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BETWEEN IDEALISM AND SURVIVAL: NEGOTIATING PROFESSIONAL JOURNALISM IN LOCAL MEDIA ORGANIZATIONS

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ABSTRACT

Local media play a strategic role in sustaining the quality of democracy at the regional level, yet they increasingly face complex economic and political pressures. This study examines how local media in West Sumatra—specifically Langgam.id and Harian Haluan—negotiate journalistic idealism, professionalism, and commercialism in editorial policies and political news production. Employing a qualitative approach with a comparative case study design, data were collected through in-depth interviews with editors and journalists, limited newsroom observations, and document and content analysis. Informants were selected purposively based on their direct involvement in editorial decision-making and media business operations. The findings reveal that both media organizations normatively uphold values of independence, public interest, and journalistic professionalism. However, in practice, these values are continuously negotiated under economic constraints, particularly the limited scale of the local advertising market and dependence on political advertising. Political coverage tends to be dominated by elite actors, with indications of editorial compromise in the form of soft-selling practices. While the digital-native outlet demonstrates greater technical adaptability than the legacy media, both face similar structural pressures that shape editorial autonomy. This study concludes that local media practices are best understood as the outcome of a dynamic interaction between journalistic idealism, commercial imperatives, and professional norms. Theoretically, this research contributes to local journalism studies by proposing a conceptual model of negotiated journalism within the political–economic context of regional media in Indonesia.

1. INTRODUCTION

Social media has transformed politics. The mass media occupy a central position in modern democracy, not only as a conveyor of information, but also as an arena for the formation of public opinion and the mediation of political communication. Within the framework of political communication, the media serves as a liaison between citizens and political actors, shaping public perception of social reality through the selection of issues, determination of viewpoints, and framing of news (Han, 2024). This role becomes crucial when the media serves as a check on power and provides a space for public deliberation, which is normatively seen as a prerequisite for a healthy democracy (Esau, 2025).

In Indonesia, the normative function of the press is affirmed in Law No. 40 of 1999 concerning the Press, which states that the press serves as a medium for information, education, entertainment, and social control. The function of social control requires the media and journalists to operate in a
with the principles of independence, verification, and a public interest orientation. Kc
Rosemary (Kovach, 2021) emphasize that quality journalism must play a role as *a Monitor o*

examining the actions of powerful actors, uncovering irregularities, and ensuring accountability. However, global research shows that such idealism often has to be negotiated with structural pressures, including economic demands, owner interests, and political relations (Stanyer & Negrine, 2023).

This dilemma seems to be getting sharper in the local media. On the one hand, local media have a socio-cultural proximity to their audience and a strong potential to enhance citizens' political participation, as they are able to raise issues that are most closely related to daily life (Franklin, 2012). On the other hand, the small scale of the business makes local media vulnerable to socio-political intervention, especially when the funding model relies on government advertising, advertorials, or advertisers with a vested interest (Tapsell, 2017). These vulnerabilities often give birth to the practice of blurring editorial and commercial boundaries, for example, through paid content that resembles news, transactional relationships with sources, or "news orders" that shift editorial professionalism standards.

The economic pressure of local media is increasingly complex in the era of digital platforms. The shift of ad spending to global platforms, such as Google and Meta (formerly Facebook), significantly reduced news media revenue and forced media organizations to adjust their business strategies (Nielsen, 2015). In this situation, the news media—including local media—encourage various forms of adaptation, such as strengthening algorithmic optimization, producing fast and viral content, developing Native Advertising, and expanding commercial cooperation, which often raises ethical concerns (Carlson, 2015). This change in the ecosystem has direct implications for the quality of public spaces, as the pressure of production and monetization can encourage the media to prioritize clicks and proximity to sponsors over the public interest.

