



PRECARIOUSNESS OF FREELANCE JOURNALIST DURING COVID-19 PANDEMIC IN INDONESIA

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Abstract:

Freelance journalists in Indonesia have a higher level of precariousness in terms of occupational health and safety, as well as socioeconomic conditions during the COVID-19 (Coronavirus Disease, 2019) pandemic. The vulnerability of exposure to the virus is caused by non-fulfillment of work equipment standards, health protocols when interacting with news sources, and inadequate health facilities. Another issue threatening freelance journalists is the deterioration of global economic conditions during the pandemic, which has had a devastating impact on corporate revenues. As a result, freelance journalists are also threatened with dismissal from work, late payment of wages, or even not paid at all. Referring to the concept of labor precariat from Guy Standing, this study aims to determine the factors that contribute to the vulnerability of freelance journalists in Indonesia and the strategies used to survive amid a pandemic that has not yet ended. This research uses a qualitative approach by observing the practice of journalism physically and in cyberspace and interviewing several key informants. The findings of this study show that internal company factors also adversely affect the condition of freelance journalists. Freelance journalists are often considered not an important part of the company, so some need to be equipped with standard equipment, adequate security equipment, and health insurance. So, to deal with this condition, some freelance journalists try to survive by applying individual tactics such as doing business on the sidelines of their journalistic activities. In addition, they also apply institutional strategies by strengthening networks through associations and professional communities.

Keywords: Labour, Journalism, Precarious

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INTRODUCTION

The COVID-19 pandemic has caused many social problems, including in Southeast Asian countries, especially Indonesia. Since the first case confirmed by President Joko Widodo on March 2, 2020, two Indonesian citizens were infected by a previously infected Japanese citizen (Psp/Ugo, 2020), Indonesia has become one of the countries exposed to a large number of cases and increasing number of deaths. As of mid-November 2021, more than 4.25 million confirmed citizens and 144,000 people died (Data, 2021).

One of the impacts of this pandemic is the strengthening of precariousness to journalists, especially freelance journalists (Quandt & Wahl-Jorgensen, 2021). Apart from paramedics, freelance journalists are workers who still have to carry out their activities amid this pandemic and are very vulnerable to being infected with the COVID-19 virus (Sharifi, 2020). Data released by AJI shows that around 294 journalists were infected with Covid-19 during 2020. However, in reality, this figure could be higher, considering that not all journalists are willing to report their cases. (Ni'matun, 2021).

A few months after this pandemic spread to various countries, the International Federation of Journalists (IFJ) released the results of a survey entitled *The Crisis facing journalism in the face of COVID-19* (Kokhanska, 2022). Involving 1,308 respondents in 77 countries, this survey found several things that contributed to the vulnerability of journalist workers in carrying out reporting in the COVID-19 emergency (Wadhar et al., 2023). It is said that the Covid-19 pandemic has confronted journalists with various threatening crises. These include salary cuts, termination of employment, serious obstacles in carrying out journalism duties, deteriorating working conditions, and even worse psychological conditions for journalists. From the survey conducted on April 26-28, it was revealed that 65.4 percent of the respondents had experienced salary cuts, layoffs, and worsening living conditions (IFJ, 2020).

A few weeks after this IFJ's finding, in May 2020, the Alliance of Independent Journalists stated that the successful handling of communications determined the successful handling of the COVID-19 pandemic. AJI stated that the media's response in managing information plays an important role in increasing public awareness and what the community should do to prevent the transmission of COVID-19. In this case, public communication is an inseparable part of journalistic work, especially in packaging and strengthening information and convincing the public of government policies. Thus, attention is needed to the work of journalists (Lee et al., 2021).

The Indonesian government has declared a public health emergency in large-scale social distancing (PSBB), which implies limited space for community activities, including journalists (Masduki & Prastya, 2022). This situation makes it even more difficult for freelance journalists because they do not get monthly wages like journalists with employee status but completely depend on the amount of news that is published in the media. If they work outside the home, they will get paid.

Another problem arose approximately two months after the government officially announced Covid-19. Dozens of journalists have experienced salary cuts, delays in payment of wages, and even dismissals (Trifonova et al., 2022). In just two months, 26 journalists were fired, 21 journalists were temporarily laid off, and 11 journalists experienced salary cuts or delays in payment of salaries. In October 2020, this figure continued to increase because several media such as Tempo, Jawa Pos, The Jakarta Post, and kumparan.com carried out the practices of delaying salaries, cutting salaries, and unilateral layoffs not by the Indonesia Law Labor - act 13 of 2003 (Estella, 2020).

