

BUILDING PROFESSIONAL COMPETENCE THROUGH JOURNALISTIC PROFESSIONAL ORGANIZATION PRACTICES: A STUDY OF THE INDONESIAN JOURNALISTS ASSOCIATION (PWI) IN MANDAILING NATAL

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Received: 2026-05-28; Accepted: 2026-06-03; Published: 2026-06-22

Abstract : In the current era of digital media transformation, professional organizations play a decisive role in sustaining journalistic standards. This study investigates how the Indonesian Journalists Association (PWI) Mandailing Natal branch shapes the professional competencies of its members through institutional practices. Drawing on qualitative case study methodology, data were gathered through in-depth interviews with eighteen informants, participatory observation, and documentary analysis over forty days at the PWI Mandailing Natal secretariat. Thematic analysis reveals that PWI contributes to competency development through four principal mechanisms: formal training programs including Journalist Competency Tests (UKW), professional networking and knowledge exchange, journalistic ethics enforcement and mediation, and advocacy for press freedom and journalist protection. Nevertheless, the organization confronts persistent structural challenges, including limited budgetary resources, uneven member participation, a pronounced generational digital skills divide, and the accelerating pace of media industry transformation. These findings underscore the central yet constrained role of local professional associations in building journalism capacity in non-metropolitan regions. The study recommends differentiated training, formalized mentoring schemes, strengthened institutional partnerships, and supportive public policy frameworks to enhance organizational effectiveness in sustaining professional journalism.

Keywords: Professional Competency, Professional Organization, Journalism, PWI, Mandailing Natal

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DOI: <https://doi.org/10.47453/>

Introduction

The journalism profession has undergone fundamental transformation in the digital era, characterized by the convergence of multiple media platforms, rapid proliferation of digital channels, and a profound shift in how audiences access and consume information (Triyustino et al., 2024). These changes have not merely reconfigured how news is produced and disseminated; they have fundamentally redefined the competency standards expected of every practicing journalist. Where technical writing proficiency and basic reporting skills once constituted the core of journalistic expertise, the contemporary media ecosystem now demands a far broader and more complex set of capabilities (Broersma & Peters, 2013). Journalists must now demonstrate strong digital literacy, the capacity to verify information amidst an overwhelming volume of disinformation and misinformation, mastery of multimedia production tools, skills in data journalism and computational reporting, and an unwavering commitment to journalistic ethics that have themselves grown increasingly layered and dynamic. Accordingly, professional journalism can no longer be conceived narrowly as technical craft; rather, it represents an integration of technological competence, ethical deliberation, and social accountability.

Against this backdrop, professional associations occupy a strategically vital position in upholding and advancing journalistic standards (Joseph, 2013). In Indonesia, the Indonesian Journalists Association (Persatuan Wartawan Indonesia, or PWI) stands as the oldest and most institutionally entrenched professional organization for journalists, carrying both normative and operational responsibility to support the continuous professional development of its members (Fauzi, 2021). Through its programs of training, mentorship, competency certification, and enforcement of the Journalistic Code of Ethics, PWI functions as an agent of professionalization, mediating between the escalating demands of the external media environment and the internal need for member capacity development. This role becomes all the more critical in a landscape where digital disruption demands constant adaptation and systematic renewal of skills.

However, the practical realization of a professional organization's developmental mandate at the regional level is neither straightforward nor uniform. Regional and district branches of PWI operate under conditions markedly different from those at the national level, confronting structural and cultural barriers that constrain their programmatic capacity (Hanitzsch, 2011). Limitations in funding, restricted access to high-quality training resources, and inadequate digital infrastructure collectively diminish the scope and impact of regional branches' activities. Compounding these challenges is the heterogeneity of member capacities, which complicates the design and delivery of effective capacity-building programs. PWI Mandailing Natal, as a district-level representative of the broader national organization, navigates precisely these conditions.

Mandailing Natal Regency presents a distinctive socio-geographic and economic profile that shapes the character of local journalism in significant ways. The regency's

expansive geography, combined with uneven infrastructure development, poses physical barriers to journalists' access to training opportunities and digital technologies. Economically, local journalists frequently endure financial pressures that may, in some instances, compromise their professional independence and integrity. At the same time, the geographical rootedness of these journalists within their communities provides a distinctive advantage: a deep contextual understanding of local issues and the social fabric of the communities they serve, positioning them as potentially powerful agents of locally responsive journalism (Rosen, 2018).