Several studies in Indonesia have confirmed that the tug-of-war between journalistic idealism and economic needs is a recurring pattern. Nugroho, Siregar, and Laksmi (Nugroho et al., 2012) It shows that business logic and the interests of media owners have a great influence on editorial practices, which in many cases weakens the function of press supervision. Romli (Romli et al., 2023) found that local media play a role in strengthening local democracy. The election of regional heads has inadvertently facilitated the emergence and survival of political dynasties. Meanwhile, Tumanggor (Tumanggor & Azhar, 2025) emphasized that reliance on political advertising encourages local media to play a dual role as both a provider of information and an extension of campaign strategies. These findings demonstrate that the issue of local media independence cannot be divorced from the economic and political structure that comprises newsrooms.

Nevertheless, the study of the negotiation of idealism, professionalism, and commercialism in the local media still leaves important gaps. First, many studies categorize "local media" as a homogeneous entity, despite differences in organizational character, institutional history, platforms, and editorial culture that can influence how the media respond to economic and political pressures (Hanitzsch & Vos, 2018). Second, studies in Indonesia still tend to focus more often on specific regions (especially Java) or national media, while the dynamics of local media in West Sumatra—with its intellectual traditions, relatively critical political culture, and distinctive media ecosystem—still lack adequate empirical attention. Third, research that comparatively brings together local digital media and local print/legacy media in one region to see that differences in editorial and business value negotiation strategies are still relatively rare (Nelson, 2021).

The context of West Sumatra is important to examine because it has a strong public tradition and social expectations of the media as a space for articulating criticism. In this context, two local media outlets—Langgam.id and Harian Haluan—offer a relevant locus for examining these dynamics. Langgam.id represents digital-based local media that are growing within the platform ecosystem, while Harian Haluan represents legacy media that has historical roots and a more established organizational culture. These differences in platforms and institutional histories have the potential to give rise to different strategies in managing editorial policies, relationships with advertisers, and journalists' professional practices in the face of commercial pressure. Thus, comparing these two media can provide a more nuanced understanding of how changes in the media ecosystem affect journalistic practices and independence at the local level.

Based on this background, this research aims to address the following research gaps: How do Langgam.id and Harian Haluan balance journalistic idealism, professionalism, and commercialism in their editorial policies and business strategies amidst economic and political pressures, as well as digital competition? This question is elaborated through special objectives: (1) analyzing the editorial policy of Langgam.id and Harian Haluan in determining the reporting of political and social issues; (2) examine the business patterns of the two media, including revenue sources, advertising/advertorial models, and relationships with external actors; and (3) examine how media workers (editors and journalists) balance the value of idealism-professionalism with commercial demands in work practice.

The primary argument of this study is that local media in West Sumatra are at a pivotal juncture: they are expected to fulfill normative functions as pillars of local democracy, yet simultaneously face structural pressures that can erode their editorial independence. By focusing on the study of Langgam.id and Harian Haluan, this research aims to make an academic contribution to the literature on political communication and local journalism studies, offering a comparative perspective between digital media and legacy media in a relatively understudied regional context. In practical terms, the research findings can serve as input for local media organizations to formulate strategies that maintain credibility, strengthen professionalism, and build a more sustainable business model without compromising public interest.

2. METHODS

a. Design and Research Approach

This study employs a qualitative comparative case study design to analyze how local media, Langgam.id and Harian Haluan, negotiate journalistic idealism, professionalism, and commercialism in their editorial practices and business strategies. The qualitative approach was chosen because it allows for an in-depth understanding of the processes, meanings, and considerations of media actors in specific organizational and social contexts (John W. Creswell; Cheryl N. Poth, 2017). The design of the case study is appropriate for examining contemporary phenomena in a real context, especially when the relationship between journalistic practice and economic-political pressures cannot be explicitly separated (Yin, 2018).

A comparative approach is employed to identify similarities and differences in the strategies employed by the two media within the same geographical context, thereby strengthening the analysis and facilitating a dialogue of findings with local media studies in Indonesia and internationally (Nelson, 2021).

b. Locations, Objects, and Units of Analysis

The research is located in West Sumatra Province with the object of research Langgam.id (digital-based local media) and Harian Haluan (Legacy Media with a History of the Print Press). The selection of these two media outlets is based on differences in platforms and institutional histories that theoretically influence editorial policies, business models, and journalists' professional practices (Zelizer, 2004).

