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MAPPING RESEARCH TRENDS ON POLITICAL POLARIZATION IN ONLINE MEDIA: A BIBLIOMETRIC ANALYSIS USING VOSVIEWER

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ABSTRACT

Political polarization in online media has become a prominent research theme, especially around elections, yet its intellectual structure remains fragmented across disciplines. This study maps the scholarly landscape of research linking online media, political polarization, and election through a bibliometric analysis of Scopus-indexed publications, visualized with VOSviewer, and complemented by a narrative synthesis of Discourse Network Analysis (DNA) studies. A Scopus search using the combined keywords "online media," "political polarization," and "election" retrieved 198 documents, processed into a keyword co-occurrence network of 59 items grouped into four clusters. The results show that "social media polarization," "political polarization," and "sentiment analysis" are the most dominant and interconnected terms, indicating that existing research concentrates on social media platforms and computational methods such as sentiment analysis and machine learning, while studies of polarization in verified online news media at the local-election level remain scarce. A narrative synthesis of sixteen studies (2020–2026) further shows that DNA is increasingly applied to Indonesian public debates but has rarely been extended to local electoral contests such as regional head elections (Pilkada). The novelty of this study lies in combining bibliometric mapping with narrative synthesis to demonstrate that discourse-network research on polarization in verified online news coverage of local elections constitutes an underexplored, and within the databases searched apparently unoccupied, gap in the literature. These findings offer a methodological and thematic roadmap for future communication research on media-driven political polarization at the sub-national level.

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INTRODUCTION

Elections around the world increasingly unfold not only at the ballot box but also across the pages of online news media, where competing narratives about candidates, policies, and identities circulate and, in many cases, deepen societal divisions. Scholars have documented how this dynamic has intensified political polarization across digital platforms, showing that polarization is not confined to a single platform but travels across interactional, positional, and affective dimensions of public discourse (Yarchi et al., 2021). In Indonesia, this pattern became especially visible following the 2024 general and regional elections, when online news coverage was found to reinforce both affective polarization, marked by hostility toward political opponents, and identity polarization, built around religious, ethnic, and ideological cleavages (Efrianti, 2025).

Regional head elections (Pilkada) add a further layer of complexity to this picture. Unlike national elections, Pilkada contests are shaped by local political dynamics, patronage networks, and regionally specific issues, yet they are increasingly mediated by the same national online news ecosystem that covers presidential contests. (Muhtar et al., 2025) show that the intense polarization surrounding the 2024 Pilkada had far-reaching consequences for local democracy, including declining political participation, heightened social tension, and weakened public trust in local political institutions. Despite these findings, communication research that specifically examines how verified online news media construct and reproduce polarized political discourse at the sub-national level remains comparatively underdeveloped, overshadowed by a much larger body of scholarship on national elections and on social media platforms such as Twitter/X and Facebook.

To interpret the patterns uncovered below in a consistent way, this study draws on two complementary bodies of theory rather than a single grand theory, a choice appropriate to the exploratory, field-mapping purpose of a bibliometric review. First, the bibliometric map of keyword co-occurrences is read through established communication theories, namely the media-effects tradition, agenda-setting theory, and framing theory, which offer different explanations for why particular themes and methods cluster together in a research field. Second, the narrative synthesis of Discourse Network Analysis studies is read through (Leifeld, 2017, 2020) discourse-network and social-balance framework, in which discourse coalitions form as actors converge on shared positions toward shared concepts over time. These two lenses are applied, respectively, in the Results and Discussion section to explain the bibliometric structure and to situate the position of the present study within existing DNA scholarship.

To ascertain the extent and shape of this gap, a bibliometric analysis provides a systematic and replicable way of mapping the intellectual structure of a research field (Gandasari et al., 2024). Bibliometric techniques combined with the science-mapping software VOSviewer have been applied across communication, political science, and social-network research to visualize how keywords, authors, and topics cluster together (Anugerah et al., 2022; Gandasari et al., 2024). Rather than relying on a narrative reading of a handful of studies, bibliometric mapping allows a field's dominant themes, underexplored niches, and methodological trends to be identified from the aggregated structure of a large corpus of indexed publications.

