

Journalists' Perceptions of the Journalist Competency Test in the Context of Professionalism in East Java, Indonesia

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Abstract

This study aims to understand journalists' perceptions of the journalist competency test set by the Press Council as a standard of professionalism in the Indonesian press. Using a qualitative approach with a phenomenological method, this study involved five journalists in East Java, comprising three certified journalists and two who declined to participate in the competency test process. The data collected was analyzed using NVivo 15 software. The results showed that some journalists perceived the competency test as an administrative formality that did not guarantee competence and professionalism. The competency test also has no impact on their careers or welfare. However, informants stated that if carried out consistently and professionally, the competency test has the potential to fence press freedom from unethical practices and strengthen journalistic quality. This research also emphasizes the importance of revamping regulations and maintaining the Press Council in the implementation of journalist competency tests.

Keywords | *journalists' perception, journalists' professionalism, journalists' competency test.*

INTRODUCTION

The journalist competency test is a stage that journalists in Indonesia must pass to obtain competent status as individuals working as journalists (Press Council Regulation on Journalist Competency Standards, 2023). The journalist competency test is a series of tests that must be passed by journalists in one full day or two days, with some additional material covering mass media and the latest journalistic developments in Indonesia. In this competency test, journalists will be assessed on their knowledge and understanding of press ethics and law in Indonesia, as well as their familiarity with journalistic theories and principles. They will also be evaluated on their skills in carrying out journalistic activities, which include gathering, obtaining, possessing, storing, processing, and conveying information. This competency test has three levels: young journalists, intermediate journalists, and senior journalists.

The journalist competency test is an implementation of the agreement of the press community in Indonesia to set competency standards for journalists. This journalist competency standard is contained in an agreement signed by the press community in 2010, known as the 'Palembang Charter' (antaranews.com, 2010). In the Palembang Charter, 18 press companies in Indonesia also gave a mandate to the Press Council to verify press media companies in Indonesia to realize credible, professional; independent, healthy, and independent press companies, and realize the protection press companies.

Journalist competency standards are in place to protect and ensure a healthy and high-quality Indonesian press. The press council, as an institution appointed by Law No. 40 of 1999 to promote press freedom and enhance press life, carries out its function to improve the quality of the journalism profession by issuing regulations on journalist competency



standards. The Press Council regulation on journalist competency standards was first established in 2012 and updated with Regulation Number 03/Peraturan-DP/XI/2023. Journalist competency standards are enforced as a measuring tool for the professionalism of journalists, maintaining the honour of the journalist profession, and avoiding abuse of the journalist profession.

Journalist competency standards emerged alongside the development of mass media, or the press, in Indonesia, which entered a new era after the fall of the New Order government in 1998. The enactment of Press Law No. 40 on the press in 1999 gave press institutions the freedom to produce and broadcast press products. There was no longer any fear of pressure, surveillance and strict censorship from the government (AJI, 2009). The birth of the press law coincided with advances in internet technology, which significantly increased the number of mass media in Indonesia. The results of research conducted by the Press Council and Multimedia Nusantara University in 2024 estimated that the number of mass media in Indonesia ranged from 40,000 to 50,000 media outlets. The majority of media are online (Press Council & UMN, 2024).

The increasing number of media outlets in Indonesia, which emerged following the enactment of the press law, presents opportunities for new job vacancies within the community. Among the vacancies available are positions as journalists, editors, editors, graphic designers, website designers, and administrative staff. This indirectly reduces the unemployment rate in Indonesia. According to the press council, the number of journalists in Indonesia is at least 235,000 (Muktiyo, 2023). The majority of these journalists work for new or online media outlets.

Not only does the increase in the number of press media born after the Reformation open up many job vacancies, but it also creates a new problem, namely the emergence of the phenomenon of fake journalists, or bodrex journalists, and other designations that indicate the existence of unprofessional journalists. The behaviour of these unprofessional journalists does not reflect the professional ethics and professionalism that journalists should have as stipulated in the law and in the regulations of the Press Council. There are some journalists who do not have the capacity to produce news (AJI, 2009).

The advancement of internet technology, which makes it easier for people to establish an online presence, is unstoppable. This aligns with Scott Gant's observation: "We're All Journalists Now" (Leksono, 2019). To maintain the sustainability of the journalist profession and protect it from unprofessional practices, the press community in Indonesia, along with the Press Council, has issued a regulation on journalist competency standards. These competency standards outline key aspects of what a journalist should possess, including an awareness of ethics and law, knowledge of journalism, and journalistic skills (Press Council, 2023). Following the enactment of the regulation, all journalists in Indonesia are required to take a journalist competency test as the basis for issuing a competent journalist certificate.

