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Understanding negotiating journalism: Survival tactics, non-state pressure, and resistance of local media in Madura, Indonesia

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ABSTRACT

After the Reformation era in Indonesia, discussions of press freedom have mainly focused on institutions, while the everyday experiences of local journalists facing non-state pressures are often overlooked. This study examines interviews with nineteen journalists from four regencies on Madura Island and introduces the concept of negotiating journalism. Local journalists regularly face pressures from *blatter*, *klebun*, *kiai*, contractors, politicians, and predatory NGOs while trying to maintain professional standards. Drawing on the perspectives of Anthony Giddens, Michel de Certeau, and Joel S. Migdal, the study identifies four main findings. First, journalists experience intimidation, verbal abuse, financial loss, and social exclusion. Second, they cope by fact-checking, being polite, building relationships, protecting editors, and finding additional income sources. Third, they resist pressures through negotiation, adherence to norms and rules, investigative reporting, and legal action. Fourth, journalists continuously balance ethical ideals, practical realities, and economic survival. Negotiating journalism is not a form of surrender but a practical strategy for working within a complex environment marked by overlapping authority, weak institutions, and unstable local media economies. The study shows that press freedom is shaped by journalists' everyday relationships and local-level negotiations.

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Introduction

Twenty-eight years after the reformation era, Indonesia's press freedom is increasingly being measured against the democratic values that replaced authoritarian rule. While the country officially guarantees freedom of the press, recent reports continue to highlight violence against journalists, digital harassment, intimidation and punishment. Oligarchic power and media concentration have also been identified by scholars as having altered modern constraints on press freedom (Tapsell, 2012, 2017). However, the primary pressures on local journalists frequently do not originate in the central state, but rather from locally rooted players such as religious leaders, village officials, political brokers, contractors and predatory organizations that wield informal influence in their communities.

The problem is especially acute in local contexts where journalists operate in contexts of overlapping authority, fragile institutional protections, and tenuous media economics. On Madura Island, Indonesia, local journalists have to constantly debate what can be reported, when, and how to keep professional ethics and their personal safety. This circumstance is an example of what this study calls negotiating journalism, a pragmatic method by which journalists handle conflicting influences but continue to generate news. The main argument of this study is that journalistic activity is never meaningless and always in negotiation with the powers surrounding it.

Previous studies have explored self-censorship, safety of journalists, media ownership, and risk-management tactics in journalism (Lee, Tang, & Chan, 2023; Hughes & Márquez-Ramírez, 2017; Slavtcheva-Petkova et al., 2023). The impact of decentralization, oligarchic politics and informal authority networks in *post-Reformasi* Indonesia has been examined by others (Hadiz, 2010; Aspinall & Berenschot, 2019; Wilson, 2015). In the meantime, theories of journalism have tended to focus on professional autonomy, routines, and institutional structures, including frameworks such as Pierre Bourdieu's field theory, media system theory, and approaches based on political economy.

Yet, little attention has been paid to how local journalists in Indonesia navigate everyday challenges from non-state actors while upholding journalistic ethics. Existing studies mostly depict journalists as victims of coercion or as compromised professionals, and so leave little space for understanding their tactical agency and daily practices of bargaining.

This article contributes to filling that vacuum by introducing the concept of negotiating journalism, as an analytical framework that is developing from the Global South. Conceptually, the study draws on the views of Anthony Giddens, Michel de Certeau, Joel S. Migdal and James C. Scott to understand the enactment of tactical agency of journalists under hybrid structures of authority. The study also revisits journalistic field theory and shows that local journalism in Indonesia is affected not just by state and commercial factors, but also by communal, religious, and coercive networks that operate as key actors in the journalistic field.

The empirical basis of this study is based on interviews with nineteen journalists in Bangkalan, Sampang, Pamekasan, and Sumenep, Madura Island. Understanding how local journalists reconcile professional values, economic survival and personal safety under contested local power structures in *post-Reformasi* Indonesia is helpful.

This research aims to analyze the forms of pressure on local journalists from non-state actors in Bangkalan, Sampang, Pamekasan, and Sumenep, as well as how the forms of pressure work in the daily practice of journalists. The study also aims to learn

how local journalists navigate, handle and respond to such demands while continuing to do their professional duties. This study also seeks to analyze negotiating journalism as a type of tactical agency that mirrors the way journalism functions in the midst of the complex social, political, and economic contexts of the Global South, specifically in the local context of Madura, Indonesia.