The research analysis unit includes: (1) editorial policies and practices in determining the reporting of political and social issues; (2) media business patterns, including sources of revenue and content commercialization practices; and (3) media workers' strategies in balancing the value of journalistic idealism, professionalism standards, and commercial demands. This multi-level approach aligns with the framework *hierarchy of influences* in journalism studies (Reese, 2001).

c. Selection of Informants

The research informants were selected through purposive sampling, considering their relevance to experience and direct involvement in the editorial process and media business management. The criteria for an informant include: (a) having a position or role directly related to editorial or business

decision-making; (b) having at least one year of work experience in the media under review; and (c) being involved in reporting political and social issues. Informants include editors-in-chief, editors, reporters, and staff who handle the business/advertising aspects.

The use of purposive sampling is prevalent in qualitative research because it enables researchers to obtain rich data from individuals who are best positioned to understand the phenomenon being studied (Patton, 2002). In the study of journalism, this technique is widely used to access key actors of the newsroom and understand professional practices that are contextual and not always formally documented (Alaql et al., 2023).

Based on these criteria, seven informants were identified in this study, comprising details of three individuals from Langgam.id and four individuals from *Harianhaluan.com*. The difference in the number of informants between the two media is due to the need for supporting information that can strengthen the data that has been obtained previously.

d. Data Collection Techniques

This study employs three primary data collection techniques to enhance the depth and validity of the findings.

First, Semi-structured in-depth interviews were conducted to explore the views, experiences, and considerations of informants regarding editorial policies, ethical dilemmas, and economic and political pressures. Semi-structured interviews enable a systematic exploration of core issues while allowing space for new themes to emerge from the informant's narrative (Brinkmann & Kvale, 2019). This method is widely used in research on newsrooms and journalists' professionalism (Hanitzsch & Vos, 2018).

Second, limited observation was done on specific editorial activities, such as editorial meetings or reporting routines (if possible), to capture the dynamics of decision-making and the interaction between editorial and business interests. Observation helps understand news production as a social practice that involves the negotiation of values and interests (Hartley, 2008).

Third, document analysis carried out on editorial guidelines, internal codes of ethics, media kits, or advertorial materials, as well as examples of political and social news. Document analysis serves to verify the consistency between normative claims and actual media practices, thereby enriching data triangulation (Bowen, 2009).

e. Data Analysis Techniques

Data was analyzed using Thematic Analysis to identify key patterns and themes related to the negotiation of journalistic idealism, professionalism, and commercialism. Thematic analysis was chosen because it is a flexible and effective method for managing qualitative data from multiple sources, enabling the development of themes grounded in empirical data (Braun & Clarke, 2022). The analysis process includes the data familiarization stage, initial coding, theme development and review, and the preparation of an analytical narrative that relates the findings to the theoretical framework of journalism and political communication (Saldana, 2022).

The analysis was conducted comparatively by comparing themes that appeared in Langgam.id and Harian Haluan to identify similarities and differences in editorial and business strategies, as well as their implications for local media independence. This approach aligns with comparative research on local media, which emphasizes the role of organizational contexts and media platforms in shaping journalistic practices (Nielsen, 2015).

f. Data Validity and Research Ethics

To maintain the validity of the data, the research employed a strategy of trustworthiness that included triangulation of sources and methods, *member checking* selectively, as well as systematic recording of the research process (*Audit trail*) (Nowell et al., 2017). In terms of ethics, this research adheres to the principle of *informed consent*, maintains the confidentiality of the informant's identity,

and uses the data solely for academic purposes, given the sensitivity of the issues being researched (Orb et al., 2001).

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

a. Research Results

The results of this study are based on in-depth interviews with editorial actors and journalists of Langgam.id and Harian Haluan, limited observations of editorial practices, and analysis of political and social news documents and content. The findings are presented descriptively based on thematic categories that emerge from field data.

