

# The digital fetishism challenge of Indonesian millennial journalists

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## Abstract

This study aims to analyze the journalism and digital media practice that resulted in the digital fetishism trend in Indonesian millennial journalists before and during the COVID-19 pandemic. This research adopts the qualitative approach by a case study with in-depth interviews with eight journalists from reputable print and online media and participatory observations which focus on eight journalists' social media accounts. This research finds that digital media has become a part that cannot be separated from millennial journalists. Dependence on digital media forms a digital fetishism. This research shows that millennial journalists remain disadvantaged and tend to be exploited. Journalists also have the status of digital labor. Digital fetishism has become an ideology and identity which shackles millennial journalists. This study suggests that many opportunities can still be developed by gaining a sustainable future by prioritizing innovation, professionalism, independence, and inclusion.

Keywords: Digital fetishism, digital labor, sustainable future, millennial journalist, political economy

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## Introduction

In the last three decades, a journalistic transformation has arisen in Indonesia. Press accomplishes a phase of openness after the fall of President Soeharto in 1998. In the post-Soeharto era, particularly the leadership of former presidents BJ Habibie and Abdurrahman Wahid, press freedom in Indonesia developed with a very rapid increase (Gazali, 2002). During the Soeharto regime, the media was constantly under pressure wherein censorship was a familiar pattern (Hill & Shiraishi, 2007) and pressure on journalists (Tapsell, 2012).

Journalism work that relies more on computers in the mid-late 1990s and laptops and smartphones in the mid-2000s has also become a vital part of journalistic practices. This transformation is interconnected to digital technology that affects journalists' profession. Digital is an inseparable part of journalists working in the mass media (Tandoc, 2014; Tapsel, 2017; Winarnita et al., 2020). The characteristic of journalists in Indonesia are "young, male, well-educated and earns an above-average salary" (Hanitzsch, 2005, p. 493).

Journalists going through the age of digital transformation feel how changes in journalism work. They have to get in the habit of writing news on office computers, changing to laptops, and using more mobile devices. They also leave tape recorders switching to MP3s and recording sound on their devices. From television journalists who used to utilize a large Betacam camera, now many professional television journalists are only required to carry a DSLR camera with good quality video.

Endi Bayuni (2017, p. 1300) states Indonesian media has "a massive transformation" because of freedom of the press and the internet revolution.

Freedom and the Internet have led to the unleashing of energy, and creativity affects how news and information are produced and disseminated. Besides the mass media proper, other forms of media for creative expressions are experiencing rapid growth. (p. 1300)

The presence of digital media is the main characteristic of being equipped with the internet, making it easier for users to interact with converged mobile devices (Pavlik & McIntosh, 2004). The future of traditional journalism is now increasingly threatened, but the presence of technology to shape digital journalism provides enlightenment. Digital technology provides journalists and news outlets (Wahl-Jorgensen et al., 2016). The future of journalism is how the mass media must be able to overcome the changing "news habit" toward an online environment (Bird, 2009). Digital media, in the form of software; smartphone; and social media

such as Twitter, Facebook, Instagram, and others (Feldman, 2003; Messaris & Humphreys, 2006; Winget & Aspray, 2011), have greatly influenced the work of journalists both in the field and in the office. A journalists' life cannot be separated from digital media, from waking up from sleeping, even while resting. They are with digital media for 24 hours a day and seven days a week.

However, the millennial generation—those born in 1982 to 1990s (Strauss & Howe, 2000) —needs a faster adaptation process to digital media. In a study conducted by Jennifer McClure (2008) in Graeme Turner (2009), 100% of millennial journalists reveal that new media is a tool to support journalistic practices, compared to baby boomer journalists aged 50-64 years, only 40% of whom consider digital media as necessary.

Nowadays, journalists' practice is highly dependent on social media to obtain breaking news and track the activities of other news organizations (Adornato, 2017; Bossio, 2017; Belair-Gagnon, 2015; Greenslade, 2014). As Barbara Nixon (2014) stated, 51% of journalists will not do their work without social media, and 68% look for issues people are talking about.

The practice of journalism in Indonesia cannot be separated from digitalization (Hasfi & Wijayanto, 2021; Nurlatifah & Mutmainnah, 2021). Digital journalism tends to focus on digital platforms (Kencana & Djamal, 2021) and the strong influence of social media (Banjiwo & Irwansyah, 2022). Digital journalism encourages pressure on journalists to compete (Ambardi et al., 2014).

Digital media for journalists is not just a device at work. Now, digital media has become a fetish. Digital media has also become a fetish among journalists who have added value and become "gods," impacting the political economy. Digital media has pushed the position of journalists into a crossroads because it has become a commodity fetishism with many consequences. The emergence of exploitation of journalists with work demands because digital media and journalists also become digital labor.

The issue related to digital media and fetishism is referred to by Christian Fuchs (2016) as digital fetishism. Apart from digital fetishism, fetishism is also discussed in various fields, such as moral fetishism (Toppinen, 2004); glove fetishism (Noguchi & Kato, 2010); spatial fetishism (Soja & Hadjimichalis, 1985); yoga fetishism (Alter, 2006); and sexual fetishism (El-Badri & Robertshaw, 1998).

