



# The challenges of journalists in facing the new normal of the COVID-19 pandemic

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## Abstract

Media performance in providing information, educating people and conducting social control of the change process is influenced by various factors including external factors. The new normal condition of the COVID-19 pandemic has altered the work patterns of journalists. Recently, the press in Indonesia has encountered such a dilemma because the policies and information from the government have shown various inconsistencies and errors. This study illustrates the problems and challenges faced by journalists during the new normal conditions. This study adopted a qualitative descriptive approach with in depth interviews and focus group discussion techniques with journalists in Malang Raya, Indonesia. The results showed that journalists have encountered internal and external challenges during the pandemic. Internal challenges were related to editorial policy that determines the point of view of news and work pattern policy during the pandemic. For safety reasons, the editor prohibited journalists from covering directly in the field. The establishment of a news point of view puts pressure on journalists in carrying out their profession. External challenges come from the government and the Task Force related to information disclosure, the crisis of civility from public officials during the pandemic and inconsistencies in law enforcement for violations of health protocols. Finally, this research suggests five recommendations to strengthen the press's role during the pandemic. They consist of the role of mainstream mass media against hoaxes, editorial policies putting forward health perspectives, packaging news simply and straightforwardly, collaboration between mass media agencies and demanding information disclosure from the government and the COVID-19 Task Force.

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## Introduction

In Indonesia, the COVID-19 pandemic cases continue to increase, however, the government decided to start

a new normal situation until the situation becomes worse. This situation changed most people's daily lifestyles (Habibi, 2020; Masudi & Winanti, 2020). Mass media also encountered a similar situation and had to adapt to new working patterns in charge of providing information to the people (Casero-Ripolles, 2020). As one of the pillars of democracy, the media are required to provide information, educate the people and conduct social

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surveillance of the change process precisely and quickly (Cappello & Rizutto, 2020; Liu, Cai, & Zhao, 2019; Preeti, 2014). For such purpose, the mass media requires disclosing information from the government related to COVID-19 case data. In other words, the government and the mass media should develop cooperation to deal with the crisis posed by the COVID-19 pandemic (Shalvee & Sambhav, 2020). This cooperation serves as a channel of information to educate the community (Nahar, 2020; Shalvee & Sambhav, 2020). The government has the power of information; hence, it plays an essential role in providing information related to COVID-19 (Nahar, 2020). Simultaneously, with its power in reaching the audience, the media contribute massively to disseminating government information. Unfortunately, in situations that demand massive and widespread social change, governments and communities have demonstrated loose cooperation dealing with the provision of proper information.

Information disclosure is an essential element to improve the quality of information produced by mass journalists (Susanto, 2013; 2014). With this condition, journalists experience work escalation due to filtering the information prior to public dissemination. Mass journalists must face moral-ethical demands to provide educational content to the public (Liu, Cai, & Zhao, 2019; McQuail, 2010; Kovach & Rosenstiel, 2014; Susanto, 2014). On the other hand, the government's primary source of information remains poorly organized (Farisa, 2020). However, recently, the press in Indonesia has encountered such a dilemma because of the policies or information from the government that till contain various inconsistencies and errors (Cappello & Rizzuto, 2020; Farisa, 2020; Liu, Cai, & Zhao, 2019; Preeti, 2014). Inconsistent and unorganized information lead to misguided media and public. Consequently, mass media can choose another role as a watchdog for the people (Strakman, 2015).

Several previous studies focused more on the mass media's role in providing education to the public during the COVID-19 Pandemic, such as Cappello and Rizzuto (2020) and Shalvee and Sambhav (2020). Other researches talked about the impact of information education from the media on the public during the COVID-19 Pandemic, such as Sharma, Gupta, Kushwaha, & Shekhwat (2020) and Dhanashree et al. (2020). Moreover, Ferreira and Borges (2020) exposed mass media and social media as community groups during the COVID Pandemic. This study aimed to illustrate the challenges faced by mass journalists in carrying out their duties amid the COVID-19 pandemic and to reveal journalists' views in addressing problems or challenges faced during the COVID-19 pandemic.