These conditions collectively indicate that professional competency development for regional journalists cannot simply replicate models designed for urban or national media contexts. Instead, context-sensitive, adaptive, and locally anchored approaches are required. This rationale makes the study of PWI Mandailing Natal's role in shaping journalists' professional competencies both timely and academically significant. A rigorous examination of this organization's contributions, mechanisms, and constraints offers insights not only into the institutional practices of a particular regional branch but also into the broader question of how professional associations can most effectively serve journalism in resource-constrained, geographically dispersed environments.

Theoretically, this research draws on the sociology of professions, particularly Freidson's (2001) model of professional dominance, which emphasizes the role of occupational communities in regulating knowledge, setting standards, and controlling entry into the profession. This framework is complemented by Wenger's (1998) concept of communities of practice, which highlights how professionals develop expertise through situated participation in social communities rather than solely through formal instruction. Together, these theoretical perspectives illuminate the multi-dimensional nature of professional learning within organizational settings and provide a conceptual basis for analyzing PWI's developmental functions in Mandailing Natal.

Empirically, the research fills a gap in the literature concerning the functioning of journalism professional associations at the sub-national level in Southeast Asia. While considerable scholarly attention has been devoted to journalism professionalism in national and metropolitan contexts (Patterson et al., 2021; Josephi, 2013), district-level organizational dynamics remain underexplored. This study thus contributes original empirical knowledge about how regional professional associations navigate the interplay between institutional aspiration and structural limitation in advancing journalism quality.

The central research questions guiding this investigation are: (1) How does PWI Mandailing Natal contribute to the development of its members' technical and ethical competencies? (2) What structural and cultural challenges constrain the organization's effectiveness in competency development? (3) What strategies might enhance the organization's capacity to serve journalists in a non-metropolitan context? The answers to these questions are expected to yield both conceptual insights and practical

recommendations relevant to professional journalism organizations operating in comparable regional settings across Indonesia and the broader Global South.

Research Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative approach anchored within a case study design (Ahmed, 2024), selected for its capacity to generate deep, contextually embedded understanding of how professional organizations enact their developmental mandate in real-world institutional settings. Case study methodology is particularly appropriate when the boundaries between the phenomenon under investigation and its surrounding context are indistinct and when the researcher seeks to capture nuanced processes and meanings (Nii Laryeafio & Ogbewe, 2023). PWI Mandailing Natal was designated as the primary unit of analysis, representing a single instrumental case that illuminates broader patterns of professional organizational behavior in non-metropolitan regional contexts (Busetto et al., 2020).

Fieldwork was conducted over forty consecutive days at the PWI Mandailing Natal secretariat in Mandailing Natal Regency, North Sumatra Province. The fieldwork encompassed direct observation of routine organizational activities, participation in training and workshop sessions, attendance at coordination meetings, and informal interactions among organizational members (Lim, 2024). This extended presence in the field enabled the researcher to develop a comprehensive picture of the organization's internal dynamics, leadership patterns, and programmatic practices as they unfolded in real time (Dewi, 2022).

Table 1. Research Informant Composition

Informant Category	Number	Role	Sampling Criteria
PWI Chairperson & Core Board	5	Organizational leadership	Active tenure; strategic decision-makers
Active PWI Members	8	Field journalists from various media	Min. 2 years of active membership
Editorial Leaders	3	Heads of local media outlets	Direct engagement with PWI programs
External Key Informants	2	Academic & government stakeholders	Indirect relation to journalistic activity
Total	18	-	Purposive sampling

Informants were selected through purposive sampling based on criteria directly relevant to the study's objectives, as illustrated in Table 1. The sampling logic was designed to capture perspectives from across the organizational hierarchy and from external stakeholders, thereby enabling cross-perspective triangulation (Cole, 2024). Data collection employed three complementary techniques: semi-structured in-depth interviews, participatory observation, and systematic documentary analysis. Interviews probed informants' lived experiences with PWI programs, their perceptions of

organizational effectiveness, and their assessments of competency development outcomes. Documentary analysis covered organizational work programs, activity reports, training materials, and official correspondence. Data analysis followed the thematic analysis framework proposed by Miles, Huberman, and Saldaña (2014), proceeding through stages of data condensation, data display, and conclusion drawing. Validity was ensured through source triangulation, method triangulation, and member checking, in which key informants reviewed and verified preliminary findings prior to finalization.

Results and Discussion

Organizational Profile of PWI Mandailing Natal

Established in 2013 following the administrative expansion of Mandailing Natal Regency from South Tapanuli Regency, PWI Mandailing Natal has grown into the primary professional association for journalists practicing across the regency. The organization currently unites 47 active members representing journalists employed in print, online, radio, and local television media. Its formal structure follows the standardized PWI organizational model, comprising a chairperson, vice chairperson, secretary, treasurer, and several functional divisions responsible for education and training, member advocacy, and external communications and partnerships. The organization's work program reflects its dual mandate: the internal development of member competencies and the external advocacy for press freedom and journalist welfare. Institutional partnerships with the regional government, local higher education institutions, and both governmental and non-governmental donors provide the organizational with the financial and human resources necessary to sustain its capacity-building activities. A summary of the organization's key structural characteristics is presented in Table 2 below.

