

MEDIA DISRUPTION IMPACT ON JOURNALISTS' INTEGRITY: A ROLE STUDY OF INDEPENDENT JOURNALISTS ALLIANCE (AJI) IN MAINTAINING PRESS INTEGRITY AND FREEDOM



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Abstract

Digital transformation in the media industry has created structural disruption that has significantly affected the integrity of journalists' work, especially in the dimensions of accuracy, independence and compliance with ethical codes. This research aims to analyze digital media disruption impact on the integrity of journalists in Surabaya, as well as exploring the role of Surabaya Independent Journalist Alliance (AJI) in maintaining the values of journalistic professionalism amidst complex structural pressures. Using a qualitative-descriptive approach and data collection techniques through in-depth interviews and documentation studies, this research highlights Independent Journalist Alliance (AJI)'s four main roles: as an ethical values keeper through membership selection, as a facilitator of professional education, as an internal ethics supervisor, and as an advocate for legal and digital protection for journalists. The discovery shows that Independent Journalist Alliance (AJI) functions as a normative actor capable of intervening in digital disruption through community-based institutional strategies and value solidarity. By referring to Disruptive Innovation theory and Mediatory Theory of the Message, this study concludes that the sustainability of journalism integrity does not only depend on individual agency, but also on the existence of institutions that are able to stabilize value in a media ecosystem driven by algorithmic and market logic.

Keywords: Digital Media Disruption, Journalists' Integrity, Ethics of Journalists, Independent Journalist Alliance (AJI), Professional Organizations, Digital Journalism

INTRODUCTION

Advances in digital technology have encouraged structural disruption in the media industry which has a direct impact on global journalistic practices, including in Indonesia. This disruption is characterized by a shift from conventional media to digital media, which presents advantages in speed, accessibility and real-time distribution of information (Chang & Chang, 2023; Hasan et al., 2023). However, this transformation also raises ethical and professional dilemmas among journalists, especially regarding pressure on accuracy, independence and integrity in reporting (Nic Newman et al., 2023).

In digital media context, content distribution algorithms and orientation towards clicks and engagement encourage instant journalism practices that sacrifice the principles of verification and balance (Carlson, 2018; Tandoc, 2015). Traffic-based business models lead to the commodification of information, where the journalistic value of news is assessed based on its visual appeal and virality potential, not the substance of its truth or social relevance (McChesney, 2013). As a result, media disruption has weakened the position of journalists as guardians of truth and democratic actors (Connolly-Ahern et al., 2025).

This condition is exacerbated by the imbalance in digital regulations, the instability of media economy, and weak protection for journalists, both legally and in terms of work welfare. Data from the Edelman Trust Barometer shows that the level of Indonesian people's trust in the media will decline drastically to 46% in 2024, indicating an acute crisis of trust (Edelman, 2024). Apart from that, pressure on journalists also comes in the form of political intervention, public polarization, and even cyber attacks, which have the potential to threaten press freedom and work safety (Posetti, 2017).

In this context, professional organizations such as Independent Journalists Alliance (AJI) plays an important role as normative actors that maintain the ethics and professionalism of journalists. Independent Journalists Alliance (AJI) does not only provide education and advocacy on journalistic ethics, but also acts as a supervisory institution for violations of the code of ethics and protects journalists who experience structural and political pressure (Sunarto et al., 2022). This study attempts to fill the gap in research by focusing analysis on the role of Surabaya Independent Journalists Alliance (AJI) in maintaining the integrity of journalists amidst the increasingly complex pressures of digital disruption.

To understand the complexity of these dynamics, this study uses two main theoretical approaches as a basis for analysis. First, the Disruptive Innovation Theory developed by (Christensen, 1997) provides a framework to see how digital technology structurally disrupts conventional media business models and forces the journalism industry to adapt quickly. This disruption is not only about technology, but also about paradigm changes in information distribution, power relations in media, and the competencies which is needed by journalists to face the pressures of digital platforms and algorithmic logic (Christensen et al., 2018).

Second, this study also utilizes Mediator Theory of the Message (Fiske, 2002; Hall, 1980) to examine how journalistic messages are no longer neutral, but become a field of ideological construction that is influenced by economic, political and algorithmic pressures. In this context, media messages are seen not as mere reflections of reality, but as products mediated by various interests and powers both from within media institutions and from outside (McChesney, 2013). This perspective is important for understanding how journalistic

values such as accuracy, objectivity and integrity have the potential to be displaced in the production process of digital content oriented towards performance and commercial appeal.

Based on this conceptual framework, this research aims to describe and analyze how digital media disruption, as a form of disruptive innovation, affects the work integrity of journalists in Surabaya, especially in the dimensions of reporting accuracy, independence in reporting, and compliance with journalistic ethical codes; also explore and explain the role of Surabaya Independent Journalists Alliance (AJI) in responding to the challenges of digital media disruption, by highlighting how this organization maintains the idealism of its members through member selection mechanisms, ethical advocacy, strengthening professional capacity, and enforcing accountability in journalistic practice amidst an increasingly competitive and disrupted media ecosystem.

RESEARCH METHOD

This research uses an exploratory qualitative approach with a case study strategy, which aims to understand in depth how digital media disruption affects the integrity of journalists and the role of Surabaya Independent Journalists Alliance (AJI) in maintaining journalistic ethics and professionalism amidst the challenges of the digital era. This approach was chosen because it is able to reveal social and institutional dynamics contextually in a complex and rapidly changing environment (Creswell, 2014; Robert K. Yin, 2018).

