

**ICMC 2023**  
**The 3<sup>rd</sup> International Conference on Management and Communication**

**REALIZING PRESS PROFESSIONALISM IN INDONESIA WITH  
JOURNALIST COMPETENCE**

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**Abstract**

The issue of press professionalism in Indonesia has long been on the minds of journalists who have high hopes that the press in Indonesia will finally reach a level of professionalism. The Press Council of Indonesia is a meeting place for the press community in Indonesia. It has developed and implemented several plans. One of them is to improve the quality of journalists through the implementation of the Journalist Competency, which has been in place since 2010. By the end of 2022, a total of 21,811 journalists had taken the journalist competency test, spread across 24 institutions verified by the Press Council. However, this figure is not encouraging as only 10% of Indonesia's 200,000 journalists have taken the test. For the collection of research data, this study relied on a literature review that identified two factors hindering the improvement of the press industry: the lack of support for press professionalism and the lack of interest of journalists in taking competency tests. The study used the theory of social responsibility of the press to analyse the findings of the study on the barriers to technical professionalism and pragmatic professionalism as experienced by journalists in Indonesia. To achieve press professionalism, the study recommends the need for public participation in improving the quality of the national press.

2357-1330 © 2023 Published by European Publisher.

*Keywords:* Community Participation, Journalist Competence, Press Professionalism, Press Social Responsibility

## 1. Introduction

The year 1998 marked a significant turning point for Indonesian democracy, as the fall of the 32-year New Order government coincided with the expansion of press freedom. The era of reform has allowed for the establishment of various forms of media - including print, radio, television and online news - without any restrictions from the government. As a result, public life has become more transparent in various aspects of government and public services. Press Law No. 40 of 1999 has played an important role in improving public access to information, and the protection of press freedom remains a fundamental principle of democracy in Indonesia. According to Stellarosa and Silaban (2020), the number of media in Indonesia has reached an all-time high of 47,000 news agencies, including 43,300 online, 2,000 print, 674 radio and 523 television. However, only 1,683 of these media have been verified by the Press Council (Mardhiyah, 2022). This situation is similar to the appearance of mushrooms in the rainy season.

The freedom of the media landscape in Indonesia has been an encouragement for more people to pursue a career in journalism. Becoming a journalist in Indonesia is open to anyone who understands and abides by the journalistic code of ethics, as no formal education or special qualifications are required (Mardhiyah, 2022; Waluyo, 2018). According to the Press Law No. 40/1999, a journalist is a person who is regularly engaged in journalistic activities and has an obligation to abide by the journalistic code of ethics. There is no requirement for formal education, and one becomes a journalist simply by carrying out journalistic work on a regular basis. Kamsol Hasan, a press expert, stated that journalistic competence or formal diplomas are not required for someone to become a journalist in Indonesia (Rakhma, 2023).

The focus of this research is on the capacity of Indonesian journalists for the improvement of their media professionalism. To maintain high standards of journalism, the Indonesian Press Council requires all journalists to pass the Journalist Competency Test. The Journalist Competency Test is designed to assess journalists' awareness, knowledge and skills related to the standardisation of press professionalism. Journalists who meet these standards receive a certificate of competency in accordance with Press Council Regulation No. 1/2010, later revised by Press Council Regulation No. 4/2017, which establishes the journalist competency certification programme. The primary goals of the journalist competency certification programme are as follows: (1) to enhance the skills and professionalism of journalists; (2) to serve as a benchmark for companies in evaluating journalists' performance; (3) to uphold press freedom based on the public interest; (4) to maintain the honor and integrity of journalists as a respected occupation involved in producing intellectual works; (5) to prevent the misuse of the journalistic profession; and finally, (6) to position journalists in key roles within the media industry. According to a study by Pratiwi and Ambardi (2020), the journalist competency certification is closely linked to professional journalism, which is crucial for safeguarding the rights of the public. Additionally, Priyambodo (2012) emphasized that the intellectual capacity and general knowledge of journalists are the fundamental aspects of their professionalism.