This research is crucial because the dynamics of local journalists working in outlying areas with particular sociocultural characteristics like Madura has not been adequately explored in current journalism. In this region, the generation of news is not simply a linear process but a site of discursive struggle in which journalists oppose the predominance of traditional religious authority and the incursion of local political oligarchies. This asymmetrical sociological pressure and the widespread of physical and digital intimidation at the regional level routinely trigger self-censorship and damage editorial independence (Masduki, 2022). This research is therefore academically urgent to conceptualize how local media actors employ techniques of negotiation and resistance to sustain their local identity within the hegemony of power capital in the region (Rianto et al., 2024). In theory, this work makes an important contribution to the critical media political economy literature by analyzing mechanisms of power reproduction at the grassroots level that are generally neglected by the mainstream analysis.

Method

The study employed a qualitative research design to investigate the experiences and everyday behaviors of people. This design was judged acceptable for investigating how people made sense of their social reality and everyday lives (Yin, 2018). This investigation was conducted in January to April 2026 in Madura Island covering Bangkalan and Sampang in the western region, and Pamekasan and Sumenep in the eastern region. Madura Island was chosen as the location as it displayed the interplay of three prominent social groups: a.i. *kiai*, *klebun*, and *blater*, studied by researchers such as de Jonge, Pribadi, and Sila (de Jonge, 1990; Pribadi, 2015, 2018; Sila, 2019).

On Madura Island, the local media scene consisted of newspapers such as *Jawa Pos Radar Madura*, *Harian Bangsa* and *Koran Madura*; online news portals such as *MadurainDepth.com*, *Mediajatim* and *Kabar Baru*; television stations including Metro TV, TVOne and Garuda TV; and public radio stations such as RRI Sampang. The study investigated the link of these media entities with the nearby local communities. The unique culture and media environment of Madura Island makes it a valuable place to explore the connection between journalism and local society.

All identifying information was deleted to protect participants' safety. For example, J1 was a senior journalist from West Madura. Each participant was given a code. The backgrounds and features of the participants are summarized in Table 1. Data were acquired through in-depth interviews lasting one to two hours. Most interviews were conducted in person, although encrypted phone calls were used when distance or safety issues arose. The participants might speak in either Indonesian or Madurese, according to their preference and comfort. In the interviews, they talked about their career paths, the economic climate in the workplace and their experiences in reporting on sensitive issues such as municipal elections, property conflicts, corruption, drugs prosecutions, religious difficulties and infrastructure projects. The interviews also examined participants' experiences of pressure, their techniques of negotiation and resistance and their notion of negotiating journalism.

Table 1. Composition of informants (n = 19)

Aflribute	Distribution
Regency	Bangkalan 5; Sampang 4; Pamekasan 5; Sumenep 5
Medium	Print 7; online 8; television 3; radio 1
Seniority	Senior (>5 yrs) 11; Junior (<5 yrs) 8
Gender	Male 16; Female 3
Affiliation	PWI 8; AJI 4; IJTI 3; Wartatama 2; KWB 2

All interviews were transcribed and translated into English when quotations were used in the study. Back-translations were undertaken with the help of a Madurese-speaking research assistant to maintain the meanings of culturally distinctive terminology, such as *celurit*, *amplop*, hak jawab, and *bahasa halus*. The data were analyzed using Braun and Clarke's (2006) six stage reflexive thematic analysis. The procedure includes familiarizing with the transcripts, generating initial codes, identifying themes, reviewing and refining themes, defining themes and writing the findings. The initial coding stage produced forty-one initial codes which were subsequently clustered into four analytical categories: types of pressure experienced by journalists, survival tactics, forms of resistance and meanings connected with negotiation journalism.

The study implemented Tracy's (2010) "big-tent" criteria, which encompassed topic relevance, methodological rigor, sincerity, credibility, resonance, significance, ethical integrity, and coherence, to guarantee rigor and trustworthiness. The analysis was also influenced by the insights from Cottle's (2007) ethnography of news production, particularly in the context of journalistic practices and newsroom protocols.

All participants provided verbal informed assent, and the risks associated with identifying non-state actors were explicitly discussed. No identifying information was stored outside of an encrypted research archive. Additionally, regional press organizations were consulted regarding the research process to guarantee adherence to duty-of-care protocols.