On the way, the implementation of journalist competency standards to maintain the professionalism of journalists, maintain the honour of the journalist profession, and avoid abuse of the journalist profession has not been effective. There is still much unprofessional behavior by journalists, even though they have a journalist certificate; rejection of the

implementation of competency tests for all journalists; lack of support from media companies and the government to oversee the journalist competency test policy; and the weakness of the Press Council institution in overseeing the behavior of journalists. Even the journalist competency test policy has been sued several times to the court to be canceled (Antony, 2022).

Although the Press Council has established the journalist competency test as a standard instrument of journalist professionalism in Indonesia, its implementation still raises resistance and debate among journalists. There is a lack of comprehensive understanding of how journalists perceive the competency test in their professional practice, and how these perceptions influence attitudes towards regulatory legitimacy, professionalism, and the sustainability of the profession.

Several previous studies have highlighted the implementation of journalist competency tests. Research by Trisnayanti and Suwanto (2019) found that several journalists considered the journalist competency test to be an inadequate measure of professionalism. There is no correlation between competency certificates and journalists' income (Nourkinan, 2016), while local governments and other agencies do not require a journalist competency certificate as one of the requirements for networking, willingness to provide information or interviews and submit advertisements (AJI, 2009), so that the practical value of competency certificates is often questioned. Meanwhile, Madonna's professional research (2020) found that the Press Council is not yet strong enough to take action against press companies that fail to meet company standards or against unprofessional journalists' behaviour.

Some previous studies have contributed to an initial understanding of the implementation and challenges of the competency test for journalists in the field; however, few approaches have explicitly examined how journalists are perceived as subjects of the policy. Within the framework of symbolic interactionism (Mead, 1972), the competency test for journalists is not only viewed as an administrative procedure, but can also be understood as a symbol, a form of control, or even as a means of delegitimising certain groups. Meanwhile, social construction of reality theory (Dharma, 2018) emphasizes that the meaning of reality is formed through social and cultural processes that take place in interactions between journalists, media companies, the Press Council, competency testing institutions and the government.

This study aims to fill the gap and deepen research on the competency test for journalists established by the Press Council as a standard for journalist competency. By understanding journalists' perceptions, a comprehensive picture of the implementation of the competency test will be obtained, as well as its position in the sustainability of the press in Indonesia.

METHOD

This research uses qualitative research methods with a phenomenological approach. The phenomenological approach seeks to understand and describe the meaning of individual subjective experiences related to a particular phenomenon (Sobur & Mulyana, 2017). Phenomenology originated in the philosophy of Edmund Husserl, which was later developed



into a research methodology by figures such as Alfred Schutz, Max van Manen, Clark Moustakas, and Martin Heidegger. According to Moustakas (1994), the phenomenological approach focuses on direct experience and how meaning is constructed through the process of consciousness. The researcher seeks to suspend personal judgment or assumptions in order to capture the natural perceptions and meanings of the informant's experience.

The phenomenological method is employed in this research because it enables the study to understand human life events from the perspective of journalists' thoughts and behaviours, as they are understood or perceived by the journalists themselves. The phenomenological method is suitable for understanding the essence of human experience, where researchers must understand the world from the perspectives of their research subjects, rather than relying on assumptions or theories that originate from outside (Creswell, 2018).

This study captured five journalists who have been in the profession for more than 10 years as informants. The five informants are journalists who work in several cities in East Java. Three journalists participated in the competency test process, while two journalists refused to take the test. Data collection was carried out through in-depth interviews and observations to gather informants' perceptions of the competency test for journalists. Documentation studies were also conducted to deepen the data and research in the form of laws and regulations, news archives, and other relevant studies related to this research. The data from this study's results were then analysed using NVivo 15 software.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Journalist Competency Test is Only a Formality, Does Not Guarantee Competence and Professionalism

Three of the journalists who became informants in this study took the competency test for journalists, while the other two refused to take the test, despite their organisations and media offices encouraging them to do so. The informants believe that the competency test does not guarantee that journalists who pass it will become competent and professional journalists. In addition to the fact that the competency test implementation is sometimes not so detailed in looking at the technical abilities and awareness of the competency test participants, some informants know firsthand that some journalists who have passed the competency test, especially at the young level, do not have adequate skills in journalism, such as writing skills, ethics of searching and writing news. There are still practices of bribery, even asking for money from sources.