One method that has gained particular traction for examining how actors and issues are connected within online news discourse is Discourse Network Analysis (DNA), a hybrid content-and-network-analysis approach that reconstructs the relationships between political actors and the concepts they support or oppose within a given debate (Karter et al., 2023). In the Indonesian context, DNA has been applied to a wide range of policy and political debates carried in online media, including the discourse surrounding nuclear power plant construction (Zulkifli & Amrihani, 2024), the Tabungan Perumahan Rakyat (TAPERA) housing-savings program (Pribadi et al., 2024), freelance labor policy (Arifianto et al., 2023), and conflict over church construction in Palembang (Bafadhal et al., 2024). It has also been extended to social media debates, such as digital activism around presidential term-limit discourse on Twitter (Khatami, 2022), and to the earliest stages of the COVID-19 outbreak (Eriyanto, 2022). Despite this expanding body of work, applications of DNA that specifically examine polarization within verified online news media during regional or local elections such as Pilkada remain scarce. In other words, while DNA has been validated across a wide and growing range of Indonesian policy debates, a systematic search of Scopus- and Google Scholar-indexed literature (the retrieval procedure is detailed in the Research Method section) did not return any published study, Indonesian or international, that applies this discourse-network method to polarization in verified online news coverage of a sub-national election. Given the scope limitations inherent in a two-database search and a finite

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set of keyword combinations, this is best described as an underexplored, and so far as this search could establish, unoccupied gap in the literature, and it is this gap that the present study addresses.

This gap can be illustrated briefly. Indonesia's 2024 simultaneous regional elections (Pilkada Serentak) were held on 27 November 2024 across 545 regions nationwide, with more than 203 million registered voters (Wantimpres RI, 2024). In South Sumatra, the gubernatorial race was contested by three candidate pairs, and both pre-election surveys and local media coverage converged on the incumbent's advantage as the dominant campaign narrative (Antara News, 2024; Kompas, 2024; KPU Sumatera Selatan, 2024; SINDOnews Daerah, 2024). Multi-actor, information-rich local contests of this kind are precisely the setting in which discourse coalitions are likely to form and polarize, yet, as the bibliometric and narrative evidence presented below shows, they remain almost entirely outside the scope of existing DNA scholarship.

The stakes of this gap are reinforced by convergent evidence, across both cross-national and Indonesian studies, that non-neutral, conflict-oriented reporting can itself deepen polarization. At the cross-national level, three independent large-scale studies point to the same pattern: analyses of 69,400 election-news headlines in India (Chebrolu et al., 2025), more than 127 million news-browsing records in the United States and Poland (Heseltine et al., 2025), and a systematic review of the broader media-and-polarization literature (Kubin & Von Sikorski, 2021) all find that conflict-oriented, partisan, or uncivil news coverage, regardless of an outlet's own political leaning, is associated with heightened ideological, emotional, and perceived polarization among audiences. In the Indonesian context, a parallel picture emerges at both the voter and the outlet level: (Afrimadona, 2021) documented a Jakarta electorate sharply divided along religious and economic lines during the 2017 gubernatorial race, (Firman & Rahmawati, 2023) showed that Indonesian online media frequently produce non-neutral coverage shaped by ownership interests and political affiliations, and a comparison of CNNIndonesia.com and Okezone.com coverage of the 2024 Jakarta Pilkada found systematic differences in how the two portals framed candidates (Sihite et al., 2024). Read together, these two bodies of evidence suggest that conflict-oriented, non-neutral coverage is not an isolated finding but a recurring feature of polarized election reporting across contexts, and that if South Sumatra's online news coverage followed a similar pattern, the resulting discourse would be a productive, empirically grounded object for DNA-based mapping.

This study addresses this gap by conducting a bibliometric analysis of research at the intersection of online media, political polarization, and election, using Scopus-indexed publications visualized through VOSviewer. Specifically, this study aims to: (1) map the keyword co-occurrence network of research combining these three themes; (2) identify the dominant thematic clusters and their interrelations; and (3) synthesize recent empirical studies (2020–2026) applying Discourse Network Analysis and related discourse-oriented methods to online media coverage of political debates, in order to situate the position and novelty of research on polarization in local-election news coverage. The findings are expected to provide a methodological and thematic roadmap for future communication research addressing media-driven political polarization at the sub-national level, and to make explicit, through the combination of bibliometric mapping and narrative synthesis, a research gap that neither method could establish as convincingly on its own.

METHOD

This study employed a bibliometric analysis complemented by a narrative literature synthesis. The bibliometric component followed the widely used two-stage procedure of data retrieval and network visualization that has been applied in recent bibliometric reviews across the social sciences (Anugerah et al., 2022; Gandasari et al., 2024).