Digital fetishism is a development of the concept of commodity fetishism (Marx, 1976). Within digital fetishism, there are concrete communicative and social use-values of digital media obscuring the more abstract forms of commodities and the forces that support their use (Fuchs, 2016).

Digital fetishism is also a part of commodity fetishism. According to Robert Waterman McChesney (2007), commodity fetishism is one of the four Marxist intellectual tools in communication studies, in addition to criticism of capital accumulation, criticism of the ideology of legitimacy domination, and quality and independent journalistic practice. Along with commodity fetishism, people will also experience technology fetishism, especially digital media (Nygren & Gidlund, 2012).

In this article, we analyze the case of the phenomenon of digital fetishism in Indonesian millennial journalists based on millennial journalists in the time before the COVID-19 pandemic and during the health crisis. We explore their opinions on the uses and the role of digital media and social media platforms and their correlation with digital fetishism the exploitation of journalists because of their status as the digital fetish.

As we shall examine, most of our respondents comprehend they are digitally fetishistic because their work cannot be separated from digital media and social media. They are also part of exploitation in their work and became digital labor with professionalism. Then, we shall argue that digital fetishism has become an ideology that impacts our work and life of the respondents. This research also recommends how the Indonesian millennial journalists can empower the digital fetish to get a sustainable future and become growth journalists.

## **Conceptual framework**

### **Marxist concept and digital fetishism**

Fetishism is not new in communication and social research. However, this concept continues to evolve following the times and is still appropriate to criticize the phenomena that exist in society.

Karl Marx (1976) stated that fetishism is related to the product of labor that produces commodities and cannot be separated from commodities. Fetishism also deals with the social relations between producers, labor, and products that become commodities. Fetishism also concerns the relationship between something and people—labor will produce other values.

Besides Marx, fetishism has also been explained by Sigmund Freud (1977), who alluded to needs that are not always linked to sex. Then, Jean Baudrillard (1981) also criticized Marx's concept of commodity fetishism, in which he called fetishism more directed as a sign of the social value a person has. However, this research focused more on Marx's (1976) concept of fetishism. According to Tim Dant (1996), fetishism identifies a world's misunderstanding where objects are treated as necessary in the world order.

Georg Lukacs (1971) noted that commodities are the main problem in the economy but as the center of the structure of capitalist society in all aspects. A similar idea is expressed by Franz Jakubowski (1976), who argued that social wealth is a collection of commodities that is a phenomenon of the capitalist economy and is also an ideological superstructure. Meanwhile, Michael Taussig (1980) explained that fetishism is an attribution of life, autonomy, power, and domination of an object.

Then, fetishism is a major problem because of the “inhabit social life” (Paasi, 2020, p. 21). Fetishism as a process is also a study in social form (Grollios, 2022). According to the study conducted by Maurizio Atzeni (2021), fetishism is also related to trade unions with “existing social processes of struggle” (p. 1349). Because as a part of everyday life and social processes, fetishism in various forms has a tendency to be strengthened until it has a great influence.

Based on Desmond McNeill’s argument (2021), fetishism also “assumes the fantastic form of relation between things” (p. 44) besides being related to social relations. It shows that fetishism is related to “exchange-value that cannot be material nor natural relation” (pp. 50-51). However, this is difficult to capture by adding “taste” and “technology” (p. 52).

Moreover, the concept of digital fetishism was originally delivered by Fuchs (2016). Digital fetishism is the closeness of online social activities with digital media covering the abstract reality of digital exploitation, control, surveillance, and exclusion (Fuchs, 2016). Fuchs (2017) affirmed that users think Facebook is great because it is social and they do not feel exploited, watched, and the exception expresses partial truth and considers social media to provide social benefits.

The study of digital or technological fetishism is also an interesting subject to study in media and journalism (Comor & Compton, 2016; Freedman, 2015, Hearn-Branaman, 2014;). Digital fetishism is more about how digital media becomes a fetish for journalists, including social media. Edward Comor and James Compton (2016) argued that “the fetishization of digital technologies is rooted in the social relations of contemporary journalism and neoliberal capitalism” (p. 74). Journalists gain great influence by being a technological fetish in experience, job security, and employment status (Comor & Compton, 2016).

Then, fetishism in a journalistic approach is also often associated with professionalism (Hearn-Branaman, 2014, 2021). Research by Hearn-Branaman (2021) on Thai and Chinese journalists showed that journalistic idealism is related to placing truth as an unattainable fetishism. Meanwhile, Des Freedman (2015) focused more on how fetishism is in media policy where there is closure in policymaking and does not involve the community.

Fuchs and Sevignani (2013) took note of the concept of reverse fetishism about social media commodities. Fetishism is manifested in changes in technological culture by constructing digital and physical construction or, in other words, technological fetishism and the natural world (Barnard, 2017). Fetishism associated with digital technology is more subject to human habits to provide real or imagined objects or mysterious entities and have magical powers to move and shape the world in different ways (Harvey, 2003).

