

Critical Moment for Indonesian Journalism: Disappearance of Journalistic Firewall

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ABSTRACT

This study aims to understand the dynamics of journalists' professionalism regarding the critical moment for Indonesian journalism in carrying out their journalistic practices. This study uses a qualitative approach with a case study method and took place in Surabaya, East Java, the second largest city in Indonesia that records the highest media growth in the country besides Jakarta and Medan. The results of this study show that there has been the destruction of old journalistic values including journalistic independence and the normalization of new journalistic practices that mix editorial and business among journalists surveyed. Nowadays, the mixture is considered a normal journalistic practice. The COVID-19 pandemic has accelerated the process of eroding journalists' welfare and reviving pre-pandemic unethical practices, such as bribery, extortion and news withdrawal on the pretext of welfare. The pandemic has also given rise to a turning point in journalistic practices related to the press business model which traditionally relied on ads and changed the direction of news reporting that the journalistic firewall has cordoned by separating editorial from business. This gave rise to the destruction of journalistic values including independence and the disappearance of the journalistic firewall.

Keywords: *Journalistic values, journalists' welfare, critical moment, journalistic independence, firewall.*

INTRODUCTION

This research starts from two crucial problems of journalism or journalistic practices. First, it is related to the Quandt and Wahl-Jorgensen thesis that the COVID-19 pandemic has presented a critical moment for journalism that has dramatically changed journalistic practices. This critical moment for journalism can be seen from five aspects: (1) *turning point*, that changes journalism development; (2) *transformation*, that changes journalism work process; (3) *starting point*, that encourages the emergence of new trends in journalism; (4) *amplifier*, that accelerates the existing process of journalistic practices; and (5) *destruction*, that destroys things that already exist in the journalistic domain.

The second turning point is related to one of the most chronic problems in the journalism history in Indonesia, namely journalist's welfare described by many researches as giving rise to various ethical problems in daily journalistic practices. Historically, the welfare issue has existed in the early days of the birth and development of journalism in Indonesia, namely the pre-independence era; the Old Order regime; and the New Order regime (Krisdinanto & Supardi, 2018), up to the reform era and the post-COVID-19 pandemic. The welfare issue became one of the crucial problems facing journalists' efforts to carry out

journalistic practices independently (Alfarisi & Gumilar, 2019; Krisdinanto, 2024; Amalia & Esti, 2012).

This research focuses on a new complexity that emerged in journalistic practices related to journalist's welfare in the post-COVID-19 pandemic. In this connection, this study aims to see how the critical moment for journalism contributes to determining the struggles or dynamics of Indonesian journalists seeking to carry out journalistic practices independently amidst the welfare problem facing them. Referring to Carlson (2017) and Perreault and Ferrucci's (2020) views, this study on the critical moment for journalism could be used as a chance of rethinking the meaning and practice of journalism in the post-COVID-19 pandemic.

Historically, various researches conducted in Indonesia since 2000 show how critical the issue of journalist's welfare is, including its effect on journalistic practices. In the local context such as in Surabaya, East Java, this issue could be seen from the researches conducted by Budiyanto and Mabroer (2000), and Nugroho with Santos (2001). The research shows figures and narrations regarding the journalist's low welfare which was later attributed to the press company's commitment and soundness. In this connection, the study conducted by Ritonga in Medan, North Sumatra, found that press independence eroded due to information disruption exacerbated by COVID-19. Consequently, journalist's welfare reached its breaking point, causing journalists to voluntarily ignore journalistic independence (Ritonga, 2021).

The same problem was also found in other parts of Indonesia currently. A series of research conducted by the Alliance of Independent Journalists, the Press Council, and academics since 2000 show a similar portrait (Amalia & Esti, 2012; Lukman, Dharma, Pane, Nurkholis, & Mustafid, 2003; Manan, 2005, 2011, 2013; Nugroho, 2003; Purnomo, 2018; Samsuri & Winarto, 2015; Sukardi, 2009). All studies show a stagnant trend of journalist's welfare, such as salaries below standard, minimum bonuses, allowances and supporting facilities or insurance. Ironically, the minimum welfare affects not only journalists of upper-middle class press companies but also journalists of lower-middle class press companies.

Additionally, the researches also found that some of the press companies in and outside Jakarta paid their journalists less than provincial minimum wages (UMP) whose amount is different from one province to another. This problem left journalists trapped in various unethical practices better known as envelop culture in the form of bribery, gratification from source persons and extortion. Actually, this practice occurs not only in Indonesia but also in various countries in Asia, Africa, United States, and Europe (Ireri, 2016; Ofori-Parku & Botwe, 2020; Sampaio-Dias, 2019; Slavtcheva-Petkova, 2018). In Indonesia, this *unethical practice* still poses a serious problem in various parts of the country (Alfarisi & Gumilar, 2019; Komala, 2018; Prasetyo, Jasman, Purnomo, Susanti, & Bangun, 2018; Purnomo, 2018; Samsuri & Winarto, 2015; Susanti, 2018).

