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The algorithmic trap: how social media monetization undermines investigative journalism in local media

Ansar Suherman*

Department of Communication Science, Universitas Muhammadiyah Buton, Bau-bau, Indonesia

The focus of this article is on the economic restructuring of journalism through platformisation, with implications for the sustainability of investigative journalism, particularly at the local level. The research focuses on Indonesia as a Global South democracy due to its lack of regulatory protections. It analyzes how algorithmic monetization, visibility driven by audience engagement, and platform dependency all marginalize journalism that is not able to exercise editorial independence and commit to long-form journalism. The analysis produces a nested crisis: economically, investigative journalism is no longer viable when it is being framed through platform logics; politically, investigative journalism is susceptible to market forces and diminishing institutional protections. Local newsrooms are particularly vulnerable as they experience the risks and threats caused by a lack of resources exacerbated by platformization, leading to fragmentation and deprofessionalization. Therefore, the article provides a two-track framework of systemic solutions that involve external solutions, in terms of platform regulation and the use of media literacies in specific contexts, and internal solutions including possibilities for collaborative infrastructure and institutionalized newsroom partnerships. These solutions aim to calibrate public-interest journalism in the frame of the platform. The article contributes to scholarly and professional debates about how journalism can effectively resist structural capture and reclaims its role in a democratic society. The Indonesian case offers a singular example, but it is situated in broader debates on platform capitalism, media accountability, and journalistic sustainability.

KEYWORDS

investigative journalism, social media algorithms, attention economy, Indonesian local media, platformization

1 Introduction

The emergence of social media platforms as primary news distributors has fundamentally changed the economics of journalism, particularly for investigative reporting. Over the past decade, platforms like Meta (Facebook, Instagram) and Google have become gatekeepers of news consumption, leveraging algorithmic curation to prioritize content that maximizes user engagement (Lee, 2024). Despite a move to further democratize information, the transition has resulted in an inherent tension: the clash between click-based monetization and creating serious journalism in the public interest (Flew et al., 2024). Investigative journalism, which takes time, resources and ethical integrity to do, is at a disadvantage in the attention economy that favors viral and emotionally laden content (Degen et al., 2024). The paradox is heightened for local media, which experience a double whammy: a drop in traditional revenue while being pressured to adapt to an algorithmic logic that does not favor serious journalism (Matamoros-Fernández and Farkas, 2021).

The logic of the attention economy poses an existential threat to investigative journalism—which requires long periods, large resources, and is often high-risk—research in Indonesia (Dan et al., 2020; Moe and Madsen, 2021). Investigative media including Tempo and Kompas face contradictory pressure in business models: investigation has social impact (such as reporting on e-KTP corruption or human rights violations in Papua), but the interactions on digital platforms are limited (Bojic, 2022; Bonina et al., 2021). Due to the discrepancy between production costs and per-click advertising funds, in an analysis of the Alliance of Independent Journalists of 60% of Indonesian local media in the past 5 years, journalists have abandoned their investigative journalism sections. This dynamic corresponds with global results on platform capture (Flensburg and Lomborg, 2023; Gerlitz et al., 2019; Wang and Wu, 2021), whereby media are caught in a structural dependency rooted in algorithms that conflictingly align with the values of public journalism.

There is a great knowledge vacuum in present research on how these algorithmic pressures subtly compromise the viability of investigative journalism. Few have critically examined the systemic repercussions for investigative reporting—especially at the local level, where such journalism plays a vital democratic role in exposing corruption and holding power accountable—even while research has examined platform dominance in news distribution (Kaushik and Pandey, 2024; Murschetz, 2020) or the rise of clickbait (Bazaco et al., 2019; Lischka and Garz, 2023). For example, local inquiries into environmental crime, or corruption in a city, do not often have the" shareable quality" of celebrity gossip or heated political issues, and hence become economically invisible in the algorithmic feed (Nowak-Teter and Łódzki, 2024). In turn, this can create an incentive structure that skews media companies to ordain investigative teams a lower priority for cheaper and more entertaining content (Dwivedi et al., 2023; Schäfer and Painter, 2021).

The author examines how the algorithmic monetization framework of social media undermines the sustainability of investigative journalism in the local media context. Taking from examples (the dismantling of investigative desks at local media) and frameworks: platform capture (Pignard-Cheynel and Amigo, 2023) and attention economy (Zheng and Mason, 2022), the author argues that algorithmic systems are participatory actors in re-shaping journalism's values, often to the detriment of its democratic purposes, rather than neutral tools. The authors identify potential solutions to counter these pressures, including regulatory solutions and hybrid funding. This manuscript review adds to the ongoing dialogue of preserving investigative journalism in an increasingly platform economy by connecting media economics, journalism practices (Mattoni and Ceccobelli, 2018; Nenadić et al., 2024; Trifonova Price and Antonova, 2024).