The research location is centered at the Surabaya Independent Journalist Alliance (AJI) Secretariat, which is located at Monginsidi street No. 5, Surabaya, East Java. This location was chosen because Surabaya Independent Journalist Alliance (AJI) is a branch of the journalist professional organization which is active in advocating ethics, press freedom and media education at the local level, and represents the dynamics of digital media in the second largest metropolitan city in Indonesia.

Data was obtained through three main techniques: in-depth interviews, participant observation, and documentation. Interviews were administered with Surabaya Independent Journalists Alliance (AJI) management, active journalist members, and local media stakeholders. Interviews were administered in a semi-structured manner with six key informants selected based on the relevance of their roles and knowledge of the research topic. The selection of informants used a purposive sampling technique to ensure the depth of data from various perspectives from both internal organizations and external stakeholders. Detailed information regarding informants can be seen in Table 1 below:

Table 1.
Research Informants

No	Initial Informant	Position / Role
1	IN-01	Head/Chairman of AJI Surabaya
2	IN-02	Secretary of AJI Surabaya
3	IN-03	Journalist Member of AJI Surabaya
4	IN-04	Former/Ex Member of AJI
5	IN-05	Local Media Journalist of non-AJI
6	IN-06	Journalism Academics (Partner of AJI)

Observations were directed at organizational activities such as training, advocacy forums, and member recruitment and development processes. Meanwhile, documentation includes Independent Journalists Alliance (AJI)'s internal archives, code of ethics, notes, and the organization's annual report.

The researcher acts as an insider and reflective observer, because he is an active journalist and serves as Vice Chairman of the Advocacy Division of Surabaya Independent Journalists Alliance (AJI) for the 2022–2027 period. To minimize bias that might arise due to this position, data triangulation, critical reflection, and comparison between primary and secondary data were carried out to maintain the objectivity and validity of the research.

Data were analyzed using thematic analysis techniques through a process of reduction, categorization, and interpretation of meaning based on the main themes that emerged from the field data. Data validity was maintained through triangulation of sources and methods, as well as a confirmation process with key informants to ensure consistency and credibility of findings (Miles et al., 2018).

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Media Disruption Impact on Journalists' Integrity

Digital media disruption has fundamentally reconfigured the structure and dynamics of journalistic work. The shift from conventional media to digital platforms not only changes the way information is distributed, but also influences the ethical and professional values that have long been the main foundation in journalistic practice. In a new media landscape filled with algorithmic and market-oriented pressures, journalists are required to work faster, more concisely, and more visually appealingly often at the expense of the principles of verification, balance, and independence (Carlson, 2018; McChesney, 2013; Tandoc, 2015).

The pressure on journalist integrity in this context can be read through the *Disruptive Innovation* framework (Christensen, 1997), where technology-based innovation has replaced old journalistic work systems and models with a more pragmatic and commercially efficient approach. Meanwhile, *Mediatory Theory of the Message* (Fiske, 2002; Hall, 1980) emphasizes that information produced in a disrupted media system no longer exists as an objective reflection of reality, but rather as a construction influenced by the logic of capital, algorithms and political pressure.

Field findings show that media disruption has a direct impact on various dimensions of journalist integrity in Surabaya. In the following subsection, we will describe thematically the forms of pressure faced by journalists, ranging from changes in work rhythms to crises of ethics and public trust, all of which show how complex the disruption to the dimensions of journalistic professionalism is.

Disruption Reality on Journalistic Practice

Digital disruption has created structural changes in the journalist work space. These changes do not only cover the devices and technology used, but also touch the essence of journalistic work itself. Work rhythms that were previously based on daily or weekly basis have now changed to a real-time work system, which makes the boundaries between work time and personal time increasingly blurred. Journalists are required to respond to events quickly and instantly, even before the information has been thoroughly verified.

One of Journalist member of Independent Journalists Alliance (AJI) stated that:

"We don't have enough time to think. The news has to be published now. Otherwise, it will be left behind by other media and traffic can be lost. It means we sometimes have to 'play it safe' with half-baked information." (IN-03, Journalist Member of AJI)

This phenomenon is the main characteristic of disruptive innovation as explained by (Christensen, 1997), where new business models based on efficiency and technology replace conventional, more layered approaches. In media context, this disruption has overhauled quality control mechanisms such as double editing, editorial meetings, and verification processes that previously became standard journalistic work.

Apart from work rhythm, disruption also brings pressure in the form of multiplatform work. One journalist is now burdened with various roles, from reporter, videographer, editor, to social media manager. It does not only increase workload, but also creates the risk of errors and disregard for verification principles.

An Independent Journalists Alliance (AJI) administrator stated that:

"Now a journalist has to make news for the web, record videos, post them to Instagram and TikTok. But the coverage time is still only a few hours. When is the time to delve into the issue?" (IN-01, Chairman of AJI Surabaya)

This condition shows a decline in the quality of coverage due to limited time and resources. What should have been in-depth coverage turned into surface reporting shaped to meet the demands of algorithms and momentary trends.

Furthermore, the editorial structure also experienced depreciations. Many medias, especially those financially impacted, have downsized editorial teams and shifted the burden of verification to individual journalists. As a result, the supervisory function (gatekeeping) which was previously carried out collectively is now replaced by a single authority in the hands of the reporter. One of informant stated that:

"Editors used to play a very important role. Now sometimes news is published straight away without editing. Editors pursue the quantity of news, not the quality." (IN-05, local media journalist of non-AJI)

This situation shows the loss of an internal control system that should maintain the quality and integrity of published information. In the perspective of *Mediator Theory of the Message* (Fiske, 2002; Hall, 1980), the loss of a strong editorial process results in media messages being increasingly influenced by external dynamics such as market interests and digital performative logic. Content no longer reflects objective reality, but is constructed according to the needs of the fast information market.

