

Journalistic Ethics In Local News Coverage At Suarokito.Com

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ABSTRACT

As journalism continues to evolve under the influence of digital technology, local media play an essential role in delivering relevant and credible information to their communities. One such media outlet in North Bengkulu is Suarokito.com, a digital platform dedicated to local reporting. This study analyzes the application of journalistic ethics in local news coverage on Suarokito.com, focusing on the principles outlined in the Indonesian Journalistic Code of Ethics: independence, professionalism, verification, balance, and protection of sources and privacy. This research adopts a qualitative normative approach, using in-depth interviews, participant observation, and content analysis of published news articles. The informants include reporters, editors, and the editor-in-chief of Suarokito.com. The findings show that Suarokito.com strives to uphold independence and professionalism, despite challenges such as pressure to publish news rapidly and limited resources. The principles of verification and balance are generally observed, with news articles undergoing fact-checking and using multiple sources. However, challenges persist, including the temptation to avoid unverified or sensational stories due to resource constraints. The study recommends regular ethical training for local journalists and the strengthening of internal mechanisms to maintain editorial integrity and news quality.

INTRODUCTION

The digital transformation of journalism has fundamentally reshaped the production, dissemination, and consumption of news content across the globe. In Indonesia, the growth of online media has escalated significantly, with more than 43,000 registered media outlets by 2019, reflecting the rapid shift from traditional to digital platforms (Lestari, 2019). This transformation not only alters the technical aspects of journalism but also redefines the ethical responsibilities and professional conduct expected from news practitioners. As media outlets strive to adapt, the implementation of journalistic ethics becomes even more critical in maintaining public trust and safeguarding democratic values (Ashari, 2019).

The convergence of journalism with digital technology demands that media organizations operate in a more competitive and fast-paced environment. Online news platforms are pressured to deliver content in real-time, which often compromises the depth and verification of reporting (Artini, 2019). In this environment, journalistic ethics serve as the moral compass guiding news organizations to resist the temptation of sensationalism, misinformation, and biased reporting (Ardianto, 2016). Ethical journalism requires a commitment to truth, independence, accountability, and respect for human dignity—principles that are enshrined in the Indonesian Journalistic Code of Ethics. Local media occupy a strategic position in the national media landscape, especially in rural and suburban communities. Unlike national media that focus on broad-scale issues, local news outlets report on matters directly affecting the daily lives of citizens, such as regional governance, public services, and cultural identity (Andriani & Kurniawan, 2019). Local journalism not only informs but also empowers communities by acting as a watchdog and fostering civic engagement. Nevertheless, the ethical challenges confronting local media are often exacerbated by limited financial resources, inadequate training, and proximity to local power structures, which may compromise editorial independence (Rahmat & Sudirman, 2018).

The application of journalistic ethics is particularly crucial in the context of Suarokito.com, a digital news outlet based in North Bengkulu. Established with a mission to provide reliable local news, Suarokito.com serves as a primary information source for the local community. However, as with many

regional news outlets, the platform must navigate a complex terrain of limited staffing, financial constraints, and ethical dilemmas arising from close-knit community interactions. Questions remain regarding how effectively such media adhere to the ethical standards prescribed in the Code of Ethics for Indonesian Journalists. Journalistic ethics encompass a wide range of practices, including the pursuit of truth, accuracy, fairness, impartiality, and accountability. The Indonesian Press Council (Dewan Pers) has codified these standards into an official ethical guideline that media practitioners are expected to follow (Dewan Pers, 2008). Key provisions include the obligation to verify information, avoid plagiarism and sensationalism, respect privacy, protect vulnerable sources, and ensure balanced reporting. Violations of these principles can undermine media credibility and erode public confidence in journalism (Hermawan, 2020).

A significant example illustrating the consequences of unethical reporting is the 2018 Radar Bogor headline “Ongkang-Ongkang Kaki Dapat Rp 112 Juta,” which sparked public outrage and physical threats against journalists. The article was deemed misleading and sensational, violating principles of accuracy and fairness, and triggering broader conversations about press accountability (Liputan6, 2017). Closer to the context of this study, Suarokito.com was observed publishing a politically sensitive article without disclosing verifiable sources, raising concerns about the credibility and transparency of the report.

