



# Interpretative Phenomenological Study of Meaning-Making in Conflict Reporting by Independent Journalists in Post-Truth Media

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## ABSTRACT

Independent journalism has become a vital force in shaping public discourse, especially in social conflicts and amid declining trust in mainstream media. In this changing media landscape, independent journalists face emotional, ethical, and professional challenges that are still understudied, particularly in the post-truth era marked by misinformation and narrative manipulation. Although research exists on media structures and disinformation, little is known about how independent journalists experience and interpret reporting in these conditions. This study uses interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) to explore the lived experiences of independent journalists covering social conflicts in Indonesia and how they construct meaning without institutional support. Through in-depth interviews with eight independent journalists, four key themes emerged: navigating fragmented truth, emotional toll, negotiating safety and autonomy, and building counter-narratives via digital media. These findings show how journalists balance personal risk and ethical responsibility while confronting contested truths and hostile information environments. The analysis highlights a strong link between emotional labor and journalistic identity, suggesting independent journalism acts as both resistance and self-expression. This research deepens understanding of journalism as an experiential and affective practice, offering valuable insights for future studies on press freedom, trauma, and digital storytelling.



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## INTRODUCTION

In the contemporary media landscape, independent journalism plays a crucial role, especially amid social unrest and political polarization. As traditional news institutions face declining trust and increased corporate or political influence, many journalists turn to independent platforms to cover sensitive or underreported issues such as social conflicts, protest movements, and state-citizen tensions. These journalists operate outside institutional protection, navigating complex environments with limited resources and significant personal risk.

The rise of post-truth discourse complicates their work further. In a climate where emotional appeal often outweighs factual accuracy and misinformation spreads rapidly via digital networks, reporting truth becomes politically charged and contested. Independent journalists covering social conflict face competing narratives, disinformation campaigns, and audience skepticism. Their lived experiences—emotional, ethical, and existential—reflect the tension between professional responsibility and personal vulnerability. This phenomenon holds significant relevance in understanding how individuals experience truth-making and meaning-construction in volatile social settings. The subjective experiences of independent journalists, particularly in conflict zones, offer insight into the human cost of journalism and the evolving nature of press freedom in the digital era. These are not merely occupational challenges; they reflect broader sociocultural shifts in how societies engage with truth, authority, and resistance.

Given the limited scholarly attention to the lived experiences of independent journalists in the post-truth era, there is a pressing need to explore this phenomenon through a phenomenological lens. Such an approach enables a deeper examination of how journalists internalize, narrate, and assign

meaning to their experiences of reporting amidst conflict and misinformation. Understanding these experiences not only contributes to journalism studies but also enriches broader discourses on media ethics, emotional labor, and the sociology of knowledge in contemporary society.

Research on the lived experiences of individuals engaged in high-risk, high-impact roles—such as independent journalists covering social conflicts—has become a critical sub-area within qualitative inquiry, particularly in phenomenological research. This subfield emphasizes the exploration of meaning as constructed through subjective consciousness and embodied engagement with the world. Within the context of conflict reporting, the phenomenon is not merely professional or technical; it involves profound existential negotiation, emotional exposure, and moral reflection, all of which are central to phenomenological investigation.

Despite its importance, existing research on conflict journalism has often relied on content analysis, institutional critiques, or survey-based approaches that inadequately capture the depth of personal experience. Quantitative frameworks, while valuable for trend analysis or policy evaluation, fall short in illuminating how journalists feel, interpret, and internalize their encounters with trauma, misinformation, and ethical complexity in the field. These dimensions are inherently subjective and context-bound, making them inaccessible through purely objective or numerical means.

This methodological limitation has left critical gaps in understanding the essence of independent journalism in the post-truth era. While several studies have addressed the challenges of misinformation (Sanchez, 2023) and the emotional toll of digital storytelling (Behar, 2019), few have examined the full phenomenological arc of journalistic experience—from witnessing and documenting, to narrating and making sense of events—particularly outside institutional structures. Consequently, earlier methodologies have not fully captured the layered, affective, and interpretative dimensions of what it means to be an independent journalist amidst contested truths and sociopolitical volatility.

