



Between Clicks and Conscience: Editorial Sense-Making in Local Digital Newsrooms

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ABSTRACT

Digital journalism has transformed how editorial decisions are made, increasingly shifting authority from human judgment to algorithmic systems. Within this evolving landscape, local online news editors in Indonesia face mounting pressure to balance journalistic integrity with platform-driven performance metrics. While prior research has examined institutional and structural responses to algorithmic influence, there remains limited understanding of how editors themselves experience and interpret these pressures in their daily routines. This study asks: how do local Indonesian online editors make sense of their editorial judgment under the influence of algorithms and audience metrics? Employing an interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA), this research investigates the lived experiences of eight local news editors (four women and four men) from a diverse range of Indonesian digital media outlets, including both independent and corporate-owned organizations operating in urban and regional contexts. Data were gathered through in-depth, semi-structured interviews and analyzed thematically to uncover shared patterns of meaning.

Three dominant experiential themes emerged: (1) the persistent tension between editorial ideals and audience-driven metrics; (2) the shifting definition of newsworthiness shaped by algorithmic visibility and platform logic; and (3) the emergence of internal ethical dilemmas and professional identity fragmentation. These findings highlight not only operational challenges but also the emotional and moral negotiations embedded in digital editorial practices.

By illuminating these dynamics, the study contributes to a deeper understanding of editorial subjectivity in the context of algorithmic governance. It also provides practical implications for newsroom leadership and journalism educators to develop strategies that support editorial autonomy and well-being amid digital pressures. This research lays the groundwork for further phenomenological inquiries into the affective dimensions of digital media labor.



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INTRODUCTION

In the rapidly evolving landscape of digital journalism, editorial judgment has become increasingly shaped by the logics of algorithmic systems and audience engagement metrics. As news production migrates to online platforms, editors face new challenges that extend beyond traditional journalistic practices. The digital environment is no longer neutral; it actively influences which stories are told, how they are framed, and how their value is assessed. In this context, the role of news editors has shifted significantly—from curators of public knowledge to navigators within data-driven infrastructures that often prioritize virality over substance (Adams, 2023).

This shift holds profound implications not only for the nature of news but also for the lived experiences of those responsible for making editorial decisions. Editors operate in a climate where professional ideals intersect with commercial imperatives, creating ethical, emotional, and cognitive tensions. The sense of professional identity, once anchored in journalistic norms such as public service and editorial independence, is increasingly questioned in light of algorithmic pressures and

performance-based evaluations (Albaladejo-Ortega dkk., 2024). These dynamics are particularly pronounced in local online media outlets, where resource limitations and economic survival intensify the negotiation between integrity and viability.

Understanding this phenomenon requires attention not merely to organizational structures or media systems, but to the subjective experiences of those embedded within them. The phenomenological approach offers a compelling lens for exploring how editors make sense of their roles, reconcile competing values, and interpret their agency within algorithmically mediated environments. Rather than measuring behaviors or outcomes, this approach seeks to uncover the meaning structures and emotional landscapes that shape how phenomena are lived and understood.

In such a context, a deeper exploration of how local news editors experience and interpret editorial decision-making under algorithmic influence becomes not only relevant but essential. It speaks to the human dimension of digital transformation in journalism—how individuals feel, think, and act in the face of invisible systems that increasingly dictate the flow of public information.

The investigation of subjective experiences within specific professional contexts has gained increasing scholarly attention, particularly in fields that are undergoing significant structural and technological change. In digital journalism, the lived experience of editorial decision-making under algorithmic influence represents one such area of interest. Editors are no longer autonomous agents operating solely within normative frameworks; rather, they are embedded in systems that continuously reshape their judgments, routines, and values (Allen dkk., 2022). This shift calls for methodological approaches that can illuminate how such experiences are felt, interpreted, and given meaning.

