

Constructing Social Reality Through Media Narratives: The Case of Rempang Eco City in Indonesia

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ABSTRACT: This study examines how Indonesian mainstream digital news narratively constructs social reality around the Rempang Eco City project during August–September 2024. Using qualitative narrative analysis, we analyze ten items from Kompas.com, DetikNews, CNNIndonesia.com, Kompas TV, and Kompaspedia to identify plot structures, authorized voices, evaluative language, and scale shifts. We find four dominant narrative types—Development-as-Progress, Rights-and-Resistance, Technocratic-Governance, and Environmental-Risk—which compete to define “what the problem is” and who is authorized to speak. Across outlets, state and investor voices frequently anchor openings/codas, which naturalizes developmental inevitability, while community and expert voices gain salience in resistance- and risk-oriented pieces. The results support mediatization scholarship by showing that news not only reports events but co-authors public meanings about legitimacy, justice, and belonging. We discuss implications for communicative legitimacy in national strategic projects and suggest audience- and cross-platform extensions for future research.

KEYWORDS: Mediatization; Social Construction of Reality, Narrative Analysis, Rempang Eco City.

I. INTRODUCTION

The Rempang Eco City project has emerged as one of Indonesia’s most ambitious development plans, officially designated as a National Strategic Project (NSP) under the Coordinating Ministry for Economic Affairs in 2023. With an investment value projected at USD 11.6 billion, or approximately IDR 381 trillion, through cooperation with China’s Xinyi Group, the project aims to transform Rempang Island into an integrated hub for industry, renewable energy, commerce, tourism, and residential zones. Covering 7,990 hectares of land, the project is expected to generate employment for more than 306,000 workers who will live and work in the designated area. This massive undertaking has been promoted as a cornerstone of Indonesia’s long-term economic growth strategy.

However, the project has sparked intense controversy due to the planned relocation of approximately 2,637 households and the conversion of ecologically sensitive areas. As of mid-2024, official data indicated that only 241 families had registered for relocation, with 127 families already moved and 114 still awaiting transfer, while more than 1,500 families continued to resist relocation. Government plans for land acquisition, housing resettlement, and infrastructure have triggered resistance from local residents and Indigenous communities who perceive the initiative as a threat to their cultural identity, livelihoods, and ancestral land rights. The situation has escalated into protests, legal disputes, and highly polarized public debates.

From a communication studies perspective, this controversy is not merely a question of economic planning or administrative policy. It reflects how development projects are mediated, narrated, and contested in the public sphere. Media coverage plays a crucial role in framing the legitimacy of the project, amplifying the voices of state actors, investors, or affected communities, and shaping how the wider society interprets the meaning of Rempang Eco City. This is consistent with the view that communication is not only the transmission of information but also the social construction of reality (Berger & Luckmann, 1966/2017).

Digital news platforms such as Kompas, DetikNews, and CNN Indonesia have become central arenas where the Rempang conflict is articulated. Their reporting has framed the issue alternately as an economic opportunity, a human rights violation, or an environmental threat. In the era of mediatization, where social practices are deeply entangled with media logics, public understanding of Rempang cannot be separated from how it is represented and circulated in journalistic narratives (Couldry & Hepp, 2017; Hepp, 2020).

The urgency of studying Rempang from a communication lens lies in this interplay between media and society. Media narratives do not simply reflect the facts of relocation, investment, or ecological change; they actively construct meanings that influence public perception, social mobilization, and policy legitimacy. The polarization of narratives—between state-led

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modernization and grassroots resistance—illustrates how communication becomes a battleground of power and identity (Couldry & Hepp, 2017).

Previous studies on media and development in Indonesia often focused on economic policy communication or public relations strategies of government agencies. Yet, little attention has been given to how news narratives co-produce social reality in contested infrastructure projects. This study therefore fills a significant gap by shifting the lens from policy outputs and government communication strategies to the narrative constructions through which development conflicts are publicly understood. By examining the case of Rempang, this research highlights the communicative processes through which meanings of progress, justice, and belonging are negotiated in the media sphere.

Methodologically, this study applies narrative analysis to examine how five national channels—Kompas.com, DetikNews, CNNIndonesia.com, Kompas TV, and Kompaspedia—constructed the social reality of Rempang Eco City during August–September 2024. Unlike descriptive reporting or policy communication analyses that often focus on official statements, narrative analysis highlights how meaning is created, contested, and stabilized through journalistic storytelling structures. This approach reveals not only the content of news but also the cultural scripts through which development controversies are rendered intelligible to the public (Riessman, 2022).

