

Journalism Ethic in Online Media in Indonesia

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ABSTRACT: The rapid development of online media in post-reform Indonesia presents serious challenges in upholding journalistic ethics. This study aims to analyze the implementation of journalistic ethics in Indonesian online media, identify factors influencing ethical violations, evaluate the roles of the Press Council and related institutions, and propose strategies to strengthen ethical journalism. A descriptive qualitative approach through literature review was employed. Findings show that ethical violations such as the use of clickbait, weak verification, and widespread misinformation are prevalent, driven by economic pressures and social media algorithms. Furthermore, the limited capacity of the Press Council to monitor the growing number of online outlets exacerbates the issue. Systemic approaches are needed, including media literacy, regulatory reinforcement, journalist training, and media transparency. This study highlights the importance of collaboration between regulators, media, and the public in fostering ethical and responsible online journalism in the digital era.

KEYWORDS: clickbait, journalistic ethics, online media, verification, Press Council

I. INTRODUCTION

The development of information and communication technology has significantly changed the portrait of journalism (Fadila et al., 2024). Media digitalization has facilitated the rapid and widespread distribution of information through online platforms (Fadli, 2018). In Indonesia, the growth of online media has been very rapid since the reform era in 1998 which was accompanied by press freedom and deregulation of the media industry. Until the end of 2023, the number of media verified by the Press Council was around 1800 and this figure is certainly far from the actual number of media in Indonesia. So far, the number of media in Indonesia is estimated to reach 40-50 thousand. This is based on the assumption that in each city/district there are around 100 media and there are 514 regencies/cities in Indonesia (Dewan Pers & UMN, 2024). This phenomenon shows that the Indonesian online media industry is developing very dynamically, but on the other hand, it raises serious challenges related to professionalism, accuracy, and ethics of reporting.

Journalism ethics is one of the main pillars that maintains the credibility of the mass media (Garnida, 2021; Prasetyo, 2024; Putra et al., 2023; S & Shandy, 2024). This ethical principle is stated in the Journalistic Code of Ethics formulated by the Press Council, which among other things emphasizes the importance of accuracy, independence, impartiality, and protection of sources (Fadli, 2018; Lestari, 2020; Putri et al., 2021; Widodo, 2017). However, the reality on the ground shows that many online media in Indonesia are inconsistent in implementing journalistic ethics. Some of the main factors that influence non-compliance with the code of ethics include: tight competition in gaining reader traffic, high economic pressure to pursue digital advertising, and dependence on social media algorithms that encourage sensational content (Desvianny & Susanto, 2020; Muarif et al., 2024; Thomas, 2015).

One of the most prominent examples is the clickbait phenomenon. Many online media use bombastic and provocative titles to attract readers' attention (Rozan et al., 2024). However, this kind of title is often misleading because it does not match the content of the news, thus causing public misunderstanding. According to research by Hadiyat (2019), many online news in Indonesia use clickbait titles to increase reader visits (Hadiyat, 2019). This practice clearly contradicts the principles of accuracy and honesty in the journalistic code of ethics. In addition to clickbait, the practice of copying and pasting news without verification is also a serious problem. Many online media only copy articles from other sources without confirming or checking the facts further (merdeka.com, 2020). As a result, fake news (hoaxes) and misinformation circulate widely in society, reducing public trust in the media and several other losses (Azzahra et al., 2024; Sarjito, 2021).

In addition, another ethical problem that is rampant in Indonesian online media is the lack of protection for the privacy of sources. Public interest and personal interests are always a problem (Sobur, 2001). Often the media publishes the identity or personal information of crime victims, children, or vulnerable individuals without consent or ethical considerations. This practice not only

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violates the journalistic code of ethics but also has the potential to violate human rights and legal protection for individuals who are reported on.

In addition to internal challenges, online media in Indonesia also face external pressures, such as political intervention or the interests of media owners that have the potential to reduce editorial independence. The dependence of online media on funding through digital advertising often puts the media in a position of compromise with economic interests, so that journalistic independence is disrupted. This is exacerbated by the social media algorithm system that dominates news distribution and encourages the media to prioritize engagement (clicks, likes, shares) over the quality and accuracy of reporting.

