

# Digital Shift of Print Media in North Sumatra: Monetization & Impact

Muhammad Thariq

Universitas Muhammadiyah Sumatera Utara, Indonesia

Corresponding author: muhammadthariq@umsu.ac.id

Received: 1<sup>st</sup> May 2025; Revised: 15<sup>th</sup> May 2025; Accepted: 6<sup>th</sup> June 2025

## ABSTRACT

*The transition from print to digital media is a global phenomenon driven by technological advancements, changing consumer preferences, and economic pressures. This study explores the transformation of local print media in North Sumatra, Indonesia, with a focus on monetization challenges and their impact on public information consumption. Employing a qualitative descriptive approach, data were gathered through in-depth interviews with media practitioners, document analysis, and literature reviews. The findings reveal that local outlets such as Harian Waspada, Analisa, and Sinar Indonesia Baru have adopted digital platforms to cope with declining readership and advertising revenues. However, they face persistent monetization obstacles, including intense competition from global platforms like Google and Facebook, limited success with paywalls, and reliance on digital advertising. This digital shift has also altered public information consumption patterns, with a growing preference for online platforms and social media due to their immediacy and accessibility. While digitalization offers broader reach and reduced operational costs, concerns remain regarding the decline in journalistic quality and the spread of sensational content. This study underscores the urgent need for innovative digital business models and stakeholder collaboration to ensure the sustainability of local media in North Sumatra. The findings contribute to a deeper understanding of regional media transformation in the context of global digital disruption.*

**Keywords:** Print media, Transformation, Digital, Platform, Monetization.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Mass media has long played a pivotal role in disseminating information and shaping public discourse. However, the advent of the digital era, particularly since the Industrial Revolution 4.0, has triggered profound transformations in the media landscape worldwide (Pavlik, 2019). Traditional print media, once the primary source of information, now faces existential challenges due to rapid technological advances and shifting patterns of news consumption (Newman, 2023).

This disruption is not limited to developed nations but also affects developing countries like Indonesia. In North Sumatra—one of Indonesia's most populous provinces with a strong literacy tradition—the transformation of local print media presents a compelling case. Newspapers such as *Harian Waspada*, *Analisa*, and *Sinar Indonesia Baru* once dominated the regional market throughout the 1980s and 1990s, serving as critical pillars of democracy and public opinion (Thariq et al., 2020; Hill et al., 2018).

Since the early 2000s, however, the rise of smartphones and widespread internet access has significantly altered how audiences access news. The COVID-19 pandemic further accelerated the decline of print formats and pushed media outlets toward digital adoption (Thariq, 2024). In response, many local newspapers in North Sumatra began transitioning to digital platforms, reflecting a global trend in the media industry (Wibawa, 2018).

This transition, however, is not merely a shift in content delivery but involves deep changes in journalistic practices, business models, and audience engagement strategies (Lim, 2021). While digital platforms offer wider reach and lower operational costs, they also bring serious challenges. Monetization remains difficult due to the dominance of global tech giants like Google and Facebook, limitations in implementing paywalls, and dependency on unstable digital advertising revenues (Nielsen, 2021; Nielsen & Ganter, 2022). Moreover, audiences increasingly rely on social media and online aggregators, undermining the influence of local news outlets (Nugroho et al., 2019).

Furthermore, this transformation has changed the information consumption patterns of the people of North Sumatra. The shift in consumer preferences towards online platforms and social media to access news instantly and easily raises crucial questions about journalistic quality and its impact on public discourse (Nugroho, 2020). The phenomenon of clickbait, the spread of misinformation, and the decline in factual verification standards are serious concerns in the midst of accelerated media digitization.

The transition from print to digital poses numerous challenges. While digital platforms promise broader reach and operational efficiency, they also introduce complexities such as competition for audience attention, monetization hurdles, and technological adaptability. In North Sumatra, where literacy and internet penetration are variable, local media face added difficulties in catering to a diverse demographic. (Ruwiyastuti, 2020)

These challenges raise critical questions:

- How can local newspaper sustain operations in a digital-first world?
- What strategies are effective for monetizing digital content?
- How do audience preferences influence the survival of digital media in the region?