The reality of disruption in journalistic practice is reflected in three main aspects: (1) acceleration of work rhythm, (2) multiplatform work pressure, and (3) depreciation of the internal monitoring system. These three aspects directly reduce the reflective space and ethical control in journalistic work, so that professional integrity becomes increasingly vulnerable in a fast-paced and competitive information ecosystem.

Ethics Erosion and Professional Standard

Digital transformation in the media industry has given rise to systemic pressure on journalistic ethics. Disruption is not only changing distribution tools and platforms, but also affecting fundamental values that were previously closely guarded in journalistic practice, such as accuracy, verification and balance. Economic pressures, content distribution

algorithms, and an orientation towards speed and popularity have meant that ethical principles are often compromised for the sake of media affordability and existence.

This phenomenon can be seen in the practice of instant journalism which is increasingly taking root in newsroom. Journalists often no longer go through a strict verification process, but only reproduce information from social media or official press releases without a cross-checking process. One of informant stated that:

"We're like a news factory. If there's a release it goes up straight away, sometimes without checking again. If it's a little slow, other media will broadcast it first. In the end, what's important is fast, not right." (IN-02, Secretary of AJI Surabaya)

This condition reflects the symptoms of what (Tandoc, 2015) calls "*click-driven journalism*", namely a reporting model that is oriented towards digital traffic and impressions. As a result, the principles of balance and accuracy are being eroded by algorithmic pressures that prioritize the attractiveness of content, not the quality of information.

Disruption has also given rise to the practice of sensationalism and the use of provocative titles (*clickbait*) that obscure facts to attract attention. One of informant from local media stated that:

"News headlines now have to be bombastic. Sometimes the content and title don't connect, but the important thing is that people click and read." (IN-05, non-AJI journalist)

Within the framework of the *Mediatory Theory of the Message* (Fiske, 2002; Hall, 1980), this phenomenon reflects message construction mediated by commercial interests and performative logic. Journalistic messages are no longer neutral, but are constructed to meet market expectations and digital platform algorithms. News ethics as a substantive principle has shifted to a cosmetic strategy.

In addition, economic pressures cause the media to make efficiencies by cutting the number of editors and hiring more freelance contributors (*freelancers*) who do not always have a strong understanding of the journalistic code of ethics. Some journalists, according to informants, have even begun to blur the lines between journalistic work and paid content promotion (*paid content*). An administrator of Independence Journalist Alliance (AJI) confirmed that:

"What we are worried about is the normalization of ethical violations. When envelopes are considered normal, advertorials are not labelled advertising, and journalists become brand ambassadors, all of this lowers the dignity of the profession." (IN-01, Chairman of AJI Surabaya)

This ethical erosion does not only create a crisis of professionalism, but also has an impact on public trust in the media. The report (Edelman Trust Barometer, 2024) shows that the decline in public trust in the media cannot be separated from perceptions of bias, non-neutrality, and the economic orientation of the newsroom. When the public no longer sees the media as a truth-seeking institution, but rather as a market actor, the legitimacy of the journalistic profession is threatened.

Media disruption has shifted journalistic ethical values to a marginal position. Principles like verification, accuracy, independence and balance are under pressure from various directions: from increasingly efficient media organizational structures, from market logic that prioritizes performance, and from digital platform algorithms that do not favour

the quality of substance. In this context, the integrity of journalists is not only tested individually, but also systemically.

Trust Crisis and Profession Symbolic

The most significant but less visible follow-up impact of media disruption is the erosion of public trust in the journalist profession and media institutions themselves. In a climate of saturated, fast and often unverified information, it is increasingly difficult for the public to differentiate between valid and manipulative information. When media repeatedly fails to meet expectations of objectivity and accuracy, the credibility of the journalistic profession is degraded.

Field findings show that journalists now do not only face technical and ethical challenges, but also symbolic challenges: how to maintain their professional identity in the eyes of the public. A journalist member of Independent Journalists Alliance (AJI) stated that:

"We are increasingly being mistaken for buzzers. If we report on politics or conflict, we are immediately suspected of taking sides. Even when we try to be neutral, the public still doesn't believe us." (IN-03, journalist member of AJI)

This phenomenon shows that digital disruption does not only impact the technical and structural aspects of journalistic work, but also changes the way society interprets and responds to journalists' work. Within the framework of the *Mediatory Theory of the Message*, media messages are not just the result of institutional production, but are also influenced by the way the public interprets and gives meaning to the message. When the media is considered biased, partisan, or not independent, the symbolic meaning of the journalist profession as a "*guardian of truth*" collapses.

This condition is exacerbated by the worsening relations between the media and the public due to the rise of hoaxes, misinformation and polarization on social media. People tend to choose information that suits their political or ideological preferences, and reject information that contradicts it, without considering its validity. In this kind of ecosystem, journalists lose epistemological authority as controllers of public discourse. As explained by one of academic informant:

"The authority of journalists is now being defeated by algorithms and viral opinions. Journalists can be factually correct, but lose in perception." (IN-06, academic partner of AJI)

The report (Edelman Trust Barometer, 2024) reinforces these findings by showing that Indonesian people's trust in the media has plummeted to 46%, the lowest figure in the last five years. This shows that there is a structural and deep crisis of trust, not just a technical problem in reporting.

Apart from that, journalists also experience a weakening of their professional identity internally. Economic pressure makes some journalists take part-time jobs as paid content creators, brand ambassadors, or even copywriters for certain agencies. One of former/Ex member of Independent Journalists Alliance (AJI) mentioned that:

"In the past, being a journalist was idealistic. Now many of my friends do coverage in the morning and create content for clients in the afternoon. They can't survive on media salaries alone." (IN-04, former/Ex member of AJI)

It shows that the symbolic identity of journalists as an idealistic and independent profession is now being replaced by a dual role that tends to be pragmatic. In the logic of

Disruptive Innovation, this condition is a form of individual adaptation to a changing system, but it also risks damaging the collective ethical order of the profession.