Such incidents highlight the tension between the pursuit of immediacy and the obligation to uphold ethical standards. In small newsrooms with limited oversight, the risk of ethical lapses increases. Therefore, examining the extent to which Suarokito.com adheres to journalistic ethics is not only timely but necessary to understand the operational realities of local media and to identify areas for ethical reinforcement. From a scholarly perspective, previous studies have explored the application of journalistic ethics in various contexts. Fauziah (2021) analyzed ethical compliance at *Harian Umum Haluan Padang*, revealing persistent issues with independence and accuracy. Meanwhile, Sari (2020) investigated the ethical behavior of journalists on social media, noting a frequent neglect of verification and objectivity due to audience-driven pressures. These studies underscore the multifaceted challenges journalists face in applying ethical standards across different platforms and organizational settings.

The present research contributes to this growing body of literature by focusing on a digital-native, hyper-local news outlet, which has received little scholarly attention. By investigating Suarokito.com, this study aims to assess how journalistic ethics are operationalized in the daily news production process, and how institutional and individual-level factors influence ethical decision-making. Through qualitative interviews with reporters and editors, supplemented by content analysis and direct observation, this research seeks to illuminate the practical realities behind the adherence—or lack thereof—to ethical norms. Furthermore, this study is situated within the broader discourse on media credibility and democratic integrity. As the public increasingly relies on digital news sources, ethical journalism becomes a cornerstone of informed citizenship and democratic participation. Missteps in ethical conduct not only mislead audiences but also compromise the journalistic mission of serving the public interest. Thus, reinforcing ethical standards in local journalism is essential for cultivating media literacy, combating misinformation, and preserving democratic resilience (Putri & Wibisono, 2021).

The specific research question that guides this inquiry is: *How does Suarokito.com implement journalistic ethics in its coverage of local news?* This central question will be explored through subthemes including editorial independence, verification practices, respect for privacy, avoidance of bias, and mechanisms for correction and accountability. In conclusion, the intersection of digital journalism and ethical practice is a fertile ground for academic inquiry, particularly in the context of local media struggling with resource limitations and societal pressures. By focusing on Suarokito.com, this study seeks to provide both theoretical and practical insights into the ethical landscape of Indonesian journalism at the grassroots level.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Journalistic Ethics

Journalistic ethics refers to the normative guidelines that govern the conduct of media practitioners in the process of gathering, producing, and disseminating news. According to Ardianto (2016), ethical journalism must prioritize truth, fairness, independence, and responsibility. These principles serve as the foundation for maintaining public trust and ensuring that the media fulfills its democratic function. In the Indonesian context, the Journalistic Code of Ethics (Kode Etik Jurnalistik) formalizes these values, making them mandatory for all registered media professionals.

Independence in Journalism

Independence is a fundamental principle that emphasizes the journalist’s duty to remain free from outside influence—whether political, economic, or personal—in the news production process. The Press

Council of Indonesia (Dewan Pers, 2008) states that journalists must report facts as they are, without favoring any party. This principle is particularly critical in local media environments, where close relationships with public figures can easily blur the line between objective reporting and advocacy journalism.

Professionalism and Verification

Professionalism in journalism entails a commitment to accuracy, verification of facts, and transparent sourcing. According to Kovach and Rosenstiel (2014), the discipline of verification is what separates journalism from other forms of communication. Journalists must check the credibility of their sources, validate claims, and offer balanced perspectives. This ensures that news content is both truthful and fair, upholding the standards of ethical reporting.

Balance and Fairness

Balanced reporting requires journalists to represent multiple sides of an issue, providing all relevant stakeholders with the opportunity to present their views. The Indonesian Journalistic Code of Ethics underscores the need for proportional representation and avoidance of bias. Studies such as Wibisono & Pratama (2020) have shown that balanced journalism not only improves content quality but also prevents the spread of misinformation and mitigates public distrust toward the media.

Privacy and Source Protection

Respecting the privacy of sources and protecting the identities of vulnerable individuals—such as victims and minors—is a key ethical obligation. The Press Council mandates that journalists must not publish private information unless it serves the public interest. Furthermore, journalists are expected to exercise the “right to refuse” (hak tolak) to safeguard the anonymity of confidential sources. This protection is essential for preserving journalistic integrity and encouraging whistleblowing in cases of public wrongdoing (Rahmawati, 2020).

