial mission of the platform. This kind of model represents a more general re-

conceptualization of journalism as a civic common, owned by its audience and co-created with them, as opposed to a product to be consumed.

Organizationally, Project Multatuli is based on a hybrid model of funding, which is a combination of individual donations, institutional grants, and strategic partnerships. Some of the notable funders have been Open Society Foundation, Yayasan Kurawal, Google News Initiative, and Media and Development Investment Fund [60]. Although the platform recognizes the difficulties of preserving editorial independence in the context of having donor relations, transparency, editorial control, and value congruence are emphasized as the non-negotiable terms of its funding practice. In sum, Project Multatuli explains why alternative journalism can play not only the role of a watchdog, but also a deliberative actor, creating solidarities, crafting counter-narratives, and promoting environmental governance by taking communicative action. Its paradigm is not utopian as well as lacks contradictions, but it shows a successful example of critical, inclusive, and justice-oriented media in the Global South.

4.2 Digital Journalism as Deliberative Environmental Governance

In the context of accelerating environmental crises and shrinking civic spaces, digital journalism has become a very important platform of environmental governance that is participatory, dialogic, and justice-oriented. The open access distribution, participatory narrative strategies, grassroots alliances, and dialogic intersubjectivity of Project Multatuli is an excellent illustration of how digital journalism can reflect the ideals of *deliberative environmental governance* as theorized by Jurgen Habermas [12] through the principles of open access, participatory narrative, grassroots alliances, and dialogic intersubjectivity.

One of the hallmarks of Project Multatuli's approach is its commitment to Creative Commons licensing, which allows unrestricted republication of its investigative reports. It is an open model that has been particularly effective in environmental justice, including in the coverage of PLTU Cirebon and the Dalem Tamblingan community in Bali. Both articles, which were actively spread on local NGO bulletins, community forums, and even WhatsApp discussion groups, contributed to the spread of important ecological knowledge among non-journalistic masses. In this way, Project Multatuli will change the ecology of information to be one of active circulation and contestation, rather than a passive consumption.

In addition to distribution, Project Multatuli is a deliberative culture, where *narrative interpellation* is used, a method whereby the reader is not only invited to read but respond, reflect, and participate [48]. This can be found in articles like "Underprivileged Gen Z Pesisir Dadap (Underprivileged Gen Z in Coastal Dadap)" where the voices of youth environmental defenders are not only included as sources, but also as co-narrators of the story frame [64]. The articles are designed in such a way that they instigate identification, empathy, and civic urgency in the reader, inviting them to comment and hold discussions on the articles on social media platforms and in groups. This strategy is consistent with the idea of communicative action [12] in which the aim of communication is to reach an agreement and coordinate the social activities instead of manipulation and the transfer of information.

Deliberative environmental governance requires not just inclusive communication, but it is also important to acknowledge epistemic plurality, the voices of marginalized communities that are most impacted by environmental degradation [49]. On this note, Project Multatuli has established robust partnerships with grassroots actors, such as NGOs like WALHI, the

SALAM Institute, and indigenous councils like Brasti Tamblingan in Bali [65]. Such partnerships do not just appear as getting quotes or data validation- there is co-investigation, co-authorship and setting of agenda.

An example of such an article is "*Menuntut Hak Hutan dan Air* (Fighting for Forest and Water Rights)" that is not a mere journalistic narrative but rather a co-production of the narrative that mirrors the worldview and struggle of the Dalem Tamblingan community [65]. The Project Multatuli journalists were also incorporated into the spiritual-ecological practices of the community, where they could not only capture data on the environment, but also cosmological meanings, which in the context of extractives development is usually erased. This form of collaborative journalism is an example of what Nancy Fraser terms *subaltern counterpublics alternate* spaces in which the oppressed groups develop and articulate oppositional meanings of their needs, interests, and identities [13]. It also conforms to the ideal speech situation that was proposed by Habermas where there is no exclusion of any related participant and everyone is given the same chance to speak, ask questions and criticize [66].

Deliberative environmental governance is not procedural or access based but the intersubjective construction of meaning [67]. Project Multatuli is an application of this principle since it represents what Habermas refers to as a discursive public sphere, i.e., a communicative space in which environmental issues are not discussed as technical externalities but as moral and political problems among subjects [45]. This is especially noticeable in the article titled "Hidup Dekat Asap PLTU (Living in the Shadow of Coal Power Plant Pollution)", which juxtaposes the numbers related to emissions and energy transition (e.g., 4,445 tons of daily carbon emission, the failure of Perpres 112/2022 implementation) with personal narratives of mothers, children, and displaced fishermen in Cire The storytelling combines both the structural critique (stalling within Just Energy Transition Partnership/ETM roadmap) and the affective aspects of loss, grief, and intergenerational dispossession-in such a way that it generates empathetic rationality, beyond technocratic reporting [47, 68]. Digital journalism, in this case, is a location of lifeworld rationalization, where daily life and systemic criticism merge [46]. Project Multatuli helps the so-called colonized lifeworld, the communities dominated by imperatives of a system, such as capital or bureaucracy to regain voice and agency in narrative [46].