The purpose of this article is to examine how journalism competencies are being used in Indonesia as a tool for the achievement of press professionalism. The question that arises is whether a professional press can be achieved by certifying the competencies of all journalists. To answer this question, (Nasution, 2017) suggested that the condition of journalists needs to be viewed in terms of technical and

pragmatic professionalism. Syafriadi (2017) argues that given the support of the Press Law No. 40/1999, the Code of Journalistic Ethics and other regulations that prioritise the public, such as those issued by the Press Council, the media is a space that serves the public interest and there is reason to be optimistic.

### **1.1. Press professionalism**

The issue of press professionalism is closely related to the quality of press freedom. Anom et al. (2021) argues that the level of media professionalism in a country is directly related to the level of press freedom. Indonesia's press freedom is in the middle range. According to the 2022 Press Freedom Index, Indonesia ranks 117th out of 180 countries with a score of 49.27. Reporters without Borders published the 2022 World Press Freedom Index on 3 May 2022, which shows that Indonesia currently ranks 113th with a score of 62.60 (Kurniawan & Ghandawangi, 2022). Compared to 2021, Indonesia's ranking increased by 4 points from 122nd. This ranking is determined by various indicators, including political, legal, economic, social and security factors.

The findings indicate that the level of professionalism within the press industry in Indonesia is perceived as average, particularly concerning the attributes of commitment, autonomy, expertise, and responsibility. According to Mari (2015), professional journalists possess four key characteristics: (1) they exercise independence in making decisions and choices; (2) they exhibit a strong dedication to serving the public rather than solely focusing on personal financial gains; (3) they possess elevated intellectual and technical skills; and (4) they adhere to the journalistic code of ethics, ensuring responsible performance of their duties. Furthermore, Katerynych (2021) elucidates in an article titled "Professional Competence of a Journalist of Modern Education" that professionalism encompasses a range of values that encompass both material and spiritual dimensions. These values comprise aspects such as social responsibility, professional identity, adherence to ethical principles, critical thinking, creativity, continuous self-improvement, and personal growth.

According to Amin (2004), there are six characteristics that define a professional, namely, having special expertise through education or experience, receiving compensation commensurate with the level of expertise, adhering to a code of ethics, maintaining a degree of autonomy in their work, continuously developing their expertise, and being accountable for their work. Based on these characteristics, it is clear that journalism is a profession that requires a high level of professionalism.

The press in Indonesia is becoming more professional, and more media are emerging, including print, electronic and web-based media. This provides the public with more opportunities to access information. However, the increase in media choice does not guarantee that all media provide honest, accurate and educational information. Due to the low quality of journalists and lack of professionalism in the press, there is a lot of negative news that violates journalistic ethics. This has led to news that is erotic, unbalanced, inaccurate, politicised, judgmental and even identifies young people. This makes people question the level of professionalism of the Indonesian press (Tumengkol, 2021).

The level of press professionalism in Hong Kong is much higher than in Indonesia. Despite facing government intervention and pressure from financiers, journalists in Hong Kong are highly respected by the public for their professionalism (Chan, 2017). The concept of professionalism in journalism encompasses the ideals of objectivity, balanced reporting and adherence to factual reporting, which is

seen as a safeguard against government repression and capitalist interference in newsrooms. In the semi-democratic context of Hong Kong, the independence of journalists and the spirit of social control have been seen as essential to democracy. In contrast, the press in Africa faces challenges in maintaining professionalism due to the low quality of journalists, who often lack professional training (Nyarko et al., 2018). Similarly, upholding press standards in India faces obstacles in terms of accuracy and protecting the privacy of individuals. Although journalism is a highly respected profession in India, there are instances where certain journalists tarnish the reputation of their field (Belsey & Chadwick, 1995).