Avoidance of Sensationalism and Misinformation

Ethical journalism avoids sensationalism, falsehoods, and content designed solely to provoke or attract clicks. In the digital era, the temptation to prioritize virality over accuracy has increased, leading to ethical breaches. According to Santoso (2016), the use of misleading headlines and unverified data not only damages public trust but also violates journalistic principles of accuracy and public accountability.

Code of Ethics for Online Media (Pedoman Media Siber)

In response to the proliferation of online media, the Indonesian Press Council issued specific guidelines tailored for digital journalism. The *Pedoman Pemberitaan Media Siber* addresses challenges unique to online reporting, such as the speed of publication, comment moderation, and content updates. These guidelines emphasize that even in a fast-paced digital environment, ethical standards must be upheld, including fairness, accuracy, and source accountability (Dewan Pers, 2017).

Ethical Challenges in Local Journalism

Local media often face unique ethical dilemmas due to limited resources, proximity to news subjects, and potential conflicts of interest. As noted by Setiawan (2020), journalists in local settings may be more susceptible to pressures from advertisers, political figures, or community leaders. These dynamics increase the risk of biased or compromised reporting. Ethical literacy and institutional safeguards are therefore necessary to maintain editorial independence and journalistic standards.

The Role of Ethics in Media Credibility

Credibility is the currency of journalism. When journalists adhere to ethical standards, they build long-term trust with their audiences. Conversely, ethical lapses—such as publishing hoaxes or omitting critical context—can irreparably harm a media outlet’s reputation. Studies such as Putri & Kurniawan (2018) have linked ethical compliance directly to audience loyalty and civic engagement, reinforcing the need for ethical discipline in all aspects of reporting.

Theoretical Framework: Deontological Ethics

This study is grounded in deontological ethics, particularly the perspective of Immanuel Kant, which asserts that actions are morally right based on their adherence to rules, not outcomes. In the context of journalism, this means that ethical behavior—such as verifying facts or protecting sources—must be followed regardless of the potential benefits or consequences. This framework supports the normative role of journalism in society, where truth and integrity outweigh popularity or profitability (Fauziah, 2021).

METHODS

This study employed a qualitative normative research method to analyze the implementation of journalistic ethics in local news reporting at Suarokito.com. The normative approach was chosen to focus on the application of legal and ethical standards—such as the Indonesian Journalistic Code of Ethics, Press Law No. 40 of 1999, and Press Council regulations—in actual journalistic practices. This design is suitable for examining how media institutions conform to ethical guidelines while producing content in a digital environment.

Data were collected using four techniques: in-depth interviews, participant observation, document analysis, and literature review. Interviews were conducted with key informants, including the editor-in-chief, two senior reporters, and a newsroom manager, selected through purposive sampling. These informants were chosen based on their roles in editorial decision-making and their direct involvement in content production. The interviews aimed to explore their understanding, application, and challenges related to journalistic ethics in daily news work.

Participant observation allowed the researcher to closely examine the internal editorial workflow and ethical decision-making processes in real time. This involved observing editorial meetings, reviewing article drafts, and monitoring the newsroom's verification protocols. In addition, document analysis was carried out by reviewing published news articles from Suarokito.com to assess compliance with ethical principles such as accuracy, balance, and source attribution.

Secondary sources—including legal documents, academic journals, and press council publications—were used to construct the normative framework and support analytical interpretation. Data were analyzed using the interactive model of Miles and Huberman, consisting of data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing/verification. This triangulation of methods ensures a comprehensive understanding of how ethical principles are interpreted and practiced in a local digital media context.

The overall goal of this methodology is to provide a descriptive yet critical examination of journalistic ethical compliance in Suarokito.com, and to identify both strengths and ethical gaps in their reporting practices.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

This section presents the results of a qualitative study investigating how Suarokito.com, a local digital media outlet in North Bengkulu, implements journalistic ethics in its news coverage. The findings are organized according to the main principles outlined in the Indonesian Journalistic Code of Ethics, including independence, professionalism, verification, balance, and source protection. Data were derived from in-depth interviews with three informants—Eren Jilly Yandra (editor-in-chief), Wawan Putra (senior reporter), and M. Fadil (field reporter)—as well as observational fieldwork and analysis of published news articles.