On the other hand, media monitoring institutions such as the Press Council do have an important role in enforcing journalistic ethics. However, challenges arise because the Press Council only has limited capacity to carry out comprehensive media verification and take action against ethical violations, especially against online media whose numbers continue to increase. In addition, law enforcement related to violations of the code of ethics is still self-regulatory, meaning that the main responsibility lies with the awareness of the media itself. With many online media operating without verification, the control of journalistic ethics becomes weak.

Based on these conditions, it is necessary to conduct an in-depth study of the application of journalistic ethics in Indonesian online media. This research is important because journalistic ethics are not only normative guidelines, but also the foundation for building a healthy democracy through the provision of quality and responsible information. The formulation of the problem in this research is: (1) how is the implementation of journalistic ethics by online media in Indonesia in daily news reporting practices?; (2) what are the factors that influence the occurrence of violations of journalistic ethics in Indonesian online media?; (3) what is the role of the Press Council and related institutions in supervising and enforcing journalistic ethics in Indonesian online media?; (4) What strategies can be proposed to improve online media compliance with journalistic ethics in Indonesia? By understanding the challenges and root problems faced by online media in implementing journalistic ethics, it is hoped that more targeted solutions can be formulated to improve the quality of journalism in the digital era.

II. METHOD

This study uses a descriptive qualitative approach with a literature review method. This method was chosen to obtain a comprehensive understanding of the application of journalism ethics in Indonesian online media through the analysis of various sources of literature, documents, and previous research. Data were obtained through literature studies from national and international journal articles relevant to the theme of media ethics and online journalism, textbooks related to journalistic ethics, mass communication, and digital journalism, official reports from the Press Council, AMSI (Indonesian Cyber Media Association), the Indonesian Broadcasting Commission, and KPAI as well as Law Number 40 of 1999 concerning the Press and the Press Council's Journalistic Code of Ethics. Other supporting data comes from research reports from independent institutions and NGOs that monitor online media and news or documentation of cases of violations of online media ethics in Indonesia. The data obtained is then analyzed in literature and the results of the analysis are written. Then conclusions and research recommendations are drawn. These steps are in accordance with the descriptive qualitative analysis of Miles and Huberman (Miles & Huberman, 1994)

III. RESULT AND DISCUSSION

The media has become an important part of human life. Now, news is no longer conveying events that have taken place but events that are currently taking place that are broadcast by the media (Putri et al., 2021). However, in reality, there are still many ethical violations that occur. Based on the results of the literature study conducted, the following is the discussion:

3.1 Implementation of Journalistic Ethics in Indonesian Online Media

Based on the results of a literature study, the implementation of journalistic ethics in Indonesian online media still faces serious challenges. The principles in the Journalistic Code of Ethics, such as accuracy, verification, balance, independence, and protection of sources, are often ignored for the sake of speed of news distribution and competition to gain readers. The clickbait phenomenon is one indication of the weak implementation of journalistic ethics. Clickbait does not just happen, but is an effort by the writer/editor to create a title that can attract attention and manipulate emotions so that readers are unable to miss the title and clickbait uses sensational titles to attract traffic, even though the content often does not match the substance of the news (Hadiyat, 2019). The use of clickbait often violates the journalistic code of ethics, which prohibits fake news, slander, and discrimination. This violation has a negative impact, especially for Indonesian people who have low literacy levels. Sensationalism and provocation in clickbait can influence audiences who are less critical and vulnerable to misinformation (Nurfadila et al., 2024).

This analysis shows that online media focuses more on media economic strategies than on journalistic ethics principles. The practice of clickbait that is freely carried out by social media users is a logical consequence of the rapid development of information technology (Restendy & Hilmi, 2020). In addition, the analysis shows that news verification is still a major problem.

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Many online media quote statements from social media (netizens) without a confirmation process, which has the potential to increase the spread of hoaxes. The Alliance of Independent Journalists (AJI) Indonesia recorded 73 cases of violence against journalists and the media from January 1 to December 31, 2024, including one murder case, 19 cases of physical violence, 17 cases of terror and intimidation, eight cases of coverage bans, eight cases of threats, six cases of digital attacks, three cases of police summons for clarification, three cases of gender-based violence, two cases of civil lawsuits against the media, five cases of destruction of equipment/deletion of data, and one case of self-censorship in the newsroom. These cases not only occurred directly to journalists but were also related to online media (Aliansi Jurnalis Independen Indonesia, 2025).