Bibliographic data were retrieved from the Scopus database using a combined keyword search of “online media,” “political polarization,” and “election” applied to the title, abstract, and keyword fields. The search returned 198 documents. Because the three keyword strings did not always co-occur directly within a single document, the corpus captures the broader thematic neighborhood surrounding these three concepts rather than a narrowly defined set of papers that discuss all three terms simultaneously. This approach follows standard bibliometric practice, in which a moderately broad retrieval strategy is preferred over an overly restrictive one so that the resulting keyword network can reveal latent thematic relationships that a narrower search might miss (Gandasari et al., 2024).

To improve replicability, the retrieval procedure is reported in full. The search was conducted on the Scopus database on *1 Mei 2026*, using the Boolean query *TITLE-ABS-KEY (“online media”) AND TITLE-ABS-KEY (“political*

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polarization") AND TITLE-ABS-KEY ("election"), with no restriction on publication year. Documents were included if they were (a) journal articles, conference papers, or reviews, (b) written in English or Indonesian, and (c) classified by Scopus under the Social Sciences, Arts and Humanities, or Business, Management and Accounting subject areas. Documents were excluded if they were erratum notices, editorials, or duplicate records, or if they lacked an abstract and author keyword needed for VOSviewer processing. After these criteria were applied, 198 documents remained and were exported in full-record format (including cited references) for bibliometric processing. Table 1 reports the exact query used, the filters applied at the point of search, and the exclusion criteria applied to arrive at the final corpus.

Table 1. Record Retrieval and Inclusion Criteria for the Bibliometric Analysis

Stage	Description	n
Records retrieved	Records returned by the Boolean query TITLE-ABS-KEY("online media") AND TITLE-ABS-KEY("political polarization") AND TITLE-ABS-KEY("election"), restricted at the point of search to journal articles, conference papers, and reviews; English- or Indonesian-language documents; and the Social Sciences, Arts and Humanities, or Business, Management and Accounting subject areas	198
Records included	Records retained in the final corpus after manually excluding erratum notices, editorials, and duplicate records, and records lacking the abstract or author-keyword fields required for VOSviewer import; no records in this corpus were excluded at this stage beyond the criteria already applied within the Scopus query	198

Source: Scopus export log, processed by the author, 2026.

The exported metadata were processed using VOSviewer version 1.6.20 (Van Eck & Waltman, developed at Leiden University) to construct a keyword co-occurrence network. VOSviewer applies a clustering algorithm that groups keywords with strong co-occurrence links into distinct thematic clusters, visualized as a network map in which node size reflects term frequency and proximity reflects the strength of association between terms. The resulting map consisted of 59 items distributed across four clusters. To probe the network structure in more detail, two overlay visualizations were generated by isolating the direct connections of the two most central items, "polarization" and "sentiment analysis," following the common practice of using item-level overlays to interpret a cluster's substantive meaning (Anugerah et al., 2022)

To complement the quantitative mapping with a substantive understanding of how Discourse Network Analysis has actually been applied, sixteen studies published between 2020 and 2026 that employed DNA or a closely related discourse-network approach to online media or public-issue debates were purposively selected from the retrieved literature and supplementary searches on Scopus and Google Scholar. Studies were located through two complementary routes: (a) supplementary keyword searches on Scopus and Google Scholar combining "discourse network analysis" with "Indonesia," "online media," "Pilkada," or "election"; and (b) backward citation tracking from key DNA methodological references identified in the bibliometric corpus (Karter et al., 2023; Leifeld, 2020). To be included in the synthesis, a study had to (1) explicitly apply DNA or a closely related discourse-network method rather than merely cite the approach, (2) analyze online media content or a public-issue debate, and (3) be published between 2020 and 2026. Studies that used DNA-related terminology only nominally, without reconstructing an actor-concept network, were excluded to reduce selection bias. Each study was reviewed for its object of analysis, methodological design, and key findings, and then compared against the focus of the present research, namely polarization in verified online news coverage of local elections, to identify similarities, differences, and the specific niche that remains open for further investigation.