4.3 Challenges, Limits, and the Future of Alternative Environmental Media

Although the project Multatuli has a very innovative way of approaching journalism, and its goal to amplify marginalized voices, it experiences a web of challenges that are likely to affect its sustainability in the long run and its effect. The restrictions are not only logistical or operational, but structural, political and epistemological - ingrained in the larger media ecosystem, power dynamics, and knowledge hierarchies [16].

One of the most pressing challenges is financial sustainability. Being a non-profit, public-interest media organization, Project Multatuli is not dependent on advertising revenues or market-based content models. Rather, it maintains its activities by foundation grants, the donations of people, and its membership program called *Kawan M*. Although these sources allow some form of editorial independence, it also makes the organization susceptible to financial precarity. Donor funding is essential but can also be subject to time constraints and priorities and therefore can exert pressure on editorial agendas. With the growing saturation of

the donor landscape, particularly in the Global South, the reliance on a few donors can put long-term independence and creativity at risk.

In addition to the structural economic vulnerabilities, political threats are also a major threat to environmental journalists in Indonesia. The investigative reporting by the Project Multatuli of the concerns of land dispossession, marine pollution, and fossil fuel oligarchy often addresses state and corporate elites with interest in silencing dissent. In such an atmosphere, reporters are also prone to intimidation, surveillance or even legal action against defamation or digital information regulations [58, 59]. Environmental journalism is not only a profession but also a resistance as the civic space shrinks, watchdog organizations, such as the SAFEnet and the Alliance of Independent Journalists (AJI), declare. Physical security, digital safety and psychosocial defense of journalists and their sources have become an ethical necessity of media institutions who seek to oppose the hegemonic authority.

5 Conclusion

This paper has discussed how the role of alternative media, namely Project Multatuli, has been transforming as a participatory environmental governance agent in Indonesia. Based on the theoretical perspectives of Spivak and Habermas, we have illustrated how Project Multatuli functions as a journalistic outfit, as well as a discursive space where subaltern voices and environmental issues are voiced in opposition to mainstream development, industrialization, and extractives logic.

The discussion of the environmental reporting on Project Multatuli, which includes cases of coastal degradation in Cirebon, water privatization scuffles, youth-led opposition in Kampung Dadap, and dispossession of the Dalem Tamblingan Indigenous people, is indeed supported by empirical evidence that alternative journalism can, indeed, be used as a megaphone and a reflection by silenced communities. These are not merely stories about the environment and are published under the thematic umbrella of #ProyekSengsaraNasional; they are acts of witness and protest, of claiming the right to be heard in the public. The insistence of Creative Commons licensing, multilingual distribution, and horizontal collaboration with civil society of Project Multatuli is an example of a praxis of deliberative media governance in line with democratic pluralism and environmental justice.

Nevertheless, the critique has also revealed systemic issues that impede the scaling and sustainability of this model: financial reliance on grants and lasting epistemic asymmetries in the production of media. Considering these results, we will offer a few policy suggestions to enhance the ecosystem of alternative environmental media in Indonesia and elsewhere:

First, the public interest journalism should be acknowledged and promoted as a type of civic infrastructure that is necessary to govern the environment. This involves the means of publicly funded mechanisms that are not subject to political influence, including media endowments or civic journalism funds run by independent boards and including the representation of civil society. Second, media outlets exhibiting participatory commitments should receive institutional support, such as incentives to collaboratively report, open news room models, and community-led editorial projects. This support may be associated with transparency requirements of the public or sustainability reporting models. Third, media literacy and digital

inclusion should be known to be of environmental justice. Civil society groups and schools are to come up with specific programs that will enable marginalized groups to have the means not only to consume but to co-produce media stories of their spaces. This involves training on citizen journalism, participatory mapping and multimedia storytelling based on local knowledge systems. Fourth, the regulatory frameworks should guarantee the security and freedom of environmental reporters, such as repealing or amending oppressive laws that criminalize dissent or reporting. The state should be answerable in creating an atmosphere where journalists can investigate environmental abuses without fear of being attacked. Lastly, there should be transnational solidarity and regional platforms that facilitate cross border coordination of the alternative media actors in the Global South. The networks of resistance and storytelling must also cross-national borders as environmental degradation and authoritarian inclinations are not limited to a particular country.

In conclusion, Project Multatuli is a symbolic example of how alternative journalism can mobilize the subaltern voices and ecological logic in the hostile media-political culture. Its labour confirms that the democratization of environmental governance is not an issue of institutional change or of legal design but rather of giving the world a new story - of telling stories that put the margins at the center, that oppose erasure, and that recast the future of justice on a planet under threat

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