



## Aesthetic Misinformation in Local Digital Journalism: A Case Study on Editorial Bypass in Public Service News Production

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**Abstract.** *The transformation of journalism in the digital age has led to the emergence of local online media platforms operating without formal editorial structures. This study investigates the news production process of a public service article published by a semi-professional online portal, focusing on how editorial routines are adapted—or bypassed—in decentralized environments. The selected article, which listed hospitals affiliated with the national health insurance program, was widely circulated yet contained factual inaccuracies that impacted readers' real-life service access. Using a qualitative case study design, the research draws on interviews with the editor, observational data, document analysis, and reader responses. The results reveal a linear, individualized editorial workflow in which a single actor handled all stages of production without verification protocols. Visual design elements such as structured layouts and official-like typography were employed to simulate credibility, resulting in what this paper terms aesthetic misinformation. While the article was produced to serve the public, the absence of institutional oversight contributed to its unreliability. The findings contribute to media and communication studies by highlighting the tension between visual legitimacy and journalistic integrity in grassroots media production. The study recommends adopting lightweight editorial standards and reflexive design practices to promote ethical information dissemination in non-institutionalized news environments.*

**Keywords:** *Digital journalism, editorial workflow, aesthetic misinformation, local media, visual credibility*

### INTRODUCTION

The transformation of journalistic production in the digital era has fundamentally altered how news is curated, validated, and distributed to the public. With the increasing dominance of online media platforms, particularly at the local level, the boundaries between professional journalism and user-generated content are increasingly blurred (Główczyński, 2022), (Simatzkin-Ohana & Frosh, 2022). In Indonesia, where mobile internet penetration has surpassed 77% of the population (Situmorang et al., 2023), digital news portals have become primary sources of information, especially concerning public services such as healthcare, transportation, and administration (Riad et al., 2022). However, the rapid growth of local news portals raises critical concerns about the reliability and accuracy of public service information presented without rigorous editorial validation. A significant example is the circulation of a news article listing hospitals claimed to collaborate with the national health insurance agency (BPJS) in a major urban region, which, upon validation, was found to include inaccurate entries, misleading public expectations.

Numerous studies have addressed the structure and workflow of digital newsrooms and the role of editorial policy in ensuring journalistic accountability (Sonni et al., 2024), (Gallofré Ocaña & Opdahl, 2022), (Mtchedlidze, 2024). Scholars such as (Guo et al., 2025), (Yang et al., 2025) emphasize that editorial routines—such as desk meetings, multi-stage editing, and field verification—are crucial for mitigating misinformation, especially in articles with public service relevance. Others argue that in semi-professional or blog-based media, the lack of newsroom hierarchy often results in singular editorial control, compromising the accuracy of reports (Yang et al., 2025), (Hamada & Abdel-Salam, 2025). In the Indonesian media landscape, local online portals often operate outside institutional regulation, with limited resources and informal workflows (Prasetyo, 2024), (Wardiyanto et al., 2025). While some portals successfully adapt ethical journalism frameworks into their practice (Karlsson et al., 2023), many still rely on heuristic judgments and minimal verification processes, particularly when republishing information sourced from social media or government websites.

Despite the existing body of research on digital journalism, there is a gap in the empirical investigation of editorial practices in semi-professional local online media, especially regarding how public service news is produced and the risks associated with bypassing editorial verification. Most prior work focuses on mainstream or institutional media (Sonni et al., 2024), (Gallofré Ocaña & Opdahl, 2022), leaving a lack of scholarly attention on how news is produced in decentralized, often single-editor-run, online portals where journalistic routines are not formally structured. This gap is critical, as such platforms increasingly influence public perception in urban communities and frequently operate as the primary news source for service-related content (Riad et al., 2022), (Wardiyanto et al., 2025).