The participants also emphasized that the competency test had no impact on their careers. Although two of the informants had passed the intermediate level, or the second level of the journalist competency test, they did not experience any increase in salary or opportunities for more exhaustive news coverage. The media offices where the journalists worked also did not respond after they reported that they had taken and passed the journalist competency test.

The journalist competency test, which has been in operation since 2012, is considered by journalists to be an administrative process and a formality required to fulfil the laws and

regulations of the Press Council, particularly those related to mass media verification. According to the Press Council regulation number 3 of 2024 on the code of conduct and professional press standards, the Press Council requires the competence of the main journalist, who is the person in charge or editor-in-chief of the press media.

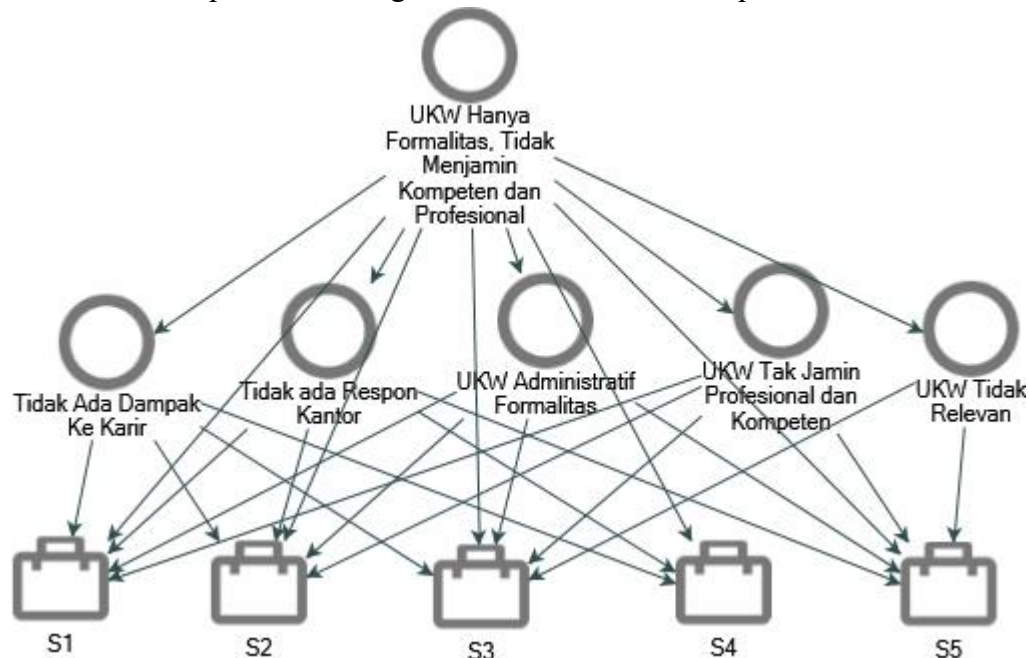


Figure 1. Project map of informant interviews through NVivo 15

The findings of this study are in line with several previous studies, which state that competency tests and certification for journalists are not a fully reliable measure of journalists' professionalism. Professional journalists will be sincere in their work without being overshadowed by the UKJ (Trisnayanti & Suwanto, 2019). Waluyo's research, 2018, which found that there is still no commitment from media managers to require journalists to take the journalist certification test (Waluyo, 2018), is also relevant to this study because it found that there was no response from the office of each informant. There was no obligation from media companies for journalists to take the journalist competency test. The findings of this study also reinforce the findings of Ibrahim & Sukmana (2024) who still found journalists' behavior of extorting sources. The journalist competency test which was held for two to three days could not be a benchmark for adherence to ethics, as one of the requirements for professionalism, because the ethics test in the journalist competency test was not applicable in the field.

Improvement of Competency Test Process and Mass Media Regulation

Amid the pessimism of participants who consider the competency test of journalists as a formality and administrative process, which does not guarantee to produce of competent and professional journalists, participants still think that the competency test of journalists can guarantee professionalism if it is carried out according to the procedures and rules regarding the competency test of journalists. In addition, the informants also hope that there



is a correlation between the competency test of journalists and the improvement of the status and career of journalists in press companies, as well as the enhancement of welfare. Improving the rules and laws regarding the press is also one of the key considerations for journalists in their efforts to establish a professional national press, in line with its function as a forum and channel for information, education, entertainment, and social control.