A more interpretative, experience-oriented approach is therefore essential to understand the realities faced by journalists who operate autonomously within increasingly polarized and digitized environments. Such an approach prioritizes lived experience as both the object of inquiry and the source of insight—revealing not only what happens, but what it means to those who live it.

Most existing approaches to understanding independent journalism in conflict zones have centered on practical frameworks such as media safety protocols, content verification strategies, and political economy critiques of media systems. While these approaches offer valuable insights into operational and institutional challenges, they largely overlook the subjective, affective dimensions of journalistic experience. Specifically, they fail to capture how journalists personally confront disinformation, negotiate ethical boundaries, or internalize the emotional weight of witnessing violence and social unrest.

Studies that have attempted to address these dimensions often rely on surface-level qualitative techniques or assume a detached analytical perspective, which limits the depth of understanding regarding how meaning is constructed through lived experience. For instance, content-based analyses may reveal what is reported, but not how journalists feel during the reporting process, nor how they interpret their own roles and responsibilities in an environment shaped by truth distortion and narrative warfare (Wood, 2021; Sanchez, 2023).

These limitations highlight a crucial gap in the literature: a lack of interpretative, phenomenologically grounded research that centers on the experiential essence of being an independent journalist in the post-truth era. Without such insights, our understanding of journalistic agency, resilience, and moral negotiation remains incomplete—especially for those operating beyond institutional structures where risk, uncertainty, and ethical ambiguity are daily realities.

A phenomenological approach, particularly one grounded in interpretative analysis, offers a powerful alternative for addressing this gap. By focusing on the lived experiences of journalists, such an approach enables a holistic exploration of how individuals make meaning of their work under conditions of sociopolitical tension and informational chaos. It moves beyond what is seen and said, to uncover what is felt, struggled with, and embodied—providing a richer, more human understanding of independent journalism in the contemporary media climate.

Previous studies have explored the challenges of journalism in conflict zones, especially focusing on institutional constraints, media bias, and disinformation. Research by Wood (2021) and Kirtz (2020) highlights the role of digital media in shaping journalistic narratives, while Behar (2019) and Sanchez (2023) emphasize the emotional and ethical burdens carried by independent reporters. However, most of these works do not offer a deep, interpretative understanding of how journalists experience these pressures personally. Theories of post-truth media and narrative construction provide a conceptual framework, but little is known about how these are internalized by journalists on the ground. This gap underscores the need for phenomenological research that centers on lived experience.

This article adopts an interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) to uncover how independent journalists experience, interpret, and give meaning to their work in the era of post-truth. This method allows for an in-depth exploration of subjective experiences, especially in ethically complex and emotionally charged environments. The study addresses the knowledge gap by offering insight into what it feels like to navigate truth, conflict, and identity as a journalist without institutional backing. IPA was chosen for its ability to connect individual accounts with broader sociocultural contexts. This approach reveals how the phenomenon is lived and understood by those directly involved.

The structure of this article begins with an introduction to the phenomenon of conflict journalism in the post-truth era. It then provides a review of relevant literature and the theoretical underpinnings of phenomenological inquiry. The methodology section details the use of IPA, including participant selection, data collection, and analytical procedures. The results present key themes that emerged from the interviews, supported by direct quotations. Finally, the discussion interprets the findings and connects them with broader implications for journalism, ethics, and media studies.

## **RESEARCH METHODS**

### **Study Design**

This study employed an interpretative phenomenological approach (IPA) to explore the lived experiences of independent journalists reporting on social conflicts in the post-truth media landscape. Phenomenology, as a qualitative research design, focuses on uncovering the meanings that individuals ascribe to their lived experiences. The interpretative strand of phenomenology, grounded in Heideggerian philosophy, emphasizes the interpretive engagement with participants' subjective realities and the context in which these experiences occur. This aligns closely with the research aims to understand not only what the journalists experience but how they make sense of their role amid sociopolitical complexities. IPA's focus on the existential and contextual dimensions of experience made it particularly suitable for examining the nuanced ethical and emotional challenges faced by independent journalists working outside institutional frameworks. Through this approach, the study sought to capture the depth and complexity of meaning-making processes as participants negotiate their professional identities and ethical responsibilities in a contested media environment. The design enabled deep engagement with participants' narratives, emphasizing their perspectives and interpretations within specific cultural and media contexts.