This research does not focus on the linkage of welfare problems to envelop culture or extortion which has been frequently studied in other research. Instead, this study focuses on the impact of journalist's welfare on the crucial aspects of journalistic practice including independence in the post-COVID-19 pandemic era using the framework of thinking about critical moment for journalism. As described earlier, the COVID-19 pandemic created a critical moment for journalism that may give rise to a crisis of professionalism or independence towards various interests seeking to control journalistic practices. As referred to by Iggers (2018), journalistic independence leans on safe distance between editorial room and business room, among others. In journalistic study, this issue is often discussed using the term journalistic firewall (Harsono, 2010; Kovach & Rosenstiel, 2021; Krisdinanto, 2024).

At this point, the COVID-19 pandemic has drastically reduced press companies' advertisement revenues. Before the pandemic, media digitalization has caused a newspaper crisis due to the migration of advertisements to online media (Anderson, Bell, & Shirky, 2015; Angelucci & Cagé, 2017; Ballhaus, Chow, & Rivet, 2023; Bara, Affandi, Farid, & Marzuki, 2021; Cawley, 2019; Dragomir & Thompson, 2014; Hongcharu, 2024; Radcliffe, 2020; Siles & Boczkowski, 2012; Walulya & Moges, 2022; Wilding, Fray, Molitorisz, & McKewon, 2018), followed by a social media phenomenon that led to a decline in online media's advertisement revenues. The pandemic also made the impact of digitalization on media, both national and local scales, increasingly deeper. The media faced double disruption derived from technology and COVID-19. A report from the Association of Indonesian Cyber Media (AMSI) shows national-scale online media's advertisement revenues plummeted by up to 70%, causing several media outlets to stop operating, slashing employees' salaries or allowances and lay off some employees (Niman, 2021). Local online media also experienced the same fate; seeing advertisement revenues nose diving by up to 80% despite an increase in reader traffic (Fitriyani, 2020).

This situation poses a serious threat to journalistic independence and practices, particularly when it comes to the need for advertisement income. In Iggers (2018) framework of thinking, this moment has an impact on the threat to one of the elements of journalistic independence, namely journalistic firewall. Pressure on journalists' welfare and needs for advertisements have the potential to encourage journalists to get involved in journalistic practices that go beyond independent barriers.

The research subjects include local online media journalists in Surabaya, East Java, the second largest city in Indonesia which has the highest media dynamics and growth next to Jakarta and Medan. On a national scale, according to the Press Council's report, Indonesia has the largest number of mass media outlets in the world, with around 47,000 divided into print, electronic and mostly online media (Prasetyo et al., 2018). Most of the media outlets do not meet qualifications as sound media, measured from administrative and factual verification status by the Press Council, and a minimum corporate capital of Rp 50,000,000, or equal to 3,200 USD.

East Java, has 41 print media outlets (30%), two radio stations (1%), 33 television stations (24%), and 61 online media outlets (45%) as verified by the Press Council (Masduki et al., 2023). To date, Surabaya has 14 factually and administratively verified media online outlets. Based on data from the Indonesian Journalists Association (PWI) of East Java Chapter, the number of online media outlets operating in Surabaya far exceeds the figure (Ritonga, 2021). However, the PWI Chapter in East Java has no official data on the actual number of media outlets in the city. The Executive Board of PWI Chapter in East Java estimated the number of online media outlets at 100 and most of them have not been registered at the Press Council. The higher number of online media outlets is assumed to have brought about serious dynamic or problematic issues to journalistic practices, particularly those related to journalist's welfare and separation of editorial and business rooms or journalistic firewall.

This research complements the landscape of journalistic practices brought about by previous researches themed journalistic practices in the pandemic period and journalistic firewall in many countries including Indonesia. In Indonesia, research was conducted by Aisyah (2023), Kalaloi et al. (2023), Hanief et al. (2021), Manik et al. (2021), Masduki and Prastya (2021), and Ritonga (2021), among others. The studies were focused on different media outlets in several parts of the country and generally, were linked to the editorial work

pattern or journalists' role during the pandemic period. The same tendency also emerged from studies conducted outside Indonesia and most of them highlighted journalists' role, media routines, journalism function, or media coverage in the issues of health and pandemic (Arafat & Porlezza, 2023; Bernadas & Ilagan, 2020; Garfin, Silver, & Holman, 2020; Mellado et al., 2021; Olsen, Pickard, & Westlund, 2020; Perreault & Perreault, 2021).