## Methodology

Following the objectives, this research adopted a methodology design with a constructivist paradigm that seeks to build knowledge through systematic and detailed explanations of empirical social phenomena (Creswell, 2013). The research paradigm's usefulness is to be a point of view for researchers to the object of study. The constructivist paradigms guide researchers in building conceptual knowledge from journalists' views to address problems or challenges faced during the COVID-19 pandemic.

This research is included in the descriptive qualitative approach because it systematically and deeply explains through textual narratives journalists' views in addressing problems or challenges faced during the COVID-19 pandemic. Neuman (2014) explained that the descriptive qualitative approach leads researchers to explain the purpose of systematic and detailed research through an in-depth narrative in the form of text/description of social phenomena based on their natural *settings*.

## Participants

Participants of this study were selected from the Indonesian Journalists Association (*PWI-Persatuan Wartawan Indonesia*) and Independent Journalists Association (*AJI-Aliansi Jurnalis Independent*) in Malang Raya (Malang City, Malang Regency, and Batu City). Eleven media consisted of seven locals (Ngopibareng.id, New Malang Post, Birawa, Times Indonesia, Adadimalang.com, Terakota.id, Memorandum), and four nationals (Liputan6.com, Tagar.id, Trans7, and Surya.id) selected based on their news reputation.

## Data Collection

Data were collected through in-depth interviews, focus group discussion (FGD) and documentation. The interview and the focus group discussion were conducted with mass journalists. The selection of FGD as a data mining technique conformed to this study's purpose, which sought to explain journalists' views in addressing the problems or challenges faced during the COVID-19 Pandemic. It refers to Given (2008) that the design of FGD is to know the attitudes, behaviors and viewpoints of a group of people.

Document studies were also used as data mining techniques to obtain policy information from the government, the health sector (Hospitals, Indonesian Doctors Association, and health experts) and mass media/

press agencies. Data from document studies served as a support to strengthen journalists' views in addressing problems or challenges faced during the COVID-19 pandemic. The documents used were mainstream media coverage, press releases from the government, health agencies and the Indonesian Doctors Association (IDI-Ikatan Dokter Indonesia).

### *Data Analysis*

Data analysis was done through source criticism, which means only correct and relevant data were compiled as factual findings. Source criticism was carried out by triangulation of methods using informant explanation, secondary data and focus group discussion.

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## **Results and Discussion**

### *Journalist Challenges*

This study revealed that the first challenge regarding media policies in managing news in the pandemic era was the presence of social media that quickly released information to the public. When the first news was spread by social media, journalists often missed or failed to update important points related to the COVID-19 Pandemic. The problem arose when the news contained invalid information or rumors. News spread on social media is wild information exposed without proper journalistic techniques. Such may create an untrustworthy and disturbed community related to control of the COVID-19 Pandemic (Al-Zaman, 2021; Nasir, Baequni, & Nurmasyah, 2020). The trends were similar to previous studies, which stated that social media often delivered untrusted information (Park & Rim, 2019).

Some journal editors explained that the presence of social media may lead to disinformation about the COVID-19 pandemic. There was disinformation in the middle of the COVID-19 Pandemic at this level, and this spread uncontrolled and made it challenging to trace the truth (Hu, Yang, Li, Zhang, & Huang, 2020). In the face of such situations, the role of mainstream mass media becomes really vital as a channel of information that should be the primary reference for the community (Ferreira & Borges, 2020). The Spirit of mainstream mass media to present factual and up-to-date information has become the joint work of editors and journalists in the era of information disruption. In the era of disclosure of information, news sources become essential to show the quality of information (Chaer, 2010; McQuail, 2010).

Concerning the news about the COVID-19 pandemic, mass journalists tend to choose news sources with a high level of credibility and explain the COVID-19 pandemic. Sources of journalists' referrals include central and local government officials, COVID-19 Task Force, health authorities such as hospitals, non-government organizations such as the Indonesian Doctors Association, academics, health and epidemiology experts.