To further ground the gap identified above with an illustrative empirical case, a supplementary coding exercise was carried out on a corpus of online news articles covering the 2024 South Sumatra gubernatorial election, drawn from the author's broader research program on this contest. Articles were retrieved from five online media outlets selected for their

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consistent coverage of the South Sumatra Pilkada throughout 2024, significant local and national readership, public accessibility without a subscription paywall, and range of institutional and political affiliations: Tempo.co, SindoNews.com, Bisnis.com, MetroTVNews.com, and Antaranews.com. Articles were retrieved through a combination of manual keyword search (using terms including "Pilkada Sumatera Selatan 2024," "Pilgub Sumsel 2024," and the names of the three candidate pairs) and structured web scraping conducted in accordance with each site's robots.txt policy. Articles were eligible for inclusion if they were published between January and December 2024, contained at least one codeable statement from a named actor, and directly concerned the gubernatorial contest. Rather than drawing a statistical sample, this exercise followed a discursive-representativeness approach and retained all 61 articles meeting these criteria during the study period, consistent with the logic of Discourse Network Analysis corpus construction, in which analytical adequacy is judged by the diversity of actors, issues, and positions captured rather than by sample size alone (Leifeld, 2020)

Following (Leifeld, 2017)discourse-network coding scheme, the unit of coding was the statement rather than the article: a statement is a single verbal or written expression, by a named actor, of a position toward a specific concept. Because a single article frequently contains more than one such statement (for example, an article may report both a candidate's claim about electability and an election official's claim about administrative legitimacy), the 61 articles yielded 153 statements in total, each coded independently for the actor, the discourse concept addressed, the direction of the actor's position (agreement or disagreement), and the date of publication. Each statement was assigned to exactly one of six discourse-theme categories, developed inductively from the corpus and defined in a codebook that specified operational definitions and illustrative examples for each category. Coding was performed independently by the main researcher and two additional coders against this codebook, and inter-coder reliability was assessed across all 153 statements using Cohen's Kappa, which ranged from $\kappa = 0.724$ to $\kappa = 0.968$ across coder pairs, indicating substantial to almost perfect agreement. The results of this coding exercise are reported in Table 3 as an illustrative snapshot; they are not presented as a full, independently validated Discourse Network Analysis, and the limitations of treating this snapshot as illustrative rather than definitive are discussed in the Conclusion.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Bibliometric Landscape of Online Media, Political Polarization, and Election Research

The Scopus search combining the keywords “online media,” “political polarization,” and “election” returned 198 documents. Processing this corpus in VOSviewer produced a keyword co-occurrence network of 59 items organized into only four clusters (Figure 1), a relatively coarse clustering structure. Following the interpretation used in comparable bibliometric reviews of emerging research areas, a small number of broad clusters typically signals a field that is still consolidating around a limited set of core themes rather than one that has diversified into many specialized sub-topics (Gandasari et al., 2024)

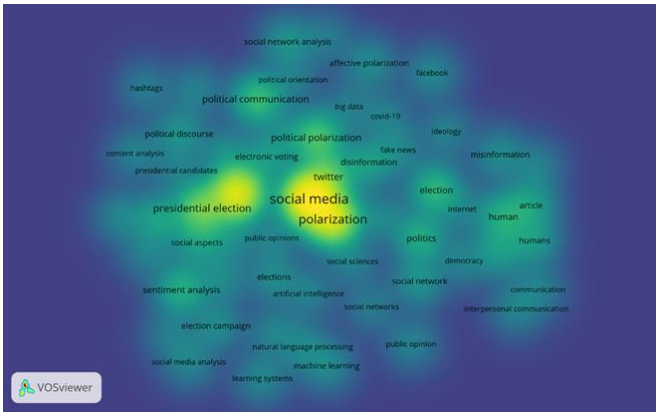


Figure 1. Keyword Co-occurrence Network of Online Media, Political Polarization, and Election Research (n = 198)
Source: Scopus, VOSviewer, processed by the author, 2026.

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As shown in Figure 1, the most prominent terms are "social media polarization," "political polarization," and "sentiment analysis," indicated by their large node size and central position in the map. Surrounding these core terms are two broad thematic neighborhoods: one oriented toward computational and data-driven methods ("sentiment analysis," "natural language processing," "machine learning," "social media analysis," "artificial intelligence"), and another oriented toward the electoral and communicative dimensions of polarization ("election," "political communication," "democracy," "disinformation," "fake news," "public opinion"). Notably, platform-specific terms such as "twitter" and "facebook" appear with high frequency, while terms referring specifically to verified online news outlets or journalistic media are largely absent from the map. This pattern indicates that the bulk of existing scholarship in this thematic area concentrates on user-generated content on social media platforms rather than on edited, professionally produced online news coverage.