Violations of the code of ethics from online media, especially related to verification and balance of news, show the weakness of the gatekeeping process in the digital era, where the pressure to broadcast quickly defeats the principle of journalistic caution. There are many research results related to the application of journalistic codes of ethics in online media. However, the reality is that violations of ethics in reporting and media are still violated by various irresponsible parties.

3.2 Factors Causing Ethical Violations

From the literature, it shows that there are two main factors that influence violations of journalistic ethics in Indonesian online media, namely internal factors and external factors. Internal factors include low professionalism of journalists, the inability of the media to carry out continuous ethics training, and the media's dependence on digital advertising. Online media, which are mostly oriented towards high traffic to generate advertising revenue, tend to prioritize engagement metrics (likes, shares, clicks) over the quality and ethics of reporting. This is in line with the Theory of Political Economy of Media which focuses on understanding the importance of the economic basis of the media. The theory of political economy of media explains how ownership of media forms can include ideological positions and social myths of people who create media messages (Arifin, 2021). So that violations of journalistic ethics can arise in reporting for the sake of the media industry economy.

External factors include political intervention and media owners who can direct news reporting for certain interests. In addition, social media algorithms that prioritize viral content have an impact on online media to produce sensational news, so as not to lose readers (Harahap et al., 2025). Thus, the media often ignores the principles of independence and balance in reporting in order to gain higher visibility.

3.3 The Role of the Press Council and Related Institutions

Literature analysis shows that the Press Council has an important role in enforcing journalistic ethics through media verification, public complaints, and the preparation of a code of ethics. However, the studies reviewed show that the Press Council has limitations in reaching all online media, which are very large in number. The total number of cyber media from constituents is 3,886 media. Of this number, only 36% have been verified by the Press Council (1850 media) (Dewan Pers & UMN, 2024). This shows that self-regulation in Indonesia is still weak in dealing with digital dynamics.

Formal regulations, such as the Press Law Number 40 of 1999, are also not sufficient to anticipate the rapidly changing practices of online journalism. Enforcement of ethics still depends heavily on the awareness of the media itself. In addition to the Press Council, professional organizations such as the Alliance of Independent Journalists (AJI) Indonesia also play a role in supervising and providing ethics training to journalists. However, its effectiveness is still not optimal due to limitations in reaching the many small-scale media that have emerged. For this reason, strategic steps are needed to overcome ethical problems in online media.

3.4 Strategic Efforts to Strengthen Journalistic Ethics

From the literature analysis, there are several efforts that can be made to improve online media compliance with journalistic ethics in Indonesia:

1. Increasing media literacy among both journalists and the public. This literacy is important so that the public can also play a role as an independent supervisor of media practices.
2. Strengthening the role of the Press Council by expanding the online media verification system digitally and being more adaptive to online media.
3. Collaboration between social media platforms and regulators so that content distribution algorithms not only emphasize engagement metrics but also support quality and ethical content.
4. Increasing the professionalism of online journalists through routine training related to journalistic ethics that are relevant to digital challenges.
5. Transparency of the media business so that the public can know who owns the media and the potential for conflicts of interest that affect the independence of reporting.

Based on the literature analysis and findings, there are three major findings that are the common thread in this study:

1. Online media in Indonesia face high economic pressure, especially in the form of traffic competition for digital advertising revenue. This encourages clickbait practices, declining verification quality, and the use of unreliable sources. These findings are relevant to the Media Economics theory which explains how market pressure can reduce the quality of reporting.

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2. The gatekeeping process in online media is becoming increasingly complex. The speed of news production and social media algorithms are forcing the media to prioritize engagement metrics over journalistic quality. This causes the verification process to weaken and the potential for hoax news to increase.
3. The regulatory framework through self-regulation implemented by the Press Council still faces obstacles, especially in reaching the very large number of online media. The low level of online media verification is a major challenge in upholding journalistic ethics.

IV. CONCLUSION

This study confirms that journalistic ethics in Indonesian online media still faces major challenges. Violations of basic principles of journalism such as accuracy, verification, and independence often occur due to economic incentives and the dominance of social media algorithms. The Press Council and related institutions have an important role, but limited scope and regulatory power make supervision less than optimal. Strategies that can be taken to strengthen journalistic ethics include increasing media literacy, adaptive regulatory reform, collaboration with digital platforms, journalist training, and transparency of media ownership structures. A collaborative and systemic approach is needed to build a credible and responsible digital information ecosystem as the foundation of a healthy democracy.

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