This paper aims to determine the factors that contribute to the precariousness of freelance journalists in Indonesia and the strategies used to negotiate and survive amid an unfinished pandemic.

METHOD

In this study, we carried out several steps concerning new ethnography. This method seeks to be "fairer" to the realities of the other's life. However, due to limited access to informants due to the COVID-19 pandemic, we added the virtual ethnography method, namely by observing the activities, experiences, interactions, and emotions of freelance journalists when practicing journalism. We observed the culture and cultural artifacts of journalists in cyberspace and interviewed some of them as key informants.

Data was collected through interviews with several freelance journalists and representatives. The main sources in this research are freelance journalists in Indonesia consisting of 5 women and five men. We also interviewed several sources from the top three journalist associations in Indonesia, namely the Indonesian Journalists Association (PWI), the Alliance of Independent Journalists (AJI), and the Indonesian Television Journalists Association (IJTI). We also collect and

elaborate secondary data from the literature review, official information from the government, several regulations, and other documents that support this research.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Before discussing the precariousness of freelance journalists during the pandemic, it is important to describe the relations and hierarchy in the newsroom structure to know exactly where the freelance journalist stands in the media industry where he works. Harrower, an editor and columnist who has won several awards, said that Publications are like armies. They need clear lines of authority to avoid chaos. Therefore, in every media organization, there is always a clear hierarchy and relationship between its structures (Ferrucci & Kuhn, 2022).

Referring to Harrower's description, we present Figure 1 of the hierarchical structure of a newsroom in a medium-sized media industry (Rouse et al., 2022). As for larger or smaller companies, the number of tables may vary. This figure shows three structural levels. At the first level or the very top, there is The Publisher, who is the main boss and leads all departments to ensure company profits, which means that there is always a political economy interest in publishing a product in the form of news. At the lower level, there are several positions, such as Production Manager, Circulation Manager, and Advertising Manager. At this level, all managers are in charge of supervising and coordinating all parts running according to plan. In the third layer, there is The Editor, who is responsible for the production process in the newsroom and whose job is to give final consideration to the selection of stories and news philosophy. He oversees several editors, including the Online Editor, Photo Editor, Copy Desk Chief, Features Editor, and Sports Editor. In contrast, at another table, a Copy Desk Chief oversees editing.

At the lowest layer in this editorial structure, there are journalists, photographers, or writers who have an asymmetrical relationship with the third layer described above. They consist of Reporters and Producers who carry out the assigned assignments and write them in the form of stories that will be published in the media. There are also Photographers and Graphic Artists. Photographers are tasked with tracing an event and producing it in photos. At the same time, Graphic Artists create graphics or page designs on pages.

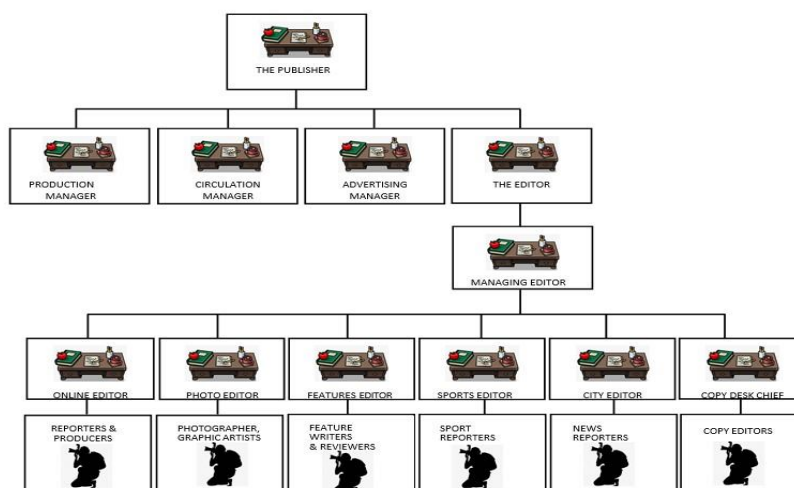


Figure 1: Relations and hierarchy in newsroom structure, re-design from Harrower, 2010

In Figure 1, we can see that the relations in a newsroom are hierarchical and top-down. In addition, this figure does not depict other journalists who have a relationship with the editor. Because there are still actors who work as journalists but need to be mentioned in this structure, they

are correspondents, contributors, wires, or stringers whose identities are often confused with "freelance journalists".