These structural patterns can be productively read through established communication theories. The centrality of "sentiment analysis" and related computational terms is consistent with a media-effects tradition in which audience attitudes are treated as measurable outputs of message exposure, whereas the cluster anchored on "political communication," "disinformation," and "public opinion" resonates with agenda-setting theory's proposition that the volume and framing of coverage shape which issues and considerations become salient to audiences (Yarchi et al., 2021). At the same time, the near-absence of verified news-outlet terms in the network suggests that framing theory, which explains how journalists' selection and emphasis of particular aspects of an issue construct specific interpretations for audiences, remains comparatively underapplied within this thematic area, despite its evident relevance to how professionally edited outlets narrate electoral polarization.

This structural pattern carries a substantive theoretical implication beyond the descriptive observation itself. A field that concentrates on platform-generated, computationally tractable data risks treating polarization primarily as an attribute of aggregated audience sentiment, measurable and comparable across posts, rather than as a relational and institutional process constructed through the editorial choices of named actors and outlets, which is precisely the process that framing theory and discourse-network approaches are designed to capture. This concentration also carries a plausible epistemological bias: because sentiment- and platform-based studies are easier to produce at scale, and because Scopus itself privileges English-language, internationally indexed venues, the bibliometric record may systematically under-represent polarization research conducted on verified, often local-language news media in electoral contexts outside major Western platforms. It is this combination of data-availability incentives, elaborated further below, and indexing bias that plausibly helps explain the specific gap this study identifies: verified online news coverage of sub-national elections such as Pilkada remains comparatively invisible in the bibliometric record not necessarily because it is theoretically less important, but because it is harder to study at bibliometric scale.

Cluster and Network Structure Around Polarization and Sentiment Analysis

To examine the network structure in more depth, an item-level overlay was generated for the "polarization" node (Figure 2). This item recorded 57 links, a total link strength of 391, and 77 occurrences, making it one of the most densely connected terms in the entire map. Its immediate neighborhood includes "affective polarization," "political communication," "election," "disinformation," and "ideology," suggesting that polarization research in this field is conceptually anchored to questions of communication strategy, information disorder, and electoral competition rather than to the internal editorial dynamics of specific news outlets.

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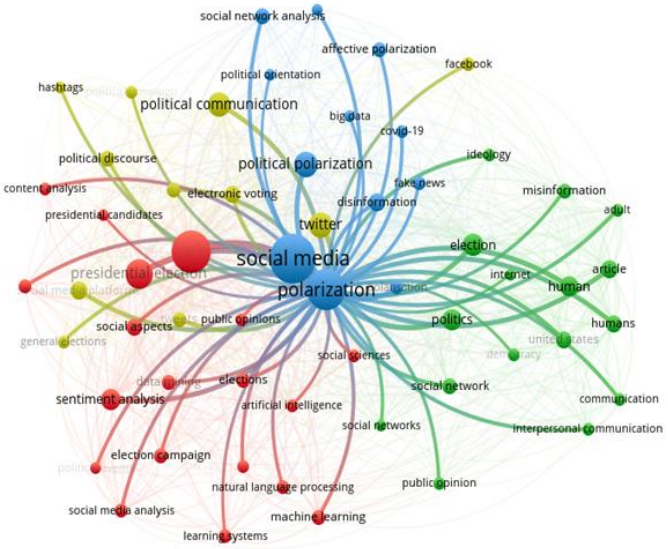


Figure 2. Co-occurrence Network of the "Polarization" Item
Source: Scopus, VOSviewer, processed by the author, 2026.

A second overlay was generated for the "sentiment analysis" item (Figure 3), which recorded 36 links, a total link strength of 127, and 19 occurrences. Its connections are concentrated on computational terms such as "machine learning," "natural language processing," and "social media analysis," confirming that a substantial share of the retrieved literature treats polarization as a measurable, text-classification problem best approached through automated content analysis rather than through a relational or discourse-analytic lens.

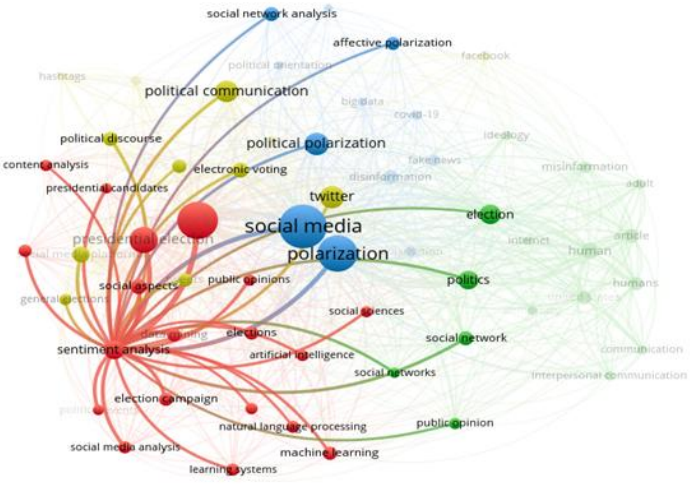


Figure 3. Co-occurrence Network of the "Sentiment Analysis" Item
Source: Scopus, VOSviewer, processed by the author, 2026.