However, capturing the essence of these experiences presents methodological challenges. Traditional research on journalism practices has often relied on quantitative metrics, content analysis, or large-scale surveys that, while valuable, tend to overlook the emotional and interpretative layers of editorial work. These approaches frequently fail to account for the complexity of meaning-making processes that occur at the intersection of ethical reflection, institutional pressure, and technological mediation (Austin dkk., 2023).

As a result, much of the existing literature does not sufficiently address the internal dialogues, value negotiations, and existential dilemmas faced by editors as they navigate algorithmically shaped environments. The reliance on external observations and aggregated data may offer a generalized understanding of newsroom behavior, but it lacks the depth needed to uncover the essential structures of experience. This limitation underscores the need for a research paradigm that privileges personal meaning and phenomenological insight over surface-level behavioral analysis.

By focusing on how local news editors interpret their editorial roles amid shifting digital landscapes, the present study aims to fill this gap through a phenomenological inquiry that centers on lived experience, not only as a data point but as the foundation for understanding a complex, evolving professional identity.

In addressing the increasing influence of algorithmic systems on editorial decision-making, existing studies have largely adopted practical or system-oriented approaches, such as performance analytics, content strategy assessments, or organizational workflow analyses (Barbaro dkk., 2022). While these approaches have contributed to understanding how metrics shape newsroom behavior, they often prioritize observable outcomes over internal experiences, thus overlooking the deeply personal, ethical, and cognitive dimensions of editorial judgment.

These prevailing methodologies fall short in capturing how editors feel, make sense of, and negotiate their professional identities in real time. Quantitative tools, such as engagement dashboards or survey-based satisfaction metrics, may document patterns of adaptation, but they fail to reveal the nuanced, internal processes by which editors interpret algorithmic pressures, resolve ethical dilemmas, or redefine news values in their day-to-day decisions (Blanco-Castilla dkk., 2022).

This gap calls for a methodological alternative that foregrounds experience over behavior and meaning over measurement. A phenomenological approach is uniquely positioned to fulfill this need.

By prioritizing lived experience and interpretive meaning, phenomenology allows for a more comprehensive understanding of how editorial identities are constructed, challenged, and reconfigured within the socio-technological frameworks of contemporary journalism. It enables scholars to move beyond surface-level descriptions and engage with the essence of the phenomenon—how editors live through and make sense of editorial decision-making in an environment governed by algorithmic logic.

Previous research on digital journalism has explored how audience metrics, platform algorithms, and newsroom routines influence editorial practices. Scholars such as (Carr dkk., 2020) have examined the structural tensions between journalistic values and digital performance systems. However, few studies have addressed how editors personally experience these pressures or interpret their professional roles in response. Research tends to focus on systemic outcomes rather than the meaning-making processes of individuals. This study builds on that gap by turning attention to the subjective experiences of local editors.

To explore this, an interpretative phenomenological approach was adopted. This method was selected to uncover the lived experiences and perceived meanings held by local online editors as they navigate algorithmic influence in their editorial work. Phenomenology enables deeper insights into how participants understand their world and act within it (Cooper, 2019). By focusing on personal narratives, this study aims to reveal the underlying structures of thought, emotion, and identity that shape editorial judgment. The findings respond directly to the knowledge gap by offering a richer understanding of editorial sense-making under digital pressure.

This article is structured as follows: The introduction outlines the research background, current understanding of the phenomenon, and the rationale for a phenomenological inquiry. The method section describes the interpretative phenomenological design, participant selection, data collection procedures, and analytical steps. The results section presents key experiential themes derived from the data, supported by direct quotations. The discussion elaborates on these findings in relation to existing theory and broader socio-technological contexts. Finally, the conclusion highlights the implications for journalism studies and editorial practice in algorithm-driven environments.

