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Local Journalism in the New Media Landscape: Opportunities and Challenges

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Abstract

The practice of local journalism is changing alongside with the increase of new media usage among the audiences and the people working in the media industries. The development of new media landscape, with the increasing use of digital/online media, presents the local journalism with new opportunities and challenges, both in the consumption as well as the production of the local media contents. This paper attempts to describe how the practices of journalism have been impacted by the growing use of new media in the local media industries, especially in the city of Surakarta. The use of new media in local journalism has created multi-media and multi-platform news production and distribution, more demand for new skills from the journalist – which in turn will demand new approach in the journalism education/training, and new ethical issues to be addressed.

Keywords: new media; local journalism; practical and ethical issues

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1. Introduction: The Changing Media Use

Many academics and journalists acknowledge the significance of the press as the chroniclers of the local communities. They also recognise the democratic function of the local press, which play the important role of presenting independent reports as well as commentary on local issues. They provide local citizen with a forum for expressing their views about what happen in their immediate environment [2, 4]. In the case of Indonesia, the local newspapers play a larger role compared with other media, such as local television or local radio stations. In recent years, however, the growth of local newspapers has suffered with the decline of newspaper business in Indonesia. According to Nielsen's survey, spending on advertisements in newspapers declined by 4 per cent in 2015, the first time in the last 10 years.

The dawn of the new media is considered as having significant impact on the development of local journalism. In the case of local media in UK, for instance, Oftcon (2012) emphasized how the new media has the potential to support and promote local media contents. In Indonesia, though, the development of online media has to an extent contributed to the decline of newspaper industry. The 2015 Nielsen's survey showed that the number of newspapers in the Indonesia decreased from 117 in 2015 to 101 in 2015.

Some papers, including *Sinar Harapan* and *The Jakarta Globe*, closed their operations due to high operating costs and tight competition with online media [8].

The new media has penetrated deeply into the lives of Indonesians. In [11], revealed that there are 88.1 million active internet users in Indonesia (penetration 34% of the total population, 15% growth from 2015). The survey also notes that with the increasing numbers of mobile device users in Indonesia; there are 326.2 million mobile subscriptions (2% growth since 2015) with 85% of adults owning a mobile device (46% of them own smart phones). Almost half of the users (48%) use internet every day, and 70% users access news from their mobile device (41% increase from 2015).

The increasing use of new media also affects the news consumption pattern by Indonesians. According to the survey by Indonesia Digital Association (2015), 96% of (how many?) respondents use smart phones as their primary media to access information, followed by television (91%); only 31% use newspaper, while radio only used by 15% of the respondents. TV and online news are the top two sources of news (70%); interestingly, more than half acquire news via social media (60%). Most of the respondents who use online media to access news are in the age range of 13-32 years old (64%). The top four news topics accessed by the users are entertainment, social issues, politics, and sport. People surveyed in this study said that they get their online news by different pathways, i.e. search engine (31%), channel in same domain (28%), social media (24%), and website homepage (10%).

2. Opportunities and Challenges for Local Journalism in Surakarta

Surakarta has a unique place in the history and development of journalism in Indonesia. The city witnessed the rise of Indonesian journalism. One of the first publications for local citizen, using Javanese language, was *Bromartani,* which published in Surakarta in 1855. The first national journalist association (*Persatuan Wartawan Indonesia* or PWI) was also founded in Surakarta in 9 February 1946, and was sanctioned by the government as the National Press Day (*Hari Pers Nasional*). Ironically, Surakarta is also known as the "newspaper graveyard" because many local newspapers that started in this city had been closed down, usually for financial reasons. *Solopos*, which was started in 1997, is considered as the local newspaper that "break the bad spell" [9].

After *Solopos*, the development of local media, especially news media has been growing alongside the increasing use of new media in its operation. At present, Surakarta is packed with various media targeting the audience. There are 17 free to air TV, 10 newspaper (2 of them are local newspaper, 1 local online news portal), and around 30 local radio stations.

2.1. The Speed of News Delivery

The first characteristic of online journalism is its instant delivery of news to the audience [1]. New items or news updates are posted every 15-60 minutes in a typical working day of an online news media. Timlo.net, as an online news portal, publishes new entries every 15-30 minutes, while Solopos and Joglosemar publish their news items or updates every 30-60 minutes. But, in the case of reporting an ongoing story, these local media post updates more rapidly (every 10-15 minutes). In the case of Solopos and Joglosemar the speed of distributing news to the audience is varied. During morning to afternoon, the updates are more frequent than during the night time. This is caused by the fact that even though those newspapers have online platform, but the news production is still influenced by the work cycle of traditional print newspaper.

The demands for more rapid news delivery in the online media put more pressure on the journalists and editors in producing the news items. In some cases, such pressure resulted in compromising the news quality. The news story sometime is not complete, and even though the media argue that they publish updates regularly there are many cases where the updates are still fragmented and not linked with the previous related news item – therefore, the reader do not have the comprehensive understanding of the issues being reported. In the more technical side, the possibility of typos in the news story is increasing, even when this issue may not be considered as important for the majority of the audience.