Independence and Editorial Autonomy

The first principle examined was editorial independence, which refers to the ability of journalists to operate without interference from external actors such as political figures, advertisers, or interest groups. According to Eren Jilly Yandra, the editorial policy of Suarokito.com emphasizes neutrality and factual accuracy in all reporting. He stated:

“We direct the entire team to stay neutral when writing news. There is zero tolerance for bias. All reports must be verified and free of loaded language, especially when facts on the ground are still unclear.”

(Interview, April 15, 2025)

Observational data confirmed this stance, with editorial meetings consistently focusing on verifying news sources and cross-checking facts before publication. Both Wawan Putra and M. Fadil admitted to facing external pressures—often from local officials or business actors—but emphasized that they prioritize public interest and resist any form of narrative manipulation.

Professionalism in News Production

Professionalism involves ethical conduct in sourcing, interviewing, and news writing. Suarokito.com reporters routinely identify themselves during interviews, avoid sensationalism, and document events using original visuals and notes. M. Fadil described an incident in which he was offered money to delay a negative news piece:

“There are temptations. Sometimes officials try to influence coverage with gifts or promises. But we’ve made a commitment as a team not to accept those. Once a journalist caves in, trust is gone.” (Interview, April 17, 2025)

Field observation supported this, revealing a strict routine in which drafts undergo editorial review, and fact-checking is emphasized even for soft news content such as cultural or community event reports.

Verification and Accuracy

The ethical principle of verification requires journalists to confirm information with reliable sources and refrain from publishing rumors or one-sided narratives. Suarokito.com appears to maintain this standard by enforcing a dual-source policy: all claims must be corroborated by at least two independent sources before publication. In reviewing five randomly selected articles published between February and April 2025, researchers found consistent attribution to official statements, documents, or eyewitness reports. For example, in a report on flood damage in Hulu Palik, the article cited both the village chief and a local resident, balancing official and personal perspectives.

Balance and Fairness

News balance is achieved when journalists present multiple sides of a story with equal weight. In interviews, both reporters acknowledged the difficulty of obtaining opposing views, especially in politically sensitive stories. However, Suarokito.com ensures that every article includes space for rebuttal or clarification when necessary. Wawan Putra noted:

“It’s not always easy to get the other side—some people don’t want to comment. But if that happens, we still mention that we tried to contact them. Readers need to know we made the effort.” (Interview, April 16, 2025)

A review of political and crime reports from the site revealed that disclaimers such as *“The party concerned could not be reached for comment”* are used when direct responses are unavailable, indicating procedural fairness.

Privacy and Source Protection

The ethical obligation to protect vulnerable individuals—including minors, victims, and anonymous sources—is respected in Suarokito.com’s editorial policies. Observations confirmed that names of sexual assault victims and underage crime suspects were never published, and photographs were either blurred or omitted. Additionally, informants explained their use of “off the record” statements during reporting and their familiarity with the right to refuse (*hak tolak*) under Indonesian press law.

Avoidance of Sensationalism

One recurring challenge identified during the study was the temptation to use clickbait or sensational headlines to increase engagement. However, Suarokito.com actively avoids such practices. Articles are titled conservatively, with a focus on informative language. For instance, a report on corruption in the education sector was headlined: *“Procurement Investigation Targets Local PAUD Program,”* avoiding provocative or accusatory phrasing. The editorial team argued that long-term credibility outweighs short-term traffic spikes.

Ethical Challenges in Practice

Despite these strengths, the study uncovered several recurring ethical dilemmas. One involves the speed of publication. Due to the 24-hour digital news cycle, some reporters admitted to publishing incomplete stories, with updates made later. While this practice is not uncommon in online journalism, it poses a risk to factual integrity. Another issue is the absence of a formal internal code of conduct beyond the national journalistic code. Though Suarokito.com adheres to general ethical standards, the lack of a written in-house guideline may hinder consistent enforcement in complex cases.