It seems that none of these researches focused attention on journalistic practices during the COVID-19 pandemic, particularly related to the issues of journalistic firewall and journalist's welfare. In fact, the two issues are very crucial in the study of journalistic practices because they are directly connected to one of the significant elements of journalism, namely journalistic independence. Journalistic practices formed during the COVID-19 pandemic are related to the two issues that will not vanish even though the pandemic is declared over. The journalistic practices will continue and become a new norm that is considered right.

This is what makes this research important because it does not merely describe the impact on journalism, but the results of this research can be used as a turning point to reflect the extent to which journalism needs to transform or adapt innovatively to the new reality of journalism in post-COVID-19.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Critical Moment for Journalism

In this research, the COVID-19 pandemic is seen as a disaster that has a profound impact on all spheres of society, including journalism particularly in the context of digital journalism. The pandemic has brought about dramatic changes in journalistic routines or working practices as well as in audience behavior. The pandemic can also be seen as a critical moment for journalism, a moment of significant importance for reconsideration of past, present and future for journalism (Quandt & Wahl-Jorgensen, 2021). At the end, the pandemic provided a chance of rethinking the meaning and practice of journalism (Carlson, 2017; Perreault & Ferrucci, 2020).

This critical moment for journalism can be seen as five things. First, *turning point*. The crisis changes or reverses the direction of ongoing developments in digital journalism. Indeed, some news organizations took the crisis as a reason to abandon the standard reporting process, for instance, in the context of ethics, objectivity, or separation of editorial from business room. Second, *transformation*. Change often went hand in hand with transformation process, news organizations used the pandemic to change the composition of staff or responsibilities in editorial room, encourage a blend of virtual work and work from home. This aspect can also be chosen as a focus of research on how the pandemic encouraged news organizations to adapt in terms of media routines (García-Avilés, 2021).

Third, starting point. The pandemic gives rise to new journalism form, new journalistic project, new skills, or new information tools and sources. The significant rise in online news consumption during the pandemic may also have encouraged the birth of online news startups, either innovative or traditional, with all their dynamic and problematic issues. For instance, the resurgence of data journalism as a means of explaining crisis to audience as part of the efforts to keep journalistic autonomy and authority from economic and political pressures.

Fourth, amplifier or accelerator. In several cases, the pandemic may serve as an amplifier or process accelerator or certain practice that has started in journalistic practices or news production long before the pandemic. Fifth, *destruction*. The pandemic may have give rise to the birth of something new which often means the destruction of something old in the

journalistic domain. Generally, the COVID-19 crisis has destroyed the economic basic of media organizations due to the collapse of the advertising market, or had a serious impact on supply chains or distribution channels. Even the pandemic supposedly created a moment of media extinction in developing countries.

Journalistic Independence

Referring to Kovach and Rosenstiel (2021) views, journalistic independence is one of the journalism elements besides the other eight elements, namely truth, loyalty to citizens, discipline of verification, a monitor of power, forum for public criticism, interesting/relevant, and exercising personal conscience.

Independent means being independent from factions. Journalists must keep personal distance, in order to be able to see anything clearly and make independent assessment. Independence from factions does not mean denying the influence of journalist's experience or background, such as from the standpoint of race, religion, ideology, education, socio-economic status and gender. However, the influence must not become number one. It is the journalist's role that must be prioritized (Kovach & Rosenstiel, 2021).

To keep the independence, Iggers (2018) stressed the significance of keeping the two main pillars; first, keeping fact away from opinion; and second, separating editorial room for reporting process from business room, particularly in obtaining advertisements. The separation is a boundary that must not be passed beyond in journalistic practices. Even it is often described as a separation between "state and church" (Krisdinanto, 2021).

This research looks at the second pillar, the separation of editorial room from business room or often dubbed as journalistic firewall (Harsono, 2010). This is because advertisements as a source of income for the media becomes a source of normative and ethical conflicts which leads to a serious violation of objectivity and truth as well as a potential source for cheating the audience (Han, Drumwright, & Goo, 2018).

This violation has the potential to restrict journalistic autonomy from the third party's commercial interests. As a result, journalistic firewall is expected to be "Chinese Wall" which was metaphorically built to protect journalism from the influence of advertisements (Lauerer, 2019). However, in Indonesia, there is a strong commercial influence where the media is dependent on advertisements from government agencies and private companies. Consequently, the idea of creating a free market to allow for competition is difficult to realize because journalism is not oriented to public interests but commercial interests (Rianto et al., 2023).