Different stakeholders may influence the concept of professionalism and the values that govern different domains (Li & Chitty, 2021). This study uses an approach that divides professional values into two groups. The first group includes power dynamic values that focus on the relationship between media and authority. This group emphasises norms of public service, independence, autonomy, relevant journalistic identity, watchdog and community mobiliser. The second group is the operational group, which guides daily journalistic practice based on truth, inclusiveness, impartiality, fairness, objectivity and immediacy. This group emphasises the values of disseminators and translators.

## **1.2. Journalist competence**

The role of journalism in maintaining the health of democratic institutions is crucial. In democratic societies, journalism is often referred to as the 'fourth pillar' and is considered an essential component in the development and modernisation of democracies around the world (Flick, 2018). In the United States, the three branches of government - the legislative, executive and judicial - are considered the "first three pillars" of the country's system of government, while an independent press is considered the fourth pillar. In order to maintain its independence, the media must remain impartial and unbiased by not being affiliated with political parties, which increases the likelihood of producing more objective reports (Costera Meijer & Bijleveld, 2016). The media's ability to report, investigate and draw public attention to issues in other institutions is directly linked to its independence.

The United Nations (UN) recognises that quality journalism plays an important role in achieving the Sustainable Development Goals and highlights its importance (Pratiwi & Ambardi, 2020). As part of the World Press Freedom Day celebrations in 2021, the UN will highlight the importance of knowledge as a public good. The UN has issued a call to treat information as a public good and to examine what changes can be made in the way content is produced, disseminated and received to improve journalism, increase transparency and empower individual agency without excluding anyone.

According to Lacy and Rosenstiel (2015), journalists are obliged to produce good journalistic products in an environment of free, independent and pluralistic media. This, in turn, becomes a benchmark for providing reliable information to society, government and effective decision makers. The role of journalists in safeguarding democracy is therefore crucial. Costera Meijer and Bijleveld (2016) state that the quality of journalists working in a democracy is directly proportional to the quality of democracy. This is because today's journalists are more skilled than ever before. Journalism is no longer limited to one place, but has become an ideology that can spread around the world, ensuring that the work of journalists will continue to have an impact on people's daily lives (Deuze, 2019).

Some people believe that journalism is a set of ideals that are expressed in the news, such as revealing the truth, being of service to society and developing constructive ideas. These principles will give a sense of purpose to the culture of journalism, to news organisations and to the media at all times and in all places (countries). Every journalist will integrate these principles into his or her daily working methods and procedures. The media sector is growing and becoming more socially acceptable, with good news organisation and competent news sources through mainstream media. The news industry is also becoming more competitive. According to Deuze (2019), in this scenario, journalism is highly credible and forms a safe environment for the activities of journalists. The concept of journalism is more complex than it appears. Basically, journalism is the continuous transmission of information and facilitation of discussion on events, trends and public issues through various media channels with the aim of informing, entertaining and connecting members of society. To achieve these goals, it is in the public interest for journalists to conduct in-depth research and provide a genuine service. Journalism provides a variety of important information that enables individuals to become responsible members of society.

In this regard, every journalist is accountable to the public by meeting the standards of competence that create a professional press. Journalists are required to have a high level of professionalism in their work, adhere to idealistic commitments, have autonomy in their work and carry out their work with full responsibility. According to Manan and Harijanti (2016), only professionals can effectively carry out the mandate of press freedom. According to research conducted by Mahendra Gautama and Purwanto (2020), competency criteria for journalists are needed as an effort to build public trust while maintaining the honour of the journalistic profession.

UNESCO attaches great importance to the qualifications of professional journalists and encourages all governments to make journalism education a priority to ensure global professionalism. The UNESCO Model Curriculum for Journalism Education underlines the importance of developing journalism education to produce the quality journalists needed by the mass media industry. According to the UNESCO version, some of the journalistic skills required include intellectual ability, a broad knowledge base, the ability to research and process information, the ability to use various journalistic tools and adapt to new technologies, knowledge of journalistic ethics and awareness of the role of journalism in society (Mahendra Gautama & Purwanto, 2020). However, as stated by Ritonga (2019), the journalistic skills of Indonesian journalists do not meet the UNESCO standards, but only the standards set by the Press Council, which is the only benchmark for assessing the competence of journalists in Indonesia.