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Taken together, the two overlays reveal a field split between a computational, platform-centered tradition and a smaller but conceptually rich communication-and-democracy tradition. Discourse-analytic and network-relational methods such as Discourse Network Analysis, which examine how specific actors and concepts are connected within a bounded text corpus, occupy a comparatively marginal position in this bibliometric landscape, despite their demonstrated usefulness for tracing how polarized narratives are constructed by named actors in professionally edited news coverage.

As anticipated above, viewed through a digital-media-ecosystem framework, this computational-versus-discourse-analytic split also reflects a broader structural feature of the online information environment. Algorithmically mediated platforms generate large volumes of readily quantifiable user-generated data that are well-suited to sentiment and machine-learning analysis, whereas the discourse produced by verified news organizations, smaller in volume but arguably more consequential for agenda-setting and public legitimacy, is harder to scale computationally and is therefore better suited to the actor-concept reconstruction that Discourse Network Analysis provides (Leifeld, 2020). This ecosystem-level asymmetry offers one explanation for why bibliometric attention has gravitated toward the former at the expense of the latter.

Narrative Synthesis of Discourse Network Analysis Studies (2020–2026)

To situate this bibliometric picture within a more fine-grained understanding of current practice, Table 2 synthesizes sixteen studies published between 2020 and 2026 that applied Discourse Network Analysis or a closely related discourse-network approach to online media or public debates.

Table 2. Narrative Synthesis of Discourse Network Analysis Studies (2020–2026)

No	Study (Author, Year)	Focus / Object	Method	Key Finding
1	(Eriyanto & Ali, 2020)	COVID-19 public issue debate in Indonesian online media	DNA (qual.-quant.)	Discourse network shifted over time as actors renegotiated the meaning of the pandemic as a public issue.
2	(Wallaschek et al., 2020)	Solidarity discourse in German newspapers, 2008–2017	DNA	Discourse coalitions and their composition changed as the socio-political context evolved.
3	(Khatami, 2022)	"Three-term president" debate on Twitter	DNA	Identified digital-activism actors and their positions in a rapidly emerging political controversy.
4	(Karter et al., 2023)	Prabumulih oil-spill environmental crisis coverage	DNA	Mapped legitimacy struggles between corporate, government, and civil-society actors.
5	(Arifianto et al., 2023)	Freelancer labor policy in Kompas.com, 2003–2022	DNA	Pro-economic-value statements dominated counter-statements across two decades of coverage.
6	(Zulkifli & Amrihani, 2024)	Nuclear power plant construction on detikcom & KOMPAS.com	DNA	Discourse on both outlets was predominantly supportive of the government's nuclear energy policy.
7	(Pribadi et al., 2024)	TAPERA housing-savings program in online media	DNA (quant.)	Two opposing coalitions emerged: government/public institutions versus political parties/NGOs.

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No	Study (Author, Year)	Focus / Object	Method	Key Finding
8	(Bafadhal et al., 2024)	Church-construction conflict in Palembang	DNA	Identified two structured discourse coalitions in Indonesian online news coverage.
9	(Bakry & Ardianto, 2025)	Literature review of DNA in journalism studies, 1994–2024	Literature review	DNA remains underused in Indonesia despite advantages over CDA and framing analysis.
10	(Baqi, 2025)	Jakarta International Stadium (JIS) non-sports-use debate	DNA (quant.)	The pro-multievent coalition dominated the discourse network with the highest centrality scores.
11	(Muhtar et al., 2025)	2024 Pilkada polarization and local democracy	Mixed methods	Polarization reduced political participation and weakened local democratic institutions.
12	(Efrianti, 2025)	2024 general election online news coverage	Qualitative descriptive	Identified affective and identity polarization patterns in online media narratives.
13	(Kwon et al., 2026)	20-year nursing-legislation debate in South Korea	DNA (mixed methods)	Policy change followed a shift from centralized to dense, collaborative actor networks.
14	(Elislah, 2023)	Election-postponement discourse on Kompas.com & Detik.com	DNA	Conflict-oriented political discourse in the media correlated with rising political cynicism.
15	(Sumirat & Eriyanto, 2023)	Papua province-division debate in media texts	DNA	Mapped distinct pro- and contra-discourse coalitions on the province-division issue.