Trust crisis in journalists is not only a problem of relations between the media and the public, but also an internal problem related to the fragmentation of professional identity and the weakening of the symbolism of journalism as an institution of truth. Disruption has blurred the boundaries between journalists, content creators, and propagandists, so the biggest challenge going forward is how to rebuild the symbolic legitimacy of the journalist profession amidst an increasingly blurred and fluid information ecosystem.

External Pressure: Economic, Politic, and Safety

Media disruption not only creates internal pressure on journalists in terms of work rhythm and quality of reporting, but also increases external pressure that threatens independence, work stability and professional security. This external pressure appears in three main forms: economic pressure, political pressure, and threats to the security of journalists, which directly or indirectly weaken the position of journalists as democratic agents and professional ethical actors.

Economic pressure is a logical consequence of the unstable digital media business model. Income from conventional advertising has decreased drastically, while alternative funding sources are often pragmatic and compromise editorial independence. Many local media in Surabaya, according to informants, have to rely on funding from the local government or large corporations which are regular clients. In these conditions, journalists lose the freedom to report critically.

"Sometimes we know that there is a problematic project from a media client, but it can't be reported on. If we are forced to broadcast it, we could be fired or the media will lose its sponsor." (IN-04, former/Ex member of AJI)

The practice of unlabelled advertorials, paid coverage, and commissioned content is increasingly common. It creates ambiguity between public information and commercial information, which goes against the principle of transparency in journalism. In the *Disruptive Innovation* framework (Christensen et al., 2018), it can be understood as an adaptation of media organizations to the realities of the digital market, but ethically it is a form of regression towards journalistic ideals.

Apart from that, economic burdens also have an impact on journalists' working conditions. Many journalists in local media are paid below living wage standards, do not have permanent employment contracts, and are not legally protected. This condition makes journalists very vulnerable to pressure, and opens up space for compromising practices such as accepting "envelopes" or gratuities from sources. As explained by administrator of Independent Journalists Alliance (AJI):

"When media cannot give decent salary, the integrity of journalists is at stake. We often find cases where journalists end up accepting sources' money because it is their only source of income." (IN-02, Secretary of AJI Surabaya)

This condition indicates that journalist integrity is not only a matter of individual idealism, but is also closely related to the fragile economic structure of the profession.

Political pressure is another external dimension that is clearly felt by journalists, especially when covering issues involving public policy, agrarian conflicts, or corrupt practices in the regions. Informants explained that political intervention can come in various

forms: from a gentle warning not to broadcast the news, editorial summons by officials, to police reports against critical journalists.

"I was once reported to the police just for reporting on a government project tender. Even though my data was valid, they accused me of defamation." (IN-05, local media journalist of non-AJI)

These actions create a chilling effect, where journalists end up self-censoring in order to avoid legal or social risks. This is in line with analysis (Posetti, 2017), which states that political pressure on journalists has shifted from physical repression to legal and symbolic forms, especially through the Law on Information and Electronic Transactions (UU ITE) and defamation.

In the perspective of Mediatory Theory of the Message, this political intervention does not only influence journalistic work, but also shapes the way media messages are constructed and perceived by the public. When the media is not free to express public interests, the information circulating will always be under the shadow of power.

The final aspect of external pressure is that the security of journalists is increasingly threatened, both physically in the field and digitally. Media disruption is changing the professional risk landscape: from direct intimidation in the field to systematic digital attacks. The attacks are like doxing, hacking, spreading hoaxes against journalists, and threats against families often occur.

"Our members have been terrorized via WhatsApp and social media after covering mining issues. Their accounts were hacked, photos of their families were distributed, and they were even given physical threats." (IN-01, Chairman of AJI Surabaya)

Unfortunately, not all medias have adequate protection mechanisms. Weak legal protection, and authorities often do not side with journalists. This situation shows that journalistic work in the digital era requires new, more complex forms of protection, not only legally but also from a psychological and digital perspective.

(Posetti et al., 2020) emphasizes the importance of creating a journalist security system based on digital safety and institutional policies. However, at the local level, it has not been implemented optimally, making journalists vulnerable to pressure and mental fatigue, which ultimately affects the quality of their work and integrity.

The external pressures experienced by journalists in disruption era are not only additional, but are structural and inherent in the current information production system. The media's dependence on economic interests, political interference that threatens independence, and weak security protection for journalists directly weaken the ethical foundations of the profession. In this context, maintaining the integrity of journalists is not possible only at the individual level; it requires strong structural and institutional support, including from professional organizations such as the Independent Journalists Alliance (AJI).

Surabaya Independent Journalists Alliance (AJI) in Maintaining Integrity and Journalist Professionalism

In the midst of complex internal and external pressures due to digital media disruption, the existence of professional organizations has become increasingly crucial in maintaining the idealism and work ethics of journalists. Disruption does not only test the resilience of individual journalists, but also threatens the structural legitimacy of the profession. In this situation, professional organizations such as Independent Journalists

Alliance (AJI) plays a strategic role as guardians of the basic values of journalism through normative, educative and advocacy mechanisms.

Independent Journalists Alliance (AJI) as an ethics and independence-based organization exists not just as a membership forum, but as a collective actor whose function is to protect and promote professional standards amidst vulnerable working conditions. Surabaya Independent Journalists Alliance (AJI), as one of the active branches in Indonesia, places integrity as its main value which is maintained through a strict selection process, enforcing a code of ethics, regular training, and advocacy against cases of press freedom violations.