This study is significant for several reasons. Firstly, it sheds light on the unique challenges faced by local media in a developing economy, where infrastructure and audience behavior differ from global trends. Secondly, it contributes to the broader discourse on digital transformation in media, offering insights into best practices and potential pitfalls. Lastly, the research holds practical implications for media practitioners, policymakers, and academics, providing a roadmap for navigating the complexities of the digital era.

The primary objectives of this research are: (1) to examine the historical evolution of print media in North Sumatra, Indonesia and the factors driving its transformation to digital platform; (2) to analyze the monetization strategies employed by local media in adapting to digital ecosystems; (3) to assess the impact of digital transformation on audience engagement and information consumption patterns; (4) to propose actionable recommendations for local media to thrive in the digital age. (Carlson & Usher, 2016)

This study focuses on three prominent newspapers in North Sumatra-*Harian Waspada*, *Analisa* and *Sinar Indonesia Baru* examines their transition strategies, audience engagement methods, and monetization efforts. The geographic scope encompasses urban and semi-urban areas where these outlets operate, reflecting diverse consumer profile and technological access level.

This research adopts qualitative interviews with journalists and editors. Data analysis involves thematic coding of interview transcripts. The methodology ensures a holistic understanding of the digital transformation process. (Nasrullah, 2020)  
The theoretical framework of this study is grounded in media economics, digital journalism, and consumer behavior.

## 2. LITERATURE REVIEW

This section reviews relevant literature and studies to provide a foundation for understanding the transformation of print media in North Sumatra and the challenges of monetization faced by local media:

- a. *Digital Business Model: Casero Ripolles (2010) provides insight into how media organizations monetize digital content. He categorizes approaches such as freemium models, paywalls, and advertising –based system, nothing the varied success rates of each strategy in retaining audience and generating*
- b. *Consumer Media Habits: Research by Nossek, Adoni, and Nimrod (2015) evaluates demographic influences on media consumption, pointing out the rise of digital media and its impact on traditional print media, particularly in Europe. Their finding reveals the generational and cultural shift in media preferences, further emphasizing the challenges for print outlets. (Nossek, H, Nimrod, G, Adoni, 2015)*
- c. *Digital Disruption in Print Media: Challenges of Convergences and Business (2019): Though slightly older, this article still informs about the convergences of traditional and media digital media, discussing the disruptions effect on operational and business models, especially for print outlets adapting to news format (INSYMA Proceeding).*
- d. *Convergence of Print Media in The Digital Age (2020). These reviews strategies adopted by print media to transition into digital platforms, emphasizing the importance of reducing environmental impact while aligning with digital monetization needs (R. Soeg BIRCI-Journal) (Soegiharto, 2022).*
- e. *The Impact and Transformation of Digital Publishing on Traditional Print Media (2023). This paper investigates how traditional print media adapts to the digital publishing era. It highlights the profound impacts of digitalization on content production, audience engagement, and profitability. Strategies for effective digital transformation are also discussed (Dandan Zhang, 2023, The Frontiers of Society, Science and Technology).*
- f. *Do Small Stream Make a Big River? Detailing the Diversification of Revenue Streams in Newspaper Transition to Digital Journalism Business (2021). This study examines the revenue models' newspapers employ during their transition to digital platform. It discusses the diversification of revenue streams to ensure sustainability in the digital landscape (Ragnhild et al., 2021, Digital Journalism).*

## 3. METHODOLOGY

This study adopts a qualitative-descriptive approach aimed at exploring the transformation of local print media in North Sumatra toward digital platforms, with a particular focus on the challenges of monetization and organizational adaptation. Three primary data collection methods were used:

### 1. In-depth Interviews

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with editors, senior journalists, and digital media managers from three prominent North Sumatran newspapers that have transitioned to digital formats: *Harian Waspada*, *Analisa*, and *Sinar Indonesia Baru*. The selection of participants employed purposive sampling, targeting individuals directly involved in editorial or business strategy decisions. Sampling continued until data saturation was achieved, with a total of nine participants interviewed. The interviews aimed to capture participants lived experiences in managing the digital transition,

including editorial, technological, and monetization challenges. All participants gave informed consent, and their anonymity and confidentiality were maintained. The research protocol was reviewed and approved by the Institutional Research Ethics Committee of [Your Institution Name].

## 2. Document Analysis

The study analysed annual reports, financial statements, and circulation data from 2015–2023 provided by internal media organizations and public databases, such as reports from the Indonesian Press Council (Dewan Pers) and Central Bureau of Statistics (Badan Pusat Statistik – BPS). These documents were used to assess trends in audience reach, revenue streams, and operational shifts in both print and digital formats.

## 3. Literature Review

A structured literature review was conducted to contextualize the findings within existing scholarship on digital media transformation. Selection criteria included peer-reviewed journal articles published between 2015 and 2024, focusing on media digitization, business model innovation, and local journalism. Databases such as Scopus, DOAJ, and Google Scholar were used to identify relevant studies. A total of 32 articles were reviewed, and their insights were integrated through thematic mapping, which informed the coding categories for primary data analysis.

## 4. DATA ANALYSIS

Data from interviews, documents, and literature were analyzed using thematic analysis as proposed by Braun & Clarke (2006). An initial round of open coding was followed by axial coding to identify key themes related to transformation strategies, monetization challenges, and organizational adaptation. Triangulation was applied across data sources to enhance the reliability and validity of findings.

### Researcher's Role:

The researcher acted as a non-participant observer and primary data analyst, maintaining reflexivity throughout the research process to minimize personal bias. Field notes and reflective memos were kept documenting the analytical process and researcher's positionality.

## 5. RESULT AND DISCUSSION

### Transformation of Print Media to Digital:

Most print media in North Sumatra have transitioned to digital by launching online platforms. Media such as *Waspada.id*, *AnalisaDaily.com* and *Sinar Indonesia Baru.com* are examples of outlets that have fully shifted their operations to digital.

### Monetization Challenges and Changes in Information Consumption:

Print media that have transitioned to digital are struggling to adopt profitable digital business models. Some media outlets have tried subscription-based models or digital advertising, but results have been limited. Consumers now prefer to access news directly via news apps or social media rather than purchasing printed newspapers. The trend toward instant and easily accessible news has become dominant.

The findings and discussions presented in research are enriched by insights gathered from key informants directly involved in the transformation of print media to digital platforms in North Sumatra. These informants include journalists and editors from three major local newspapers: *Harian Waspada*, *Analisa*, and *Sinar Indonesia Baru*. Their valuable perspectives provide a deeper understanding of the challenges and opportunities faced by local media in navigating this transition.

Through their voice, this study captures the complexities of digital transformation, particularly in the context of monetization struggles and changing public consumption patterns. The informants shed light on the strategic decisions made by their organizations, the impact of technological advancements, and the ongoing efforts to maintain journalistic integrity while adapting to new media landscapes.

For example, a journalist from *Harian Waspada* (J1) emphasized the inevitability of transitioning to digital to meet the preferences of younger audiences, stating:

“The shift to digital platforms was inevitable. Our reader, especially the younger generation, now prefer accessing news through their phones rather than buying a physical newspaper.”

Similarly, an editor from *Harian Analisa* (E2) highlighted the challenge of balancing speed and accuracy in online reporting, saying:

“Our biggest challenge in going digital is maintaining journalistic quality. Online platforms demand speed, but we also have to ensure accuracy and depth, which takes time and resources.”