The selection of news sources that journalists refer to is a policy provision of the editors or arranged in the editorial room. So, in this case, the journalists are fielded following the policies. Journalists also use their intuition to get an exciting and vital point of view on the events of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Most national media chose news from press releases or statements from government authorities such as the COVID-19 Task Force and the Ministry of Health, health experts and epidemiologists, as well as members of the Indonesian Doctors Association. Journalists from the national mass media viewed the news source they chose as the most valuable and credible news source with the condition of the COVID-19 pandemic. Meanwhile, local media journalists choose news sources from local government officials, health authorities such as hospitals and competent scientists. Other media avoid publishing data of COVID-19 cases. Rather, they choose alternative news such as exposing the community's creativity in facing and overcoming problems during the COVID-19 Pandemic and the need for social assistance. This media tries to provide alternative information to the public during the COVID-19 pandemic, as well as carrying out the role as an alternative media that raises grassroots issues amid mainstream issues from other mass media (Maryani & Adiprasetyo, 2018).

The second challenge was related to validity of the information. Some media view that the vagueness of information about the COVID-19 pandemic may confuse people. The mass media have difficulty providing education to the public because the news materials from their sources frequently overlap and are unclear. Therefore, the news creates doubt. For instance, the different data between the Government of DKI Jakarta and the Central Government related to the case of COVID-19 (Nafian, 2020). There was an overlapping of PCR car policies between the Governor of East Java and the Mayor of Surabaya at the local level. The Governor of East Java caused a commotion with the anger of the Surabaya mayor exposed by the media (Wibowo, 2020). That kind of thing finally makes it difficult for journalists to make good news to educate the public facing the COVID-19 pandemic.

To solve this problem, the media tries to always make clarification and confirmation from sources as well as other sources deemed competent. This is to sharpen and strengthen data in the data processing process so that it is hoped that the published news will provide education and become healthy, useful and accountable information. Concerned community groups, the Indonesian Doctors Association and others became our sources to explore more information conveyed by the government and the COVID-19 Task Force.

The third challenge was related to the crisis of civility from public officials during the COVID-19 pandemic. Journalists viewed the crisis of civility from public officials during the COVID-19 pandemic. From the national level, the Institute for Research, Education and Economic and Social Information study found there were 37 errors from public officials in tackling the COVID-19 pandemic (Farisa, 2020). From the regional and local level, there were also frequent errors or bad examples such as crowds caused by public officials, conflicting statements between public officials such as the Mayor of Surabaya and the Governor of East Java (Wibowo, 2020) –inappropriate management by the public officials amid the COVID-19 pandemic situation.

One of the informants explained that public officials often violate the provisions of social restrictions, and this happens from presidential to major level activities. With such conditions, it is expected that public officials can be an excellent example for the community in the face of the COVID-19 pandemic, but such may not materialize, which is true of public officials to the public in the face of the COVID-19 pandemic.

According to the informant, a problem is the inconsistency of officials or authorities who apply punishment. If the media cover a violation of health protocols or other policies, then penalties will be given. Conversely, if the media miss covering the violations of health protocols or other policies, then penalties are often ignored.

Public officials are also considered to have bad coordination in informing the public, and often there is a discrepancy between the national and regional levels. This contradiction in coordination ultimately confuses the public. There is no definitive information that can be used as a reference in the face of the COVID-19 pandemic. As explained by an informant, public officials who do not provide certainty in providing information make the public confused.

The fourth challenge was related to health issue. The explanation of some journalists found two policy tendencies of mass media agencies in applying health protocols. First, media agencies apply strict health protocol policies to journalists on duty in the field and the

office. Times Indonesia became one of the mass media that pays more attention to the application of health protocols, such as wearing masks, cleaning hands with hand sanitizer and social distancing when workers are on duty in the field doing coverage. The manager pays more attention to the field journalists or editors to implement strict health protocols.

Another media agency pays attention to journalists' conditions in the field, giving masks, vitamins and milk to work guides when doing coverage given to journalists. Work from home is also one of the policies—however, it is an issue that affects journalists' income. However, journalists can still do curation techniques by utilizing online digital media such as social media that update information in real-time (Sujoko & Larasati, 2017).

Second, the policy of media agencies that apply health protocols for journalists in the field is just that. One of the informants explained his agency is just a formality in health protocol policy. In the field, the journalists apply limited Standard Operational Procedure and do not wear PPE-Personal Protective Equipment.