Source: Data processed by the author, 2026.

The synthesis in Table 2 shows that Discourse Network Analysis has been applied to an increasingly diverse set of Indonesian public debates, energy policy, housing programs, labor policy, environmental conflict, and sports-facility governance, as well as to comparative and cross-national policy contexts (Kwon et al., 2026; Wallaschek et al., 2020). However, only two of the sixteen studies engage directly with electoral politics (Efrianti, 2025; Muhtar et al., 2025), and neither of them applies the DNA method itself; both instead rely on qualitative descriptive or mixed quantitative-qualitative designs that describe polarization patterns without reconstructing the underlying actor-concept network. Conversely, the studies that do apply DNA rigorously (Arifianto et al., 2023; Bafadhal et al., 2024; Baqi, 2025; Karter et al., 2023; Pribadi et al., 2024; Zulkifli & Amrihani, 2024) are concentrated on national policy debates rather than on electoral contests, and none examines a regional head election (Pilkada).

This pattern corroborates the bibliometric findings above: research explicitly combining online media, political polarization, and election tends to rely on computational, sentiment-based methods applied to social media data, while research applying discourse-network methods tends to focus on national policy debates in verified online news media. The intersection of the two, a discourse-network analysis of polarization within verified online news coverage of a local election, remains largely unoccupied.

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Positioning the Research Gap

Considered together, the bibliometric mapping and the narrative synthesis point to the same conclusion from two different angles. Quantitatively, the keyword network shows that studies linking online media, political polarization, and election cluster heavily around social media platforms and computational text analysis, with comparatively little representation of verified news media as the unit of analysis. Qualitatively, the review of sixteen recent DNA studies shows that the method has been validated across a wide range of Indonesian policy debates but has not yet been extended to the discourse networks that online news media construct around a regional election. Regional head elections such as the 2024 Pilkada are shaped by locally specific actors, issues, and coalitions that a purely computational, platform-level analysis is unlikely to capture in the same way that a discourse-network approach can, since DNA explicitly reconstructs which named actors support or oppose which concepts over the course of a contest (Karter et al., 2023; Pribadi et al., 2024)

This gap carries both theoretical and practical significance. Theoretically, extending DNA to a local electoral context test whether the discourse-coalition structures observed in national policy debates also characterize sub-national political contests, or whether local dynamics produce distinct coalition patterns. Practically, mapping how verified online news media construct polarized discourse coalitions during a Pilkada can inform media literacy initiatives and newsroom self-reflection in regions where local democracy has been shown to be particularly vulnerable to the effects of polarization (Muhtar et al., 2025). A mixed-methods study that combines DNA's structural precision with qualitative interpretation of coalition meaning therefore represents a well-justified and timely contribution to the literature mapped in this study.

Empirical Snapshot: Discourse Themes in Pilkada Sumsel 2024 Online News Coverage

Although the main body of this study is bibliometric in design, this snapshot is included for a specific methodological reason: it operationalizes, on a small explanatory scale, the very unit of analysis that the sections above show to be missing from the literature, polarization in verified online news coverage of a Pilkada. The coding reported below does not constitute a second, independent study; rather, it previews the kind of raw material (competing discourse themes voiced by named actors) that a full Discourse Network Analysis of this contest would need to formalize into an actor-concept network, and it illustrates the practical relevance of the gap identified through the bibliometric mapping and narrative synthesis above.

The full retrieval, sampling, coding, and reliability procedures for this exercise are reported in the Supplementary Coding of Pilkada Sumsel 2024 News Coverage subsection of the Research Method above. In brief, 61 articles meeting the inclusion criteria were coded into 153 actor statements, each assigned to one of six discourse-theme categories; the unit of analysis is therefore the statement, not the article, since a single article commonly contains more than one codeable statement. The resulting distribution is summarized in Table 3.

Table 3. Discourse Themes in Online News Coverage of the 2024 South Sumatra Gubernatorial Election (n = 153 statements coded from 61 articles)

Rank	Discourse Theme	Statements	Percentage
1	Legitimacy of Pilkada administration	33	21.57%
2	Candidate electability and competence	32	20.92%
3	Fraud and electoral violations	32	20.92%
4	Party coalitions and political strength	26	16.99%
5	Voter participation and mobilization	22	14.38%
6	Legitimacy of candidacy regulations	8	5.23%

Source: Coding of online news articles by the author, 2025.