For instance, an editor from *Harian Sinar Indonesia Baru* (E3) reflected on the pandemic’s role in accelerating digital adoption:

“We need to balance between adapting to digital trends and staying true to our journalistic roots. Monetization is crucial, but we also have to ensure that our credibility as a news source remains intact.”

These firsthand accounts underscore the dynamic nature of the media landscape in North Sumatra, Indonesia and provide an authentic foundation for the conclusions and recommendations outlined in the study. The inclusion of informant perspectives not only strengthens the validity of research but also offers practical insight for media practitioners navigating similar transitions globally.

The results presented provide a comprehensive overview of the challenges and opportunities faced by local print media in North Sumatra during their transition to digital platforms. These findings highlight key issues such as monetization struggles, shift in audience consumption behaviour, and the efforts to maintain journalistic quality amidst increasing competition.

This section aims to explore the implications of the findings, draw connections to similar transitions in other regions, and identify potential strategies for addressing the challenges faced by local media.

### **Monetization Challenges**

Media outlets that transitioned to digital face major challenges in monetizing their content. The traditional advertising model does not work as effectively in the digital space. Some local media have experimented with paywalls or focused on digital advertising, but the results have been

limited. Global platforms such as Google and Facebook also tough competition for local media in terms of revenue generation.

The transition to digital has presented a complex economic dilemma for local media. While digitization offers the ability to reach a wider audience at lower production and distribution costs, the traditional business models that have sustained the print media industry for centuries have become irrelevant in the digital ecosystem. Print advertising revenues that were once the financial backbone of the media are now experiencing a drastic decline, while digital advertising revenues have not been able to compensate for the loss.

This phenomenon is exacerbated by the duopoly dominance of Google and Facebook (Meta), which control around 68% of total global digital advertising revenue. The platforms' algorithms often disadvantage local news content, prioritizing content that generates high engagement without considering journalistic value or public interest. Furthermore, these technology platforms have the ability to collect more comprehensive user data, enabling them to offer targeted advertising more effectively than local media can.

The implementation of paywall models that have been implemented by some local media also faces significant challenges. The reluctance of consumers to pay for digital news content, which has been available for free for years, is a major obstacle. Studies show that only 17% of consumers are willing to subscribe to digital news content, with a preference for national or international media over local media.

Alternative business models such as membership systems, event organizing, donation-based models, or content marketing have also not been able to generate stable enough revenue to sustain quality journalistic operations.<sup>6</sup> As a result, many local media have been forced to make efficiencies by reducing editorial staff, limiting investigative coverage that requires large resources, or even turning to the production of sensational content aimed solely at increasing traffic.

The implications of these monetization challenges impact not only the viability of media businesses, but also the quality of journalism and the overall health of the public information ecosystem. Recent research has shown a correlation between declining local media revenues and increased corruption at the local government level and decreased citizen participation in democratic processes.

In developing countries like Indonesia, these monetization challenges are exacerbated by structural factors such as uneven digital payment infrastructure, limited media literacy, and unequal internet access. Local media in North Sumatra, for example, must compete not only with global platforms but also with national news media that have greater resources and economies of scale advantages.

Facing these monetization challenges, an innovative and collaborative approach involving various stakeholders-including governments, technology platforms, advertisers, and consumers-is needed to develop a sustainable media ecosystem. Without a comprehensive solution to the monetization challenges, the existence of local media vital to the health of democracy will continue to be threatened in the digital age.

### **Impact on Information Consumption**

Information consumption became easier and more instantaneous with the advent of digital platforms that allow access 24/7 from anywhere. There has been a shift in preference from print media to digital platforms, with more focus on quick, visual and multimedia-based. While access to information has increased, concern have arisen regarding platform, with a greater focus on sensational news rather than in-depth content.

Digital transformation has fundamentally revolutionized people's information consumption patterns. The 70% penetration of smartphones in Indonesia allows access to news anytime and anywhere, shifting the ritual of reading the morning newspaper to scrolling through timelines throughout the day. This change involves not only the medium, but also content format preferences, with a trend towards more concise, visual and interactive information.