RESEARCH METHODS

Study Design

This study adopted an interpretative phenomenological approach to explore the lived experiences of local online news editors in navigating editorial decision-making under algorithmic and audience metric pressures. Interpretative phenomenology, grounded in the philosophical tradition of Heidegger, emphasizes the co-construction of meaning through the participant's account and the researcher's interpretative engagement. This approach was selected for its capacity to illuminate how editors interpret and give meaning to the dilemmas they face in balancing professional ideals and digital performance demands (Diepeveen & Pinet, 2022). By focusing on subjective experience, this design enabled a deep exploration of the cognitive, emotional, and ethical dimensions embedded within editorial practices in the context of algorithmic influence.

Participants

Participants consisted of local online news editors with a minimum of three years of professional experience in digital journalism. Inclusion criteria required active engagement in editorial decision-making processes, familiarity with audience analytics tools, and experience operating within algorithm-driven publishing environments. Individuals not directly involved in editorial tasks or currently inactive in digital newsrooms were excluded. Participants were selected through purposive sampling to ensure relevance to the research phenomenon. The sample included eight editors (5 males, 3 females), aged between 29 and 45 years, representing various local online media outlets in Indonesia. Their varied organizational contexts and geographical locations enriched the dataset and provided diverse perspectives on the phenomenon under study.

Data Collection

Data were collected through in-depth, semi-structured interviews guided by a flexible interview protocol that encouraged open-ended narratives (Dunleavy dkk., 2024). Interviews were conducted in person or via secure online platforms, depending on participants' availability and convenience. Each interview lasted between 60 and 90 minutes and was audio-recorded with informed consent. The interviews took place in settings chosen by the participants to ensure comfort and privacy, including editorial offices and home environments. The interview guide was developed based on core phenomenological principles and was refined following a pilot interview to enhance clarity and responsiveness. All interviews were transcribed verbatim to maintain the integrity of participants' expressions.

Data Analysis

Data were analyzed using interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA), which involves a systematic, iterative process of coding, theme development, and interpretive synthesis. The analysis began with repeated readings of the transcripts to identify significant meaning units. These units were then clustered into emergent themes through thematic mapping and examined through a hermeneutic lens to uncover underlying meanings. NVivo software was utilized to support data organization and facilitate thematic coding. The final themes were constructed through a process of abstraction and integration, capturing both individual nuances and shared experiences across participants. This approach enabled the emergence of essential meanings that reflect how editors experience and interpret the tensions between editorial judgment and digital performance metrics.

Ethical Considerations

Ethical approval for this study was obtained from the appropriate institutional review board prior to data collection. Written informed consent was provided by all participants, who were assured of their right to withdraw at any stage without consequence (Foà dkk., 2024). To maintain confidentiality, pseudonyms were assigned and all identifying information was removed from transcripts and reports. Data were securely stored and handled in accordance with institutional and international ethical guidelines for human subject research.

RESULTS

The findings of this study are structured around three central themes that emerged from the interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) of in-depth interviews with local online news editors. These themes reflect the nuanced subjective experiences of participants as they navigate editorial judgment in the shadow of algorithmic influence and click-driven imperatives. The narrative is built around the voices of the participants, allowing the lived meanings of their experiences to unfold through direct quotations and contextual interpretation.