Table 2. Organizational Profile of PWI Mandailing Natal

Aspect	Description	Details	Notes
Establishment	Year Founded	2013	Following Mandailing Natal district expansion
Membership	Total Active Members	47 journalists	Across print, online, radio, TV
Structure	Organizational Units	Chairman, Vice, Secretary, Treasurer, Divisions	Education, Advocacy, Public Relations
Programs	Key Activities	UKW, Workshops, Seminars, Competitions	Periodic competency-based programs
Partnerships	Collaborating	Local government,	MoU-based

Aspect	Description	Details	Notes
	Institutions	universities, industry	cooperation frameworks

Competency Development Through Training Programs

Among the most tangible contributions of PWI Mandailing Natal to journalist competency development is its administration of the Journalist Competency Test (Uji Kompetensi Wartawan, UKW), a nationally standardized assessment instrument designed to evaluate and certify journalists' professional proficiency. Within a recent five-year period, the organization has conducted two rounds of the UKW, both of which took place in 2022. The first UKW was delivered in partnership with PT. Sorik Marapi Geothermal Power, while the second was co-organized with the Mandailing Natal Regional Government. These partnerships reflect the organization's pragmatic strategy of leveraging external institutional relationships to offset its limited internal resources (Hanitzsch, 2011).

Accompanying the UKW, PWI Mandailing Natal conducted a series of preparatory workshops aimed at equipping participating journalists with the technical and ethical competencies assessed by the examination. These workshops addressed themes including news quality standards, journalistic professionalism as a partner to governance, and the role of the press in supporting regional development. The thematic focus of these sessions indicated an organizational orientation toward not merely technical journalism skills, but also the broader civic and social responsibilities of the journalistic profession. In 2023, the organization expanded its programmatic repertoire by organizing an open scientific writing competition under the theme of independence and development, accompanied by a journalistic writing seminar that brought together local cultural figures and senior journalists as resource persons. A detailed chronological overview of competency development programs is presented in Table 3.

Table 3. PWI Mandailing Natal Competency Development Program Chronology

Year	Program	Partner/Sponsor	Focus Area
2022	1st Journalist Competency Test (UKW)	PT. Sorik Marapi Geothermal Power	Ethics, writing standards, news judgment
2022	2nd Journalist Competency Test (UKW)	Mandailing Natal Regional Government	Professional journalism practices
2022	Workshop Series (Pre-UKW)	PWI Mandailing Natal	Journalism quality, govt partnership
2023	Scientific Writing Competition	PWI Mandailing Natal (Public)	Theme: Independence through

Year	Program	Partner/Sponsor	Focus Area
			Development
2023	Journalistic Writing Seminar	Local culturalist, senior journalist	Local journalism context & values

Interview data gathered from member participants revealed broadly positive assessments of the impact of both UKW and workshop programs on technical journalism capacity, particularly with respect to news production standards, source verification practices, and professional writing quality. Participants noted that the structured UKW assessment process created a productive impetus for self-evaluation and skill improvement. However, several informants raised concerns about the insufficient frequency of such programs, with ideal levels cited as three to four events per calendar year, in contrast to the organization's current capacity to deliver only one to two per year due to persistent budget constraints. This finding is consistent with broader observations in the literature that resource scarcity represents a primary limiting factor for regional journalism organizations in developing countries (Laksmono & Nurhaliza, 2025).

An important dimension of competency development that emerges from the data is the role of structured intergenerational exchange between senior and junior journalists. Senior members contribute accumulated experiential wisdom, including deep knowledge of news judgment, source management, and professional ethics, while younger members introduce digital fluency and familiarity with emerging social media platforms and data tools. This complementary exchange aligns closely with Wenger's (1998) communities of practice framework, which posits that professional learning is inherently social, embedded in the relational dynamics of a practicing community, and extends well beyond the boundaries of formal training programs. The relatively small and cohesive size of the Mandailing Natal journalistic community arguably facilitates this informal learning environment, creating conditions for peer mentorship and situated knowledge sharing that larger, more fragmented metropolitan journalist communities may find more difficult to sustain.