To address this issue, this study aims to examine the editorial and production process of a public service news article published on a local Indonesian online portal, specifically analyzing the steps involved in content creation, editorial decision-making, and fact-checking mechanisms. The study employs a qualitative case study approach focusing on a news article listing hospitals purportedly partnered with BPJS. By doing so, it seeks to uncover the limitations of current editorial practices in non-institutionalized digital newsrooms.

This research contributes to the discourse on media ethics, localized journalism, and digital communication by highlighting the implications of editorial bypassing in the production of public service content. It advocates for the integration of structured editorial mechanisms even in grassroots or semi-professional news platforms and provides a framework for evaluating news production workflows in decentralized environments. The findings aim to assist media practitioners, scholars, and regulatory bodies in understanding and improving the reliability of public-oriented journalism in the age of digital decentralization.

## **LITERATURE REVIEW**

The digitization of journalism has profoundly reshaped how news is produced, edited, and disseminated, especially within online platforms that prioritize speed, audience metrics, and platform compatibility over traditional editorial rigor. In conventional newsrooms, structured editorial routines such as desk meetings, source triangulation, and multi-stage editing have long served to ensure content credibility (Główczyński, 2022), (Simatzkin-Ohana & Frosh, 2022). However, in the context of online media—particularly local or independently operated outlets—these structures are often fragmented or absent (Situmorang et al., 2023). Singer (Riad et al., 2022) notes that the immediacy imperative in digital journalism tends to undermine reflective editorial practices, replacing deliberative processes with accelerated production cycles shaped by audience data and click-driven priorities.

As online news portals multiply across local and regional contexts, the editorial process becomes increasingly informal, with single individuals often taking on multiple roles as reporter, editor, and publisher (Sonni et al., 2024). (Gallofré Ocaña & Opdahl, 2022) conceptualizes this shift as “gatewatching,” where digital journalists curate existing information rather than independently verifying new facts, thus transforming the very nature of editorial control. (Mtchedlidze, 2024) further argues that digital interactivity, while democratizing content contribution, simultaneously reduces newsroom authority over factual integrity. This has led to growing concerns over the prevalence of unverifiable claims in semi-professional media spaces, especially when news content is derived from government bulletins, social media discourse, or community submissions with minimal journalistic scrutiny (Guo et al., 2025).

The problem is particularly acute in public service journalism, where accuracy is paramount. Journalism in this domain, especially when covering topics such as healthcare access, social protection, and civic administration, has a direct impact on citizens' decision-making (Yang et al., 2025). As (Hamada & Abdel-Salam, 2025) highlights, journalism that fails to uphold its civic function risks eroding public trust and enabling misinformation to circulate unchecked. In Indonesia, public expectations for accessible and reliable service information have placed increased pressure on digital outlets to publish rapidly, often at the cost of factual precision (Prasetyo, 2024). This is exacerbated in local contexts where editorial procedures are not standardized, and news content related to public services may be generated without fact-checking protocols (Wardiyanto et al., 2025).

Compounding the issue is the growing influence of technological infrastructure, content management systems, SEO-driven layout constraints, and algorithmic news ranking, which further shape what gets published and how (Karlsson et al., 2023). (Zhu, 2023) warns that as content production becomes automated and optimized for discoverability, the space for careful editorial judgment narrows significantly. In small-scale or volunteer-run portals, editorial discretion is often reactive rather than deliberative, dictated by social media trends or immediate audience response (De Morais, 2022). Journalists and editors in such settings operate under the weight of platform logic, wherein viral visibility frequently overrides the principles of public accountability and verification (Walters, 2022). As a result, the visual and textual aesthetics of reliability may persist, even when the underlying facts are poorly substantiated.

This condition is reflective of broader structural limitations in Indonesian local media ecosystems. (Luik & Aritonang, 2021) and (Krisdinanto et al., 2024) both note that journalistic professionalism in Indonesia is often shaped more by survivalist economics than by institutional editorial culture. In regional media, content production frequently involves recontextualizing existing information rather than independently gathering new data (Haapanen & Manninen, 2023), (Schwarzenegger, 2023), (Torenholt & Tjørnhøj-Thomsen, 2022). News about hospitals or health services, for example, is commonly aggregated from government websites and republished with minimal adaptation (Li, 2023), (Beard et al., 2024). While such practices may fulfill short-term informational

needs, they also risk amplifying inaccuracies, particularly when the data is outdated or incomplete.