The Press Council's competency standards state that journalists must have three main components: awareness, knowledge and skills. The Press Council stresses the importance of Indonesian journalists mastering all the components contained in the journalism competency standards. The awareness component includes understanding legal and ethical norms, sensitivity to audience needs, and understanding the importance of networking and advocacy. The knowledge component refers to the mastery of journalistic theories and principles, general knowledge and specialised knowledge. The skills component covers journalistic reporting activities such as seeking, gathering, storing, processing and disseminating information, and carrying out research and analysis. In addition, journalists must also have

the ability to use information technology and tools, as well as the ability to determine the direction of the news (Priyambodo, 2012).

In addition, Herrero-Diz et al. (2022) add that the standard of journalistic skills must reach the ability to apply visualisation techniques. This global standard skill requires an interdisciplinary team of developers, designers, statisticians, visualisers and mapping experts. Journalists need to be able to respond to changes in the environment, in this case to technological change with different approaches, without neglecting the fundamentals of journalism. As the jargon of media technology, collaboration is the ability of a team consisting of different expertise in making journalistic works.

### **1.3. Social responsibility of journalist**

The press plays an important role in maintaining the quality of democracy. According to the social responsibility theory of the press, the press has a responsibility not only to inform, entertain and generate economic benefits, but also to bring conflict into the public debate. This is done by members of the press because they are responsible to the wider community (Triyono, 2013). The press is required to uphold social responsibility, which consists of public opinion, consumer behaviour and professional ethics. These three factors are interdependent and affect each other, making it difficult to establish the media's obligations within the scope of social responsibility. As a result, some scholars see this system as falling between authoritarian and libertarian political systems.

According to McQuail (1987), the theory of social responsibility has several basic principles. These principles include: (1) The press should facilitate discussion and provide information on public issues to strengthen the political system; (2) The press should provide information to the public to enable them take action; (3) The press should act as a watchdog to protect individual rights from government abuse; (4) The press should support the economic system by facilitating trade through advertising; (5) The press should provide entertainment for the public; and (6) The press should maintain financial independence so as not to be influenced by particular interest groups (Oluwasola, 2020).

According to this interpretation, the press is available to anyone who has ideas to express, but it should not violate people's right to privacy or damage social institutions. This theory emphasises the freedom of the press and encourages media professionals to adhere to certain social standards. The social responsibility theory, on the other hand, suggests that the press is governed by public opinion, consumer behaviour and professional ethics (Christians & Nordenstreng, 2004). While this theory opposes restrictive regulation of the media, it recognises that these three factors can control the press. Press accountability theory examines the extent of journalists' social duty to protect the public interest and the role of society in achieving press professionalism. Both journalists and the public must be educated, as communication, technology and education are constantly changing tools, and a society without a foundation can be destroyed by waves of distorted digital information (Rivera et al., 2018).

## **2. Method**

The author conducted this research using library research, which is obtaining study materials and data through materials from journal articles, books, and online news about journalist competence and

press professionalism. The researcher collects these materials, analyses them, and then draws conclusions and discusses the role of journalist competence in achieving professionalism standards in the press (Fadhli, 2020).

### **3. Results and Discussion**

Based on the discussion presented, the author concludes that the press in Indonesia is making progress in upholding democracy while maintaining its dignity and independence. In other words, the author is optimistic that the development of the press in Indonesia is going in the right direction. The current freedom of the press creates a conducive environment for the growth of democracy, which in turn encourages the creation of a professional press. The author believes that the competence of journalists in carrying out their duties and functions is the basis for the creation of a professional press. According to Syafriadi (2017), qualified journalists will create useful information and contribute to the growth of Indonesia. The press has strong determination and dedication, but it also needs to have the ability to carry out its duties as a journalist, which is to find, process and produce news professionally. In other words, a professional journalist is responsible for his or her work not because of an individual's will from outside, but because he or she is doing a job based on fulfilling his or her duties as a journalist. In addition, every journalist must recognise that journalistic responsibility is a consequence that accompanies his or her work (Wibawa, 2020).