Digital media, including social media, has become a mysterious and magical entity that influences the life of journalists. Judy Attfield (1999) stated that ideology and object fetishism contain ordinary power in thought, holding the object as the main criterion in innovation. The fetishism of digital technology is understood as an influence, the relationship between mediation and reality (Comor, 2017). Freedman (2005) argued that the operationalization relationship of fetishism is used to illuminate “unanswered questions, uninvited agendas, uninvited players, and unspoken assumptions” (page?).

Nick Dyer-Witford (2014) described the role of digital networks as fetishism. The internet is a technological fetishism with post-political advancement (Dean, 2004). Then, Fuchs (2017) linked classic commodity fetishism with digital labor, specifically social media users who are exploited because they are not paid even though they provide enormous profits for social media companies.

## **Political Economy**

In discussing digital fetishism, it cannot be separated from the political economy, which also developed from a Marxist perspective. The relationship between fetishism and political economy stands continuously struggling with capital and labor with a connection that has consequences. McNeil (2021) argued that commodity fetishism and political economy are complex by prioritizing “where value takes the form of exchange-value” (p. 37) by involving workers.

The study of commodity fetishism will be more extensive with the support of a political economy of communication approach. It is because media commercialization, labor exploitation, and the process of commodification of mass media determine the exchange of values (Hope, 2019). ByWayne Hope (2019) also argued the interrelationships between commodity fetishism and the political economy of communication.

First, certain epistemes of time, temporality, time reckoning, coevals, and epochal open up new understandings of commodity fetishism. Second, from a time-related perspective, various manifestations of commodity

fetishism obscure not just labor relations but the materialities of unequal socio-ecological exchange and the slow violence of socio-ecological destruction. Third, the preceding critical insights have a contemporary global resonance that requires urgent scrutiny. (pp. 262-263)

Fetishism stands in sequence to the trend of political economy in media and communication, “the return to the classic Marxist theme to the integration of digital technologies” (Wasko, 2014, p, 259). Vincent Mosco (2009, p. 24) stated that political economy concentrates on how a series of social relations organize around the power or ability to control other people, processes, and things, despite resistance.

The political economy analyst of communication sees a change in the form of control along the path of “social relations, particularly the power relations, that mutually constitute the production, distribution, and consumption of resources” (Mosco, 1996, p. 25). Political economy also focuses on “the unequal distribution and the critical arrangements whereby such inequities are sustained and produced” (Hardy, 2014, p. 8).

The most apparent impact of the political economy of communication is ideology. Garnham (2006, p. 213) revealed that the production of ideology is seen at the level of consciousness as a human transformation from real experience into practical knowledge. Therefore, there is a relationship between social experience and ideological production, as in labor and capital.

An exciting study in the political economy of media labor is interconnected to trade unions. The political economy of media labor is infrequently touched on by researchers (Mosco, 2011, p. 358). Political economy in the media associated with journalists is generally bonded to professionalism (McChesney, 2008). In development, journalists also have another position as an interventionist and collaborative (Hovden & Kristensen, 2018). Mosco (2011) explained the decline in union penetration amidst increasing corporate concentration and conglomeration in new information and communication technologies.

Media labor is part of media production; according to Paul Marris and Sue Thornham (2009), the political economy also focuses on work patterns and the division of labor, artistic abilities and professional routines, and understanding, including market and audience operational concepts. Labor is an essential part of the media economy, as stated by D. Charles Whitney and James S. Ettema (2003, p. 166) that the economy is an essential factor in the media industry which has an important impact on the significant implications of mass communication labor which affect the form, content, meaning, and message of media.



Furthermore, political economy cannot be separated from “cultural and social considerations” (Manzanilla & Campos, 2017, p. 232). Research on political economy media in Hong Kong by Alex Zhi-Xiong Koo (2022) found that the state has tight control over online news production. Internet penetration provides an opportunity for the development of digital media entrepreneurship. In Girija’s research (2019), with a political economy approach, there is no public funding and government support, making new media dependent on corporate funding. In Turkey, the political economy of the media is also associated with a strict system of regulating the media, as a study conducted by Simon A. Waldman and Emre Caliskan (2019) found that the Turkish government exploits their interests and establishes business relationships with media owners.

The political economy of media focuses on “the economic and political motives behind media organizations” (Surokim, 2016, p. 105), where journalists are an important part. Ashraf (2021) also uses a political economy approach to risk and its relationship with capitalism to journalists categorized as working class. In addition to technological and economic changes, the threat of violence against journalists on the battlefield, such as in Pakistan and Afghanistan, is also a real threat (Ashraf, 2021).

### **Digital Journalism**

The future of traditional journalism is now increasingly threatened, but the presence of technology to shape digital journalism provides enlightenment. Digital technology provides journalists and news outlets (Wahl-Jorgensen et al., 2016). The future of journalism is how the mass media must be able to overcome the changing “news habit” toward an online environment (Bird, 2009).