1. Editorial Policy and Media Independence

The results of the interviews show that both Langgam.id and Harian Haluan normatively prioritize independence as the main principle in their editorial policies. The editor-in-chief of the two media emphasized their commitment to balance, verification, and the public interest in reporting. However, field data also show that newsrooms are not completely free from external pressures, especially those stemming from economic needs and relationships with local political actors.

In Langgam.id, the main pressure comes from the demand to maintain financial sustainability as a local digital medium with a limited advertising market. One editor stated that although the editorial tried to keep a distance from practical politics, there was a certain compromise in the form of flexibility for advertisers who had political affiliations. Meanwhile, at Harian Haluan, long-term relationships with major advertisers and local political actors also influence the dynamics of editorial decision-making, especially on sensitive political issues.

From these findings, three main categories emerged: (1) independence as a normative value; (2) economic pressures as structural factors; and (3) editorial compromise as a survival strategy. These findings suggest that local media independence is contextual and negotiable, rather than a completely absolute condition.

2. Practice of Reporting Local Political Issues

Analysis of news content reveals that political news in both media is often dominated by local elite actors, including regional heads, members of the DPRD, and figures from political parties. Observations and interviews reveal that this dominance is influenced by the ease of access to official sources, as well as the limited time and resources available to the editor.

Some journalists acknowledge that political coverage frequently adheres to a pragmatic journalistic approach, relying on official agendas and statements from political actors. As a result, the voices of civil society and non-elite groups are relatively underrepresented. In addition, there is a practice of "soft-selling" in the news, where certain political interests are subtly inserted in coverage packaged as general news.

The categories that emerged from these findings include: (1) the dominance of elite speakers; (2) limited public representation; and (3) pragmatism-based journalistic routines. These findings indicate that the practice of political news in local media continues to face challenges in creating an inclusive public space.

3. Journalist Professionalism and Media Adaptation Strategy

In terms of professionalism, the data shows that journalists in both media have a strong understanding of journalistic codes of ethics and professional standards. The editorial guidelines and internal documents explicitly emphasize the principles of independence, accuracy, and public responsibility. However, in practice, professionalism is often tested by business pressures and resource limitations.

Haluan Daily faces challenges in the digital transformation process from print media to online platforms, including adjusting work rhythms and news production models. Instead, Langgam.id is more adaptive in leveraging digital distribution strategies, such as search engine and social media optimization, as well as developing niche journalism-based coverage for specific local issues. However, both media still face limitations in the local advertising market that limit editorial maneuverability.

These findings generate three main categories: (1) normative commitment to professionalism; (2) market pressures and digital transformation; and (3) adaptation strategies through content differentiation.The findings of this study are presented in the following table.

Table 1. Editorial Practices of Langgam.id and Harian Haluan (Rinaldi, 2025)

Main Themes	Subtheme	Evidence
Journalistic Idealism and Media Independence	Independence as a normative value of editorial	Interviews with the editor-in-chief of Langgam.id and Harian Haluan reveal that independence, balance, and public interest are the official principles guiding their editorial policy. The editorial guidelines document of the two media outlets affirms their commitment to the journalistic code of ethics
	Economic pressure on editorial decisions	Informants from Langgam.id stated that the limited local digital advertising revenue affects the flexibility of editors in responding to content related to politically affiliated advertisers. At Harian Haluan, long-term relationships with major advertisers and local political actors have shaped the editorial sensitivity to certain issues
	Editorial compromise as a survival strategy	Observations suggest that there is an internal negotiation practice when addressing sensitive political issues, including adjusting the viewpoint and intensity of coverage to avoid harming media business relationships. This is seen by the editor as a strategy to maintain operational sustainability
Local Political Reporting Practices	Dominance of elite actors as resource persons	An analysis of political news content on Langgam.id and Harian Haluan reveals the dominance of statements by regional heads, members of the DPRD, and party leaders. Interviews reveal that elite actors are more accessible and have a scheduled agenda
	Lack of representation of civil society	Journalists acknowledge that limited time and resources mean that political coverage often overlooks civil society groups and ordinary citizens. Editorial routine observations show priority on the official agenda over participatory coverage
	Soft-selling *practices* in the news	Some informants acknowledge a tendency to subtly insert certain political interests into public coverage, especially during the period leading up to important political agendas. This practice is understood as a compromise between journalistic idealism and the financial needs of the media
Commercialism and Media Business Patterns	Shift in ad revenue to digital platforms	Interview data and internal documents show a significant decline in conventional advertising revenue in both media. Langgam.id relies more on digital advertising and content collaboration, while Harian Haluan still relies on a combination of print and online advertising
	Differences in digital and legacy media adaptation strategies	Langgam.id implements SEO strategies, social media distribution, and niche coverage to attract its