The ethical implications of this editorial laxity are significant. As (Oso et al., 2024) argues, journalism serves a social function grounded in transparency, accuracy, and accountability. When these norms are compromised—either by technical constraints, economic pressure, or editorial simplification—the reliability of public information becomes uncertain. In Indonesia’s decentralized media landscape, regulatory oversight remains weak at the grassroots level, allowing small portals to operate without adherence to press council standards or legal liability frameworks (Siahaan et al., 2025). This makes editorial bypassing not just a technical flaw, but a systemic vulnerability. While the literature offers valuable insights into newsroom dynamics and platform logics, there remains a critical gap in empirical research focused on how semi-professional online portals produce public service news without robust editorial safeguards. Addressing this gap is essential to strengthen the informational infrastructure relied upon by urban citizens in the digital age.

## **METHODS**

This study adopts a qualitative research approach with a case study design to explore how editorial processes operate in a semi-professional digital news environment. The research is framed within a post-positivist paradigm, which acknowledges the existence of an objective reality while also recognizing the limits of fully capturing it due to researcher bias and contextual complexity (Główczyński, 2022). This paradigm is suitable for examining journalistic practices, particularly in dynamic and decentralized settings where institutional structures are either informal or absent. By focusing on a specific case involving the publication of a public service news article, the study aims to investigate the editorial routines, content decision-making, and verification strategies within the selected media platform.

The case under investigation involves a locally operated online news portal that published a public service article listing healthcare institutions affiliated with the national health insurance system. The portal operates independently without formal newsroom hierarchy or institutional editorial oversight. The case was selected due to its relevance to the broader issue of information reliability in community-based digital media. This study

focuses on a single article published in 2022, which was widely circulated and cited among local citizens seeking healthcare information. Upon preliminary investigation, factual inconsistencies in the article became apparent—prompting a deeper inquiry into how the article was produced and verified.

Data were collected through in-depth, semi-structured interviews with the portal’s editor and contributing journalists, supported by document analysis of the published article, editorial drafts, and internal communication records. Additionally, field observations and informal interviews were conducted with four readers who attempted to use the information in the article to access healthcare services. These participants were selected using purposive sampling to ensure that they had direct experience with the effects of the article’s content. This multi-source triangulation was designed to ensure data validity and provide a comprehensive understanding of the editorial and audience perspectives (Simatzkin-Ohana & Frosh, 2022), (Situmorang et al., 2023).

For data analysis, this study employed thematic content analysis to identify recurring patterns, editorial decisions, and omissions throughout the news production process (Riad et al., 2022). The data were coded inductively, allowing for the emergence of themes such as “editorial centralization,” “absence of verification,” and “aesthetic adaptation of external sources.” These themes were then interpreted through the lens of media ethics and editorial theory, linking individual practices to broader structural conditions in digital journalism. Throughout the research process, reflexivity was maintained to acknowledge the researcher’s positionality and to minimize interpretive bias (Sonni et al., 2024). The resulting analysis aims not only to describe the production dynamics of the selected case but also to offer critical insight into the risks posed by informal editorial ecosystems in the digital media landscape.

## **RESULTS**

The analysis of the editorial workflow in the selected local online media reveals a highly individualized and streamlined production process that departs significantly from professional newsroom standards. The creation of a public service article titled “21 Hospitals in [Redacted City] Partnering with BPJS in 2022” did not involve a formalized editorial workflow. Rather than engaging in collaborative routines such as editorial meetings, peer review, or fact-checking chains, the content was developed by a single

editor who oversaw all stages—ideation, sourcing, writing, editing, and publication. As described by the editor, “We publish fast because people need information, and we are doing our best with what we have. But we don’t have a team or resources for verification.”