Navigating the Tension Between Editorial Ideals and Click Metrics

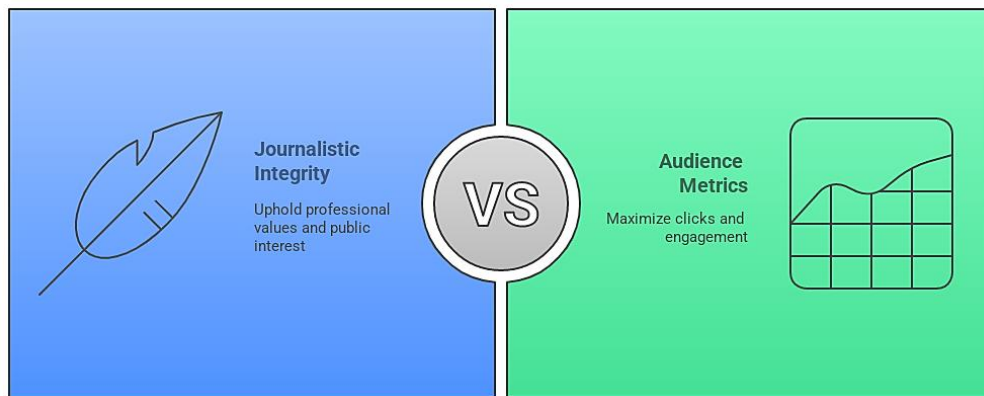
Editors described an ongoing internal conflict between maintaining journalistic integrity and responding to the performance demands imposed by algorithmic systems and audience metrics. Many participants expressed a deep sense of ambivalence when making editorial decisions that favored virality over substance.

"I know this kind of headline will attract clicks, but sometimes it feels like I'm betraying what journalism is supposed to be," (Editor 3).

This theme highlights how editors do not merely follow audience metrics but actively negotiate their meaning in light of professional values. The decision to prioritize certain stories over others was often portrayed not as an act of surrender but as a calculated compromise to survive within the digital economy. Despite pressures, several editors emphasized their intent to preserve the "public interest" aspect of journalism.

"There are stories we must run because they matter, even if nobody clicks on them. But we have to be strategic about when and how to publish them," (Editor 7).

How should editors balance journalistic integrity and audience metrics?



Reconstructing Newsworthiness Under Algorithmic Influence

The concept of "news value" has become increasingly fluid. Editors shared that their traditional understanding of newsworthiness has shifted significantly, not solely by editorial judgment, but by anticipating how platforms like Facebook or Google might treat a story.

"We now think about how the algorithm will treat a story before we even assign it. That's something I never thought would happen in my editorial career," (Editor 1).

Newsworthiness, once grounded in relevance, significance, and timeliness, is now reinterpreted through the lens of predicted engagement and platform responsiveness. Editors described this not as a deterministic process, but as one that demands continuous recalibration.

"A story about local policy could die without a trace online, but a less important scandal will go viral. That's the reality we work with," (Editor 5).

This theme captures the ongoing transformation in the editorial meaning-making process, where news selection is both shaped and reshaped by invisible algorithmic structures.

Ethical Dissonance and Identity Fragmentation

Participants frequently described ethical dilemmas and personal dissonance as they attempted to balance commercial realities with professional ideals. The psychological toll of this balancing act was evident in expressions of self-doubt, fatigue, and identity confusion.

"I feel like I'm two people—one who wants to do journalism that matters, and one who's chasing metrics to keep the site alive," (Editor 6).

Some editors employed strategies of internal justification, distinguishing between their "ideal editor self" and the "pragmatic actor" necessary for digital survival. Others reported experiencing burnout and existential questioning of their role.

"There are days I don't recognize myself anymore. We used to fight for truth. Now we fight for clicks," (Editor 2).

This theme reflects the deeper emotional and cognitive fragmentation experienced by editors as they attempt to preserve professional identity in a landscape driven by platform logic.

The essence of the participants' experience centers on the fragile balance between upholding editorial values and responding to algorithmic expectations. Editors are not passive victims of technology but are meaning-makers engaged in ongoing negotiation between professional integrity and platform-induced pressures. Their narratives reveal the emotional and ethical costs of this negotiation, as well as the adaptive strategies they employ to sustain both the newsroom and their sense of purpose.

DISCUSSION

The findings of this study reveal the complex and often conflicting experiences of local online news editors as they navigate editorial judgment within algorithmically shaped environments. These experiences reflect an ongoing negotiation between professional ideals and the pragmatic realities of platform-driven journalism, directly addressing the central question of how editors interpret their roles and decisions in response to digital performance pressures.