Furthermore, three participants were of the view that the professionalism of journalists, which the Press Council envisages can be established through the journalist competency test process, must be in line with the increasing welfare of journalists. The welfare of journalists, according to the three participants, plays a crucial role in enabling them to remain professional and continually improve their competence in journalism.

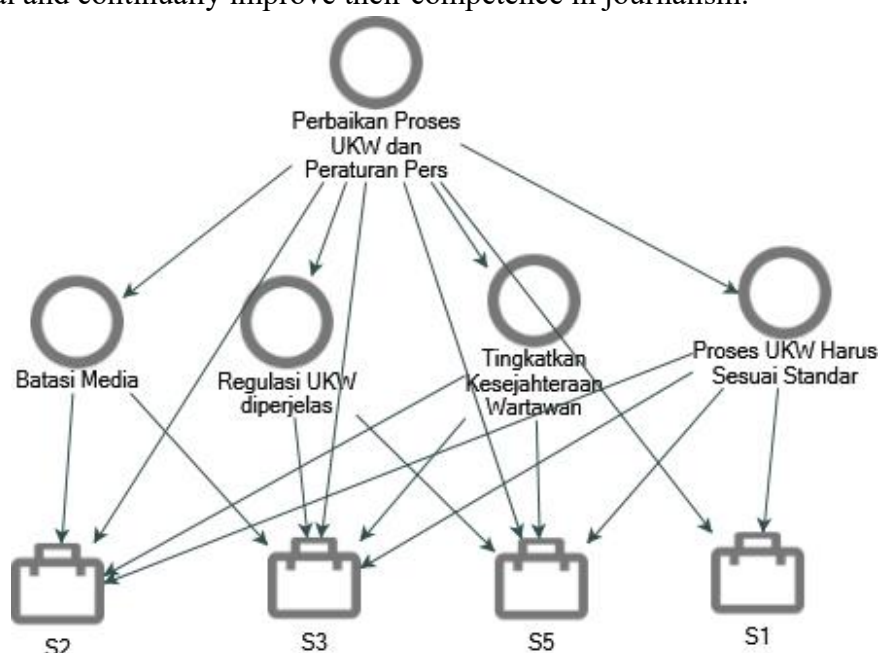


Figure 2. Project map of informant themes through NVivo 15

This research reinforces the findings of Panama and Situmeang (2023) who found legal loopholes in regulations related to the establishment of mass media. Even Law No. 40/1999 on the Press itself opens the door for anyone to establish a press company, but it does not require it to increase its capacity. The Press Law also does not regulate educational requirements for journalists but instead leaves this to the press company. Press regulations related to mass media verification and journalist competency tests only apply to those who register with the Press Council. These conditions have led to the uncontrolled growth of mass media, especially cyber media, and the activities of unprofessional journalists tend to violate the principles of press freedom (Panama et al., 2023). In line with this, Madonna's research (2020) also revealed the ineffectiveness of the task force in eradicating fake online media. The Press Council needs to strengthen its regulations to support and provide space for strategic and practical action in dealing with fake online media (Madonna, 2020).

Competency Test Impedes Press Freedom

From the results of in-depth interviews with five participants, two participants identified potential dangers associated with the WKW process established and implemented by the Press Council since 2010. The danger expressed by the two participants is that the WQE has the potential to inhibit press freedom, even silencing and muzzling the status of a journalist, as was done in the New Order.

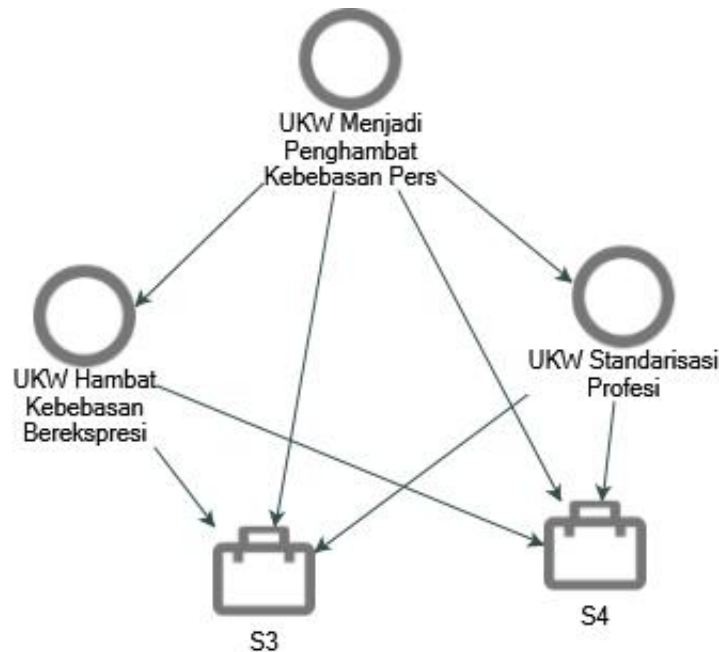


Figure 3. Project map of informant themes through NVivo 15

The concerns of these two participants align with the findings of Hidayat's research (2020), which also found that the interests of sources and companies remain strong. Professionalism is still held hostage by media business practices and interests, and not a few are plunged into pragmatic interests such as benefiting a group of parties in the news.