Burgess and Hurcombe (2019) developed a practical and basic definition of digital journalism as “those practices of newsgathering, ... reflect, respond to, and shape the social, cultural and economic logics of the constantly changing digital media environment (p. 359). Moreover, Gregory P. Perreault and Patrick Ferrucci (2020) said digital journalism is not so different from journalism in general, “but it is ‘business-as-usual’ throughout the journalistic field” (p. 1298). The presence of digital journalism is because social life has been influenced by digital technology, so “digitization sets the agenda for journalism to follow” (Duffy & Ang, 2019, p. 378). Digital journalism is also about the practice of journalistics and how to develop the digital journalism industry (Fang & Repnikova, 2021).

The role of journalists cannot be ignored in digital journalism. The role of journalists remains significant because they have values and are professional, and can be central, although collaboration with other parties

is needed (Gutiérrez-López et al., 2022). The goal of the evolution between journalism and technology is to increase the productivity of journalists (Diakopoulos, 2020). In digital journalism, the ability to master technology is a fundamental principle in the journalist profession (Marta-Lazo et al., 2020).

Digital journalism strengthens digital fetishism due to the use of digital media in all lines of journalism practice. Comor and Compton (2016, p. 8) explained that “fetish lies in the fact that digital technologies have become constitutive features in the moment-to-moment labor of the journalist and his/her interactions with others.”

## **Methodology**

This study uses a critical paradigm as its primary foundation. Catriona Ida Macleod et al. (2018) claimed that the primary key to critical research is that researchers must defend knowledge claims against the mainstream. Researchers often seek to empower people in structuring and working towards meaningful social change (Neuman, 1991).

The critical research paradigm is considered appropriate to be the basis for research on how digital fetishism develops among millennial journalists. It can also see how the behavior of using digital media in journalistic tasks.

The approach to this research is qualitative. According to Dawson R. Hancock and Bob Algozzine (2006), researchers must spend time in the environment under study in qualitative research. This qualitative research is also appropriate for studying the topic of digital fetishism and millennial journalists because it emphasizes more participation in research subjects.

The research method in this study adopts a case study. This research focuses on exploring digital fetishism among Indonesian millennial journalists. Digital fetishism as the subject matter be observed and described through action and perspectives of Indonesian millennial journalists. John Gerring (2007) stated that case studies are understood as single case intensive studies in which the study aims to provide information on cases in a larger class, specifically the population. Arch G. Woodside (2010) tells that the case study also examines people who have a mental model which is described by (1) a type step explaining people, conversations, behaviors, and events that occur; (2) a type process step, specifically, a model of behavior; (3) what is given to the process; and (4) participation perceptions of how other people, organizations, or processes are being tested.

To capture representatives of the digital fetishism in Indonesian millennial journalists, the researchers use a critical orientation, which focuses on power on personal and professionalism. It is explored through interviews and observations of journalists' social media. The subjects

of this study are eight millennial journalists based in Jakarta. They are journalists who work in newspapers (four respondents) and online media (four respondents). The selection of the eight journalists is based on their credibility with at least three years of experience. They are categorized as the millennial journalist category because they were born between 1980 and 1994. The eight journalists' social media accounts are Twitter, Facebook, Instagram, and YouTube, including a blog for the research object.

To get primary data, the researchers decided to conduct interviews. The interview is conducted by direct meeting, and if the data is lacking, interviews will be based on the WhatsApp Web application and conversation applications on social media, such as Facebook Messenger. According to Robert K. Yin (2002), interviews are an essential resource in case studies by (1) following the line of research according to the case and (2) asking actual questions in cases that are unusual following the research.

Then, researchers collected data by observing the social media respondents. According to Bill Gillham (2000), the characteristics of participatory observation are descriptive and interpretative. These observations are more directed at the respondents' social media accounts. These observations are carried out from January 1, 2019, until December 31, 2020. Precisely, social media behavioral observations determine digital behavior in journalistic practices. The study duration is chosen because it compares journalistic practices in the pre-pandemic era and during the coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic.

Next, researchers collected secondary data from literature reviews, reference books, and other publications. Apart from that, researchers also examine secondary data from online news sources.

The unit of analysis in this study is the results of observations of both social media accounts and in-depth interviews. The unit is analyzed, interpreted, and criticized based on the theory of digital fetishism to gain a deep understanding.

Researchers follow the strategy defined by Yin (2002) in conducting data analysis, precisely developing case descriptions. The strategy has the original aim of describing and identifying the exact causal relationships being analyzed. In addition, an analysis strategy that relies on theoretical propositions is also used to support the analysis. The theoretical proposition is based on research questions, literature reviews, and propositions (Yin, 2002).

We examine the result of observation and interview based on the following research question:

- RQ1: How do millennial Indonesian journalists use digital media and social media to support their work?
- RQ1: How do millennial Indonesian journalists become a digital fetish?
- RQ2: How do the consequences of digital fetishism for millennial Indonesian journalists?
- RQ3: How do millennial Indonesian journalists survive in the age of digital fetishism?