The novelty of this research lies in situating the Rempang controversy within the framework of mediatization and social construction of reality. By analyzing journalistic narratives, the study demonstrates how media function as co-authors of contested realities, producing competing versions of truth that shape collective understanding. This contributes to communication scholarship by bridging the empirical context of Indonesia's national development conflicts with broader theoretical debates on media, power, and meaning-making in contemporary society.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

Contemporary communication research increasingly understands “reality” as something narrated, circulated, and stabilized through media practices. Building on social constructionism, Couldry and Hepp propose that everyday life is now constituted within “deep mediatization,” where meaning-making is entwined with datafied infrastructures and platform logics that condition what becomes sayable, visible, and legitimate in public arenas (Couldry & Hepp, 2017; Hepp, 2020).

Mediatization theory reframes media not as a discrete “effect” but as a long-run meta-process that permeates social fields and gradually moulds how reality is enacted within each field. Hepp emphasizes that such moulding forces are context-dependent—politics, work, everyday life—and must be traced empirically as they reconfigure communicative practices and shared meanings (Hepp, 2020).

A key implication is media centrality: in mediatized cultures, what counts as important tends to correlate with what is narratable through news and networked platforms. Yet this centrality is not reductionist. Mediatization scholarship highlights the interplay between local lifeworlds and translocal, media-mediated formations—an analytic duality that is crucial for conflicts like Rempang, where village identities and national development scripts meet within digital news flows (Hepp, 2020; Couldry, 2012).

Within this meta-process, narrative analysis offers a precise lens to examine how journalism organizes conflict into plots, roles, and symbolic oppositions (e.g., progress vs. dispossession; development vs. rights). Rather than treating media logic as deterministic, a mediated-construction perspective asks how infrastructures and newsroom practices set the conditions under which journalistic storytelling becomes socially consequential (Couldry & Hepp, 2017). Narrative analysis then makes visible how meaning is created, contested, and stabilized through story structures and evaluative language (Riessman, 2022).

Recent Indonesian studies align with this perspective by showing how online media frame large projects through selective narrative emphasis. Empirical work on Rempang finds local outlets and national portals leaning toward pro-investment frames or government perspectives, while downplaying community loss—evidence of competing constructions circulating in the public sphere (Rahmawati & Firman, 2023).

These dynamics unfold within a broader media environment where ownership structures and political ties shape agenda priorities and narrative prominence. Evidence from Indonesia documents how ownership affiliations and political alignments can influence coverage patterns, with implications for which versions of reality gain visibility (PR2Media, 2023).

Taken together, global mediatization theory and Indonesian empirical findings suggest that news narratives are not mere reflections but constitutive acts: they co-author public meanings about legitimacy, justice, and belonging in contentious development. What remains underexplored, however, is a systematic narrative analysis across Indonesia's mainstream national outlets—mapping how stories about Rempang are plotted, which actants are authorized to speak, and how evaluative cues steer readers toward particular interpretations (Hepp, 2020; Riessman, 2022).

Addressing that gap, the present study analyzes narratives in Kompas, DetikNews, and CNN Indonesia to show how mediatized storytelling constructs competing social realities around Rempang Eco City, and to clarify the communicative processes through which those realities gain traction in the national conversation (Couldry & Hepp, 2017; Hepp, 2020).

III. RESEARCH METHODS

A. Research Design

This study adopts a qualitative narrative analysis to examine how mainstream digital news constructs social reality around Rempang Eco City. Rather than treating news as neutral reportage, narrative analysis interrogates how stories are plotted, which actors are authorized to speak, and how evaluative cues invite readers to judge events (Tracy, 2020). This design is suitable in mediatized contexts where public meanings are co-authored through journalistic storytelling and circulation (drawing on the mediated-construction perspective)

B. Data Sources

The corpus comprises ten online news items listed in Table 1 of the attached document, drawn from five nationally visible channels: Kompas.com, DetikNews (Detik.com), CNNIndonesia.com, Kompas TV, and Kompaspedia. The temporal window is restricted to August–September 2024, capturing the peak period of contention. Items were located through outlet search pages and internal tags using Bahasa Indonesia keywords (Rempang, Rempang Eco City, relokasi, penggusuran, adat/ulayat, lingkungan, investasi), and retained exactly as enumerated in Table 1 to ensure reproducibility of the narrative sample. Included genres are straight news, features, explainers, live reports, and (where applicable) editorials that explicitly frame the project’s meaning