METHODOLOGY

This research uses a case study method with qualitative approaches that positions the researcher to play a role as a key instrument (Lune & Berg, 2017). This case study method refers to the procedure developed by Yin (2014), focusing on studying contemporary phenomena in the real world and answering the questions of "why" and "how". In this case study, data was collected through interviews, direct observations, documentation covering minutes, letters, agenda, reports, memorandums, research results, clippings, etc. and archive records including audio-visual records, etc.

In this research, data was collected through interviews and observations. Interviews were conducted with 10 informants working as journalists at 10 online media outlets in Surabaya, including those that have been administratively and factually verified by the Press

Council and have not (Table 1). The interviews focused on such issues as welfare, journalistic practices during the pandemic, and journalistic independence, particularly the separation of editorial room from business room related to advertisements.

Table 1: Research informants, origin of media and status of media at the Press Council

Informant Code	Name of Media	Media Status
Informant # 1	Kilasjatim.com	Not verified
Informant # 2	Lentera Today	Administrative and Factual
Informant # 3	Pilar.id	Not verified
Informant # 4	Inewssurabaya.id	Administrative and Factual
Informant # 5	Ngopibareng.id	Administrative and Factual
Informant # 6	Suarajatimpost.com	Not verified
Informant # 7	Beritajatim.com	Administrative and Factual
Informant # 8	Jatim Now	Administrative and Factual
Informant # 9	Optika.id	Not verified
Informant # 10	Globalnews.com	Administrative and Factual

Data was processed using Miles dan Huberman analysis model (Miles, Huberman, & Saldaña, 2019). Data was analyzed through data reduction, data display and conclusion drawing phases. The data reduction was conducted by sorting and summarizing data to be able to determine the focus of important findings. The data was later presented in narrations from which conclusion was drawn to answer the research problem.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

This research started from the viewpoint that COVID-19 pandemic not only caused a disaster to journalism but also offered a chance of re-reflecting the meaning and practice of journalism including in the digital context. Quoting Reporters without Borders (2020), the press world has entered the deciding decade for journalism, exacerbated by the corona virus.

Quoting Quandt and Wahl-Jorgensen (2021), the pandemic also proved how important journalism is as a social institution that will never be isolated from external context. That is why, at least until a certain limit, journalism needs to be protected from external factors to ensure the function of democratic community. This research data shows the pandemic has put journalistic practices under serious pressures at the element considered journalism pillar, namely journalistic independence.

Journalist's Worsening Welfare and Its Ethical Implication

A report from Thomson Reuters Foundation described a paradox in the media industry as the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic (Radcliffe, 2021). On one hand, the media realized that they need factual and high quality information to face the crisis. However, on the other hand, business models supporting media organizations had collapsed. Some journalists admitted a physical restriction on the editorial room, internet data cost, limited instrument, salary cut added to pressures on them. At a certain point, the paradox appeared in the context of this research as shown in Tabel 2.

Table 2: Journalist's welfare in Surabaya during COVID-19 pandemic

Informant Code	Media	Salaries	Salary Cut	Allowances/ Insurance	Side Jobs
Informant #6	Suarajatimpost.com	Below UMP	Yes	No	Herbal sale
Informant #2	Lenteratoday.com	Below UMP	Yes	Health and Employment Insurance (Abolished during pandemic)	Job wedding, videographer of company
Informant #1	Kilasjatim.com	Below UMP	No	No	Journalistic trainer at campus
Informant #3	Pilar.id	Below UMP	Deferred salaries	No	No
Informant #5	Ngopibareng.com	Below UMP	Yes	Health Insurance (Abolished during pandemic)	No
Informant #4	Inewssurabaya.id	Above UMP	No	No	No
Informant #7	Beritajatim.com	Below UMP	No	No	No

Table 2 shows how the pandemic accelerated journalists' worsening health conditions. Only 7 out of 10 journalists interviewed, were ready to reveal their worsening welfare condition due to the pandemic. But data in Table 2 can qualitatively represent the health condition of journalists in general. Only 1 out of the 7 journalists from various media outlets received salaries according to provincial minimum wage (UMP). The other 6 journalists had their salaries reduced or deferred during the pandemic. Even most of them received no health/manpower allowances and forcibly sought additional income, such as becoming herbal medicine seller, freelance photographer, opening a coffee shop, T-shirt screen printing, or giving training. At this point, it turns out that welfare is not positively correlated to the verification status of the media company where they are employed. The following statements of journalists confirm the condition.