2 Concepts and theoretical challenges

The platformization of media is shifting the dynamics of journalism by shifting the control of content distribution, audience engagement and monetization to technology companies. Under these circumstances, newsrooms are increasingly functioning in a "platform-dependent" mode, where editorial decisions—if not outright driven—are determined by engagement optimization and monetization mechanisms devised by global digital intermediaries (Nielsen and Ganter, 2022). These changes have also restructured journalism as a profession, reducing editorial independence,

incentivizing speed and virality over verification, and fragmenting audience news consumption (Carlson and Usher, 2016). More fundamentally, as Pickard (2019) notes, these changes represent the deep-structural violence of market-driven media systems, where commercial logics continue to erode the public service ethos of journalism.

These changes have almost unequivocally harmful results for investigative journalism which is time-intensive to investigate, requires deep fact-checking and is deeply informed by invested editorial relationships. This type of journalism is not sustainable in an environment that sees algorithmic visibility and engagement data, as a basis of worth over deep reporting (Anderson, 2018). The situation becomes even more acute at the local level, where newsrooms often operate with limited financial and technological resources. As Flensburg and Lomborg note, the process of datafication exacerbates dependence on third-party digital infrastructures, restricting the agency of smaller outlets and increasing their vulnerability to platform fluctuations (Flensburg and Lomborg, 2023). Therefore, while platformisation reshapes journalism broadly, its compounded impact on investigative journalism—and particularly on local investigative journalism—represents a layered structural crisis.

2.1 Democratization vs. digital oligarchy

The democratic deficit (Diprose et al., 2019; Sundram, 2025) emphasizes that platform dominance deepens inequality in information access, particularly at the local level. While 80% of digital advertising revenue is controlled by Meta and Google (Nieborg and Poell, 2018), local media struggle to fund investigations vital for democratic accountability. The concept of algorithmic opacity (Kiseleva et al., 2022) is also relevant for analyzing the lack of transparency in the distribution of advertising revenue. The case study of Jateng Daily, which closed its investigative column, shows how platform capture can weaken oversight of local power. The unresolved theoretical challenge is to formulate policy interventions that can balance the power of platforms without sacrificing press freedom.

3 The paradox of social media dependence

3.1 The dependence of local media on platforms and its impact

Local media in Indonesia are increasingly dependent on social media platforms such as Meta (Facebook, Instagram) and Google as their main sources of advertising revenue. Data shows that more than 60% of local media's digital revenue comes from click-based ads. However, this dependence creates a paradox: although platforms expand news reach, their algorithms prioritize content that triggers emotional engagement—such as clickbait, celebrity gossip, or politically polarizing content—over in-depth investigative reports (Nieborg and Poell, 2018). As a result, local media face structural pressure to reduce investigative sections that require a long time and high costs but have minimal engagement (Susanto et al., 2020). A concrete example is the decline in corruption investigation production in regional media, which have shifted to viral content to maintain revenue.

3.2 The logic of attention economy vs. the value of public journalism

The platformisation of journalism has introduced a new commercial logic centered on engagement optimization, algorithmic visibility, and programmatic advertising. In this system, media organizations are no longer gatekeepers of distribution but are instead subjected to the opaque infrastructures and monetization policies of dominant platforms such as Meta and Google. These platforms extract value primarily through attention metrics—likes, shares, time-on-page—which shapes what kind of journalism is economically viable. As a result, stories with emotional charge, immediacy, and virality are algorithmically prioritized, while forms of journalism that require time and deliberation—especially investigative reporting—are often economically penalized.

This transformation does not simply threaten journalism in the abstract—it reshapes its normative foundations. Investigative journalism, historically rooted in watchdog roles and public accountability, becomes difficult to sustain when the metrics of success are dictated by visibility algorithms and click-through rates. Editorial decisions are increasingly subordinated to what the algorithm might favor, reducing the space for civic-minded content that may not immediately perform well in engagement terms. As Nielsen and Ganter (2022) argue, platforms exercise "generative power" by actively shaping the strategic and editorial behaviors of news organizations, not only limiting their autonomy but also defining what journalism becomes in practice.

In response to this dilemma, journalism has not remained entirely passive. Drawing on Nielsen and Ganter's framework, we can observe that media outlets adopt both strategic adaptations—such as developing content in platform-native formats (e.g., videos, listicles, short-form news), investing in audience analytics, or designing editorial calendars around peak algorithmic traffic—and tactical responses, including the diversification of revenue sources, collaborations with civil society, and the pursuit of crowdfunding or subscription-based models (Nielsen and Ganter, 2022). In the Indonesian context, such responses have emerged through initiatives like IndonesiaLeaks (a cross-platform investigative consortium), the subscription model of Kompas.id, or the member-based engagement used by Pantau. These efforts illustrate that while the platform logic constrains, it also provokes experimentation—sometimes in the form of reluctant compromise, sometimes as active resistance. As Alfter and Cândea (2019) further emphasizes, collaborative journalism not only redistributes labor and risk, but also reclaims investigative capacity through trans-institutional networks that can bypass platform limitations (Alfter and Cândea (2019).