Within the framework of the Mediatory Theory of the Message, Independent Journalists Alliance (AJI)'s role can be seen as an effort to intervene in the process of meaning production in an increasingly disrupted media space. Independent Journalists Alliance (AJI) acts as an actor who seeks to return journalistic messages to a fairer ethical and social framework, amidst the dominance of algorithms and market logic. Meanwhile, from a Disruptive Innovation perspective, Independent Journalists Alliance (AJI) plays a role as a value stabilization agent to fill the gaps left by the editorial structure and regulatory system which are weakened by the pressure of digital innovation.

This part will describe thematically how Surabaya Independent (AJI) carries out its role in maintaining the integrity and professionalism of journalists. There are at least four main dimensions that will be discussed: (1) Independent Journalists Alliance (AJI) as an ethical filter, (2) Independent Journalists Alliance (AJI) as an educational agent, (3) Independent Journalists Alliance (AJI) as a supervisor and ethics enforcer, and (4) Independent Journalists Alliance (AJI) as an advocate for the protection of journalists.

Independent Journalists Alliance (AJI) As an Ethical Filter

Since its inception, Independent Journalists Alliance (AJI) has positioned itself not as an open membership organization, but as a values-based professional community. In the midst of increasingly commodified media industry conditions, Surabaya Independent Journalists Alliance (AJI) maintains a strict selection model as an initial screening mechanism for the ethical and ideological qualities of prospective members. This becomes important as more and more journalists are trapped in a system that encourages compromise on the basic principles of journalism, such as independence, verification and balance.

Independent Journalists Alliance (AJI) membership selection process is not just a formality. There are three main stages that prospective members must go through: administrative selection which includes a track record of the media where they work and journalistic work; ethics interviews conducted by administrators; as well as signing an integrity pact, which is a personal commitment to anti-bribery, anti-hoax and anti-order principles. In interviews, prospective members are concretely tested on how they respond to dilemmatic situations that often arise in the field.

"We want to know how prospective members behave when faced with pressure from sources, when coverage of advertisements is not neutral, or when asked to delete news. This is not a theoretical question, but an everyday reality," said IN-02, Secretary of AJI Surabaya.

This caution in selection is not without reason. Independent Journalists Alliance (AJI) realizes that an organization's identity will be determined by the consistency of its members in maintaining values. Therefore, selection is carried out not only based on journalistic

competence, but also personal integrity. Some candidates are even rejected even though they have long work experience, if they are assessed permissive towards practices that deviate from the code of ethics.

"I was rejected when I first registered. Not because I was incompetent, but because I still often received envelopes. At that time I thought it was normal. But that interview opened my eyes," said IN-05, a local media journalist of non-AJI.

This firm attitude makes Independent Journalists Alliance (AJI) is different from other professional organizations which tend to be inclusive without value judgments. In the context of media disruption, strict ethical selection like this, it can be crucial. When many newsrooms no longer have strong gatekeepers and functional ethical training systems, professional organizations are the last bastion that can maintain the line between professionalism and pragmatism.

More than just assessing, this selection process also functions as a form of early education. The interviews which carried out are reflective in nature and invite prospective members to review their professional experiences critically. Many prospective members, after failing in the selection process, return with a stronger understanding of ethics and a firmer professional attitude. It created a ripple effect beyond the organization, as it encouraged the emergence of broader ethical awareness among local journalists.

"The process was not intimidating, but really opened up space for reflection. I was forced to rethink practices that I previously considered normal. It made me realize how many compromises I had made so far," said IN-04, a former/Ex journalist who had ever failed AJI's selection.

The implication is that Surabaya Independent Journalists Alliance (AJI) has formed a cohesive ethical community where the standards of behavior of its members are maintained not only by the organizational structure, but also by collective moral pressure. Independent Journalists Alliance (AJI) members are aware that every ethical violation not only impacts themselves, but also tarnishes the credibility of the organization. This model becomes important when the mainstream media structure experiences a value crisis and is no longer able to develop journalists ethically.

As an ethical filter, Independent Journalists Alliance (AJI) does not only filter who is worthy of being part of the organization, but also creates a professional habitat that provides space for values that are now starting to become rare in newsrooms. Through this selection mechanism, Independent Journalists Alliance (AJI) ensures that journalism remains a valuable practice, not just a functional job in the digital content production chain.

Independent Journalists Alliance (AJI) As an Educational Agent and Capacity Strengthening

The pressure of digital disruption does not only change the way journalists work, but also demands new capacities, both technical, cognitive and ethical. In the midst of this rapidly changing landscape, Surabaya Independent Journalists Alliance (AJI) positions itself is not only as an ethics supervisor, but also as a shared learning space that consistently facilitates increasing the capacity of its members.

Independent Journalists Alliance (AJI)'s education program includes various forms: in-depth journalism training, workshops on specific issues (environment, human rights, corruption), digital literacy classes, and journalist competency tests (UKJ). The main focus

is not merely on technical news production, but also on strengthening critical thinking and ethical courage in facing pressure in the field.

"We can't just rely on experience. The world is changing fast. Journalists need to continue learning, not just writing skills, but also understanding context, data, and how to remain independent amidst algorithm pressure," said IN-01, Chairman of AJI Surabaya.

Independent Journalists Alliance (AJI) realizes that disruption creates a gap between new demands and the readiness of human resources. Many young journalists enter the world of work without a deep understanding of ethical values and journalistic principles. On the other hand, senior journalists also need to adapt to developments in technology, platforms, and reporting approaches that are more data-based and visual narratives. Independent Journalists Alliance (AJI) acts as a bridge between generations, uniting old values with new needs through open educational spaces.