Ethics Enforcement and Professional Standard Setting

Beyond competency training, PWI Mandailing Natal performs a critical normative function through its enforcement of the Journalistic Code of Ethics and its mediation of ethical disputes within the journalistic community. The organization conducts regular socialization sessions to familiarize both members and new journalists with the ethical standards that govern professional practice, creating a shared normative baseline within the local journalism community. When ethical violations or conflicts arise whether between journalists and their sources, between media organizations, or between journalists and institutional actors PWI functions as a mediating body that facilitates dialogue and negotiated resolution. This restorative approach to ethics governance is particularly well-suited to the dense social landscape

of a district-level community, where relationships are multi-layered and a punitive approach to ethical breaches risks damaging the social cohesion upon which professional solidarity depends (Freidson, 2001).

The socialization of the Press Law (UU Pers) and the Freedom of Information Act (UU KIP) constitutes another important dimension of PWI's normative program, aimed not only at journalists but also at government officials and community stakeholders. By educating non-journalist audiences about the legal rights and professional responsibilities of the press, PWI works to cultivate a more enabling institutional environment for independent journalism. This outward-facing normative advocacy function represents an underappreciated dimension of professional organizations' contributions to journalism quality, one that extends the organization's impact beyond its immediate membership base into the broader civic and institutional ecosystem.

Professional Networking and Collaborative Practice

PWI Mandailing Natal serves as a professional networking hub that facilitates information exchange, collaborative reporting, and mutual support among its members. Digital communication channels, particularly WhatsApp-based group networks, enable journalists to share news leads, coordinate coverage of complex stories, and offer one another logistical and moral support. In several documented instances, these informal networks have supported collaborative investigative reporting efforts that exceeded the resources of any single media outlet. The network also extends beyond the local community, connecting Mandailing Natal journalists to regional and national PWI networks and thereby expanding their access to information sources, professional development opportunities, and exposure to diverse journalism models.

The organization also facilitates institutional access for its members through formalized memoranda of understanding with local government agencies and public institutions, which provide journalists with improved access to official sources of public information. While informants generally valued this access facilitation, some noted the risk that formalized institutional relationships could subtly compromise journalistic independence, creating incentives toward promotional rather than critical coverage of government activities. This tension between institutional partnership and editorial independence is well-recognized in the journalism studies literature as a structural dilemma for regional media organizations operating in resource-scarce environments (Hanitzsch, 2011).

Advocacy for Press Freedom and Journalist Protection

Since its establishment in 2013, PWI Mandailing Natal has engaged in active advocacy on behalf of journalists facing threats, intimidation, and legal harassment. The organization has handled multiple documented cases involving journalists who faced pressure as a result of critical reporting, providing legal accompaniment,

coordinating with law enforcement authorities, and conducting public advocacy to protect members and affirm press freedom. These protective activities reflect a conception of the professional organization's mandate that goes beyond technical and ethical development to encompass the physical and legal security of its members, a dimension of particular salience in regional Indonesian contexts where journalists remain vulnerable to extrajudicial pressure.

The welfare advocacy function of the organization complements its protective role. While PWI lacks direct legal authority over employment relations within media organizations, it has actively promoted minimum welfare standards for journalists, encouraging media outlets to provide adequate remuneration, health insurance coverage, and occupational safety guarantees. This advocacy reflects a recognition that professional quality journalism is sustainable only when journalists themselves are economically secure and legally protected, a connection between material conditions and professional practice that the sociology of journalism increasingly emphasizes (Deuze, 2007).

Structural Challenges and Organizational Constraints

Despite its contributions across multiple dimensions of professional development, PWI Mandailing Natal confronts a series of structural challenges that constrain its effectiveness. As presented in Table 4, these challenges span financial, participatory, technological, and environmental dimensions, each of which represents a distinct category of organizational constraint.

Table 4. Structural Challenges Facing PWI Mandailing Natal and Recommended Responses

Challenge	Root Cause	Current Impact	Recommended Response
Budget Constraints	Dependency on external partnerships	Only 1–2 trainings/year	Diversify funding; strengthen MoU networks
Low Member Participation	Workload, geographic distance	60–70% attendance rate	Develop incentive and recognition systems
Digital Competency Gap	Generational divide in tech literacy	Uneven skill distribution	Tiered, differentiated training programs
Rapid Media Industry Change	Digital disruption of business models	Organizational relevance at risk	Continuous program review and adaptation
Weak Press Protection	Limited legal enforcement capacity	Journalist vulnerability to intimidation	Legal accompaniment, public advocacy

Budget limitation is the most frequently cited and consequential constraint on organizational capacity. The organization's heavy dependence on external partnerships for program funding creates a degree of financial precarity that limits long-term planning, restricts program frequency, and makes it difficult to respond nimbly to emergent training needs. Member participation rates, while adequate, remain short of universal engagement, with attendance at organizational activities averaging between 60 and 70 percent. Qualitative data suggest that geographical distance, professional time constraints, and an incomplete understanding of the benefits of active membership contribute to this participation gap.