Newsroom Constraints and Resource Limitations

Operating with a small team and limited funding, Suarokito.com faces constraints in terms of personnel training and technological support. Journalists often multitask, managing both reporting and editing duties. This can lead to burnout and occasional lapses in quality control. Nevertheless, the organization compensates by maintaining a close-knit team culture and strong peer accountability. Regular discussions on ethical dilemmas help reinforce shared values and professional boundaries. The findings of this study demonstrate that *Suarokito.com*, as a local digital media outlet, exhibits a strong commitment to the ethical principles enshrined in the Indonesian Journalistic Code of Ethics. However, this commitment is often tested by structural constraints, local pressures, and the evolving demands of

digital journalism. In this section, we discuss the implications of these findings in relation to existing theoretical frameworks and prior research.

Independence as an Ideal vs. Operational Reality

Editorial independence is considered a cornerstone of ethical journalism. Suarokito.com's internal culture promotes nonpartisanship and transparency, aligning with the definition of independence provided by the Press Council (Dewan Pers, 2008). However, the interviews suggest that this independence is sometimes challenged by informal relationships with local political actors or sponsors. This mirrors the concerns raised by Setiawan (2020), who argued that in small towns, the social proximity between media practitioners and news subjects often complicates impartiality. While the newsroom attempts to draw a clear line between professional and personal affiliations, the lack of formal editorial firewalls makes the practice of independence fragile and heavily reliant on personal integrity.

Professionalism and Verification in a Resource-Constrained Environment

The study affirms that reporters at Suarokito.com exhibit a strong sense of professionalism, characterized by fact-checking, clear source attribution, and rejection of bribery—principles that align with the ethical model proposed by Kovach and Rosenstiel (2014). However, the newsroom operates with limited staff and financial resources, which constrains their capacity to conduct in-depth investigative reporting or real-time verification for breaking news. This reinforces the argument by Rahmat & Sudirman (2018), who emphasized that resource scarcity in local media often undermines ethical diligence. Nevertheless, Suarokito.com manages to compensate through informal peer review, collaborative editing, and a shared understanding of journalistic standards.

Ethical Tensions in the Pursuit of Speed vs. Accuracy

One of the ethical dilemmas frequently encountered in digital journalism is the trade-off between speed and accuracy. While Suarokito.com strives to verify information before publishing, the pressure to stay competitive in the 24/7 news cycle sometimes forces reporters to publish partially verified content, followed by post-publication updates. Although this practice may be justified within the norms of online media, it introduces ethical risks if not transparently managed. As Ashari (2019) noted, the digital acceleration of news often leads to "reactive journalism," which may compromise quality for immediacy. The study indicates that Suarokito.com mitigates this risk by adding follow-up clarifications and stating the provisional nature of early reports.

Balance and Fairness: Challenges in a Small Community

The principle of balance requires journalists to present all sides of a story. Suarokito.com generally fulfills this obligation by seeking multiple sources and noting attempts to contact stakeholders. However, in a small media ecosystem where access to dissenting voices is limited, achieving perfect balance remains a challenge. Similar findings were documented by Fauziah (2021), who observed that in regional media, actors who feel exposed by critical reporting may refuse to speak, thereby limiting journalists' ability to present alternative viewpoints. Suarokito.com addresses this by including disclaimers such as "attempted contact was unsuccessful," which aligns with the ethical concept of due diligence in fairness.

Ethical Consciousness in Source Protection and Privacy

The study highlights that Suarokito.com is highly aware of its ethical responsibilities in protecting vulnerable sources and respecting privacy—especially in reports involving children, sexual abuse, or anonymous tips. This aligns with the principles outlined in the *Pedoman Pemberitaan Media Siber* (Dewan Pers, 2017), which emphasize discretion, consent, and public interest as criteria for disclosing sensitive information. The consistent use of pseudonyms, blurred images, and non-disclosure of locations in such stories indicates a mature ethical framework, despite the absence of a written internal policy.

Avoiding Sensationalism: A Strategic Editorial Decision

In contrast to many online news platforms that rely on sensational headlines to attract traffic, Suarokito.com consciously avoids clickbait and controversial framing. This editorial stance supports the findings of Wibisono & Pratama (2020), who argue that responsible media must resist market-driven pressures that prioritize virality over substance. The site's editorial decisions reflect a long-term vision of building trust and credibility rather than short-term audience gains. This restraint may cost the outlet some digital visibility but enhances its journalistic integrity in the eyes of its core audience.