Table 1. News Items

Media & Writer	Date	Title
<i>DetikNews</i> (Muliawati, 2024)	6 Sept	Komnas HAM masih upayakan mediasi kasus Pulau Rempang.
<i>DetikNews</i> (Dahlia, 2024)	9 Sept	Polisi kejar provokator sebabkan bentrok di Rempang.
<i>Kompas TV</i> (Firdaus, 2024)	20 Sept	Kekerasan terhadap masyarakat adat Pulau Rempang masih terjadi, presiden didesak bertindak.
<i>Kompas.com</i> (Maharani & Alexander, 2024)	17 Sept	Pembebasan lahan proyek Rempang jadi tanggung jawab BP Batam.
<i>Kompas.com</i> (Sirait & Purba, 2024)	31 Aug	Warga Rempang diteror gardu listrik dan spanduk penolakan Rempang Eco City.
<i>Kompas.com</i> (Wiyoga, 2024)	7 Sept	Doa warga memperingati 1 tahun bentrok Rempang: Tanah adalah ibu yang kami sayangi.
<i>Kompaspedia</i> (Yuniarto, 2024)	20 Sept	September Hitam: rentetan catatan pelanggaran HAM di bulan September.
<i>CNNIndonesia.com</i> (Arp/dal, 2024)	1 Sept	Warga Pulau Rempang diteror spanduk tolak PSN dan gardu PLN dibakar.
<i>CNNIndonesia.com</i> (Arp/dal, 2024)	10 Sept	Warga Pulau Rempang kukuh tolak relokasi imbas PSN Eco City.
<i>CNNIndonesia.com</i> (Arpandi, 2024)	18 Aug	Warga Pulau Rempang menangis tolak PSN Rempang Eco City.

We included items that substantively addressed Rempang Eco City and developed a discernible story (headline–lede–body with quoted sources). We excluded briefs under ~150 words lacking narrative content, duplicate reposts, purely market updates, non-Indonesian editions, and aggregator pages. These criteria preserved narrative richness while limiting noise from micro-updates and syndication (aligned with the final ten-item list in Table 1). Following selection, each article was archived and prepared for analysis by segmenting the text into headline, lede, body paragraphs, quotations, and codas under a uniform metadata scheme.

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C. Analytical Framework

The unit of analysis in this research is the individual article. For each item, we archived the full text (and stills where relevant), captured metadata (outlet, date, author/byline when available), and segmented the text into headline, lede, body paragraphs, quotations, and codas. We preserved all Bahasa Indonesia quotations verbatim and translated only when needed for analytic memoing. A project log records search terms, retrieval dates, and file paths to enable auditability.

Analysis proceeds with a story-grammar and actantial lens suited to news discourse. Each article is read as a plotted story that moves from orientation → complicating action → evaluative turning points → (attempted) resolutions → codas, while actors are cast in recognizable roles: state officials across administrative levels (including security apparatus), investors (e.g., the Xinyi Group ecosystem), affected communities (local residents and Indigenous groups), civil society (NGOs, academics, religious figures), media as narrators, and other institutional voices such as experts or courts. Within this plotting, we identify how the text defines the central problem (e.g., investment delay, rights violations, environmental risk), traces causality and temporality through chains of events and pacing, and signals valuation via adjectives, metaphors, modal verbs, and quoted judgments that cue moral stance. We also examine voice and authorization—who speaks first/last and how much textual space each actor receives—alongside spatialization and scale, noting shifts between village lifeworlds and national/global development frames (references to national strategic projects, supply chains, or adat/ulayat spaces). Finally, we attend to intertextuality by tracking references to laws, official statements, data, prior events, or other media that stabilize one reality over others. On this basis, articles are clustered inductively into narrative types—such as Development-as-Progress, Rights-and-Resistance, Technocratic-Governance, and Environmental-Risk—tested against disconfirming cases rather than assumed a priori (situated within the mediated-construction perspective).

D. Coding Procedure

Analysis unfolded in three iterative cycles. Open coding surfaced plot moves, actants/roles, voice cues, evaluative language, spatialization, and intertextual references without imposing categories in advance. Axial coding then organized these descriptive codes into higher-order families aligned with the narrative framework, and drafted provisional narrative-type definitions with inclusions/exclusions and exemplars. Selective coding applied the scheme to the full corpus to assign a dominant narrative type per article, register any secondary subplots (not used for salience), and memo cross-outlet and temporal contrasts. This workflow follows the mediated-construction logic that news narratives are constitutive of public meaning, not merely reflective of events (Saldaña, 2021).