Table 3 shows that the coverage was led almost equally by two themes: the legitimacy of the Pilkada administration itself (21.57%), closely followed by reports of candidate electability and competence, and also fraud and electoral violations

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(20.92%). Together, these three themes account for nearly two-thirds of all coded statements, suggesting that South Sumatra's online news coverage leaned heavily toward contestation- and legitimacy-related narratives rather than substantive policy debate, a pattern consistent with the conflict-frame tendencies documented in other electoral contexts (Chebrolu et al., 2025; Heseltine et al., 2025). Party coalitions and political strength (16.99%) and voter participation and mobilization (14.38%) were also prominent, while the legitimacy of candidacy regulations (5.23%) was comparatively marginal.

This distribution is consistent with findings from other Indonesian DNA-based studies of online news discourse. (Elislah, 2023), analyzing Kompas.com and Detik.com coverage of election-postponement discourse using DNA Analyzer and Visone, found that conflict-oriented political discourse in the media correlated directly with rising political cynicism among the public. Similarly, (Sumirat & Eriyanto, 2023) mapped comparable pro- and contra-discourse coalitions in media coverage of the proposed division of Papua province.

Read together with the bibliometric mapping and the narrative synthesis presented above, this empirical snapshot indicates that the 2024 South Sumatra gubernatorial race generated a discourse environment plausibly structured around competing coalitions, exactly the kind of structure that Discourse Network Analysis is designed to uncover, but that no existing study, Indonesian or international, has yet mapped for a provincial-level Pilkada using this method.

CONCLUSION

This study mapped the bibliometric landscape of research linking online media, political polarization, and election, and complemented that map with a narrative synthesis of sixteen recent studies applying Discourse Network Analysis. The bibliometric mapping of 198 Scopus-indexed documents produced a comparatively coarse network of 59 keywords in only four clusters, dominated by “social media polarization,” “political polarization,” and “sentiment analysis,” and concentrated on social media platforms and computational text-analysis methods rather than on verified online news media. The narrative synthesis showed that Discourse Network Analysis has been productively applied to a growing range of Indonesian policy debates, yet almost none of these applications address polarization within online news coverage of a regional election.

These converging findings identify a specific and researchable gap: the absence of discourse-network studies of polarization and discourse coalitions in verified online news coverage of local elections such as Indonesia's Pilkada. Future research is encouraged to address this gap through mixed-methods designs that combine the structural precision of Discourse Network Analysis with contextual, qualitative interpretation of the resulting actor-concept networks.

Beyond identifying a gap, this study offers three contributions. Theoretically, it shows that agenda-setting, framing, and digital-media-ecosystem perspectives jointly help explain why discourse-network methods remain concentrated in national rather than sub-national electoral contexts. Methodologically, it offers a replicable template for triangulating a research gap by combining bibliometric mapping with narrative synthesis. Practically, it gives newsrooms, election monitors, and civil-society organizations a rationale for why mapping discourse coalitions, not sentiment counting alone, matters for understanding polarization during regional elections.

As with any bibliometric study, these findings are methodologically bounded in three respects. First, they are bounded by the scope of a single database (Scopus) and a specific keyword combination; a different search string or additional databases such as Web of Science or Dimensions might reveal a different cluster structure. Second, the narrative synthesis rests on a purposive, non-exhaustive selection of sixteen studies identified through Scopus and Google Scholar, and may not capture DNA applications published in venues indexed elsewhere or under different terminology. Third, the supplementary coding exercise summarized in Table 3, although subjected to formal inter-coder reliability testing (Cohen's $\kappa = 0.724–0.968$ across coder pairs), remains a single-province, non-probability illustrative sample rather than a fully validated Discourse Network Analysis, and its findings should not be generalized beyond the 2024 South Sumatra contest. Nonetheless, the convergence between the bibliometric mapping, the narrative synthesis, and the empirical snapshot lends confidence to the conclusion that discourse-network research on local-election polarization in verified online media constitutes a timely and researchable gap in the current literature.

Future bibliometric work could extend this search strategy by triangulating Scopus with complementary databases such as Web of Science, by broadening the keyword combination to include terms such as “news media,” “journalism,” or “regional election” to check whether verified-news-focused studies are simply indexed differently rather than genuinely

absent, and by adding a bibliometric performance analysis, such as citation counts, h-index, and productivity trends by author, institution, and country, to complement the structural picture offered here with an assessment of scholarly impact.

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