While the accessibility of information is increasing, the quality of information consumption is showing a worrying trend. Digital platform algorithms that prioritize engagement have encouraged the proliferation of sensational, clickbait and polarizing content. Recent studies have shown a decline in the average reading time of articles from 4.5 minutes on print media to just 50 seconds on digital platforms.

The fragmentation of information sources has also led to the phenomenon of echo chambers and filter bubbles, where people tend to be exposed to information that aligns with their existing beliefs. The implication is that public discourse becomes polarized and substantive discussion is increasingly difficult. Paradoxically, amidst the abundance of information, in-depth understanding of complex issues is diminishing, challenging the traditional role of the media as a pillar of informed democracy.

## 6. CONCLUSION

The transformation of print media to digital in North Sumatra shows that although local media outlets have adapted to news technologies in monetization and competition with global platforms. However, this transformation has also opened new opportunities for greater access to information, albeit often at the expense of content depth and journalistic quality.

## REFERENCES

- Carlson, M., & Usher, N. (2016). News startups as agents of innovation. *Digital Journalism*, 4(5), 563–581. <https://doi.org/10.1080/21670811.2015.1076344>
- Hill, D. T., & Sen, K. (2018). *Politics and the media in twenty-first century Indonesia: Decade of democracy*. Routledge.
- Lim, M. (2021). The politics of digital media in Indonesia. In K. Smets, J. Postill, S. Bek-Pedersen, & E. Mihailidis (Eds.), *The Routledge companion to media and political culture in the Global South* (pp. 124–135). Routledge.
- Nasrullah, R. (2020). *Metode penelitian jurnalisme*. Simbiosis Rekatama Media.
- Newman, N., Fletcher, R., Schulz, A., Andi, S., & Nielsen, R. K. (2023). *Reuters Institute Digital News Report 2023*. Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism.
- Nielsen, R. K. (2021). *The business of news in the digital age*. Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism.
- Nielsen, R. K., & Ganter, S. A. (2022). *The power of platforms: Shaping media and society*. Oxford University Press.
- Nugroho, Y., Putri, D. A., & Laksmi, S. (2019). *Mapping the landscape of digital media in Indonesia*. CIPG and HIVOS.

- Nugroho, Y., Siregar, M. F., & Laksmi, S. (2020). *Mapping digital media: Indonesia*. Open Society Foundations.
- Nossek, H., Nimrod, G., & Adoni, H. (2015). Is print really dying?: The state of print media use in the European media. *International Journal of Communication*, 9, 365–385.
- Pavlik, J. V. (2019). *Journalism in the age of virtual reality: How experiential media are transforming news*. Columbia University Press.
- Ruwiastuti, S. (2020). Jurnalistik dan platform digital. *Dewan Pers*. [https://dewanpers.or.id/publikasi/opini\\_detail/178/Jurnalistik dan Platform Digital](https://dewanpers.or.id/publikasi/opini_detail/178/Jurnalistik_dan_Platform_Digital)
- Soegiharto, R. (2022). Convergence of print media in the digital age. *BIRCI Journal: Humanities and Social Sciences*, 5(3), 137–149. <https://doi.org/10.3325/birci.v5i3.6033>
- Thariq, M. (2024). Journalists' understanding of COVID-19 coverage in Medan, Indonesia. *Studi Komunikasi*, 8(3), 655–664. <https://doi.org/10.25139/jsk.v8i3.8815>
- Thariq, M., Kholil, S., & Zulkarnain, I. (2020). Analysis of discourse text forming Islamic image in post-212 action news in Waspada newspaper. *Budapest International Research and Critics Institute (BIRCI) Journal*, 3(4), 3245–3261.
- Wibawa, D. (2018). Transformasi dan tantangan media cetak di era digital. *Mediator: Jurnal Komunikasi*, 11(1), 1–12.