The insights generated through interpretative phenomenological analysis offer a unique and nuanced answer to this question. Rather than portraying editors as passive agents responding to technological change, the study highlights their active and reflective engagement with ethical dilemmas, shifting news values, and fragmented professional identities. The themes uncovered—such as the tension between editorial values and click metrics, the redefinition of newsworthiness, and the internalization of ethical dissonance—demonstrate that editorial decision-making is experienced as a layered, emotionally charged process. These findings extend our understanding of algorithmic influence by grounding it in personal narratives that expose the human cost and meaning-making processes within digital journalism.

The results align with previous scholarship that identifies the disruptive effects of algorithms on journalistic authority and editorial autonomy (Frau-Meigs, 2024), yet they go further by providing an interpretive, experience-centered account of these disruptions. For example, while (Grotlüschen dkk., 2024) emphasized structural dilemmas within news organizations, this study reveals how such dilemmas are embodied and negotiated at the individual level. The findings also support (Jamil & Alazrak, 2023) notion of journalism in crisis, but they add emotional and existential dimensions by illustrating how editors internalize and cope with these crises. In doing so, the study contributes a deeper phenomenological understanding to the literature on algorithmic gatekeeping, showing how editorial sense-making is shaped not only by institutional norms but also by personal values, emotions, and ethical reflection.

Implications of the Findings

The findings of this study carry important implications for both journalism practice and media scholarship. Socially and professionally, the results highlight the emotional labor and ethical negotiations that local editors must undertake in response to algorithmic and commercial pressures. This underscores the urgent need for news organizations to acknowledge and address the psychological and moral burdens faced by editors, particularly in under-resourced environments. Culturally, the study invites a broader reflection on how algorithmic systems shape not only public discourse but also the internal experiences of those who mediate that discourse. These insights can inform the development of more ethically sensitive editorial frameworks and platform policies that recognize the lived realities of digital newswork.

Study Limitations

As with all qualitative research, this study is subject to certain limitations. The purposive sample of eight editors, though diverse in experience and geography, does not permit generalization to all editorial contexts or national media systems. The study focused specifically on local online media in Indonesia, which may differ in structure and pressure dynamics from other media landscapes. Additionally, while the phenomenological approach provides rich, in-depth insights, it does not aim to measure prevalence or causality. These limitations, however, do not detract from the validity of the findings; rather, they point to the need for complementary studies that explore similar phenomena in different cultural and organizational contexts.

Prospects for Future Research

Future research could expand on this study by exploring how editors in national or international media organizations experience similar tensions, or how emerging technologies like AI-generated content further complicate editorial roles. Comparative phenomenological studies across different countries or media ecosystems could provide additional insight into how local cultural values intersect with global digital pressures (Kresin dkk., 2025). Furthermore, interdisciplinary

collaboration with psychology or organizational studies may deepen understanding of the coping strategies and identity negotiations editors employ. This research contributes a foundational step in recognizing editorial experience as a vital domain of inquiry within journalism studies, opening new pathways for phenomenologically informed exploration of professional identity and digital transformation.

CONCLUSION

This study explored how local online news editors experience and interpret editorial decision-making under the influence of algorithmic and click-driven pressures. Through a phenomenological lens, the research revealed that editors actively negotiate ethical tensions, redefine newsworthiness, and navigate fragmented professional identities in response to digital demands. The findings offer deeper insights into the human dimensions of editorial work that previous system-oriented or quantitative studies have often overlooked. This study contributes to journalism scholarship by highlighting the emotional, ethical, and cognitive aspects of editorial judgment in a rapidly evolving media landscape. It underscores the need for media institutions and platform designers to consider the lived experiences of editors when shaping newsroom policies and digital infrastructures. Future studies may expand this inquiry by comparing editorial experiences across different cultural or technological contexts to enrich our understanding of professional identity in digital journalism.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest regarding the publication of this article. All funding sources have been transparently acknowledged, and the research was conducted independently, without any influence from the sponsor on the design, analysis, or interpretation of the data.

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