		target audience. Haluan Daily faces structural obstacles in digital transformation, despite having developed an online portal as part of media convergence
	Limitations of the local advertising market	Informants from both media emphasized that the economic scale of the advertising market in West Sumatra is relatively small, thus limiting the media's ability to completely avoid relying on political or advertorial advertising
Journalist Professionalism	Normative understanding of the code of ethics	The majority of journalists stated that they understood and appreciated the principles of journalistic ethics and professionalism. Internal documents show the existence of editorial operational standards related to verification and balance
	Ethical dilemmas in political coverage	Interviews reveal that journalists often face a dilemma when covering political actors who also serve as advertisers or media business partners. This dilemma affects the way of reporting and the selection of viewpoints
	Individual strategies to maintain professionalism	Some journalists develop personal strategies, such as strengthening data verification and using neutral language, to minimize bias in coverage. This strategy is seen as a form of professional identity negotiation amid structural pressures

b. Discussion

1. Media Idealism and the Function of Social Control

The findings of this study indicate that the idealism of local media in West Sumatra remains subject to significant structural pressures. Although independence is upheld as a principle, the control function of social media has not been consistently implemented. These findings align with research (Tapsell, 2017), which indicates that local media in Indonesia are often entangled in political and economic patronage relations, thereby limiting their ability to play a critical role in shaping power.

However, in contrast to Tapsell (2017), who emphasized the dominance of political actors, this study found that the limitations of the media economy play an equally important role in undermining idealism. This strengthens the argument (Gasher, 2000) From a political economy perspective of the media, the financial crisis of the media industry has a direct impact on the quality of journalism and democracy.

2. Commercialism and Local Media Business Transformation

The difference in strategy between Langgam.id and Harian Haluan demonstrates that media platforms influence adaptation patterns in response to commercial pressures. Local digital media are relatively more flexible in leveraging technology and online distribution, while legacy media face structural barriers in digital transformation. These findings are consistent with the study of Nugroho, Siregar, and Laksmi (Nugroho et al., 2012), which found that online media in Indonesia is more adaptive to changes in the advertising market than print media.

However, this study also shows that technological adaptation does not necessarily solve the problems of the local media economy. The limited scale of the local advertising market remains a major obstacle, as noted by Nielsen and Ganter (Kleis Nielsen & Ganter, 2018) in a global context. Thus, the challenge of local media lies not only in the form of platforms but also in the economic structure of the local market that limits the sustainability of the business.

3. Journalistic Professionalism in the Local Political-Economic Landscape

The findings on the dilemma of journalist professionalism show that the professional identity of journalists in local media is always negotiated amid economic and political pressures. This condition is in line with the findings of Hanitzsch and Vos (Hanitzsch & Vos, 2018), which shows that journalists in a variety of contexts must negotiate their professional values in a complex landscape of power.

In the context of West Sumatra, the compromise of professionalism is evident in the practice of political coverage, which often gives more space to actors who have economic access or business relations with the media. These findings align with Sen and Hill's argument (Kitley, 2000) that journalism in Southeast Asia operates within a political-economic structure that renders press independence contingent and never entirely free from negotiation.