On average, none of media workers including me working for middle-class media company receives salaries according to UMP. It is rare to receive UMP. (Informant #2, 2023)

In the pandemic years, I had very minimum income, so I had to sell herbal medicine made of ginger powder online. I struggled to live outside journalism. (Informant #6, 2023)

I did not receive salary for two months during the pandemic. From October to almost mid December 2021 salary was not paid. I thought as if I would quit. As I did not receive salary, I wondered what to do. Unfortunately, when the salary was paid I received it only for one month... (Informant #3, 2023)

This condition is not much different from the results of a survey conducted by the International Federation of Journalists on 1,308 journalists from 77 countries, including Indonesia, during the pandemic. This survey revealed that almost all journalists had their salaries cut and 65.4% of them were stressed, worried and helpless due to a lack of social

security and fair manpower practices (IFJ, 2020). In Indonesia, AJI Surabaya reported, many journalists received indecent salaries, which are far below UMP (AJI Surabaya, 2018).

The journalists surveyed acknowledged that 2020 and 2021 were the heaviest years in their life. As the backbone of their family, they could not merely rely income on working as a journalist. Therefore, some of them tried to find side income from outside their journalistic profession that made them feel uncomfortable. One journalist described his side job as “prostituting himself”. He was working as a source person at a certain campus or company because he considered it irrelevant to his journalistic profession.

Yes, I continued to be a prostitute, to a campus which invited me. After the pandemic many people want to make this, make that... For instance, because I happen to get acquainted with many campus public relations officers and several lecturers as well, they phoned me. There were freshmen. Their number is ... They were communication students and need a picture of journalistic profession. (Informant #1, 2023)

This condition, as told by the informant, made journalists emotional, unable to build concentration and work optimally. The condition created by the pandemic regarding financial change aroused negative emotions that may influence journalists’ self-perception by exploring the meaning of being a journalist (Libert, et al., 2022; Šimunjak, 2022). This means that the pandemic affected not only the financial aspect but also the journalists’ psychological welfare because they do not receive maximum support from the company they are employed (Backholm & Idås, 2022).

Only informant #4 out of the 10 informants received salary above UMP. This is because he was a journalist for 17 years. Compared to other informants, informant #4 is the only journalist who began his career at the national newspaper *Koran Seputar Indonesia*. Since 2022, he has enjoyed the trust as the Editor-in-Chief of iNews channel for Surabaya, Mojokerto and Probolinggo. Interestingly, despite receiving a salary of above UMP, informant #4 did not receive allowances such as Health and Employment Insurance from government or other health insurance.

This research found that only two informants, informant #5 and Informant #2, received health allowances from their company. However, both lost the allowances during the pandemic. This finding confirmed journalists’ limited access to health services and important financial security (Kalaloi et al., 2023; LBH, 2021; Pers L., 2022). Journalist is likened to someone in the intersection who continues to resist although he was not paid or lost his job during the pandemic (IFJ, 2020).

This position aroused ethical implication regarding journalists’ independence in their daily practices, particularly those related to chronical practices in Indonesian journalism such as bribery including gratification from source persons to journalists or extortion. As a social institution, journalism does not work in a vacuum. There are sustainable interections influencing this industry, ranging from economic, political, social to cultural aspects. In general, these aspects interact with each other and can contribute to creating corruption culture and bribery in journalism (Hamada, 2020). In the Indonesian journalistic world, these practices are not something new as described by the previous research (Alfarisi & Gumilar, 2019; Komala, 2018; Prasetyo et al., 2018; Purnomo, 2018; Ritonga, 2021; Samsuri & Winarto, 2015; Susanti, 2018).

Based on this research data, the pandemic exacerbated journalists' welfare and press companies' has accelerated the practices or amplified far wide. This is marked not only by the widespread practice of bribery or extortion in journalistic practice but also by the emergence of new modus variants in this practice. On average the journalists that become research subjects admitted receiving and normalizing money commonly known as "envelop" from source persons on the pretext of low income. The amount of money ranges from 3 dollars to 31 dollars.

Journalists normalize this practice in various ways particularly by calling it legal practice, for instance, through such narrations "need each other, already recorded in the institution's official budget, part of politeness" or as a form of "source person's appreciation to journalists."