4 Clickbait economics vs. investigative costs

Investigative journalism grapples with significant constraints related to the digital media economy, where production costs exceed revenue costs. Data indicates that a detailed investigative piece (a 6-month investigation on corruption) could only rack up 1,000 clicks. However, a simple clickbait piece, celebrity gossip, or possibly political polarization content could easily rack up 100,000 clicks within 24 h (Kuntadi et al., 2022). This disparity creates structural disincentives for the media to invest in investigative reporting, especially locally. In Indonesia, this pressure is exacerbated by the decline in traditional

advertising revenue and dependence on platform-based monetization, which only values highly viral content.

Producing investigative journalism requires significant resources: long time, specialized teams, strict verification, and legal protection—factors that clickbait content lacks (Molyneux and Coddington, 2020). For example, Tempo's investigation into corruption in the oil and gas sector took 6 months. It involved five journalists, but its advertising revenue was outperformed by lifestyle content produced in hours (Ikonen et al., 2017). The impact is that many local media outlets have turned to churnalism—practices of re-quoting or producing quick news without in-depth verification—to meet the demands of algorithms (Lundahl, 2020). This phenomenon erodes the media's capacity as a democratic watchdog, especially in uncovering local corruption cases or human rights violations (Pickard, 2019).

This economic imbalance has reduced investigative teams in local Indonesian media. AJI data in 2023 shows that 70% of regional media have reduced or closed their investigative sections in the past decade. Meanwhile, platforms like Facebook and Google accumulate 80% of digital advertising revenue without a proportional allocation for public interest-based content (Nieborg and Poell, 2018). This condition deepens the media's dependence on the logic of the attention economy (Wu, 2023), where journalistic value is measured through engagement metrics, not social impact (Anderson, 2020; Graves and Anderson, 2020).

5 Local media's survival strategies: compromise or resistance?

5.1 Compromise strategy with algorithmic logic

Some local media outlets adopt hybridization strategies to maintain investigative journalism in the face of platform-based economic pressures. One of the approaches is the hybrid model, which involves collaborating between ProPublica and local media in the US to share resources and investigative risks (Lincoln, 2025; Sonni et al., 2024). Similar initiatives have emerged in Indonesia through the Indonesia Leaks project (Multatuli Project), where media outlets like Tempo collaborate with regional outlets to disseminate corruption investigations. Another strategy is to package investigations into short serialized content (micro-investigative content), as Kumparan does by breaking down long reports into shorter video formats that are more "algorithm-friendly." Although this approach allows investigations to continue being produced, critics argue that it risks diminishing the depth of analysis and blurring the line between public journalism and infotainment (Dezso, 2024; García de Torres et al., 2025; Ilis, 2024; Marinov, 2020; Seelig, 2019).

5.2 Resistance strategy through alternative funding models

Several local media outlets are switching to a community-based funding model to reject dependence on platforms. For example, Pantau—a media outlet in Indonesia—relies on crowdfunding and public donations to fund investigations into agrarian issues. Kompas.id and The Jakarta Post have also adopted the subscription model, which offers exclusive content to paying subscribers. Additionally, local media collaborations—such as the Jaring investigative network

in Sumatra—enable resource sharing and reduce cost burdens (Nieborg and Poell, 2018). This strategy reflects efforts to build an autonomous journalistic economy (Hanusch and Löhmann, 2023), although challenges such as low subscription awareness in Indonesia remain obstacles.

5.3 The dilemma between adaptation and integrity

The choice of this strategy raises ethical and practical dilemmas. On the one hand, compromising with the logic of algorithms (for example, through micro-content) can expand the reach of investigations, but it risks eroding journalistic value (Elliott, 2019). On the other hand, resistance through alternative funding is often unstable and relies on limited audience loyalty (Pickard, 2019). Case studies show that media outlets that completely reject platform monetization—such as Narasi with its membership model—must invest heavily in public education about the value of investigative journalism. This challenge shows that there is no one-size-fits-all solution, but a combination of collaboration, format innovation, and policy advocacy might be the middle ground (Shi and Sun, 2024).

6 A call for systemic solutions

The systemic challenges posed by both platformisation and algorithmic monetisation do not lend themselves easily to solutions purely at the level of the individual newsroom, or the journalist. Solutions to the sustainability of engaged, investigative journalism—particularly at the local level—will require structural efforts, and innovation from within. This section outlines two broad categories of systemic responses: external structural interventions, which aim to intervene into the broader digital and civic problem space, and internal responses, which arise from within the media system.