Independent Journalists Alliance (AJI) training programs are usually designed to be responsive to actual issues. When cases of journalist criminalization occur, Independent Journalists Alliance (AJI) opens training on legal protection. When a wave of hoaxes and disinformation emerged during the election period, Independent Journalists Alliance (AJI) held a workshop on digital verification and fact-checking. This approach makes education not top-down, but adaptive to field needs.

"Independent Journalists Alliance (AJI)'s training is very contextual. For example, when women's issues are widespread, they provide training on gender coverage. Or when there is an agrarian conflict, we are invited to learn a fair reporting approach for all parties," said IN-03, journalist member of AJI.

Apart from increasing technical and ethical capacity, Independent Journalists Alliance (AJI) also provides space for critical reflection on daily journalistic work. Weekly discussions, member meetings, and cross-issue forums become arenas for dialogue that encourage journalists to evaluate themselves and open new perspectives. This is where Independent Journalists Alliance (AJI)'s role as a "learning community" becomes important because it goes beyond the formal function of a professional organization, and becomes a dynamic epistemic ecosystem.

This educational role also extends to non-member journalists. Many Independent Journalists Alliance (AJI) training courses are open to the public, especially for freelance journalists and alternative media who do not have access to formal training from their company. In this way, Independent Journalists Alliance (AJI) helps fill the institutional void left by editorial staff and media institutions that are weak in educating their journalists on an ongoing basis.

At a broader level, this educational approach also strengthens journalists' resistance to ethical compromise. Journalists who have a deep understanding of the principles of journalistic work and their professional rights will be stronger in facing the political-economic pressures that often occur in the field. In this context, Independent Journalists Alliance (AJI) does not only enrich skills, but also strengthens the critical power and moral courage of its members.

"After taking part in training on legal protection, I am more confident when writing about sensitive issues. I know my rights, know what to write about, and am not afraid when threatened with a summons," said IN-06, independent journalist who is active in AJI training.

Through an educational approach oriented towards liberating knowledge and strengthening ethos, Surabaya Independent Journalists Alliance (AJI) acts as an agent of value transformation. It is here to ensure that journalism remains rooted in the principles of truth, independence, and alignment with the public interest, even though the media world continues to change and shift towards becoming increasingly complex.

Independent Journalists Alliance (AJI) as a Supervisor and Ethics Enforcer

As many media organizations lose their internal control function due to commercial pressures and operational efficiency, the role of ethical oversight is slowly moving from editorial institutions to professional organizations. This is where the Independent Journalists Alliance (AJI)'s position becomes crucial: not only screening membership and providing training, but also being an active actor in upholding ethical standards through monitoring, reprimanding, and excluding violations of journalistic principles.

This function is carried out through internal mechanisms such as the Ethics Council, member complaint reports, and evaluative forums at organizational meetings. If there are Independent Journalists Alliance (AJI) members who are indicated to have violated the principles of the ethics code, for example, accepting bribes, creating ordered news, spreading hoaxes, or committing sexual violence in journalistic work, the organization can carry out an independent investigation and impose sanctions. Sanctions can take the form of an open warning, membership suspension, or permanent dismissal (Sunarto et al., 2022).

"We once revoked someone's membership because they were proven to have received honorariums from sources to create positive news. For us, that is a serious violation. If left unchecked, Independent Journalists Alliance (AJI)'s image will collapse," explained IN-01, Chairman of AJI Surabaya.

In the midst of digital disruption, this monitoring function is becoming increasingly important. When newsrooms lose gatekeepers, and news is produced rapidly to meet algorithmic demands, the opportunity for ethical lapses increases sharply (Carlson, 2018; Tandoc, 2015). Many journalists are under high production pressure with no inherent supervision, making the temptation to "play it safe" in unprofessional ways great. This situation creates a "normative vacuum" in the news production process.

Through its role as supervisor, Independent Journalists Alliance (AJI) fills this void. It does not only monitor the behavior of its members, but also creates a sense of trepidation about violations of values. Several informants said that being an Independent Journalists Alliance (AJI) member made them more careful in their actions, because they realized that there were collective ethical expectations attached to their membership identity.

"When we join Independent Journalists Alliance (AJI), we are not just ordinary journalists. There is a moral burden. If we violate ethics, we know our friends will know and their attitude can be very firm," said IN-03, journalist member of AJI.

This perspective is also in line with the theory of message construction, that the meaning of media is not only determined by the text, but also by the social position of the sender. When a journalist's credibility collapses, the journalistic message loses legitimacy (Fiske, 2002; Hall, 1973). By maintaining the integrity of its members, Independent Journalists Alliance (AJI) maintains the social legitimacy of journalistic messages in the public sphere.

On the other hand, Independent Journalists Alliance (AJI)'s supervisory measures also reflect a strategy to stem the flow of value degradation in a disruptive innovation ecosystem. The disruption model, as stated by (Christensen, 1997), often weakens old institutional structures due to the pressure of efficiency and acceleration. In this context, Independent Journalists Alliance (AJI) acts as a value stabilizer to ensure that ethical principles are not eliminated by the speed and logic of the digital market.

Apart from internal supervision of members, Surabaya Independent Journalists Alliance (AJI) also actively monitors violations outside its membership. In several cases, Independent Journalists Alliance (AJI) issued a statement regarding media or journalist actions that violated journalistic principles. This reflects Independent Journalists Alliance (AJI)'s role as an ethical actor operating not only at the organizational level, but also at the symbolic and public level.

"We once sent a letter of protest to the editor of a large media because the news was very insensitive to victims of sexual violence. Even though it was not the media where our members worked, we felt the need to take action," explained IN-02, Secretary of AJI Surabaya.