Correspondent refers to someone who sends a letter containing news from a location far from the media company, such as a capital city or commercial center. According to Nerone, correspondents usually do this as a hobby, sometimes receiving a fee per article, but often writing for free, perhaps with an interest in a future career (Simonson et al., 2013). At the same time, the contributor refers to someone who carries out activities like journalists in general, with more legally bound relationships than a correspondent. In Indonesia, the term contributor is generally used for freelancer journalists who work in electronic media, both radio and television. Outside of this term, there are two others, namely wire and stringer, which are usually given to freelancer journalists who work for foreign media.

Even though they are known as 'freelance journalists', in our view, this term may not be correct because if "freelance" refers to free time for journalists to carry out their duties, we find a different reality. All the informants we met work with that status, and they work full-time. Thus, even though they are freelance journalists, they work as full-time journalists. Even though they are known as 'freelance journalists', in our view, this term may not be correct because if "freelance" refers to free time for journalists to carry out their duties, we find a different reality. All the informants we met work with that status, and they work full-time. Thus, even though they are freelance journalists, they work as full-time journalists.

According to our observations and interviews, we found an unequal working relationship between freelancer journalists and the media where they work. This discrepancy is because our informants need to have employment contracts, ID cards, or both. We then divided them into four classifications, as shown in Figure 2. Classification A is freelance journalists who have a contract and are also given an ID card. Journalists who are included in this classification can work more safely because the employment contract can be a guarantee for their relationship with the media company that employs them. An employment contract is a written agreement between a journalist and a company that contains the working conditions, rights, and obligations during his work. By the Indonesian Labor Law, companies must provide them with an employment contract before their work begins.

The second classification is B, where journalists who fall into this classification need a clear employment contract with the company. However, journalist B was still given an ID card as a form of identification for his needs, especially when conducting interviews with informants.

The current classification is C, namely journalists who have a work contract but do not have an ID Card. At the same time, classification D is a journalist who does not have either a work contract or an ID Card. This is the most precarious classification.

	Contract	No Contract
ID	A	B
No ID	C	D

Figure 2: Freelancer journalist classification

We see this classification as being similar to the precariat working class described by Standing. Referring to the classification described by Standing, we see strong and similar characteristics between the precariat group and the freelance journalists who are the subjects of this

research. In the structure of an editorial, they are at the bottom of the hierarchy and have an unequal or unbalanced relationship with the editorial structure to whom they must submit their work.

We found several freelance journalists whose work is still being determined. They carry out activities such as full-time employment. However, in their daily life, there are no benefits or social security, protection of security, completeness of work equipment, uncertainty of wages and standards below living wages, and precarious dismissal.

Pandemic and precariousness of freelance journalists

Lack of standard equipment

We found the vulnerable situation that freelance journalists faced when we observed their activities since the government declared a public health emergency in the form of large-scale social distancing. The limited space for journalism makes them unable to work productively. Journalism is carried out from their homes by interviewing sources via telephone, chat, or government-owned YouTube and social media channels (Goeritman, 2021).

Freelance journalists also experience other precariousness when interacting with news sources in hospitals or other places that could be a source of the spread of this virus. Some of the informants in this research did not have adequate personal protective equipment such as masks or PPE. In general, journalists do not get these facilities from companies, and they cannot afford to buy them themselves, considering the price of personal protective equipment, which is relatively expensive and difficult to obtain in the market. Such a situation is certainly very dangerous for their safety.

"The scarcity of masks forced me to use one mask for three days. Every time I go home from coverage, the side of the mask that sticks to my face is sprayed with alcohol, even though this is not medically recommended. The next day, I use it again after first layering the part of the mask that is attached to the face with a piece of porous tissue" (J1, male, interview)

Another informant who works for a foreign media said he was forced to buy his own PPE in a jacket equipped with a mask and hand sanitizer to reduce the risk of exposure (virus). He convinced himself that the jacket he wore was of better quality because it was made of a different material than PPE. He believes that his jacket can ward off the COVID-19 virus like ordinary personal protective equipment.

Together with other journalists, he often covers the COVID-19 outbreak, including taking pictures of blood sampling activities using the rapid diagnostic test (RDT) method via a drive-thru. The government conducted tests on residents to determine the possibility of the spread of Covid-19. Another activity that is also vulnerable is reporting on funerals for patients who died and were buried in special cemeteries for COVID-19 patients.

"The next challenge was when I had to cover a special funeral for COVID-19 corpses. Funeral workers must wear level 2 PPE when burying bodies with COVID-19 procedures. At that time, hazmat clothing or surgical gowns were not easy to come by. So, for the solution, I wore a raincoat made of plastic 'kretek' for Rp 10,000. Once used, throw it away immediately. Another option is to use a raincoat, which can be washed again after use. Of course, I washed it with soap and disinfectant." (J2, male, Interview)

In order to be able to continue their work, some of our informants then tried to find an alternative using self-made PPE at a lower price. This was mainly done a few months after the government announced the first case in March 2020. At that time, people were buying masks and other health equipment, so there were no more store stocks. Even if there were, they were very expensive, and the informants could not afford to buy the tools.