The last challenge was related to the national economic situation. Media agencies during the COVID-19 pandemic also encountered an economic decline, which forced them to implement tight financial policies that impacted the income of journalists, especially field journalists (Dwiastono, 2020). Some journalists who posed as editors who became informants in this study explained that the mass media business dropped drastically during the COVID-19 pandemic. Income from private and government advertising decreased substantially. However, on the other hand, the media must still hire workers to maintain existence and inform the public. This dilemma is a challenge for journalists at the managerial level or editor-in-chief. At the same time, this situation reinforces Casero-Ripolles (2020) opinion that the COVID-19 pandemic has affected the mass media system. The role of journalists in providing information and providing education to the public related to the COVID-19 pandemic is becoming quite important in the digital information era as it is today (Cappello & Rizutto, 2020).

#### *Formulation of Mass Media Coverage Related to the COVID-19 Pandemic*

With the problems faced by journalists as described earlier, it is necessary to present a news formulation to provide education to the public related to the COVID-19 pandemic. This research produced several formulations as guidance for journalists carrying out work during the COVID-19 pandemic. Formulations of mass media coverage related to the COVID-19 pandemic include:

First, make the mainstream mass media an antidote to fake information. In this case, the amount of fake information during the COVID-19 pandemic is a problem for the government trying to stop the spread of the virus. As one of the country's pillars that adheres to the democratic system (Sujoko, Haboddin, & Afala, 2020), the mass media should uphold ethical values such as counteracting fake information developed during the COVID-19 pandemic (Marhaenjati, 2020).

Journalists have an uneasy task in warding off fake information during the COVID-19 pandemic. It sees information or issues developing on a large scale and quickly on social media – this is what Khan (2015) calls an era of information abundance with a growing number of information providers. However, journalists should continue to work professionally to ward off fake information during the COVID-19 pandemic, referencing the mainstream mass media's role in keeping public spaces from fake news or hoaxes (Ferreira & Borges, 2020; Manika, Rosyidi, & Muhaemin, 2018).

Second, is the consistency of editorial policy in highlighting aspects of health. In this case, editorial policy should take a focal point on the health perspective — meaning that the editorial strengthens the news from a health point of view.

Third, packaging information is more straightforward and more attractive. Journalists, in this case, must be able to present the news simply or straightforwardly. Straightforward language towards the core of information needs to be worked on by journalists in conveying the events of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Fourth, is the collaboration between media. The importance of educating the public about the COVID-19 Pandemic demands cooperation from various media agencies. In this case, mass media agencies/press print, electronic and new-based media (internet) must jointly raise the COVID-19 Pandemic and package it in the form of information that provides education to the public. The media editors, in determining the policy direction from a news point of view, must have willingness to coordinate with each other. Editors of mass media agencies/press are needed to produce news that educates on the public COVID-19 pandemic.

Fifth, is the demand for information disclosure from the government and health agencies. Disclosure of information from relevant authorities such as the government and health agencies is essential for journalists to get access to information as news material in educating the public in the face of the COVID-19 pandemic. As Susanto (2013) explained, information disclosure from the government or the authorities becomes very important for the mass media in carrying out its functions in a democratic country.

## Conclusion and Recommendation

Journalists face internal and external challenges during the COVID-19 Pandemic. Internal challenges were related to editorial policy that determines the point of view of news and work pattern policy during the COVID-19 pandemic. For safety reasons, the editor prohibits journalists from covering directly in the field. The establishment of a news point of view puts pressure on journalists in carrying out their profession. External challenges come from the government and the COVID-19 Task Force related to information disclosure, the crisis of civility from public officials during the COVID-19 pandemic and inconsistencies in law enforcement for violations of health protocols. Finally, this research suggests five recommendations to strengthen the press's role during the COVID-19 pandemic. They consist of the role of mainstream mass media against hoaxes, editorial policies putting forward health perspectives, packaging news simply and straightforwardly, collaboration between mass media agencies and demanding information disclosure from the government and the COVID-19 Task Force.

## Conflict of Interest

There is no conflict of interest

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