Ethical Challenges Without Internal Codification

While Suarokito.com adheres to national journalistic standards, the lack of an internal, written code of ethics presents a gap in institutional accountability. As the newsroom relies primarily on informal agreements and cultural norms, the enforcement of ethical discipline is inconsistent and largely dependent on individual values. This supports Pratama & Sari's (2019) assertion that internal codification and training are essential for sustainable ethical practices, especially in environments with high journalist turnover or limited managerial supervision.

Strengths and Vulnerabilities of a Close-Knit Newsroom Culture

The small size of Suarokito.com's editorial team fosters a collaborative, trust-based environment in which ethical decisions are openly discussed and reinforced. This culture is effective for mutual accountability but may also create blind spots, such as reluctance to criticize a colleague's judgment. The informality of this setup echoes the findings of Nugroho (2020), who warned that excessive reliance on interpersonal dynamics can result in ethical complacency or favoritism. As such, formal ethical audits and periodic training could strengthen the newsroom's integrity.

Relevance to Broader Media Ethics Discourse

The case of Suarokito.com illustrates how ethical journalism can still thrive in under-resourced settings, provided there is a strong moral commitment from its practitioners. However, it also underscores the structural and cultural vulnerabilities of small, local newsrooms in maintaining consistent standards. This research contributes to the broader conversation on how journalistic ethics must evolve to accommodate the realities of digital media, decentralization, and community-based reporting (Putri & Kurniawan, 2018).

CONCLUSION AND SUGGESTION

This study has explored the application of journalistic ethics in local digital media through a case study of *Suarokito.com*. The findings reveal that the outlet, despite operating within a resource-constrained environment, demonstrates a commendable commitment to ethical principles such as editorial independence, accuracy, verification, balance, and respect for source confidentiality. The newsroom maintains a clear stance against bribery, prioritizes accuracy over sensationalism, and applies ethical judgment in its handling of sensitive information.

However, this ethical commitment is not without challenges. The pressure to publish rapidly in a digital-first environment sometimes leads to premature reporting that requires later clarification. The lack of a formal internal ethical code and institutionalized training mechanisms further exposes the organization to inconsistencies in ethical judgment. Furthermore, maintaining balance and independence in a small local media ecosystem—with overlapping social and professional networks—remains an ongoing challenge.

Despite these limitations, *Suarokito.com* manages to uphold its editorial integrity through a culture of peer accountability and shared values. The newsroom benefits from the professionalism of its core team, who are acutely aware of their responsibilities and the social impact of their reporting.

This study, while providing valuable insights into the implementation of journalistic ethics at *Suarokito.com*, is subject to several limitations that may affect the generalizability and depth of its findings. First, the research was conducted using a single-case study design, focusing exclusively on *Suarokito.com* as the sole unit of analysis. While this approach allowed for an in-depth exploration of the newsroom's practices, it limits the study's applicability to other local or national media outlets with different organizational structures, resources, or editorial policies.

Second, the sample size of informants was relatively small, involving only three primary participants—an editor-in-chief and two reporters. Although these individuals provided rich, first-hand perspectives, the limited number of voices means that certain views, dissenting experiences, or internal ethical dilemmas may not have been captured comprehensively. Third, the data collection period was short-term, spanning just several weeks of observation and interviews. As such, the study might have missed longer-term trends, seasonal editorial practices, or exceptional events that could influence ethical decision-making processes, such as election coverage or crisis reporting.

Fourth, the researcher's presence during observation may have introduced an element of reactivity. Newsroom staff might have modified their behavior—either consciously or subconsciously—due to being observed, which could result in overly favorable portrayals of ethical compliance. Lastly, the study focused mainly on internal editorial practices, without incorporating audience perspectives or external stakeholder views (e.g., local government, advertisers, NGOs) that may provide a more holistic

understanding of how journalistic ethics are perceived and negotiated within the broader ecosystem. Future studies could address these limitations by adopting comparative multi-case designs, longer observation periods, and incorporating perspectives from a broader range of media practitioners and stakeholders.

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