Some limitations of this study are recognized. First of all, majority of the participants are male journalist, which is in line with the gender composition of Madurese journalistic environment. Therefore, the experiences of women journalists are under-represented and need more investigation. Second, the conclusions of the qualitative case study should be generalized with caution to other contexts beyond Madura, as qualitative case studies are context-specific (Yin, 2018). Third, the study primarily relied on journalists' perspectives regarding the roles of *kiai*, *klebun*, *blater*, and other local actors. Future research should therefore include perspectives from these actors themselves in order to provide a more comprehensive understanding of local power relations and negotiation journalism in Madura.

Results and Discussion

The findings are organized in four clusters: a mapping of non-state actors and their pressure modalities; survival tactics; the resistance spectrum from soft to hard; and journalists' own theorizations of negotiating journalism.

Mapping non-state actor pressure

People told us about a group that is not part of the government and tries to get what it wants by using pressure. We listed these people in Table 2. Usually, the pressure did not come from one person. What normally happened was that a group of people worked together. For example, someone who was upset would ask a family member for help. This family member would then involve others. At the time, someone who was friendly would offer some money to make the problem go away. A local leader would also warn the reporters' families to be careful.

Verbal threats over the phone were reported by all participants. Physical intimidation using the *celurit*, the curved blade that is the trademark of Madura and that lies at the heart of the carok honor culture (Wiyata referenced in Pribadi, 2018), was highlighted by 12 of the 19 journalists. One senior reporter described an especially difficult moment covering a controversial pilgrimage:

> *"He placed a white envelope on the table and set a celurit beside it. He said, 'Brother, choose. Both are gifts.' I left both untouched and walked out. That night, I could not sleep." (J7, senior, West Madura).*

Three journalists claimed being mobbed, including one example where "three men with machetes came to the rented house" of a young reporter at midnight (J12, junior, Sampang). Five individuals reported getting death threats, including threats to their children. All online journalists in the

Table 2. Non-state actors and dominant pressure modalities

Actor	Source of authority	Dominant pressure modality
Blater	Coercive reputation, *celurit*	Physical intimidation, mob escort, threats against family
Klebun (village head)	Local administrative monopoly	Verbal threats by phone, social ostracism, denial of access
Kiai	Religious-moral authority	Communal pressure, public rebuke, takedown via *pesantren* networks
Local businessmen	Advertising spend, project capital	Bribery (*amplop*), advertorial leverage, owner pressure
Politicians	Patronage, party machine	Sponsorship withdrawal, lawsuit threats, deployment of brokers
Predatory NGOs (LSM)	Brokered leverage on officials	Coordinated takedown demands, counter-reporting
Drug dealers	Illicit economy	Direct physical threat
Project bosses	Site control, sub-contracting	Intimidation at sites; "envelope-or-machete" logic

Authors' fieldwork interviews, 2026.

sample reported receiving demands for article removal or unpublishing, frequently through unscrupulous NGOs purporting to represent the community, or "take-down requests".

Economic difficulties were also a big factor. The *amplop* (envelope) was used to shape the framing of articles, while advertorial funds, increasingly unstable due to government "*efisiensi*" (efficiency) policies, were used to influence editorial decisions at the outlet level. These dynamics resonate with Tapsell's (2012, 2017) description of the transition after Reformasi from pressure through formal governmental authority to economic dependency and clientelistic networks, which becomes even more prominent at the local level.

The withdrawal of source access, boycotts, and social register ostracism are extremely potent. According to an individual I conversed with:

> *"In Madura, you need your neighbors to get work done. If the kiai and klebun both ignore you, you lose access to information your family suffers at the pengajian. People stop greeting your wife. That is way tougher than being threatened with a celurit." (J3, East Madura).*

People I spoke to said they often lie awake at night, feel anxious, get incredibly fatigued, and experience what they term moral hurt from having to compromise. Some say they do not want their children to be journalists. Some feel criticized because people put them in a box with *wartawan abal-abal* (false journalists). green reporters who show their press cards to grab money out of people.

Survival tactics: A repertoire of tactical agency

Participants devised a set of practical strategies known as *jurnalisme negosiasi* (negotiation journalism) within these intricate power structures, which allowed them to continue reporting while reducing personal and professional risks. The results indicated that survival practices were not indicative of passivity or surrender. Rather, they were indicative of tactical agency that was implemented in structurally unequal environments.

Participants described six inter-related strategies for survival. The first was detailed fact-checking and fair reporting. Journalists consistently stressed the significance of "covering both sides" as an ethical ideal and as a technique of self-protection. By allowing chances to reply, the probability of retaliation was lowered and the credibility of reporters in the face of intimidation was enhanced.