Based on the findings and discussions of the editorial practices of local media in Padang in reporting on local politics, it is shown that journalistic practices in Langgam.id and Harian Haluan are the result of a dynamic interaction between normative values of journalism, economic-political pressures, and professional strategies of media actors in the local context. This practice is illustrated in the following model.

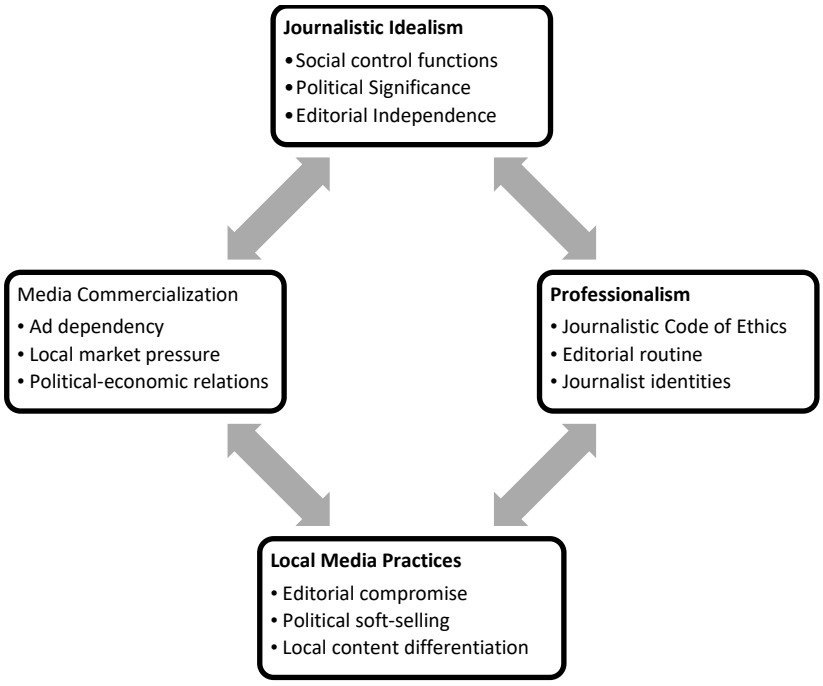


Figure 1. Negotiation model of idealism, commercialism, and professionalism of local media (Rinaldi, 2025)

4. Synthesis of Findings

Overall, this study reveals that Langgam.id and Harian Haluan exemplify the condition of local media at the intersection of idealism, commercialism, and professionalism. The media seeks to exercise the function of social control, but economic limitations and political pressure encourage compromise in journalistic practices.

These findings broaden the understanding of local media in Indonesia by showing that the media does not only function as a *watchdog of power* (Kovach & Rosenstiel, 2014), but also as an organization struggling to survive the media's political economic crisis. Thus, this study emphasizes the importance

of examining the dynamics of the local media context both contextually and structurally, rather than solely from a normative perspective.

4. CONCLUSION

This research demonstrates that Langgam.id and Harian Haluan exemplify the dynamics of local media in West Sumatra, which is undergoing a continuous negotiation between journalistic idealism, professionalism, and commercialism. Although both media normatively uphold independence, the public interest, and the function of social control, journalistic practices on the ground often reveal that these values are negotiated in the face of economic pressures and local political relations.

In terms of editorial policy, media independence is contextual and not completely sterile from external interests, especially those related to financial sustainability. Political news practices tend to be dominated by elite actors, with indications of *soft-selling* as a form of editorial compromise. Meanwhile, the professionalism of journalists is understood normatively, but it is carried out in a dilemmatic condition when ethical demands are faced with the needs of the media business.

A comparison between local digital media and legacy media reveals that platform differences influence adaptation strategies, yet do not eliminate the structural pressures that local media face, particularly the limitations of the advertising market. Theoretically, these findings confirm that local media cannot be understood solely as *a watchdog of power*, but rather as an institutional actor operating within a complex economic and political landscape. The idealism–commercialism–professionalism negotiation model developed in this study enriches the study of local journalism with a contextual perspective grounded in empirical findings.

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