2.2. Depth of Information

The second advantage of the use of new media in journalism is the capacity for more depth in the news coverage. There is really no limit on what a journalist posts on a web site [1]. One of the factors that contribute to the decline of local newspaper industry is the production cost, especially the price of paper. This fact also limits the number of pages for each edition, which in turn, will limit the amount of information for the audience. The common practice in online journalism is to present the news story comprehensively, in order to use the unlimited space in the web site, by providing contextual information related to the story. The information (which can be in the format of text, graphics, pictures, or videos) may be come from other news stories published in their own news site or digital library, or taken from external site.

In the case of local media in Surakarta, the news story is usually linked to other story internally; they seldom provide external link in the news piece. One of the reasons is that the local newspapers do not want to encourage readers to leave their web site so as to follow the external links. The local newspapers still rely on their own news items; which in some cases will limit the depth and richness of the information

for the audience. On the other aspect of this issue, although the news media has already been using multi-platform news production (for instance, *Solopos* embed links in their *SoloposTV* and *SoloposFM* websites), but the information or news from these various platforms have not been integrated. In the case of *Solopos*, we may say that in one news media website the audience can access different media format (print, audio, and audio-visual), but the information in those different format is not related or coordinated. In some cases, the multimedia contents are not produced by the journalist, but taken from other sites such as *YouTube* or *Facebook*.

This practice of multimedia and multiplatform news content delivery in turn demands more work and skills from the journalists. For the reason of efficiency, media institutions are not willing to hire new journalists for their new news platform, but they prefer to train their existing journalists to be able to perform multimedia news gathering and production. *Solopos*, for example, will assign its journalist to produce news for the print media, online media, and when needed for their radio and television news [7]. This policy place much pressure on the journalists, especially elder journalist, who only had been trained in print journalism.

2.3. Level of Interactivity

The new media allows the consumer to interact with the product and the producers [10]. The practice of interactivity may take the form of: interaction between the readers with the journalist/ editors, between readers to other readers; and between readers to the mass of audience – when they use the news media to voice their opinion or to publish their own story.

Although every local media in Surakarta has provided a facility for readers to give comments, but these facilities areseldom used by the readers. The interaction between readers and journalists/ editors happens when certain news story is shared in the social media (usually *Facebook*). The interactions and conversations take place not in the news media website, but in other online media. In some cases, the journalist/editor share news story (provided with a link to their website) as a promotional tool to entice and encourage their friends to visit their news site.

The capability of the audience to produce "news" also impacts on the process of agenda setting. In the classical model of agenda setting, the media and policy maker are the ones who choose and frame particular issues to become a public agenda. At present, there are many cases where the opinion of individual broadcast in the social media, as long as it became popular or viral, is grabbed by the mainstream media and published as their news item.

2.4. Decline of News Authenticity and Trustworthiness

One of the major impacts of new media in the journalism practice is the capability to produce and manipulate digital contents. The availability of software, application, and webhosting services that are getting cheaper and easier and more convenient to use has enabled practically anyone to become a news producer and publisher. It challenges the role of the journalist as 'gatekeeper' and information provider. It also raises all sorts of issues about the accuracy of that information and reportage [10].

Among journalists in Surakarta, there is a practice called *berita bandheman* (news story swapping). This is where a journalist will share his/her news piece with other journalist in order to get news story from his/her counterpart. In some cases, journalists from different media will agree to go to different locations, and at the end of the day will give his/her particular reports to the other journalists. This practice is widely known and practiced by many journalists, although they will not admit it openly to the public or their employer [5]. The emergence of new media has made this practice easier via the email, wireless connection (bluetooth or wi-fi), and even memory stick to exchange and swap the story. This practice will rob the readers from the opportunities to be exposed to different angles and points of views on certain issues.

The other issue faced by the local media is the problem of piracy and copyright infringement. There are increasing cases where certain online news website publishes stories taken from other sites without acknowledging the source of the information. Some sites make minor alteration or modification on the story, but many just copy and paste the whole story to their webpage–sometime they just change the title with a more provocative or sensational one. Such practices of plagiarism sometime discourage the journalist who actually doing the hard works of news gathering and writing.

The third problem is the intentional disinformation by changing the information in the news published by legitimate and respected newspapers, and then re-publishing the modified story in social media, claiming that it is the original news form that newspaper. This problem is worsened by the fact that the majority of users in Indonesia are not critical to the information they see in the social media. They readily assume and accept that all information is genuine, without any desire to confirm or check the newspaper that originally published the story. Furthermore, if the story is "hot", provocative, or sensational, they will spread the defective story further to their online social network.

3. Conclusion

The practice of local journalism is changing alongside with the increase of new media usage among the audiences and the people working in the media industries. The development of new media landscape, with the increasing use of digital/online media, presents the local journalism with new opportunities and challenges, both in the consumption as well as the production of the local media contents.

There are major issues that need to be addressed: (1) the need for more skills among journalists so as to meet the demand of journalism practices using new media; (2) the need to instill and enforce best practices of journalism, including the journalism code of conduct not only among the journalists, but also among the audience, because in the era of new media, the audience has the capability to produce and publish news; (3) the need to do more media education in order to increase the level of media literacy among the audience, so that they become more critical towards any information they access.

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