To bolster credibility, two coders double-coded ~20% of the corpus to negotiate shared understandings of categories. For categorical assignments (dominant narrative type; evaluative valence), we computed Cohen's κ as a checkpoint (target ≥ 0.70) before proceeding with single-coding, resolving disagreements by discussion and documenting reasons in an audit trail. We used negative-case analysis (actively seeking disconfirming articles), simple triangulation across outlets and months, and sensitivity reads (e.g., re-reading without headlines) to test robustness against house-style effects. These steps align with the study's theoretical stance that media enact reality through narrative operations and authorized voices in mediatized settings.

All materials are publicly available news items. We quote sparingly and paraphrase where appropriate, maintaining fidelity to meaning and avoiding unnecessary identification of private individuals. Reflexive memos documented how our disciplinary commitments (communication theory and mediated construction) might shape attention to voice, authorization, and scale, and were revisited during category refinement to mitigate interpretive bias (consistent with the mediated-construction stance outlined in the paper).

This study focuses on mainstream, national outlets over Aug–Sep 2024; it does not analyze local media or social platforms and does not claim audience effects. The small-N, theory-driven corpus prioritizes depth of narrative mechanisms over breadth. Findings should thus be interpreted as analytic generalizations about how Indonesian news narrates contentious development under conditions of mediatization, not as population estimates. Future work can extend the window, add local outlets, and trace audience uptake.

IV. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Across the ten-item corpus (Aug–Sep 2024), two narrative types dominate: *Rights-and-Resistance* and *Technocratic-Governance*. Rights-and-Resistance accounts for all August items and the majority in September, while Technocratic-Governance appears intermittently as a secondary but visible pattern. Development-as-Progress and Environmental-Risk occur only as secondary subplots. We quantify these distributions using narrative salience by month (Figure 1) and by outlet (Figure 2).

Given the two-month window, narrative salience is calculated per month as the proportion of coded articles whose dominant narrative type matches each line in Figure 1.

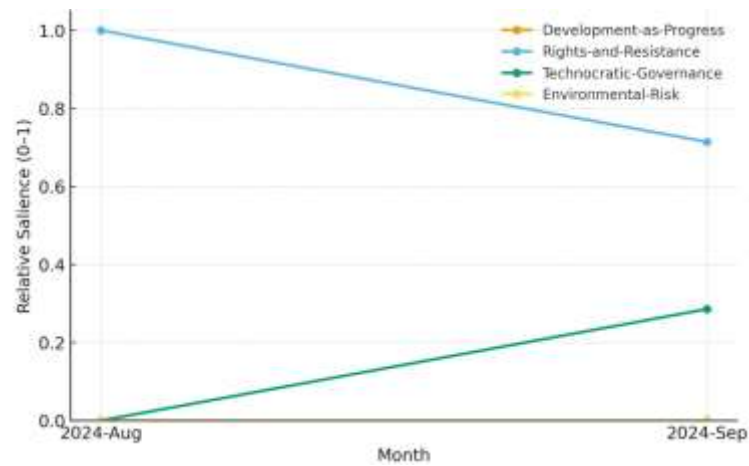


Figure 1. Temporal Shifts in Relative Salience of Narrative Types

Salience per month = $\#(\text{articles with dominant narrative type}) \div \#(\text{all coded articles in that month})$. August (n=3): Rights-and-Resistance = 1.00; September (n=7): Rights-and-Resistance = 0.71; Technocratic-Governance = 0.29; Development-as-Progress = 0.00; Environmental-Risk = 0.00. Values pool Kompas.com, DetikNews, CNNIndonesia.com, Kompas TV, and Kompaspedia.

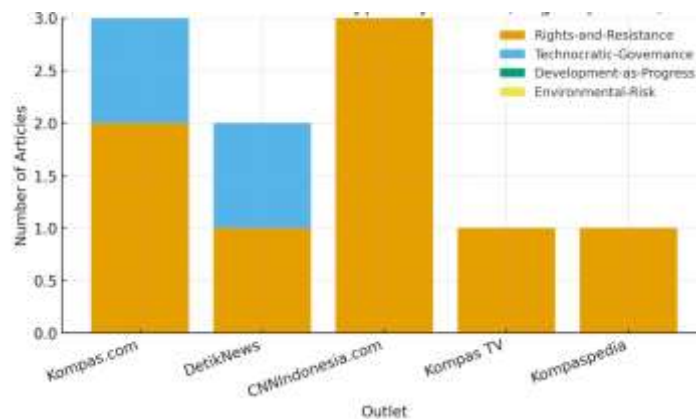


Figure 2. Distribution of Dominant Narrative Types by Outlet

Bars show the count of articles per outlet by dominant narrative type. Rights-and-Resistance dominates across outlets, while Technocratic-Governance appears in DetikNews and Kompas.com. Development-as-Progress and Environmental-Risk do not appear as dominant types in this ten-item sample.