The article was composed using publicly accessible information from government bulletins, Instagram posts, and a previous year’s list of partner hospitals, without direct confirmation from the mentioned healthcare providers. The editor admitted that while the content was visually structured to resemble official publications, no validation steps were taken beyond rephrasing existing online sources. This aesthetic mimicry created a perception of authority and accuracy, which influenced readers’ trust in the content. Observations of the editing environment confirmed that the content was drafted directly within a blog-based content management system, with minimal use of metadata, citation structure, or hyperlinking for external verification. The production process followed a six-step flow that can be seen in Table 1. Each step was handled individually by the same person, leading to the absence of quality control or dialogic editorial judgment.

Table 1. Stages of News Production in the Selected Online Portal

Stage	Activity Description	Editorial Oversight
Topic Selection	Chosen by the editor based on social media demand and public relevance	Individual
Data Gathering	Collected from public websites and prior posts	Individual
Drafting	Text assembled in a blog platform with minimal structure	Individual
Editing	Self-edited by author; no peer or supervisory input	None
Layout Design	Blog-style layout, standard list formatting, use of stock visuals	Individual
Publication	Immediate publication on the portal; no team-level feedback	Individual

Table 1 outlines the six stages of the article’s production process, reconstructed from the interview data and observational documentation. It illustrates the absence of institutional checkpoints typically found in professional newsrooms. To further clarify the editorial logic, Figure 1 visualizes the actual editorial path taken during the production of the article. Unlike conventional newsrooms, which incorporate internal review and layered responsibilities, this model operates in a straight line, marked by aesthetic presentation but lacking editorial accountability.

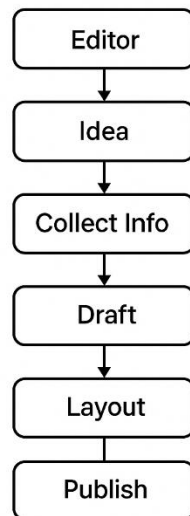


Figure 1. Linear Editorial Flow in the Selected Online Portal

The research also uncovered audience-side implications. Four readers, interviewed based on their direct experience using the article for healthcare access, shared consistent concerns. Two respondents physically visited hospitals listed in the article, only to discover that the facilities had ceased accepting BPJS patients. One participant explained, “I trusted the article because it looked professional—like it was written by a government agency.” Another noted, “I tried calling the hospital number listed in the post, but they said the information was wrong.” These accounts illustrate how the lack of verification in editorial processes translated into real-world service disruption and emotional distress for readers.

In addition to the informational discrepancies, there was also an over-reliance on visual mimicry to imply credibility. The layout, typography, and iconography used in the portal article closely resembled those found in official digital platforms. While aesthetically pleasing, this design choice created a misleading sense of reliability. From a media design perspective, this points to a problematic conflation of visual legitimacy with journalistic legitimacy. The absence of bylines, timestamps, or source attribution further contributed to a credibility gap between the appearance and the substance of the content.

These findings demonstrate that although the selected media outlet successfully reached and engaged its local audience, its editorial process fell short of basic journalistic and ethical standards. The results suggest a strong dependence on individual initiative,

aesthetic presentation, and reactive content decisions driven by online trends rather than structured editorial strategy.

## **DISCUSSION**

The findings of this study reveal a significant disconnect between the visual authority of the online article and the absence of a rigorous editorial process behind its creation. While the article's layout and formatting mimicked official public service announcements, its factual reliability was undermined by the lack of verification and oversight. This confirms prior research by Karlsson and Ryden (Główczyński, 2022), who argue that editorial aesthetics in digital news can obscure weak verification practices. The situation mirrors (Simatzkin-Ohana & Frosh, 2022) concept of “gatewatching”, where content is curated from available sources without sufficient validation. Such practices pose ethical dilemmas, particularly when the content involves critical public services like healthcare, where informational inaccuracies have immediate real-world consequences.