We are not hypocritical. My salary is below UMP. That is the fact that our salary is low but we earn much from outside. For instance, I am assigned to the provincial government office and the provincial police station. There is much money. (Informant #3, 2023)

At least Rp50,000. For a press conference, the money must have been budgeted. They need help and we realize they need us so we accept... (Informant #7, 2023)

This condition has long been an ethical dilemma for Indonesian journalists because it has the potential to cause one party to exploit or to be exploited by other. A research conducted by the Indonesian Alliance of Journalists (AJI) shows, 67.8% of journalists see that accepting the money will influence their coverage. But if they reject it they will be under threat of gossip, meaning that there will be a threat of information isolation from their social environment (Aderinkola, Adewumi, & Akisola, 2022; Hamada, 2020; Amalia & Esti, 2012; Olivia, 2014). This condition is exacerbated by low wages and allowances that they receive (Kalaloi et al., 2023). It is the practice that poses a serious threat to journalistic independence. This also becomes a problem in many countries. In Asia, for instance, such gratification or money is something normal to get access and build relations with journalists (Nguyen & Tsetsura, 2017). What must be questioned is how to make a distinction of blurred lines between gratification as a means of building connection and as a form of bribery in relation to journalists (Matthews & Pichandy, 2016).

The pandemic also accelerated extortion practices, which in the context of digital journalism has spread to the practice of news withdrawal so that it has "404 Not Found" status. An informant said the new extortion modus is known as Loading and Uploading Media (MBM). This practice capitalizes on technical facility for withdrawing news on digital platforms. In fact, the Guide for Cyber Media Reporting explicitly stated that the published news cannot be withdrawn on the grounds of censorship by a non-editorial party, except if it is related to tribal, religious, racial, and social group (SARA) issues, morality, children's future, victim's traumatic experience, or other special consideration stipulated by the Press Council. If the news is withdrawn, the media must mention the reason for its withdrawal and make it known to the public (Dewan Pers, 2022).

What is terrible now is withdrawing news. There is now the term MBM, Loading and Uploading Media. For instance, the news of X found bringing a woman to a hotel was published and went viral. X objected to it and offered Rp5 million bribe. Then the news was withdrawn. (Informant #9, 2023)

Earlier, extortion practice also had become a problem in the Indonesian journalistic world. For instance, there was the term “bogus online media”, which refers to the emergence of online media to reap profits from news reporting aimed to extort certain individuals or institutions (Prasetyo et al., 2018; Susanti, 2018). This practice is also known as “moonlighting”, that is an unethical act of damaging the good reputation of somebody else, publishing unverified information, using personal documents without permit, using fake identity, and falsifying fact to attack a source person (Ramírez, 2014). It is difficult to decide this practice because the regulations do not define it properly and the legislation is weak (Starke, Naab, & Scherer, 2016), complicated by the authorized institution’s weak supervision (Hamada, 2020).

This is evident from Informant #4’s experience that he often found bogus media journalists coming to various projects to find loopholes which allow them to create a controversy.

The number of journalists coming to projects to find a controversy continues to increase. It’s clear they aim is money. Say, when a development project has a problem, they will come to it. What for? To meet the supervisor for money. After receiving Rp50 thousand to Rp100 thousand, that’s over. Surely, they will not write a story. (Informant #4, 2023)

When Ethics Become Journalist’s Additional Burden

In the economic context, the pandemic has a very serious impact on journalism, exacerbated by a shortfall in advertisement revenues as a result of stagnant economic growth (Olsen et al., 2020). The economic crisis triggered by the pandemic influenced the news industry. Many local media outlets which were hit hardest by the pandemic shut down. This raised questions about the continuity of journalism business model which relies on advertisements and has so far been guided by the principle of separating editorial from business room.

While the media industry is facing a financial problem due to the pandemic (Walulya & Moges, 2022), advertisements are the last resort to “patch” the media business’ finance as a result of the crisis (Radcliffe, 2020, 2021). Globally, Price Waterhouse Coopers (PWC, 2023) data shows that in 2020 the global media industry saw a decline in their income due to a drop in the advertising market (Radcliffe, 2020). This condition caused online media business to increasingly pin its hope on advertisement revenues.

This condition was also seen from the stories of journalists who became the informants of this research. Almost all of them acknowledged that their media’s income fell by at least 50%, fueled particularly by a shortfall in business or corporate advertisements. Many media companies were able to withstand the crisis by relying on advertisements from local governments and slashing expenditures including journalists’ salaries and allowances and even reducing the number of journalists. This situation is considered capable of creating a turning point moment, the pandemic-induced crisis may serve as a change in the direction of ongoing journalistic development or as a full reversal of strategies based on a reconsideration of the altered situation (Quandt & Wahl-Jorgensen, 2021). Indeed, some

news organizations took the crisis as a reason to abandon previous processes or objectives. Therefore, several scholars noted the necessity for new organizational and economic solutions particularly at the local level, where the crisis hit particularly hard (Olsen et al., 2020).