Competency Test Fences Freedom of the Press

Although the participants considered that the UKW was only a formality and not a benchmark for journalists' professionalism and competence, they still hoped that the UKW would continue, because this competency test could be a barrier to the profession from the evil intentions of individuals who wanted to use the journalist profession for specific unprofessional interests.

In addition to being a barrier to the journalist profession, the research informants also understand that with the UKW, the working environment of journalists in various regions will slowly, over time and with the experience of journalists, create a professional environment that will improve the professionalism and competence of journalists.

The participants in this study also believe that the existence of professional journalists who are shaped by the environment, as well as the proper administration of competency tests, will have an impact on the quality of journalistic products produced by journalists. Good news products, as well as a positive self-image among journalists reflected in their behaviour and work, will benefit the general public as consumers. The public will benefit



from high-quality news coverage and informed discussions on relevant issues, which will enhance public knowledge and understanding. Additionally, journalists benefit from increased confidence and pride. In addition, the UKW process also refreshes material and increases knowledge for journalists who were previously stuck in their daily routines.

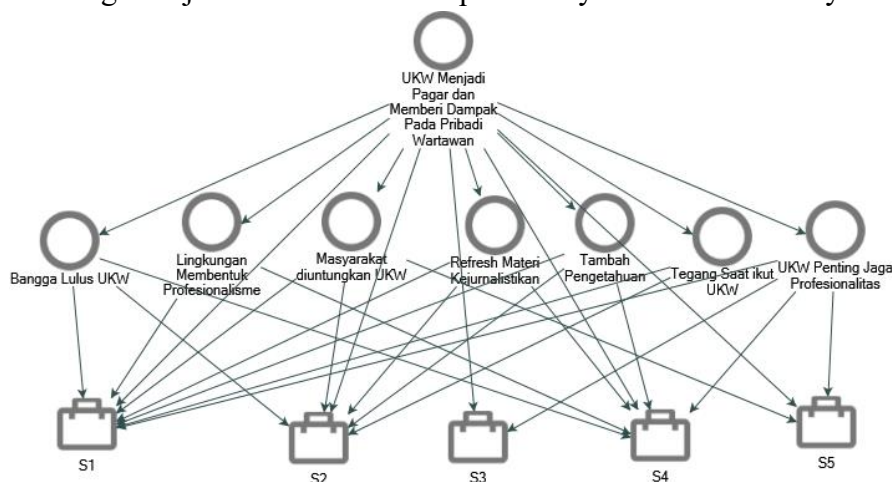


Figure 4. Project map of informant themes through NVivo 15

The findings in the study align with those of previous research, which stated that in Sukabumi City, many people claim to be journalists but do not adhere to journalist standards, which is detrimental to various parties and tarnishes the profession, as fake journalists are involved (Akasah, 2024). Journalist Competency Test is needed as a way to create professional journalists (Hidayat et al., 2020), and research by Wutun (2019 in Kupang City, East Nusa Tenggara, on journalist competency standards, which are interpreted like a driver's license for a journalist in carrying out his duties (Wutun & Liliweri, 2019).

CONCLUSION

Although pessimism dominates journalists' perceptions of journalist competency tests regarding journalist professionalism, they can be a barrier to the practice of fake journalism, or the malicious intentions of individual journalists. Journalist competency tests are also considered a forum for self-reflection and refreshing journalistic materials and skills for individual journalists. At the same time, the inhibiting factors of competency testing found in this study are the absence of the influence of journalists' competency tests on the careers and welfare of journalists, the lack of support from media companies in recognizing the results of competency tests, as well as the discovery of less credible testing institutions and the lack of strong regulations and hierarchy of laws and regulations governing the obligation to test the competence of journalists as a whole.

Recommendations for future research on journalist competency tests are expected to reach more journalist informants from different provinces, members of the Press Council, as well as other stakeholders from government elements such as the Ministry of Communication and Digital.

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