### **Participants**

Participants in this study were independent journalists with direct experience reporting on social conflicts in Indonesia between 2020 and 2024. A purposive sampling strategy was used to identify individuals who met specific inclusion criteria: actively working as independent or freelance journalists, having reported on at least one incident of social unrest or political conflict, and possessing the capacity to reflect meaningfully on their experiences. Exclusion criteria included journalists affiliated with formal media institutions or those without field experience in conflict zones. A total of eight participants (5 male, 3 female), aged between 27 and 42, were involved in the study. Their professional backgrounds varied from multimedia journalism to investigative reporting, providing a rich diversity of experiential perspectives.

### **Data Collection**

Data were collected through in-depth, semi-structured interviews, guided by a flexible interview protocol designed to explore participants' emotional, ethical, and practical experiences in conflict reporting. Interviews were conducted either face-to-face in quiet, neutral locations or via secure video conferencing platforms, depending on participants' preferences and availability. Each session lasted between 60 and 90 minutes and was audio-recorded with participants' consent. The interview environment was designed to ensure comfort and psychological safety, allowing participants to express their experiences openly. Interview questions were open-ended, allowing for narrative elaboration and participant-led direction. All recordings were transcribed verbatim and reviewed for accuracy prior to analysis.

### **Data Analysis**

The data were analyzed using Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA), which emphasizes the detailed examination of how individuals make sense of their experiences. Transcripts were read repeatedly to gain immersion, followed by initial coding to identify significant statements, emotional expressions, and experiential meanings. Emergent themes were generated through an iterative process of comparing codes, grouping similar units of meaning, and constructing thematic clusters. Cross-case analysis was conducted to identify recurring patterns while respecting the idiographic nature of each participant's account. NVivo 12 software was used to facilitate data organization, though the interpretative process remained grounded in manual thematic reasoning. The analysis produced core themes that reflect the participants' unique and shared experiences of conflict journalism in the post-truth era.

### **Ethical Considerations**

Ethical approval for the study was obtained from the appropriate institutional research ethics committee. Written informed consent was provided by all participants, and they were briefed about the purpose, procedures, and voluntary nature of the study. Anonymity and confidentiality were strictly maintained by assigning pseudonyms and omitting any identifying information in the transcripts and final report. The study adhered to international ethical standards for research involving human subjects, including respect for autonomy, non-maleficence, and protection of participant well-being.

## **RESULTS**

This section presents the findings from in-depth interviews with independent journalists who have covered various social conflicts in the contemporary post-truth media landscape. The themes that emerged reflect the participants' lived experiences, perceptions, and meaning-making processes. These themes represent recurring patterns of meaning across participants' narratives and are illustrated with direct quotations to maintain the authenticity of their voices.

### **Navigating Truth in a Fragmented Media Landscape**

Participants consistently described the complexity of discerning and representing truth while covering social conflict in the post-truth era. Rather than working within a clear dichotomy of true or false, they encountered competing narratives shaped by political interests, social media virality, and public sentiment.

“People no longer ask if it’s true—they ask if it supports their belief. I can show them proof, but they’ll say it’s fake news if it goes against their side.” (Participant 4)

This challenge forced journalists to rely not only on evidence but also on narrative strategies that balance factual reporting with public credibility.

“I’ve learned to present facts alongside emotional appeal. That’s the only way people listen now. Cold facts just don’t travel.” (Participant 1)

Their testimonies suggest a shift in journalistic ethics and practices, from objective detachment to strategic engagement with audiences' values and biases.