The second method was the use of *bahasa halus*, or polite language. The journalists said that in dealing with local elites, notably the kiai and village leaders, it was important to communicate respectfully. One senior journalist said:

> *"If I start a phone call with bahasa halus, the elder knows I respect them. The story can still be tough, but the relationship stays good." (J9, senior journalist, Pamekasan).*

These findings echoed Michel de Certeau's concept of tactical agency. In Madura, journalists did not often approach powerful actors directly. Rather, they operated within the established cultural frameworks via strategic use of politeness, time and relational bargaining. At the same time, these actions illustrated the notion of structuration by Anthony Giddens, wherein journalists reproduced and maneuvered the social systems that constrained them.

Building relationships was another crucial protective tactic. In order to try to lessen susceptibility, journalists built links with political factions, religious groups, and professional organizations. Several

participants said their wide social networks prohibited any single individual from exercising total control over them.

Participants also cited organizational strategies that were designed to share risk. Sensitive confirmations often took place on the telephone and not in face to face encounters. Editors, as intermediaries, were frequently required to deal with complaints and legal conflicts. Independent web reporters without editorial support had less institutional protection than journalists at major media institutions.

Another significant survival mechanism was diversification of the economy. Twelve of the interviewees said they had supplementary professions outside of journalism, including teaching, freelance media production, photography, NGO consulting and small company operations. Participants said the extra money enabled them to decline *amplop* payments and keep their editorial independence.

> *"If I only depend on my salary, the envelope becomes bigger than my income. So, I do other jobs. Then the envelope is just an envelope. I can refuse it." (J14, junior journalist, Sumenep).*

This conclusion implies that economic survival was a core factor of *jurnalisme negosiasi* (negotiation journalism). Tactical agency thus was not only cultural and relational but material. Journalists established professional autonomy through alternative economic arrangements that decreased dependence on local political actors.

Across all survival strategies, participants consistently emphasized one principle:

> *"There is no news worth risking your life." (J2, J5, J11, J17).*

Participants reframed accountability as a long-term process, rather than forsaking watchdog journalism. Journalists contended that survivability itself was a professional strategy, as reporters who maintained their safety could continue to produce investigative work in the future. This discovery challenged the binary perceptions of press freedom that characterized journalists as either completely autonomous watchdogs or compromised actors.

The resistance spectrum: from soft to hard

Survival tactics and resistance are two distinct concepts, even though they can overlap. Survival tactics help a reporter stay safe while doing their job in a place. On the one hand, resistance is about fighting back against the things that are making it hard for them. People who provided information to us described these two things as existing on a scale, which we have shown in Table 3. Survival tactics are really about keeping the reporter going, while resistance is about pushing back against the pressure they are

Table 3. The resistance spectrum among Madurese local journalists

Level	Practices	Logic
Soft	Euphemism; balanced framing; cultural codes (Madurese honor vocabulary); leaking to national journalists; calibrated story selection	Hidden transcript: critique embedded under deniable surface (Scott, 1990)
Medium	Coordination with PWI/AJI/IJTI; insistence on *hak jawab* (right of reply) protocols; documentary trail; collective bylines	Institutional buffering; converting individual into organizational stakes
Hard	Frontal investigative reporting; reports to LBH Pers (Press Legal Aid); criminal complaints against intimidators; documentation of intimidation	Open transcript: legal-juridical reframing of coercion

under. The two are. Understanding them can help us make sense of what reporters face. Table 3 shows how we have categorized these survival tactics and resistance.

Daily practice is controlled by resistance. Eleven people told us that they regularly give information to journalists as a backup plan. For example, a reporter from Madurese who cannot publish a story in their local area will give the information to a reporter in Surabaya or Jakarta. This way, the story can be published without the local reporter being identified as the source. This is like what de Certeau said in 1984, where a weaker person uses the resources of a powerful person to their advantage.

Sometimes resistance is a little stronger. This happens when press organizations are working well. When AJI or PWI chapters are strong, reporters can get support from them. In smaller areas or for less well-known organizations, reporters have to use softer or harder methods to get their stories out. They often skip the approach altogether.

Hard resistance is only used in certain cases. This is when reporters are physically attacked, get death threats, or when there are campaigns to shut down the organization. Three people we talked to had gone to the police for help. Two of them got support from LBH Pers. They did not see this as a success. As a last resort. When all other methods are used up, hard resistance is necessary to survive and keep reporting.