Appendix A lists the ten news items analyzed in this study (August–September 2024), including outlet, date, original Indonesian title, and the assigned dominant narrative type based on the coding scheme described in the Methods. One-line coding notes indicate the textual cues driving each label (plot focus, voice/authorization, and evaluative language).

Table 2. Corpus and Dominant Narrative Labels

Media	Date	Dominant Narrative	Coding Note
DetikNews	6 Sept	Rights and Resistance	Rights discourse, mediation, due process emphasized.
DetikNews	9 Sept	Technocratic-Governance	Operational/security lens, order-maintenance, administrative problem.
Kompas TV	20 Sept	Rights and Resistance	Violence claims, moral call to authority, justice frame.
Kompas.com	17 Sept	Technocratic-Governance	Responsibility allocation, administrative steps, SOP language.
Kompas.com	31 Aug	Rights and Resistance	Community harm/terror motive, grievance foregrounded.
Kompas.com	7 Sept	Rights and Resistance	Identity/belonging, memory, ethical evaluation over data.

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Kompaspedia	20 Sept	Rights and Resistance	Human rights chronology, evaluative language, rights lexicon.
CNNIndonesia.com	1 Sept	Rights and Resistance	Protest/retaliation focus, community impact at centre.
CNNIndonesia.com	10 Sept	Rights and Resistance	Explicit refusal, consent and relocation contested.
CNNIndonesia.com	18 Aug	Rights and Resistance	Affective cues, dispossession, moral evaluation.

Across the ten-item corpus (August–September 2024), two narrative types dominate the mainstream digital coverage of Rempang Eco City: Rights-and-Resistance and Technocratic-Governance. Rights-and-Resistance accounts for all August items and a clear majority in September, while Technocratic-Governance appears intermittently as the second most frequent pattern. Development-as-Progress and Environmental-Risk surface only as secondary subplots—traceable in single sentences or side paragraphs—but do not organize the dominant plot of any story in this compressed window. The distribution aligns with Figure 1 (monthly salience) and Figure 2 (outlet distribution), indicating that at the height of contention the news agenda coalesced around moral and procedural claims rather than investment or ecological horizons. This pattern exemplifies how, under conditions of deep mediatization, journalism’s narrative operations actively configure public reality rather than merely mirror events (Hepp, 2020).

Rights-and-Resistance stories plot Rempang as a conflict over belonging, consent, and dignity. They foreground lived consequences of relocation and amplify first-person accounts or advocacy voices, using evaluative lexis that invites readers to interpret events through an ethics of harm and remedy. In narrative terms, these pieces provide temporal depth (memory of prior clashes, sequences of protest and response) and codas that call for dialogue or moratoria. Such storywork is consistent with narrative analysis scholarship that treats plotting, voice, and evaluation as the principal mechanisms through which texts make meaning and guide moral judgment (Riessman, 2022).

Technocratic-Governance stories, by contrast, recast the problem as an administrative sequence: verification, registration, compensation, and order maintenance. The plot leans on documents, spokesperson briefings, and institutional attributions of responsibility, with citizens abstracted into categories or caseloads. Codas emphasize throughput and timelines, normalizing the project as a policy workflow rather than a moral controversy. Read through mediatization theory, this storyline illustrates how institutional logics circulate via news and gradually mold what counts as “reasonable” action in a given field—here, relocation as procedural compliance (Hepp, 2020).

Outlet tendencies in Figure 2 reflect this split in plot preferences. CNNIndonesia.com, Kompas TV, and Kompaspedia more often sustain Rights-and-Resistance as the dominant story form, with extended quotes and contextual paragraphs that elevate moral and legal vocabularies. Kompas.com and DetikNews carry the corpus’s Technocratic-Governance items, consistent with event-driven and policy-step reportage that foregrounds administrative verbs (verify, map, register) and emphasizes order. These are tendencies rather than hard partitions, but the aggregate pattern suggests a division of narrative labor in Indonesia’s mainstream digital sphere. That division resonates with recent accounts of the mediatization of politics, where the relative weight of media logics shapes how institutional actors, advocacy groups, and citizens become publicly thinkable within news narratives (Strömbäck, 2022).