A journalist must have the ability to communicate knowledge, skills and attitudes and know how to process information for media such as radio, television, press and internet (Rivera et al., 2018). The competence of journalists contributes to the development of citizens' autonomy, as well as social and cultural engagement through the role of the media. Therefore, the competence of journalists in the mass communication process is very important to know the level of competence or skills that individual journalists have in dealing with the changes in society due to technological developments. At this point, it is important to know how journalists innovate and practice in order to achieve change and build a better society through messages in the area of media literacy. If social communicators do not know how to combine knowledge, teaching, skills and expertise with information and communication technology, they will become traditional journalists who do not adapt to change.

According to Wibawa (2020), the willingness of journalists to focus on serving the communities in which they work by disseminating journalistic work through mass media such as newspapers, magazines, radio, and television is an important component of their professionalism. Because journalists are considered public servants, the work they do is directed at fulfilling the information needs of the community. However, this is not realised as a way to gain maximum financial benefits. There is a social responsibility that journalists must carry out. If there is news that is important for public attention, it must be reported immediately because it is good for the community. As the most effective method to influence the formation of public opinion, journalism is an honourable career that is respected. According to Chakravorty and Tilak (2019) journalists are a profession that has a great responsibility that oversees the interests of the wider community.

In order to determine whether journalists can be considered a profession, it is necessary to examine the requirements of their work. There are two main perspectives that address this question (Nasution,

2017). On the one hand, journalists are often considered to be professionals because their work fulfils the criteria necessary for a profession. To be classified as a profession, the field of journalism must meet the following requirements: (1) a body of knowledge taught in universities; (2) a professional code of ethics, such as the Journalism Code of Ethics; (3) a professional organisation that is accessible to all journalists, as well as a professional ethics committee; and (4) an accreditation test for journalists, which has been implemented in Indonesia.

Universities now often offer courses dedicated to the study of journalism. This type of education was introduced in the United States at the University of Missouri, and its popularity has grown steadily since its inception. Journalism is now taught at all levels of higher education, from diploma to doctorate. According to the journalism education census report conducted by the World Journalism Education Council since 2007, there are currently 3,000 journalism study programmes around the world, spread evenly across North America, Europe and Asia (Nasution, 2017).

On the other hand, some argue that journalism should not be considered a profession because it does not meet all the characteristics that define a profession. According to Liljegren (2012), there are two components that make up a professional attitude, namely technical professionalism and pragmatic professionalism. The extent to which people working in a particular field actually have adequate technical skills. Then, to what extent does the job meet the requirements of their pragmatic professionalism? For example, does the salary they receive from the job meet the appropriate standards for this type of work? If not, then the job has not met the professional requirements and it is difficult to call the job professional.

What about journalists in Indonesia? According to Nasution (2017), the profession of journalism in Indonesia still faces several challenges. First of all, it cannot be said that being a journalist is a full-time job, as many journalists still do it alongside other jobs. This is linked to the fact that the majority of journalists are paid unsatisfactory salaries. In 2009, the Press Council carried out a study which showed that the income of many journalists is still far below the standard minimum wage. This is because many media outlets do not have adequate financial resources and are therefore unable to pay their journalists properly. To stay in business, some media practitioners resort to unprofessional practices (Bangun, 2023).

The issue of pragmatic professionalism, which refers to the material rewards or welfare provided to journalists, is a major concern in the journalism community in Indonesia. According to data released by the Alliance of Independent Journalists (AJI) in 2013, the low welfare level of journalists in Indonesia is quite alarming, as it is the lowest among other Asian countries. Even in remote areas, the average monthly salary of journalists is only around Rp 500,000. This certainly affects their professionalism. This low income makes journalists vulnerable to bribery and violation of their professional code of ethics (Saudale, 2021).