The making of negotiating journalism

Participants reframed accountability as a long-term process, rather than forsaking watchdog journalism. Journalists contended that survivability itself was a professional strategy, as reporters who maintained their safety could continue to produce investigative work in the future. This discovery challenged the binary perceptions of press freedom that characterized journalists as either completely autonomous watchdogs or compromised actors.

This structure of economy played a big role in creating the conditions for the emergence of negotiation journalism. Financial dependency was a control device, and contractors and politicians rarely had to resort to direct censorship. Thus, journalists handled not only cultural authority and physical threat but structural economic precarity as well.

The findings confirmed wider studies arguing that press freedom rests not only on legal protection but also on the material conditions underpinning journalistic labor. The decline of local media economies in Madura made journalists more vulnerable to informal influence, but also drove tactical adaptation.

The study also showed that negotiating journalism fed into broader discussions in Global South journalism studies. Present Western models tend to think about journalism in binaries like freedom against restriction or autonomy versus compromise. But the experiences of Madurese journalists showed a more fluid reality in which professional activity was continually negotiated amid overlapping networks of power.

Consequently, a conceptual framework known as "negotiating journalism" was established in the Global South. It detailed the manner in which journalists maintained factual integrity while strategically negotiating language, timing, relationships, and exposure in environments that were influenced by political patronage, economic dependency, communal authority, and coercive pressure.

Negotiating journalism reflected the daily labor necessary to maintain journalism in contested local contexts, rather than representing the absence of press freedom. In this context, press freedom was not solely institutional or legal. It was perpetually

produced through daily negotiation between journalists and the multiple actors surrounding them, and it was relational, situational, and ongoing.

Conclusion

This study explored how nineteen local journalists in Madura managed demands from non-state actors in the setting of *post-Reformasi* Indonesia. The data showed that negotiating journalism was not a journalistic compromise or professional failure but a tactical mode of journalism built inside hybrid local power structures of overlapping religious, political, community and economic authority. Local journalists were always negotiating the production of news—the timing, language, exposure, and relational characteristics of news production, not the factual substance of reporting, to preserve both professional integrity and personal safety.

The study made a significant contribution to the field of journalism by demonstrating that press freedom at the local level cannot be interpreted solely through formal legal protections or institutional guarantees. Rather, journalistic practice was influenced by the daily negotiations that occurred within environments where coercion, patronage, social legitimacy, and economic precarity intersected. This study introduced *jurnalisme negosiasi* (negotiating journalism) as a conceptual framework that unites the political economy of local journalism, tactical agency, hidden resistance, and hybrid authority by incorporating perspectives from Anthony Giddens, Michel de Certeau, James C. Scott, Joel S. Migdal, and Pierre Bourdieu.

By questioning binary perceptions of journalism as either autonomous or compromised, free or censored, the study also made a contribution to the field of Global South journalism scholarship. The experiences of Madurese journalists exposed a more fluid reality in which professional practice was perpetually negotiated within unequal and unstable power structures. In this regard, negotiating journalism provided a conceptual framework for comprehending journalism in regions characterized by overlapping systems of authority, fragmented media economies, and inadequate institutional protection.

Discussions of press freedom found that threats to journalists in local Indonesia often did not come from centralized state censorship but rather from hybrid coalitions of local elites, brokers, religious authorities, contractors, and coercive actors embedded in everyday community life. Press freedom, therefore, appeared not merely as a legal condition, but as a relational and situational process produced through ongoing negotiation between journalists and the multiple actors surrounding them.

Several limitations should also be acknowledged. Most participants were male journalists, limiting a deeper understanding of gendered experiences within local journalism. Future studies should therefore more extensively explore the experiences of women journalists. Comparative research across regions such as Aceh, Papua, and Sulawesi would also help identify whether negotiating journalism operates similarly in other hybrid political contexts in Indonesia. Finally, future studies should include perspectives from *kiai, klebun, blater,* contractors, politicians, and other non-state actors in order to provide a more comprehensive understanding of how local power relations shape journalistic practice.

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Data availability: Our analysis uses interview reports from two course documents given by the user. These reports are data. The original files contain the info, so we did not include them here.
Ethics note: The researchers compiled this article by analyzing themes from documents. We hid personal info from those documents to protect people's identities.

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During the preparation of this work, the researchers utilized ChatGPT to enhance the readability and language of the content. Following use of this tool/service, the researchers reviewed and edited the material as necessary, assuming full accountability for the publication's content.

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