Independent Journalists Alliance (AJI)'s enforcement of ethics is not just an internal organizational function, but also a form of symbolic resistance to the commercialization of values that occurs in the media industry. Through consistent attitudes and firm control mechanisms, Independent Journalists Alliance (AJI) ensures that the journalist profession remains built on public values, not just algorithms, impressions or capital interests.

Independent Journalists Alliance (AJI) as an advocate for the protection of journalists

In the midst of increasing risks to journalists' work, both physically, legally, digitally and psychologically, Independent Journalists Alliance (AJI)'s role as a protection advocate has become increasingly important. Media disruption does not only change the structure of information production, but also increases journalists' exposure to pressure from the state, markets, and digital publics. Journalists are not only faced with ethical dilemmas, but also with threats to their safety and continuity of work.

Surabaya Independent Journalists Alliance (AJI) carries out this advocacy role through three main approaches: legal assistance, digital protection and psychosocial support. When journalists face criminalization through the Law on Information and Electronic Transactions (UU ITE), political intimidation, or physical violence in the field, Independent Journalists Alliance (AJI) provides a legal aid team, a network of partner lawyers, and mobilization of public solidarity. One of the cases handled involved a local journalist who was reported to the police after writing an investigative story about a government project.

"When I was reported, my office did not assist me. But Independent Journalists Alliance (AJI) immediately sent a letter, helped a lawyer, and even encouraged my case to be discussed at National Commission on Human Rights (Komnas HAM). That meant a lot morally," said IN-05, an investigative journalist.

Apart from legal protection, Independent Journalists Alliance (AJI) also actively promotes digital security. Journalists are increasingly experiencing attacks in the form of account hacking, doxing and spreading personal information, especially when reporting on controversial issues such as corruption, human rights and agrarian conflicts. Independent Journalists Alliance (AJI) provides basic and advanced digital security training, helps

members secure their work devices, and assists them when they are the target of online attacks.

"We have handled several doxing cases. There have been members whose photos were shared, their addresses leaked, and even their families were terrorized. We helped them reset their accounts, report them to the platform, and keep their spirits up so they don't drop," explained IN-02, Secretary of AJI Surabaya.

The protection provided by Independent Journalists Alliance (AJI) does not stop at the technical dimension. This organization also opens psychosocial support spaces, such as counseling and collective discussions, for journalists who have experienced trauma due to work violence. In several cases, Independent Journalists Alliance (AJI) helped connect victim journalists with professional psychologists. This is an important recognition that journalistic work is not only legally vulnerable, but also emotionally—especially amidst increasingly intense polarization of public opinion and cyberviolence.

This advocacy role makes Independent Journalists Alliance (AJI) As a key actor in filling the void of structural protection that media institutions and the state have failed to provide. Many news agencies at the local level do not have clear protocols for protecting journalists, and law enforcement officials often position journalists as violators, not victims. In this context, Independent Journalists Alliance (AJI) becomes a counter-hegemonic institution, building horizontal solidarity between journalists and creating a community-based protection system (Posetti, 2017; Posetti et al., 2020).

If viewed from the dynamics of disruption, Independent Journalists Alliance (AJI)'s position in protecting journalists shows that innovation is not just a matter of technology, but also about creating an ecosystem of value and professional sustainability. When digital media innovation accelerates content production but neglects the protection of those producing it, disruption leads to structural erosion and professional burnout. Independent Journalists Alliance (AJI) responded to this gap by presenting a protection system that is adaptive, participatory and based on solidarity values.

Furthermore, this advocacy function also has symbolic implications. By defending journalists who are being pressured for their reporting, Independent Journalists Alliance (AJI) strengthens the social position of journalism as a profession that works for the public. When professional organizations take a firm stance against violence against journalists, the message sent to the public and the authorities is that press freedom is not a negotiable right, but rather a democratic principle that must be jointly maintained (Connolly-Ahern et al., 2025; Edelman Trust Barometer, 2024).

"If Independent Journalists Alliance (AJI) doesn't defend it, who will? Many journalists are now afraid to write critically because they don't feel they have protection. We are here to change that fear into organized courage," confirmed IN-01, Chairman of AJI Surabaya.

This advocacy role emphasizes Independent Journalists Alliance (AJI)'s position as a counter-hegemonic institution that fights for press freedom as a democratic value that cannot be negotiated. It includes strengthening the capabilities of journalists so that they not only survive, but also have the courage to take a critical role in society.

Tension between Digital Disruption and Journalism Values: Rereading Independent Journalists Alliance (AJI)'s Role as an Ethical Intervention Agent

The changes brought by digital disruption to the media landscape are not linear or solely technological, but contain ideological, epistemological and structural dimensions. Journalism as a social practice no longer operates within the same framework as it did two decades ago. Now, journalistic work is faced with speed of distribution, algorithmic pressure, expansion of the logic of virality, and weakening of editorial structures. What used to support the work of journalistic gatekeepers, newsrooms, multi-layered verification, and a code of ethics that was maintained collectively has shifted to become the personal burden of each journalist. In this context, the integrity crisis is not just an individual phenomenon, but a structural symptom that marks the collapse of the journalism ecosystem as a whole.

The *Disruptive Innovation Model* (Christensen, 1997) explains that innovation that starts from efficiency and accessibility ultimately replaces old systems that are no longer competitive. In the media world, this disruption can be seen in the proliferation of online platforms that emphasize impressions over accuracy, and standardize content to meet algorithm expectations. In such a system, journalists shift their role to become fast-food content producers, and verification-based journalistic values become economically irrelevant. As a result, accuracy, independence and balance, the three main principles in the journalistic code of ethics, are often sacrificed for the sake of performance metrics.