### **The Emotional Toll of Bearing Witness**

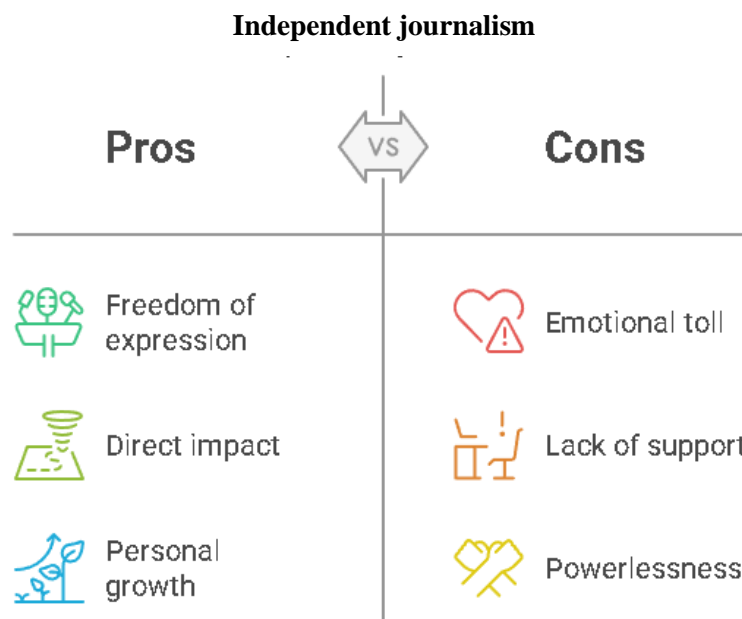
Covering social conflicts without institutional support placed immense emotional pressure on the participants. As independent journalists, they often lacked access to counseling, debriefing, or editorial support systems, leading to prolonged emotional burdens.

“I was there when a protest turned violent. I filmed it all, and for days, I couldn’t sleep. There’s no one to talk to—no editor, no newsroom. Just me and my footage.” (Participant 6)

Participants also reflected on the psychological weight of witnessing suffering while feeling powerless to intervene.

“You become a vessel for pain. You record it, write it, publish it—and yet, nothing changes. It breaks you a little each time.” (Participant 2)

This theme emphasizes the personal costs of independent journalism, which often remain invisible in mainstream discourse.



### **Negotiating Safety and Autonomy**

While independence offered flexibility and freedom from editorial constraints, it also exposed participants to significant personal risks. They had to manage their own safety, credibility, and logistics without institutional backing.

“There’s no press card to flash when things get ugly. I rely on instincts—and luck. Sometimes I dress like the crowd just to blend in.” (Participant 3)

Some described experiences of being targeted online or in person due to their reporting, particularly when narratives they presented conflicted with dominant public opinions.

“After I published a story on police violence, I received anonymous threats. They found my number and messaged me, telling me to stop.” (Participant 5)

These experiences highlight the precarious balance between journalistic autonomy and vulnerability in conflict zones.

### **Building Counter-Narratives through Digital Media**

Digital platforms enabled participants to share stories bypassing traditional gatekeeping. However, they also faced challenges in maintaining credibility in spaces saturated with misinformation and disinformation.

“I can post a story instantly, but so can a troll account spreading lies. We’re fighting for truth in a space where lies go viral faster.” (Participant 7)

Despite these obstacles, participants viewed digital media as a crucial space for counter-narratives and activist journalism.

“I tell the stories that big media won’t touch. The people I interview trust me because I’m not part of a corporation.” (Participant 1)

This theme illustrates how independent journalists navigate digital media not only as platforms of dissemination but also as contested terrains of truth.

The findings reveal a multidimensional lived experience of independent journalists as they strive to report on social conflicts in a complex post-truth environment. Their narratives show how they negotiate between truth and belief, emotional resilience and trauma, autonomy and risk, while attempting to build credible counter-narratives in a fragmented media ecosystem. These voices reflect the human cost and ethical intricacies of contemporary independent journalism.

## **DISCUSSION**

The findings of this study reveal that independent journalists reporting on social conflicts in the post-truth era experience a complex negotiation of personal ethics, emotional resilience, and narrative credibility. These lived experiences reflect the psychological, moral, and practical struggles of engaging with fragmented truths and hostile media environments—directly responding to the research question concerning how these journalists construct meaning through their work.