The digital competency gap between generational cohorts of journalists represents a particularly complex challenge for the organization's training design. Senior journalists, while possessed of invaluable experiential knowledge and professional networks, often struggle to adapt to digital production tools, social media platforms, and data journalism methodologies. Younger journalists, conversely, tend to demonstrate stronger digital fluency but may lack the foundational journalism skills including rigorous source verification, editorial judgment, and news ethics that their more experienced colleagues have internalized over years of practice. Splichal and Sparks (1994) presciently identified the tension between technical skill and normative competence in journalism education; in the digital era, this tension becomes even more pronounced and organizational responses more complex. Finally, the accelerating pace of media industry transformation, including evolving business models, new platform ecosystems, and shifting audience behaviors, places ongoing adaptive demands on the organization that its current capacity structure may be insufficient to fully meet.

Theoretical Implications and Discussion

The findings of this study carry theoretical significance for understanding the role of professional organizations in journalism professionalism. The evidence confirms the multi-dimensional developmental function of PWI Mandailing Natal, which extends across formal training, informal peer learning, normative enforcement, network facilitation, and institutional advocacy. This multifunctionality is consistent with Freidson's (2001) theoretical model of professional dominance, which characterizes professional organizations as the primary institutional mechanisms through which occupational communities regulate knowledge, enforce standards, and sustain professional identity.

The prominent role of informal and peer-based learning processes in the Mandailing Natal context lends strong empirical support to Wenger's (1998) communities of practice framework. The organization serves not merely as a formal training provider but as a social community within which professional identity, shared values, and practical expertise are collectively produced and reproduced through daily interaction and mutual observation. This insight is particularly valuable for understanding journalism professionalism in regional settings where formal institutional capacity is inherently limited; it suggests that informal community-based

mechanisms of professional development may carry disproportionate weight in such contexts.

The research also engages with a broader debate in journalism studies about the nature and prerequisites of journalism professionalism in non-Western, non-metropolitan contexts (Josephi, 2013; Hanitzsch, 2011). The findings suggest that journalism professionalism in regional Indonesia is not a pale reflection of metropolitan or Western models but a contextually adapted practice that responds to the specific social, economic, and technological conditions of the local environment. This contextual specificity has important implications for how professional organizations in similar settings design their programs and measure their effectiveness. Frameworks and benchmarks derived from national or international norms may require significant adaptation to remain meaningful and actionable at the regional level.

Conclusion

This study establishes that PWI Mandailing Natal plays a substantively important role in shaping the professional competencies of regional journalists, operating through an interconnected set of mechanisms that includes formal training programs, intergenerational peer learning, ethical code enforcement and mediation, professional network facilitation, and advocacy for journalist protection and welfare. The organization functions as a professional learning community that nurtures not only technical and ethical journalism skills but also the social capital and professional solidarity that sustain journalistic integrity in a challenging regional environment.

The research further demonstrates that the small, cohesive character of the Mandailing Natal journalistic community, which might superficially appear to limit organizational scale and impact, actually creates distinctive conditions conducive to intensive informal learning and peer mentoring. This finding challenges assumptions that professional development in regional journalism contexts is necessarily inferior to metropolitan equivalents, instead revealing contextually specific strengths that could be more systematically leveraged.

Nevertheless, the organization's effectiveness is substantially constrained by persistent structural challenges: insufficient financial resources, suboptimal member participation, a significant generational digital competency divide, and the rapid transformation of the media industry environment. Addressing these challenges will require coordinated action at multiple levels: within the organization itself, through differentiated training design, formalized mentoring programs, and enhanced member incentive systems; at the institutional partnership level, through more diverse and robust funding partnerships with governmental, educational, and private sector actors; and at the policy level, through national advocacy for stronger governmental support for regional journalism organizations and improved legal protections for journalists.

Future research should pursue longitudinal assessment of the long-term impacts of PWI Mandailing Natal's capacity-building programs on journalism quality and public trust in local media. Comparative studies examining multiple PWI regional

branches across Indonesia would also enrich understanding of the factors that differentiate more and less effective professional organizational performance in varied local contexts. Ultimately, the strengthening of regional journalism professional associations constitutes not merely an organizational development challenge but a matter of democratic significance, insofar as the quality of local journalism shapes the capacity of citizens to hold local power accountable and make informed civic choices.

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