In relation to this conversation, the author presents a paradigm of reciprocity that can be found in the idea of the social responsibility of the press. The problem of low professionalism that has recently plagued the media is not solely the responsibility of those who work in the industry. The existence of social media, which has taken over the advertising industry, is one of the main variables why mass media companies are finding it increasingly difficult to maintain their business. Mass media advertising revenues continue to decline. At the same time, newspaper sales continue to hit rock bottom. Meanwhile, the demands of life no longer being met by media companies, journalists are still expected to work



professionally while being asked to improve their journalistic skills. The same is true for journalists working for low-quality media. There are already many journalists who are no longer consistently paid. They are in financial difficulties, so many of them cannot afford to take the Journalist Competence Test required by the Press Council.

Furthermore, the reality of press professionalism in Indonesia is that there are no special educational qualifications to enter the field. This means that anyone can become a journalist. This opens the door for any individual to practice the profession of journalism with low standardisation. Therefore, the Journalist Competence Certificate is expected to be an important step in the process of improving the status of journalists, so that people no longer think that it is easy to work in the media. Through the ongoing Journalism Competence Programme, it is expected that in the future not everyone will be able to become a journalist. Rather, only journalists who pass the competency exam will be able to gain professional recognition.

According to Press Council expert Kamsol Hasan, the competency test is not a mandatory requirement to become a journalist under Indonesian press regulations. The journalist competency test is not intended to be an entrance exam for those interested in the profession. He mentioned that the journalist competency test is not an order or mandate derived from the Press Law, but only a regulation set by the Press Council (Rakhma, 2023). According to Article 1(4) of Press Law No. 40 of 1999, a journalist is a person who regularly carries out journalistic activities. There are no other specific requirements to become a journalist. Of course, this has become a strict dialectic among Indonesian journalists themselves, considering that society's demands for press professionalism are already so strong.

However, as Kamsol Hasan reiterated, the competence of journalists remains very important. As explained earlier, the level of competence of journalists is an important factor in achieving press professionalism. Only by taking the journalist competency test will a journalist know the standardisation of his/her technical journalistic skills.

Previous research shows that qualified journalists can improve their professional behaviour, especially journalistic professionalism in technical aspects. On the other hand, there is no solution to overcome the lack of pragmatic professionalism of journalists in Indonesia. The problem of pragmatic professionalism of journalists is highly dependent on the ability of media business actors, the business climate in the mass media sector, and the media business regulations issued by the government. How these factors can be encouraged to work well, then the role of society can be raised through this issue. According to the theory of social responsibility, the press can be regulated and monitored by public opinion. There is a possible way to fulfil the pragmatism factor of the media, which is through community participation as stipulated in Article 17 of the Press Law No. 40 of 1999.

#### **4. Conclusion**

The results of this study show that the role of journalists is very important in achieving professionalism in the press. There are three factors that journalists need to master in order to become competent journalists, namely mastering good journalistic awareness and knowledge as well as adequate journalistic skills.

Journalistic competence is an important step towards achieving technical press professionalism. But mastering technical professionalism alone is not enough. Pragmatic professionalism must also be achieved so that journalists are not hindered in their work. The press council, the government, the private sector and, of course, the media companies where journalists work all have a role to play in helping journalists achieve technical professionalism. On the other hand, the pragmatic professionalism of journalists has not worked well. There is no solution for journalists to fulfil their pragmatic professionalism. The responsibility for pragmatic professionalism lies entirely with the media companies they work for. Meanwhile, the ability of media companies is highly dependent on the ability of media business actors, the business climate created and the government regulations that support the media business.

From this situation, it is clear that the professionalism of the press in Indonesia has not yet been fully realised. On the other hand, there is a possible solution that has never been done before through the application of the theory known as the theory of social responsibility, namely the role of the community. In fact, the role of the community is regulated in Article 17 of the Press Law No. 40 of 1999. This study identifies a gap between the high professional demands placed on journalists and the fact that most journalists do not earn a decent standard of living. This study offers a way for the public to get involved in a way that does not contradict the constitution and the spirit of press freedom.

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