In the context of this research, the turning point that happened are the strategies of the media in Surabaya that abandon news reporting and business processes which refer to the principles of journalistic independence. Conceptually, referring to Iggers (2018), journalism ethics which lean on two pillars, separation of facts from opinion and separation of news (editorial) from advertisements (business). The second separation aims to prevent advertisers or the mass media's economic interests from disrupting news reporting as a responsibility to the public. The second pillar is often linked to the issue of journalistic independence. To protect journalistic independence from the pressures of profit-oriented business, journalists are protected by the *journalistic firewall* (Kovach & Rosenstiel, 2021).

It is the dynamics that surrounds this separation that often causes complex problems in journalistic practices. Traditionally, journalism is practiced by protecting editorial independence from commercial influences. However, a decline in sales and advertisement income often triggers news organizations to cross the journalistic firewall or blur the definition between news room and business room. The more blurry the line between commercial logic and professional journalism, the worse the ethical implication on the journalists' normative and performative role will be.

It is this dynamic or problem that in this research appears to color the turning point of journalism. All journalists who are informants of this research noted the increasing involvement of journalists in looking for advertisements or mobilizing editorial staff to lobby potential advertisers due to the pandemic. The journalists acknowledged that they were ordered to lobby source persons from government institutions and business entities to put advertisements or sign a contract with editorial staff for news reporting. Though it is not obligatory, the ability to find advertisements is often used as one of the yardsticks to assess journalists' performance.

Small scale media makes it obligatory. (The management said) 'If you can, support your source persons to put ads on our media'. Such an order is no longer secret. (Informant #1, 2023)

Reporters must also be able to lobby and make deals to put ads. This practice has long existed since around 2010 at the company group. (Informant #4, 2023)

All media outlets do that. That is journalists' demand today. They must be forced to get ads. (Informant #7, 2023)

Finding ads appears to be *sunnah jurnalistik*. Putting an ad variable into journalists' job description is an inevitable demand... (Informant #6, 2023)

This research found that the practice of blurring journalistic firewall is not something new in journalism including in Indonesia. Even one of the informants used the Islamic terms "sunnah jurnalistik" to refer to the practice. In the Islamic context, *sunnah* means something

that is not obligatory to do, but if it is done it will bring about reward or goodness. In the journalistic context, it means that for journalists finding advertisements is considered an acceptable normal practice to bring about goodness.

In the pre-pandemic age, it is a push-pull struggle or dynamic that appeared to be strong; some journalists rejected it by referring to the principle of journalistic independence reflected on the journalistic firewall, while others accepted it by referring to narrations of collective economic interests (Krisdinanto, 2021; Manik et al., 2021). Meanwhile, this research data shows all journalists who were the informants of this study acknowledged that they carried out the practice of blurring this journalistic firewall and described this practice as the reflection of their respective media's editorial and business policies.

Moreover, digital transformation has complicated the financing of online news in the professional journalism industry (Beckert, 2023). On one hand, the media company's business was traditionally been built by distributing journalistic content and advertisement sales (Tomaz et al., 2022). But on the other hand, Lauerer (2019) noted that this business model has sparked discussions on whether advertisements will be a blessing or a condemnation for journalism. advertisement revenues have laid the financial foundation for professional and ambivalent journalism and this financial dependence has caused a potential threat to journalistic independence. There is a source of normative and ethical conflicts, particularly when the practice of advertising under the guise of journalistic content can violate the norms of objectivity and truth because it can cheat the audience (Han et al., 2018).

One thing that also surfaced in this research related to the turning point of journalism, is normalizing the practice of blurring newsroom and business room. The situation that changed due to the pandemic and resulted in a decline in advertisement revenues and welfare problem made journalists compromise the practice. The continuity of media and personal income is the most outstanding reason for the stance. However, they also appeared to have defined the principle of journalistic independence which allows them to break through the journalistic firewall without having to feel guilty. In other words, the miserable impact of the pandemic on the journalists' personal life and their media companies make them abandon the old values that separate news room from business room. They altered the direction of journalistic practices by accommodating the practice of blurring the boundary between news room and business room as a normal and acceptable practice, including when it was used as one of the yardsticks of performance although in the journalistic context the separation is considered sacred in the separation of state and church (McChesney, 2004; Perreault, Kananovich, & Hackett, 2023; Tomaz et al., 2022).

Questioning the dual jobs of finding ads (and writing stories) is no longer relevant. This contributes to journalists' welfare. Like it or not, we have to adapt to the situation today. As a source of information, we must follow the standard today. Right now we must be accustomed to justifying that we are idealist, in the sense that we are not immediately capitalist. On the other hand, we also need to see that this company needs to take a breath. (Informant #6, 2023)

Journalists are people who are close to source persons and institutions, so we take advantage of them. We eventually reconcile. It doesn't matter. We also got incentives that motivate us. Obtaining ads gives us spirit to write. (Informant #7, 2023)

The journalist informants' acknowledgment depicts how the pandemic-induced crisis not only reduced the journalists' welfare and their news organisations' soundness but also altered dramatically the way they look at journalistic independence as reflected on the principle of separating news room from business room. The turning point increasingly makes it difficult to uphold the ethical concept of journalistic firewall. As a matter of fact, journalists serve as a vanguard of news organisation that plays a crucial and central role in journalistic practices (Perreault, Stanfield, & Luttman, 2020).