## Results and discussions

### The ruler of digital

A total of eight respondents referred to as Respondent 1 to Respondent 8 are journalists who have worked in mass media based in Jakarta. Four journalists work for newspapers, while four other journalists work in online media. Two respondents hold positions as content editors, while six other respondents are reporters working in the field looking for news. Gender is also a major concern in this study. Respondent 1 until Respondent 4 are women journalists, and Respondent 5 until Respondent 8 are male.

Eight respondents in this study are journalists who have worked for at least four years in their reputable media. Six respondents hold a bachelor's degree, while two journalists have earned a master's degree. Only one respondent is a member of a journalist union organization; the seven journalists are focused on a career as a journalist and only follow specific social communities.

In observations on the respondents' social media accounts, all respondents have Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram as their social media accounts. They actively use their social media accounts to support their journalistic work. Almost all respondents also upload news links on their news sites to Twitter and Facebook. So, they are digital fetish because they are the rule of digital.

If I get a reporting assignment (from the editor), I see developments about the issues in social media. (Respondent 1)

Journalists must be able to adapt to changing times. Make compromises to the system. (Respondent 4)

However, half of the respondents are not active in uploading videos on YouTube. They only use YouTube to watch videos to find references related to news issues. Some journalists who often upload videos to YouTube

accounts are usually on assignments abroad or outside the region and are more like traveling videos during their coverage.

Seven respondents say they are proud to be the millennial generation. An exciting thing is revealed by Respondent 8, who states that “millennial journalists are labelled as a lazy and dissident generation.”

Factually, only one respondent admits that he is not proud of the millennial generation. Respondent 8 says: “No. Journalists are still journalists.” He admits that he does not like the various classifications of journalists, including millennial journalists or baby boomers. For him, journalists are the same without any classifications. The proof is that when digital media become a complete journalist’s task, many baby boomer journalists can also adapt quickly.

The eight respondents have digital devices and social media to support their work. They agree that digital media helps their journalistic work. They also think it is impossible to work journalism without digital media because it has become a “spirit” in their work.

When digital media has become the “second life” of journalists, they will not work without it. They can not cover, interview news sources, write and send news. So, dependency on digital media is also very heightened.

All of the respondents told researchers that they are very dependent on digital media. On average, 70% of their journalistic activities are directly related to digital media, ranging from hardware to software and even social media. They also state that experiencing obstacles in using digital technology has become a demand for jobs and the mass media industry.

Smartphones can be used as tape recorders during interviews with resource persons. The gadget can also be used as a laptop to write reports or news from the field and then send it to the editor. In addition, smartphones also help us get some supporting data for news writing. (Respondent 7)

Some respondents consider the presence of smartphones to be addictive for journalists. The positive thing is that journalistic work becomes accessible. Of course, it will be even more fun for the millennial generation because digital media has become a meaningful thing that cannot be separated from their life and performed as journalists.

All respondents consider digital media as a tool to support their work, especially for journalists who work in online media. The demand for speed is the main thing in delivering news to readers. However, millennial journalists are also getting more innovative because they have to pay attention to accuracy in writing news. They realize that journalism’s job is to convey

correct information, not fake news. They believe that credibility is also an essential factor in their work and at stake for their big media reputation.

As explained by Respondent 3: “Digital media is very important, because of the demands of speed as the ‘spirit’ of online media.” She also explains that what distinguishes journalists and social media users is the confirmation and verification of information obtained. In addition to fulfilling the cover of both sides of news, according to Respondent 3, verification is the differentiation of news and news spreads on social media.

Editors or journalists are also responsible for channels in online media or pages in newspapers. They consider digital media to help explore issues, especially from several subscription news agencies, and development issues related to their field of work.

So, coverage does not stagnate on issues raised by resource persons. We also come with our issues. (Respondent 4)

As expressed by Respondent 4, in addition to creating knowledge for writing, digital media also provide much information. That is done, Respondent 4 states, it is not immediately swallowed up, so it can provide a guide for interviewing the informants.

### **The ideology of digital fetishism**

From the analysis of the interviews and observations of social media accounts, eight respondents indicate that they are digitally fetishistic. They have placed digital media as sacred objects with more value and significantly influenced journalistic life and work.

Digital media owned by journalists is helpful in journalistic work alone. However, digital media already has an exchange value as a commodity for Indonesian millennial journalists because digital media produces particular interests, goals, and targets. So, digital fetishism becomes the ideology of the millennial journalist.

Respondent 5 explains that his work could not be separated from social media. It happened because, according to him, social media is the fastest and most widespread place for information dissemination. Unfortunately, he states that the spread of information on social media cannot be justified quickly and massively. He makes sure he cannot work without a social media presence.

Meanwhile, Respondent 6 describes his dependence on social media because he can observe news from other media from social media or monitor social media to find news materials. He utters that social media is very beneficial because it can get initial information quickly.

Digital media has become a fetish for journalists and has increased their position and bargaining power. As a result, all forms of “servitude” and “privilege” to digital media are also carried out by journalists. Without digital media as a commodity, journalists cannot work and have no role.

Digital media in the hands of journalists is also a social value. It is a means of interaction and social relations with the outside world, directly with journalists. Journalists have good relations from the ministerial level to the village head with the digital media. Their interactions are vital so that the value of their digital media is also getting more robust because of the social relationships they build. They still think positively about digital media, especially their activities on social media.