Field findings show the impact of this disruption concretely at the micro level: journalists are required to pursue broadcasts as quickly as possible, often without a cross-checking process; coverage is requested to suit the needs of advertising clients; and economic pressures mean that many journalists have no bargaining room when faced with source intervention. While newsrooms lose their educational power, media organizations are reluctant to assume legal or political risks for the content produced by journalists. In this empty space, Surabaya Independent Journalists Alliance (AJI) appears as an actor to fill the normative gaps providing ethics, protection and critical reflection which are increasingly rare within the media system itself.

Independent Journalists Alliance (AJI)'s role does not stop at the administrative aspects of professional organizations. It operates as an ideological and epistemic force that redefines the meaning of the journalist profession amidst the vacillation of market logic. Independent Journalists Alliance (AJI) does not only manage membership, but builds a consciously curated ethical community through value selection. Membership is not simply given, but must go through strict selection based on personal integrity, which ultimately forms a collective professional culture. This is where the Mediatory Theory of the Message (Fiske, 2002; Hall, 1973) becomes relevant: a journalistic message will not have social power if the sender is not considered credible. By maintaining the credibility of journalists through a system of ethics and advocacy, Independent Journalists Alliance (AJI) helps maintaining the legitimacy of messages in the public sphere.

In the context of meaning production, Independent Journalists Alliance (AJI) acts as a social mediator who ensures that journalism remains a channel for public articulation, not just a channel for content distribution. Independent Journalists Alliance (AJI) returns journalism to its function as a producer of morally and socially valid messages. In other words, Independent Journalists Alliance (AJI) does not only defend journalists, but also fights for the meaning created by journalists to remain rooted in public truth and not be reduced to algorithmic products that are sterile from value.

Independent Journalists Alliance (AJI)'s educational function increasingly shows its theoretical dimension when positioned as a strategic response to disruptive innovation. In many media organizations, ethical and journalistic capacity training is increasingly rare because it is considered not to produce direct profits. Independent Journalists Alliance (AJI) actually took over this function as a form of resistance. By providing training on coverage based on human rights, gender, digital security and legal protection, Independent Journalists Alliance (AJI) makes education a value survival strategy in an increasingly exploitative world of work. These programs demonstrate that innovation does not have to kill value; instead, values can form the basis of community-based institutional innovation.

The protection aspect carried out by Independent Journalists Alliance (AJI) also raises structural dimensions that are rarely considered in disruption literature. Protection of journalists does not only include physical security, but also includes psychological and symbolic space. When Independent Journalists Alliance (AJI) accompanies journalists who are victims of doxing, advocates for those who have been criminalized, or simply becomes a place to share trauma, this organization is carrying out functions that should be carried out by the state and media companies. Here, Independent Journalists Alliance (AJI) acts as an institutional substitute to support values that emerge from the weaknesses of the state and the media industry itself (Posetti et al., 2020).

More than that, Independent Journalists Alliance (AJI)'s existence also creates a symbolic political effect: that it is still possible to carry out journalism with values, that resistance is still relevant, and that professional solidarity can still be the foundation of moral courage. Independent Journalists Alliance (AJI)'s existence as a collective actor who refuses to submit to market logic alone shows that disruption is not a total inevitability. Disruption can be negotiated, its direction can be corrected, as long as there are social actors who are willing to mediate—both regarding the message, values, and meaning of journalistic work itself.

In such a configuration, Surabaya Independent Journalists Alliance (AJI) exists not as a single solution, but as a model of possibility: that amidst waves of disruption that threaten the ethics and professionalism of journalism, there is still room to maintain integrity through collective solidarity, critical education, and value-based advocacy. Independent Journalists Alliance (AJI)'s role is not just to be reactive to crises, but to be proactive in shaping a new landscape of journalism that remains based on the principles of truth, justice and moral courage. So, reading the role of Surabaya Independent Journalists Alliance (AJI) is also reading the potential for ethical resistance to the normalization of deviation in the digital media industry. This is what makes Independent Journalists Alliance (AJI) not only a professional organization, but also a cultural actor that offers alternative values in the midst of the legitimacy crisis of contemporary journalism.

CONCLUSION

This research shows that digital media disruption has fundamentally affected the structure and values of the journalistic profession, especially in the context of journalists' work in Surabaya. Pressure on the speed of news production, orientation towards clicks and traffic, and the instability of the media economy have eroded principles of integrity such as

accuracy, independence and professional accountability. In such conditions, journalists often face ethical dilemmas without adequate institutional support.

Surabaya Independent Journalists Alliance (AJI) has emerged as a normative actor that plays a strategic role in maintaining professional ethics and the resilience of journalism values. Through integrity-based membership selection, ongoing training, code of ethics enforcement mechanisms, and legal and digital advocacy, Independent Journalists Alliance (AJI) is not just carrying out the functions of a professional organization, but transforming into an ethical institution that mediates the tension between structural disruption and public expectations regarding the quality of information.

By referring to the *Disruptive Innovation framework and Mediatory Theory of the Message*, this research shows that Independent Journalists Alliance (AJI) functions as a value stabilizer in a disrupted media ecosystem, while maintaining the social legitimacy of journalistic messages in the public sphere. In situations where mainstream media fails to provide ethical protection and direction, Independent Journalists Alliance (AJI) offers an alternative institutional model based on community, solidarity, and commitment to public values.

Conceptually, these findings expand understanding of the role of professional organizations in a media landscape increasingly driven by algorithmic logic and commercial pressures. This study emphasizes that the sustainability of journalism values cannot only be based on individual agency but requires adaptive and ethically oriented institutional support. In this way, Surabaya Independent Journalists Alliance (AJI) shows that resistance to the integrity crisis can be carried out collectively, strategically and based on values, while also creating a space of possibility for journalism that remains in favor of the public interest in the midst of an era of disruption.

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