From this explanation, we understand that several freelance journalists who become informants do not get facilities that are by the health protocol standards set by the government, namely 3M: Wearing masks, washing hands, and keeping social distancing.



Figure 3: informant wore PPE made by another journalist (photo: informant)

No health insurance

The unequal relationship between freelancer journalists and the media industry, as we explained earlier, has resulted in the absence of guarantees for health services, especially during the COVID-19 pandemic. Indonesian Journalists Association's data shows that around 400 thousand journalists still need health insurance (BPJS), decent salaries, or tax allowances (Ford & Ward, 2021).

When there is the COVID-19 pandemic, what journalists need is increasingly open. Many of our members are still isolated, and many are worried. This is partly because there are still many media who pay the journalists by way of contributions to the news that they submit to the media (Hilman et al. of West Java Indonesian Journalists Association, interview).

Some of the informants in this study had been infected with the COVID-19 virus, and they had to do self-care without getting help from the company where they worked. Two female informants admitted that they did not receive any health assistance even though they had reported to the editor that they had been infected with this virus. Moreover, these two informants already have children, and their children have the risk of being infected as well. During the quarantine, they cannot work because they have to take complete rest.

The strategies to negotiate and survive

Several efforts have been put in place by freelance journalists to survive during the pandemic, but it cannot be known when it will end. The first strategy is that some are looking for additional income by starting a small business run by their family. One of them is done by a private television correspondent. He started a business selling chicken meat and eggs after completing his activities as a journalist.



Figure 4: A freelance journalist starting a small business to survive during pandemic

Another journalist decided to choose a strategy by joining the Journalist Association. Informants feel safe because they can gather with freelance journalists. There are even informants who use ID cards as association members as substitutes for press cards from their news organizations. This association is also important as a force when it comes to negotiating with companies about unpaid wages or dismissals. Unions must do this role, but the number of unions in

media companies in Indonesia still needs to grow. Sasmito Madrim, chairman of the Alliance of Independent Journalists, said that out of around 40,000 media outlets in Indonesia, only 40 have unions. So, laborers often encounter difficulties when demanding their rights because there is no place to fight for them.

This pandemic period can be a momentum for journalists to form unions because there are many employment cases such as dismissals, unpaid wages, and others, so all of this can be "capital" to move to form a union. (Sasmito Madrim, Chairperson of The Alliance of Independent Journalists, interview April 2021).

Some of the strategies carried out by freelance journalists are a form of rejecting precariatization, both from internal parties in the media industry and from outside parties. However, it is hard to argue that the deteriorating global economic conditions during the pandemic adversely affected the company's revenues.

CONCLUSION

The COVID-19 pandemic that began to spread in Indonesia in March 2020 has affected the media sector, including freelance journalists (Hayes & Silke, 2018). We find their position in the media where they work is very precarious, for example, because their status is not formally recognized, especially not having a work contract and ID card. This has even worse implications when conditions such as a pandemic hit them. The absence of this formal status causes them not to be equipped with work equipment and adequate security. Even though as journalists, they are required to keep working in the field, conducting observations or interviews with resource persons, all of which pose a risk to the spread of the COVID-19 virus. In addition, their vulnerable position causes them not to have health insurance. When our informants were exposed to COVID-19, they were not provided medical facilities by the company. They have to self-medicate by self-quarantining at home until recovery so they can work again. When they have to rest to recover their body condition, they cannot work on reporting. Thus, they do not have income in honoraria from the news they produce, even though they have to survive, especially for those who are married and have children.

This bad condition can be overcome by assisting the professional association of journalists. The three largest journalist professional associations in Indonesia continue to seek assistance in the form of health equipment such as masks and hand sanitizers. For members exposed to the virus and must be treated or quarantined, the association assists such as cash, food, or medicine. To deal with this ongoing situation, some of our informants started a business at home, either related to their status as journalists or completely new. Our informants, among others, produce equipment or jackets or personal protective equipment that they sell to other journalists. Another informant is trying to survive by starting a business selling eggs and chicken meat in front of his house. They do this business on the sidelines of their work as journalists. From this study, we offer suggestions that freelance journalists keep strengthening the community through professional associations and the journalist community. Thus, their role as an important part in overcoming this pandemic is still strong in these uncertain conditions. On the other hand, starting a business can be an option as long as it does not interfere with the independence of journalists in carrying out their duties.

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