But implicitly and explicitly, the journalist informants see the ethical principle which should actually become a guidance, as a burden. They admitted they were tired of adjusting their journalistic practices to their company's standard or demand, to help find advertisements. Therefore, they see the obligation to harmonize journalistic practices with the code of ethics and journalistic firewall as a difficult additional burden. This argument makes sense in light of Perreault, Stanfield and Luttman (2020) statement that journalists' close ties with certain officials or elites can weaken the journalists' ideological position. Or in more extreme argument, journalists who have fun with the people they will cover are tantamount to committing suicide for press credibility (Sullivan, 2018).

Although the journalists see the journalistic ethics as a burden, they did not question the practice of compromising news content in favor of advertisers' interests. The demand to help find advertisements described as tiring made them no longer question journalistic ethics that are considered difficult.

To keep the balance between writing news and finding ads is tiring. So, when the management enforced certain conditions requiring journalists to hold or stop news if it involves an advertiser, we follow it. This is one of the efforts to avoid confrontation or conflict with the business partner involved in a certain case. As a matter of fact, we can live from there. (Informant #8, 2023)

... in the journalistic lesson, there is a firewall that separates production from marketing, why? To prevent marketing from intervening in production. But what happens now is that marketing is stronger. Your story criticized this company, this is our client... (Informant #1, 2023)

Given such a turning point of journalistic practice, along with its ethical complexity, ads have become the integral part of many journalists' routines (Beckert, 2023). Several points of the research findings also confirmed what Wyatt (2014) has described that journalists are not basically as autonomous as they imagined. The external influence such as pandemic may more strongly influence journalists and even the most independent media.

It is worth noting the statement of Quandt and Wahl-Jorgensen (2021) who saw the COVID-19 pandemic as a critical moment, a moment of significant importance and reconsideration of past, present and future of journalism. In other words, the pandemic-induced crisis provided a chance of rethinking the meaning and practice of journalism, including the issue of journalistic independence when facing the media business model which has traditionally relied on ads.

The critical moment for journalism, quoting again Quandt and Wahl-Jorgensen's (2021) statement, one of them was *destruction* which means destruction of something old in the journalism world. In the context of *destruction*, the pandemic can likely birth something

new which often means the destruction of something old in the journalism realm, namely the collapse of journalistic firewall. Globally, the COVID-19 crisis has destroyed the economic basic of news organizations, due to the collapse of the advertising market, and has a serious impact on supply chains or distribution channels. Even the pandemic is thought to create “*media extinction*” in developing countries. Referring to the statement of Reporters without Borders (2020), the world is currently entering a decisive decade for journalism, exacerbated by COVID-19.

The pandemic may destroy traditional journalism business model which relies on advertisements, however, the destruction may also trigger a restructuring process in the journalism realm. The result of the restructuring will be visible in the long run. In this context, this research can be used as a starting point to identify and elaborate various ideas or innovations that can be processed.

CONCLUSION

In general, this research found the destruction of old journalistic values including journalistic independence and the normalization of new journalistic practices including the blending of news room and business room at the news organisations. In addition, this research depicts how the COVID-19 pandemic presented a critical moment for journalism in the Indonesian journalism realm in the form of *amplifier (accelerator)*, *turning point*, and *destruction*. First, the pandemic accelerated the process of reducing journalists’ welfare, and accelerated or amplified pre-pandemic unethical practices including bribery, extortion, and news withdrawal on the pretext of welfare. Second, the pandemic also presented a *turning point* phenomenon in journalistic practices related to the press business model or process which has traditionally relied on advertisements. The pandemic has altered the direction of reporting process earlier fenced with the principle of separating news room from business room frequently known as journalistic firewall. The pandemic-induced economic crisis caused the blending of news room and business room, which is considered a normal and acceptable journalistic practice now. In addition raising questions on the continuity of journalism business model relying on advertisements, this trend may lead to the destruction of old journalistic values including journalistic independence. This study on critical moment for journalism not merely because it describes or categorizes a dramatic change resulting from the pandemic in the journalistic realm. Above all, this study provides a chance of reconsidering or reflecting changes in the journalism to be able to innovate and adapt to post-pandemic new reality.

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