Respondent 4 states that Twitter is used to find trending news topics. She also states that Instagram is useful to build issues. In the case of migrant laborers in Hong Kong, she explains that several sources can be contacted via Twitter.

### **Status of digital labor**

This research uncovers the position of millennial journalists at a disadvantage. The presence of digital media does not seem very helpful for digital work. However, it has extended consequences for Indonesian millennial journalists. As laborers, journalists become victims of exploitation because digital media has become a fetish for them.

However, digital fetishism also weakens the position of journalists because they are digitally exploited, and their position is not a “player” but a “victim.”

Even with their position as employees, journalists persist under the grip of corporations who are still looking for profit and approaching power. With digital media as a commodity of fetishism, the journalists are in a position that is constantly pressured always to work hard and produce quality journalistic work on the pretext of the presence of digital media technology as an excuse for media corporations to boost the productivity of their journalists.

It is demanded to increase the quantity of news. In online media, this pressure will decrease the quality of the written news. However, at the same time, journalists are also required to continue strengthening their knowledge. The position of journalists is also in a complex and challenging position.

As expressed by Respondent 4, the pressure from editors as directors or directors of media companies on journalists is evident due to the presence of digital media. She reveals that media corporations still think digital media will become more manageable.

The demand to consistently work hard has pressured them to become a fetish. However, this exploitation is disclosed by journalists interviewed by the researchers, often not matched by bonuses or established financial support. It shows that the exploitation looks very real, but they are still doing it as usual because it has become an obligation and a duty.

Companies and editors will press on (the journalist). They think that nowadays, it is easier than in the era of editors, where digital development is not that fast. However, it all depends on us whether to maximize the function of technology and whether the information conveyed is accurate. (Respondent 4)

Certainly (there are demands from superiors), smartphones hold them almost every hour and check social media. (Respondent 6)

Of course, the demands of editors or companies related to productivity (news) by considering the news's speed, accuracy, and update. (Respondent 7)

The media corporation demands are complex. It is admitted by Respondent 8 that there exists exploitation of journalists. Moreover, journalists are also tied to the company's work performance index. It requires journalists to submit a minimum of three news stories plus strong research material for in-depth news. Companies always demand work perfection of the journalist. It is a form of exploitation by journalists.

This research finds that millennial journalists also had digital labor status, an extension of digital fetishism. It is because most journalists are people who are also active on social media. They promote their news on Twitter, Instagram, and Facebook. They often write a tweet to provide information to the public. As digital labor, journalists upload their news, photos, and videos to social media as part of their jobs.

In interviews conducted by researchers to reveal whether the eight journalists are aware of digital labor, only two admit their position as digital laborers. The other six respondents claim that they are not digital laborers because they do not know the actual definition. Their activities with social media are a form of digital labor.

It is not just digital labor which is carried out, but they also understand that effort to post news on social media is part of a labor act because it benefits the social media corporation more than what they got. Journalists want the news just viral because it is shared by many other social media users and gets many comments.



Journalists should get additional salaries from social media corporations for contributing the content. After all, what they do is also part of the big data that social media companies can use for their benefit, especially for advertisers.

As a digital laborer, I share (news) on social media, but I do not get anything (wages). (Respondent 1)

What about the four respondents who stated that their activities on social media are not digital labor activities? They still believe that social media corporations are not exploiting them. They believe that social media still benefits them as journalists and their media.

On the pretext of collaboration between mass media and social media, the four respondents consider that it makes mass media stay close by encouraging the participation of their readers to interact directly. The engagement is considered capable of increasing the existence of mass media amid a public which is getting worse when social media is getting stronger.

The presence of digital media and social media cannot be separated from the work and life of millennial journalists. It indicates an addiction because when there is no digital media and social media, they cannot do their work optimally, affecting the professional aspect.

### **Digital fetishism and sustainable future**

While being oppressed by the position of journalists due to pressure from technology and digital fetishism, there are many opportunities to get better. This opportunity is more directed toward personal development journalists.

Based on the results of interviews and observations, digital fetishism has become the identity of millennial journalist. This identity is symbolized in the ownership of various digital media and their activeness on social media and shown in journalistic work patterns and thinking patterns.

First, journalists with digital fetish status will always pay attention to their speed in working in the journalistic realm, from reporting, interviews, news writing, and news editing. All processes will always pay attention to time. In their minds, they always think of being the first to finish the job. With the digital fetish being the identity for Indonesian millennial journalists, they have a powerful influence on professional development. This identity can also be a capital for acquiring a sustainable future.

Second, millennial journalists also always prioritize no mistakes in their work. They do not want a bad digital footprint because it will affect image and performance. By working without fault, the journalists have the credibility

that concerns the good name of individuals, not just the representation of the media in which they work.

Third, with digital fetish, millennial journalists will prioritize the impact of everything they do. It will measure how the impact of generated news content on social media. The demand for virality is often used as a parameter of their success. Thus, as a digital fetish, the Indonesian millennial journalist has high adaptability to adjust situations and conditions related to technology, society, and politics. Not only is it results-oriented, specifically the virality of the news content, but it also prioritizes the process based on responsibility and accountability.