The themes identified—navigating fragmented truth, emotional toll, negotiating safety, and building counter-narratives—provide a comprehensive response to the central inquiry. They illustrate that journalism in this context is not merely a professional act, but a deeply personal endeavor shaped by uncertainty, resistance, and existential reflection. Unlike institutional journalists, independent reporters must shoulder both the burden of truth-telling and the cost of visibility in increasingly hostile sociopolitical climates. These findings contribute new understanding to the field by foregrounding the affective and meaning-making dimensions of independent journalism, which are often overlooked in more structural or output-focused analyses.

This study complements existing literature while extending its scope. For example, Sanchez (2023) discusses the therapeutic value of digital storytelling among survivors, a notion echoed in participants' accounts of emotional release through journalistic narrative. Similarly, Behar (2019) explores embodied narratives in grassroots media, which aligns with this study's insights into journalism as a form of lived witness and self-exposure. However, this research diverges from prior works by centering independent journalists as meaning-makers rather than mere content producers, emphasizing their internal negotiations amid the external chaos of misinformation and socio-political instability. It adds depth to theoretical conversations about media ethics and emotional labor by bringing forward voices that often remain marginalized in media studies discourse.

The findings of this study carry significant implications for understanding the ethical, emotional, and epistemological dimensions of independent journalism in contested information environments. On a professional level, the study highlights the need for greater institutional recognition of independent journalists' contributions and vulnerabilities, particularly in contexts where they act as first-hand witnesses without the support systems available to mainstream media. Culturally, the narratives underscore how truth is increasingly negotiated through emotion, identity, and community alignment—suggesting a shift in how journalistic authority is perceived in the digital age. Socially, the study draws attention to the precarity of journalistic labor and the personal sacrifices involved in sustaining public discourse under hostile conditions. These insights are relevant not only for journalism scholars and practitioners but also for media policy stakeholders and human rights advocates working to protect press freedom in transitional societies.

As with all qualitative research, this study has several limitations that warrant consideration. The findings are based on a relatively small, purposively selected sample of independent journalists, which limits the ability to generalize results to all journalists or conflict contexts. The focus on Indonesia provides deep contextual richness, but similar phenomena in different cultural or political settings may

yield distinct experiential patterns. Furthermore, while interpretative phenomenological analysis enables rich insight into subjective meaning-making, it inherently prioritizes depth over breadth. These limitations, however, do not diminish the study's value but rather highlight the need for complementary studies using varied designs and larger participant groups.

Future research may expand on this study by exploring comparative experiences of independent and institutional journalists in conflict reporting, especially in different national contexts. Longitudinal studies could investigate how meaning-making evolves over time as journalists revisit or relive their coverage of traumatic events. Additionally, research could further examine the intersection of digital activism, emotional labor, and journalistic identity in the post-truth era. By continuing to center lived experience within journalism studies, future inquiries can better capture the complex interplay between narrative, emotion, and social accountability in contemporary media practice.

## **CONCLUSION**

This study explored the lived experiences of independent journalists reporting on social conflicts in the post-truth media era, focusing on how they construct meaning amidst narrative fragmentation and ethical tension. The research revealed that these journalists navigate a complex landscape of truth-making, emotional burden, and personal risk without institutional support. Key themes such as negotiating fragmented truth, emotional resilience, and building counter-narratives show the depth of their professional and existential struggles. Beyond restating these findings, this study underscores the urgent need to recognize and support the vital role of independent journalists as frontline defenders of truthful reporting in increasingly hostile media environments. These findings address critical gaps in previous research by offering an interpretative understanding of journalistic identity and agency in hostile information environments. The study contributes to journalism and media ethics literature by centering experience as a source of knowledge rather than merely an object of analysis. Therefore, stakeholders—media organizations, policymakers, and academic institutions—must collaborate to create protective frameworks that empower independent journalists and safeguard press freedom. Future studies may extend this work through cross-cultural comparisons or longitudinal designs to examine how meaning-making evolves over time.

## **CONFLICT OF INTEREST**

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest.

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