Two mechanisms help explain why developmental inevitability can feel persuasive in some items while grievance feels urgent in others. First is voice ordering: state or security sources that open or close stories anchor readers’ priors (common in Technocratic-Governance), while community-first ledes ethically “pre-classify” events before official justifications appear (typical in Rights-and-Resistance). Second is scale-work: governance plots stretch to national/global frames (PSN, investor pipelines), shrinking locality into administrative units; resistance plots start from villages, graves, and homes, then scale up to constitutional norms. These mechanisms illustrate how news organizations “co-author” the social by selecting plots and scales that render some futures necessary and others negotiable—a core claim in contemporary mediatization theory (Couldry & Hepp, 2017; Hepp, 2020).

The Indonesian media environment adds an important structural layer. Research on ownership and political affiliation documents concentrated control across major groups and recurring alignments with political elites and state-linked interests. Such conditions can influence which voices obtain prominence and how administrative frames attain commonsense status, especially in moments of conflict when risk management and stability are editorial priorities (PR2Media, 2023; Syarief, 2024). While our small-N corpus cannot test causality, the observed hierarchy of authorization—state/economic voices often structuring openings and codas—accords with these broader system-level dynamics.

At the same time, the regulatory and press freedom context matters for how far resistance narratives can travel. Recent overviews highlight legal and political pressures that may chill critical coverage or incentivize safer, proceduralist storytelling during contentious episodes. This helps explain why Environmental-Risk remains marginal as a dominant plot in our window:

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long-horizon, expert-led frames struggle to compete with the immediacy and institutional visibility of security or coordination updates (Putra, 2024).

Theoretically, these findings refine what deep mediatization implies for development conflicts. First, legitimacy is narratively produced: repeated governance codas (deadlines, responsibility, compliance) can sediment the sense that relocation is the default path, whereas sustained first-person testimony and rights vocabularies recalibrate what seems plausible or just. Second, eventfulness organizes attention: as mediatization scholarship notes, when politics is increasingly performed through media, peaks of eventfulness (operations, clashes, pressers) disproportionately structure public meaning (Strömbäck, 2022; Hepp, 2020). Third, infrastructural conditions—ownership, platform distribution, newsroom routines—shape which plots are narratively “affordable” in daily production, reinforcing the patterned dominance we observe (PR2Media, 2023; Syarief, 2024).

Two limitations temper interpretation. The corpus is small and restricted to two months at peak contention; Development-as-Progress and Environmental-Risk may dominate in other phases (announcement, planning, post-settlement). And our analysis targets textual construction rather than audience uptake. Even so, the patterns suffice to show how mainstream journalism co-authors contested realities around Rempang in the heat of conflict and to indicate where communicative legitimacy is likely to be won or lost. A logical extension is to add local media and cross-platform layers, then test whether narrative salience tracks outlet structure (ownership, revenue mix) or event cycles (policy deadlines), aligning micro-level storytelling with meso- and macro-level mediatization processes. This would more fully integrate narrative analysis with contemporary communication theory on media power and institutional change (Hepp, 2020; Strömbäck, 2022; Riessman, 2022).

V. CONCLUSIONS

Analyzing ten news items from five national outlets (Aug–Sep 2024), this study shows that mainstream digital journalism constructs—rather than merely reflects—public meaning around Rempang Eco City. Two narrative types dominate at the peak of contention: Rights-and-Resistance, which confers plausibility to ethical and procedural claims through temporal depth and first-person testimony; and Technocratic-Governance, which normalizes relocation as administrative compliance via document-driven sequencing, deadlines, and codas. These findings specify how deep mediatization operates through concrete narrative mechanisms—plotting, voice ordering, evaluative language, and scale-work—that render some futures necessary and others negotiable.

Practically, policy legitimacy is communicatively produced: it requires codas that address consent, remedy, and recognition with parity to KPIs and timelines. Newsrooms can mitigate structural tilt by varying format (briefs plus features), disclosing voice sequencing, and coupling environmental frames to present-tense thresholds.

The study is limited by a short window and small corpus focused on national outlets. Future research should extend the timeline, integrate local media and platforms, and pair narrative coding with audience studies and structural variables (ownership, event cycles) to test how these plots travel, mutate, and sediment into public common sense.

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