6.1 External interventions

6.1.1 Reorienting platform incentives

The platform logic which privileges engagement and monetization often gets in the way of journalism's democratic function and will require systematic intervention to realign platform incentives with public-interest outcomes; for example, establishing regulatory regimes requiring transparency in algorithmic curation, requiring platforms to contribute to journalism funds, or incentivizing quality over virality. While these sorts of reforms are being considered in many countries around the world, regulators in Indonesia could initially engage with platforms and civil society to ease into considering policies, utilizing international models to inform and shape local approaches themselves. Although this process of reforming places difficult, the absence of accountability for platform itself falls disproportionately on countries such as Indonesia where legacy structures or public subsidies do not protect media institutions.

6.1.2 Strategic media literacy

An additional approach is to encourage strategic media literacy, both for audiences, but also for journalists, educators, and policymakers. Media literacy, rather than teaching users how to "spot price news" must in fact initiate literate citizens into the economic and algorithmic forces that shape what gets seen, shared, and monetized (Flensburg and Lomborg, 2023). In the context of Indonesia, this can involve developing critical media studies in school curricula, building up civil society programs to strengthen citizen awareness of media studies, and encouraging citizen-led monitoring of media performance. These initiatives can create new demand-side changes and facilitate pressure for media systems to serve public, not platform, interests.

6.2 Internal responses

6.2.1 Building collaborative infrastructures

In the face of similar threats and limitations in resources, local newsrooms have started to experiment with collaborative structures. Projects such as IndonesiaLeaks and Jaring.id are providing structured collaborations for investigation that share editorial labor, augment distribution, and lessen institutional risk. These collaborative projects not only increase output and distribution; they also become informal networks for accountability. Such structures are suggestive of the emergence of "cross-border collaborative journalism" in response to isolated and poorly funded media systems (Alfter, 2016). In conditions of competition that can fragment media efforts, shared systems may offer the most scalable approach to public-interest journalism that is possible in a local context.

6.2.2 Institutionalizing collaboration

Rather than simply ad-hoc partnerships, long-term resilience will require institutionalizing collaboration as part of newsroom practice, and media culture. This includes formalizing joint editorial projects, developing workflows between newsrooms, and embedding collaboration in journalist training. Embedded in institutional norms and processes, collaboration becomes a sustainable strategy, supported by outside actors such as universities and donors (Alfter and Cândea, 2019). In Indonesia, institutional support, such as from media alliances, foundations, and journalism schools, can help institutionalize practices which can help to diminish dependence on the volatile digital ecosystem.

6.3 Transition to conclusion

The dual-track strategy proposed above highlights the notion that rescuing investigative journalism from the toxins of platform capitalism requires actions along multiple fronts. Other interventions outside of journalism are required to change the structural conditions that dictate visibility, funding and public expectations. At the same time, responses within journalism are equally required, including working collectively, learning institutionally, and innovating from the editorial level, to build resilience from the bottom up.

In sum, these proposals illustrate that sustainability in local investigative journalism is not as much about financial sustainability, but rather about democratic infrastructure. The following conclusion takes stock of these findings, while also considering the implications for journalism and civic accountability in digital ambient environments.

7 Conclusion

The purpose of this study was to investigate platformisation effects on journalism and specifically in relation to how these platformisation-related structural changes undermine local investigative journalism. Looking specifically at Indonesia, the findings demonstrated how systems of algorithmic monetisation, and audience metrics, underwrote anti-investigative practices that are time intensive, need independence, and can provide investigative depth. With local newsrooms operating on limited financial resources, there is greater fo rce to compromise the scope of investigative journalism, producing an investigative ecosystem that is fragile, often jeopardising the central function of journalism as a public good.

By foregrounding the case of Indonesia, this paper contributes to global discussions around the political economy of platforms, demonstrating how platform capture operates in democracies in the Global South largely unregulated. Local investigative journalism not only operates at an economically unsustainable level under platform logics but it is also politically vulnerable, with potential eliminates to critical public space without meaningful and democratic accountability or oversight.

In response, the study highlights a potential future of collaborative journalism as a structural model which adapts to the local context, instead of being reliant on funding innovation. Collaborative networks not only present an opportunity to share resources and redistribute editorial labour, but they also work to amplify and prioritise public-interest reporting across newsrooms. Future research would extend to consider how platform governance, media innovation, and civic participation converge to produce change to journalistic resilience, particularly in cases where both state power and platform power asymmetries restrict the public service role of the press.

Data availability statement

The original contributions presented in the study are included in the article/supplementary material, further inquiries can be directed to the corresponding author.

Author contributions

AS: Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing.

Conflict of interest

The author declares that the research was conducted in the absence of any commercial or financial relationships that could be construed as a potential conflict of interest.

Generative AI statement

The author declares that no Gen AI was used in the creation of this manuscript.

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