The centralized, individual-led editorial structure observed in the portal exemplifies what (Situmorang et al., 2023) and (Riad et al., 2022) describe as a departure from institutionalized journalistic norms toward a more fragmented, reactive model. In contexts where media organizations operate informally—such as the studied case—editorial routines become compressed or collapsed entirely. This collapse is not merely a structural limitation but reflects broader systemic vulnerabilities in local digital journalism ecosystems, especially in non-metropolitan regions. As (Sonni et al., 2024) and (Gallofré Ocaña & Opdahl, 2022) have noted, the absence of legal or professional safeguards in grassroots digital media permits the persistence of such editorial shortcuts, often under the guise of speed and accessibility. The consequences are particularly problematic when content, despite its aesthetic polish, is assumed to be trustworthy due to its public-service framing and government-like presentation.

Moreover, the study highlights the problematic conflation between visual legitimacy and journalistic legitimacy. The trust placed by readers in the article’s layout—perceived as official and credible—aligns with (Mtchedlidze, 2024) framework on mediated trust, where form can override substance in audience perception. In this case, design functions not as a tool of clarity or transparency but as a façade for informational fragility. This echoes findings from (Guo et al., 2025) and (Yang et al., 2025), who assert

that in digital spaces, the performative and visual dimensions of media often take precedence over the epistemological ones. While the use of clean design, bullet lists, and government-style typography increased engagement, it also camouflaged the absence of verification—misleading readers into assuming institutional endorsement or factual accuracy.

From a journalistic ethics standpoint, these findings reaffirm the need to distinguish between editorial intent and journalistic responsibility. The editor's motivation to inform the public cannot compensate for the lack of procedural safeguards. As (Hamada & Abdel-Salam, 2025) stresses, journalism's civic role is not merely to transmit information, but to curate, validate, and contextualize it responsibly. In this sense, the studied portal—despite good intentions—has perpetuated a form of aesthetic misinformation, where design simulates credibility without fulfilling its ethical obligations. The study thus contributes to a growing body of research advocating for the professionalization of editorial workflows even in decentralized or semi-professional digital media environments.

## **CONCLUSION**

This study examined the editorial production process of a public service news article published by a semi-professional local online media outlet. The findings demonstrate a linear and individualized editorial flow, in which a single editor performs all stages of content creation, topic selection, data collection, drafting, editing, layout, and publication, without institutional oversight or verification mechanisms. While the intent behind the article was to inform the public about health service access, the absence of cross-checking, source triangulation, and peer review resulted in factual inaccuracies that misled readers. These results confirm prior research on the weakening of editorial norms in digital journalism and highlight the risks of relying on aesthetic cues as substitutes for journalistic legitimacy.

The study contributes to the literature on digital media ethics by illustrating how visual presentation can mask the epistemological gaps in content creation, especially in local media contexts where regulatory and institutional support is minimal. The concept of aesthetic misinformation, as observed in this case, points to a critical intersection between media design, editorial process, and public trust. By documenting how visual

cues—such as official-looking layouts and structured lists—are used to simulate authority, this research calls attention to the urgent need for ethical standards that go beyond content appearance and focus on procedural integrity. The implications extend beyond journalism, offering insight into how design functions ideologically in public communication.

In light of these findings, we recommend that semi-professional online news portals develop basic editorial protocols, even in resource-constrained environments. This includes instituting minimal forms of verification, using checklists before publication, and providing transparency about sources and authorship. Platform developers and CMS providers could integrate lightweight verification prompts or templates that guide editors toward ethical publishing standards. In terms of policy, digital literacy initiatives should emphasize not only how to consume information critically but also how to recognize the difference between aesthetic polish and factual reliability. Finally, future research should extend this inquiry to a comparative study across multiple local media outlets, including interviews with designers and developers, to further understand the role of visuality in constructing trust in digital journalism.

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