By attaching to innovation, professionalism, independence, and inclusion, millennial journalists will remain an essential element so that digital fetishism is not a frightening specter. The journalist will remain a profession needed in a digital society, even though technological developments will continue moving forward. The hope is that journalists will continue to exist and will not be eroded by the technology.

Then, to realize a sustainable future, journalists must also have a sense of responsibility in their work. It is because journalists are a critical element in developing democracy. Although social media have dramatically reduced their role, journalists are vital in realizing freedom of expression and control for the government and society. That is what social media, algorithms, artificial intelligence, and machine learning cannot do.

## **Discussion**

### **From the Digital Fetish to the Growth Journalist**

Specifically, journalists from the millennial generation are familiar with digital communication technology in their life (Gorman et al., 2004), and they are also known as multitaskers or gamers (Sweeney, 2005). Technology disrupts the media business and gives rise to other new media (Coll, 2016). Computers and the internet, automation, and computing have emerged into the world of journalism (Bell, 2016).

Dependency on digital media and social media, which is very strong in millennial journalism, affects their journalistic work. They cannot work without it and leads to further dependence. They also become “looking down journalists because they often look down at their cell phone screens or focus on their notebooks.

The digital or virtual world is increasingly real and can penetrate and map real-life and social relationships (Lovink, 2011). Then, Baratunder Thurston (as cited in Sanders, 2015), a well-known journalist from the United States, argued in the *Columbia Journalism Review* in 2013 that many young

people connected to global technology and culture will save and revive the American Dream. Millennial journalists consider the involvement of technology in their career; it makes their work more effective, collaborative, and interactive (Turner, 2009).

Moreover, digital media and social media have forced millennial journalists to enter digital fetishism as an ideology. The ideology intervenes into millennial journalists without them knowing they desire it. Digital fetishism has become an ideology integrated into their thoughts and lives. In its course, they are victims of the digital fetishism ideology because of the demands of work and professionalism, not just because of the demands of the development of the digital age.

However, the digital fetishism ideology of millennial journalists has become a commodity with value. It becomes their bargaining power because they are considered an advantage in this field. Not just professionalism, but this ideology is a personal capital value and social capital attached to the millennial journalist. It is experienced by eight journalists who are respondents in this study. Digital media connects them to the arena of power.

Fuchs (2016) explains that fetishism in traditional Marxism leads to labor fetishism, leading to hard work. Then, digital networks have an essential role in shaping fetishism (Dyer-Witheford, 2014). Moreover, it cannot be denied that by becoming a digital fetish, millennial journalists are also victims of exploitation by the media corporations that employ them. They are required to work perfectly. It follows digital fetishism, which always demands perfection in everything with no mistakes and defects so that everything seems to have value.

The exploitation maintained by corporations is permanently under the pretext of professionalism. They are also assessed by an index of professionalism and measurable performance measures with specific parameters. They are always required to be the best and the fastest. However, not many millennial journalists get decent welfare for their performance.

As laborers, journalists' political economy position remains weak and helpless with digital media in their hands. They complete the demands of what their corporation wants them to do. Companies have even more power to pressure journalists to work better and harder with digital media.

Ideally, digital fetishism can be solved by social struggles adapting the internet and putting it under user control (Fuchs, 2016). Fuchs says that digital media is designed, formed, and used to achieve equality in life and participatory democracy, views, and respect. Millennial journalists are also victims of digital fetishism. However, they chose to stay because economic

life demands forced them to have jobs. In addition, the competition for new jobs is getting tougher.

Hence, the research defines the growth journalist as a journalist's ability to become the digital fetish to continue developing, adapting, and building breakthroughs, not only for corporations where they work but also for personal development. The growth journalists are a positive side of the status of the digital fetish, apart from being digital labor. It can be accomplished through two approaches, (1) collaboration or cooperation and (2) empowering the value.

Cooperation or collaboration is the main thing journalists do, either among journalists or other entities. Collaboration with fellow journalists can be in the form of unions to fight for their rights with corporations, and cooperation with other groups can be realized as a mutually beneficial partnership, whether investors or the government. It can be done with the main objective of building collective power personally and a journalist community on a broad scale. Collective power can be achieved after acknowledging collective awareness that Indonesian millennial journalists also have a responsibility to society as the digital fetish.

Then, strengthening the value in every step of the journals, both thoughts and actions manifested in work and achievements. The value demonstrates something exchanged, but it becomes a personal development that characterizes the power of innovation and creativity. This value also leads to a personal character who becomes a community character based on originality and authenticity as a differentiator. However, with these values, journalists do not become mere commodities but become the growth journalists who continue to grow and develop.

Although digital fetishism, according to Fuchs (2016, p. 173), continuously has a wrong perspective, there is an opportunity, "only think about immediate individual advantages." Personal advantage must be acquired and become a priority for Indonesian millennial journalists. The advantage will be a mass advantage that can be turned into a mutual concession as the growth journalist which has some characteristics will be developed.

First, millennial journalists are more innovative. The journalist's new technology can "generate editorial innovation" (García-Perdomo & Magaña, 2020, p. 3089). Humans are creators of technology, and humans also use technology. Moreover, Z Hidayat and Debra Hidayat (2020) suggested that journalists increase their skill in data-driven journalism and big data analytics.

Humans determine innovation, so journalists must take position themselves as technological subjects, not objects. Digital fetishism often

forces journalists to become objects, but this must be changed by turning journalists into subjects. Not only innovation for media corporations, but innovation is for journalists themselves. The opportunity is very open for journalists to become influencers, bloggers, or YouTubers. The important thing in being an influencer is “for building a healthy and long lasting relationship with their communities and also with the brands they are promoting” (Balaban & Mustatea, 2019, p. 42).

Journalists must also be able to utilize technology, such as artificial intelligence, to support the work of journalists to create “synergistically ... and a meaningful blend ...” (Gutierrez Lopez et al., 2022, P.16). Search engines and social media also play an important role in extracting information for research (de Haan et al., 2022). The use of social media in digital journalism work also strengthens quality and reputation while strengthening followers and engagement (Shin & Ognyanova, 2022).

Innovation is an important thing in the world of digital journalism, such as the study conducted by Kecheng Fang and Maria Repnikova (2021) with the phenomenon of “state-preneurship” with “the amount and sustainability of funding, the extent of newsroom restructuring, and the transformation of journalistic culture” (p. 479). In the era of digital and disruption, journalists can also develop startup media. According to the research by Matthew Chew and Edson C. Tandoc Jr. (2022), media startups in Singapore still have the characteristics of “traditional journalistic habitus and the startup habitus” (page?).

Journalists can develop a more comprehensive capacity in their fields by developing higher-quality content. They rely not only on journalists’ status in media corporations but also on developing their knowledge and social capital. This research also shows that journalists must also have good working capital. That is like the research conducted by Tandoc Jr. (2014) which states that news written by journalists contains popularity and quality to form capital for journalists.

Second, being more professional and independent. Digital media also can be a chance to be “the professional survival of journalists” and “the path toward better journalism and more independent journalists” (Van Der Haak et al., 2012, p. 2923). Credibility must be a barometer for a professional journalist (Miglani, 2018).

The position of millennial journalists is still strong competition with robots, artificial intelligence, and algorithms that are not a factor of humanity and civility at work. With humanity, journalists can see an issue with more character and meaning in their work. Meanwhile, civility in journalistic practices will generate respect and care. Such as a result of the

research conducted by Sahil Koul (2018), journalists and media have “the right to freedom of speech and expression” (p. 90).

Third, more inclusiveness. The development of new media that support digital fetishism should be like “maintaining value has been expressed through digital inclusion” (Horst, 2011, p. 454). Although journalism’s work is definitely to generate profits for media corporations, it still has a big responsibility to the community, especially maintaining inclusion. With inclusion, journalists will avoid bias in reporting because they understand the issue, sources, and readers. Inclusion will present wise opinions and share experiences that uphold the truth. Diversity is also always sustained to become the unity and integrity of society so that society is preserved. Inclusion will also encourage journalists to possess the noble values of society.

Hence, fetishism forms a digital ideology that can impact change in society (Fuchs, 2021, p. 145). One form of change is innovation and creativity produced by humans due to digital or technology fetishism (Ampuja, 2020, p. 33). However, these changes are generally still covered by capitalism and neoliberalism that benefit the elite and oppress the workers.

## **Conclusion**

Millennial journalists are digital media users, but they have made digital media part of their life. Digital media is used to help their work because journalistic work requires speed and accuracy. It causes journalists to depend on social media.

Hence the dependence on digital media forms of digital fetishism. Digital media is a fetish among millennial journalists because it influences and plays a significant role in their work. Digital media is valuable as a tool in journalistic work and has an exchange value as a commodity for these journalists. The exchange rate is because digital media produces specific interests, goals, and targets. Digital media in the hands of journalists has also become a social value because of social relations. Then, digital fetishism becomes the ideology of Indonesian millennial journalists.

Moreover, journalists remain at a disadvantage in digital fetishism. However, the media have long-tailed consequences for journalists because they are victims of exploitation. With their position as employees, journalists remain under the grip of media corporations which are still looking for profit and approaching governance. With digital media as a commodity of fetishism, journalists are in a position that is constantly pressured always to work and construct the good quality journalistic work.

The journalists also have the status of digital labor, which is an extension of digital fetishism because they are active in social media. They promote

their news on Twitter, Instagram, and Facebook. They often do the tweet lectures to provide information to the public. However, they do not get paid by social media corporations. They are unpaid laborers when contributing to social media.

Ultimately, digital fetishism also allows journalists to develop knowledge capital and social capital as a form of personal development. They no longer depend on the corporation but have become more innovative, professional, independent, and inclusive. Indonesian millennial journalists will have collective power by prioritizing collaborative and empowering values. So, they can become journalists who still deliver the best contribution to society.

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